

Speech by David Tatham
on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary
of the South Georgia Association

Miss Rumble, President, Chairman, guests and fellow members of the SGA

It is a great pleasure to be with so many friends to celebrate our tenth birthday. Someone once said that the best thing about children's birthday parties was that they reassure you that there exist other children even worse behaved than your own. I 'm glad that our behaviour tonight has been seemly – that it has not all ended in tears – at least not yet.

But there are still competitions to be won and lost!

Our chairman – when he inveigled me into speaking tonight – said that there must be amusing stories about our foundation. In fact as I recall it was a very painfree birth. Since my first visit in 1990, I had cherished the pipedream that SG, with its incredible natural environment and its short but eventful history needed and could inspire a group to protect it and promote its study. After I retired in 1999, Xmas cards from the Carrs at Grytviken and the Lurcocks at KEP gave further strong encouragement. But the clincher was an exhibition on British overseas territories at the Foreign Office. Among the bodies on parade was the Friends of the Chagos. I remember thinking that if the Chagos Islands rated a group of Friends then surely South Georgia must do too.

So in September 2001, we called a meeting of the nearly great and partly good in the offices of the Falkland Islands Association and gathered a nucleus around which we set up the SGA. I decided when writing this speech that I would not single out anyone by name because literally everyone contributed their talents and we very soon had a computerised membership list, subscriptions, a secretary and a treasurer, and an excellent newsletter. We received encouragement for which we were very grateful from our counterparts in Norway, Øyas Venner – the Friends of the Island. The Foreign Office and the Commissioner himself were also encouraging. So we held a public meeting at the Linnean society to which we invited any possible members we could think of.

This was an impressive gathering: explorers, whalers, scientists, journalists, three former commissioners, all of them sharing a deep knowledge of the Island, and affection for it. We set out our stall, enlisted their support and began to recruit our members.

We declared that our object was to encourage interest in and the conservation and study of the natural and cultural heritage of South Georgia. A second objective seemed to me very innocent – it was the promotion of contacts and encouragement of fellowship among those who have lived or worked in or around SG.

But it tripped me up in one of my tasks which was to obtain charitable status for the SGA. I must admit that in this I totally failed. The Charity Commissioners interpreted fellowship as expecting the British taxpayer to subsidize our booze-ups. They were not amused – as cold as charity indeed.

I saw their point perhaps when we celebrated the 20th Anniversary of the Liberation of South Georgia – which must have been in April 2002. The party was held in the Athenaeum and the club staff kept pouring some rather fine wines. It made a hole in our bank account but it certainly established our fellowship credentials.

The event when I would say we came of age was the conference which we held in Cambridge - thanks to the hospitality of BAS - in September 2003 on the “Future of South Georgia - the next ten years”. It was a sell-out. We displayed the range of talents possessed by our members in giving an overview which only we could provide. The conference also attracted generous financial support which enabled us to finance our initiative fund, making small grants available for projects to do with South Georgia.

These projects are deliberately modest: paying for the restoration and digitisation of historic photographs; funding the presentation of books about South Georgia to libraries; contributing to surveys of historic sites on the Island; presenting benches at the Museum for weary cruise ship passengers. But there is no doubt that the grants were appreciated.

A word about South Georgia. Many of you know the Island far better than I do – you have studied it professionally; you have lived and worked there; you have surveyed it; you have sailed around it counting albatross or elephant seals. You know that South Georgia has the ability to enchant all those who visit. Then there are those giant figures from the past – Captain Cook, Carl Anton Larsen, Ernest Shackleton, Duncan Carse.

By their heroic standards my own South Georgia experiences are pretty low key and now rather out-dated. But Val and I did visit a couple of times from the Falklands in the nineties and we were staggered by the magnificent landscape, the clarity of the air, the fur and elephant seals, the penguins and sea-birds, the evocative whaling settlements and their surviving buildings – the excellent Museum and the charming Norwegian church. On one visit we slept in the hospital among the trolleys and the oxygen cylinders. We enjoyed the hospitality of the Garrison, a Ghurkha platoon

under the command of a very smooth Ghurkha captain who invited us to dinner in Shack House. The main course was piped to the table in the best military manner – it was reindeer curry. One of the most unforgettable nights of my life. All a long time ago.

Today the people who live and work in South Georgia, the people who make it all happen, are still fortunately slightly larger than life. We in the South Georgia Association applaud their work - the scientists and administrators at King Edward Point, Grytviken and Bird Island; just as we are grateful to those in Stanley and London who support them. We know that the South Georgia fishery is run successfully on strict conservationist lines based on current scientific research. It is sustainable and it has achieved astonishing success in reducing the deaths of albatross on fishing lines to virtually nil. We are aware that tourism is another major source of income, but also that it is tightly controlled to avoid damage to the environment. I have mentioned our gift of benches: we in the SGA also agonised one AGM over the boardwalks on Prion Island. Reports are that the boardwalk's construction has been achieved sensitively and with the minimum of intrusion. So there is now a safe passage for people of all conditions to visit the magnificent wanderers.

We applaud but we are not simply a fan club. We also hope to act as a conscience for the Island, and it is in this role that we attended the gatherings of “stakeholders” which were held in the Foreign Office during September last year and again this September. The Foreign Office and the Government of South Georgia brought together all the British bodies with an interest in the Island in order to up-date them on recent official activity and their plans for the next few years 2010 to 2015. We hope that these meetings will become annual events. Plenty has been going on: planning to establish a Marine Preservation area; measures to deal with invasive species; a lot of good housekeeping work, tidying up legislation, risk management; and then all the research needed to sustain the fishery.

Bob Burton who represented us at the meeting remarked on all this activity: “so unlike your time as Commissioner when inaugurating a new lavatory on the jetty was the highlight of the visit!”

We have also welcomed the formation of the South Georgia Heritage Trust which has taken over the Museum and obtained the funds to make a very promising start in tackling the major problem of rat-eradication. A huge sum is still needed to complete the task and we have contributed to show our support.

After ten years I believe we are achieving the objectives we set for ourselves in our first meetings. We have become a forum for everyone interested in the Island; we have disseminated information on the rapid pace of change at KEP and Grytviken; we have achieved the status of an authority on a wide variety of South Georgian topics;

we have donated a bust of Duncan Carse to the Museum; we have held numerous public meetings in London, at Cambridge, Edinburgh and Taunton.

While we have attained these worthy objectives of ten years ago, I believe we are also achieving our other objective: we have always met in an atmosphere of good fellowship even good cheer. Something worthy of celebration – may the next ten years be as fruitful -and as cheerful!