Flag Day Celebration 2022

Churchill War Rooms, London, Wednesday 27 April 2022

Merkið - the national flag of the Faroe Islands, was first designed and hoisted as a national banner in 1919. It was officially recognised by the British Government on 25 April 1940 as the ensign of the Faroe Islands, shortly after British troops occupied the Faroe Islands under "Operation Valentine". The 25th of April has since 1947 been celebrated as Flag Day, a national holiday in the Faroe Islands.



"The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see" Winston Churchill



Faroese Flag Day in London has always been an opportunity to emphasise the close historic ties between the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom, highlighting and celebrating the many links made since the war years. In 2020, plans were made for formal celebrations in May that year to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the British occupation of the Faroe Islands. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of these events had to be cancelled.

The Flag Day Celebration 2022 in London was arranged to revive some of the planned celebrations in 2020, creating a platform for highlighting the legacy of the war years and the breadth and diversity of Faroe-UK cooperation and cultural exchange today.



REPRESENTATION OF THE FAROE ISLANDS TO THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Programme

HCA Auditorium

19:00

Welcome & introduction Kate Sanderson, Head of Representation

Welcome to the Churchill War Rooms Dame Diane Lees, Director General, Imperial War Museum

Flag Day Address Bárður á Steig Nielsen, Prime Minister of the Faroe Islands

Remarks on behalf of the British Government Rear Admiral Iain Lower, Assistant Chief of Naval Staff

The Legacy of the Friendly Occupation Ivan Hentze Niclasen, historian and CEO of the Faroese Broadcasting Corporation

19:30

Operation Valentine A performance of sound and images by Jens L. Thomson and Kirstin Helgadóttir

20:00 - 22:00

Reception in the Harmsworth Room



Welcome & introduction Kate Sanderson, Head of the Representation of the Faroe Islands in London



Prime Minister, Dame Diane, Rear Admiral Lower, excellencies, distinguished ladies and guests, gentlemen,

Good evening and a very warm welcome to this year's Flag Day celebration in London.

Faroese Flag Day in London has always been an opportunity to highlight and celebrate the close ties between the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom. And that is certainly our intention here this evening.

This is the first Flag Day event in London for three whole years. We have the pandemic to blame for not being able to organize anything since 2019. The pandemic was also responsible for the cancellation of most of the events that had been planned in 2020 in the Faroe Islands to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end WWII and the end of the British occupation.

The long-awaited return to normal activities gave us the idea to try to make up in some way for the cancelled celebrations in 2020 - and the result is our program here tonight. I am very pleased and proud to have the role of introducing our speakers and special performance. And I am especially pleased that so many of you could join us here tonight.



FANFAROE

Flag Day Celebration 2022 featured a special reprint of Volume 1, No 5 of FANFAROE - the Faroe Islands Force Magazine. Five numbers were written and published in

1942 and 1943 by British troops stationed in the Faroe Islands. With thanks Krígssavnið, the War Museum in Sørvágur, for lending their original copy for the KRÍGSSAVNIÐ reprint.



After the formal program here in the HCA auditorium ends, we will be moving back to the Harmsworth Room for a reception with plenty of drinks and food, featuring some fresh Faroese quality salmon from Bakkafrost, which has been especially shipped in directly to the chef here at CWR for the occasion.

Before we get under way, I want to draw your attention to a couple of things we hope you will find interesting.

You will hopefully all have found the booklet tucked inside the programmes on your seats. For this special occasion, we have decided to reproduce an edition of FANFAROE – the Faroe Islands Force Magazine, which was written and published by British troops stationed in the Faroes during WWII. Five numbers appeared from 1942 to 1943, and we have chosen the last of these, Volume 1, number 5. There was no Volume 2, although the intention was there.

FANFAROE brings to life the voices of the British servicemen sent to the Faroe Islands during the war – their impressions and descriptions of Faroese life, their own amusing comment about military life in a place with very little action, even trying their hand at translating Faroese poetry. Many of the advertisements are from Faroese shops and services that still exist today.

A driving force behind FANFAROE was Kenneth Williamson, a keen ornithologist who married a Faroese woman, Esther Louise Rein



and went on to publish a major book about the Faroe Islands - the Atlantic Islands – in 1948, as well as many other studies on bird life. We are very happy to have his son Robin here with us this evening.

I would also like to draw your attention to the three comprehensive volumes of research detailing the Military Aspects of the British Occupation of the Faroe Islands in World War 2 that we have on the display. This research has been painstakingly carried out since 2007 by Major Anthony Barnes, whose father was also stationed in the Faroes during the war. We are very sorry that Major Tony couldn't be here this evening, and so is he. I would like to use this opportunity to thank him for his dedicated



work, and his great generosity in sharing it so freely with anyone who is interested.

We are also fortunate to have the services of photographer Andrew Wilkinson to document our event here this evening, so please oblige with your warmest smiles. I hardly need to mention that Andrew's father, Stephen, was also stationed in the Faroes during the war, where he met Andrew's mother,

Anna, and brought her back to England. There are others amongst our guest here this evening with similar war-time family connections; there are too many of you to mention you all by name!

FANFAROE, in its own unique way, is a reflection of the great interest in Faroese culture and society, which I would venture to say is stronger today that it has ever been. I would like to express a special welcome to our many guests from the cultural sector in the UK who have a special interest in the Faroe Islands, from writers and publishers to filmmakers and researchers. Tomorrow the

Representation is hosting a writer/ translator/ publisher networking event, the Faroese-English Bookcase, organised by FARLIT, the national agency to promote Faroese books.

Thank you all once again for joining us and I hope you will enjoy the rest of the evening. With this special event we are looking back to commemorate the many important ties forged in years gone by. But in so doing, I hope we are also forging many new ones to build on for future.



Welcome to the Churchill War Rooms Dame Diane Lees, Director General, Imperial War Museum

Prime Minister, Your Excellencies, Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Churchill War Rooms. I am Dame Diane Lees, Director-General of Imperial War Museums.



I am delighted that the Faroese Government have chosen to hold their Faroese Flag Day celebrations here, and that I was able to join Prime Minister Nielsen for a brief tour of our historic rooms earlier. For those who weren't on the tour, I would like to provide some context to this important site, one of Imperial War Museum's five branches.

History was made here in the Churchill War Rooms. This was the underground nerve centre of

Britain's war effort during the Second World War, hidden beneath the streets of Westminster. Then known as the Cabinet War Rooms, they were occupied by leading government ministers, military strategists, typists, cabinet staff and the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, all working tirelessly towards victory as the war raged above them. Churchill's War Cabinet met here 115 times, mostly during the Blitz and the later German V-weapon attacks.

Preserved almost exactly as they were when they were locked up at the end of the war, The Churchill War Rooms played a crucial role in one of the most defining periods in European history. Here we invite our visitors to stand just inches away from the rooms where some of the most important decisions about the course of the Second World War were made.

This summer, we will be refreshing and reinterpreting key areas of the site to delve deeper into its fascinating history, bringing to life some of the most significant events and hidden experiences of those who worked here.

Visitors will hear the challenges faced by the Chiefs of Staff when determining how to respond to

the deadly V1 attacks during the summer of 1944, and learn why the Map Room was described as the 'beating heart of the global war'.

After the past two years of closures and cancellations it is wonderful to be able to come together at the Churchill War Rooms to celebrate Faroese Flag Day and recognise the lasting legacy of the war-time connections between the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom.

Thank you very much for having me.



Flag Day Address Bárður á Steig Nielsen, Prime Minister of the Faroe Islands

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Today we celebrate our national flag, known as Merkið. This symbol and its history have a central importance for the identity of Faroese people. It is an honour to be here, in a place of such historical significance, and with so many distinguished guests.

My thanks to Dame Diane for her warm welcome, and to the Representation here in London for making this year's Flag Day such a special one. It would be difficult to find a more suitable location in London to remember Operation Valentine – the friendly occupation by British forces of the Faroe Islands in 1940.

I also want to express my warmest greetings to our Faroese expats in the UK and the friends and relatives of the Faroe Islands who have joined us.



Vælkomin!

In the Faroe Islands, we value the relations we have with our closest neighbours in the North Atlantic. The UK is our closest geographical neighbour. The culture, language and politics of the Faroe Islands have all been influenced by our larger island neighbour to the south – not least because of the British occupation during the Second World War.

Our flag was not readily accepted when it was designed in 1919. It took another 21 years and the outbreak of the Second World War for this flag to be accepted as the legitimate emblem of our distinct nation. Britain played a central role in this story.

On the 9th of April 1940, Denmark was invaded by Germany. Only four days later, Britain occupied the Faroes. We were cut off from Denmark and the continent. Within a year, most Faroese fishing vessels converted their fishing activity into a lucrative, but dangerous, fish transport trade. Attracted by rising fish prices on the British market, Faroese ships purchased fresh fish in Iceland, and shipped it to Scotland. By the end of the war, Faroese vessels had made 522 trips to Britain, bringing 33,000 tonnes of fish. This was more than one fifth of all the fish eaten in Britain during the war.

The Faroese flag had been created as a symbol of national identity. The war made it a practical necessity for the British navy, ensuring that Faroese vessels were identified as allies rather than enemies. On the 25th of April 1940, only twelve days after the occupation, the British Government and its allies recognized Merkið as the flag of the Faroe Islands.

But, flying Merkið on a ship was very dangerous during those first years. German U-boats identified Faroese vessels as enemies. Many ships were sunk, including Sólarris, with my grandfather, Petur á Steig, as skipper. Sólarris completed several trips picking up fish in Iceland and delivering it to the market in Scotland. But, in August 1941 they were located off the east coast of Iceland when they were hit by the Germans. My grandfather managed to get on a life raft with two other men. Five men perished. They persevered for several days. They drifted in the fog, and they were missed by passing ships. At one point they killed a seal and drank its blood to stay hydrated. When they were about to lose all hope of rescue, they were finally discovered by Icelandic fishermen.

My grandfather survived, but many other Faroese sailors were less fortunate during the war. According to Danish historian Jørgen Steining, writing in 1948, Winston Churchill said after peace had returned to Europe, that the Faroese sacrifice during the war would never be forgotten. Between 1940 and 1945, twenty-five vessels were lost due to enemy attacks. More than 200 Faroese sailors were killed, a significant portion of the Faroese male population. The history of our flag is synonymous with this dramatic period and the sacrifice made by Faroese fishermen.

Ladies and gentlemen,

"The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." These words of Winston Churchill fit very well with Faroese-British relations. The better we remember and value our long and shared history as neighbouring countries and peoples, the more clearly we can see the potential for developing our relationship even more in the time to come.

After the UK's decision to leave the EU, the Faroese Government is preparing for a new era of bilateral relations with the UK. We see the UK as a major partner and give our relations with the UK high priority. We certainly see scope for a lot more trade in both directions. The Faroese people agree, according to a recent survey by the University of the Faroe Islands. When asked which countries, the Faroe Islands should cooperate more with, the UK is at the top of the list.

Geography alone does not ensure that we can grow our future relationship in a meaningful way. As close as we are, we still need to nurture bonds actively and consciously in all possible areas. Bonds between our governments, businesses, researchers, students, creative artists, and other fields of common interest.

And we must not forget the many close and valuable personal and family ties that have been formed over the years. Many began with war-time romances and the young Faroese women who left their families in the 1940's to make new ones in Britain. Many of them kept their ties to the Faroe Islands alive and strong, also in their children and grandchildren.

Since Brexit became a reality, I have been encouraged by the UK Government's growing interest in engaging with the Faroe Islands in many areas of cooperation, new as well as existing. I am sure this will help us work well together to solve several pressing issues. These include the need to find lasting solutions for the international management of our shared fish stocks, such as the mackerel. I know from my own meeting with Prime Minister Johnson in November 2019 that there is commitment on the part of the British government to build constructive relations between us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are shocked and outraged by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We are concerned about the security situation in Europe and, by extension, the North Atlantic and the Arctic. The international order depends on respect for sovereignty and the basic principle of the rule of law, underpinned by active diplomacy. In the North Atlantic and in the Arctic, we are ready to do anything within our means to contribute towards permanent security and peace.

Continued close friendship and closer political, economic and cultural cooperation between the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom is not only mutually beneficial – it is essential! This, Ladies and Gentlemen, must be the lasting legacy of Operation Valentine.

Remarks on behalf of the British Government Rear Admiral Iain Lower, Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff

I am delighted to be here representing Her Majesty's Government, the UK Military and the Royal Navy to mark this important day and anniversary. It is particularly poignant to be here given the Royal Navy's involvement in the friendly occupation during the war years.

Time has in one sense stood still through the pandemic and it is so important we recognise anniversary that were just not possible to celebrate through lockdown. So this evening we are delighted to mark the 80th anniversary (in 2020) of the date on which the British government recognised the Faroese flag as the civil ensign of the Faroese Islands.

The UK remains eternally grateful for the cooperation, bravery and sacrifice of the Faroese population during the war years and especially those that plied their trade at sea catching fish. It is worth stating here that Faroese fisherman delivered over 25% of the UK's consumption and over 200 lost their lives making the many trips to deliver the protein the UK needed to continue the fight. The Faroe Islands are home to Commonwealth War



graves from all three services and the Merchant Marine and from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand reflecting the shared endeavour of those years.

I understand we left our mark. I am told that 170 marriages took place between Royal Marines, British soldiers and Faroese women during the occupation, and I believe another lasting reminder of the British is a love of fish and chips and Cadbury's Dairy Milk – well, what's not to love!

Our relationship, as demonstrated this evening, has important historical ties, but it remains a dynamic one and as close geographic neighbours there is much we can do together. In the last few years we have signed a continuity free trade agreement and a Framework Agreement on Fisheries but our cooperation runs deeper than that.

For example, on behalf of the UK Ministry of Defence I want to thank you, Prime Minister, and the Faroe Islands for the kind use of Vágar airport last year so that the 99 Squadron RAF and its C-17 fleet could conduct essential flying training in a unique terrain and surrounding. Vágar airport was originally built by British Army Royal Engineers, I believe - a striking example of how our cooperation has continued to evolve over the decades. This is just one example where we can work together as friends and neighbours, and we very much look forward to thickening those links in the years to come.

The Legacy of the Friendly Occupation Ivan Hentze Niclasen, historian and CEO of the Faroese Broadcasting Corporation

Prime Minister, Dame Diane, Rear Admiral, dear distinguished guests



It is a rare occasion indeed that an occupying force is welcomed back by the nation occupied, so that the two together can celebrate the occupations – but that's what happened in 1990 – fifty years after the marines first set foot on Faroese soil. Large crowds greeted these around fifty veterans as they marched into town.

A woman in her late forties was watchfully observing the veterans. Her fingers were fidgeting with a small iron-

aircraft hanging from a tiny necklace – the small iron aircraft was given to her by her father, a British soldier, on her one-year birthday.

He left the Faroe Islands in 1944, never to be heard from again –however, on her 25th birthday she received 25 red roses. The sender was anonymous, but it was sent from London. This day she wore the tiny necklace so her father, if he was one of the returning veterans, could recognize her. I'll return to this woman in a short while, but in order to understand why the returning occupying force was so warmly greeted, and what is to be understood by the concept of a 'friendly occupation, I will take you back to the 1940'ies when the world was much less interconnected.

In fact, the Faroe Islands were so remote that according to a famous Faroese writer, the solitary little lead-coloured islands were to the vast radiant ocean glinting like quicksilver just about the same as a grain of sand to the floor of a dance hall. Yet this grain of sand was home to approximately 27000 thousand souls.

It was on these islands that 250 marines arrived on a grey and wet afternoon on April the 13th 1940. They were met by a large and silent crowd still in a state of shock and anger, that Nazi Germany had occupied Denmark a few days before. Although the mood was somewhat gloomy there was a sense of quiet relief that it was the British and not the Germans who had arrived. The crowd watched in silence, following the marines as they began marching, their song resounding in the quiet night. At eleven the streets were again silent. Operation Valentine, the occupation of the Faroe Islands had begun...

This was a peaceful place.

It was actually so peaceful that one of the commanding officers only weeks after the invasion insisted upon a transfer to a more spectacular theatre of war. Most of the troops – however- eventually came to terms with the fact, that this was a distant outpost.

Now - one of the main reasons for this being a successful and peaceful occupation was, that the commanding officers throughout the war had very clear and direct orders: "You should refrain from any interference whatsoever with the internal administration of the Islands. You should accordingly do your utmost to cultivate friendly relations with the local authorities". Further, the soldiers were urged to treat the Faroese "as if they were British subjects".

Of course, this had political consequences. I'll briefly touch upon the three main Faroese narratives of the war.

First - the Faroe Islands had been cut off from Denmark, and hereby the political reality changed dramatically. The British wouldn't interfere, and they made it clear that the Faroes would be returned to the Danish kingdom after the war.

The islands now pretty much had to govern themselves. The Faroese parliament and the Danish governor were part of a fragile cooperation in a time affected by a growing Separatist movement. In the end, the chain of events led to the 1946 referendum which demonstrated that a small majority wanted to split from Denmark.

The referendum was overturned by Denmark, but that's another story altogether. The fact that the British Force wasn't embroiled in these political matters is a token of good political craftsmanship.

The second main narrative is that due to the war, the all-important fishing at sea had to be suspended. Instead, the small Faroese fishing vessels embarked upon an extremely hazardous route transporting fish from Iceland to Great Britain. Depending on which sources you read Faroese sailors supplied between 20 and 40 percent of the fish served on the British dinner tables during World War 2.

Shipowners and sailors earned large sums of money due to this transport, hence the occupational years later were referred to as the golden age.

This dangerous transport was at a severe human cost for the Faroese. 25 vessels were sunk by German submarines or planes – or disappeared without a trace in the North Atlantic. More than 200 sailors lost their lives. And here we have the significant element of grief which is such an important narrative when talking about occupation and war.

Thirdly – the growing number of British troops had a great impact on daily life. The soldiers and the engineering troops who were in the Faroes to lay an airfield obviously needed all kinds of services. At times there were as many as 7-8000 British troops in the Faroes.

Different public construction works were implemented and thus gave work to the Faroese. These conditions were also part of the reason for the occupational period being looked at as a prosperous one.

More money in the society brought about change – which was portrayed by an author that the Faroese people took off their old lifestyle as they would take off their worn woollen sweater.

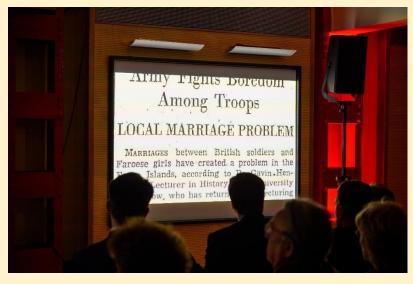


In a moment I'll touch upon a fourth narrative, but first let's get back to the daily routines of the invasion force.

Although Churchill in a speech in the House of Commons in April 1940 talked about the Faroes being a strategic point of high importance", his words were never backed by a substantial military effort. According to The British Admiralty the Faroes were too close to Bergen in Norway. Hence a naval base required anti-aircraft artillery of a size that did not match the strategic importance of the islands. Further the numerous mountains hindered the construction of any large and strategically important airbase. Instead, the Admiralty viewed the islands more as a supply base for the large convoys in the North Atlantic. Hence the occupation was preventive and had more of a medium military importance. This is one of the reasons that several soldiers described that the military discipline was not as rigorously upheld as in other places closer to the actual front. Naturally this allowed room for different types of personal encounters.

Only days after the marines had landed private initiatives were made for the soldiers to visit private homes for a cup of tea. Local people felt sorry for these young men having no one to turn to being far away from home. This was the start of many a deepfelt friendship that lasted far beyond the occupation's years. However, people understood that families with young unmarried daughters were a touch hesitant.

Most of the British soldiers viewed the islands as a distant outpost. And being on such an outpost led to specific challenges. British ornithologist Kenneth Williamson, who served on the islands described in his book how one constantly had to fight to keep the enemy of any distant outpost – boredom – at bay.



The boredom went together with the term "Faroeitis", which was the name given to the depression that many soldiers in the Faroes suffered from, especially them who served at the static gun sites. The enemy on the Faroes was according to a professor in history who visited the Faroes during the occupation the not Germans, but "the weather, the continual gales, the rain, the long winter nights, the isolation, the monotony, the

lack of certain amenities and the doubt about leave" This led to a specific kind of melancholy -"Faroeitis" – which presented itself in three stages. The first stage being, that you begin talking more and more to yourself. The second stage is beginning to talk to sheep, and the really petrifying third stage is when the sheep start talking back to you. Allow me to say that we are not alone with this ailment, since there is also "Orkneyitis" and "Shetlanditis.

Of course, it helped that a large part of the force consisted of Scottish highland regiments. The thought in London was that the highlanders would get splendidly along with the Faroese. The writer Eric Linklater, who served in the Faroes, does mention that the soldiers from Scotland, Orkney and Shetland generally felt more comfortable to be there than men from the larger cities.

So – in an environment characterized by monotony, hard work and rigorous training entertainment and diversion became immensely important to the soldier's morale. The chief commanding officer on the Faroes from 1941 to 45, captain Corbett, was aware of this. He himself was an excellent writer of comedy and didn't shy away from going on stage in shorts and sailor hat - much to the delight of both civilians and soldiers.

A magnitude of activities was set in motion. Hockey matches and football matches, shooting contests, theatre plays, boxing-competitions and so on and so forth. Cinema nights became a hit, especially among the Faroese.

The most popular and controversial form of entertainment were the dance nights because they framed the cultural meeting between the courteous, British soldier in uniform and the young Faroese woman. And this is the fourth narrative. The dance nights were excluding by nature because the soldiers only invited the young women. The young girls were happy that they had more men to choose from. On the other hand, the young Faroese men fumed outside the dancehalls and tried to punish what they viewed as the second-rate girls who chose the soldiers.

Around 160 young women married and moved to Britain. They and their families forged the strong bonds between the Faroe Islands and Britain. Around 180-190 single mothers were left behind in the Faroes. Their narrative was often not a happy one. When the soldier didn't return the short reply was often that he had fallen in the Normandy. Years later the truth came out, that some did indeed fall in the Normandy or in Italy, while others were already married when they arrived in the



Faroes, and some had met a new girl after the war was over and had marred in Britain. Regrettably many women and children were harassed and intimidated. The anger was not directed towards the British soldiers, but it seemed as if there was no room for the narratives about the young unmarried women and the happy days of the invasion. This was especially because the tale about the sacrifices brought by the fishermen at sea and the resulting grief was so domineering.

The woman with the small iron aircraft hanging from the tiny necklace didn't find her father amongst the returning veterans. A few years later the internet provided new opportunities and in 2004 she was able to contact her family in Britain. Her father had passed away, but she's still in touch with her family in England. Indeed, several of the roughly 180-190 children left on the Faroe Islands have established contact and met with their English family, much to the joy of both parts.

The legacy of the war is obviously a complex one. But the reception of the veterans in 1990 most likely tells us the true story, the story about a friendly occupation and of long and lasting friendships. In the dark years of the war with all its horror and tragedy this was indeed one of the good stories.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for giving me the opportunity to say a few words and thank you for listening.



Operation Valentine

Operation Valentine is a unique performance of sound and images by composer and musician, Jens L. Thomson and communications designer, Kirstin Helgadóttir. Evoking the personal and social experiences of the British occupation of the Faroe Islands during WWII, Jens L. Thomsen composed the work for the 2015 stage performance of the same name by the theatre company *Det Ferösche Compagnie*. It was released by <u>Tutl as an LP</u> in 2021.



Why "Valentine"?

A theory prevails in the Faroe Islands that Operation Valentine was named after Valentine Fleming, a conservative MP and friend of Churchill, who was killed in action 1917 during WWI. Churchill wrote a eulogy for Fleming, and later, as Chief of the Admiralty during WW2, perhaps even chose the code name himself, in honour of his old friend.

Valentine Fleming had four sons, one of whom, Richard, was stationed in the Faroes during WW2. Another, Ian, worked in the Naval Intelligence Division during the War and went on to become world famous as the creator of James Bond.

Little did Ian Fleming, son of Valentine, know that his own fictitious creation - or at least

a version of him - would find his final resting place in the Faroe Islands in the latest Bond film, *No Time to Die.*

This explanation for the code name Valentine has yet to be confirmed with hard evidence, but until it is, we are claiming it as fact, not fiction.



Reception in the Harmsworth Room

In the iconic Harmsworth Room, Flag Day guests were offered a welcome drink before the presentations and a "walking dinner" reception afterwards, providing a good opportunity to meet old friends and colleagues and make new ones.



PHOTOS: ANDREW WILKINSON PHOTOGRAPHY