

Starting a Re-Enactment Group

[By J.Kim Siddorn]

People are often worried about getting into deep water if they try to start a re-enactment Group and, really, it could not be easier.

It usually occurs when more than a group of close friends share a specialist interest. It starts to get unwieldy and difficult to decide issues because there is no structure and the answer is to sit down together in a neutral place – like the upstairs room of the local pub – and talk it through. At this stage, all voting should be open and issues decided by a show of hands. Please remember the most important thing I can ever tell you about clubs, committees and meetings in general – here we go, ready? - “Decisions are made by those who turn up”. Not hard to remember is it? If you are not present, you cannot afterwards complain that you didn’t get your say! The democracy in this is that everybody gets due notice of the meeting, and of course it’s one person, one vote.

Forming a club requires a Constitution and NAREs has several on file that you can look at and adopt. These have been thoroughly scrutinised by wise old owls and they will stand perfectly well as they are without fiddling about with them! Remember that NAREs requires a Constitution as a plank of membership, as does a Bank when you apply for a Bank account for your Group. At your first meeting, decide on the NAME of your new Group.

A Constitution should be applicable to all members of the club, embrace the democratic ideal and enfranchise the membership. Some clubs allow Postal Votes as their membership is scattered, but you should bear in mind that argument changes opinion and you may well decide an issue differently if you are present. Deliberately staying away from a meeting is just foolish and the only face you will spite by cutting off this particular nose is your own.

As in all human affairs, there are sensible ways of going about things. Never assume that because everyone knows it is club night on Thursday that everyone will turn up for a crucial meeting. Send out Calling Notices for Committee Meetings, Annual General Meetings etc, by post in hard copy. Although stamps are not cheap a letter on your doormat is hard to ignore. Electronic communication is fine, but especially in the early stages of setting up a club, do not disadvantage someone who cannot or does not use the Internet.

The first thing the meeting should do is elect a Chair person to run the meeting. All they have to do at this stage is run the meeting, noting down the names or initials of people when they raise their hand to speak. Thus, everyone gets a say and is not overborne by the loud or loquacious. Do keep control of the meeting. People will shut up if you tell them to – after all, they made you Chair! I have found that there will always be one person who is proactive, reliable and trustworthy and they end up in charge, therefore usually become the chairman, so I think it is more than just running a meeting. In the end one person usually ends up as the, shall I say leader rather than benign dictator. Democracy is fine in theory but it does not usually work in practice and certainly not amongst re-enactors.

The first thing the Chairperson should do is appoint someone to take the Minutes. They can be detailed for close argument or simply a note of the Proposal and the way the voting went. Minutes must be circulated so everyone gets to see what was done and said.

You will probably need a Treasurer, Secretary and Membership Secretary. Best of luck with these because they are not popular jobs as they require a person to actually DO something! Just don't make them too onerous. The Treasurer will need to take a signed copy of the Minutes and constitution to a friendly bank (we've banked at Lloyds for decades and they offer a Treasurer's Account that doesn't cost anything to operate – most big banks operate similar schemes) and open an account for the group. DON'T allow anyone to do it through their private account. They may be as pure as the driven snow, but suspicion is the one thing that will turn member against member faster than anything else. Take the trouble and get a proper account – anyway, NAReS requires its member organisations to have a club account. NAReS also has a guidance note on financial matters, and do not forget the annual audit of the accounts before presentation at the AGM.

You will find that the bank wants you to jump through all sorts of hoops but they will not tell you that it is relatively easy to launder dirty money through a club account! I tell you this not so you can, but to explain why they need to know the colour of your grandmother's eyes! (and certainly have copies of personal documents e.g. passport photo page, recent utility bill, and know of your personal bank account: it's all anti-money-laundering measures).

The inaugural meeting is to set up things and get general agreement on what the club is about, the parameters by which it will operate, its scope and brief. It is worth getting it right and spending the several hours of discussion now rather than string it out over several evenings. It might be easier to set aside a Saturday afternoon with the intention of eating together when the meeting is over. Grumbling stomachs concentrate the mind wonderfully. The final business of the meeting will be to call an Annual General Meeting at which the Constitution and Rules (yes, they are different) are adopted, the various officers of the club will be voted in and their job descriptions agreed. If everyone is present, there is no reason why the AGM should not immediately follow the inaugural meeting.

Other stuff.

- Please don't call yourselves by a silly name – “The Bloody Wolves of Angvar” for instance. You will regret it later when you are trying to get work with clients like English Heritage et al.
- Don't be overbearing, either as individuals or as an organisation.
- It is easy to appoint officers but it is a lot harder to get rid of them.
- You are not making rules for yourselves but for those who will come after you. Ask yourself if the rule you are making is one that you would be happy to follow if interpreted by someone who didn't like you.
- Be utterly, painstakingly transparent about financial matters. Have a strict rule that says “no expenses without a proper receipt” but be prepared to be flexible if someone goes down the chip shop for twenty pie and chips and comes back with a scribbled bit of oily paper.

- Do not, ever, under any circumstances have “unwritten rules”.
- Do give the benefit of the doubt – but only once...
- Ask for advice.
- Be generous of spirit.
- You can’t like everyone.
- Circumstances alter cases.
- Seek private opinion before public opinion.
- Club rules are often written to close the stable door after a departing horse!
- Think about putting out a regular magazine or even a short bulletin to cover not only club administrative matters but also interesting articles on kit and the like. Ask NAReS and I am sure that someone will send you an example. Also you need a website and Facebook page.
- Do not forget PR. Very important to get this right to put yourself in the marketplace. Try and find a professional from within your ranks to do this.

If you read the Constitution and Rules that NAReS makes available, they are pretty self-explanatory. If you adopt them as they stand – as many have before you – you will not go far wrong. We are here to help and are just about as unbiased a learned opinion as you’ll get in re-enactment. Remember your Constitution, Rules & Byelaws must FIT what you are to do. Don’t copy slavishly!

Down the line, you will need a person who does the Health & Safety job, and produce a H&S policy and Risk Assessments ready for your clients when you do events (and for your Insurers). Most public bodies require to see specific risk assessments for the event you propose.

Now for a very big topic, INSURANCES. By law, if you re-enact something from the past, you MUST have a Public Liability Insurance policy. We do not promote any particular company – that’s not we are here for – but ask and we can give advice and let you know what our groups use. You can then talk to the ones you choose and get a quote.

NB This is only to cover damage your Group, whilst re-enacting, might do to a 3rd party member of the public – its NOT member-to-member cover!!

To run a Group, there are expenses e.g. cost of insurance. So how do you fund these? Think about your membership fees and other forms of income e.g. hiring fees.

You’ll need a list of members and their contact details. Issuing a photo (the police like these when issuing licences or asking about your weapons) membership card is a good idea. Work out how much for a single adult member, and for a family group and how old someone has to be to join/participate and whether you have a ‘junior member’ category. Lots to think about! This financial projection could lead to you considering a Business Plan, but all we suggest is you think through, in advance, income and expenditure issues, whatever you intend to do and how to do it.

Talking of that, you will need to work out your authenticity standards. Presumably re-enacting some part of the past will lead to careful research and your Group setting down basic standards, both behavioural and in dress, kit and equipment, camping arrangements and the like.

Take care over weaponry safety and standards. Be it archery, swords and spears or rifles and pistols, there is a lot of law and licensing issues attached to these things. Make sure your members understand blades and guns are ONLY used on a legitimate re-enactment site and locked-away (boot of car out of sight or secure in tent) when you go off site – to the supermarket, pub or going home.

Coming together as a Group or Society is exciting. The challenge of organising a re-enactment and a Society gives great rewards in getting a good job done and is very enjoyable. However, do NOT forget you are personally liable if YOU are responsible when something goes wrong (hence Insurance cover, H&S rules, safe procedures/rules of engagement and the like!)

Creating a Club/Society/Group with a Constitution means you have formed an “unincorporated association” (technical lawyer speak) so the directing mind of the Group – the Committee – is the responsible body. Another thought for the future, when you are a big, successful organisation, is to consider Limited liability incorporation i.e. form a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee..... but that’s another story and not necessarily something for a start-up Group.

Finally, please note that to join NAReS you need to be an established group, with a democratic Constitution, H&S policy and risk assessment and have public liability cover. You have to have a minimum number of members and be able to provide two referees who can say you are OK, safe and ‘does what it says on the tin’. This is because we have to be able to guarantee certain minimum standards if we are approached for recommendations, contacts, film work or whatever. You can NOT be an individual member of NAReS.

Thus this guidance note is very ‘chicken and egg’. We do so hope any new Groups can rapidly grow and become able to join NAReS as above.

This is a huge topic. We can’t cover everything. These are what we hope are a few starter guidance notes, to put you on the right path.

Good Luck.

Be safe and enjoy.