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# The House of Words

Dr Johnson's House  
17 Gough Square  
London

# Chairman's Statement

“ I am delighted to have the opportunity to put forward the vision of the trustees of Dr Johnson's House at 17 Gough Square, in the historic City of London, as the House of Words.



This is a site of crucial importance in the development of the English language, and an open window into the development of 18th-century language and culture. Occupied for almost 11 years (1749–1759) by Samuel Johnson, it was the location of his most creative decade. Here he consolidated his career as lexicographer, poet, essayist, moralist, biographer, editor and literary critic. As journalist and letter-writer, conversationalist and wit, Johnson was a wordsmith extraordinaire — a professional writer in a new age of print. However, central to his achievements, and with legacies that continue today, was his creation of the first authoritative English dictionary, crafted in the famous Dictionary garret which remains intact at the very top of the house.

The house, built in the 1690s, is an extraordinarily intact survival. It was saved and converted to a museum 110 years ago: we now seek to re-envision it for a new and broader audience, both within the House and online, building on solid foundations but opening out our offering. Showcasing the House as a cradle in the development of the English language, we will be dramatically expanding our educational and outreach activities and our exhibition programme. The House has multiple stories to tell; whether in connection with Johnson's diverse endeavours to 'define his world' by means of English lexicography, or in his own triumphant struggles with poverty, disability and prejudice, or in his growing bond with Frank Barber, born into slavery in Jamaica and later freed,

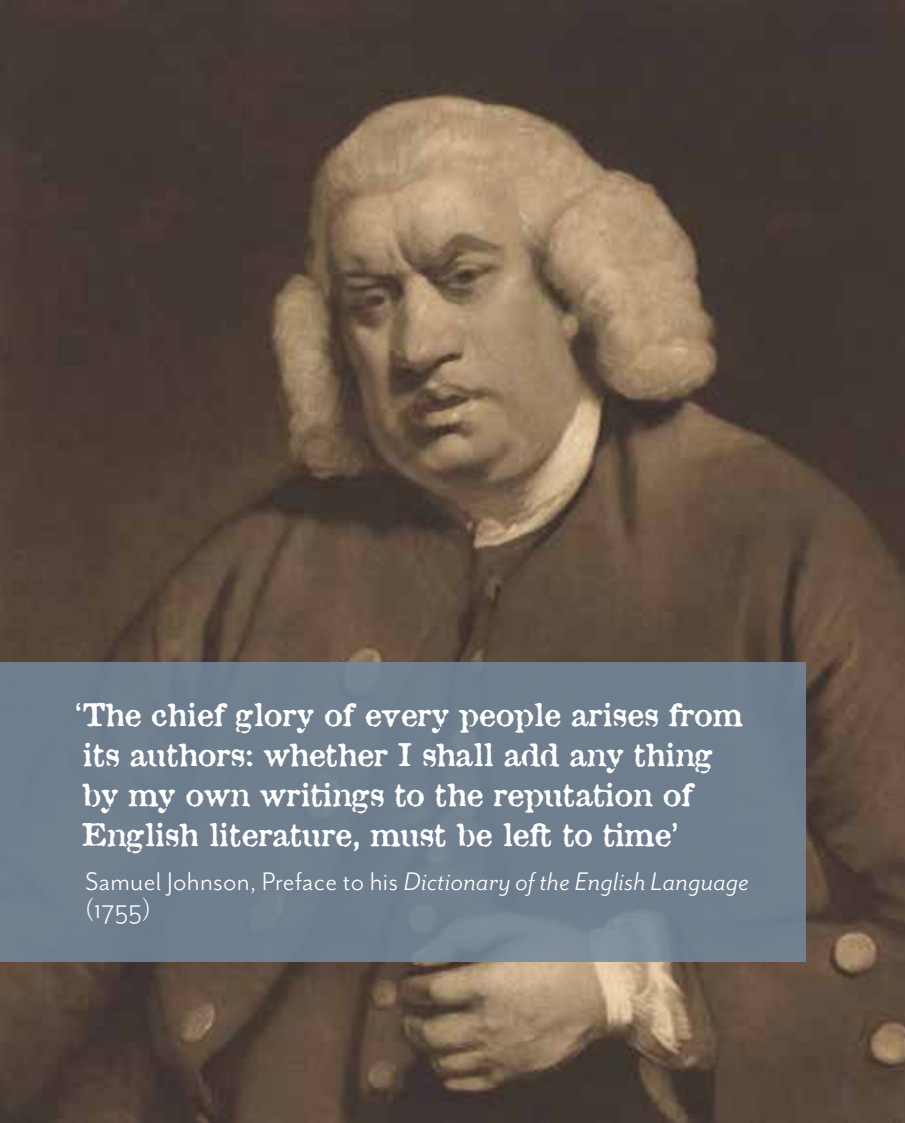
came to live with Johnson in 1752 (and who, in time, became his heir). As a hub of 18th-century literary and artistic life, the House also allows us to explore Johnson's wide and varied circle. Our vision is to realise the potential of this most evocative of settings, harnessing its historic role in language and literature to inspire and reach out to a far wider and more diverse public than ever before.

We welcome your contributions and participation as we celebrate how words define, enrich and enlighten our lives through this important heritage site and the stories of the people who have walked through its doors. ”

**Stephen Clarke** F.S.A.,  
Chair of Dr Johnson's House Trust

# Significant Dates

- 1709** Samuel Johnson is born in Lichfield
- 1737** Johnson moves to London
- 1746** Johnson begins planning his *Dictionary*, publishing his famous Plan, in a letter to Lord Chesterfield, in 1747
- 1747** Work on the *Dictionary* begins in earnest
- 1749** Johnson moves into 17 Gough Square
- His play *Irene* is performed in Drury Lane
  - Johnson writes *The Vanity of Human Wishes*
- 1750** Johnson begins the *The Rambler*, writing some 200 essays before it ends in 1752
- 1752-54** Johnson continues as an essayist, writing for *The Adventurer*
- 1755** The *Dictionary of the English Language* is published
- 1758-60** Johnson writes all but 12 of the 103 essays to appear in *The Idler*
- 1759** Johnson writes *Rasselas* and leaves Gough Square
- 1762** Johnson receives a state pension for his literary achievements
- 1763** Johnson meets James Boswell
- 1779-81** Johnson published *The Lives of the Poets*, one of his most popular and influential works
- 1784** Johnson dies in 8 Bolt Court
- 1791** Boswell publishes *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D*
- 1911** Cecil, Lord Harmsworth purchases 17 Gough Square and opens it to the public as **Dr Johnson's House**



'The chief glory of every people arises from its authors: whether I shall add any thing by my own writings to the reputation of English literature, must be left to time'

Samuel Johnson, Preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)



# Strategic aims

**In recent years we have achieved many important milestones, doubling the number of visitors and tripling school visits; undertaking essential maintenance and repairs; and recruiting new expertise to the Board.**

Our strategic aims for the future are to:

We welcome your contributions as we develop these plans for an inspiring, educational, and entertaining engagement with Dr Johnson's House as the 'House of Words' in every sense. With your help, we will encourage visitors, students, and Johnson admirers both in person and worldwide, and inspire new generations of wordsmiths to fulfil their potential to articulate, inspire, and define the future.



Further develop and expand our learning programmes to inspire people of all ages to explore Johnson's world, appreciate and employ the power of words, overcome adversity and champion diverse viewpoints



Create, for the first time, an accessible site with exciting interpretation and exhibition spaces and appropriate storage for collections



Restyle our website as a means of engaging with the national and international community of language- and history-lovers and enthusiasts for Johnson and 18th-century culture, and to harness the power of virtual learning



Double visitor numbers yet further, enhance our hire offer and other income-generating activities, and build our endowment to support long-term sustainability



**“I cannot but remark a kind of respect, perhaps unconsciously, paid to this great man by his biographers: every house in which he resided is historically mentioned, as if it were an injury to neglect naming any place that he honoured by his presence.”**

Johnson on Milton (1779)



# Samuel Johnson

b. 18 Sept 1709, Lichfield, Staffordshire, England – d. 13 Dec, 1784, London



**The son of a Lichfield bookseller, Samuel Johnson had an unprepossessing beginning.**

Early illnesses left him scarred, partially deaf and poorly sighted. For much of his life, he struggled with these disabilities, as well as bouts of intense melancholy, and probably OCD and Tourette's syndrome. While he attended the local grammar school in Lichfield and went

on to Oxford, his inability to pay the fees forced him to leave just 13 months later. In 1735, he married Elizabeth Porter, and set up a school at Edial, which failed within months. He arrived in London two years later to seek his fortune after a 132-mile journey in which he shared a horse with his former pupil David Garrick, who became the legendary actor, while otherwise travelling on foot.

**'Slow rises worth, by poverty depress'd'**

Samuel Johnson, 'London'



Johnson's financial struggles remain part of his story; his life is one of extraordinary talent rather than affluent privilege. A professional writer in a new age of print, he rose to become one of the greatest literary figures in the English language, celebrated for his agile conversation and profound wit, and making lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, novelist, and, in succeeding decades, as an editor of Shakespeare's plays. He is, however, best remembered as 'Dictionary Johnson' — the fame for which followed his extraordinary creation of the first authoritative English dictionary, published in 1755 and compiled over several years in the garret at 17 Gough Square.

Johnson would live in other places in London. He was a member of several Clubs with a wide circle of friends, including the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, the literary hostess Hester Thrale, and the writer Oliver Goldsmith, as well as his eventual biographer James Boswell whose *Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D* (first published in 1791) has been widely regarded as the greatest biography in the English language. Johnson's time at Gough Square remains, however, intensely significant; here he fully realised his ambitions to be a successful writer, loved and lost his wife, brought Francis Barber into his household and forged the enduring reputation by which his legacy — and his words — still live on today. In fact, 17 Gough Square is one of the first places in England where a

formerly enslaved person is known to have lived as a respected, independent individual. As *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* confirms, Johnson, after Shakespeare, holds the honour of being the most quoted English writer, and he continues to be a rich source of fascination to admirers and readers old and new. His story is an inspiration to all those who visit his house in Gough Square and an evocative introduction to those unfamiliar with the full scale of his accomplishments and fascinating circle of friends.



# 17 Gough Square

Dr Johnson's House was built at the end of the 17th century by a wool merchant, Richard Gough. The five-storey building has retained many of its period features, which include historic panelling and floorboards, a fine open staircase, quirky cupboards and coal holes, and even the original door handles. The 18th-century front door still has its original anti-burglary devices intact, including a heavy chain with corkscrew latch and spiked iron bar over the fanlight. Dr Johnson was a tenant at

17 Gough Square and, following his departure in 1759, the house went through a variety of uses. It had other lodgers, was used as a small bed-and-breakfast, and was even a printers' workshop and studio. By 1911, it had fallen into a sad state of disrepair, with water leaking through the roof. It was then saved and restored by Cecil Harmsworth, an MP, and later Lord Harmsworth. During much of the 20th century, the custodianship of the House was in the safe hands of three generations of women from the Dyble family.





During World War II, the House became a social club for the Auxiliary Firemen — known as 'the heroes with the grimy faces' — and gave many a tired fireman some respite from the bombing during the Blitz. Dr Johnson's House caught alight on several occasions: the garret was badly damaged by an incendiary bomb in 1940 and a new roof had to be built after the war. Remarkably, the firemen ensured that the fires were always put out in time and the House survived.

# Johnson's Circle



**Francis Barber** was born into slavery c.1742 in Jamaica and brought to London by Colonel Bathurst, and later baptised in London before being sent to school in Barton, a small village in North Yorkshire. When Colonel Bathurst died he legally freed Barber in his Will and left him a little money.

When Johnson experienced deep depression after the death of his wife, Tetty, his friend Richard Bathurst, the son of Colonel Bathurst, sent the young Barber to live with him. Johnson paid Barber and often took his side in arguments with other members of the House. Barber eventually studied as an apothecary, joined the navy of his own volition and, very likely, became the first black schoolmaster in England, having opened a small school in Lichfield. Controversially for the time, Johnson named Barber as his heir. While Johnson was anti-slavery before Barber joined his household, it is believed that his presence in Johnson's life confirmed his beliefs and influenced his later anti-slavery writings.

**Elizabeth Carter** was one of the, if not *the*, most successful 18th-century classicists. She could speak nine languages and instead of marrying, she dedicated herself to writing. Carter's greatest achievement was the first complete English translation of the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher, Epictetus, published in 1758 under her own name. This earned her international fame as well as financial independence. She was one of many female intellectuals that Johnson championed.

**James Boswell** is best known for his *Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, which is often regarded as the greatest biography written in the English language, incorporating conversations he had

noted down at the time, as well as personal details and anecdotes. Outside of his friendship with Johnson, Boswell was also a lawyer and a diarist.

**Sir Joshua Reynolds** was a renowned artist who specialised in portraits. He is often regarded as one of the major European painters of the 18th century and was the founder and first president of the Royal Academy of Arts. With Johnson, Reynolds founded an exclusive Club (later known as the Literary Club) in 1764 to discuss important philosophical and political issues.

**Oliver Goldsmith** was an Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and poet, best known for his novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), and his plays *The Good-Natur'd*

*Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). He was also a hack writer on Grub Street with a gambling addiction which prevented any real financial security. But his successful works earned him a place in the Club and the friendship of Johnson.

**David Garrick** was one of Johnson's pupils at his ill-fated school, Edial Hall. The two travelled to London together in 1737 where Garrick worked as a wine merchant before finding fame as an actor and theatre manager. He is commonly credited for the revival of Shakespeare in the 18th century and is particularly famous for his portrayal of Richard III. His early success was a point of contention between himself and Johnson, although Johnson would not tolerate a bad word being said about him by others.

**Frances Burney** was an English satirical novelist, diarist and playwright whose most successful novel was her debut, *Evelina* (1778), which she published anonymously. Johnson was a great admirer of her writing. Between 1786 and 1790 she also held the post of 'Keeper of the Robes' for Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, George III's queen.



# Financial Overview

Copy of Cash Account in  
Dr Johnson's Handwriting

Money Received		
Sept, 22	I borrowed of Mr T.	3. 3. 0
27	-----	3. 3. 0
Oct 28	-----	1. 1. 0
		<hr/>
		7. 7. 0
Expended		
Paid to Mrs Thrale		1.15. 0
Miss Owen &c		0. 4. 0
Given away at Tunbridge		
At Brighthelmston		
Booksellers and Rooms	1 3 0	
Given away	1 14 0	
Sam's Bill	0 7 4	
Neglected at the beginning	3 0	
Purloined by Mr T	0 2 0	
	<hr/>	
	5. 8. 4	
In my Pocket	1.19. 0	
	<hr/>	
	7. 7. 4.	

Dr Johnson's House Trust enjoys sound management, a pool of long-term investments totalling £1.5million and stable, if tight, finances. Our future aim is to enhance facilities and income-generating potential while building an endowment that will allow us not just to be safe, but to be ambitious in pursuing our strategic priorities.

Covid-19 has significantly impacted our income in the last two years, and this is recovering only slowly.

In the two years before lockdown, annual income from admissions, shop sales, events and private hire averaged £145,000 with annual expenditure for exhibitions and events programmes, salaries, administrative costs (including energy costs) averaging £167,000.

Energy costs are presently running at around £4,000 a year, and are expected to increase significantly in the immediate future.



## March 2022

At year end March 2022, our income was £247,182 made up of grants, donations and investment income and interest, as well as generated income from events, admissions, shop sales, and private hire. Over £100,000 of this was fundraised specifically for the essential restoration of the exterior of the building, which was completed in summer 2022.

Our expenditure at year end March 2022 was £123,174 made up of exhibitions and events programmes, salaries, administrative costs and investment management.

Our financial affairs are overseen by a committee of the Board, which includes individuals with senior accountancy, banking, and business experience.



**'Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas: I wish, however, that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote.'**

Samuel Johnson, Preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

# A Vision for The House of Words

**Words matter.** Their use is intrinsic to our lives as individuals and as a society. Samuel Johnson's ground-breaking *Dictionary* still plays an important role in how we think about, use and mark the evolution of the English language.

We envisage presenting 17 Gough Square as '**The House of Words**', where we will celebrate his work and the power of words to let us share our stories, understand our world, articulate our dreams, and debate our ideas.

Johnson and his circle of friends offer myriad stories with strong resonance for social issues in 21st-century life, including: friendship and grief; power and slavery (and Johnson's stalwart opposition to all forms of



oppression); gender and identity, not least in relation to Johnson's early championing of female authorship; disability, mental and physical health; and Black British history. We will ensure that diverse voices are consulted and reflected in our programming, which

will exhibit and celebrate both historic and contemporary writers and artists.

We are in the process of developing ambitious plans that will help us achieve our strategic aspirations to ensure Dr Johnson's House lives up to its

potential to enhance the lives of visitors, serves its community and shares Dr Johnson's brilliance with new generations around the world. We welcome your suggestions and support and would be delighted to keep you apprised of our plans and progress.



# Support Us

**As a small charity with enormous potential to inspire, educate and entertain, we appreciate all assistance. Here are just a few ideas about how you can get involved in preserving this incredible building and the legacy of Samuel Johnson's life and work. We welcome the opportunity to discuss how you would like to be involved.**

Please consider:

- Making a gift to support our various projects, from conservation and education to the development of our ambitious plans to become a fully accessible site – For example, a gift of £10,000 would contribute meaningfully to the development of our accessibility proposals; a gift of £5,000 can help to restore books from the Dr Johnson's House library, or £100 can pay for teaching resources to send to a primary school class
- Volunteering your expertise or your time to work in the house or provide content for our website
- Leaving us a gift in your Will
- Recommending us to others who may wish to support us or get involved, and by visiting [www.drjohnsonshouse.org](http://www.drjohnsonshouse.org)

For more information, please contact the Curator at [drjohnsonshouse@gmail.com](mailto:drjohnsonshouse@gmail.com)





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