EDITORIAL

This is not the story of *Brain*, a journal of neurology founded in 1878 by (Sir) John Bucknill (1817–97), (Sir) James Crichton-Browne (1840–1938), (Sir) David Ferrier (1843–1928) and John Hughlings Jackson (1835–1911). Several aspects of that history have been rehearsed in this column in recent years and a fuller account will follow in due course. That the story of *Brain* might one day be written was first discussed at the Annual General Meeting of the Guarantors held on 1 February 1927. (Sir) James Purves Stewart (1869–1949) minute that (Sir) Gordon Holmes (1876–1965) had agreed to write a history of the journal and its relationship to neurology, for Volume 50. On 23 January 1928, the committee of management proposed that Ferrier and Crichton-Browne should contribute to this history and provide photographs of the founders. But in the event, the text, which would surely have provided insights and details now lost to posterity, never materialized. Sadly, the archive of the journal is disappointingly barren. There exist two manuscript notebooks that record the minutes of meetings of the committee of management and the Annual General Meetings, from 1906, with some record of the finances; and there are files that retain correspondence and documents relating to a few subsequent events and various publishing ventures. But much that would now inform transition documents relating to a few subsequent events and various publishing ventures. But much that would now inform transition from the *West Riding Lunatic Asylum Medical Reports* and activities of the Neurological Society of London (later the United Kingdom) is evidently now lost. Rather, what follows is a record of events over the last 10 years, anticipating the arrival of a new editorial team in January 2014, led by Dimitri Kullmann who has already served as Honorary Secretary and Treasurer to the Guarantors (2003–8) and Associate Editor (2004–13). He will be assisted by David Brooks (London and Aarhus), Paul Fletcher (Cambridge), Peter Goadsby (London), Masud Husain (Oxford), Catherine Lubetzki (Paris), James Rowe (Cambridge), Andrew Singleton (Bethesda), Maria Grazia Spillantini (Cambridge) and Mathew Walker (London).

We inherited a journal that had appeared quarterly from 1878–1986, six times each year until 1997, and monthly thereafter; and which—under the guidance of John Newsom Davis (1932–2007)—had been early to embrace electronic methods of management and publishing. On arrival, in August 2004, the intention was for *Brain* to remain ‘the repository of knowledge on the scientific basis of neurology set in its historical and cultural context’. The subsequent work has been discharged by an editorial team based in Cambridge (Joanne Bell (Scientific Editor, 2008–13); Polly Compston (Acting Editorial Assistant, 2009–10); Emily Cottam (Acting Managing Editor, 2009)); Lisa Edwards (Editorial Assistant, 2004–07); Annemarie North (Scientific Editor, 2010–13); and Eleanor Riches (Managing Editor, 2004–13); staff from Oxford University Press [especially Phil Bishop (Publisher, 2007–13); and Siobhan Fogarty (Production Editor, 2008–13)]; and the Associate Editors [Anders Björklund (2004–06); David Brooks (2012–13); Patrick Chinnery (2004–13); Christian Elger (2004–08), Mark Hallett (Associate Editor, 2006–11), Argye Hillis (2008–13), John Hodges (2004–07), Dimitri Kullmann (2004–13), Geraint Rees (2007–13); Jan van Gijn (2004–13); and Angela Vincent (2004–13)].

A journal may be judged by bibliometric statistics; by how much are read in print or online the contents in different categories; by its wealth creation; and by the perception of its usefulness to the readership. In turn, these data encourage submission of high quality papers that maintain and enhance its reputation. The impact factor for *Brain* was 8.201 in 2004; it had risen modestly to 9.915 (with a 5-year impact factor of 10.870) by 2013. Online access of the journal has been evaluated in recent years; at the most recent census, downloads of articles in HyperText Markup Language (html: we have always taken a stance on abbreviations) or Portable Document Format (pdf) were >225 000 per month. These and many other statistics are set out in editorials for the February issue of each year since 2009. Although papers are placed online as soon as production is complete, throughout the current editorial tenure the motivation has been to produce a monthly print issue that is intellectually and visually attractive, aiming for balance and diversity with a narrative that runs through the contents. Modest changes were made to the structures we inherited; and the design and format of the journal were updated periodically with full colour throughout, available free to authors, from the start of Volume 130 in January 2007. Activity increased, nearly 3-fold, from August 2004 to end-2013. It follows that since the number of acceptances remained steady—varying from 200 to 281 per annum—and the page budget did not alter materially, the rejection rate increased markedly across that period. Taking whole year statistics, the number of manuscripts that were rejected after review was steady at ~775 (ranging from 722 to 864 per annum) whereas the number of papers rejected on the advice of an associate editor without external review increased each year from 204 (2005) to 935 (2012). It follows that the total number of rejected manuscripts rose from 1068 (2005) to 1733 (2012) even though the overall rejection rate only increased very slightly (81% in 2005; to 87% in 2012). Sadly, as editorial rejections increased,
the prospect that a paper selected for review would subsequently be accepted remained steady at 23% (2005) and 26% (2012). In short, we got more but published the same amount and therefore rejected an increasing number of submissions without troubling the reviewers. Brain has now to consider whether an 87% rejection rate, or higher, is sustainable and represents a valuable dividend on the time spent by authors, editors and reviewers in dealing with manuscripts or whether some means of accommodating the many excellent papers that are necessarily turned away should be adopted without becoming another online journal sporting a vast and somewhat unpatrolled list of e-contents.

The increase in activity has clear demographic trends which interact with these statistics. Some nations will not be encouraged. During the tenure of the present editorial team, of the 2717 papers that were accepted, the top 10 for publication (by nation of corresponding author) was UK (22.2%), USA (21.6%), Germany (11.4%), France (7.4%), Italy (5.9%), The Netherlands (5.1%), Canada (4.6%), Australia (3.8%), Switzerland (2.5%) and Japan (2.1%). Of the 13 176 papers that were rejected, the top 10 for exclusion from the journal (by nation of corresponding author) was USA (20.8%), Germany (10.8%), UK (10.2%), Italy (7.6%), France (6.1%), Canada (5.0%), The Netherlands (4.9%), China (4.8%), Australia (3.8%), and Spain (2.9%). Clearly these figures do not account for the volume of submissions by nation. Taking individual strike rates for nations submitting >500 papers over this period, the top 10 for success and failure were USA (3328 submissions: 18% and 82%, respectively), UK (1953 submissions: 31% and 69%, respectively), Germany (1734 submissions: 18% and 82%, respectively), Italy (1160 submissions: 14% and 86%, respectively), France (1006 submissions: 20% and 80%, respectively), Canada (786 submissions: 16% and 84%, respectively), The Netherlands (784 submissions: 18% and 82%, respectively), China (657 submissions: 4% and 96%, respectively), Australia (602 submissions: 17% and 83%, respectively) and Japan (572 submissions: 10% and 90%, respectively). Individual subjects fared well or badly at the hawkish and dove-like hands of our associate editors. Their decision-making was consistent over time and is well represented by statistics for the last full year: David Brooks (movement disorders; 15% acceptance and handling 12% of all submissions); Patrick Chinnery (neurogenetics; 21% acceptance on 10% of all submissions); Alastair Compston (multiple sclerosis, and all miscellaneous subjects; 10% acceptance on 29% of all submissions); Argye Hillis (behavioural neurology; 21% acceptance on 9% of all submissions); Dimitri Kullmann (epilepsy; 11% acceptance on 12% of all submissions); Geraint Rees (cerebral function and neuropsychiatry; 13% acceptance on 8% of all submissions); Jan van Gijn (stroke and peripheral nerve disease; 7% acceptance on 11% of all submissions); and Angela Vincent (neuroimmunology; 10% acceptance on 9% of all submissions). Ex-associate editors were somewhat more lenient in their day: Anders Björklund (acceptance rate 16%); Christian Elger (16%); Mark Hallett (16%); and John Hodges (18%).

Brain never closes other than downtime on Manuscript Central; and papers arrive from all over the globe around the clock, at weekends and on all public holidays. Our busy seasons map inversely onto those of authors with increased activity during August and at Christmas when, presumably, authors like to clear their desks before taking a break. Including manuscripts submitted in revision, we received 119 book reviews, 410 letters to the editor, 234 occasional papers, 19715 original articles and 679 reviews—a total (including the two editorials in each issue) of 21537 submissions between 1 August 2004 and 31 December 2013 (estimated). After taking editorial decisions, the 113 print issues were made up of 32768 pages containing 153 scientific commentaries, 113 editorials, 113 pieces ‘From the Archives’ describing 193 previous publications in the journal, 114 review articles, 2381 original articles, 76 occasional papers, 118 book essays based on 185 separate publications, and online access to 249 letters to the editor.

At the outset, we decided to alter the front cover, initially changing the small reproduction of a figure reproduced faithfully from one of the contents to a larger format (from January to May 2005); and then introducing a more composite appearance with a design built from multiple images taken from a single article. We resisted the easy option of coloured brains based on imaging studies, and leaned increasingly on people and historical material. Probably that trend in visual display went too far but we hoped that some covers did tell a story in pictures that caught the eye and added value to the paper of origin; and we have seen Brain covers reproduced in lectures and prominent when searching selected people or subjects on Google images. We encouraged authors to submit suggestions as covers and received some images; but with rare exceptions (see for example, August 2013), these were seldom used. Designed by amateurs and often overly busy, no doubt these covers will seem dated before long; but they provide a record of visual design within the editorial office over the period 2004–13.

We have included at least one scientific commentary in each issue, as had our immediate predecessor. These proved challenging in so far as the decision which paper to highlight always came late and only after the contents had been finalized making it necessary to invite at short notice and with a very tight deadline for submission. Almost without exception, authors—often chosen from reviewers of the paper in question who already had a good working knowledge of its contents and may have indicated preparedness to write a commentary in their report—delivered on time. Occasionally we strayed outside the scientific community: for example, on linguistic analysis of the writings of Iris Murdoch (1919–99) by the writer A.N. Wilson (Brain 2005; 128: 237–8); and review of the play Duet for One, by John Cornwell (Brain 2009; 132: 1124–5).

We aimed to publish one review article in each issue. With only two exceptions, these were submitted, not invited, and although stocks were occasionally low, or we chose not to include a review for other reasons, mostly these were in excess resulting in longer delays to print than for other articles although online access made the manuscripts available to readers within a reasonably short time of acceptance. The intention was to provide scholarly and comprehensive accounts of a topic of contemporary interest with new formulations written by experts in the field. We did not court impact factor in making these selections and although some have been highly cited, overall reviews appear neither to have
advantaged nor handicapped *Brain* on that particular statistic over the last 10 years.

The bulk of the journal has been made up of original articles. At the outset, we anticipated that these would fall into several discrete categories and the associate editors were selected on that basis. That assessment generally proved accurate and the majority of papers have been on predictable topics: movements disorders and neurodegeneration; neurogenetics; Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias; epilepsy; cerebral function and neuropsychiatry; stroke; multiple sclerosis; neuroimmunology; brain and spinal cord injury; and peripheral nerve and muscle—with a smattering of papers on miscellaneous topics not covered by these broad categories. We have observed many trends in submission as new methods were introduced and applied to specific diseases; and have seen how often one paper attracts another on the same subject as authors sense a semi-open door on a particular topic.

With a journal that aspires to definitive papers of lasting value, over time we had often to disappoint authors whose work was based on single case studies, meta-analysis, systematic review or normal physiology; those considered confirmatory or incremental; and work judged to be descriptive without insights into disease mechanisms. More generally, studies that offered a single experimental approach fared less well than those that came at a problem from different and complementary directions. We have been indulgent on clinical-pathological correlations taking the view that well-described cases with evidence for pathogenesis from examination of tissue are precious. As the number of papers based on genetic manipulation in animals expanded, we asked that, within reason, some at least of the experimental findings were validated in the human disease of interest. Where issues arose after publication—concerns expressed about the data or their interpretation, or the availability of new information that seemed to supplement the original content—we published letters to the editor, online but not in print, usually after seeking an opinion and response from the corresponding author of the article that triggered the correspondence.

In selecting papers for publication, we depended much on referees and found these to be extremely willing; almost invariably diligent, decisive and impartial; and prepared to give unstintingly of their time—often repeatedly and despite sometimes handling more than one manuscript at a time. Our referees showed professionalism, scholarship and, we hope, respect for the journal and an interest in its welfare. During the tenure of the present editorial team, we selected 58,789 referees, invited 45,460 of whom 25,394 agreed to comment, and received 23,311 completed reviews with a mean time to provide the report of 17.3 days. Taking that statistic into account and remembering that several additional steps are needed from submission to decision—assignment, selection and invitation of sufficient referees, assessing reports, drafting and ratifying decisions, and other unpredictable events—the average time to a first decision dropped from 49 days when we started to 34 days in the last complete year; and time to editorial rejection, which also involved several steps, fell from 7 to 4 days. Even with academic staff holding full-time jobs, who cannot constantly be available to discharge editorial responsibilities, there is no reason why these timelines should not improve further.

We introduced a category of occasional papers in order to accommodate submissions that did not fit the editorial policy for original articles. This allowed acceptance of some normative studies and more theoretical pieces that lacked empirical data; but without encouraging the many excellent papers on these topics that might otherwise have been submitted as original articles. Over time, and as originally intended, our occasional papers became more historical in content. We sense that these have been well received even if occasionally tinged with controversy—such as the description of a new neuropsychiatric disorder in politicians cured by being removed from office, written by Lord Owen (former Cabinet Minister and neurologist) and Jonathan Davidson (*Brain* 2009; 132: 1396–1406). Not all are written by physicians, for example an invited piece on the poetry of (Sir) Charles Sherrington (1857–1952) by the poet John Fuller (*Brain* 2007; 130: 1981–3). We included biographical essays on former editors: Peter (P.K.) Thomas (1926–2008: *Brain* 2011; 134: 618–26); lan McDonald (1933–2006: *Brain* 2011; 134: 2158–76); and John Newsom-Davis (1932–2007: *Brain* 2011; 134: 3755–74) who died between 2006 and 2008.

*Brain* has a tradition of book reviews: indeed, the late Macdonald Critchley (1900–97) maintained that this was all he ever read in *Brain*. From 2004, we offered a single book essay in each issue in which the author was invited to write a general account of a subject suggested by the content of one or more books under review but going outside the territory of those publications and at greater length than had previously been the custom for book reviews in *Brain*—more in the style of a leading article in the *Times Literary Supplement* or *New York Review of Books*. Once agreement had been reached, the submission rate was high and many fascinating stories were told, often by people whose academic discipline lay outside neuroscience. There have been several recurring themes: consciousness, science and religion, hysteria and late-19th century neurology, and the history and philosophy of ideas especially as they relate to neuroscience. Several authors have responded to repeated invitations: John Cornwell reviewing 16 books in six essays; three each from Alasdair Coles, Jurg Kesselring, John Pearce, Raymond Tallis, and Jan van Gin; a couple from Samuel Greenblatt, Stephen Heath, Stephen Jacyna and Simon Shorvon; and many singletons of note including (but not confined to) Lord Owen (‘Swaying the swingers: how neuroscience influences voting behaviour’, *Brain* 2008; 131: 591–5); Lord Renfrew (‘The sapient paradox: can cognitive neuroscience solve it?’), *Brain* 2009; 132: 820–4); Sir Michael Atiyah (‘Thoughts of a Mathematician’, *Brain* 2008; 131: 1156–60); and Jonathan Bate (‘Much throwing about of brains’, *Brain* 2009; 132: 2617–20). A good example of our intentions would be the essay in the current issue where Rebecca Flemming, senior lecturer in ancient history in the Faculty of Classics and Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge (a source of four other book essayists) writes on ‘Galen Recovered: ancient explorations of bodily movement’ (see page 3809).

Recognizing that it might prove challenging to sustain activity, the decision was taken to include a piece ‘From the Archives’ in each issue. The idea was to pick an historical link to an article appearing in each issue in order to show how a particular subject had evolved from its original or some other earlier fixed point.
The intention was not merely to rehearse the well-known papers, although many were covered, but also to allow space for little known, forgotten or quirky material. Again, the editor followed advice—this time from Christopher Earl (1925–2012)—who held the view that ‘if you want to learn neurology, read back issues of Brain’. We have; and from August 2004, From the Archives has summarized 193 previous publications in Brain or, in the case of the six editions of Aids to the Examination of the Nervous System, pamphlets published at one time by the Guarantors of Brain (see Brain 2010; 133: 2845–51). The method was to select a likely paper in the current issue, search its references for a paper in Brain, search the references of that paper for a reference in Brain, and so on, until something suitable emerged. Later, with availability of the online archive from 1878, these searches became faster, easier and more comprehensive. Each editor passes on a complete set of the journal and ready access to the print versions soon established which from amongst a number of possible papers would best suit that month’s From the Archives. The presence of an interesting figure or image was always an added attraction. With time, some topics on which we publish regularly became dry in terms of further archival material on which to write; but, even after 10 years, the papers published in Brain from 1878 would allow this column to maintain activity for many years to come. And there are plans for some continuity of this feature of the journal.

The decision to write a monthly editorial was also taken with eyes open in terms of sustainability. These were never intended to cover contemporary topics or to be opinionated. At first the structure was simply to draw attention to the contents of the issue by summarizing the book essay, and to precis about half the papers culminating at the end of the editorial with the article that triggered selection of material for From the Archives. This structure soon became a little dry and, with experience, something that suggested itself from the current contents of the journal was developed in an historical direction. For convenience when writing to a deadline, material for the editorial was always provided from sources contained within a good domestic working library or from the internet. And therefore, some rather strange and obscure books in the history of neurology made their appearances. In 2010, the invitation from William Feindel to deliver lectures at the Osler Library and Montreal Neurological Institute, including one on the history of Brain, made it necessary to read the archive, such as it is, making extensive notes on people, finances and many other administrative aspects of the journal. This provided a rich seam for subsequent editorials. With that, the overall structure changed unashamedly to the history of clinical neuroscience often linked to articles selected for From the Archives. Neurologists are intrinsically polite; and it has been gratifying periodically to receive encouragement on the editorials in Brain over the last 10 years. The most articulate and thoughtful commentator has been Jürg Kesselring (Valens, Switzerland); and others have made contact from each continent. It is, perhaps, surprising (but welcome) that so many neurologists of all ages and backgrounds appear to cherish the history of our subject.

Twice, since 2004, at the suggestion of Oxford University Press, we have produced an issue of the journal suitable for distribution at meetings rather than merely handing out the most recent issue of Brain. These two SuperBrains contained one example from each of our current categories and one paper selected by each associate editor. Covering the periods 2006–07 and 2009–11, these give an idea of what the editorial team prized most from amongst the much and varied material published by the journal over this period.

From the outset, we aimed to make all correspondence personal and informative in terms of decisions taken on each manuscript. We used templates in which free text was always inserted. The associate editors were tolerant in allowing amendments to their draft letters so that correspondence had one narrative voice. We learned to avoid certain words: ‘Our feeling is that your paper…etc.’ duly elicited the response from one disappointed author that ‘he was not interested in our feelings, indeed everything suggested that we had none’. Thereafter we expressed views or declared a consensus on reasons for rejecting a manuscript. There is no doubt that writing a personal letter tended to encourage correspondence; and we saw a growth in appeals over time that was as unexpected as it was unwelcome. Almost invariably these sought to refute the referees’ comments assuming this to be a sufficient tactic for over-turning the decision; and failing to acknowledge the many and complex factors that operate in the selection of manuscripts. Rarely persuasive, often essays in their own right, sometimes indignant, occasionally personalized and libellous, always time-consuming for author and editor in ratifying the original decision, these almost never led eventually to publication of that article. But there were some successful appeals, and this practice increased to the current rate of several each week. It seems that other journals face the same problem but use the cycle of rejection-appeal-revision-acceptance as a tactic for sifting out the most promising manuscripts. That has not been our strategy and the culture of appealing against decisions fatigues the editorial process and offers an extremely small dividend for authors. We printed many errata, corrigenda and addenda and investigated the circumstances of several papers in which authorship was disputed, plagiarism claimed or data declared unreliable by someone (usually anonymous) close to the paper. With the more complex of these episodes, it soon became clear that Brain was caught in the cross-fire of ancient and acrimonious personal disputes in which careless and superficially incriminating emails, or other discourteous, were waved in front of the editorial office. But in the end, it was not thought necessary to insist on retraction of any article published during the last 10 years, although one was voluntarily retracted by the authors after publication. In dealing with these more difficult aspects of editing a journal, it became clear that publishing is an art not an exact science and every step in the process has its confidence intervals.

A distinguished neurologist, no longer living and himself an unsuccessful candidate for the post, once remarked wistfully that serving as editor of Brain is the best job in UK neurology. He was correct. The opportunity to act as steward for a journal that has charted the advance of knowledge in our subject over the last 135 years; the daily engagement with contemporary efforts to improve understanding of the aetiology, mechanisms, phenotype and prospects for treatment across the spectrum of brain...
disease through direct study and experimental approaches; the diversity of interest that neuroscience brings in a society where the workings of the brain in health and disease are applied to almost every aspect of human behaviour; and the interactions with people, of whom only a very few are mentioned by name in this final editorial, have been a source of much enjoyment.

Turning the pages of the last 113 issues brings back many clear memories of hours spent with Brain; and I am grateful to you all for allowing me to do this work over the last 10 years.

Alastair Compston
Cambridge