

Chapter 11. MORE MEMBERS NEEDED...BUT LADIES?

A number of factors contributed to the modest but seemingly inexorable decline in membership numbers. The first reason, but not necessarily the most important, was the equal decline in the number of diversity of the businesses in Leicester. The ruling that there should be only one member representing a particular profession or a specific section of that profession or trade had presented no problem in city numbering hundreds of different trades, as was the case up to and not far beyond the Second World War. But as businesses declined or even disappeared, so the number of available potential members. More firms were taken over by the national and international conglomerates, leaving the number of businessmen owning their companies on the wane.

In 1953/4, for example, 70 percent of the Club membership of 161 exercised control over their business, but by 1992/3, with 113 members, this number had dropped to 40 percent.

This led directly to the second reason-availability for regular meetings. A man his own business might afford to take time off for charitable work, it could be argued, but a man's whose superior might even be working on the Continent may not be in so free position. There was even concern over the membership itself. There was a tendency for some new members to treat the Club in way that the membership was intended. In 1993, the Club Council officially expressed concern that some new members were not joining into the spirit and the activities of the Rotary. It was their sponsors' responsibility to explain these duties fully to new members, were attracted to Rotary.

Consideration was being given to ways in which newer members could be fully involved in the Club and its activities. This might also remind other members of the Rotary that the gathering was more than a social Monday luncheon club. On the other hand there has been criticism that the Leicester club was too big and impersonal to some degree. In effect of new members found it difficult to get to know one another, let alone the established membership. At the same time, under the presidency in 1995/6 of Lars Helgeson, Leicester was larger than any other Club in the District.

Northampton was next in size, with 77, while the average for clubs in the District was 38 members. It was the president's declared ambition that the membership should return to 120 ("You find the member, we'll find the classification," was the current thinking), a desirable complement, at least from commitment point of view. The danger of large numbers, said Lars, was that it could give some members the incentive to stay inactive in

respect of the Rotary Club objectives, and to treat the club more as a luncheon venue with the purpose of making business contacts. Perhaps another solution could be found? For generations since founding day, Rotary was for men. So would the Leicester Club ever boost its membership by admitting women? which the distaff side were not only guests but absolved from making sandwiches and serving coffee (or something stronger). But actual membership? It had worked in other RIBI clubs but official involvement by women in the Leicester Club activities had been confined to the Speaker level. For instance, on March 16, 1992 the Rotary Club of Leicester had its first visit from a woman Rotarian, Miss Jane Wiggins, member of the Chiswick and Brentford Club and premises operations manager at the BBC. As Archie Pilgrim, editor of then the Monthly News sheet, wrote: Nothing happened, the ceiling of the Kings hall did not fall down, none of the members opposing 'Women in Rotary' collapsed with heart attacks or strokes, and her neighbors at lunch did not seem unduly distressed."

To compound the incident, on the following Monday, the Leicester Club was visited by a man AND WIFE from USA, both Rotarians. There was further embarrassment when Leicester appointed a lady Lord Mayor. Traditionally the Club confers honorary membership on the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Mayor (and Bishop of Leicester, although we haven't had a woman Bishop...yet) but in the case of a lady being elected to the Lord Mayoralty, no such invitation could be made. Fortunately the new Lord Mayor was also a member of the all -female Soroptimists and understood the situation, remaining unfazed by what could have been regarded a potential snub. Rotary International first admitted women as members on July 1, 1989 but it took a further nine years before Leicester followed suit. Currently the Club has had two lady members on its books.

A consequential problem over falling membership also stemmed from the inability of many members or potential members to attend daytime meetings. Thus a Breakfast Club was set up in the County and a Evening Club was formed at Glenfield, both set-ups offering out-of business-hours for meetings. The mid - Nineties were awkward times for Leicester Rotary and associated bodies. Since 1992 Inner Wheel had suffered a decline but beginning to thrive again, while the Leicester Club received a termination notice from the Rotary International concerning the Interact Club which had failed to submit an annual report to RI. Plans were laid to revive Interact which so far have succeeded.