

## Chapter 4: SECOND WORLD WAR

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 several members were drafted away with HM forces and many more had to go to other parts of Britain for war work. They were given leave of absence and excused from paying subscriptions. One, Sidney Brown, soon became a Prisoner-of-War on the Continent and with the help of Chicago headquarters (the USA were not then at war) a parcel from his colleagues was sent to him. Later a regular monthly supply of cigarettes was sent through the Red Cross. With them on one occasion he received a letter from a Rotarian friend, R.C. Winn, which was passed by both British and German censors despite bearing the following: "Had a good game of water ladders last night with your old friends Willis, Hardy and Freeman". From this Brown correctly deduced that there has been a substantial fire Rutland Street at the premises of Freeman, Hardy & Willis as a result of enemy action. The Oriental Hall, due to a rationing and to restriction on serving large numbers, rules that it could supply lunches for no more than 130 out of a membership of over 150. This presented no difficulty attendance-wise, but as a precaution, a stop was put on new membership.

The disastrous German air-raid on Coventry in 1940 resulted in an immediate decision to send £100 to the Coventry Rotary Club for relief at their discretion, while the Club would set about raising further funds. But before anything could be sent, Leicester itself had a big air-raid and in the event £50 was given to the Leicester Auxiliary Fire Service to fit out a mobile canteen and only £50 to Coventry. Later however, another £36 was raised for Coventry. Other early deeds of assistance were the "adoption" of two minesweepers, the setting up of a study group on post-war problems, the establishment of a United Services Club and the granting of £327 to various war charities. Cigarettes were sent at Christmas to members serving in the Forces. Later on, £800 was raised for the Red Cross. When flying bombs commenced falling on Southern England in 1944 there was a further influx of evacuees from that area, although not of the magnitude of 1939. This time Leicester Rotarians found homes for wives and children of Rotarians from the South, 14 wives and 40 children. In a few cases accommodation was offered in their own homes.

The country was still being urged to "dig for victory", to grow vegetables and to cultivate fresh ground for this purpose. This prompted the Club to start a Gardening Discussion Group, and after the war this continued for some time and was, in fact, joined by other discussion groups on Art and Design, Business Problems, Travel and Photography. Weekly meetings continued at the Oriental Hall, despite food rationing and the war-time

demands on many members. Speakers of very high calibre were obtained, often men and women temporarily stationed in the area and some from further a field who welcomed the opportunity to address an influential audience such as the Rotary Club. There were occasions, however, when speakers were interrupted by noises coming from elsewhere in the Oriental Hall, in fact from girls of the Auxiliary Territorial Service (later to become the WRAC) carrying out physical training. Courteous approaches were made to the military authorities and to the restaurant management, but to little avail.

Eventually, in 1945, the War Office requisitioned the whole of the Oriental Hall for use by the ATS and Rotary meals could no longer be provided. A move by Rotary to another meeting place had to be made, but it was far more easy to find anyone willing and able to provide over 100 lunches at one time, let alone offer adequate accommodation. After much looking around it was decided to go to the Little Theatre in Dover Street, where a very frugal buffet was set up in the club room and the meeting took place afterwards in the auditorium. This was not satisfactory for Club or theatre, but gave time for further prospecting. After a few weeks however, it was arranged for a meal to be taken at the Rex Restaurant, nearby in Granby Street, and members walked up Dover Street afterwards to the Little Theatre for the meeting. Lunch cost 4/3d (21 1/2p) including 3d (1 1/2p) for the charities fund and 6d (2 1/2p) for the Little Theatre.

The following year it was a great relief when arrangements were made for a move back to the Bell Hotel, although lunch there was a little more expensive. But it was not the end of the troubles over catering, for in the autumn of 1947, although the war was over, there was enacted "The Meals (Service of Social Functions) Order 1947" limiting the number to be served at any one time to 100. The Club's membership was 148 and the average weekly attendance 120. So it was agreed to set placed for only 100 and to issue tickets to the first hundred entering the room. Anyone arriving after all tickets had gone was required to make his own arrangements for food elsewhere, but if he then returned for the meeting it would count as an attendance. Fortunately the restriction was lifted after five months.

This narrative must return for a moment to a war-time event unconnected with the war but of some importance. This was the setting up of a Commission in 1945 to enquire into and report on the future of Rotary in Leicester and the advisability of forming a second Rotary Club. The matter had been mentioned some years before, and was to come up again many times, in various ways, in subsequent years. This commission comprised the Club officers, the six most senior Past-Presidents and four members of the Council. It met many times, deliberated at length, but the views of its

members were so divergent that it was decided to list the points in favour and against the submit these to RIBI for comment. That comment was brief and to the point, the principal phrase being: "There are constitutional difficulties in the formation of a second Club in Leicester as the RI Constitution lays down that there shall be only one Club in each city unless that city contains more than one well-defined commercial or trade centre".

The Commission was in no doubt that Leicester did not meet that criterion and therefore recommend that "at the present time it does not seem desirable to form a second Rotary Club in Leicester". Council and Club agreed. But out of the Commission came one firm proposal for the future, which was adopted. This was that the existing method of electing all committees at club meetings do not make for efficiency, and a better method would be for the Club to appoint a Selection Committee and that body to choose the membership of all Committees.

With the end of the war in 1945, although obviously purely coincidentally, the question of saying grace before meals was raised for the third time. At last it was agreed that grace should be said – and that this should be the privilege of the Provost, Past-President H.A. Jones, or, in his absence, the President. In later years it became the President's prerogative to invite a member to offer grace, usually the Bishop or another clergy member.

In 1947 John Frears became the second member of the Club to become Lord Mayor of Leicester, the youngest ever appointed. Everyone was full of praise and showed great pleasure, but the Council felt it had a slight constitutional problem on its hands. It was the Club's custom to offer honorary membership to the Lord Mayor but could a serving member become honorary for a year and then merely result ordinary membership? Many years earlier, W.E. Wilford had been asked if he would like to be an honorary member during his Lord Mayoralty, and chose to be so. But this time the Council felt that the constitution did not permit such an option being offered. J.N. Frears knew nothing of the Council's little dilemma and no doubt was thereby saved embarrassment.