

Chapter 5: IN THE INTERNATIONAL FIELD

For a number of years after the war a Weekly Letter was issued to members with current information and a resume of the previous Monday's meeting and talk. There were various authors, all of them showing quite outstanding writing ability. Quotation should be made from one by Geoffrey Lea, a witty and accomplished raconteur who, while President was once described by a colleague as having "a healthy disregard for Rotary!" Of a wives' luncheon one day he wrote: "This was Seraglio Day, 85 wives being present, with Solomon in the chair considering the lilies in the field. In his wisdom Solomon referred to their autumn tints – do you think he's slipping? I'm not sure if the electric atmosphere came before this or after, but my soup spoon which had been thrown under the table sparked when I touched it. I say opposite a charming girl and enjoyed myself immensely. No autumn tints about her, she is smack in the middle of May and very good medicine for old past-Presidents".

One of Rotary's greatest concepts, the Rotary Foundation, came into being in 1947, just 30 years after the President of IRAC (the predecessor of RI), Arch Klumph expressed it as a vision at the Convention at Atlanta. At the start 18 Rotary Foundation Fellowships were awarded to graduate students from seven countries for "the furthering of international understanding and friendly relations between people of different nations through the fostering of tangible and effective projects". The awards were, and still are, financed by donations from Clubs throughout the world. At first, Leicester Rotarians were invited to contribute five shillings (25p) per annum, and this was of course readily done. The Club's first nominee to be awarded a fellowship was in 1950-51 when Dr. C. Eaborn visited the United States and spoke to the Club on his return.

Many have followed since. But Leicester has been involved far more than any other Club in the District in acting as host to Foundation Fellows from overseas, principally the United States. This is because Leicester is a University City and many overseas students have elected to study at Leicester University or the Leicester Polytechnic (now De Montfort University). Many members of the Club have acted as host to these young people and, while it could be said that the cost to Club and members has been far greater than to any other Club in the District, this becomes insignificant compared with the reward of closer contact with specially-selected students of many nationalities and many qualifications and interests. One prized possession these students have taken back with them has been a Leicester Club banner, a memento of their stay. These banners were first introduced in 1949, the first being designed by a Past-President,

Frank Gayton, printed by another Rotarian, G.D. Wykes and made by a third, R. Johnson, with silk provided by a fourth, H.N. Bream.

The club inducted its youngest President in 1949. J.G. Hilton, at the age of 40. At the conclusion of his year of office the Council congratulated him on the way "one so young" had conducted the Club's affairs, also the fact that he had become a father during his year in office. It was in his year that the Club was instrumental in providing a new Probation Hostel. The need for this was stressed by the Recorder of Leicester when addressing the Club, and in next to no time £800 was raised. Geoffrey Hilton became Chairman of the Hostel. In 1950 the Club office moved from Church House to 23 New Walk.

Leicester, through most of its history, has frequently been told it was "different" from other Clubs. This has also been said of Leicester people compared with those from elsewhere, and other Leicester organisations. If there is, and has been, a difference, then no-one is ashamed; in fact quite proud! Leicester Rotary Club has certainly been different in one important matter, in that it has always declined to accept the RIBI Standard Constitution. It preferred its own. In 1950 it very nearly succumbed to strong pressure from RIBI, and the Council actually decided to recommend to the membership that it adopt the Standard Constitution from 1st July 1951. But the Club turned the recommendation down! At an extraordinary general meeting, Past-President Alfred Groves pointed out that our Constitution had been worked out very carefully by Past-Presidents A.A. Ironside and R.W. Henry and it formed a basis on which the Standard Constitution was modelled in 1922. We were a Club of independent and critical thought, he said, and to change would sacrifice some individuality.

We should be less adaptable to local conditions, we should have to manage with a Council the same size as that of much smaller Clubs, we should have to demote our Speaker-Finder "whose power for damage exceeded that of the chef" and if we surrendered our Constitution now we should do it for all time. Many amendments have been made to our Constitution over subsequent years and these have been subject to an Article in the RIBI Constitution laying down that "A Rotary Club admitted to membership before June 5th 1922 shall not change any provision in its Constitution except to make that provision conform to the Standard Constitution".

It has been said that is it too large to be adequately active. But its record disproves this. It has been said that it is too large to be friendly – that it's impossible for members to know everyone else. A word or two must be said about this. Through its first fifty years there was a frequent worry

about “mixing”. Members were urged to sit in a different place with different people each week. The Council often took the matter up, and even tried numbering each place and making members draw from a hat to decide where they would sit. From the sixties onwards things seemed to change and it became quite unusual to see the same two people sitting together two weeks running. A friendly Club became even friendlier and except for those approaching late middle-age, who are inclined to forget even their best friend’s name occasionally, or those newly joined, everyone has known everyone else.

In the early fifties there was an even greater emphasis on the social side of things. More outings were organised (including ones to the Naval Museum at Greenwich and Fleet Review), visits to the Little Theatre were more frequent, it became a custom to have lunch at a member’s place of business each year and tour his factory, and golf proved increasingly popular with keen competition for the two main trophies, presented by William Bastard and George Tarratt. Joint meetings were held with the Round Table. With the Swithland Wood project always very much in mind, the idea came up of beautifying Bradgate Park. The Loughborough, Coalville and Ashby Clubs also expressed an interest in this and between them they bought and planted nearly 200 rhododendrons.

Another District honour came the club’s way in 1952 when Ernest Harbot became Secretary to District 107, the fourth Leicester man to hold the post. The third member to become Lord Mayor was C.R. Keene, who occupied the post in 1953-54. He invited the whole Club to join him at the Civic Service, and very nearly everyone did.

In 1954 a major change was made in the method of raising funds for charity. A new benevolent Fund was formed. Threepence (1 1/2p) of every 5/6d (27 1/2p) paid for lunch would still go to the Fund and in addition each member was invited to contribute £1 yearly. To start the scheme off the President made a special appeal for more generous donations from those who had been in the Club for 20 years and more, and this raised an extra £422. When the cost of lunch was increased the following year, the new figure became 6/6d (32 1/2p) of which 6d (2 1/2p) went to the Benevolent Fund.