

Part 3: SWITHLAND WOOD



Swithland Pool, 2002

The first mention of ladies in connection with the Rotary movement came in 1923, when the Club approved a suggestion by RIBI that Ladies Rotary Clubs be set up, with the proviso that they be essentially separate organisations. Eight years later, Leicester went further and proposed the formation of a Leicester Inner Wheel Club, but it was not until 1947 that it was in fact formed.

An event took place in 1925 which secured for all time the gratitude of the people of Leicester and Leicestershire – the decision to purchase Swithland Wood and safeguard for ever 137 acres of beautiful Charnwood Forest for the benefit of the public. W.K. Bedingfield was the prime mover. Club members subscribed £1,105 towards the appeal fund target of £6,000. The wood itself cost a little over £3,000 but further money was required for paths, fencing etc. necessary for preserving the beauties of the wood. This came from the public.

It took six years to complete the project and when Swithland Wood was finally handed over to the Bradgate Park Trustees, Colonel R.E. Martin, receiving the deeds and £600 war stock, said it was now possible to walk two and half miles from the top end of Swithland Wood to the far corner of Bradgate Park without passing over much land that did not belong absolutely to the public of Leicester and Leicestershire. Sir Arnold Wilson, present on behalf of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, said it was a gift “without parallel in history of the Council”. In acknowledgement of the gift, the Bradgate Park Trustees handed to William Bastard, the Rotary president, a key to Bradgate Park which was to be handed on each year to succeeding Presidents, giving them the right to pass through the gates of the Park at any time.

A bluebell service has been held annually in Swithland Wood in the Spring and at first this was under Rotary auspices, but its organisation soon became the responsibility and privilege of the parish of Swithland. In the Wood there is a plaque fixed to a rock and it bears the inscription "Swithland Wood. Secured as a national heritage by the Rotary Club of Leicester 1931".

This was erected in 1948 because the original inscription, in slightly different form, had been worked into the side of the quarry and was becoming partly submerged beneath the rising waters. All that could be read in 1979 was "The Leicester Rotary Club" and the second line "secured Swithland Wood". In time of drought, part of their third line "As a national heritage" could be seen.



Plaque commemorating the gift of Swithland Woods by the Leicester Rotary Club

Gifts to the Swithland Wood fund included £416 from the Walter Martin Players. Walter Martin and his brother Harry were members of the Club. Long before he formed his group, Walter had urged the Club to do something about forming an amateur dramatic society in Leicester and when the Walter Martin Players came into being they gave him every support.

Shows were put on regularly at the Opera House in Silver Street, each in aid of a particular charity approved by the Club, and the Club acted as sponsors. Substantial aid was given to the Poor Boys' and Girls' Summer Camp, the Boy Scouts, the Nursing Association, the County Mission for the Deaf and Dumb and others. From 11 plays performed between 1918 and 1929 the sum of \$4,650 was handed over to local charities. Later in this story reference is made to the Leicester Drama Society, which owed its inception in no small measure to seeds sown by Rotarians of those days.

Another contribution to the cultural life of Leicester was the founding in 1928 of the Leicester Bach Choir by a member of the Club, Dr Gordon Slater. He was its conductor until he left Leicester three years later, when another Rotarian, George Gray (later to be awarded a Doctorate of Music by Leicester University) took over and continued for a further 38 years. For 17 years a member of the Club acted as Secretary to the Choir, first Harry Tharp and then Kenneth Elliott.

Although by modern standards traffic on the roads of those days was sparse, the number of accidents was a source of concern to the Club. After all, people were getting more motor car conscious – a Club roll-call revealed that out of 150 members no fewer than 37 owned motor cars, even more than those 33 who played golf. At the instigation of the Club, representatives of City Municipal Departments, the Leicester County Council, the motoring organisations and the motor-traders were called together in the Council Chamber under the Lord Mayor's chairmanship to consider "the alarming increase in the number of road accidents". The result was the formation of a safety First Committee/ Mission accomplished, the Rotary Club then bowed out.

Although the Ladies' Evening had been held since the very early days, it was not until 1927 that the annual Ladies' Lunch was started – for wives only. In 1929 honour was also done for sons and daughters, a separate lunch for each. These three special occasions became permanent. Not so Founders' Day, for founders were getting fewer in number and it gave way in 1934 to Past-Presidents' Day, when six Past-Presidents were encouraged to speak. In the same year a Presidents' Day was introduced, at which the Club entertained Presidents of other local social service and charity organisations. But neither of these events lasted for long. The rotary year was changed again in 1930, back to the original starting date of July 1st and once more all officers were re-elected for a further six months. Thus A.F. Cholerton served 18 months as President just as E.L. Mylius had done 10 years earlier.

The late "twenties" and early "thirties" were years of depression and mass unemployment. There was much the club could do, and to help raise funds threepence (1 1/2p) of each three shillings (15p) paid at lunch was set aside to create a Benevolent Fund. A sum of over £500 was given to the Lord Mayor's Distressed Miners' Fund, £1,000 to the Lord Mayor for depressed areas, two houses were taken in Sparkenhoe Street and Laurel Road for housing families from depressed areas such as Sheldon (Co. Durham) and South Wales. In co-operation with Toc H, assistance was

given in forming and running the Shaftesbury Boys' Club and later Bedford Street Boys' club and a club in Bishop Street for government trainees. Sufficient money was raised also to assist the Royal Infirmary. This was largely by publication of a magazine. "The Leicester Jester", at a special bazaar, and the Infirmary shows its appreciation by electing two Rotarians as Life Governors. Many years later the first history of the Royal Infirmary was written by a Rotarian and retired surgeon, Ernest Frizelle. A dining hall was furnished at the Holt Convalescent Home in Norfolk and, thanks largely to F.R. Kendall, white sticks for the blind of Leicester were supplied, as and when required, until the Corporation took over this responsibility in 1952. This was one of many services the Club offered the blind, including also an annual sponsored entertainment and a team of drivers made available to the Society for transporting blind people.

In 1930 a fire at the Oriental hall destroyed a great deal of much-prized club property, notably the President's chair provided by William Bastard, the charter, the gong given by James Carmichael and flags of many nations which had been a gift largely of his two brothers, Fred and Archie Carmichael. With the help of the insurers and William Bastard, a new chair was made, to remain a thing of beauty but great presidential discomfort. For King George VI's visit to Leicester in 1946 it was offered as a Royal seat, but declined! The charter had to be replaced by one prominently marked "duplicate" and that is in the archives to this day. In due course all other losses were made good. The President's lectern was the gift of William Richards in 1956 "In recognition of over 33 years' happy fellowship in the Leicester Rotary Club". The speaker's lectern was given by J.A. Taylor, who was then Chief Constable of Leicestershire; it was the handiwork of a member of his force, Supt, Roy Boocock.

W.E. Wilford, a City Alderman, became Lord Mayor in 1931-32, the first of a number of men to become Chief Citizen while a member of the Club. To his Civic Reception he invited all his 177 fellow Rotarians and at the end of his year of office the President, Officers, Council and Past-Presidents gave a dinner in his honour. But he remained a Rotarian for only a little longer owing to the demands of his public work. His successors as Rotarian Lord Mayors, J.N. Frears (1947), Charles Keene (1953), Harold Heard (1962) and A.H. Kimberlin (1964) were able to give yeoman Rotary service over a large number of years, long after their City Council work ended.

Paul Harris, the founder of Rotary, visited the Club in 1934 and was the chief guest at a special celebration dinner. He had received the cabled invitation while aboard a ship in the Atlantic. It was not unusual for the

Club to entertain Presidents of RIBI and noted Rotarians from the United States, but meeting Paul Harris was a very special and inspiring occasion.