

Part 1: EARLY YEARS

The Rotary movement was born in Chicago on 23rd February 1905. An attorney, Paul Harris, had arrived in that city to set up his own practice after a successful university career and a few years of seeing the world. He found settling down difficult and life rather lonely. The idea came to him of founding a Club wherein members would not only get to know one another but could apply their energies and talents to improving their own vocations and also serving their fellow beings. His proposal met with the warm approval of others and a group of like-minded men met regularly, their meetings being held in each other's place of business in rotation – hence the term “Rotary”.

Eleven years later, in 1916, the Leicester Rotary Club came into being; the 340th in the world and officially the 13th in Great Britain. The first thirteen clubs were:

Dublin March 1911
London August 1911
Belfast August 1911
Manchester March 1912
Glasgow March 1912
Edinburgh September 1912
Liverpool April 1913
Birmingham November 1913
Brighton February 1914
Newcastle-upon-Tyne September 1915
Leeds May 1916
Aberdeen September 1916
Leicester October 1916

The Aberdeen Club disbanded in 1932 (to be re-formed the following year) which gave Leicester its present position as the 12th oldest.

Eight men met at the Stag and Pheasant Hotel, overlooking the Clock Tower, on 17th March 1916 “to discuss the formation of a Rotary Club in Leicester”. They were W.K. Bedingfield, C.A. Charante, A.L. Franklin, C.E. Hudson, G.T. Hurren, P.McL.Keay, G.E. Pochin and A.W. Wells. They were addressed by Thomas Stephenson, of the Edinburgh Club (to which one of their number, Charante, had belonged) and at the end of the meeting a resolution was passed “That this meeting decides to form a Rotary Club in Leicester with a view to affiliations with the British Association of Rotary Clubs as soon as 30 members have joined”.



Charles A Charante: the former member of the Rotary Club of Edinburgh who arranged the initial meeting on 17th March 1916 to introduce Rotary Club to Leicester (Photograph courtesy of his grand-daughter)



Sheet of notepaper from the Stag & Pheasant Hotel, Humberstone Gate, signed by those attending the meeting on 17th March 1916, including Charles Charante and Dr Tom Stephenson of the Edinburgh Club (the final two signatures are on the reverse of the page) (Club Archives)

Another meeting was arranged for a week later but only three persons turned up, so no business was done and it was adjourned to 7th April. At this later meeting, held at Winn's Café, Granby Street (opposite Bishop Street), no more than five turned up, but they did have before them the named of prospective members, and 20 of these were accepted.

Stephenson came again from Edinburgh and addressed another meeting at Winn's Café on 18th April and at this a Membership Committee was formed. It was clear that a club would soon be a viable proposition. So well did things go there-after that a meeting was called for 6th June, at the Grand Hotel, which they termed the First Annual Meeting, and on this occasion a resolution was passed that the club be formally instituted and be affiliated with the British Association of Rotary Clubs.

There were 19 people at his meeting and 13 unable to be present, making a total of 32 founder members. They were: W.K Bedingfield, W.J. Callard, A.H. Chamberlain, C.A. Charante, W.J. Coltman, A.L. Franklin, D.M. Gimson, D.J. Graham, A. Hawkes, W.S. Hobson, R. Holt, C.E. Hudson, G. T. Hurren, H. Hyde, G.C. Johnson, R.C. Johnson, P. McL.Keay, P.C.V. Levesley, W.T. Mason, F.V. Murmann, E.M. Mylius, W.H. Pick, G.E. Pochin, J. Ramsden, F.C. Shardlow, T.H. Swain, G. Tarratt, A.W. Wells, A.D. Wheeler, F.W.Wildman, C.J. Williams and J.H. Williams.

G. Crawford Johnson was elected the first President, to serve for six months, W.K. Bedingfield Vice-President, C.A. Charante Hon. Secretary and W.S. Hobson Hon. Treasurer – a post he was to occupy for 17 years. It was decided to hold lunches every Friday at the Grand Hotel, at a cost of two shillings (10p). It was war-time, food was scarce and the hotel insisted on a guaranteed number. Owing to the difficulty of meeting this, it was decided that “two or three gentlemen be invited to lunch each week as guests of the Club”.

By the end of July the Membership Committee were able to bring the named of 56 prospective members before the Council. Thirty-nine were passed, 11 left in abeyance and 6 deleted. A Constitution was adopted and when the Council next met after a two-months' holiday recess it was agreed to send the affiliation fee of one guinea (£1.05) to the British Association of Rotary Clubs. This was on 3rd October 1916, and this is the date of the formation of the Club according to the annals of RIBI (the successor of BARC). It should be noted, however, that Rotary International in Chicago still have the application for international recognition submitted on behalf of Leicester by BARC stating clearly that the Club was organised on 6th June! This was before the Aberdeen Club came into being the first-time, and might be considered the correct date of formation. Club publications always used to show 17th March as the date, the occasion of the provisional decision to form.

At the end of their first six months, the officers were re-elected to serve another such period, until the end of the Rotary year on 30th June 1917.

This short period was perhaps the most difficult in the Club's history. There was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the Grand Hotel, where lunches were now held on Mondays instead of Fridays; resignations were too many although exceeded by joinings; but above all the Club needed something to do, something to strive for. A letter was even sent to the Town Clerk asking for suggestions as to how the Club could assist the community, but the reply was unhelpful. Spirits were low and there were thoughts of disbanding until after the war. But the Council, fortunately, rejected the suggestion – and in the end it was the effects of the war which provided the stimulus so badly needed.

A wider interest too was to be shown in the Movement nationally. Under the BARC Constitution its Directors were nominated by Clubs, two from each, and then by districts from named submitted by Clubs. Between 1916 and 1926 when the Constitution was re-drawn, Leicester was represented in turn by J. Harrison (1 years), R.C. Johnson (3), W.K. Bedingfield (7), C. Stibbe (1), H. Hyde (3), and J. Carmichael (1). W.K. Bedingfield succeeded to the Presidency in July 1917, with G.E. Pochin Hon. Secretary. Bedingfield retained for himself the job of speaker-finder, which office he held for 16 years. Membership was 52. It was now realised that much could be contributed, in cash and kind, to the “war effort”. Help was given to a number of war funds and to a hospitality scheme for American soldiers serving in this country. A sum of £2 was sent to the Dover Patrol. Then, early in 1918, a major scheme was embarked upon, the provision of a workshop for wounded soldiers at the Base Hospital, later part of the Wyggeston Boys' School. Dr. N.I. Spriggs was appointed Chairman of the committee responsible for organising this and William Keay gave his services as architect. It was opened on 7th December by Colonel (later Sir) Jonathan North. The cost has been £600. When, a year or so later, it was no longer of use for the purpose for which it was built it was handed over to the Wyggeston Boys' School and a plaque was fixed to commemorate the Rotary Club's generosity.

Money for charitable purposes was raised in those days principally by appealing to members and having a plate for donations by the exit door after every meeting. The cost of lunches was increased to two shillings and sixpence (12 1/2p) early in 1918. E.L. Mylius became President in 1918 and C. Stibbe Hon. Secretary. At the same time it was decided that the Mayor should become an honorary member, to be joined two years later by the Bishop of Peterborough – for Leicester was then part of the Peterborough diocese. Honorary membership for our civic and diocesan leaders has been the club's happy privilege ever since. When the Leicester diocese was reinstated in 1926 the Bishop of Leicester, of course, took the

place of the Bishop of Peterborough. In 1928 the chief citizen became Lord Mayor instead of Mayor. From time to time honorary membership has also been held by other local worthies and has been conferred upon members of the Club.

Stibbe marked his secretaryship by offering a part of socks to any Rotarian who could find a mistake in the roster! It is not recorded whether any socks were won, but throughout his membership he frequently gave items of knitwear or hosiery from his own factory to important visitors. Only occasionally were they paid for by the Club.