

Chapter 7: YEARS OF INFLATION

From the mid-sixties to the late-seventies, inflation increased apace. The annual subscription in 1966 was £8; ten years later it was £21. Between 1955 and 1966 the cost of lunch ranged from 7/- (35p) to 13/- (65p), but in the next ten years it rose 250% to £2.25, at which stage there was genuine alarm at the rising cost of Rotary. So much so that a committee was formed to examine the whole matter. It reported that the luncheon cost had gone up by 460% in sixteen years, more than twice the rise in the Retail Price Index or fall in the purchasing power of the £. Lunch in less attractive surrounding would be cheaper, but no satisfactory alternative accommodation could be found for 100-120 people (and on special days 200), less frequent meetings were most unlikely to be authorised by RI according to RIBI, and the Grand Hotel could not offer less expensive fare. What the hotel was prepared to do was to hold the present charge for nine months and then offset any additional cost by the withdrawal of the sweet course. This was agreed and it was nearly two years before members were called upon to pay more – albeit for a more modest meal.

The Club had moved to the Grand Hotel in 1969 when the site upon which the Bell Hotel stood was sold and the hotel demolished to become part of the Haymarket Centre. The previous year the office was also moved, from New Walk to St James' Road, the home of the secretary Miss Dorothy Walker. Here it remained until 1976, when secretarial work was taken over by an agency in London Road. The Rev. A.H. Kirkby became District Governor in 1970-71, the fourth man to receive the honour while a member of the Club. He had been President in 1961-62 and Vice Chairman of the District for part of that time. He was then Minister of the Victoria Road Baptist Church, whose congregation had already provided five Presidents of the Club.

The Cathedral has also been closely associated with the Club. When the Provost, the Very rev. J.C. Hughes, was President in 1973-74 one could count among the Cathedral hierarchy also, of course, the Bishop, the organist (Dr. George Gray), the Diocesan Registrar (R.J. Moore) and three Lay Canons (D.S. Astbury, L.H. Millard and J.G. Selkirk). John Hughes was the fifth Provost to belong to the Club, the others having been F.B. Macnutt, H.A. Jones, M. Armstrong and R.J.F. Mayston. Hughes' successor, Alan Warren joined the Club as sixth in line. On Raymond Moore's death his son, Graham already a Rotarian, became Diocesan Registrar.

Reference has already been made to concern over the growing costs of Rotary. Indeed, throughout the history of the Club the matter has come up regularly when upward adjustments in meal charges came about. It did not appear to affect recruitment or retention of membership, but it did have an impact on the social side. The annual Ladies' Evening dinner, for more than half a century one of the highlights of the social scene in Leicester, attracted fewer Rotarians as the years of inflation went by. The growing cost resulted in economies in presentation; the elaborate décor on a theme selected by the President and the cabaret often reflecting the President's line of business were discontinued in the interests of economy. A less formal way of life generally also led to the substitution of dinner jacket and black tie for the so-elegant white tie and tails. So the need for watching individual costs, and the change to a less attractive presentation together led to a loss in popularity. Another contributing factor was the growth of noisy bands who steadfastly refused requests to tone down their amplifiers.

After the 1975 Ladies' Evening dinner and dance presided over by A. Pilgrim the Club decided to have simpler functions, at first consisting of reception and buffet, with a minimum of dancing. This attracted, it is true, more members of the Club – but it must be said that with the disappearance (for the time being at least) of the elegance of earlier times something outstanding was lost. It was the end of an era. It may have been popularity of a reception and buffet at the County Rooms early in 1976, in celebration of the Club's Diamond Jubilee, which also had something to do with the change. This took the place of the normal Ladies' Evening and was exceptionally well attended and had about it a sense of occasion.

The Club's Diamond Jubilee in 1976, like the Golden Jubilee before it, had been planned for a long time and it was decided that the occasion be commemorated by the creation of a new traffic-free square in Cheapside, part of the Market Place, and the erection there of a centuries-old High Cross. The High Cross has stood originally in Highcross Street, some 400 yards away, where it marked the centre of Leicester. From its steps public proclamations were read, town meetings held, messengers arrived with news from London and abroad, and country folk sold their meagre wares.

Here in 1603 the Mayor received Queen Anne of Denmark and her children as they followed James VI of Scotland to London to accept the Crown of England. And it was reputedly here that Charles I in 1645 encouraged and witnessed the maiming and slaughter of prisoners after the Royalists' victorious siege of Leicester. The cross consisted originally of a cupola supported by four columns, but in the nineteenth century its size was considered a traffic hazard and it was reduced to a single column with

cross on trop. Early in the twentieth century this itself obstructed traffic and it was sold and re-erected in The Crescent, King Street. From there it found its way into a garden in Evington. The city fathers eventually rescued it and placed it in the Newarke House museum garden – where few saw it. The City Council and the Museum Committee of the County Council warmly accepted Rotary’s idea that it be moved again, this time to Cheapside. It seemed a particularly appropriate thing to do, in 1976 was also European heritage Year. An early distinguished visitor to the completed project was the Duke of Gloucester.

The “Heritage Project”, as it became known, came under the enthusiastic guidance of A.W. Gayton, the 1975-76 President. A sum of £10,000 had to be raised, and he roused the Club as seldom before. Most of the money came from a “Pro-Am” golf tournament held at the Leicestershire Golf Club, but there was also a football match between Leicester City F.C. and the Leicestershire County Cricket Club, a performance of “The Sound of Music” at the De Montfort Hall, and other events. The success of this mammoth project was very much due to Alan Gayton, but his year of office ended before the “square” was complete and the High Cross erected in its fourth and perhaps final position. It fell to his successor, J.F. Payne, to preside at the dedication ceremony by the Lord Mayor and Lord Bishop on 20th May 1977. (See photo below: Councillor Bernard Toft, Lord Mayor is in the centre, John Payne on the left.)



A plaque was unveiled bearing the inscription:

The Rotary Club of Leicester, to Mark its Diamond Jubilee in the year 1976, furnished this open space and restored to the centre of the city this ancient

*High Cross that first stood some 400 yards to the west in Leicester's
mediaeval market in Highcross Street.
Let the past, enrich the future.*

John Payne also presided at the Diamond Jubilee dinner held at the Grand Hotel in October, sixty years to the month after the third of the three dates variously favored as the birth date of the Rotary Club of Leicester! The President of RIBI was there and Alan Gayton was given the honour of replying to the toast of the Club.