



“ OUR CLUB ”

A brief history of the
Weston-super-Mare Rotary Club
between 1921 and 1980

as reproduced from articles which
appeared in High Tide during 1995

IMPORTANT NOTE

This file is composed for printing in booklet page order, to read on line follow page number order.

Researched and written by Rotarian John Horler with acknowledgment of the information provided by P/P Donald Whimster at the time of the Club's Golden Jubilee in 1971

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This book is dedicated to those members who are not specifically mentioned but who each week carry out valuable service to the club in one way or another and without whom it would not be able to function.

Addendum

The story of the Weston-super-Mare Rotary Club did not end in 1980 but has continued to flourish. The intervening years have not yet been chronicled, but this is a task that will no doubt be picked up by a more recent and younger member, who will be able to record the events and personalities that have helped to make "OUR CLUB" what it is today. Lest they be forgotten in the sands of time, the following are a few of the names and events that should be remembered.

1981 Club celebrated its 60th Anniversary under the Presidency of David Dodgson.

1982 & 1984 "Super Sports" events in aid of Charity organized at RAF Locking.

1984 European Goodwill Tour in which a party of club members visited six Rotary Clubs in four different countries over a period of four days.

1991-92 Gordon Evans who had been Club President in 1980-81 elected Governor of District 1200.

1995-6 David Horler served as Club President, making it a family double following his brother John who served as President in 1983-4

1997 Club celebrated its 75th Anniversary under Presidency of Nick Bennett.

Throughout these years the club has continued to raise many thousands of pounds in a variety of ways to support local and international charities. Events of significance that are held each year include the Carnival collection, the Disabled Party at Christmas, the Family and Friends Christmas Lunch to name but a few. The club's sporting achievements continued, winning a number of District competitions.

CHAPTER 1 - "The formative years"

As we approach the 75th Anniversary of the formation of our Club it is appropriate that we glance back to the early years of Rotary in our town and trace its development and see how it has influenced Weston as we know it today

The journey from Chicago to these islands had taken a mere six years since the formation of the first Rotary Club in that city in 1905. The first club on this side of the Atlantic was Dublin in 1911, to be followed by London, Belfast, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Birmingham, forming the eight founder clubs in Britain. Rotary came to Bristol in 1917, club No 15, followed in 1920 by Gloucester and a year later by clubs in Bath, Cheltenham, Stroud, and club No 51 in Weston-super-Mare.

Weston-super-Mare in 1921 was very different from the town we know today, with a population of 31,000 it was a thriving holiday resort attracting thousands of visitors each year from the Midlands and South Wales. In the summer of 1921 the formation of a Rotary Club was suggested and a group of prominent Westonians, including John Hodge, Barney Butter, Henry Butt, Ernest Macfarlane, met with one of the founders of the Bristol Club, Stanley Hill, to seek advice and information. As a result, a public meeting was held at Brown's Cafe in the High Street on July 15th, and as reported by the Weston Mercury "in the middle of a heatwave and the tourist invasion". The meeting heard a fine, clear account of the aims and procedures of Rotary, and passed a formal resolution that a club should be formed here. Thus the stage was set for the history of the Weston-super-Mare Rotary Club to begin.

On Friday 23rd September 1921 the new club held its inaugural luncheon under the Presidency of T. Ernest Macfarlane. Other officers were Vice-President John Hodge; Hon. Secretary H. A. Dossor and Hon. Treasurer R. A. Hurst. The twenty six founder members received the greetings from Sir Harry Hatt, President of the newly formed club in Bath and listened to an enthusiastic address by Ernest Walls, President of the sponsoring club of Bristol. The club received its charter on 19th October, 1921.

The new club was soon to put the then Rotary motto of “Service first, Self after” into action in two ways. There was much hardship at that time from unemployment, and the club members and their wives helped to organise and run a soup kitchen in Hopkins Street, from which 6,000 pints were served during the winter months at 3d a pint. An effective campaign was started to create work for the jobless by circulars urging that house decorating and repairs should begin that winter, and not left as usual to the spring and summer.

The social highlight in those formative years was, as it is today - Ladies Night.

It is unfortunate that most of the club’s records for 1921-30 period were destroyed by enemy action during the air raids on the town during the war, and if it were not for the efforts of P/P (1954) Donald C. Whimster in recording 50 years of service at the time of the club’s Golden Jubilee, it would have been lost for ever.

Throughout the decade the club maintained a strong link with the local community and it is fair to say that there was hardly a cause or project that did not have a Rotarian as its catalyst. The Samaritans group formed in 1971 owed much to individual members , whilst many gave freely of their time to transport the disabled. Another permanent contribution to the public interest was the erection of a plaque to commemorate Marconi’s sending of the first wireless signals across the Bristol Channel.

Visits to and from our twin club of Rennes Nord continued, and in May 1977 a party from Weston were invited to witness the twinning between Dormagen, a small town on the Rhine, with Rennes Nord.

Naturally as the memory fades names and events will have been omitted, but it is significant to mention but a few. Past President (1968) John Temple for his work in Africa for which he was later awarded a Paul Harris Fellowship by the Club and for the Honda for Edward project that resulted. Bill Bluett who for so many years cheerfully collected coppers at luncheon raising over two thousand pounds for a variety of deserving local charities. This collection was later carried on by P/P (1961) Eddie Phillput (PHF) who collected thousands of pounds more until his death. This worthy job continues to this day.

District and National projects have been supported with enthusiasm, Operation Milkflow, Emergency Boxes, Eye Camps and many more.

The story of the Weston-super-Mare Rotary Club continues, not in the pages of the journal but in the everyday efforts of each Rotarian and in the true spirit of our motto “*Service before Self*”.

The period between 1971 and 1980 were best marked by the Club's concern for and work with young people. Earlier mention was made of the Rotoract Club for youngsters, and whilst it served a very useful roll at the time failed to find a lasting attraction for the following generation. Ever since 1973 a public speaking competition for school teams has been organized on a District basis. The popularity and success of this competition has lasted to the present day. The top local team has attended Rotary lunch and given a repeat performance to the admiration and surprise of the audience. In Weston a shield in memory of Alex Wilson is awarded annually to the local winning school.

The club's sporting activities flourished during the 1970's, coming to its peak in 1979 when the club teams were District champions in golf, bowls and cricket. The club's interest in sport was not limited to its own activities, and in 1975 developed Bowling for the Blind. It proved to be so successful that by 1979 a National Association of Visually Handicapped Bowlers was formed.

To commemorate the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, the Club in association with its neighbouring Rotary Clubs of Wrington Vale , Mendip and Wells, with money from the Jubilee Fund were responsible for the waymarking of the West Mendip Way between Wells and Weston. This project has continued with periodic work being undertaken to maintain and improve what has grown into part of a national chain of long distance walks through areas of outstanding natural beauty.

1931, the new decade opens with Percy Russell occupying the Presidential chair and Arthur Brown, who had been President in 1927 became the first in the club to elected District Chairman of the 4th District, (later divided into 10th and 17th), with twelve clubs under his jurisdiction. The early thirties were the day of the wireless and the gramophone, the television and the FAX were yet to come on the scene. Massive unemployment dominated the country and as it had done 10 years earlier the club members made strenuous efforts to alleviate the local effects.

In the October, Rotarians wives who had been meeting informally decided to form themselves into a club, and the Inner Wheel was created. Mrs. J. F. Scully was elected as the first President and Mrs. R. Ivens as Secretary / Treasurer. It has flourished ever since, giving support to Rotary in many of its undertakings. *Sadly since the original article appeared the Inner Wheel Club has closed, but hopefully will be resurrected at some future date.*

In 1932 Bernard Marsh, later to become club President in 1934, was appointed as the first Club Editor and for many years chronicled the club's activities. His bulletins contained articles both statesmanlike and controversial. Perennial questions such as the importance of club projects and individual members social work were eagerly canvassed.

There was much soul-searching in the 1930's about the Aims and Objects of Rotary. What had been six objects were restated as four, after lengthy discussions; the standard constitution of clubs, voluntary for pre 1922 clubs, was adopted by Weston in 1937.

During the 30's the work of the Boys House which had been started in the year John Hodge was President (1923) increased to such an extent that the original house at 35 Bristol Road became inadequate and a larger house at 13 South Road was purchased, to accommodate 25 boys. Throughout the decade The Boys House as it was affectionately known was the club's major project, with the house management committee being responsible for the day to day running of the house, its staff and the welfare of its guests.

The disturbed European situation also received much attention, and the club's International Committee persuaded a series of distinguished speakers to address meetings on the subject.

An unusual campaign was maintained by local Rotarians for awards to drivers for proficiency and road safety. After some years of presentation of medals and certificates by the Rotary Club itself, and led by Dick Ivens (President 1937-38) and Councillor J. J. Leaver, success was reached when in 1936 the movement was adopted by the Urban District Council, who thenceforward entered all their drivers for the competitions.

Throughout the 1920's and 1930's the club continued to hold its weekly luncheon, on Fridays at Brown's Cafe, in the High Street. The subjects of conversation then were much the same as they are today, the price of lunch and subscriptions, and why should they rise steeply. The acoustics and Rotarians who always sit together were other familiar topics.

1975 saw the formation of our Daughter Club, West Woodspring. In 1978 attempts were made to form a Past Rotarians Club but this faltered. Meanwhile the formation of a club for retired professional and businessmen (PROBUS) flourished and was soon to be followed by a second and ultimately a third club. During this decade the Clubs interest was not limited to the older generation. A Rotoract Club was formed, the first in the District to do so, for youngsters of 14 - 18. Interest was shown in Young Enterprise, a scheme organized through schools. The Vocational Service Committee tackled the ever increasing problem of youth unemployment with a scheme of "Work Experience", and Careers Exhibitions, considered to be quite revolutionary at the time. This was followed up a few years later with the scheme for mock interviews.

The 1970's were years of mounting inflation, and the club struggled to contain the subscription and the price of the weekly lunch. Our membership numbers had dropped from the level 10 years earlier, partly due to the formation of a second club in the town, and were now about 65. The Winter Gardens which had been our weekly venue for over 20 years was now too large and the cost of the meal was rising. Following much heart searching the decision was made to move, and after negotiation with one of our Hotel members, Derek Chapman, the club moved to the Rozel Hotel, where it has remained until the present day.

In 1973 the Senior Vice-President George Holder died, and in 1974 Harold Bevan died whilst in office as President. Past President Edgar Jenkins, who held the office in 1965 took over for the remaining term of office. In 1980 Jim Hall died only a few months after finishing his Presidential year. These losses greatly impoverished the club in a time of increasingly complex activity.

By 1974 the Boys' House Golden Jubilee Fund topped £30,000, but all was not well. The Management Committee were faced with escalating costs in running the house, salaries for the Warden and Matron and other members of the staff rose considerably and sponsoring clubs were finding it harder to carry the financial burden. Changes in social attitudes together with legislation reduced the capacity of the house adding to the financial worries. Two current members of the club, P/P Gordon Evans and P/P John Horler were on the House Committee when in 1979 the decision was taken to close the house, which was ultimately sold and the proceeds invested in a new and wider Holiday Trust for Children. This Trust continues to this day and provides grants each year to clubs within the owning districts for holidays for youngsters. Up to the time that the house closed almost 30,000 boys had benefited from a holiday. Innumerable members of the Rotary and Inner Wheel Club's had given their time and talents, none more so than Jim Hall (of Slocombe & Hall) who was Chairman of the House Committee for a number of years and the late Alex Wilson who was the House Secretary between 1953 and 1975.

The Rotary Club continued to function during throughout the war years, many of its members rendered valuable service to the town and its residents. Foremost amongst its members was R. J. (Bob) Norton, who worked with tireless efficiency on the Boy's House Committee, and was responsible for a number of papers setting out ideas for the post war future of the town. A detailed analysis of Weston's needs was submitted to the Mayor and Council with recommendations on development of shopping centers, roads, conference hall, airport and so on, several of which have come into being. The Weston Mercury of June 1944 carried a full synopsis of the outstanding report.

In 1944 R. W. Smith became President, significant by the fact that in 1958 his son the late Clifford Smith (PHF) became President, the first father and son to occupy this office.

In October 1946 the 25th anniversary of the club was celebrated. Four of the founder members were there, (R. Hosken and Past President Arthur Brown, H. C. Webber, and Arthur Cornwell) and the club was addressed by Stanley Hill of the Bristol Club who had played such an important role at the time of the club's formation.

In January 1947 Rotary's founder, Paul Harris died. An immediate move was made to set up a memorial fund to promote international understanding, and by the September of that year the first Paul Harris Fellowship had been awarded. Currently there are over 400,000 Fellowships worldwide, including those in our club who have been so honored.

The Boy's House in wartime must have run under almost insuperable difficulties, with transport interruptions, the blackout, and food and clothing rationing. It is reported that ladies of the Inner Wheel gave some of their own coupons to provide linen and mending materials.

The inadequacy of the accommodation at the Boys' House were becoming increasingly evident, and with the House Silver Jubilee due in 1949 it was decided to launch an appeal. On 14th September 1950 the welcoming of the 10,000th boy to stay in the House gave added momentum to the appeal.

During this decade the Boys House had not been the only project undertaken by the club. First of all in a small way in the Sea Cadet's hut, where Dolphin Square is now, and in 1949 on the ground floor of the Y.M.C.A. building, a meeting place was established where old folks could spend an afternoon, play draughts, dominoes or cards, and enjoy a cup of tea and cakes in comfort. Rotarians opened the premises and set out the room, and a rota of ladies prepared and served the refreshments. Week in, week out for sixteen years this service continued, including a Christmas Party and a summer outing by luxury coaches, laid on free by a well known Rotarian member. This project continued until 1965 when a new Community Center made it unnecessary.

In 1971 as the club prepared to celebrate its Golden Jubilee it was appropriate to reflect on 50 years of service to the local and international communities whilst at the same time look to the future. Rotary had grown into a world-wide fellowship of 15,000 clubs and 700,000 Rotarians. By the March of that year the Boys House had welcomed no less than 25,226 boys. In the July a special lunch was organized, to match the date of the inaugural meeting in 1921. A major fund raising event was launched to provide a resuscitation unit for Weston's General Hospital, and through a sponsored walk raised over twelve hundred pounds. On 9th July 1971, with Rotarian J. D. Brenner as President, a Golden Jubilee Anniversary Dinner was held, with Civic and Rotary dignitaries, including a party from our twin club of Rennes Nord.

In 1972 a major rearrangement of Rotary Districts saw the Weston Club separated from its friends in the Bristol area (District 110). It now became one of the most northerly clubs in District 120, reaching in the south to parts of Devon and Dorset. The county of Avon was not yet created.

The decade 1971 - 1980 was unfortunately marred for the Weston club by an abnormal number of deaths of members in office. In 1972 Fred Bush, the Senior Vice-President, was too ill to take up office and died in the September. Derrick Brenner having led the club in its celebration year agreed to continue as President for a second year.

The Weston club has long had a connection with the lifeboat and its crew. In 1966 the club provided the crew with new jerseys and overalls and commenced the annual tradition of inviting the crew to lunch.

In 1967 on the instigation of the International Committee, Voluntary Service Overseas was actively promoted. With the active support of the 1968/9 President, John Temple, the local committee was able to sponsor a number of student volunteers to work overseas in under developed countries.

One of the items discussed by the International Committee for several years had been a link with a French club. The Committee chairman in 1967 was the late Rotarian John Collings who had business interests in Brittany and was a frequent visitor to the Rotary Club of Rennes Nord. After tentative enquiries a "twinning" was agreed, and led by the President, Claude Champion the first of many two-way visits was made.

In 1968 Past President (1960) Roy Mason, having served in various District posts, was honored by being elected Chairman of District 110, the first in the club since Arthur Brown in 1931. It was in this year the RIBI adopted the title District Governor. Roy also had the distinction of being able to hold his Conference in his own town of Weston-super-Mare.

The club was active on many sporting fronts, Skittles and Bowls competitions were frequent events, and held the District Shield for shooting for three consecutive years 1967-8 and 1969

The 1950's were years of change for the club. Ever since its formation the weekly luncheon had been held at Brown's Cafe in the High Street, owned by two of its founder members. The usual room was approached through the restaurant and up a dark and steep flight of stairs, and was awkward for serving a club of 70 to 80 members, so that complaints developed on both sides, and in April 1952 they quite amicably decided to part. The next venue was The Grand Central Hotel, opposite the Grand Pier, but this room was awkward and the acoustics were difficult. In December 1955 the first Winter Gardens lunch was held, it proved to be just what the club was looking for and was to remain the venue for over 20 years.

The Boy's House Silver Jubilee project was finally completed in December 1953 with the opening of the new house in South Road. The house was an imposing Victorian mansion with a superb panoramic view of the Somerset sea coast in front and backed by the wide acres of Worlebury Woods. The house could adequately cope with 40 to 45 boys and had been modernized with a new dormitory and ablution block.

With the Golden Jubilee of Rotary International the club sought numerous avenues of service. Wireless for the bedridden and an international youth rally were typical. In 1956 the formation of a League of Friends of the Weston Hospitals owed a great deal to Rotarians. A particularly promising idea for an International Club to provide a meeting place for students and workers from overseas, proved to fulfil great need. With lively talks, film shows and dances it soon developed an independent and vigorous existence.

CHAPTER 5 - The 1960's, "The Vintage Years"

Twice during the decade death broke the normal sequence of office. When in 1955 Senior Vice-President H. L. Lloyd died, ex District Chairman A. H. Addison helped the club by stepping into his place, and in 1960 the Senior Vice-President Roy Mason succeeded a month earlier than usual, because of the death of the much loved Claude Lalonde.

The Club of the 1950 / 1960 era was a little larger than it is today, membership averaged around 90 and on several occasions almost reached 100. The Weston club was the only one in the town, West Woodspring was not formed until 1975. Many of the towns "family" businesses were represented in the club, and the professional classifications were much sought after and cherished by the holders.

In 1954 Past President Bob Norton reflecting on the troubled world, is reported as saying, "As we contemplate the rider called Service, and the horse named Self, and we look out upon the world of today in all its delirium, we can see that the horse has bolted, but the rider is still in the saddle, he has not been unseated, and we still have faith that the rider will regain control".
(Just as true today as it was over 40 years ago)

In September 1961 the Community Service Committee came upon a situation that cried out for attention. Two houses in Alfred Street, backing on to the General Hospital, had been given in 1882 for occupation by twelve deserving elderly ladies, and a trust set up. It had, however, little financial backing, and the houses 80 years later had no modern amenities whatsoever. The committee decided to remedy this deplorable situation, both by giving labour and raising money. Their first tasks were to provide five wash basins and cold water supplies, and to light the staircases. Then followed twelve electric cookers, coin in the slot meters, electric kettles stew pans, floor covering and fire appliances. In two years the project was completed.

New projects came along almost before the completion of the one before. The Town Council had schemes for a new Old Folks Rest Center, urgently needed in an area with one of the largest percentages of old-age pensioners in England. The club decided to try and raise one thousand pounds by means of a competition, with the first prize of a new car. 30,000 tickets were printed, a large rota of volunteer sellers enlisted, and in May 1964 the scheme was under way. Sales continued through June and July and despite periods of despair by the middle of the month the car was paid for. In September the scheme hit a crisis: the raffle had been based upon estimated football attendances on a certain Saturday - and over half the matches were cancelled! Counsel's opinion was taken and the all clear given. By mid October the unexpected winner had received her prize, and the new Rest Center was the nearer by almost twelve hundred pounds.