

THE ROTARY CLUB OF ALRESFORD

by

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The Rotary movement began in 1908 in the U.S.A. when Paul Harris a young unmarried lawyer recently arrived in Chicago,, Illinois arranged to meet with three other young professionals in his office. It is perhaps appropriate that in 1986, the first meeting of businessmen who were to go on to form the. Rotary Club of Alresford should also take place in a lawyer's office, this time in East Street, and one which probably had changed very little from that in Chicago, with heavy wooden desk and shelves of bound legal Papers.



From very humble beginnings. Rotary was quick to spread to other parts of the U.S.A., obviously filling a void in professional life, an opportunity for like- minded men of different callings to meet and become friends and to begin to use their expertise for the benefit of their community, or 'civic work'. The name of Rotary arose from 'rotating' the venture of the meetings amongst the places of work of the members, and as Rotarians visited other cities on business the word was passed and Clubs began to spring up as far apart as New York and San Francisco, Within five years, the idea had spread to the cities along the St. Lawrence River in Canada, and by 1911 the first Club on this side of the Atlantic in Dublin was formed.

The first Rotary Club did not originally meet for a meal. Later some would, eat before going on to the meeting, but as the meetings became more regular, they were able to persuade a local hotel to convert a large bedroom into a private dining room. Clubs became very large, with Chicago Rotary Club boasting 300 members by 1909. With the formation of new Clubs, Paul Harris suggested a National Association of Rotary Clubs which was to be the fore-runner of Rotary international.

London's first Club was chartered in 1912. By then it was clear that some people saw Rotary as a business-getting organisation, with a tint of idealistic overtones. This caused some uneasiness amongst the Membership, particularly in Great Britain and Ireland and was contributory to the formation of a British Association of Rotary Clubs, which although subscribing to what had...by then become the International Association, also began to formulate its own constitution. The British Isles remain the only part of the word with a separate tier, R.I.B.I. (Rotary International in Great Britain & Ireland).

In the aftermath of the Great War, Rotary's eyes turned to "the great work of reconstruction now confronting us". The idea of personal service began to supersede the business opportunity, and the movement motto "Service above self" took on a new meaning,

As the number of Clubs in Britain began to rise, (there were 99 by the end of 1922), it made sense to create a number of Districts, each with its own Council of members elected by the constituent Clubs. At the lowest level, each Club developed, its own Council, and committees to explore; the four "Avenues of Service" which came to represent the Rotary ideal - Community Service, International Service. Vocational Service and Club Service.

When a new Club is chartered, it draws its membership from a designated geographical area. Each District encourages the formation of new Clubs through the recommendation of its Extension Officer. Winchester's Club was chartered in 1927, and in 1983 a daughter Club was inaugurated,

the Rotary Club of Itchen Valley, serving the Chandlers Ford and Hursley area. With the growth of Alresford during the late 70s and early 80's, the District realised that there was the potential for a new Club to the east of Winchester, and after some research invited three local, businessmen, a solicitor, a banker and a doctor to consider the possibility of a Club for Alresford and District.

It was a bitterly cold November evening in 1984 when we met with Wallace Winchcombe, the Extension Officer and past Governor, himself a member of the Rotary Club of Salisbury. None of us knew anything factual about the Rotary movement, and we probably shared a popular misconception that it was an organisation of older business men who raised money and sent it to America. Wally soon put us right; Like Paul Harris and his colleagues, we met several times that winter, at each others' workplaces, and introduced new names and new faces. By the Spring, it was clear that there was considerable interest in the viability of the group, and we sought a regular meeting place, where we could share a meal, and start to formulate plans. Fortunately the Swan Hotel's dining room was not in regular use on a Monday evening, and we were able to make a regular reservation.

By June 1985; we were meeting as a group of some twenty-five men every Monday. We were learning a great deal about Rotary, its constitution, its past achievements and its future potential. We were committed to joining the Rotary movement, and in September a formal inaugural Dinner was held in Perins School main hall to which we invited Rotarians from all over District III, comprising Hampshire, parts of Dorset and Wiltshire, the Isle of Wight and the Channel Islands. The Rotary Clubs of Winchester & Ichen Valley took a personal interest in our development with a representative often attending our weekly meetings and we began to plan our Chartering which was to take place in the Winchester Guildhall in January 1986. This was a splendid occasion with over 300 guests and. speeches from District Governor John Elley of Sturminster Newton, and President of R.I.B.I. Bill Huntley who welcomed the Alresford Club into the Rotary fellowship.

I had the. privilege to be elected the founder president of the Club, and I was ably assisted by an enthusiastic Club Council, and membership of twenty-eight. Each. Rotary Club produces its own emblem or "banner" and we looked to Alresford and district's history for our's. The mitre of Bishop De Lucy and the roundhead helmet from the Battle of Cheriton seemed obvious companions, and the bunch of watercress obligatory.

We had many ideas about how the Club could, in particular serve the local community, but we were very aware of the established service organisation, the Alresford Pigs, who had done a great deal of good work over many years and we had no wish to intrude on their activities. The rules of Rotary require each member to attend a minimum of 60% of the weekly meetings, a commitment many of us thought would be difficult. However, a Rotarian may attend any Rotary Club at home or abroad as a most, welcome guest, even without prior notification, and such an attendance can count towards his own Club's requirements. When away from Alresford on business, and. even on holiday, many Members have taken advantage of this privilege of membership of the Rotary movement and have made new friends as far away as Australia; Turkey, Borneo and California. The Rotary ideal of Service can. only stem from the growing fellowship of its members, and all of the projects which we have developed over the past six years could not have happened without the friendship and mutual understanding of each others vocation which has grown from meeting together each week.



Each Committee of the Club draws up a plan at the beginning of the Rotary Year, which is July 1st, outlining what it hopes to achieve in the coming twelve months. Each year, the incoming President of Rotary International proposes a personal theme, and the President of R.I.B.I. likewise, so we are. never short on ideas! We have tried to balance fund-raising with personal service whenever appropriate

and in Community Service this has, I believe, been largely achieved. One of our first 'events' was a sale of Christmas trees in Broad Street, now an annual 'regular', which provides local people with good quality trees at a very reasonable price and still raises over £500 to be spent on local causes. The following year, it seemed that the Carnival would die unless a new sponsor could be found, and the Club willingly took on its organisation and built it into a most enjoyable afternoon for the town. The Torch light Procession and Fireworks Display in Arlebury Park which started in 1989, and the Christmas Ball in the same year have similarly become popular events which satisfy a local need, the proceeds have in return benefited the elderly through donations to local play-groups and the 'in-betweens' through donations to the St. John's Ambulance and the all-weather pitch at Perins School. Many of our donations are to individuals in need and not therefore greatly publicised. Returning to the theme of Service, we have dug gardens, decorated rooms and taken the elderly on, outings, and to local theatres.

The activities of the Vocation Committee need a little explanation. By and large, Rotary Clubs invite into their membership one representative from as many businesses and professions as possible. Each member then represents that vocation in the Club, and at the same time represents Rotary, and therefore what it stands for, in their own trade. Each autumn, the Vocational Committee has organised realistic interview experience for final year students at Perins School, and has supported local Rotary projects including the 'Youth Speaks' public speaking competition. One seminar for local businesses has been held in Winchester, with another planned this year. The Rotary movement puts emphasis on the encouragement of young people, and has been actively involved in the Tonix project for a coffee bar for the over-14s in Alresford.

With such an international base (there are now well over a million Rotarians in 184 countries) it is not surprising that Rotarians have played a large part in many projects involving the Third World. Rotary's greatest success to date has been Polio Plus, to eradicate poliomyelitis from the world by the year 2005 by a mass immunisation programme supported by UNICEF. World-wide, Rotary has raised \$231,000,000 to buy sufficient vaccine, not only against polio but also against four other serious diseases of childhood, and by the end of this year, 594,500,000 children will have been immunised. Rotarians in Third World countries have been very active in the administration of the programme, and as a Club we were pleased to have raised over £3000 towards it. In 1986 we supported an Eye Camp in India with a door-to-door collection in Alresford and District which also helped us to explain the aims of our new Club. We are currently exploring a Water-Aid project and have supported a District challenge to provide a water supply and school facilities for a village in India.

The Rotary Foundation is a charitable Trust endowed in the memory of Paul Harris and which we as individual members support through an annual levy. It was set up to support international projects, and particularly to finance educational exchanges between very different parts of the world. Each year, our District hosts foreign undergraduates at Southampton University, and the Club always takes the opportunity to invite them to Alresford and learn a great deal from them. We have also hosted Group Study Exchange students from Australia, the U.S.A. and India, and this year a group from South Africa. One of our members has led an Exchange Team to Australia and Papua New Guinea, and we have sponsored a team member from the town on an exchange to Texas. The value of these exchanges in terms of international understanding has proved invaluable.

I wonder if Paul Harris really ever imagined what would become of the organisation he started 97 years ago. In age terms, the Rotary Club of Alresford is still a small child, and yet has achieved much more than its first three members could have predicted. Although in no way a political organisation, the Rotary movement has enormous potential for the advancement of international understanding, and perhaps that has never been more important than at the present. We in Alresford will hope to play our small part.

