

SOCIAL CLUB STORY

Ever heard of Mr. Henry Solly? No, he wasn't the local pawnbroker or Rabbi; far from it - he was in fact a Unitarian Minister, who in 1862 founded the Working Men's Club and Institute Union - the C.I.U.

He, like many of his class, was disturbed at the huge amount of drunkenness amongst the working men of the time whose only relaxation away from the wife and kids was provided by the pub. Naturally, the main interest of 'mine host' was to sell as much beer - and spirits - as he could, throwing out the drunks when they became too much of a nuisance.

Solly recognised the domestic problem this caused and came up with the idea of creating clubs - Working Men's Clubs - where men could meet for social intercourse without the booze and therefore the drunkenness. However, his first attempts were not a success; the idea did not appeal to the majority of working men to whom total abstinence, particularly among friends, was unthinkable. Solly had to concede the point and beer was allowed to be sold, but because, unlike the pubs, there was no pressure to 'drink up!' drunkenness became almost unknown in his clubs. The important thing was sociability, as today's members will confirm. The movement took root, became popular and Working Men's Clubs sprang up throughout the country.

Coffee taverns were established with the same intention of abstinence, and it was as one of these that the building now housing the Albany Club was opened in 1889 as the Allchurch Coffee Tavern. Unfortunately this was not a success and soon closed down. The building was bought by the Earlsdon Building Company, a small consortium of local men interested in the purchase of property for development in the area.

Seeing the way the area was developing in the early years of this century, with hundreds of new families moving in, a group of local businessmen realised the need for more than the City Arms, the Earlsdon Cottage and the Royal Oak had to offer in the way of social activities. They met together at the Liberal Club in Union Street on the 10th February 1910 and out of their



Earlsdon Street around the turn of the century, showing the Albany Club with the arched windows

discussions came the idea of a Working Men's Club, already popular in other parts of the city.

They approached the owners of the old Coffee Tavern who agreed to lease the building to them at a rent of £50 a year and with a membership already of over 200 they held an inaugural concert and opening ceremony on Thursday 31st March 1910.

A steward was appointed at a salary of 10s. 0d. a week, with accommodation, gas and coal included and by April a billiard and a bagatelle table had been installed. On April 25th the committee was informed that the bar takings for the previous week amounted to £11.18s.6d.

Help for the needy being high on the list of Club priorities, a Benevolent Fund was formed early on for cases of hardship, funded by members paying a small weekly contribution. However, because too many regarded it as a sick club, entitling them to automatic benefit whenever they were off work through sickness, it had to be discontinued. Later on the idea was resuscitated and, with money raised entirely from raffles, totes, donations etc., the fund was used and is used today, as originally intended, purely in cases of real hardship.



Club members on an outing, probably during the First World War.

That first summer of 1910, a club outing was organised to Long Itchington and in August the first flower, fruit and vegetable show was held, with money prizes of 5s.0d. (25p) for the winners. There was a special class for the children, but with a first prize of a model flying machine and a second prize of a pair of boots for the best collection of wild flowers, it seems they didn't expect any girls to participate.

So the club flourished, although not without its problems - mainly financial, but also because of personality clashes - until 1931. In that year a disgruntled wife, so the story goes, fed up with her husband spending too much time at the Club, spilled the beans to the police that after hours drinking was going on, and the Club was closed down.

However, it didn't remain closed for very long, and re-opened a couple of months later as the Albany Social Club, since when it has gone from strength to strength..

(to be continued in next issue)

Mary Montes

ALBANY SOCIAL CLUB - Part 2



Pictured above: Members of the Albany Club before leaving on a trip

Last month we left the 'Albany' reopening after its short 'hiccup' when it was closed down in 1931. Its misdemeanour had only been minor - playing cards and a little drinking after hours, but it was serious enough for a prosecution to be brought. The committee was taken to court, a devastating experience for those normally extremely law-abiding gentlemen. The club was fined £2. 11s. 6d. and closed down for one month. At a general meeting held in Earlsdon School after the month was up, it was decided to start again and an application was made for a new licence.

The application was successful, although the magistrates made two provisos: The first was that a completely new committee was to be elected; not one of the old committee was to serve on it which was quite a blow to some of the old serving members, but if the club was to reopen the directive had to be obeyed. The other proviso was that the club should have a new name. Now this was no problem and by common consent it was changed to 'The Albany Social Club', the name we're familiar with today. It was a wise choice, as now hopefully the club would have a wider appeal, particularly to those gentlemen who, living in 'middle class' Earlsdon were loth to consider themselves as 'working class'. Whether or not it did have any effect is hard to tell but in any case the membership rose steadily.

The building itself then remained in its imposing entirety, quite different from the utilitarian frontage we see today. The entrance stood in the centre of the facade, with two tiny lock-up shops either side which had attractive windows under stone archways. The large window in the upper storey opened onto a tiny balcony, surrounded by a very pretty iron railing. When this was removed in the 1970's, apparently for safety's sake, the upper structure was also altered, giving the building a truncated appearance. It is a pity that the old facade could not have been preserved - it was definitely the most attractive building on Earlsdon Street.

When the club reopened in 1931 the two little lock-up shops were re-let and the one on the left hand side, which until the 1920's had been a ladies' dress and millinery shop, was taken over by the Sketchley Dye Works. They were there until moving to their present premises further up the street in the 1960's. The right hand shop, which from the beginning had been a tobacconist and confectioner's was re-occupied by Mr. T.H.Thatcher who, except for a short period before the First World War had been there since 1910.

Writing of this tiny shop, with its walls lined with bottles of humbugs, toffees, coconut mushrooms, bulls' eyes, Japanese teacakes, acid drops and many other delicacies, brings back happy childhood memories of Saturday afternoons, when we children would stock up at the 'Institute Stores' as it was known and take our goodies across the road to spend two or three hours of thrills and laughter in the Imperial Cinema, affectionately known by everyone as the 'Barn'. The sweet shop closed, to the regret of many, in the 1970's and both shops were incorporated into the club which, expanding fast, needed the extra space.

Although naturally when it was first opened it was intended for men only, the club, not without its dissenters, has accepted the presence of women at all times and in most activities (except snooker and billiards!) and they have become an increasingly important part of club life, although they can still only be affiliated members. With events and interests for all ages and all members of the family, from summer outings and Christmas parties for the younger ones, to bingo and outings for pensioners and sports and events for all these and everyone in between, the club has come a long way from those early days of 80 years ago.

Then spittoons and sawdust in the little bar and smoke room were the order of the day, with a few newspapers in the reading room, a game of cards in the card room and a very limited variety of beers and wine. There was the occasional treat of a tripe supper or a smoking concert and a huge piece of beef to share at Christmas, but it was a centre of interest and social activity in Earlsdon which at that time had very little else to offer the ordinary working man.

How would those few early members react if they could visit the club today? A few, naturally, would be unhappy at the loss of their little cloistered retreat, but most would, I am sure, be delighted at the relaxed family atmosphere of today's 'Albany Club'.

Mary Montes

Albany Social Club

Ever heard of Mr. Henry Solly? No, he wasn't the local pawnbroker or Rabbi'. Far from it - he was in fact a Unitarian Minister, born in 1814 and educated at London University, and in 1862 he was the founder of the Working Men's Club and Institute Union, the C.I.U.

He, like many of his class was disturbed at the huge amount of drunkenness amongst the working men of the time, whose only relaxation away from the wife and kids was provided by the pub. Naturally, the main interest of 'mine host' was to sell as much beer as he could, throwing out the drunks when they became too much of a nuisance. Solly recognised the domestic problems this caused and came up with the idea of creating clubs where men could meet for social intercourse without the booze, hence the Working Men's Clubs. However, his first attempts were not a success. The idea did not appeal to the majority of working men, to whom total abstinence particularly among friends was unthinkable! Solly had to concede the point and beer was allowed to be sold, but because, unlike the pubs, there was no pressure to 'drink up!', drunkenness was practically unknown in his clubs. The important thing was sociability, as today's members will confirm, and the movement took root and spread throughout the country.

men got together in 1911, formed a committee, raised a mortgage, bought the old Coffee Tavern and started business as the Earlsdon Working Men's Club, with a membership of about 300. It was affiliated to the C.I.U. from the start.

Help for the needy being high on the list of Club priorities, a Benevolent Fund was formed early on, for cases of hardship, funded by members paying a small weekly contribution, but because too many regarded it as a Sick Club which entitled them to automatic benefit whenever they were off work through sickness, it had to be discontinued. Now, with money raised entirely from raffles, totes, donations etc., the Fund is used as it was always intended, purely in cases of real hardship.

Apart from a slight hiccup in 1931, when it was closed for a short period, the Club has never looked back. Reopening as the Albany Social Club, still affiliated to the C.I.U., it has gone from strength to strength and now boasts a membership of 1800 - 1900. With an elected committee which appoints the full-time Secretary and with a Steward for the front of the House, it is run smoothly and efficiently. Apart from membership subscriptions, income comes mainly from bar sales profits.



Members of the Albany (then Earlsdon) Social Club on an outing, probably during the First World War. Old photographs kindly lent by Mr. and Mrs. Gorsuch.

Coffee Taverns were established with the similar intention of abstinence, and it was as one of these that the building now housing the Albany Club was opened in 1899, as the Allchurch Coffee Tavern. It was never a success and had closed by 1905.

Already familiar with the Working Men's Club movement in the City, a small group of local

Intended originally solely for men, it has become over the years very much a family institution, with snooker, dominoes, darts, pool, cash Bingo, a monthly concert, dances and cabarets, it offers something for everyone, and the Over 60's Club, with its regular meetings and outings, is reckoned to be the most lively and thriving in the City. The children too are not forgotten, with

summer outings and the annual Christmas party, where they receive not an orange and a penny, but a £5 gift each. The Club also offers outside interests, with men's and women's bowling teams, two good football teams and, if marching bands are to your taste, the Club is home to Mercia Marching Brass, one of the top bands in the country.

The Club has certainly come a long way from its beginnings in the old Coffee Tavern with its pretty balcony complete with wrought iron railing, and just a Bar and Smoke Room for its 300 members.



Members outside the Albany Club about 1925: front, from left- 3rd Ernie Tarrant, 7th Ernie Turner, 8th Fred Underwood, 15th Sid Bales; back, from left- 6th Bernard Carpenter, 7th Alf Hill, 9th Fred Cribden. Can you recognise any others? Please let us know.

Why is it still thriving when others are closing down for lack of support? Two members at least think they know the secret. Partly, they say, it is because it offers value for money: membership, which is obtained purely by sponsorship, doesn't cost the earth, just £2 a year, with £1.15, payable on joining, for life membership of the C.I.U., giving access to any of the hundreds of affiliated clubs up and down - and outside - the country. The main reason, however, for its continuing success is the emphasis on family participation, an aspect which would have surprised but, I ... sure, greatly pleased old Mr. Solly! Every member of the family is welcome, from little Matthew tucking into his Coke and crisps, to Dad with his pint and Grannie enjoying her Gin and Tonic. There is a place and entertainment for all, and generations of local families have taken full advantage of its hospitality. The youngsters may look further afield for brighter lights and more exotic experiences, but return in the end to the familiar, friendly atmosphere of the 'Albany'.

A Member's View

Albany Club member Barry Shapley writes:

The Albany Social Club, with 1710 members, is one of Coventry's oldest working mens clubs. The Club was formed in the late 19th century as the Earlsdon Working Mens Club and was not allowed membership to the National Club & Institute Union until as late as 1921. In those days ladies were only allowed in as far as the stairs! It wasn't until 1962 that children were allowed in the Club - as long as accompanied by a parent.

The oldest member is 84 year old Wal Bennett, and the longest serving members alive today are Frank Ganley and Wally Cooke. The longest serving President was Harry Lunn who had the honour for over 15 years in the late twenties and into the thirties.

It is a C.I.U. rule - probably soon to be changed due to Government pressure - that ladies can only be associate members, which restricts their right within the club, e.g. they may not serve on the committee.

The current President is Mr Harry Hayes, in his eighth year as such, the Secretary is Mr Roy Hartle and the Games Secretary is Brian Langley.

The club is friendly and cosy (no juke boxes but two "bandits"!) with a distinct family atmosphere and everyone who visits the club is immediately struck by that fact. The Steward and Stewardess, George and Bett, and all their staff are prompt and friendly in their service.



All smiles behind the bar. Photo by Barry Smith

The club caters for various sports such as bagatelle, snooker, pool, darts, dominoes, crib, whist etc., with teams in both the Coventry & District C.I.U. leagues and other independent leagues.

A unique fact is that two of the older members are very famous in their own right being named (yes!) William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens.

Why not pay a visit then?

St. Barbara's Extension

The £18,000 extension to the rear of St Barbara's Church Hall (centre of picture) has now been completed. It is being used mainly for storage, enabling the full floor area of the main hall and the committee room to be brought into use.

Photo by Barry Smith

