

A Brief History of Probus since its inception in 1965

One of the first clubs was formed by the Rotary Club of Welwyn Garden City, 25 miles from London, with Fred Carhill as the driving force. When he retired he occasionally used to meet a few other retired friends for morning coffee – mostly ex-commuters to London, with professional and business backgrounds with lots of experience behind them. There were many men in the area with similar backgrounds, again commuters and previously unable to participate in the life of the town. This gave him the idea of starting a luncheon club. He phoned some of his friends and all were agreeable. The Rotary Club President arranged the first meeting and 45 men attended. So the first club was born.

The first club was called The Campus Club, and the name was selected from the fact that the meeting place was facing the centre of town called 'The Campus'.

The Rotary District took up the scheme with the result that Rotary International, Britain and Ireland published a leaflet about the idea to encourage other Rotary Clubs to sponsor a similar club.

At about the same time in September 1965 Harold Blanchard the chairman of Caterham Rotary Club Vocational Service Committee retired from business there and, in trying to be helpful got under his wife's feet in the kitchen. His wife is reputed to have made a comment to the effect that she was grateful when he attended a Rotary lunch once a week and added "Why can't you do something for the wives of retired men who are not Rotarians?"

He too saw the need for something for retired business men who did not have the same opportunities or inclination for social contacts in the district due to the hours spent commuting and working out of the area.

The members of the Rotary Club Vocational Service Committee decided that the least that could be done was to organise perhaps a monthly lunch to enable them to meet for fellowship and social activities in their own club and the idea was put to the Rotary Club Council who agreed with the suggestion and told the Committee to see it through.

The committee decided to publicise their proposals and called a meeting at a local

hotel for all retired professional and businessmen aged 60 and over living in the local area, in February 1966, and 42 prospective members turned up. A monthly lunch was arranged so that the men could widen their range of acquaintances. At the initial meeting it was agreed to a monthly luncheon, and it was suggested that as individuals were virtual strangers to each other it would be advisable if the Rotary Club President took the chair so that the members of the new club could get to know each other a little before electing their own officers and drawing up simple rules.

The inaugural luncheon of the first Probus Club anywhere in the world therefore took place on the 2nd March 1966 and in May of that year a Committee was formed under the Chairmanship of the late Harold Blanchard (Chairman of the Rotary Club Vocational Service Committee) who is now accepted as the 'Father Figure' of Probus.

It was felt that members had suffered too many rules and regulations during their working lives and for this reason very simple Probus Club rules were adopted. The Chairman should serve for one year only and Committee members on average only occupy their posts for two years. This encouraged volunteers to come forward and helped to ensure a continual current of fresh ideas in the club.

Members were asked for suggestions for a name for the club and many names were suggested and were until one member came up with the idea of Probus taking the first three letters from 'PROfessional and BUSiness'. He assured everyone that Probus was a Latin word from which 'Prohibit' was derived and the new name was adopted with enthusiasm.

Incidentally, there is a village in Cornwall near Truro called Probus and its name is derived from Saint Probus after whom the church, along with Saint Grace, is named. The church has the highest tower in Cornwall and is visited frequently. The village is also famous for its gardens, which attract visitors from Europe and further afield and featured regularly on the television programme 'Gardeners World'.

Probus was also the name of a Roman emperor who apparently devoted himself to developing the internal resources of the empire, but fearing that the army would deteriorate with inactivity, he employed the soldiers on public works. Such occupations were deemed degrading and excited discontent and a discontent and a body of troops engaged in draining the swamps about Sirmium murdered him in AD282. He was also reputed to be famous in his day for cultivating vines.

The success of the Probus Club of Caterham very soon became known among neighbouring Rotary Clubs and the whole concept being so simple snowballed and new clubs sprang up everywhere.

As there is no central world body, it is difficult to tell the exact number of Probus clubs in existence, but there are over 1700 clubs in Great Britain and Ireland. There are others in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Malta, South Africa, Spain, USA, Canada, Bermuda and South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, India, Argentina, Chile and Malaysia.

Some countries do have their own governing body for Probus, but Great Britain and Ireland do not. Each club is autonomous, making its own rules and decisions about time, place and regularity of meetings, and the format that these gatherings follow. Some clubs are still sponsored by their local Rotary Club and others spring up from waiting lists of thriving clubs.

All the clubs follow the original ideals of providing a gathering of like-minded retired people who want to extend their circle of friends, and because of this simple philosophy Probus is growing at a tremendous rate both for men and women, and in some cases clubs of mixed gender.

Written by Julia Lymer of Probus Supplies and Information with help from a history written by Mr. George Lewis of the Probus Club of Worcester North.

If any reader has anything to add or to challenge about this 'history' please do. I am always interested to hear more and very willing to adapt to further information. Julia.