

HISTORY AND MEMORY: THE FIRST 100 YEARS OF UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

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Our University has a prehistory which reaches back to the late 1880s, to meetings of this Society, in which a succession of members of the Lit and Phil suggested that the town needed a College. In 1912 the idea of a college was revived by Astley Clarke, a consultant radiologist at Leicester Royal Infirmary. Dr Clarke was President of the Lit and Phil, and throughout his year in office he generated support for the contention that Leicester needed a university college.

On 14 November 1917, four days after the conclusion of the Battle of Passchendaele, in which the 550,000 casualties included the deaths of 1,300 men from Leicester, the *Leicester Daily Post* called for the establishment of something more than a mere artistic war memorial, and proposed a college to commemorate lives lost and lives damaged by serious injury. On Armistice Day Astley Clarke opened the fund with a donation of £100. Dr F.W. Bennett (a local surgeon and geologist) added £500, and 14 months later the fund passed the £100,000 mark, much of which was donated by grieving parents and widows. On the 4th of April 1919 came the biggest gift of all, when a local businessman called Thomas Fielding Johnson, aged 90, announced that he had bought the former lunatic asylum for £40,000, and was donating it to the town of Leicester as a site for the proposed university college and the two Wyggeston Schools (Boys' and Girls'). £20,000 was soon given by Harry Simpson Gee, the father of Percy Gee. The Lit and Phil was of course involved, and in 1920 it undertook to provide a botanical garden for the college.

One aspect of the fundraising that has remained in the shadows is the contribution of local women, a subject that Simon Dixon has been investigating. One of the key women was Agnes Archer Evans, the last headmistress of Belmont House, who served on the Council of Vaughan College and in 1913 became the first female President of the Lit and Phil.

On 4 October 1921, less than three years after the Armistice, the College of Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland opened, with eleven students, three lecturers, and a principal, Robert Rattray, who was

the Minister of Great Unitarian Meeting and an active member of the Lit and Phil. Sometime in the first year of the College's life, a photograph was taken of staff and students. Figure 1

One might think that ours was a women's college in which both students and teaching staff were women, and indeed the first published history of the University said precisely that. That was almost true, but two male students are missing from the photograph, possibly because they had already left the College, and Dr Rattray taught English and Latin. The woman seated on the right is of interest. She was Nellie Bonsor, the daughter of a poor widow in Wigston who took in laundry to make a living; Nellie became the first president of the Students' Union. It is pleasing that our aspiration to accommodate a broad social range of students was realised in our first intake.

The new College was financed by benefactions and the Town Council. But because it was the Lit and Phil that established the University, rather than the Town Council, Leicester was never a civic university in a sense that Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester are, and so we have long enjoyed a good relationship with the Council; this has not always been the case with the civic universities.

In the interwar period most subjects were taught by a single person, who had to cover the entire syllabus; the chemistry lecturer, for example, had to teach all of organic, inorganic and physical chemistry. One member of staff whose star was destined to shine brightly was W.G. Hoskins, who was here for three periods between 1931 and 1968. Hoskins founded English local history as an academic discipline, and



Figure 1 It shows nine students – all women, including Rhoda Bennett on the upper left – Principal Rattray, and two members of Staff – Miss Measham, who taught botany, and Mr Gibbs, the College Secretary. There were two other members of the teaching staff: Miss Sarson, who taught geography, and Mlle Chapuzet, who taught French. ©University of Leicester

he founded it here. In 1955 he published his *Making of the English Landscape*. I read it in 1975, four years before I came here. Reading it is a transformative experience: one can never again look at English landscape in the same way.

One striking feature of the college in the interwar period is the triangular relationship between the University College, New Walk Museum, and the Lit and Phil. The Museum and its foundation collection were, like the University, created by the Lit and Phil. To give one example, the Lit and Phil's centenary in 1935 was marked by the College's Botany Department mounting an exhibition and demonstrations in New Walk Museum. The University's Museum Studies programme is a product of that relationship. As for the Museum, it may, like the University, have outgrown its parent, but filial ingratitude is a constant danger, and not just in *King Lear*.

In the 1950s we had greatness in our midst, in the person of Norbert Elias, arguably the greatest thinker

in the history of the University. He arrived in England as a refugee in 1935, aged 38, and taught evening classes in London until he was 58, when he landed his first full-time job, a lectureship in our department of Sociology, and seven years later retired as Reader in Sociology. He published little while he was in London and Leicester, possibly because, like many Jewish intellectuals of his generation, he was a damaged man – his mother had perished at Auschwitz. In 1939, however, he had published (in German) a book later to be translated in two volumes as *The Civilizing Process*. His central insight was that manners, far from being a trivial subject for academic investigation, are in fact the outward manifestation of the process by which humans learn to live in peace with each other. Elias was a celebrated European intellectual, the first recipient of the Adorno prize, the holder of honorary doctorates and state honours in Germany, France and the Netherlands. In his adopted country of Britain, there was no such public recognition.

Our students in the postwar period included the novelist Malcolm Bradbury and the literary critic John Sutherland, both in the English Department. The University, in Bradbury's estimation, offered to its graduates 'sober futures, in low or middle management or schoolteaching'. John Sutherland also hints at this modesty. In *The Boy who Loved Books*, Sutherland gives a chapter to his time as an undergraduate at Leicester. He arrived after a stint as a labourer on the railways, wondering whether one could sink lower than the world of bucketed over-sweetened tea and the life of a rail dog. His answer that one could indeed sink lower, by going to Leicester University. 'To be accepted at Leicester', he explains, 'was to have failed everywhere else in academic life. You didn't 'come up' to Leicester, as Oxonians and Cantabrigians said (toffily), you ended up there'.

In marked contrast to present attitudes, the University was utterly lacking in ambition. In the words of Jack Simmons, who spoke for many in his history of the University (1958), the buff-grey brick of which the University is built ... 'is the best emblem of its character. Quiet, undemonstrative, under-emphatic, it is an authentic piece of the East Midlands'. Sixty years on, we are a global university that is numbered in the top few hundred in the world, and we have no interest in being quiet, undemonstrative, or under-emphatic.

In 1957 we gained our independence, and thereafter we move into the sphere of personal memory. The longest memory belongs to Jean Humphreys, who arrived in 1946. She is yet another woman who has committed her life to this University, and has also been a President of the Lit and Phil.

In the sixty-one years since we became a university, our ambition has been to rise in the world, and to be a distinctive university. We became, for example (in the words of *The Times*) the cradle of British Sociology, thanks to Ilya Neustadt and his team, and our School of Education was regularly singled out for praise as a national asset. When we introduced Law, we chose an unusual emphasis on European law. Our new medical school chose to offer a syllabus that integrated pre-clinical and clinical subjects. When we decided to introduce Engineering, it was not the single-subject engineering that dominated British universities, but engineering science.

The same sense of ambition is evident in our research, which we started slowly. There has been distinction in many areas of our activity. Think, for example, of the work of Ken Pounds on black holes, or Alec Jeffreys on genetic fingerprinting, or John Swales and Nilesh Samani on heart disease, or Richard Buckley's discovery of the bones of Richard III and the subsequent analysis of the bones by colleagues in other departments.

If such discoveries are to continue, and if the University is to flourish – and nothing is assured at this uncertain time, as Brexit approaches – we must of course be well led and well governed. We have long been fortunate in our leaders, and now, more than ever, we need strong leadership. The damage that government inflicts on universities by such measures, and the damage that Brexit is already inflicting on the sector, will be disproportionately felt by relatively small research-intensive provincial universities like ours, and the responsibility for dealing with it will fall on the shoulders of our leaders, more than it has in the past. This means in turn that governance has become critical to the well-being of the University, and our recent chairs of Council, as Bridget Towle well knows, have had to bear workloads and exercise responsibilities that were unknown in scale or importance to their predecessors.

I should like to finish with a word of advice to our leaders and governors. In the words of a commonplace articulated by James Baldwin, 'know from whence you came'. This University came from the intellectual and educational ambitions of the Lit and Phil, and from the noble wish to memorialise the dead in an educational institution for the living. Baldwin continues 'If you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go'. That should be our resolution as we embark on our second century.