

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BILSTON ROTARY CLUB

HAPPY 90th BIRTHDAY ROTARY IN BILSTON
Rotarian John Crockett 2021

When a group of nine Bilston business men met in the back room of the Villiers Arms in March 1931 to receive the charter that started Rotary in Bilston, I'm sure they could have had no idea what the next 90 years would look like or what a difference the club they were starting would make. What they did know was they wanted to make a difference, a difference to the community they lived in and in the lives of the people who lived and worked in Bilston. They probably didn't really know what it was they were going to do or how they were going to do it but they knew they wanted to be part of a movement that had and still has the motto 'service above self' something that they and the hundreds of Rotarians that have followed in their footsteps have continued to do.

It was a bleak world outside that room in 1931 the world was gripped by a global crisis affecting every country. The Great Depression was destroying economies across the world, factories closing, businesses going under, jobs lost, lives ruined and communities destroyed. Bilston, at the heart of the industrial midlands with its steel and heavy industry, was particularly badly hit; so never was there a better time for a group of like-minded people to embark on a journey to help communities, support people and help create a better world.

Equally there was no way they could know that in 90 years' time Rotarians in Bilston following in their footsteps would again be working against a backdrop of another global crisis as a global pandemic devastates economies, communities and lives but once again Rotarians are there to help support and alleviate the heavy burden on the people of Bilston.

It's been a roller coaster 90 years as generation after generation of Rotarians have continued in the footsteps of those founding members of Rotary in Bilston. The movement has changed, adapted, reinvented itself to meet the many different challenges but always stayed loyal to that commitment to put service to our community above self. The original aims of Rotary in Bilston 'to provide vocational and personal services and to raise money for disasters and good causes' have remained in many different and varied ways and what has happened throughout the 90 years a combination of doing things with and for the community and raising money for good causes.

It was Rotary that in World War Two provided a mobile canteen for workers and servicemen and in more recent times have provided thousands of hampers to Bilston pensioners each Christmas.

Rotarians have continued to organise events from raffles to car shows from bingo to under 11 football tournaments, from street collections and 'Bikeathons' to arranging the annual Wolverhampton Music School concert. Some of these are entertainment and others raise money so we can support local causes from Green Park Special school to the refurbishment of the War Memorial in Bilston for 100th anniversary of World War One.

While the focus has been on Bilston and local causes', Rotary is an international organisation with 1.2 million members worldwide and the club in Bilston has played its part in helping support disaster relief by providing shelter boxes, providing support for World International Eye Camps and with Rotary friends in Calcutta helping establish a local school in in Duttakapour India. Bilston continues to actively support young entrepreneurs with loans and support Rotary's International pledge to eradicate Polio throughout the world. Over the 90 years since our Rotary Club was formed, we have raised nearly £1 million to benefit those in need, both locally and internationally and continue to work hard today.

Rotarians have always been local and remain close to business, professional and community leaders in the town. When Bilston first became a borough in 1935 the first four mayors were all members of the club and that tradition remains strong with more recent Wolverhampton City mayors in Bert Turner and Phil Page being part of our club and for the future Sandra Samuels, mayor in 2022/23, will carry on that tradition as an active member of the club in Bilston.

Ninety years on the club finds itself, as the founders were, in a global crisis caused this time caused by coronavirus. But true to the spirit of the aims of Rotary and the commitment of those who started the club Rotarians have adapted and continued to provide help and support in these difficult times. Moving to video calls instead of meetings Rotarians have provided services or financial support to a range of organisations across Bilston from 'Di's Kitchen' to Parent and Carer Support from Bilston Resource Centre to Ettingshall and Bilston Outreach as well as 'The Melting Pot' and Excel Church Food Bank. Rotarians continue to work for, and in, our communities and are there continuing to fulfil the rotary aim of "Doing Good in the World".

One lasting memory for most people of Rotary in Bilston over the years is our Santa Sleigh which each year brings joy to children as it journeys through local estates or proudly leads the procession down Bilston High Street, supported by local scouts and guides, to the switch on of the Christmas lights. Sadly, this could not happen in 2020 but normal service will be resumed!

Rotary is an international organization and a local community leader and the Rotary club in Bilston has spent 90 years serving, supporting and helping Bilston and hope to be here in another 90 years helping the people of Bilston as we have done since 1931.