

THE VICTORY CLUB

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Club was founded 60 years ago with a membership in excess of 300 Founder Members. Launched by the Mayor of the day Councillor H.T.Bush, who chaired a meeting of members at the Town Hall called to elect an Executive Committee and to approve the proposed rules.

Nelson House, the Club's original home in Trafalgar Street, had been purchased for £4,500, raised by public subscription to a welcome home fund, subsequently known as the Victory Fund for Ex-service men and women. This was to have financed a gratuity to each returning service-man, but not enough was raised to make the sum worthwhile. The total fund amounted to £7,764 17s 4d to be divided among 8-10,000 returning service men and women. After a number of meetings the idea of a Club was adopted and the Victory Club was born. The premises had formerly been used as a Social Club by the Gloster Aircraft Company.

Over the following years, in spite of predatory attempts to convert the site into an hotel complex, Nelson House was administered and developed by its elected committees to a standard whereby the many service organisations and members were able to enjoy the facilities offered. The Club's activities rapidly expanded to play an active part in the social life of the town, with football teams, snooker, billiards and skittles to the fore.

The first major development was a skittles alley, followed by the Cabin Bar - a favourite meeting place used by many organisations. The need to invest in a new roof caused development to slow down until sufficient funds had been put aside to continue. Then in 1981 a new £35,000 ballroom extension was built. This was opened by the President of 22 years, Honorary Alderman David Morris, demonstrating conclusively the suitability of the room for formal occasions.

A make over of the main bar followed. During building work and subsequent refurbishing of the Steward's flat a substantial amount of dry rot was uncovered, pushing the expenditure past the £40,000 mark. Nevertheless further improvements to the entrance hall and kitchen area were carried out, financed mainly from the clubs own resources. But unfortunately more dry rot was uncovered, causing concern to the management.

1987 saw the completion of a Scheme of Trustee and Management, worked out by the Club's Officers in conjunction with the Town



Council and the Charity Commission. The process had started in 1984 and was refined until all parties were happy with the final document, which was then published. Prior to this time the Town Council had acted as Trustees to oversee the running of the Club, but this had proved to be a remote and unsatisfactory arrangement, highlighted when the Club sought to renew its expired lease. This system has been replaced by a Committee of Management consisting of six Club officers, called Elected Members, two retiring annually, but eligible for reappointment if still in Victory Club office, and three further members called Representative Members, appointed annually from the Council of Old Comrades



Cheltenham Victory Club

Executive Committee, 1947

Photographed at the opening of the new club

Back Row:

Mervyn Moore, F.C. Newell, J.A. Smith, W.O. Clec

Second Row:

H. Fowler, L.W. Browning, Miss E. Douglas-Jones, Miss E.J. Evans, T.C. Owen, J.A. Little, R.D. Turner

Front Row:

Miss B. Farmer, R.J. Ashdown (Chairman), Ald. Clara Winterbotham,
R. Rouse (Hon Sec.), Miss G.M. Douglas-Jones (Vice-Chairman), G.B. Tyrer (Treasurer)

Association, the Town Council and the Victory Club.

The Club membership during this period varied between five and eight hundred - a considerable increase from that in 1946, mainly due to the expansion of membership grades. But in spite of these numbers it became increasingly difficult to encourage members to take an active part in running the Club as Committee members. Committee work continued however and many discussions (but little action) took place about the underlying condition of the fabric of Nelson House and the amount of money spent trying to combat the advance of dry rot throughout the building. It was finally decided to 'bite the bullet' and either have a new building on the site or to move elsewhere.

The officers visited the Charity Commission in Taunton and established that part (or all) of the site could be exchanged for residential development against a new custom built Club of similar floor area provided that the 1987 scheme was amended to include permission to dispose of the site. The Charity Commission prepared the necessary documentation, which was signed up and exhibited on the notice boards of the Club and the Borough Library for the statutory period of one month. There being no objections to the proposed change the way was cleared to proceed. A number of developers submitted schemes, none of which measured up to the aspirations of the Trustees. Disappointment led to the examination of alternative options. Selling the complete site and moving to a green site and building a custom designed Club, or of moving to another building suitable for conversion, taking care not to buy something which would turn out to be in the same state as Nelson House. With no 'green sites' available attention focused on existing buildings, such as two local clubs, already closed down, complete with room for expansion, which would have been ideal, but were themselves destined for redevelopment and therefore ruled out.

Later, notices appeared in the local press advertising Burlington House, for rent. This building, Grade II listed - subsequently revoked, was at various times a first world war military hospital (a plaque on the wall of the portico testifies to this), Electricity Board Headquarters and District Health Authority Headquarters. It had been recently refurbished as a quality office block with a substantial and comparatively new three floor extension to the rear - on the face of it an ideal prospect.

Plans were drawn up for the conversion of the building to Club requirements. Eventually approved by the Borough Planners, conversion was commenced by Greet Building Services, the Club remaining open during the work. A setback occurred during conversion when an unexpected overnight deluge caused the upper floor of the older part of the building to resemble a swimming pool, because the roof had been left open during replacement of the bitumen felt. Many ceiling tiles were ruined and had to be replaced and the electrics checked. However the first phase of the conversion was completed in time for the Mayor of Cheltenham, Councillor Ken Buckland, to officially open the Club on the 27th July 2002.

Since that time development has continued with refurbishments to the lounge bar, dining room and ballroom. The Trustees, the Club and a very active Ladies Committee provide the finance. Further Improvements will follow which will make Burlington House the best and most elegant Club in the area. The founders would surely approve.

Space not required for Club purposes has been let out to Planning Consultants CgMs, providing income for the Trust to finance further improvements.