

Chapter 19

GOOD CAUSES & PUBLIC HEALTH

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Coming up to the turn of the century, fund-raising was in full swing in aid of the new Birmingham University, one of Joseph Chamberlain's favourite projects.

Transformation of the [Mason] college into a university was a major enlargement. Nobody campaigned harder than Joseph Chamberlain and J T Bunce, editor of the "Birmingham Post". They raised the necessary funds locally . . . In 1900 the University of Birmingham, at Edgbaston, became the first university in England since the founding of Oxford and Cambridge to be designed for a single city. (1)

Not to be left out of the action, local trade unions decided to make an independent effort in relation to for this worthy cause. Let W J Spurrier's "*Birmingham Magazine of Arts and Industries*" tell the story.

When subscribers were being sought on behalf of the University, the organised

portion of the working men thought they would like to do something, if only in a small way, to show their appreciation of the efforts then being made by Mr Chamberlain and the gentlemen working with him . . . A conference of the members of Trade Unions and other analogous societies was held under the auspices of the Trades Council upon the thirteenth of September 1899, with the object of providing the means for the sons and daughters of artisans to take advantage of the educational facilities offered by the Birmingham University . . . It was unanimously decided that the best method . . . to create a fund to endow bursary scholarships at the University . . . [would be to organise] an Industrial Polytechnic Exhibition . . . [which] would appeal to, and bring together, the working men and the manufacturers, and also enlist the co-operation of the educational authorities.(2)

There were guarantors aplenty for the show; more than 150 firms and individuals were listed in the catalogue, headed by Alderman Sam Edwards, the Lord Mayor, and, of course, the Rt Hon Joseph Chamberlain, MP. On the working-class side there were some 40 organisations listed, ranging from the Birmingham Trades Council to the Jewish Tailors' Society. Some of the societies' names reflect trades long since passed into oblivion, such as, for example, the City Lamp Men's Union, the Flint Glass Cutters and the Birmingham Horse Collar Makers' Society. (3)

Entitled the Birmingham Industrial Polytechnic Exhibition, the show was opened by the Lord Mayor on 26 August 1901. Contributions in the catalogue by staff of the University, including one by Dr Oliver Lodge, the Principal, described their own displays. There was a similar piece written by W E Sumpner, the Principal of the Municipal Technical School, Suffolk Street.

An official guide book was also available, which, in addition to describing the exhibits, carried an illustrated feature, a “*Strangers Guide to Birmingham*”, which provides a brief but interesting description of the city at the end of the nineteenth century. Under the title “*From the Board School to the University, or the Educational Ladder*”, Professor Muirhead provided details of scholarships for bright grammar school pupils. These were available at several universities, including Birmingham. (4) (All very well, but the good professor probably did not fully appreciate that even scholarships to grammar school, that first step before university, could very seldom be taken up, even if won, by poor children in the “good old days”, as many of us know to our cost). Spurrier’s magazine, cited above, provided a summary of the exhibits.

That the exhibition has been very attractive is proved by the enormous attendance: at the same time there was more instructive matter than is usually found in the collections displayed in Bingley Hall . . . Amongst the exhibitors were several of our leading manufacturers who have never

before appeared at a local exhibition. Neither has there previously been such an educational display as was made in the galleries. These larger collections were contributed by the Municipal Technical School, the School of Art, the School Board, and the West Bromwich School of Art. The University also had several collections on the floor of the Hall . . . in the Industrial sections, about the most noticeable exhibits were those of Messrs Archibald Kendrick & Sons, Allday & Onions, Parkinson Cowan and Southall Bros & Barclay . . . To the public the band and the side shows are the great attraction: they thus take their information in a highly diluted state, often not realising that they are learning anything at all . . . By far the most important . . . exhibit was that of the printing office . . . Quite the quaintest and most original exhibit . . . was the stall of the Safety Bottle & Ink Syndicate Ltd. The effect . . . was funereal in the extreme . . . being dedicated to the memory of the old-fashioned stone ink bottle. (5)

In addition to the catalogue and the guide, there were daily programmes on sale. A large bound collection has survived. The visitor, they tell, could watch demonstrations of several industrial processes being carried out, electroplating, moulding and casting of church bells and confectionary making, to name but three. Board School children were showing their prowess

at physical exercises from 2-30 to 5pm each day – let us hope for their sakes that they did it in relays!
(6)

Musical entertainment was never lacking at Bingley Hall. The ceremony on opening day was accompanied by the national anthem played by the band of the Royal Marines. Lots of other bands performed, twice daily, during the whole run of the exhibition and members of the Birmingham Welsh Musical Society gave vocal concerts every evening. “*Rule Britannia*”, played by the Coldstream Guards band, followed, as legally required then, by the national anthem, closed the proceedings on the final evening.

Running for ten weeks, the show closed on 2 November, having been an enormous success. As Spurrier wrote:

Right up to the last hour the place was literally besieged, and had it been possible to obtain the use of the hall, would have remained open for a longer time . . . it was attended by 333,000 people . . . the sum raised would be about £3,000. (7)

Birmingham Town Hall hosted the 17th Congress of the Sanitary Institute in the autumn of 1898. In parallel the organisers mounted a health exhibition in Bingley Hall, which ran for almost a month. Entrance cost 2s 6d, or by season ticker 5/-, so evidently they were not targeting the lower classes. The catalogue lists over 200 stalls, many displaying baths, lavatory pans and wash-basins. One supplier used a rather special name but a

couple of years early with “*Fin de Siecle parallel-sided bath, metallic enamelled Range Royal inside, decorated Chrysanthe outside*”. From Union Passage Mould’s were offering a “*patent boiler-bath . . . heated underneath by a small coal or slack fire*”. Not the sort of thing to stoke up too enthusiastically, it might be thought! (8)

Glover’s of Warwick were selling “*an appliance for emptying cesspools without exposing the contents to the air*”, surely a great boon to those poor mortals whose job it was to carry out that unpleasant work. Gaskell, Chambers & Fulkes, Dale End, displayed a “*Municipal Closet with Double Mahogany Seat*”, an extremely sociable product! The names of the closets offered by Skey & Co of Tamworth conjure up a variety of ribald visions – “*Torrent*”, “*Rocket*”, “*Scientific*” and “*Klondike*” amongst them. (“*Klondike*” – named after a river in Alaska – sounds a mite chilly!) Izal disinfectant and Ronuk polish were on sale in the hall, both still in use today.

By 1920, the year of their next visit to Birmingham, the Institute had become the Royal Sanitary Institute. Once again they arranged a health exhibition in Bingley Hall to coincide with their Town Hall Congress. There were, according to the catalogue, fewer stalls taken this time, only 120, but closer inspection of the details suggests that the exhibition was much more interesting. At about this time Birmingham’s Municipal Baths Department had introduced Cottage Baths around the city and they had quickly become very popular. (The writer can testify to this, having been taken as a child to make use of one of them every Saturday

morning.) The showpiece of the 1920 exhibition was a large model of one of these new bath complexes. *“It comprises 18 Private Baths for men, 16 for women and 1 for babies, so arranged that crying children could not be heard in other parts of the establishment”.* (9)

George Pinkerton of London was displaying a full-size working model of his latest invention, an *“Improved Sanitary Dustbin and Automatic Cinder Sifter, which can be used as a coal bin for flats”*. Birmingham’s Salvage Department had on show *“the standard dustbin adapted by the Corporation for the storage on domestic premises of house refuse awaiting collection”*. This was another welcome innovation at the time, replacing the miskin, previously used for this purpose. (The miskin was an uncovered enclosure in the back yard). Packaging, other than tins and bottles, could be burnt. (Most bottles were returnable, with the bonus of a small refund). Even vegetable peelings were used on the domestic fire. Consequently, household waste was mainly finely sieved ash. Hence the term “dustman” for the refuse collector. He had to shovel up the ash into a rush basket, which then had to be carried, balanced on the head, to be tipped into his open-topped vehicle in the roadway.

The department also displayed goods made by them from by-products of the salvage collections. Concrete was mixed using crushed clinker from their furnaces and was then made into kerb-stones, housing blocks and garden rollers. Meat, fish and vegetable wastes were turned into manure, glue and soap. From the War Office came

“models of sanitary apparatus and devices illustrating military hygiene during the war”. The St John Ambulance Association set up a model first-aid room. Two of the food supplements on sale, Glaxo and Virol, are still available today.

It was not until there was a shocking loss of life in the winter of*****, especially in London, that decisive government action was taken to curb the menace of smoke pollution in British towns and cities. Created in earlier times mainly by smoking domestic chimneys, the volume of smoke discharged into the atmosphere increased enormously as industry expanded from the eighteenth century on.

For many years the Smoke Abatement Society had campaigned against this lethal public nuisance. In the autumn of 1926 they mounted an exhibition in Bingley Hall in order to recruit support for their campaign, a very sound choice of venue; for Birmingham’s filthy air was notorious. The foreword in the exhibition catalogue was explicit.

Thousands of people live their lives from start to finish in a smoke-laden air . . . if the damage caused by smoke were done suddenly there would be a great outcry . . . Smoke abatement enthusiasts have fought their cause in the face of ignorance and apathy . . . the nuisance is preventable . . . public health and happiness alike call for its prevention . . . smoke is a disaster . . . a serious loss of potential fuel and causes immense damage to property. (10)

The Society held a conference in the hall during the exhibition.

In June 1921 a “*Scenic Fair*” was staged in Bingley Hall as “*a tribute to the nursing profession*”. It was hoped that £10,000 – a sum probably approaching £500,000 today – would be raised. The College of Nursing would receive ten per cent of that, as would the Nation’s Fund for Nurses. The balance would be used for another excellent *****.

*To ***** a club for Nurses in Birmingham and to endow scholarships for Nurses in Birmingham and the Three Counties. All fully trained Nurses are eligible, if disabled, for help from the Nation’s Fund, whether members of the College or not, and will also be eligible for membership of the Club and to compete for the scholarships. (11)*

Local committees were established in various Birmingham suburbs and elsewhere in the region, each one making itself responsible for stocking and running a stall at the fair, selling donated locally. A co-ordinating committee supervised these efforts and hired exhibition specialists to set up the hall.

Advance publicity was provided by nine editions of a monthly news-sheet, the *Scenic Fair Herald*, commencing in October 1920. In addition to creating anticipation amongst the public, these news-sheets kept the scattered participants up-to-date with the latest developments in all the other Birmingham districts and Midland towns that were involved. (12)

The scene created, as described in the official handbook, must have been very attractive. One feels a tinge of regret not to have seen it.

The visitor finds Bingley Hall transformed into a grand Homeland Scene of English Country Life, with Village Green and Fair in full swing. Manor House, Pretty Country Houses with tiled and thatched roofs, some timber built with small latticed windows and quaint old gates. Many of the cottage fronts have Rose, Honeysuckle, Ivy and other flowers clinging in profusion, and all charming in appearance. The ground floor of each house being used as a stall, for the sale of goods. Added to them are a number of bright looking Market Stalls, decorated with red and white awnings. There are Pergolas, Kiosks and Caravans, Novel Fishponds, Hooplas, Village Well, Stocks and Pillory etc, etc. Surrounding the entire Hall will be a great Panorama of Country Scenes – the whole setting will form one of the prettiest and most picturesque Scenic Fairs ever held in the United Kingdom.

The event was presided over by the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Birmingham, Mr and Mrs Cadbury, and was opened by Mrs Cadbury at 3pm on Thursday, 2 June. Other exalted persons officiated on following afternoons, but the principal social highlight of the event was the visit of Princess Mary on Monday, 6 June. As an honoured guest she was probably the only visitor to get in free, because, very wisely, no complimentary

tickets were issued. Entry before 5pm cost 2/6d, about £3 today, a price that would have kept the afternoons very exclusive, which was probably the intention. After 5pm the cost of admission fell to a modest 6d.

A wide range of goods was on offer. There were stalls selling "*Everything for the House*", "*Everything for the Table*", "*for Mother and Baby*" and others of a similar character. Baskets, bags, second-hand books, toys, sweets, cakes, seaside hats and summer dresses could be bought at the kiosks and other stalls. The handbook announced a little fund-raiser that also provided a welcome refreshment break.

A cup of delicious Bournville Cocoa, together with a small sample tin, and a biscuit, can be obtained at Cadbury's stand at a charge of 2d per cup. (The entire proceeds of such sales will be handed to the Hon. Treasurer in aid of the Scenic Fair Fund.)

A lounge was set up as an Old English rose garden by the Business Girls' Section. "*Iced drinks, iced fruit, cigars and cigarettes*" were served there "*by ladies daintily dressed in Old English Chintz Frocks*". No alcoholic beverages were available in the hall, due, one suspects, to the strong Quaker involvement in the event.

There were amusements galore: Punch and Judy, optical illusions, "*Puzzle-Em Photos*", finger football and hand billiards, to name just a few. A shooting gallery and "*cocoa-nut*" shy were manned by wounded soldiers from the Highbury, Uffculme

and Sorrento hospitals. Music was provided by the City of Birmingham Police Orchestra and the Band of the Coldstream Guards, alternating in afternoons and evenings. A concert party gave regular performances and there were two jazz bands engaged for dancing to in the evenings.

For a small charge your silhouette could be drawn for you by Mr H E Oakley, MBE. He was the talented artist responsible for the stunning and entirely appropriate design of the posters that advertised the show. (A mint copy is held in Birmingham Reference Library). This striking design was also used for the cover of the official handbook. (Fig*)

A number of subsidiary events took place in the months beforehand, each raising money towards the target figure. The most spectacular of these was an amateur football match played on West Bromwich Albion's ground. A crowd of 10,000 watched Stoke play St Helens – but the players were all ladies, unusual even today! There was no charge made for the use of the ground.

The final report, published in September 1921, declared that the event had gone “*with a swing from beginning to end*”. Better still, the accompanying balance sheet revealed that over £22,000 had been raised, more than double the target figure, at least £1m in today's terms. The stall managed by West Bromwich and Smethwick, “*Everything for the Kitchen*”, achieved the distinction of being top contributor to the fund. (13)

In 197* Birmingham Retirement Council formed a new section devoted to initiating leisure groups for retired citizens. They chose the name

Fir-Cone, the first part of the name being an acronym for “Friends in Retirement”. In June 1972 an event was organised at Bingley Hall to promote greater interest in the project. The *Birmingham Post* reported their chairman’s speech at the opening ceremony.

An appeal for people to come forward and impart their skills . . . to new leisure groups of retired people, was made by Sir Eric Clayton, Chairman of Birmingham Post & Mail Group Ltd yesterday. He was opening the three-day Fir-cone Festival in Bingley Hall, Birmingham, staged to show what activities elderly people were organising for themselves . . . loneliness was the greatest problem affecting older people. The Lord Mayor . . . said he was greatly impressed by the variety of activity displayed. (14)

Over more than a quarter of a century Fir-Cone has nurtured groups studying foreign languages, art, local history, playing bridge and scrabble, enjoying dancing and swimming – the list goes on – all led and tutored by volunteers, most of whom are Fir-Cone members themselves.