

First Steps: A History of the Early Wayfarers

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April 29, 2016

Formation and Constitution

The Guild of Students has a history dating back to the late 19th century, and is often said to be one of the first students' unions in the country. It was a founding member of the National Union of Students in 1922, but its Edgbaston building, today synonymous with the organisation, was not built until 1930. It was in this decade that much more was established of what we now take for granted at the Guild, including the Saturday Hop (now Fab 'n' Fresh); Guild News (now Redbrick); and permanent members of staff. [3]

The first mentions of Wayfarers in University records lie in the Guild of Undergraduates Council Minute Book for the period 1931-33. [2, p. 130]

“Wayfarers’ Constitution The proposed Constitution, having been circulated to members, was taken as read.

R. D. G. Vann stated that it was understood that a Mountaineering Club was in process of formation and suggested that the two Societies might amalgamate.”

By the time of the next Guild Council, on January 13th, Wayfarers had already run its first walk. (See page 2.) It decided to function separately from the Mountaineering Club, and the Council officially adopted the Wayfarers constitution. [2, p. 138]

The only internal document to survive from this decade is an accounts book which was used continuously from 1933 until 1972. [6] From this we learn that 47 membership subscriptions were taken between Wayfarers' formation and the end of the academic period in 1934. (Although a count the start of the next year suggests ten more members didn't pay anything to join.) The balance at this time was a healthy $19/8\frac{1}{2}$. Aside from the usual stationery expenses, the society unsurprisingly purchased many maps, as well as printed photos of their walks for a log book which, sadly, has since been lost.

Early Activities

We can glean much information on the early activities of the society from contemporary issues of Mermaid magazine. Published almost continuously from

1904 to 1977, in the 30s the magazine featured “articles about the opening of the Guild building as well as regular features consisting of short stories; dialogues; poetry; society reports; sports teams reports; faculty gossip; correspondence; Debating Society reports; film reviews; and the Chancellor’s Hall [of residence] supplement.” [1]

From the issue of Mermaid published March 1933 [4, Vol. III, No. 5, p. 115], we read

“The University of Birmingham Wayfarers is the name of a Society recently formed in the University. Its objects are to create and foster in members a love of the countryside by the organisation of rambles and cycle runs and the holding of lectures which shall stimulate interest in the outdoor activities... The first activity of the Society took the form of a ramble to the Clent Hills on Sunday, February 5th.”

This report goes on in a humorous vein (see the full text below), mentioning a weekend trip to Ludlow and a lecture given by a Mr. Hugh Gibbins on the Youth Hostel Movement.

The society continued the regular rambles, cycle runs and lectures throughout the Spring term, and come October was ready to welcome Freshers for the first time. In the Guild of Undergraduates Year Book¹ for that year, a description of the society is given, along with the names of the committee members (comprising Chairman, Secretary-Treasurer, and four general committee members), as well as the annual subscription cost of one shilling, or £3.12 in today’s money.² The schedule for the first term was as follows: [5, Vol. IV, No. 4, pp. 84-5]

Sunday, October 1st. Ramble: Clent Hills and Romsley. Leader, D. A. Wright.
Sunday, October 29th. Ramble: Maxstoke and Packington. Leader, Miss J. Summers.
Saturday—Sunday, November 11th—12th. Youth Hostel Week-end at the New Little Witley Hostel. Severn Valley and Abberley Hills. Leader, G. G. Freeman.
Sunday, November 19th. Cycle Run: Teme Valley. Leader, O. Kipps.
Monday, November 20th. Lecture: Francis B. Andrews (President, Birmingham Archaeological Society), on “Old Buildings Around Knowle.”
Sunday, November 26th. Ramble: Knowle and Temple Balsall. Leader, J. K. W. Jones.
Saturday, December 2nd. Joint Ramble with Birmingham Youth Group of the League of Nations Union: Cofton Woods and Hopwood.

¹Not to be confused with the American conception of the Year Book, this was a document intended to make students aware of the protocols of the Guild, as well as the services that it offered, such as room hire, sports clubs and other student groups.

²According to the Bank of England Inflation Calculator.

Wayfarers' first full year ended with a week-long walking tour of Derbyshire, where "despite the Easter rush of walkers, the party managed to accommodate itself comfortably in some of the fine Derbyshire Hostels at Harlington Hall, Overton Hall, and Derwent Hall, and in occasional cottages." [5, Vol. IV, No. 6, pp. 141] This trip was attended by fifteen students, of whom half were from Birmingham University and half from other universities across the country.

A An appeal to past members

Nothing brings the history of Wayfarers to life more than hearing the experiences of past members in their own words. The trip reports in Appendix C are brilliant examples of the humour and camaraderie characteristic of the society, which drove me to make this research. If you are a past member with stories to share, or maybe photographs or other artifacts representing your time with us, then I, or whoever is in the future responsible for the society, would love to hear from you. Contact details are listed at the end of this document.

B Advice to those wishing to research further

In writing this document, I am aware that I have but scratched the surface of the history of the society. While little exists in the Wayfarers archives³ of its pre-war activities, I am confident that much additional interesting information could be brought to light through continued diligent study of Guild records kept by the Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections. Although performing a catalogue search for 'Wayfarers' does not turn up much, I suspect that the society is mentioned in many student periodicals, minutes, handbooks and so forth yet to be discovered.

For researchers interested in the history of the group from the 50s onwards, there are also useful documents in the Wayfarers archive. These are mainly trip logs but also include committee documents, publicity, award certificates and correspondence with other Birmingham walking groups. Wayfarers has much shared history with the "Stoats" University Mountaineering Club, so it is worth enquiring about their archive material too.

Finally, Wayfarers is renowned for the long-standing commitment of its members, and it stands to reason that many past members would be happy to tell you more of their time in the society if they can but be found. (See Appendix A if this applies to you!)

C "Mermaid" reports on the Wayfarers

The University of Birmingham Wayfarers is the name of a Society recently formed in the University. Its objects are to create and foster in members a love

³Read: cupboard.

of the countryside by the organisation of rambles and cycle runs and the holding of lectures which shall stimulate interest in the outdoor activities. Membership is open to all members of the University on payments of an annual subscription of one shilling.

The first activity of the Society took the form of a ramble to the Clent Hills on Sunday, February 5th. Nineteen members, under the leadership of Messrs. J. K. N. Jones and G. G. Freeman, left Rubery Tram Terminus at 11-15 a.m. during a heavy shower of rain. It soon cleared up, however, and only rained again when Shafei was trying to take photographs of the party climbing the Clents. Lunch was taken at the Fountain Inn at Lower Clent⁴, where three more members were discovered in the "snug". During lunch a gentleman from the North told a joke about a barmaid. During the afternoon the party rambled over another part of the Clents and then went to Frankley Green for tea. During tea a gentleman from the North told a joke about a barmaid. From Frankley Green the party went to Northfield, and, with the exception of the gentleman from the North and a lady member, who stayed behind at the "Travellers' Rest," returned home by tram. The total walking distance was about 15 miles.

Twenty Members spent Founder's week-end⁵ in the Youth Hostel at Ludlow, some of whom cycled, while the rest went by train to Cleobury Mortimer and then walked to Ludlow. On Sunday, Titterstone Clee was visited. On Monday morning several male members of the party awoke to find their trousers missing and one member, who set out in his pyjamas to find the missing pantaloons, returned rather hurriedly on hearing a feminine footstep approach.

During the week-end a gentleman from the North several times told a joke about a barmaid. This week-end was so successful that it is hoped to arrange a similar one next term. [N.B.—We are authorised to state that Shafei has not invited pantechnicon dealers to supply tenders for his next rucksack].

The first lecture to the Society was given on Monday, February 6th, by Mr. Hugh Gibbins, of the Birmingham Regional Group of the Youth Hostels Association, who spoke about the Youth Hostel Movement.

During the first few weeks of its existence this Society has been particularly successful and it has undoubtedly come to stay. All members of the University are invited to take part in the rambles and cycle runs, or attend the lectures.

H. S.

⁴[Author's note] This pub is still open, and is occasionally visited by the Wayfarers.

⁵[Author's note] Probably Saturday 25th February - Monday 27th.

D Useful contacts and websites

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| Wayfarers Committee | wayfarersatguilddotbhamdotacdotuk |
| A. Greenhill (author) | apgreenhillatgmaildotcom |
| Student Groups Enquiries, Guild of Students | studentgroupsatguilddotbhamdotacdotuk |
| Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections | wwwdotbirminghamdotacdotuk/ facilities/cadbury/index.aspx |

References

- [1] *Description of Mermaid magazine*. 2014. URL: <http://calmview.bham.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog%5C&id=XUB/GUILD/F/3>.
- [2] *Guild of Undergraduates Council Minute Book 1931-33*.
- [3] *History of the University of Birmingham Guild of Students*. 2010. URL: <http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/74/b6f23185f6004617a0a662deaa3deacc/About%20Us-ourhistory-timeline.pdf>.
- [4] *Mermaid 1932-33*.
- [5] *Mermaid 1933-34*.
- [6] *Wayfarers accounts, 1933-1972*.