

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2022

Henley Management College - Dan Remenyi

Wargrave Local History Society resumed its programme of talks after the summer break when Dan Remenyi gave an illustrated presentation at the September meeting about the Henley Management College. He had had a close association with the college, as after working in the computer industry for a number of years, he obtained a PhD in computer management, which he then taught at the college. Following his retirement, he had researched and written the book on the college's history.

Dan began with a brief history of the site. The college is based in one of the most beautiful houses alongside the Thames, Greenlands. There had been a house there for a very long while, possibly since Tudor times, and it was possible that Queen Elizabeth I had visited there. By the time of the Civil War, it was occupied by a Royalist family – but the neighbouring Fawley Court belonged to Parliamentary supporters. When Charles I was defeated, the Parliamentarians decided to use their guns to demolish the house at Greenlands.

In due course, a new house was built on the site, which was bought by a member of the Smith family (of W H Smith's), who had founded a newsagent's business in London 1792. The family gradually acquired a number of estates in this area and in Devon (including the entire village of Hambleden nearby – later generations of the family holding the title of Viscount Hambleden.



At the outbreak of World War 2, the building at Greenlands was made available to the government to use, and it was used in part by the Royal Corps of Engineers, and partly for children from Great Ormond Street Hospital. At the end of the war, however, the family decided that they did not wish to re-occupy the house.

In 1939, Great Britain was not really prepared in many ways for the war which ensued, and certainly British industry was not able to respond as would be required. A group of influential individuals, including an established management pioneer, Lynall Urwick, met to consider how this major problem might be improved. Lynall Urwick had been at Oxford and then in the army, and at the Army Staff College (where potential generals studied) had seen how senior military officers were trained. He believed that middle

managers should be taken out of their jobs for a year to follow a comparable type of course. However, this was considered impractical in 1942-4, and Urwick was replaced by Geoffrey Heyworth (later Sir, and then Lord Heyworth). He had great experience in industry, having risen from a boy worker to be chairman of Lever Bros, and he later headed ICI. It was decided that the country could not afford to release people for a year, so a maximum of 12 weeks was agreed for these courses.

At the end of the war, this programme became the Administrative Staff College, formally registered in 1945. It was in need of both a home and a principal. As the 3rd Viscount Hambleden had decided not to move back to Greenlands, he gave it to those starting the college on the basis of a peppercorn rent of £100 per year. One of the group was concerned at what might happen if the Viscount died, and the family wanted the building back, so an insurance policy to the value of the property was arranged. The first principal was appointed in 1946 - Noel (later Sir Noel) Hall. He had been a professor at University College, London, before the war, and then headed the British Commercial Commission in Washington. It was planned that the first courses would begin in 1947, but they actually started at the end of March 1948 – on the very day that Viscount Hambleden died. The insurance policy then enabled the College to secure the Greenlands site as its own.

When the first course participants arrived, the post-war conditions meant they had to take their ration books with them (a situation that lasted until 1954). The facilities were described as “just good enough”. The main entrance was what Dan called ‘the mail entrance’ – a porter’s lodge in the same way as Oxford Colleges. The courses, however, were based on the ideas of the Army Staff College, where in general external experts were not brought in to give lectures, but the people on the course engaged in syndicate group work, learning from each other’s experience, with a pressure to complete tasks to time and a strong emphasis on self-development. It was a great success, and ‘the world came to Henley’ which was the clear leader in management development – leading to a decade when there was a 2-year waiting list for potential entrants. There was a good team running the College – but no accountant. Those taking the 12-week course were charged £100 per person – but it was costing more than that to run. Noel Hall turned to some of the larger companies, such as ICI, for help. Noel Hall was subsequently ‘head-hunted’ to become the Master of Brasenose College at Oxford, but the financial problems continued through the Principalship of Noel Hall’s successor, J P Martin Bates.



This was the era of the Robbins Report on universities, which declared that Britain needed more business schools. Both London and Manchester Universities soon set up these, and Henley’s waiting list no longer applied. The next Principal was Thomas Kempner, who came from a different background. Born in Germany, he had come to Britain at the same time (although not one of) the kinder-children, and came to

Henley from the Bradford Business School, bringing several of the team there with him (who the existing staff considered to be the “Bradford Mafia”). The College could still not offer degree courses, so Kempner introduced the idea of liaison with Brunel University, offering an MA. There were only 20 – 30 applicants, and this was considered a disaster, so it was re-named as an MBA (Master of Business Administration), the “thing to get” at the time. The course was then readily filled, and Kempner made the Henley Management College into what Dan called a fantastic business. It was still very male orientated, however, at this time. Thomas Kempner had a somewhat authoritarian approach, and lived on the premises, which he seemed to consider his own.

He was succeeded by Dr Ray Wild, one of those who had come from Bradford. This was the ‘golden age’ of Henley, when it opened up new markets. It also gained a Royal Charter, to be able to award degrees (although not Doctorates), but the number of people taking its courses declined. Dr Wild served as Principal for 10 years, and was followed by a Cambridge academic, Stephen Watson, who did not stay long, and then Gary Hamel.

By this time, Brunel had set up its own business school, Henley was losing key members of staff, there were financial losses, and the College lacked a general ‘feel good factor’. One problem was that those with good management experience would receive an ‘inferior salary’ compared to what they could earn in industry. One of the College Governors then suggested that a young and energetic former director at Cadbury Schweppes, Chris Bones, who had an MA from Glasgow University, should become Principal. He had a strong belief that the College should change radically. A number of senior staff moved elsewhere, whilst the expenditure on information systems did not prove effective, and the College was again struggling financially.

The way forward was to arrange a merger with Reading University, with 2 sites – Greenlands and Whiteknights in Reading, and ‘business as usual’. It is said to have cost several £million to bring Greenlands back up to standard, but Dan concluded by saying that the Henley Business School looks forward to the challenges of the 21st century.
