

Straight and True

The Story of the Swansea Boys Club from the 1930s to the 1960s

In the early 1930s, members of the Swansea Strand Mission, a voluntary religious organisation, regularly met with groups of young people who congregated on the streets in the centre of Swansea after they had finished their schooling or work for the day.

These young people, who were predominately boys, complained that there was very little for them to do in their leisure time, because of the scarcity of organised activities in the town which were suitable for their age group. The Mission members publicly expressed concerns that some of the boys they met might drift into anti-social activities through boredom.

These concerns came to the attention of Mr F.J.May, the Chief Constable of the Swansea Borough Police Force. In his professional capacity Mr May realised that throughout the country, for Police Authorities discharging their duties for preserving law and order, no type of delinquent presented more difficulties than the juvenile offenders whose environment and home conditions did not permit the natural use of physical energy.

The Chief Constable decided to take action to remedy the situation. In the latter part of 1933, he organised a committee of enthusiastic volunteers from the Police Force and interested civilians.

The Committee managed to rent a disused printing works in the centre of Swansea as a meeting place for boys. The building was open for seven days a week and immediately attracted a healthy membership. From this modest beginning began the long and illustrious history of the Swansea Boys Club.

The Committee set out to organise a programme of wide activities for the boys with the aim of promoting character building. The organiser's simple philosophy was that boys who were healthy in body and mind were likely to grow up to be useful citizens in their adulthood.

Under the instruction of trainers with the required coaching skills, football, cricket, table tennis, swimming, P.E. and athletics teams were quickly organised. The club soon established an impressive record of participation and achievement in sports events organised by what was then the South Wales Federation of Boys Clubs.

Other popular non physical activities included carpentry and first aid courses. The first St John's Ambulance Cadet Division in Swansea was formed in the youth club.

The club library proved a popular area of quiet activity, particularly on Sunday evenings. The Committee constantly appealed to the public for the donation of books of a juvenile nature which would appeal to inquiring young minds.

It would be difficult for any club member to attempt to smuggle gangster comics into the club library past the trained watchful eyes of the police helpers.

The adopted club motto "Straight and True" was a reminder to the boys of the many benefits of developing a good character.

There was no written set of rules for the club members to abide by, but every boy was expected to uphold the club membership pledge which was "I promise that, with the help of God, I will endeavour to be honest, straightforward and manly in my daily life and that I will do all I can to promote the best interests of the Club".

Senior club members participated in the organisation of club life by monitoring the progress of new club members and making recommendations to the senior committee as to whether the young probationers should become full club members.

One regular club activity which became very popular and reinforced the Committees aims of character building for boys was the annual Club Camp.

The first of many visits of one week's duration was held in 1934. The camp was held at St Athans Boys Village. It was sponsored by the South Wales Miners Welfare. Over 90 boys attended the first camp. Places were eagerly sought as in all probability the camp was the only holiday which many of the club members were likely to have.

The theme of the camp was a week in the fresh air when "good food, physical activity, spiritual guidance and good companionship could not fail to develop a good character". The traditional end to a day of wholesome activities was a communal evening sing-song – simple pleasures in those pre TV and Game Boy days.

The different phases of development of the Swansea Boys Club in the early 1930s, highlighted the voluntary commitment of many adults who were determined to make the enterprise a success.

There was substantial expense involved in meeting the costs of running the club. Payment for rental, heating, lighting, purchase of equipment etc, had to be met to maintain the clubs momentum.

Mr May and his committee embarked on a vigorous ongoing programme of fundraising in Swansea. The list of financial subscribers printed in the first Club Annual Handbook reads like a Who's Who of Swansea at that time. Organisations such as Rotary Clubs, Masonic Lodges, Chambers of Trade, the Legal Profession together with many prominent townspeople of the day – either donated cash or equipment to the Swansea Boys Club.

Serving members of the Swansea Borough Police Force made weekly donations from their wages, when it became necessary to pay a full-time warden as the club grew in popularity.

The formative years of the Swansea Boys Club were in an era of economic depression in the whole of the country.

There are many recorded examples of ways in which the volunteer helpers assisted club members who came from low income families.

When not attending club sessions, the boys' general welfare was of interest to the police helpers and many a boy was diverted from drifting into juvenile crime because of the influence of those police volunteers.

In recent years, there has been much publicity about Community Policing projects in support of young people in Wales. There is ample evidence that the Swansea Borough Police Force carried out much service to young people in the community through its work in the Swansea Boys Club in the 1930s and onward.

Club workers had regular contact with many local firms and, although employment was often scarce, suitable work was found for a number of senior club members.

Honorary doctors attended club sessions to be aware of any boys who were physically unfit, possibly due to under nourishment or other conditions. If that were the case, the boys would be medically supported with sensitivity and with the permission of their parents.

Although it was a boys only club, many groups of women supported the work being done there.

One group of women had a specific task. They were known as the 'Necessitous Needs Committee'. The objective of this group was to kit out many of the members who attended the annual Club Camp.

In addition, the women on the Committee collected articles of clothing for older boys of limited means who could be sure to look smart when attending job interviews or actually turning up for work.

The 1934 Club Annual Report records the fact that “since the club opened over 100 boys have been assisted with clothing and footwear, involving the distribution of the undermentioned articles”:

Hose	77 pairs
Boots and Shoes	59 pairs
Shirts	58
Trousers	42
Caps	21
Jerseys	32
Suits	3
Coats	7
Vests	9

In 1937 the large waiting list of boys desiring entry to the Club and the inadequacies of the existing club premises led to a decision to launch a Building Fund.

A new Executive Committee, still including many serving Police Officers and a Board of Trustees was appointed to lead a vigorous fund raising programme.

The cost of the new building was calculated to the nearest old penny at £10,385.7s.7d.

The National Fitness Council of England and Wales agreed a grant of £8000. The National Association of Boys Clubs donated £825 and the remaining cost of staffing and equipping the building was met from money raised locally from the Swansea public.

A successful tender was submitted by Mr John Weaver, a distinguished local architect and the Club Trustees entered into a 99 year lease with the Swansea Corporation at a nominal rent of one shilling per annum for a site at the top of Baptist Wells Place, Mayhill.

The new building was erected on a rocky outcrop overlooking the eastern approach to Swansea.

The fixtures and fittings in the two floored building were made of top quality stone, timber and brass. The walls in the entrance and on the stairway were covered with heavy duty white tiles – not entirely attractive to look at but completely functional. The block wooden floors in all the activity rooms are still wearing well today after thousands of pairs of young feet have pounded them over the years.

The building was completed at the outbreak of the Second World War and was not immediately available for use as a youth club as it was commandeered for official war-time use.

Unfortunately, due to the heavy bombing of Swansea town centre, the old printing works could no longer be used as a meeting place for the boys.

The Club managed to run a temporary programme of activities when the Management Committee negotiated the use of the Swansea Ragged School, an imposing red brick Victorian building located opposite what is now the old Swansea Central Police Station.

In the middle of the war the new building became available for use and the programme of physical, arts and crafts, practical and social activities on offer to the members could be widely extended.

Many of the ex-members were now serving in the armed forces, but these young men were always keen for news of the progress of the club.

The decade from the mid 40's to the mid 1950's was the vintage years of the Swansea Boys Club. The Swansea Borough Police Force continued to play a key role in running the club and demand for membership never diminished. In the austere years of the immediate post war period, the club provided an important leisure time meeting place for the boys.

Because of the improved facilities in the recently erected free standing building, club members achieved an impressive reputation for success in many competitions organised by the Welsh Association of Boys Clubs.

Another way in which members of the Swansea police supported youths at risk, happened in the late 1940's, boys who appeared in Juvenile Courts in the South West Wales area were directed to attend compulsory sessions at the Swansea Boys Club where they were taught skills such as woodworking etc, by members of the Swansea Police Force who volunteered in their free time to instruct the boys.

The annual cost of running the Club was still considerable and the Management Committee in the 1950's under the Chairmanship of Mr D.V. Turner, the Chief Constable of Swansea, continually worked to raise funds.

A modest annual sum of money was received from the Swansea Education Authority, but the Management Committee was in continuous heated debate with the Local Authority in an attempt to receive more money from the Grants to Voluntary Organisations.

The Committee still clearly sated its aims and objectives. They maintained – that, with the many activities on offer in the club programme, provision is made for all that a lad needs to lead a manly life, to 'play the game' and to know that 'Sow an act you reap a habit', 'Sow a habit you reap a character', and to 'Sow a character you reap a destiny'.

The Variety Club of Great Britain was particularly generous to the Swansea Boys Club. When in the 1950's the Committee had to find large sums of money to meet necessary maintenance and equipment costs, the Variety Club organised some popular Midnight Matinee shows which were held in the old Plaza Cinema in Swansea. The financial proceeds from these concerts were, as the Management Committee readily acknowledged, a 'Lifesaver'. It is to be believed that a young Shirley Bassey appeared in one of these concerts.

Regular boy members were always expected to pay modest subscriptions to the Club funds, but continuing the '1930's Spirit', no boy was ever forced to pay his subscription, if for genuine reasons he lacked the means to do so.

Many young, and not so young ladies flocked to the Club when in the late 1950's that great star of Television and Cinema and devout supporter of the Boys Club Movement, the late Frankie Vaughan visited the club to boost the fund raising.

As the 1960's arrived so the financial pressures on the Club grew. The 'Great and the good of Swansea' still gave generously but the Club Committee continued to criticise the Local Education Authority for lack of financial support.

When in 1961, the Authority was compelled to cut its grant to the Club for what they argued was necessary savings, the Club Committee reacted angrily. They made the point that "It is an astonishing state of affairs that, with all the hue and cry of decadent youth and the troubles into which they get, the Local Authority places our voluntary organisation so low in its priorities as to be unworthy this year of encouragement and help in combating this decadence and delinquency. The grant aid withheld does not amount to the cost of keeping one juvenile delinquent for a year in an Approved School. Is it seriously suggested that the Swansea Boys Club has not helped to prevent at least one boy each year being sent to such an institution?"

Perhaps this argument has a familiar ring to it for many Youth Workers in Wales in recent years.

Finally, and to the great disappointment of many ardent supporters of the Boys Club Movement, in the mid 1960's the Club Committee entered into negotiations with the Swansea Local Education Authority who agreed to take on the complete management of the Swansea Boys Club.

The policy of the Local Education Authority was to provide mixed youth clubs and the Club became officially known as the 'Swansea Boys and Girls Club'.

In the past few decades, there have been many youth projects carried out in the Club building, sponsored by the West Glamorgan County and the City and County of Swansea Education Authorities.

It is a matter of speculation as to what use the building will be put to in the future.

The impressive structure stands in its prominent position overlooking the Eastside of Swansea, as an enduring tribute to the many Police Officers and other prominent towns' people who had the vision and determination to support the youth of Swansea all those years ago, by creating the Swansea Boys Club.

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