

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DENBIGH & DISTRICT PROBUS CLUB

Compiled by John Peel 2009 and
revised John Peel and Keith Lester 2023.

Around 1973-4, some members of Denbigh Rotary Club first suggested that a Probus Club be formed in the area (there was already a Probus Club in Rhyl). Rotarian Ed Winterbottam sent the following undated circular to prospective members:

ROTARY CLUB OF DENBIGH

Dear Sir

The attention of the above Club has been drawn to the possibility of the need for the formation of some sort of club or association for the retired business and professional men in the Denbigh area. From your own experience, you may be aware that, on retirement time can hang heavily..... We intend making available the opportunity for the formation of such a club in Denbigh. The rules, regulations, objects etc. can be as broad or as narrow as you yourselves desire..... Such clubs merely meet once a month for lunch, they have a speaker and a general get together....in particular members make new acquaintances and get to know a few more people in their neighbourhood...

Would you therefore be so good as to complete the attached slip and return it to me or to one of our club members at your earliest opportunity, and in due course you will be informed of the preliminary meeting.

Yours faithfully,

Ed. Winterbottam Chairman of Community Service Committee

Respondents to the above letter were subsequently invited to the Inaugural Meeting held at the Eagles Hotel, Denbigh on the evening of Wednesday 6th November 1974. Sixteen men were present at this meeting, chaired by Rotarian Ed Winterbottam. A draft constitution was drawn up and a committee elected; a venue for future meetings had to be decided, the choice being between the Eagle, Bull, Crown and Hawk & Buckle Hotels. It seemed that the Eagle could not guarantee a hot meal as the kitchen was distant from the only suitable room for the meetings; at the time the Hawk & Buckle had just opened a new dining room and this became the first of a number of venues over the years since 1974.



Founders members 1974

Front Emrys Roberts, Frank Haddon, Arthur Roberts, Dai Wheway Davies, J Rhys Williams, unknown. **Middle Row** Albert Crump, Ernest Roberts, Leonard Grimley, R Kerfoot Owen, Oliver Tordoff, John P Davies **Back Row** D H Griffiths, John Wesley Evans, Unknown, Gwilym Davies, Gordon Censi, Unknown, Unknown, E Glynne Price, J Madoc Jones, D Glanfor Rees.

Unidentified E I Dawson, Jim Ellison, William Gooseman, Richard Spencer

The first luncheon meeting was held at the Hawk & Buckle on 9th December 1974 at which Mr Winterbottam was the first guest speaker; lunch being served at a cost £1.00. Initially there were 25 members, increasing to 35 by March 1977. The following letter was sent to the Secretary of the Rhyl Probus Club on 3rd March 1975:

Dear Mr Tegid Evans,

At today's meeting – the fourth since our inauguration – we reached the maximum membership of 35, a limit we have had to impose because of our restricted accommodation. We have now formed a group of men from a wide variety of careers so that our luncheons are not only informative, but interesting and enjoyable. The object of this letter is...to say that now we have become reasonably established we would very much like your Chairman and yourself to be our guests at our May luncheon on Monday 5th May...

*Yours very sincerely,
Frank Haddon
Hon. Secretary*

During the early years the desire for activities other than the monthly luncheon meetings soon became apparent and the first visits were made to Brenig dam and reservoir (then under construction) and to the police headquarters in Colwyn Bay. The first Ladies Evenings were held at the Dinorben Arms, Bodfari, on 23rd March 1976 and then at the Queen's Hotel, Rhyl on 18th April 1978; during the early years of the club it was the custom to hold only occasional ladies evenings at different venues and at irregular intervals, indeed a ladies evening proposed for May 1984 was not held owing to the poor response from members. The current pattern of regular twice yearly luncheon meetings for the ladies did not become established until the 1990s and has changed subsequently.

Problems over catering are nothing new! After only two years the licensee of the Hawk & Buckle started to insist that the club pay for a minimum of 30 lunches at each meeting, despite the fact that at the time there were only 35 members and therefore quite often fewer than 30 were present at a meeting. From 10th January 1977 meetings were transferred to the King's Head, Llanrhaeadr where the club was to remain for the next 12 years. "Much improved catering and service" was reported to the AGM on 10th October 1977. The move to the King's Head meant more space and the club was able to raise the limit on the number of members to 50, this has been the limit ever since; by 1980 membership had reached 50 and in 1981 there was a waiting list of 23, a level not attained since. Even in those early days membership was not confined to the town of Denbigh; a look at the membership list for 1980 reveals that there were 12 members in the Trefnant/Cwydian Park area, 2 in St Asaph and 1 each in Rhualt, Henllan, Prestatyn and even Rhos on Sea. Such was the demand for membership that at the July 1982 committee meeting it was proposed to close the waiting list until it became shorter.

Over some 50 years of inflation tends to make one forget what price levels were during the early years of the club. There was an enrolment fee of £1.00 and an annual subscription of 50p. Lunches were served for £1.00 for the first twelve months and had increased by only 10p to £1.10 in 1976; by 1980 the cost was £1.60 and £2.20 from April 1985. The concept of a raffle at the monthly meetings was first put forward in June 1979 with tickets costing 30p; 50% of the income to club funds and 50% to the winner. Satisfaction at the state of the club's finances was expressed at the 1977 AGM when "the balance of £35.85p carried forward from last year plus this year's income of £206.90p made a total of £242.75p. With a total expenditure of £217.44p this leaves a balance of £25.31p in the bank".

It has not always been the practice to hold meetings without speakers during the summer months, for example the meetings for July and August 1980 both had speakers. During the 1980s, as an alternative to speakers, occasional meetings consisted of a quiz and even a debating session. At the February 1983 meeting a panel debated subjects including - trade union power, smoking, the influence of TV and the use of seat belts – subjects that are still with us today! It is interesting to observe that during 1987 child abuse and drugs were mentioned as problems and that requests were made for a speaker to address the club on those subjects.

The subject of whether or not the club should make regular charitable donations was raised at meetings during 1986; opinion on the matter was clearly divided, some feeling that the club should not be fund-raising and that the giving of regular donations would leave the door open for charities to bombard it with requests for funds. Others felt that occasional donations would be in order and that there should be a £1 levy on each member at Christmas to be donated to a charity of the club's choice. It was eventually decided during the December 1986 meeting to make a one-off donation of £100 to Macmillan Cancer Relief. Occasional donations to charity have always been made, especially when a speaker is from a charitable organisation.

Meetings continued to be held at the King's Head, Llanrhaeadr for much of the 1980s but towards the end of the decade uncertainties began to arise when the premises were put up for sale. In November 1988 various venues were considered; at that time Bryn Morfydd Hotel quoted £6.50 for a lunch and Oriel House Hotel £8.50 (the latter was immediately rejected as being "too expensive"). The Farmers Arms quoted £4.50-£5.00 but this venue (as now) was closed on Mondays and members were unwilling to change the dates of meetings to either Thursday or Friday which were the days offered. The club therefore transferred to the Llindir Inn, Henllan with the first meeting held there on 6th February 1989; this venue did not prove to be long lasting, concerns were expressed by some members as early as the March meeting regarding the menu and difficult access to the toilets. During the June and July 1989

meetings there was discussion regarding a return to the King's Head or to yet another new venue Y Cymro, also in Llanrhaeadr. It was then discovered that Y Cymro was also for sale and uncertainties meant that the Christmas lunch for 1989 was held at Bodelwyddan Castle which then became the next venue.

Away from the recurring problems over a venue for the meetings, visits occupied the attention of the committee; this was still a time when full day outings by coach to places and events such as the International Eisteddfod at Llangollen, the Royal Welsh Show, Ironbridge and the Shrewsbury Flower Show could be undertaken at reasonable cost and these were offered but the response was sometimes disappointing; a visit to the 1990 International Eisteddfod had to be cancelled but one to the Shrewsbury Flower Show was able to go ahead.

Constitutional amendments regarding the admission of new members were discussed at various meetings during 1988-89. The necessity for these arose over confusion regarding the process of nominating and seconding new members, this became evident when a prospective member failed to receive his expected invitation to join. The reason for the problem occurring was because a member who did not know the applicant had been asked to second him and did not do so.

Early in 1990 came the Towyn flood disaster and at the February meeting, held only days after, the members agreed to send a £50 donation to the disaster appeal. Concerns over finding a suitable long-term venue for the club meetings continued into 1990 and 1991 when several meetings were held at Bodelwyddan Castle; this was found to be rather too far from the Denbigh area for some members and, again, the quality of food became an issue along with the price of the meals. Other venues were once more discussed, this time Oriel House was considered but a lack of interest from the hotel management at the time was reported to the August 1991 meeting and a move to Y Cymro, despite lingering uncertainties, was approved at the 1991 AGM.

The concept of keeping the summer meetings free of speakers was first considered at the April 1990 meeting; this arose because of a growing difficulty in finding enough speakers to cover all the meetings coupled with the fact that the speaker for July had withdrawn. It was therefore resolved at the meeting held on 30th April 1990 that "*speakers not be sought for the June, July and August meetings in 1991*" This policy was implemented during 1991 meetings but when it came to 1992 a member present at the July meeting queried why there was no speaker and was reminded that there had been a majority vote in favour of the policy.

Another subject discussed in the early 1990s was the problem of late apologies and/or members simply failing to turn up at meetings creating a growing problem of untaken meals that had to be paid for from club funds; this was discussed at several committee meetings before the decision was taken to clarify matters through an amendment to the constitution approved at the 1992 AGM. This made it clear that members were responsible for payment unless there were exceptional circumstances.

Yet again there was uncertainty over the future of Y Cymro and by the summer of 1993 it was apparent that the licensee no longer wanted Probus to meet there and in addition there was concern regarding the small size of the room which made it impossible to consider holding larger gatherings there such as a ladies invitation meeting. This time the choice at the July 1993 meeting was between Bryn Morfydd or the Farmers Arms, this was put to the 1993 AGM and there was a clear majority in favour of Bryn Morfydd as a move to Farmers Arms would have meant a change to another day of the week.

Since the Club's foundation the number of members has fluctuated and the records show that, apart from those who passed away, members were regularly lost to the Club as a result of moves from the district; this seemed a more prevalent trend during the 1980s and early 1990s than in recent years. Nine vacancies were reported at the AGM in 1993 but by July 1995 membership was up to 50 again and in August a question was raised as to whether the membership level could be raised above 50 because there was once more a waiting list, though not so great as that in the early 1980s. However just three years later the membership level had fallen to 42 in June 1998 and only 41 in February 1999; concern at the "*low level of attendance*" was expressed at the July 1999 meeting.

Another aspect of the Club's activities which showed fluctuating fortunes, especially during the earlier years, was the ladies invitation meetings; until the mid 1990s they were only held at irregular intervals and, as has been mentioned earlier, even had to be cancelled on at least one occasion due to lack of interest. In November 1995 "*The Chairman asked that the Committee look into the question of a special event to include wives/friends. It was pointed out that this proposal had been put forward on a number of previous occasions but insufficient interest had been shown by members. However, it was agreed to raise this at the members meeting.*" This was then discussed and agreed to by the members at the December meeting and a ladies invitation lunch was subsequently held on March 2nd 1996 at a cost of £6.25; following the success of this, the Committee agreed at the December 1996 meeting to hold a Ladies Invitation Meeting twice per year – April and November, thus establishing an event that has existed until the present

day with modifications like the change to December agreed in 2008. Catering problems still would not go away and following the April 1997 Ladies Invitation at Bryn Morfydd, it was recorded in the minutes of the May meeting that *“the lamb served at the main course was tough and unpalatable”*.

During 1996 the acquisition of a chain of office for the Chairman was discussed, the final decision being taken at the September meeting when *“The Treasurer reported as follows on the estimated costs: Medallion and ribbon including ten plates would be £123. Additional plates at £2.20 each. Following a detailed discussion, it was decided that we should proceed with the purchase of the medallion and ribbon together with sufficient plates to provide for all twenty-two past chairmen. The Treasurer was asked to determine the cost of engraving each plate and thanked for his detailed report. The Vice Chairman proposed that the items specified should be ordered now and this was seconded and agreed unanimously.”*

The delicate subject of politics became evident in 1997 because Probus is a non-political organisation. It had always been the policy of the Club not to invite speakers with an obvious political message so, in August 1997, the Committee rejected a request from the “Just say No” campaign to send a speaker to address the club on the subject of devolution. Although 1999 was the 25th anniversary of the Club it was also a period of concern regarding membership levels and at the February meeting came the news that Bryn Morfydd was for sale, thus giving rise to uncertainty regarding the venue for future meetings.

The 25th anniversary of the meeting to discuss the formation of a Probus Club in Denbigh was on 6th November 1999 but the Club's 25th Anniversary Meeting was not held until 10th January 2000, this being the date closest to the anniversary of the first luncheon meeting. At this meeting the President of the Denbigh Rotary Club was the guest of honour and the speaker was the Superintendent of Loggerheads Country Park who spoke on environmental matters. The Chairman was presented with a new silver emblem to be added to the chain of office. The Principal of Llysfasi Farm Institute (as it was then known) spoke at the next meeting in February and subsequently invited members to Llysfasi where a successful visit was made in August. The newly opened cancer unit at Glan Clwyd Hospital was visited by members during February 2001.

Following the admission of a member who had found it difficult to find a sponsor there was discussion during 2002 regarding the policy to be adopted if further enquiries were received from prospective members unable to find a sponsor. Despite the low membership level prevailing, it was not thought appropriate to advertise in the press for new members. For the first time, Probus was represented at the Remembrance Day observations in Denbigh on Sunday 9th November 2003 and it subsequently became the policy of the Club to have representation on an annual basis and to place a wreath on Remembrance day at Denbigh War Memorial.

The final years at Bryn Morfydd were not always happy ones with members becoming increasingly concerned at what were seen to be falling standards and high prices. At the August 2003 meeting several members felt that £8.00 was excessive for the two-course meal on offer and the Chairman asked members if they wished the Committee to investigate alternative venues once again. It was subsequently found that alternative venues were either more expensive or had insufficient accommodation so the majority of the members decided to remain at Bryn Morfydd and pay £10.00 for a three- course lunch. Lingering concern at the standards at Bryn Morfydd continued during 2004 and, following further investigations of alternative venues, there was a special meeting of the Committee on 25th October to consider the matter. The result of a vote taken at the December meeting was inconclusive so it was decided to remain at Bryn Morfydd. Despite this decision, there was a continuing desire for change among many members but before there was a further vote there was a major fire at Bryn Morfydd. This resulted in the closure of the hotel for several months. Three of the 2005 meetings therefore had to be held at other venues - Salisbury Arms, Tremeirchion; King's Head, Llanrhaeadr and Oriel House, St Asaph.

By September 2005 the Bryn Morfydd Hotel had reopened and the newly refurbished restaurant was an attractive venue and for a time it was felt there was some improvement in standards. However, dissatisfaction never really went away and discussions regarding an alternative venue continued from time to time until a majority decision was made by members to move to Oriel House, the first meeting held there being that for May 2008. Just before the Club left Bryn Morfydd a handsome display cabinet was made by one of the long-serving members to house the Past Presidents' ribbon and plates which was then on display in the hotel; unfortunately, for security reasons, it is not currently possible to display it at Oriel House. As a means of increasing fellowship, recent years have seen the creation of a list of members' interests and hobbies; at meetings several members have spoken about and/or displayed objects and information covering these interests. Another trend has been a revival of visits being made to places of interest on a more regular basis. In some cases, these visits have reflected members' own careers or experience including Shotton Paper Mill, the Airbus Factory at Broughton, Connah's Quay Power Station and the North Wales Police Control Room. Current membership levels were low at under 40 and the club looked to increase its membership through information being posted on the Denbighshire County Council web site and in the Denbigh and St Asaph Libraries. Further visits

to newspaper printers, manufacturers, Rhydymwyn World War Two, nuclear research facilities, Lloyd George Museum, Jodrell Bank telescopes and RAF Valley.

In 2015 there was the 50th anniversary lunch of North Wales Probus Clubs held at Faenol Fawr. This was organised by the Rhyl Club.

Ladies invitation events proved popular and the number was increased from two to three, held in April, August and December from 2012. In 2017 there was a possibility of winding up the Club if its membership declined further. However, the Club was well funded and marketing activity included a stand at the Flint and Denbigh show and articles in the local press. In 2018, it was decided to hold a secret ballot to determine whether ladies should be admitted to the Club. Two thirds voted in favour and this positive response permitted the admission of lady members from 2019. In consequence membership increased significantly from 16 in 2017 to 41 in 2023. The title 'Chairman' was replaced by 'President'. In 2018 as had been the custom in the past, the Chairman was invited to the Rotary Club of Denbigh's Annual dinner.

In early 2019 the constitution was revised and reprinted. It took into account the lower membership of the Club resulting in a smaller committee, together with the introduction of lady members. This was further reviewed and revised for the 2022 Annual General Meeting.

The cost of meals increased slowly each year to £15.50 which remained for three years. In 2019 the Oriel House and Leisure Club was sold and changed the name to the Oriel Hotel. A new management requested a price of £17.50 for their service and meals. This resulted in some members wishing to review alternative venues and following this, it was agreed to retain the current arrangements. In 2023 the meal cost had increased to £20 and the annual membership fee increased to £20.

After a lapse, visits were made to Ruthin and Gwrych castles following speakers presentations to the Club. Other speakers' subjects included, the Welsh harp, moles, driving from London to Capetown, the Earl of Leicester's connection with Denbigh, working in Montserrat, the Denbigh plum and the Power of the Potter's Wheel.

The monthly meetings were interrupted and Club ceased to function from April 2020 as a result of the Covid 19 epidemic. During this period the possibility of zoom meetings was explored but not all members had suitable facilities and safely spaced open air meetings were also considered. The Oriel Hotel was closed for about twelve months. The Chairman remained in office for two years and was followed by the first lady President.

Once the Covid 19 restrictions reduced, the Club decided to try and restart with an informal coffee morning in July 2021. It was thought the Club could be viable with 15 to 20 members in the short term. The coffee event was a success as 17 members attended. Nevertheless, mask wearing was recommended, and members were still not free to move around the room socialising as was the usual custom. The programme for 2021 was largely the remainder of that for 2020.

The Club had a full programme for 2022. It ranged from talks on the Tweedmill Shopping Outlet, Kingdom of Butan, Lady Charlotte Guest, 18th Century Crime in Denbigh courts, construction of the Conwy tunnel and archaeology. Another outstanding talk followed by a visit was about the Rhug organic farm estate.

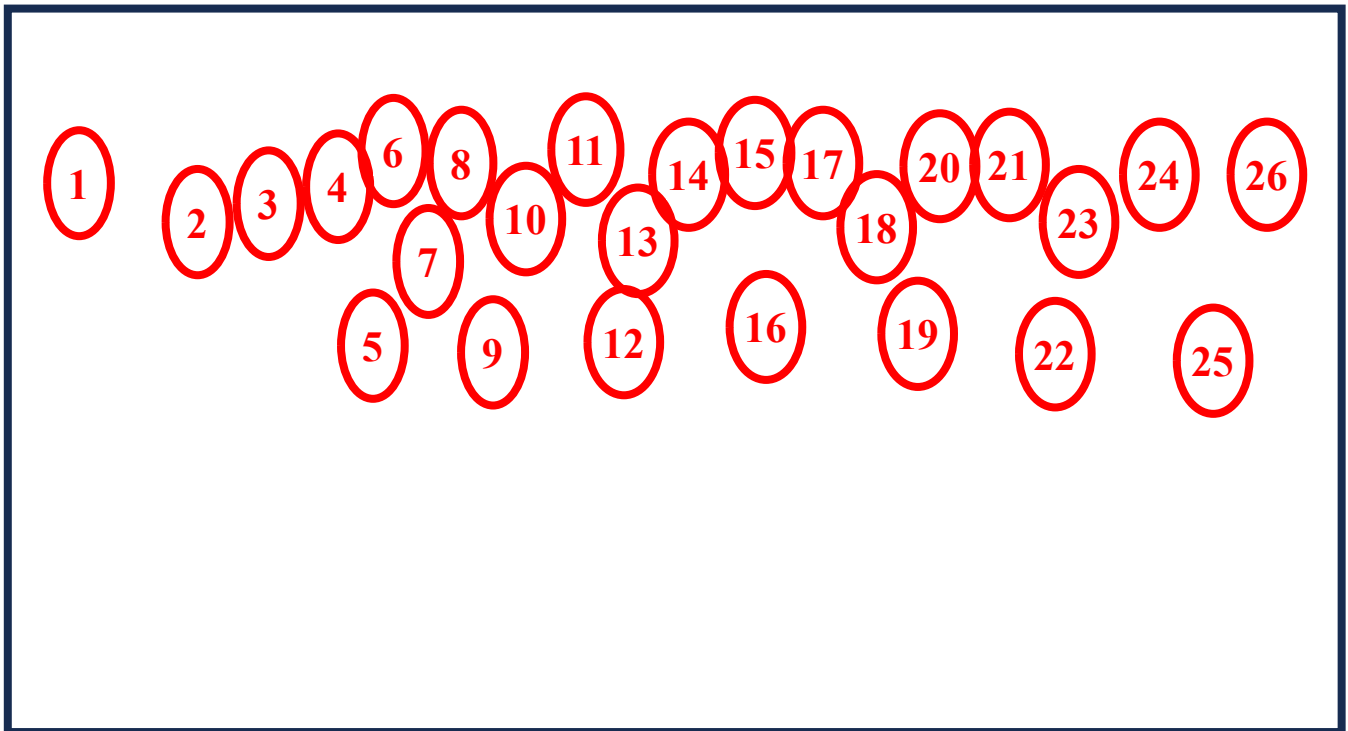
Robert Scott, Secretary of Rhyl Probus Club invited the President and two other members to their Club's 50th anniversary which precipitated thought for a potential celebration for the Denbigh Club in 2024.

In 2023 there was a talk about the Woodland Skills Centre at Bodfari followed by a visit. Other speakers covered topics relating to the Second World War, motor rallying, Dark Skies, the work of Denbighshire County Council. and regenerative farming. News of the Club featured in The City Times (St Asaph), the Free Press in Denbigh, Clwyd Connection and Llais Llandyrnog.

As a result of the increased number of members the Club Committee was enhanced to share the burden of activities to include Membership, Media, Regalia, Meeting and Greeting and Programme Officers. In addition, a regular 'keep in touch' monthly newsletter was started that encouraged members, especially those who did not attend the recent meeting, to feel part of their Club. The duties of the Meeting and Greeting Officer was particularly important in easing new members into the Club. Furthermore, following the admission of lady members and consequent change from Chairman to President, it was necessary to purchase new presidential regalia. This was financed by a raffle.

December 2023 membership totalled 42. The Committee was populated with a younger enthusiastic team and together with a varied programme it all augured well for the future survival and prosperity of the Club.

Members attending the November 2023 meeting.



1	Gareth Williams	10	David Roberts	19	Michael Corfe
2	Sue Ellis Roberts	11	Eifion Jones	20	John Peel
3	Carol Lester	12	John Barr	21	Gwyn Evans
4	Andrew Faulkner	13	Donald Hanby	22	Fay Corfe
5	Keith Lester	14	Merfyn Roberts	23	Robert Jones
6	Alun Heddwyn-Jones	15	David Meredith-Jones	24	Richard Thornton
7	Dewi Owens	16	Graham Evans	25	Anne Mellor
8	Meirick Lloyd Davies	17	Peter Gibson	26	Steve Tootell
9	Julia Hughes	18	Bernard Thomas		

OFFICERS OF THE CLUB

Chairmen - Presidents

1974-75	Dai Wheway Davies	1999-2000	G Wyn Williams
1975-76	Arthur Roberts	2000-01	Terry Barrett
1976-77	Jim Ellison	2001-02	Eric Johnson
1977-78	Ernest Roberts	2002-03	Meurig Voyle
1978-79	Frank Haddon	2003-04	Emrys Williams
1979-80	Emrys Roberts	2004-05	Eirwyn Jones
1980-81	Gordon Censi	2005-06	Mike Freeman
1981-82	Len Grimbley	2006-07	Bob Roberts
1982-83	John Rhys Williams	2007-08	Peter Davies
1983-84	Glynne Price	2008-09	Peter Wyr
1984-85	Oliver Tordoff	2009-10	Maurice Bitcon
1985-86	Ewart Price Williams	2010-11	Aldie Robarts
1986-87	George Gough	2011-12	Eifion Jones
1987-88	John E Davies	2012-13	David Birch
1988-89	Bill Bickley	2013-14	Bryn Davies
1989-90	Trevor Aldrich	2014-15	Terence Gillespie
1990-91	Harry Maddock	2015-16	Peter Gibson
1991-92	Ivor Watkins	2016-17	Gwyn Evans
1992-93	Bob Howe	2017-18	Philip Brelsford
1993-94	Hugh Jones	2018-19	Keith Lester
1994-95	Cliff Bent	2019-20	John Peel
1995-96	David Evans	2020-21	John Peel
1996-97	Bob McKee	2021-22	Julia Hughes
1997-98	Pat Thompson	2022-23	John Barr
1998-99	Tom Thompson	2023-24	Graham Evans

Secretaries - Treasurers

1974-77	Frank Haddon	1980-83	Stan Willoughby
1977-80	Horace Mason	1983-87	Bob Harwood

At the 1987 AGM it was agreed to separate the post of Secretary and Treasurer.

Secretaries – Business Officers

1987-93	Arthur Clough	2007-2019	John Peel
1993-94	Stan Willoughby	2019- 2022	Keith Lester
1994-2005	Ken Roberts	2022-	Richard Thornton
2005-2007	Vacant		

Treasurers – Finance Officers

1987-91	Ernest Roberts	2001-04	Eirwyn Jones
1991-92	Frank Kent	2004-09	Maurice Bitcon
1992-94	Tom Williams	2009-13	Keith Lester
1994-95	Bob Howe	2013-18	Clwyd Roberts
1995-98	Tom Thompson	2018-23	Gwyn Evans
1998-2001	Eric Johnson	2023-	Gareth Williams

Notes regarding this account of the Club

1. The archives of the Club consist of a complete set of committee minutes together with documents relating to the establishment of the club in 1974 and the 25th anniversary. In addition, copies of the constitution and rules together with lists of members as they existed at various times during the club's history have been retained; however, some of these are undated.
2. It is from the above records that this history of the club's development and activities has been compiled - mainly from the Committee Minutes. The amount of detail recorded and the style of presentation varies considerably.
3. Names of individual members have not been used except in the opening section recording the foundation of the club, and in accompanying photographs.
4. Only brief references have been made to financial matters.