

As the Senior ex-President present it falls to me to ramble on for a few minutes about the distant past.

Last Saturday I was playing the bassoon in Merton College Chapel, and one of the works we played was Vaughan Williams "An Oxford Elegy", with words from the *Scholar Gipsy* by Matthew Arnold. This contains many references to the local countryside such as "the Cumnor hills", Bablockhithe, Wychwood, Fyfield, and Godstow which brought back memories of past rambles.

As keen historians of the Club will know, it started life in February 1963 as the Scholar Gypsies – clubs were not allowed to include Oxford University in their name until they had been established for 2 terms (if I recall correctly) and had a Senior Member – in our case a Dr Bill Parry of Oriel – to vouch for their good behaviour.

By the time I came up in 1966 the club had graduated to its second name – the Oxford University Rambling Club. It became the OU Rambling and Hill-Walking Club (which was a bit of a mouthful) some time in the 1980s and then more recently was abbreviated back to the OU Walking Club.

But, whatever name we know it by, we are tonight celebrating the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Club and I have been asked to share a few reminiscences of the club in my time. To help me with this I turned to the term card for 40 years ago – Hilary Term 1968.

From the back page I see that this was my term as secretary; the president was Russell Hafter (a chemist who made yogurt in a cupboard in his room in Magdalen and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of railway accidents and of the English Civil War and would not look out of place in a film of a Tolkein novel). I suggested he come tonight but characteristically he rebuffed the suggestion on the grounds that no Rambler should possess a dinner jacket and anyway he was too busy organising the summer bookings for 'Hafter Holidays' rambling trips in Germany.

The Organising Secretary, Vicki Lloyd of Somerville, is here tonight with her husband Rodney Archard who is the only known example in captivity of a Life Member of the club. The treasurer was Chris Higley of Pembroke, also here tonight. Since Chris, Vicki and I were all mathematicians the club was largely organised during lectures at the Maths Institute.

The immediate ex-President was Graham Johnson (a lawyer from Hertford with an enthusiasm for P G Wodehouse). He would also have been here tonight if he could, and would have made a better speech than me, but he took the wise precaution of absconding to the Canary Islands.

Turning the page I see that membership in 1968 cost 2/6 (12.5p) for a term or 6/- (30p) for the whole year. For those unfamiliar with the 1968 money values, the termly subscription equated to about a pint and a third of Morells bitter. Rambles were mostly done using public transport, with fares ranging from a pint and a half to three pints.

The starting point for rambles was traditionally outside Nuffield College from where we would usually walk to Gloucester Green bus station – rather larger than it is now – or occasionally to the railway station. If we were a large group – and 20 to 30 people might turn up for a Saturday afternoon ramble – the duty inspector at the bus station would lay on a duplicate bus for us.

The first weekend in March 1968 there was an afternoon ramble on the Saturday from Islip into Oxford led by Vicki and on the Sunday an all-day ramble from Pangbourne to Nettlebed led by John Woollard of New College.

There was one more adventurous trip in Hilary Term 1968 – a coach trip to the Cotswold Villages and the Malvern Hills, led by Chris Higley. As I recall, the plans for that day had to be changed because of an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease near the Malverns, but we did go for a morning walk in the Cotswolds before descending on a pub in Bourton-on-the-Water for lunch. The pub sold a rather good scrumpy and by the time we re-boarded the coach my friend Martin Sykes (who now owns a brewery in Selby) had consumed 3 pints of it – but not for long. Blaming it on the pork pie he had eaten, he found it necessary to leave the coach at Stow-on-the-Wold and I remained there with him, missing the afternoon's ramble.

In those days, all the Colleges were single-sex and one of the attractions of joining the Rambling Club was the possibility of meeting young ladies. Each term started with tea (and jelly babies) at LMH and ended with a Terminal General Meeting (a party at which the next term's committee would be voted in). The summer term ended with a Midsummer Madness – involving a walk out to Gosford for a meal and a barn dance in a pub aided by members of the Cecil Sharp Society.

We organised youth hostelling trips each vacation – abroad in the summer and in the UK otherwise, usually for about a dozen members, walking from hostel to hostel with appropriate stops in hostelryes.

Looking back we were a fortunate generation. Our tuition fees were paid by local education authorities and we got grants from government that we didn't have to pay back; we weren't burdened by health and safety regulations requiring leaders to be qualified and there was plenty of public transport.

On the other hand, the University regulations were probably stricter – we couldn't start rambles before lunch on Saturdays because of clashes with lectures, College gates were generally closed by midnight necessitating the development of climbing skills by those who liked to stay out late, and there were only enough women to go round if they went round very fast.

Friendships made while rambling have stood the test of time; witness the 5 who were contemporary with me who are here tonight. I would like to thank the Club's committee, and particularly Laura, for keeping its Alumni in mind and inviting us to join you.

I hope you will all get the same lasting value from the Club as we have.

So, before I hand over to a much more recent ex-President, Christopher Thomas, to bring the story up to date, I invite you to join me in drinking a toast to the Club and to rambling friendships.

Bill Manville, 17<sup>th</sup> President, Oxford University Rambling Club