

NASO HISTORY – BY ERIC FROST

Early Beginnings (Part 1)

The National Adult School Organisation came to Northants in the 19th century. We have no record of exactly when this was, but a minute book indicates a group meeting in Rushden by 1900. Another minute book dated 1903 records a county meeting at Wellingborough Friends Meeting House on January 15th, when it was decided to form a County Union divided into three sub unions, Kettering, Northampton and Wellingborough. The rules agreed at this meeting included:

1. Reverent consideration of the Bible, the chief feature of their work.
2. To arrange conferences, lectures, excursions etc.
3. Each school to pay an annual subscription of two shillings and sixpence (large schools more).

Later minutes record schools of well over a 100 members.

The National Adult School came into being in 1899. I have not found a date when Northamptonshire became affiliated to the National organisation, but Northants sent a delegate to the National Council meeting held in Leeds on October 8th, 1904.

Early Beginnings (Part 2)

Adult Schools continued to thrive and increase in the early 1900's, especially in the small towns and villages to the north east of Northampton. Whole families flocked to join - adults to learn, children to join in the social activities, and often to accompany their parents to classes. Talented adults were expected to hive off and start a new school.

At weekends and in the evening, local schools, village halls and chapel premises made ideal venues. So great was the membership that 400-seater trains were hired to take members to inter-county meetings in Birmingham, Leicester and Nottingham.

Rushden Adult Schools

Rushden Adult Schools were probably one of the first organisations to own their own premises, formerly a long two-storey factory in the centre of Rushden on the main road. Later on it had blazoned across the front of these premises "Rushden Adult School". They paid £1,000 for this building, which was a considerable amount of money in the early 1900's. Nowadays the outside toilets would be considered primitive! The ground floor housed four full sized billiard tables (a very popular game) and other equipment for sports including table tennis. This was open for Adult School members on weekdays; it ensured a healthy growth of young people into the Adult School. Teams competed in the various Leagues – football, cricket, darts etc.

The upstairs floor, containing a kitchen, was used seven days a week, including the Men's Adult School on Sunday mornings and Women's in the afternoons. Weekday social activities included men's and women's choirs, a brass band, a drama group, dances and whist drives. The choirs and band became well known, and much sought after to entertain. The Rushden Adult Schools played an active part in the County Annual Drama, Elocution and Musical Festivals.

The building was unfortunately sold in 1980 by compulsory purchase for road widening, and was left empty for a number of years. The Men's and Women's Adult Schools had to move into hired accommodation, which was the start of their demise.

Old Traditions of Charitable Fund-Raising

Up to approximately 40 years ago, a women's adult school met in the Northampton NASO Hall, then known as "Unity Hall" on Sunday afternoons. Each September they had a harvest festival when members brought harvest produce. On Monday evenings they had a harvest supper when members from Market Street Women's Adult School and the Wednesday evening group were invited to attend. The highlight of the evening was the auctioning off of the produce by a lively outgoing member Jim Thomas. The proceeds were donated to a local well known cause. When the women's group closed owing to the age of members, the Wednesday group took over the tradition, and were later supported by the Tuesday group as well as a Monday NASO group that met for a number of years in the Centre. Other groups in the county, Higham Ferrers and Cogenhoe, have their own money-raising event, for their own local good cause.

Early Days of the County Union

When Northants Adult Schools united, like many other counties they became a county union (NASU). They formed three sub-unions – Northampton, Wellingborough and Kettering. Wellingborough embraced schools in the town, Higham Ferrers and villages – Rushden, Irthlingborough, Finedon, Great Harrowden, Raunds etc. Most of these groups met in schools, (men in early morning, women in the afternoon), as usually these were the only premises available, churches and chapels having their own groups. One group in Wellingborough and one in Finedon used the Friends Meeting Houses, there being a strong link between the two bodies. I found the Wellingborough meeting house, with its pine clad walls and pine seating, a large iron stove, glowing red in the winter in the main aisle had a peace and tranquillity that made speaking there a joy.

Higham Ferrers Adult School

Some groups aspired to own their own premises, but only a few achieved this goal. Rushden was probably the first. Then on November 23rd 1929 Mr Charles Wicksteed opened Higham Ferrers purpose built hall. This was an outstanding achievement. In the 1920's such a venture needed great faith in the future, since groups had no capital. A builder with four guarantors purchased the site and building work commenced. Throughout the 1930's many fund raising events eventually cleared the mortgage - a wonderful period in Higham Ferrers' history.

Origins of the Northampton NASO Centre

In the early 1920's the building was a church and NASO purchased it from the Peterborough Diocese in 1924. Until the early 1940's the large hall was used as a meeting place, for large county gatherings, drama, music and elocution festivals. Now NASO meetings have moved into the smaller rooms in the building, and the large hall is let to Tricker's Shoe Manufacturers. This rent is our main source of income. The buildings are managed by up to nine Trustees, all having to be NASO members.