

M.J. Crossley Evans and Andrew Sulston, *A History of Wills Hall, University of Bristol* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (University of Bristol, Wills Hall Association 2017). 112pp., 104 pl., Hardback, £12.00.

This is the 2nd edition of a history which has its origins in an exhibition of 1989: the 60th anniversary of the founding of Wills Hall. The subject is the first purpose-built hall of residence at the University of Bristol, itself a foundation of 1909, incorporating the earlier University College, Bristol, of 1876.

In contrast with the later halls, Wills was designed on similar principles to that of an Oxbridge college. It is quadrangular, with the central court based upon the dimensions of those that the University Vice-Chancellor (Dr Thomas Loveday) himself measured in Oxford, and has rooms off staircases (rather than corridors) again in the Oxbridge fashion. Sir George Oatley of the Bristol firm Oatley & Lawrence was its architect, and he gave it a Cotswold style, with gables and mullioned windows. Unlike the later additions, this first phase was of stone. Its site was part of the former Stoke House Estate at Stoke Bishop, some 1¼ miles north of the university centre in University Road. Initially it was exclusively a male hall, deliberately well away from women's accommodation at Clifton Hill House and (after 1932) that at Manor Hall. At George Wills' insistence, it incorporated a Tudor-Gothic villa (Downside) of c.1830, built for Alfred George of the Bristol brewing family. The whole site had been purchased for the university by Henry Wills in 1922. His brother George Wills paid for the new buildings: he apparently handed a cheque to the university for £110,000. Completion was in time for the arrival of the first intake of 150 students in October 1929. One year later, the Dame Monica Wills Memorial Chapel was opened, this just to the north-east of Downside. Also by Oatley & Lawrence, it is in a somewhat austere Byzantine style.

From its earliest days, the Hall was run very much on an independent collegiate basis, headed by a Warden with deputies, a head steward, and other domestic staff known as 'scouts' (one of such for each 'house' or set of rooms off a given staircase). Formal dining took place on Fridays, a practice that was maintained, despite later pressures of numbers and antipathy from students. Much of the book is devoted to social, as much as institutional and educational history, in chapters on each of the ten Wardens. This is spiced with amusing anecdote, such as the words of the Head Steward spoken in the 1970s to the Deputy Warden at the end of a supposedly formal dinner. 'The gentlemen, if you can call them gentlemen, have finished dining, if you can call it dining, (pause) sir'. But students had, in characteristic style, misbehaved from the beginning. One lark was, after a midnight climb, to hang various items of clothing on the tower weather-vane on Downside. Another, increasingly popular after the Second World War, was to 'raid' the women's Manor Hall, on one occasion chaining the women into their dining hall. Retaliatory raids by the women saw the men's possessions being taken away and auctioned back to their original owners.

The pressures of increasing numbers of students started with having to house 80 students evacuated from King's College, London, in 1939, and later 80 Royal Navy officers from Greenwich. The compensation (for the resident male students at least) was that the latter were

accompanied by some 20 Wrens. With male staff going away to war, women were introduced as replacements, so the male preserve of Wills was slowly eroded, with increasing opportunities for women undergraduates to visit and take meals in the dining hall. Of the former Wills Hall students, 32 lost their lives in the War, recorded on a memorial plaque in the chapel, unveiled in 1950. After the War, with returning servicemen seeking their suspended higher education, the average age increased to around 25, and much-needed additional accommodation was found in nearby dwellings (known as ‘outhouses’), bought by the university for this purpose. But a long-term solution was only effected after starting a second quad, the first phase of which was opened in 1962. Designed by Ralph Brentnall (Oatley’s last partner), of brick rather than stone, these provided for 70 additional students. Another block (by David Hope) was added in 1989–90, completing the New Court, and increasing the student capacity to 335.

Major social changes, such as the admission of women students as residents, had to wait until the mid-1980s, and for much of the 1960s and 1970s the character of student life in hall was seemingly a battle between the forces of tradition and those who felt it to be totally out of touch with the real world. (The then students preferred the architecture of nearby Churchill Hall of 1946–56 - described in the most recent ‘Pevsner’ as ‘... outdated, brick with octagonal motifs ...’ - to what they thought of as the fuddy-duddy formalism of Wills.) But formal hall dining continued in the teeth of undergraduate opposition, and by the 1980s the mood had changed with a revival of hall-based activities and a new appreciation for the once-derided traditions. Finally, the semi-independence of the hall, with the Warden selecting each year’s intake, came to a close in 2007.

Apart from the more general social and educational trends charted in some detail, this book will be of most interest to those who have been involved in Wills Hall, either as students or staff. It is scattered with character sketches, especially of the ten Wardens and the other staff, and illustrated throughout with photographs of Wardens, staff and students, the latter often in suitable costume in keeping with the lighter-hearted Hall events. Also there are pictures recording visits by assorted dignitaries, such as Sir Winston Churchill at the opening of the hall in 1929 (he was Chancellor of the University from 1929 to 1965), and the BBC childrens’ television presenter, Johnny Morris in year 1992–93. For more on the architecture of Wills and the University, reference should be made to *Sir George Oatley: Architect of Bristol* by Sarah Whittingham (2011) and the *Pevsner Architectural Guide* by Andrew Foyle (2004).

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