

The History of the Watford Association of Magicians – Eddie Long - 1996

Towards the end of WW2 a number of local magicians got together and held random meetings, mainly at Eric Bloom's house. At this time some of the established clubs were trying to form a Federation of Magical Societies. One of their aims was to present shows on or near Halloween. The idea was that all advertising and receipts would be co-ordinated with a common theme going to a common charity. We decided to go along with this scheme and so on Nov.13, 1946 we presented a Night of Magic at the Chorley Wood Memorial Hall. The acts were Eric Bloom, Harry Baron, Wally Gent, John Potter and myself.

The success of this venture led us to arrange for a room at the Spreddeagle in Watford High Street, a pub that is no longer there. The exact date of this meeting is difficult to determine. However, a reference in Abra No. 90 (18 Oct. '47) shows the Association had already been formed. Another issue No. 126 (26 June '48) tells of the first Annual General Meeting held on July 14, 1948. Therefore, I am sure that our inaugural meeting was held in the summer of 1947, probably July.

At the meeting Stanley Thomas was elected Chairman and Eric Bloom was our first Secretary/Treasurer. The others present were Joe Jones (E.L.Baffel), Percy Smith, Joe Conn (Zicardi) Wally Gent, John Rose and myself.

We were fortunate in those early days to have several members who were also members of London clubs and we were able to persuade some well know magicians to come and give us lectures. Peter Warlock was most helpful and came to our meetings several times.

Our fortnightly meetings at the Spreddeagle went along well until one evening we found that the room had been double booked. It seemed that we were no longer welcome because, although we did buy our drinks before going upstairs, once there we were so involved in our magic that we forgot to order more drinks. That evening we met at Stanley Thomas' furniture shop in the High Street. We found a home at another now defunct pub, the Kings Head but unfortunately the same thing happened and we had to move on. Finally we found a home at the Old Free School and stayed there for many years.

On 25 April 1949 we held our first Dinner at the Crown, Garston. There were 83 present and the menu was excellent. The entertainment was provided by Geoffrey Buckingham, Frank Boynett, Al Koran and Tom Harris. Further annual Dinners were held at various venues, but those held at the Town Hall were grand affairs with nearly 200 attending. And yet when the members stood to toast the guests there would be only about twenty standing! We had a lot of friends!

As time went by, we attracted most of the local magicians and we also had members from St. Albans, Hemel Hempstead, Harrow and Luton. This meant that we could present magical evenings with all the best talent around. We put on several shows at St Mary's Hall, now an office block. These were free, but we took up a silver collection which swelled the coffers considerably. We also supported the Annual Days of Magic and in October 1947 we put on shows at the Guildhouse, Croxley Green and Oddfellows Hall, Watford. The programme consisted of myself to open, Harold Moon, Stanley Thomas and his two daughters with their wonderful Chinese act, Doug How, Anthony Norman, Eric Bloom, and John Rose with his living shadows all compèred by Wally Gent. Encouraged by these shows, we went mad the next year and put on five shows in Bushey, Croxley green, Kings Langley and two night at St. Johns Hall, Watford.

Our first President was Cuthbert Andrews, a very fine amateur actor, and on several occasions he opened our shows with a prologue which he wrote himself. For a show at St. John's Hall he was dressed as a wizard and I had made up a cauldron and fire effect and a flashpot which was to give off a lot of smoke and a blinding flash as Cuthbert came to the end of the prologue – giving a fine start to our show.

We were on very good terms with most of the London clubs and often had visits from their members and we would repay these by supplying acts to help out with their shows. One such club with which we are still very friendly is the Zodiac Magical Society of Ealing. For many years we have had a hard-fought Battle of Magic with them and I think the honours are just about even.

We also have several completions within the Association the first of which was started in 1958 when Gil Leaney; who was our first Vice-President; presented us with a shield to be given to be given for the best after-dinner act. I was fortunate enough to win this first competition.

Other trophies that have been presented to the club are the Eden-Gent Cup (for best close-up act) the Edgar Crook Cup, also known as the Jubilee Cup (for best after-dinner act {The Gil Leaney Shield having been changed to embrace a number of specified effects}), and the Tom Angus Trophy (for best card act). (Editor's note: in 1994 we were proud to present the first "Billy McComb WAM Magician of the Year" trophy to Ian Manly, and this past year's trophy went to Ron Denton.)

We managed to put on shows for charity until the late sixties when the effect of television was such that it became very difficult to get an audience. But recently we've had the opportunity to do several, one for the Bushey Conservative Club, and another for Bushey Methodist Church. We have visited several Clubs to provide the evening's entertainment for their weekly or bi-monthly meeting. It gives our younger members the chance to get a bit of experience before an audience.

Our dinner of 1972 was a glittering affair with a cabaret that was out of this world, thanks to Tom Angus then a new member (also a member of the Zodiac). He also found us two new Presidents: Harold Taylor and Alf Moore. At one of our dinners he arranged for everyone to play Bingo. The way the cards were printed everyone won at the same time!

Around the mid seventies St. Mary's Hall where we met was demolished. WAM went into hibernation until Vic Marks took the initiative and called a meeting of Alan White, Myles Sinclair and myself to see if we could revive our club. Vic was able to arrange a meeting space at the Holy Rood Church complex and we've met there ever since. In its various rooms we've held our special events, competitions, lectures, and Christmas party all arranged by Vic and his wife Freda – and a jolly good job they've done.

At our 1988 party, we were pleased to welcome Paul Daniels, his wife Debbie and his son brought along by our President Terry Seabrooke. We all had a wonderful time, and during the evening there was Paul swapping card tricks with the boys just as if he was a member!

We have a renewed rivalry with the Zodiac M.S. though our annual competition (modesty forbids revealing who has won the last two years). We have revived the Shield and one Cup contest and now go from strength to strength though another fifty years!