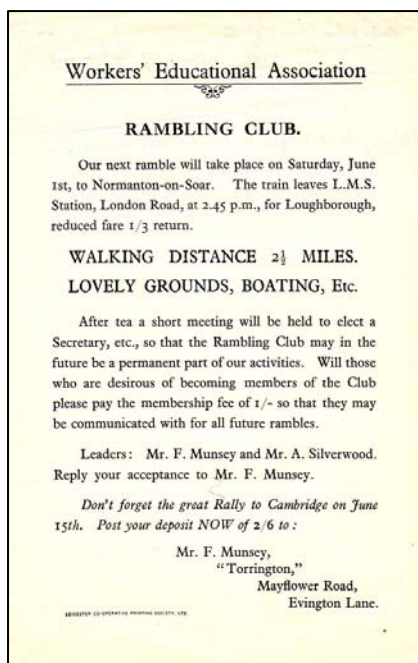


6. Ramblers, players and dancers

There was a close association between the WEA in Leicester and many of the clubs and societies based at the Vaughan Working Men's College. From its beginning, the Branch understood the value of social activities in complementing its work in the classroom, not least in keeping students engaged with the organisation over the summer when there were no formal classes. A Rambling Club Committee was elected as early as May 1909, with 'matters left entirely in their hands', and in June 1910 a local newspaper reported that a party of WEA Ramblers had spent 'a very enjoyable time in and around Lutterworth, where the Rector gave a short historical description of the church...'.¹

Rambling was a popular activity from the later 19th century, both in terms of promoting comradeship and in encouraging greater knowledge and enjoyment of the countryside as the shift of population to urban areas continued. A rambling club had been formed at the Vaughan Working Men's College in 1885, and had led in turn to a Cyclists' Association, formed by members who 'enjoyed a faster means of travel than that provided by walking on two feet'.² Members of the WEA Rambling Club paid 6d.



a year subscription, and its secretary Miss Lottie Stone sent out reminders by post to members in advance of each excursion. Seven rambles were organised that year, with an average attendance of 27, and by 1913 their educational character had been strengthened 'by appointing leaders to give short addresses in the open air'. Some were tutors like E.A. Smith, who taught a class on *Mind, Thought, Conduct* and 'came over from Nottingham to meet his students and spoke on the geology of Charnwood Forest'.³ Under the leadership of Frank Kelly, the rambles continued throughout the First World War, with 'some exceedingly jolly outings' promoting 'fellowship and the strengthening of our physical and mental powers'.⁴

Rambling clubs also played a crucial role in preserving or restoring public rights of way, and as early as 1913 the WEA club had affiliated to the local body dedicated to this, the Leicestershire Footpaths Association.⁵ The Ramblers' activities ceased for a period during the 1920s, probably due to the absence of anyone willing to take on the responsibility of organising them: it was reported in 1924 that the post of secretary to the Rambling Club would be 'filled later'.⁶ Rambles resumed in May 1929 when Mr A. Silverwood organised one to Launde Abbey in east Leicestershire. 'As an "all-the-year-round" club', it was reported in 1930 that:

... a promising start has been made, full day tramps on Sundays and week-ends having been undertaken with success, as well as half-day Saturday ones. The fellowship, the interchange of experiences, the appreciation of the beauties of our country, together with the determination of members to turn up to rambles – wet or fine – is emphasising the fact that the Rambling Club is meeting an important need.⁷

¹ *Executive Committee Minutes*, 14 May 1909; *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 27 June 1910

² Allaway, (1962), p23

³ *Annual Reports*, 1911- 14

⁴ *Annual Report*, 1917-18

⁵ *Annual Reports*, 1911-12 – 1917-18

⁶ *Executive Committee Minutes*, 29 May 1924

⁷ *Annual Report*, 1929-30

In December 1930 the club became known as the 'Vaughan College Rambling Club (in conjunction with the Workers' Educational Association)', with the aim of providing facilities for its members 'to cultivate a better knowledge and love of the countryside, particularly by the use of footpaths and byways'.⁸ The change in name was seen as 'advisable by the new relationship entered into by the Leicester Branch and the Vaughan College'.⁹ Under the chairmanship of A.E. Ball, and with G.E. Morley as secretary, the reconstituted club grew in numbers and in 1931 reported 'a very successful year', with 60 paying members (the annual subscription was now one shilling) and an average attendance of 20 on rambles.¹⁰

The routes and destinations were many and varied. The 1931-32 programme included a 'blackberry ramble' to Peckleton Common, a joint ramble with the West End Adult School to Nanpantan, near Loughborough, and a 'moonlight ramble' to Owston in the east of Leicestershire - 'Meet at Humberstone Road train terminus at 12 midnight' - with breakfast scheduled for 6.30 am. Boxing Day rambles were a regular feature, along with trips further afield, such as that to Thor's Cave, 360 feet above the River Manifold in the Derbyshire Peak District in July 1933. A 'Boating, Bathing, Basking' ramble from the Loughborough Road tram terminus also featured in the programme for 1934.



A ramble to Frolesworth in August 1935

A weekend ramble

A number of weekend rambles were also held. Ethel Garner (later Mrs Reeve) kept a log of one such weekend trip to Braunston in Rutland on 3-4 September 1932. This gives a real sense of the fellowship of the ramblers, as well as the physical exertion of such a lengthy outing. The party of 12 ramblers assembled at 3 pm at the Humberstone tram terminus around two miles east of Leicester, where:

... the lateness of the men was remarked upon by the ladies...[but] soon a definite start was made through Humberstone village and then over the footpath to Scraftoft... It was sunny with a fresh wind. There were clouds about and often they massed together but at the worst only one brief shower came. No better day could have been chosen for walking...

The route took them through Ingarsby to Billesdon Coplow and Tilton, and on to Halstead, where they stopped about 6 pm for tea at the White Lodge. Continuing along the fields towards Marefield, they came to Owston, where:

Harold brought out a book of songs, ancient and modern, and with several of the girls sang in the rear... The leader continued along a grassy road through the woods; it was full of hard uneven ruts, very tiring to the feet... Slow progress was made... [and] it was now growing quite dark...

The party eventually arrived at the Old Plough Inn at Braunston, where they were to stay for the night. Supper 'soon appeared. Cottage pie or meat and potato mash was the first course. Many of the girls turned up their noses at this fare, some ate a little to show they did not wish to quarrel with it, while a few left it altogether'. The girls 'kept the rooms in a state of merriment until after midnight' and awoke next day to 'a morning of brilliant sunshine ...'. After cleaning boots, taking photographs and visiting

⁸ *Vaughan College Rambling Club Programme*, July-Dec 1933.

⁹ *Executive Committee Minutes*, 5 Dec 1930

¹⁰ *Annual Report*, 1930-31. Mr Morley is listed in local directories as a joiner.

the village shop for sticks of rock, they left Braunston around 10.30 am 'along a dirty cart track bounded by hedges full of ripe blackberries. So progress was slow while ramblers in ones and twos dived here and there to taste the luscious fruit'. By way of Langham – where two men 'by the roadside talking stood goggle eyed at such an array of shorts' – they made their way to Whissendine for a lunch of 'minced ham sandwiches, cheese and biscuits and chunks of cake', then on to Cold Overton and Knossington, where '... the party were greeted by the shouts and laughter of the village children whose sense of propriety was shaken by the sight of the girls in shorts... With great glee they followed the party for a little way along the road...'. After tea and some 'table games' at Belton, 'the bus was caught in time... [and] there remained the satisfaction that comes from something attempted and something done mingled with a day and a half's happy memories of new scenes and faces'.¹¹

A token of esteem

Ethel Garner was one of the most active members of the Club and leader of rambles, and members presented her with a clock as 'a small token of esteem' after her marriage in 1933. The accompanying letter expressed the hope that



After breakfast on the ramble to Braunston

'your new life will not separate you from us entirely... don't let domestic duties get you down every week-end, but come even if only for part of a ramble. And why not bring HIM too?'.¹² Her name does continue to appear as a leader in programmes from the 1930s, so this hope proved justified. The Rambling Club continued its activities during World War II, with Miss Florence Pole acting as secretary from July 1940. Fortnightly rambles were held on Sundays, and numbers were sometimes augmented by members of HM forces stationed in Leicester. In 1954, members of the club also assisted in surveying paths and attending enquiries in connection with the National

Parks and Access to the Countryside Act.¹³ However, its 'active' members were reported to be declining, hence a heartfelt plea in the 1954-55 winter programme for 'old members of the Club who no longer ramble, but who receive the programme each time it is issued, to continue their subscription'.



A ramble to Derbyshire in the 1950s

There are no further reports of Rambling Club activities in the Branch Annual Reports after 1957. Its established membership was growing older, and in common with

other WEA societies, which at various times also included an Art Group, Literature Society and Music Society, it is likely that the wider availability and falling cost of commercial and home-based leisure activities, including television, made it increasingly difficult to attract new members. As a footnote to its activities, however, it

¹¹ Loaned by Hilary Payne

¹² Letter loaned by Hilary Payne

¹³ *Annual Report, 1953-54*

is interesting to note the footpath walking class tutored by Heather MacDermid in the 1980s/90s, which met with many of the tribulations familiar to ramblers while playing their own part in preserving access:

... yes, there was a bull, and yes, there was barbed wire. And a ditch and a field of rape and a river we couldn't get across... But the bull didn't charge and we negotiated the wire without ruining our trousers. We reported the missing footbridge (and found it replaced four weeks later!) and we trespassed along the old railway line when we couldn't get through the barley... Walking footpaths, learning the law, and staging mock public enquiries are all part and parcel of preserving our common ways through the delightful Leicestershire landscape.¹⁴

The Vaughan Players

The Vaughan College Dramatic Society, better known as the Vaughan Players, also had close associations with the WEA Branch. It was formed in 1930-31 when a ban on 'play acting' at the College was lifted, and the Staff Tutor, H.J.R. Lane, was excused teaching duties on one evening a week to engage in 'organising and conducting a Dramatic Society'.¹⁵ A few years later the Players staged the first



The Vaughan Players' performance of 'The Tempest' in June 1950, with Jack Findley (left) as Prospero and Pamela Brooks (right) as Ceres

production in England of *Masses and Men* by the German communist playwright Ernst Toller, who was at the performance, and who 'appealed in a passionate mixture of German and English... for justice for the Jews and artists in Germany to a packed and feverish audience'.¹⁶ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed in September 1936, when the Branch Cash Book included a rather cryptic entry for 'Cellophane' alongside the hire of costumes and printing programmes. Shakespeare featured in the repertoire on other occasions. According to a review in a local newspaper in 1950:

The Vaughan Players' production of *The Tempest* last night was too well balanced to be dominated even by an original and brilliant Caliban – but Phillip Collins' monster was its most valuable feature... Nora Mason tempered Ariel's ethereal eagerness with restraint, and Jack Findley's Prospero was sincere. Generally the standard of acting was high and production capable, but the scenery not bold enough.¹⁷

Early members of the Vaughan Players included Hans Freutel, who later performed professionally under the name of Paul Hansard, and Sidney Atkins, their Chairman for many years. They soon gained a reputation as one of the foremost amateur dramatic societies in the Midlands, winning first place in an area competition in 1938-39. Despite the loss of a number of male members to the armed forces, they continued to present plays at Vaughan College and other venues throughout the Second World War. In 1942-43, these included *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen, *Fumed Oak* by Noel Coward, and *Man of Destiny* by George Bernard Shaw, the latter at 'a nearby RAF station'. Leicester-born playwright Joe Orton also performed with the Vaughan

¹⁴ WEA East Midland District, *Newsletter*, No.3, Spring 1990

¹⁵ Allaway (1962), p91; p71

¹⁶ Dr Roger Manvell, *Midland Memories*, quoted in Allaway (1962), p80

¹⁷ *Leicester Mercury*, 8 June 1950. Philip Collins was Staff Tutor in Adult Education from 1947-62, and Warden of Vaughan College from 1954-62.

Players before moving to London to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in 1951.¹⁸ The autumn production in 1948 was George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, which was also performed at the Borstal institutions at Lowdham Grange and Sherwood. From the late 1940s the Vaughan Players also took part in annual events hosted by University College Leicester for overseas students on vacation courses. At a reception for French teachers in July 1947 they presented *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* by George Bernard Shaw, with Wendy Wright playing the Dark Lady, Emmie Bent as Queen Elizabeth, Alan Bryan as Shakespeare, and Andre Hopkins as the Beefeater. At a similar event in 1958 they performed *The Laboratory*, written and produced by David Campton, at that time a student at Vaughan College. *The Laboratory* had already won first prize in a competition organised by the Tavistock Repertory Company and second place in the British Drama League's Original One-Act Play Award. In the same year David Campton was awarded an Arts Council bursary and went on to write over 120 plays for stage, radio and screen.¹⁹

Some of the lighter moments of the Vaughan Players in the 1950s were recalled by one of their members, Beryl Richardson, including a performance of *MacBeth* when beekeepers' smoke was used in the witches' cauldron. Unfortunately, this pervaded the whole stage, causing much coughing and spluttering among the cast. The set of another play required large wrought-iron gates which were made elsewhere from wood and cardboard, painted black and then transported, much to the amusement of onlookers, in the back of a two-seater Morris.²⁰

Folk Dancing Society

When the Vaughan College Dramatic Society was wound up in 1967 it donated £10 to the WEA Branch from its proceeds. As the Committee noted, the Players 'had had a long and distinguished career, and its plays had been very much enjoyed particularly by the older members of the Branch'.²¹ Beryl Richardson was also a leading member of the Vaughan



A gathering of the Vaughan Folk Dancing Society at the home of tutor Eric Swift

College Folk Dancing Society, which evolved from WEA classes held there by Eric Swift. Mildred Phillips, who represented the club on the WEA Executive Committee in the 1950s, remembered attending a lecture by Eric Swift:

on folk tales, folk poetry and of course folk dancing. We were so interested that, with the help of the caretaker, we went up into the hall, and with Mr Swift at the piano, we did some folk dancing. This was allowed after the classes had all stopped for the night. It soon developed into a proper folk dance club, and we joined up with the other folk dance clubs in Leicester and had some Saturday night dances. For myself, this culminated in going as part of the team to dance at the Albert Hall.²²

The Branch *Annual Report* for 1947-48 recorded 'an influx of new members' and noted that 'several new dances have been learnt, including Morris and sword dances... Lately the members have shown an interest in American Square

¹⁸ *Leicester Mercury*, 2 October 2008

¹⁹ Leicester Bach Choir archive, University College reception programme, July 1958; <http://www.samuefrench-london.co.uk/sf/Pages/feature/campton.html>, 13 July 2008. David Campton was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Leicester in 2006, shortly before he died.

²⁰ Telephone conversation with Alison Coates, Beryl Richardson's daughter, March 2008

²¹ *Executive Committee Minutes*, 4 December 1967

²² Letter from Mildred Phillips

Dancing'. In July 1953 the society hosted an evening of folk dancing at Vaughan College for overseas students studying English language and literature at University College Leicester.²³ There is no further reference to it after 1956-57, when there appears to be a general decline in extra-curricular activities linked to the WEA Branch.

Socials and outings

Branch Accounts and Annual Reports also indicate a range of social activities beyond the clubs and societies themselves, including dances, socials, garden parties, annual outings, whist drives and film shows, many of them with fund-raising in mind. On 25 January 1930, for instance, at the Friends' Adult School, 'our members and friends had a very enjoyable evening. Community singing, games and dancing were entered into by all'.²⁴ A Social Committee was established in 1930, and socials were regularly held at the beginning of each new autumn term and at other points in the year. In 1929-30, a dance at Lancaster Hall made a profit of £5. 8s. 11d., while an overall loss of £1. 6s. 10d was reported in 1931 on the first of a number of joint garden parties organised with University College Leicester, despite a profit of 18s. 6d. from the sale of ices and lemonade. Expenses for the annual social in February 1932 included 10s. for a pianist, while 1s. 3d. was spent on balloons for the same event in 1934, and 6d. on a new gramophone needle for the autumn social in the following year. There are other entries in 1936 for the hire of films, a projector and one or more 'operators'.²⁵

Annual outings usually had an educational as well as social objective, and were often hosted by WEA branches elsewhere. In June 1930, members and friends spent 'a pleasant afternoon in Cambridge. In the hall of Trinity College we were welcomed by Dr Parry and addressed by Mr Tawney, the President of the National WEA'. A payment for 243 railway tickets for an outing to Oxford in June 1932 gives an idea of the scale of these visits, while a further visit to Cambridge is reported in 1933-34 'for nearly 350 people...'.²⁶ A visit to Rampton high security mental hospital in 1937 sits oddly among the lists of social activities, although it was said to be 'an extremely interesting afternoon'.²⁷

Such outings were inevitably curtailed during the Second World War and for some years afterwards. In 1950-51, an outing was organised to the Fenlands where 'the value of the visit was much enhanced by the efforts of Mr R. B. Davis who kindly prepared a guide to the places visited and also conducted the party round the Abbey at Crowland and the Cathedral at Ely'. Five visits to the theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon were also reported, but from 1951 these were organised by the Adult Education Department of University College without WEA involvement. The Branch Social Sub-Committee continued to meet, and to organise events; but for reasons similar to those that account for the decline of the organised clubs and societies, by the 1960s these activities appear to be largely confined to an occasional outing and the annual Branch dinner.²⁸

²³ Leicester Bach Choir Archive, University College Leicester programme 1953

²⁴ *Annual Report*, 1929-30

²⁵ *Leicester Branch Cash Book*, 1917-1937

²⁶ *Annual Reports*, 1929-30 & 1933-34; *Leicester Branch Cash Book*, 1917-1937

²⁷ *Annual Report*, 1936-37

²⁸ *Annual Reports*, 1936-37; 1950-1974