

175th Anniversary of the Oddfellows Guernsey District

The Oddfellows in Guernsey is part of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows which became officially recognised by the British Government in 1810. Emerging from the 'medieval Trade Guilds', ordinary people worked together to help each other out in times of need. By joining friendly societies members could protect themselves and their families against the effects of illness, injury or death.

The first Manchester Unity Oddfellows Lodge in Guernsey, called the Loyal Guernsey Lodge, was formed in 1845. There was an Oddfellows Lodge, the Loyal Independent Guernsey Lodge, previous to that, but it belonged to the 'Ancient Order' of Oddfellows. That lodge was established some time prior to 1770, with a membership that was largely made up of seafaring men. The Lodge failed sometime before 1845 and some of its members saw the advantages offered by the Manchester Unity, which already had a presence in Jersey. These members approached the Oddfellows Jersey District to open a lodge in Guernsey and this happened on 29th January 1845. The first Lodge meeting took place in the upper room of the 'Manchester Unity' Hotel in the States Arcade kept by Mr. Daniel Rougier, one of the founder members. The hotel was where the Holland & Barrett shop is now.

The members of the Loyal Guernsey Lodge soon found it too difficult to attend quarterly District meetings in Jersey and on 19th July 1847 the Guernsey District was formed.

Membership of the lodge was open to any (male) person of good character and of sound health, who was aged between 18 and 36 years. There was no limit on the number of members who could join the Lodge, however the proportion of mariners initiated in the Lodge could only be equal to one-sixth of the other members (pilots, boatmen, bargemen, and fishermen, being considered as mariners).

For their weekly fee Members would receive the benefits of the services of a doctor and medicines (not leeches) in times of illness, sick pay to provide an income if unable to work and a death benefit on the death of the member or his wife. The member may also get additional help in times of distress, such as being shipwrecked.

There were also additional benefits for travelling members as the Manchester Unity had districts throughout the English speaking world.

Over the next 100 years the Guernsey District grew to include the Pride of Sarnia Lodge, Loyal St. Andrews Lodge (mainly for the country parishes) and the St. Anne's Lodge in Alderney. The St. Anne's Lodge soon formed its own Alderney District.

Apparently Oddfellowship failed in Jersey sometime prior to 1858. So about 1861 N. J. Bott past president of the Loyal Guernsey Lodge moved to Jersey and became the founding member of the Loyal Caesarean Lodge which opened on 29th May 1862 at the Lyric Hall, Museum Street, St. Helier as part of the Island of Guernsey District. In 1870 a second Lodge the 'Loyal St. Helier Lodge' was formed and in June 1871 the 'Island of Jersey District' was formed by the two Lodges.

Each Lodge had a corresponding Juvenile Lodge for boys aged 5 to 18, which provided similar benefits to the adult lodge, but for the member only. Children could be working from any age and many families would have depended on their labour and income. Compulsory education, requiring pupils to remain in education until 13 years, was not established in Guernsey until 1903.

The female Princess May Lodge was started in September 1895, and by December that year the lodge had 31 members. Female lodges had been allowed by the Manchester Unity since 1893 and they could register as branches of their District and be subject to the same rules as male lodges, but only under certain conditions, such as confining female membership to female lodges and prohibiting female branches from meeting on licensed premises.

The Princess May lodge operated as part of the Island of Guernsey District, but was not part of the Manchester Unity until 1913.

The Guernsey District continued to grow in the early years of the 1900's and Guernsey was the venue for the Manchester Unity's Annual Movable Conference (AMC) in 1922 and 1932 both of which filled St. George's Hall with about 700 delegates from all over Britain and the British Empire.

Oddfellows Halls

The Lodges and District met at Daniel Rougier's 'Manchester Unity' Hotel until 1869 when they moved to a room owned by Mr. William Miller, who was having a large new room erected over the Tourgard Stables which were located on the south-west corner of the lower Pollet opposite the Thomas De la Rue.

The Lodge room at Mr. Miller's house did not prove very satisfactory. To find a replacement and to provide an investment several members decided to build a new venue and formed the Oddfellows Building Society in January 1872. In the three years to January 1875 they had issued 440 £1 shares to fellow Oddfellows, the Loyal Guernsey and Pride of Sarnia Lodges then committed to each match this amount to enable the building to proceed.

The Society was legally incorporated on 18 February 1875 in the Royal Court at the same time as the land for the building was purchased. "*Purchase of a plot of ground situated and bordering St. Julian's Avenue on the one side and Truchot Street on the other and for the erection of a suitable building for the purposes of the Order as well as for letting.*" The land was sold by Mr William Jones of St. Peter Port and was 14 perches in area. The cost was 10 Quarters Annual Rent and £60 cash.

The building, to be called St. Julian's Hall, consisted of a main hall (for entertainment), a lodge room and other meeting rooms plus Caretaker (Hall-keeper) accommodation. The lodge room was used by the two Oddfellows lodges and their Juvenile branches and from September 1895 the Princess May Lodge. There was also a Templar's Room that was used by Lodges of the International Organisation of Good Templars. Other rooms were used for various committee meetings, badminton, mission meetings etc.

The first public performance in the main hall was on 3 October 1876, when a local singer gave what was described as '*drawing room entertainment*'. The hall soon became the island's principal place of live entertainment. It eventually became the Gaumont Cinema and sadly was demolished by 2016.

In January 1914 the Oddfellows Building Society sold the St Julian's Hall to the New Channel Islands Entertainment Co. and although the lodges could continue to use the lodge room, the Loyal Pride of Sarnia Lodge decided to move their meetings and started to look for a new lodge room.

They bought a building at 2 Fountain Street from the States of Guernsey in April 1914 and called it the Oddfellows Hall. The lodge was to use the ground floor and the cellar. The upper part of the building was being leased to the Imperial Club, the building was also used by the Rev. De Putron for the Girls Friendly Society.

The first meeting of the Pride of Sarnia in the new Hall was in May 1914. In March 1923 the Lodge received an offer of £2,000 for the building as long as a quick sale could be negotiated. The contract of sale was agreed on 19th April, and the lodge vacated the premises and moved back to St. Julian's Hall.

Immediately after the sale of the Hall in Fountain Street the Lodge put an advert in the Guernsey Press asking for a possible site or building for a lodge room. There were seven replies, the best of them was from a Mr Samuel Henry Powell who owned a house 'The Cross Keys' at the top of Lefebvre Street. The sale of the house and a large garden was agreed for £7,350 (Guernsey) and Mr Powell vacated the property by 29th December 1923. The house, which was dilapidated, was demolished and the garden cleared.

The new building consisted of three floors, the two lower floors were divided into six rooms which were let to the States Insurance Authority. The rooms had been designed to meet the requirements of the Department including a large strong room in the basement. The upper floor contained a large lodge room with a meeting room, District Office and cloakroom/toilet. The garden was converted into garages which were rented by the Royal Court for the use of its members.

The Oddfellows Hall, Lefebvre Street, was officially opened on Friday 23rd April 1926 by the Deputy Grand Master of the Manchester Unity, Mr. B. Ashdown.

The Occupation

During the German Occupation no lodge meetings were held and the lodge room was sealed by the occupying forces. All the assets and money of the Society had to be transferred to the States and this included Oddfellows Hall. The States Insurance Authority continued to use their part of the building.

All regalia, ritual objects and books were confiscated and destroyed and meetings of more than three people were forbidden.

The Lodge Secretaries that remained in the Island continued to support members from their homes, paying doctors' fees, sick pay and death benefit. However this was on behalf

of the States who controlled all the money. No new members could be taken on or juveniles transferred to adult lodges.

Guernsey was liberated by the British Forces on May 9th 1945, and the arrangements with the States terminated at the end of May, the lodges taking back control of assets and bank accounts from 1st June 1945.

The District and Lodges reverted to their previous mode of administration as far as possible from 1st July 1945 and an advert was put in the Guernsey Press stating that Lodges would once more take on new members. As the Lodge Room would not be available for some time, Secretaries would continue to receive contributions at their houses.

Post War Social Changes

Guernsey again hosted the Manchester Unity AMC in 1952 and 1962, both with about 550 delegates and most of them and their families arriving by sea. St. George's Hall and Candie Gardens were again used as venues. Although the Bailiff in his speech at the closing Ball hoped that the AMC would return in 1972 this was the last one in Guernsey. The closure of St. Georges Hall in November 1966 and the increasing cost of travel put an end to such events in Guernsey.

The introduction of social insurance cover by the States of Guernsey meant that the old Oddfellows Benefit Tables based on the payment of sick pay were no longer relevant. Introduced in 1961 the Guernsey District Welfare Scheme included not only medical attention by your doctor, but also the additional benefits of; Hospital Bed Payment, Surgeons and Anaesthetists fees, Physiotherapists fees, Travelling expenses to the mainland, Ambulance cover, Nursing & Maternity services, Dentist fees, Optician fees for new glasses. All these additional benefits would be limited to so much per benefit year.

By the early 1970's all the Juvenile Lodges had closed due to lack of interest. Oddfellowship in Alderney had stopped with the Occupation in 1940 when all the records and regalia disappeared. It was not restarted till October 1963 when the Alderney St. Anne's Lodge was reopened as part of the Guernsey District. So by the 1980's there were five lodges in the District each with their own secretary who carried out the lodge business from their house.

Merging of Lodges

Due to the introduction of the UK Financial Services Act 1986 the Manchester Unity realised that they had to streamline their organisation to comply with the act. One of the actions was to reduce the number of Financial Lodges to one per District. This meant that the local lodges must merge into a single lodge, this action was also needed because of the fall in active members. To do this a new Lodge the Loyal Normandy Lodge was formed in November 1987 and members and assets transferred to it. A central office was opened at Oddfellows Hall to handle all the business of the new lodge.

In August 1998 the Loyal Normandy Lodge was required to register with the Guernsey Financial Services Commission under the Insurance Business (Guernsey) Law 1986.

This was the start of much more local accountability of Friendly Societies in the Island and justified the lodge mergers and centralisation of the business side of Oddfellowship. Most of the other Friendly Societies that had existed in the 1800's and early 1900's had already ceased to operate.

Medical Scheme Changes

In January 1991 the States Insurance Authority introduced a new States Health Benefit Scheme which provided a grant to reduce the cost of GP and nurse consultations. Then in January 1996 the States Health Scheme started and covered in-hospital treatment.

With these changes in universal health cover the District introduced the 'Guernsey Oddfellows Health Care Plan' from 31st December 1995. This is still the current scheme offered by the Guernsey District although changes have been made in the cover over the years.

District Lodge

In January 1999 the number of active members continued to fall and with a change in Unity rules that allowed District Lodges, it was decided to reduce administration and reorganise the District as a single District Lodge. The last meeting of the Loyal Normandy Lodge was on 8th December 1999 with the first meeting of the District Lodge held on 12th January 2000.

Oddfellows Hall Renovation

In 2019 with the termination of the lease for the ground floor and basement offices it was decided to renovate Oddfellows Hall and move the District offices to the ground floor. This would provide a modern office environment and easier access for our members visiting the office. The basement and first floor would also be modernised for rental.

In clearing out the cupboards and loft of the Hall many old record books and items of regalia were found. The books were given to the Guernsey Archive so that they could be accessed for research purposes and several items were sold.

As much of the structure of the hall dated from 1925 there proved to be significant work to be done. Also the work was hampered by Covid and delays in obtaining materials, the new offices finally opened in September 2021.

District in its 175th Year

After 175 years the Oddfellow District in Guernsey is still performing one of the key initial functions “*paying for medical attendance to members in time of sickness*”. Many things have changed over the years, especially the provisions made by the States of Guernsey to provide healthcare and support to the people of Guernsey in times of illness. However, the payment for primary healthcare (GPs, nurses, Emergency Department and Ambulance) is still reliant on the ability of the person to pay, often at the time of treatment. This means that Friendly Societies and medical insurance are still as relevant today as they were in 1847, possibly more so, with the large range of medical treatments available today.

The Guernsey Oddfellows Friendly Society is a not for profit organisation which uses its capital and investments over 175 years to keep the payments by members to a minimum. The society will have to continue to adapt, as it has done over the 175 years, to changes in healthcare provision. We will also try to provide new benefits to members as new treatments become available in the Islands. However, I don't think we will ever cover leeches.

David Elliston PPGM
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