

MILL ROAD HISTORY PROJECT

BUILDING REPORT

Romsey Town Labour Club



William Ingram

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The Mill Road History Project was officially launched in 2013 under the umbrella of Mill Road Bridges¹ to study the heritage of Mill Road, Cambridge, its buildings (residential, commercial and industrial), institutions and community. It was supported by a two-year grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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Author: William Ingram

Cover picture: Romsey Labour Club (photograph William Ingram, 2014)

¹ 'Mill Road Bridges seeks to grow and maintain the community spirit, heritage and rich cultural diversity of the Mill Road area by improving the flow of information between and about individuals, businesses, voluntary organisations and local stakeholders.'

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Abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting	<i>CIP</i>	<i>Cambridge Independent News</i>
ARP	Auxiliary Raid Precautions	CLP	Cambridge Labour Party
ASLEF	Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen	HQ	Headquarters
CA	Cambridgeshire Archives	ILP	Independent Labour Party
CC	Cambridgeshire Collection	NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
CC	<i>Cambridge Chronicle</i>	<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
CDN	<i>Cambridge Daily News</i>	TUC	Trades Union Congress

NOTE

This report was produced by William Ingram, who visited the site on 4 December 2013 and completed his report in 2014. The short sections 'The Building Plans' and 'The General Strike' were added by Ian Bent, and the appendix was compiled by Allan Brigham, all three in June 2015.

Location of site

276 Mill Road, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, CB1 3NL

The club is located on the south-east corner of the junction between Mill Road, Coleridge Road, and Hemingford Road. It is situated between Mill Road to the north, and Coleridge Road to the west.

National Grid reference

TL 546934 257597 Latitude: 52.197033 Longitude: 0.14841306

PRE-HISTORY OF THE SITE

In 1903 the land belonged to Romsey House, as shown in Figure 1 below. Between 1903 and 1927 much of its land was sold for development, and by 1927 Romsey Avenue (later to become Coleridge Road) had been built. Both the Avenue and the Labour Club are visible in Figure 2, and the GPS location of the Labour Club can be seen in Figure 3.



Figure 1 1903 Map of Romsey



Figure 2 1927 Map of Romsey

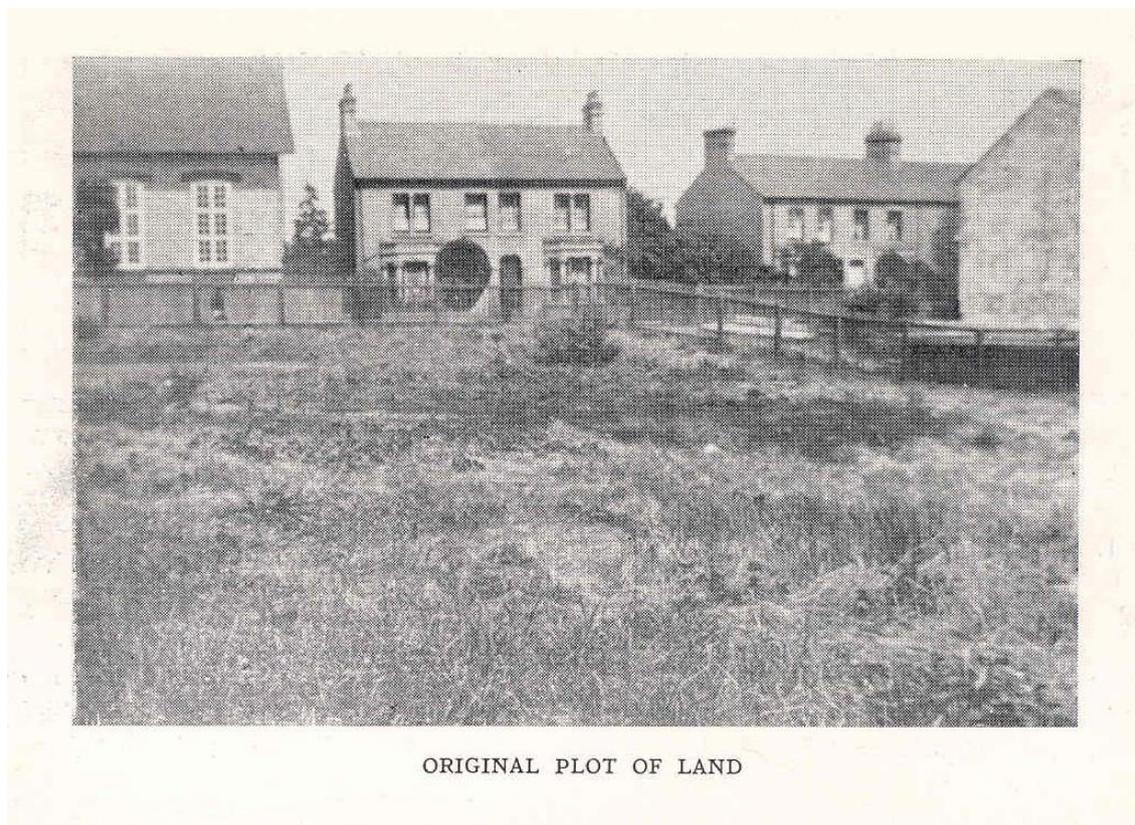


Figure 4 Labour Club site

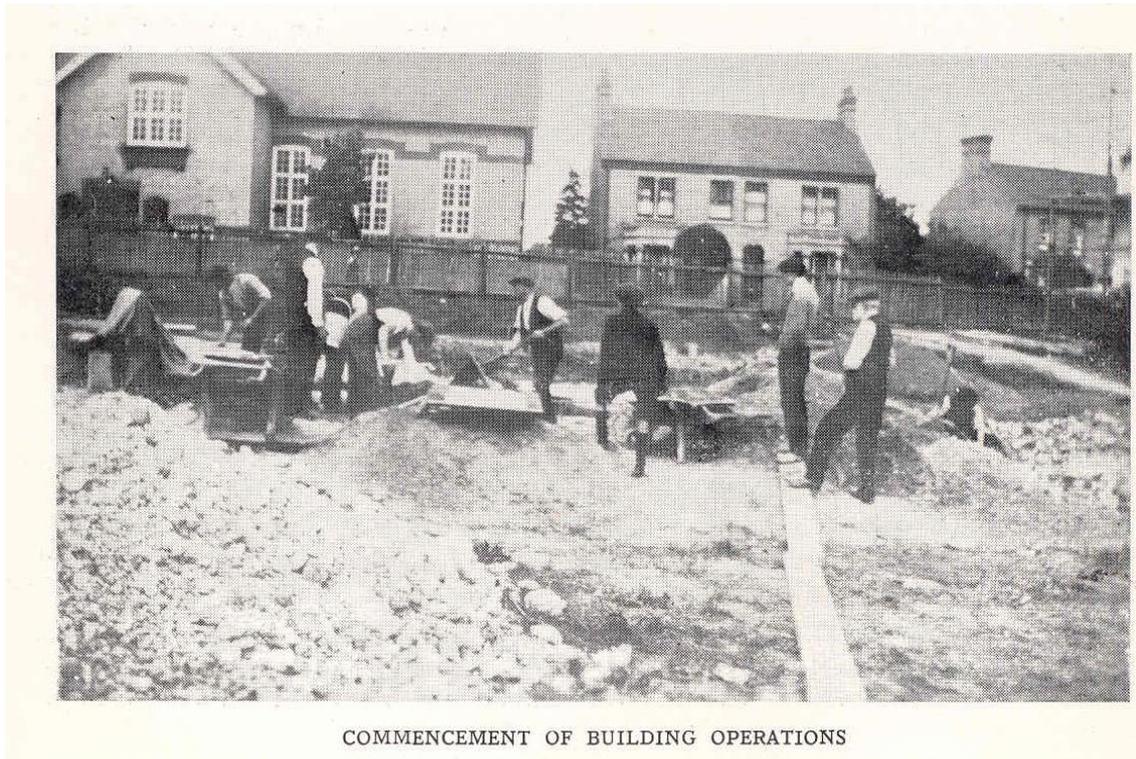
When deciding where to build a club to house the party, Romsey was an obvious choice. Firstly, Labour had won every municipal election held in Romsey since the formation of the party (and would win every election up to 1998, bar one freak by-election in 1981). Secondly, thanks in part to the trade union links, railway workers were 'the backbone of the modern labour party'³ and the vast majority of these workers lived in Romsey. Finally, residents in Romsey had already gained a reputation for holding left-wing views, and the ward was dubbed 'Red Romsey', 'Little Moscow' and 'Red Russia' by people in other parts of Cambridge. Romsey was clearly the ideal place to build a headquarters for the Cambridge Labour Party, and the current plot of land was bought for the sum £950 in 1921 (See Figure 4, above).

The First Steps

The Romsey Labour Club never became the HQ of the Cambridge Labour Party (CLP) which decided to continue looking for an appropriate venue.⁴ However the central party did allow the Labour Party to build the Club itself, granting it the land in 1922.

³ Johnson and Walsh, *Comradery*, p. 33.

⁴ The precise reasons for this need further investigation. They may perhaps relate to a desire on the part of the members to appear less 'left-wing' so as encourage those unsure of their political leanings to join the Club. See Purkis (1982), p. 44 and footnote 26.



COMMENCEMENT OF BUILDING OPERATIONS

Figure 5 Building of the club in 1924 with voluntary labour

Due to various circumstances, it was not until 21 May 1924 that the Club filed a building application (see Figure 6) as an Industrial and Provident Society, under the name of 'Romsey Town Labour Club & Hall, Ltd' (secretary Harold W Few). The application was sent off by the building committee, which had amongst its ranks William 'Billy' Briggs, who would go on to become the Club's first President and, more significantly, Cambridge's first Labour Mayor. Having been approved by the Council, the plans were outlined at Romsey Council School by Ernest Bond (bricklayer and member of the Cambridge Friends Society) and David Crown (contractor, active and prominent co-operator⁵). The idea of a bar was pushed strongly by Briggs, who claimed that after his experience with a previous venture in Romsey Town he would never support another project which did not include this facility.

Figure 6 Application for Planning Permission (Cambridgeshire Archives)

⁵ co-operator: 'a member of a co-operative society; one who practises industrial co-operation' (OED); David Crown was involved in the building of Romsey town terraced housing.

To help finance the project, it was floated. Shares cost £1 and promised an interest rate of 5%. However, the generosity of shareholders meant that most never claimed their dividends, and some even transferred their loans to donations. By 13 July 1925, £1,100 of the £2,000 goal had been raised and work began one week later.

The first thing to be put in was the damp course (a layer of waterproof material designed to stop rising damp). This also showed how the building work would proceed. The Romsey Labour Party could not afford to pay workmen, so volunteers gave up evenings and weekends to help build it. Thanks to trade union links, the club members received instructions from the Associated Union of Building Trade Workers. All those who helped were commemorated in a roll of honour.

Nick Mansfield describes the Club as 'a modest brick building in a vaguely Queen Anne style', and declares the one-storey red brick building a "Wrenaissance" structure' with 'its handsome exterior [which] boasted two Venetian windows and [a] fine stone carving over the front door'.⁶

The Building Plans

The architect's drawings, signed 'Ernest W Bond / 23 City Road Cambridge / May 1925', are preserved in the Cambridgeshire Archives.⁷ The ground-floor plan shows the layout of the interior (Figure 7). Inside the main Mill Road entrance is a small vestibule, which leads

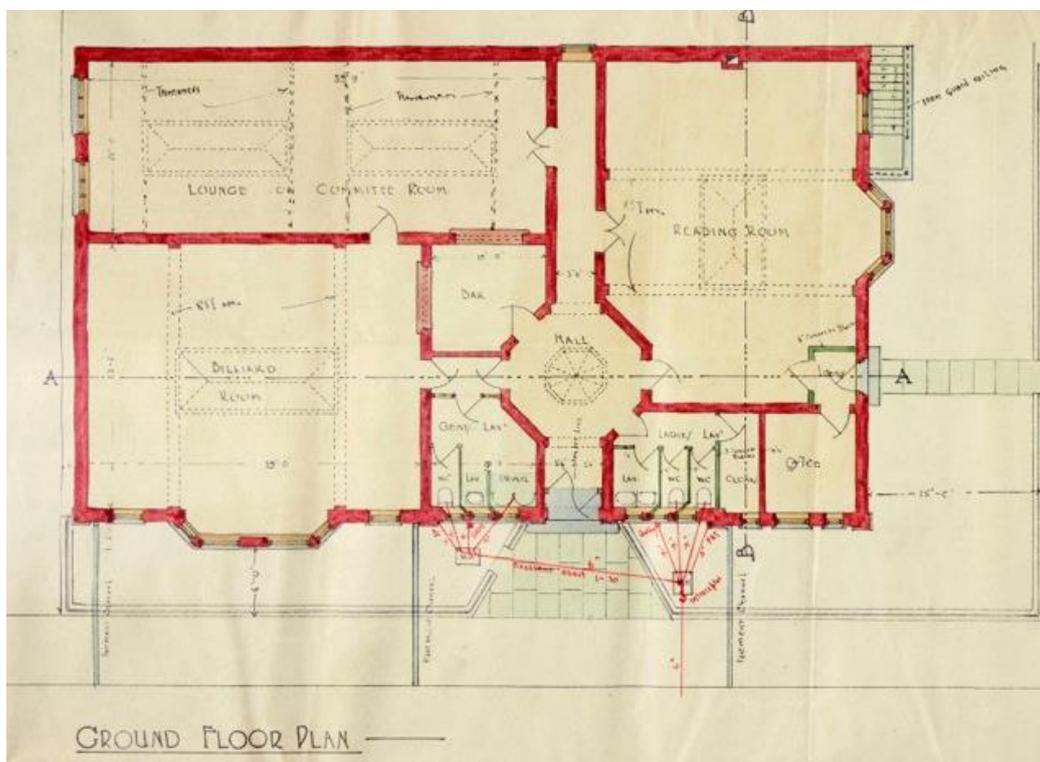


Figure 7 Ground-floor plan

⁶ Nick Mansfield, *Buildings of the Labour Movement* (English Heritage U.K., 2013), p. 95 and Figure 12.12.

⁷ CA CB/2/SE/3/9/5413 (planning application form and single sheet of drawings: Figures 6 and 7–10).

directly into a small octagonal hall, panelled in oak, with entranceways to north, south, east and west. The left (east) entranceway, with door, leads through to the billiard room, passing between the gents' toilet and the bar. That to the right (west), with door, leads into a spacious reading room extending to the back of the building. The hall has a door also on the northwest side that leads into the ladies toilet. The entranceway straight ahead (south) leads to a passageway with doors into the reading room on the right and the 'lounge or committee room' on the left at the back of the building. The bar area has a counter facing into this latter room and another facing into the billiard room.

The handsome long frontage on to Mill Road is shown in elevation (Figure 8) with much of the architectural detail drawn in, including the imposing design of the door, the windows of the billiard room, the parapet (part brick, part stone – see title-page picture), the brick banding of the corners, and even the downpipes (still preserved):

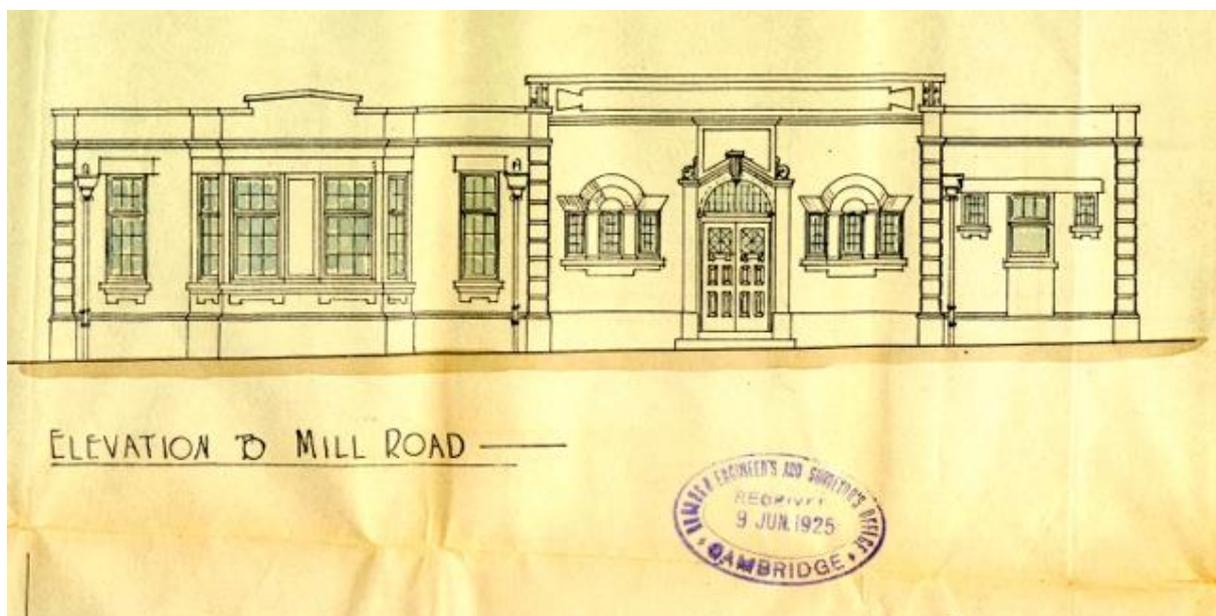


Figure 8 Mill Road frontage

The elaborate carving over the main door (see Figure 13 below) is left plain. On the right-hand side of the ground-floor plan a second entrance is shown, and this can be seen in the elevation on to Coleridge Road (then called 'Romsey Avenue' (Figure 9), which shows also the handsome bow window and smaller window of the reading room, and the chimney from the boiler. At the right-hand side of this frontage are the steps leading down to the boiler room in the basement, which extends the whole area of the original building:

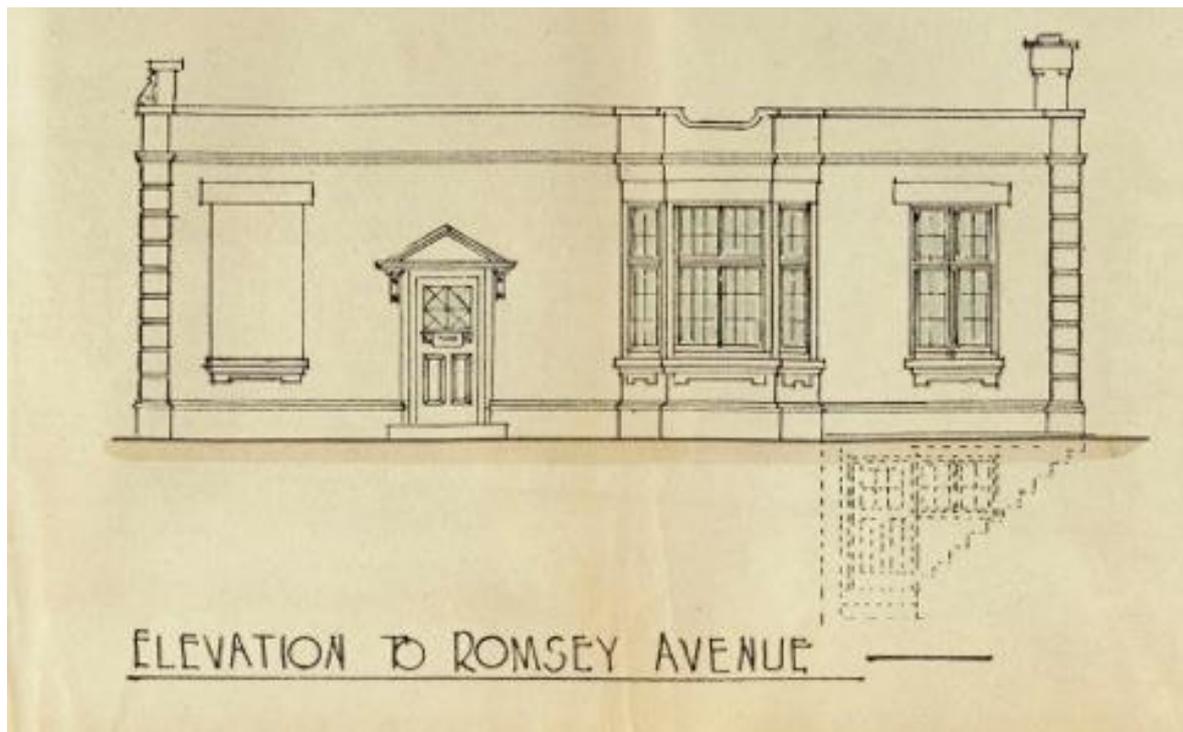


Figure 9 Frontage to Coleridge Road

The positioning of the building on the site can be seen from the architect's block plan (Figure 10):

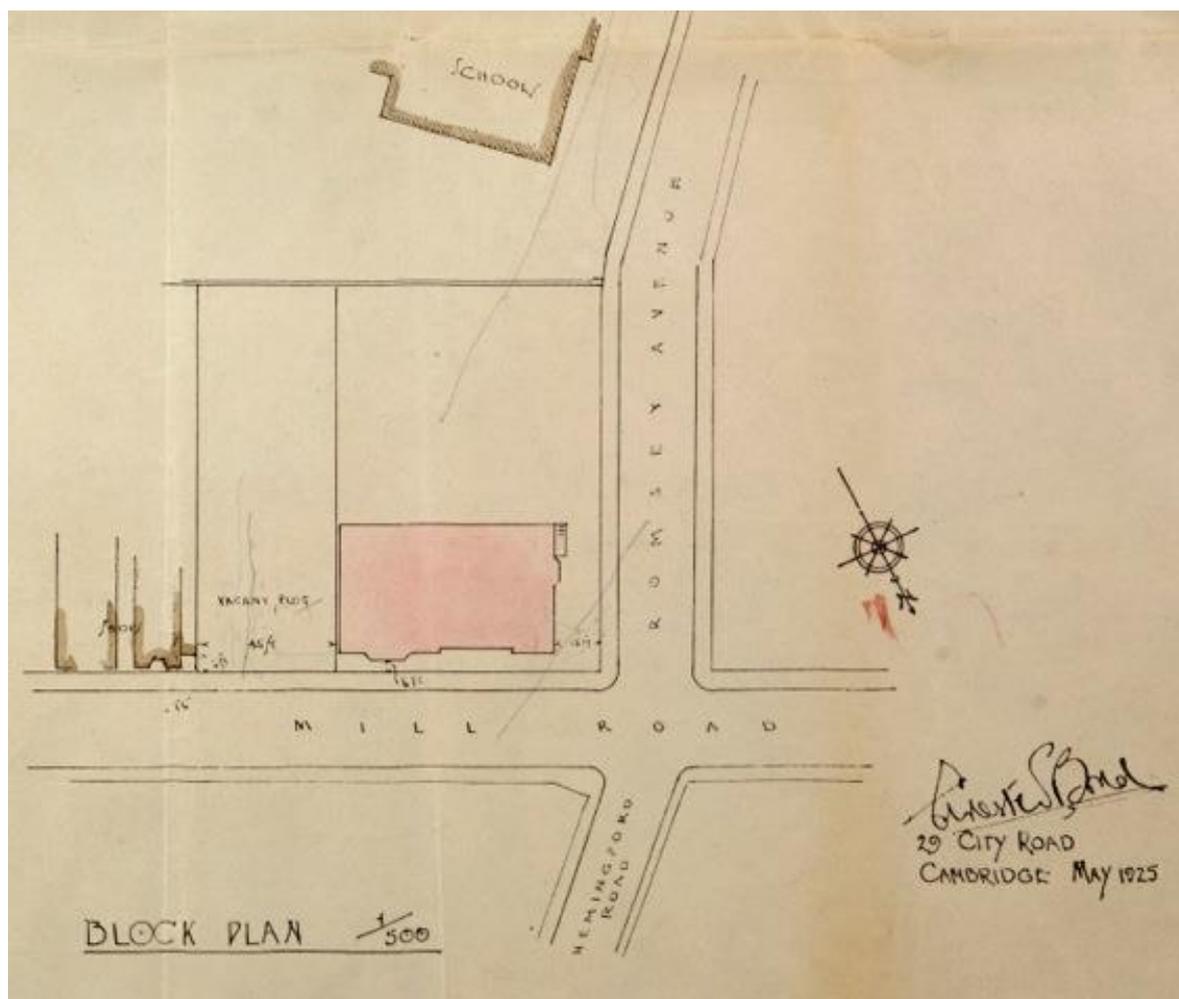


Figure 10 Block plan of the site

The old Romsey School (visible also in Figures 4 and 5 – long since demolished) is shown behind the site, with a spacious yard to the rear (since encroached upon by two single-storey rear extensions), and a vacant plot to the east before the housing starts, on which the Club was extended in 1932 (see below, 'Early Days').

“Ramsay” Town

By 1926, preliminary work on the site had finished (see Figure 5, above), and the Club could start work on the building itself. To commemorate the occasion, the party invited Ramsay MacDonald MP to lay the prestigious foundation stone.

It would be difficult to overstate how much of a coup this was for the local party. Ramsay MacDonald was Labour’s first Prime Minister (taking office for the year of 1924) and was the current leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the opposition to Stanley Baldwin’s Conservative government. To many in Romsey, despite his Scottish heritage, he would have been seen as one of their own – MacDonald was Britain’s first working-class Prime

Minister, and one of only a select few to have risen to that esteemed office without a university degree. I believe that this fact would not have been lost on the people of Romsey. Cambridge University was and is the most famous institution in Cambridge, so for such a well-respected and highly-esteemed man as Ramsay MacDonald to be successful without a university education will only have heightened his reputation with the people of Romsey.

The *Cambridge Daily News* article covering the event claimed that the audience looked up to MacDonald as an example of character, in particular his determination, thoughtfulness, and the fact that he would always strive to do what was right, no matter how unpopular the decision was.⁸ The crowd responded well to MacDonald's speech, cheering at his political views and laughing at his jokes (mainly concerning the Tory party). Clara Rackham, one of the Club's key financiers, 'did not think there could be anything which could fill them with greater hope for the value and happiness of the club they were founding that day, anything which could fill them with greater enthusiasm for the cause and give them more determination to work for it, than the presence of Ramsay MacDonald'.⁹ Glowing praise indeed, emphasizing the strong support by Romsey residents for MacDonald and also, therefore, for the Club.

For the ceremony itself, a booklet was produced with an interesting quotation blazoned across the front:¹⁰

Nation with nation, land with land,
Unarmed shall live as comrades free;
In every heart and brain shall throb
The pulse of one fraternity.
— J. A. Symonds

The event started at 2:30pm on Saturday 17 April 1926, and began with the hymn 'England Arise' and speeches by William Briggs and Ramsay MacDonald. At 3:30pm MacDonald laid the stone and was rewarded with a vase of red geraniums and a round of 'For he's a jolly good fellow'. The members were thanked for their work so far and in particular architect Ernest W Bond and Clerk of the Works David Crown. Bond's name is still visible on the foundation stone (see Figure 11, below). Throughout the service, people wore red rosettes and carried banners bearing slogans such as 'Labour offers you the true friendship' and sang songs such as 'Lift up the People's Banner' and 'The Red Flag'.

⁸ *CDN*, 19 April 1926.

⁹ Cite source.

¹⁰ A copy of the programme of the stone-laying event, and also the menu of the celebratory dinner signed by Ramsay McDonald, are preserved in CA within the collection K416/01/c/18.

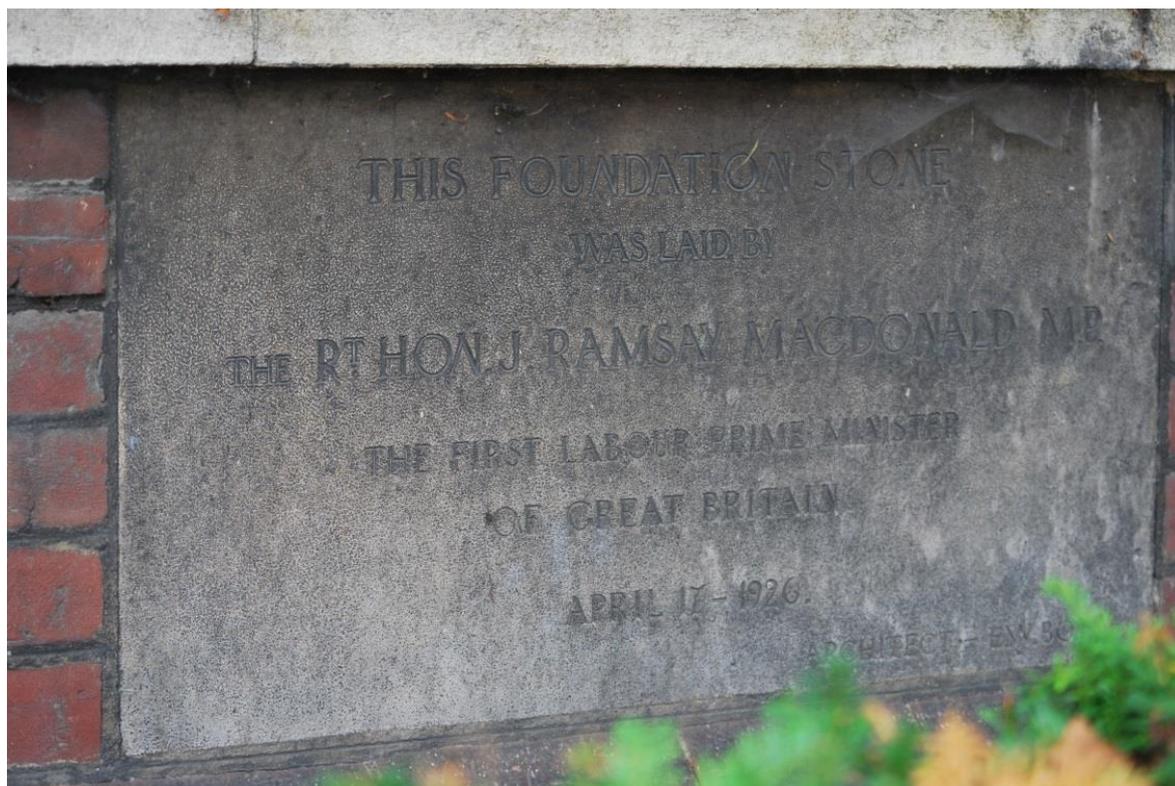


Figure 11 The stone was designed by 'first-class man' Alf Roberts.

The style of the entire day was based around fraternity and brotherhood, and the belief that those ideals and values were upheld strongly by the Labour Party. Ramsay MacDonald himself described the audience as 'his Cambridge friends' who were 'the fighting people, the feeling people, the aspiring people, the people who had grievances and did not bend down under them, but believed that by their own energy, co-operatively applied, those grievances could be ended'.

The General Strike¹¹

Exactly two weeks after this event, Liberal Party leader and former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George spoke in the Guildhall, saying 'they were met that afternoon under the shadow of a great industrial conflict of unknown magnitude'.¹² He devoted the first quarter of his speech on that day – Saturday 1 May – to the current crisis in the coal industry. A May-Day demonstration was organized by the Cambridge Trades Council, the Labour Party and the Co-operative Party, with a parade and a public meeting on Parker's Piece. A crowd of 5,000 listened to speeches there for an hour-and-a-half, wearing red hats, scarves and

¹¹ Thanks are due to Liz Brennan, Cambridge branch secretary of Unison, who very kindly made her collection of photocopies of contemporary newspaper reports, minutes and other documents relating to the General Strike of 1926 available for the purposes of this report. This section is largely dependant on that resource.

¹² *CDN*, 1 May 1926.

gloves, and encircled by red flags.¹³ Monday 3 May saw the beginning of the General Strike, called by the General Council of the TUC in the hope of forcing the government to prevent the reduction of wages and to act to improve working conditions in transportation (railways, buses, trams) and heavy industry (especially the coal mines).

By the Tuesday, more than a million and a half workers were on strike across Britain. In Cambridge, where 4,000 workers had come out on strike,¹⁴ one spokesman remarked that:¹⁵

it was not only members of the Labour Party who had withdrawn their labour, but men of all parties. Their friends at the Salisbury and Liberal Clubs who were not in the Labour movement had come out to fight their own Government against sending the miners back to slavery conditions.

Councillor W Few, following that, reported that he had come from a meeting in Ely where 'the men there were solid', and he was 'going into the fight with his teeth clenched'. The chairman expressed his gratitude to the railwaymen for coming out on strike in Cambridge, 'where [only] about four men were at work'. The *Cambridge Daily News* declared that, since no London morning papers were available, it would 'issue each day, at 1 p.m., a Strike Special, giving a summary of the principal items concerning the National dispute that have come to hand since the publication of the previous evening's issue'. The evening issue printed a local report:¹⁶

ROMSEY TOWN HEADQUARTERS.

The headquarters of the railway workers are at the Wesleyan Hall, Hemingford-road, and Councillor W. L. Briggs informs us that they have approached the authorities of the Wesleyan Chapel there asking them to arrange a service each morning from 10.30 to 11. Mr. Briggs saw the Mayor this morning, and states that his Worship has given them permission to use the Railway Band on Romsey Recreation Ground during the strike, as required.

And one such meeting is reported:¹⁷

CAMBRIDGE RAILWAYMEN'S VIEW.

Meeting on Romsey Recreation Ground.

Several hundred people—railwaymen, their wives and friends—attended a meeting held on Romsey Town Recreation Ground on Tuesday afternoon. Several short speeches were made, the Railway Silver Prize Band played selections and a collection was taken for the strike funds.

¹³ *CDN*, 1 May 1926.

¹⁴ *CC*, 5 May 1926, cited Purkis (1982), p. 51.

¹⁵ *CDN*, 4 May 1926; the chairman of the strike's Emergency Committee was H. J. Hockley of ASLEF, which set up its HQ in the Wesley Chapel on Mill Road.

¹⁶ *CDN*, date uncertain: the Wesleyan Hall, now Romsey Mill, was across Mill Road from the Labour Club site.

¹⁷ *CDN*, 4 May 1926.

“ CAMBRIDGE CHRONICLE ”
STRIKE NEWS SERVICE.
SATURDAY.

MAY 8th, 1926.

SECOND BULLETIN :—1 p.m.

SATISFACTORY REPORTS FROM EVERYWHERE.

Reports from all sources this morning indicate that the state of the country generally is satisfactory. The reports of isolated hooliganism have no political significance. The service of food transport and and protection of all services essential to the life of the community are being maintained and developed, and the newspapers that appeared this morning, including the "British Worker," make strong appeals against violence.

BIRKENHEAD AND LIVERPOOL NORMAL.

At Birkenhead 600 men have been rendered idle by the dock strike. Gas, electricity and firing are all normal.

At Liverpool all is quite normal and there is a 70 per cent. bus service.

GOOD NEWS FROM THE HOME OFFICE.

The position generally remains quiet, and the public are again warned not to believe alarmist rumours which are being actively circulated by a small minority. The transport services are improving. Volunteers are carrying on essential services and are coming forward well, and the great majority of the population is quiet and law-abiding. The situation in all Divisions generally is quiet, and the miners' conduct exemplary; only transport workers are occasionally troublesome in some parts.

WORKERS ACT AS SPECIAL CONSTABLES.

In Manchester there is no disorder, and an increased number of trains are running. Several large works are working, and workers are being sworn in as special constables.

BUXTON—ALL QUIET.

At Buxton the gas and electricity works are going. Train service improved. No items of interference.

VOLUNTEERS HARD AT WORK.

At Gerston the L.M.S. power station is being run by volunteers. Thirty-three vessels have been unleaded.

THE NORTH-EASTERN DIVISION.

The N.E. Division situation remains generally satisfactory, though there have been some incidents.

DONCASTER CARRYING ON.

The Doncaster power station is also working.

THREE MONTHS FOR COMMUNIST.

At Pontefract a prominent Communist, lately back from Moscow, was sentenced to three months for making a seditious speech.

Figure 122 *Cambridge Chronicle* 'Strike News',
8 May 1926

The *Cambridge Chronicle* also issued special strike bulletins twice a day (see Figure 12), less than sympathetic to the strike. The University Senate resolved that:

Undergraduates who have to keep the term will, on the application of their tutors, have the days allowed during which they were absent on National Service [i. e. strike-breaking, including the driving of trains – a train driven by volunteers was in fact derailed near Mill Road bridge, and hundreds of people swarmed to see the spectacle] after May 4th.

and stating that lectures would be suspended for the period of the emergency, and all examinations postponed until the strike was over.¹⁸ This points up the polarity that existed in Cambridge over the strike and the reputation that Romsey had in university – and no doubt professional and business – circles as 'Red Russia'.¹⁹

By Wednesday 5 May all 'building operatives' in Cambridge had ceased working.²⁰ This must have enabled the volunteer construction workers at the Labour Club site to make progress on the building.

However, the government had made careful preparations well in advance of the strike, and on 12 May the General Council of the TUC went to Downing Street and agreed to call off the stoppage. The General Strike of 1926 thus lasted only nine days, from the 4th to the 13th of May, during which Romsey Town had played its part with solidarity. Once it was over, many Romsey men suffered victimisation or outright reprisals from their employers.

Finishing the building

The system ran as it had before the strike: volunteers gave up evenings and weekends to help build the Club. The local builders who were helping did the bulk of the bricklaying and carpentry, railway workers dug holes and carried equipment, and those who were less able or had less time held bazaars and contributed to collections. A local man at the time felt that 'In those days there was more comradeship than what there is today. If they set about doing a thing, they'd do it. Fundraisers got the money and materials, building workers built it.'²¹

Historian Sallie Purkis found, when writing her thesis on Romsey, that 'Many people claim in conversation or letters today that they helped to build the Labour Club and it is hard to distinguish the actual participants from those who, in retrospect, want to be associated with the activity'.

By 1928, building work had finally finished. To finance the building the Club had taken £1,163 in loans and £837 in donations. Even more impressively, at the celebratory dinner held to open the building, the committee announced that it estimated the labour given to build the Club was worth between five and six hundred pounds. Hugh Dalton MP, who spoke at the opening of the Club, said 'We are celebrating today the victory of five years of persistent and determined effort on the part of men and women to build up something they could leave behind them for future generations and for the great cause for which we are all enlisted'.²²

¹⁸ University of Cambridge Senate Resolution, date unknown.

¹⁹ An account of the University's role in establishing the Cambridge Organisation for a National Emergency and recruiting undergraduates as strike-breakers, is given in Purkis (1982), pp. 50–52. The derailment was reported in *CC*, 12 May 1926, quoted in Purkis (1982), p. 52.

²⁰ *CDN*, 5 May 1926, 'with the exception of those engaged on Council houses and certain subsidy houses'.

²¹ 'J M': quoted Purkis (1982), p. 46.

²² *CIP* 12 October 1928, quoted by Purkis (1982), p. 48.

A stone on the front of the building to the left of the main entrance records the work that the members put into the building, with two improving quotations:



Figure 13 Stone inscription

R. L. C.

THERE IS NO WEALTH
BUT LIFE

THIS BUILDING
WAS ERECTED BY
VOLUNTARY LABOUR
BETWEEN THE YEARS
1925-1928

BY THEIR FRUITS YE
SHALL KNOW THEM

The first quotation is from Ruskin. In context, it reads:²³

There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others

The second quotation is from St Matthew's gospel, chapter 7, verse 16:

By their fruits ye shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

The Club already had 534 members, among them future mayors William Briggs and Ernest Gill, and decided to confer life membership on Ernest Bond and David Crown for their work in designing and building the Club.

Early days

Having finally been opened in 1928, the Club rapidly became a hive of activity, with many local organisations using it as their HQ. It became an important location for railway unions, including ASLEF and the NUR, the local Co-operative Guild (the Labour-Cooperative link

²³ John Ruskin, *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy* (1862), first published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, December 1860.

would last a long time) as well as other local labour branch parties, including neighbouring Petersfield and Coleridge.

It is worth mentioning the fact that, despite national attitudes to women still changing, the Labour Club viewed men and women equally: four women's groups made use of the facilities, and President Billy Briggs emphasized that the Club was for the use of both sexes, no matter how 'experimental' this might be. As mentioned earlier, Clara Rackham was a keen supporter of the Club, and was one of the three speakers at the stone-laying ceremony (with MacDonald and Briggs), and nine women are commemorated on the roll of honour (out of sixty-three), with many more helping by running stalls to raise money for the project.

Such was the popularity of the Club that, despite debts, members made significant improvements and in 1932 built a new and larger building on the east side to house meetings,²⁴ the current meeting room becoming a lounge. In 1935, the Club expanded further, again due to growing membership, and the card room and bar were extended. To finance these changes, the Club mortgaged the property and relied on shareholders, particularly Rackham, to guarantee them. The Club also commissioned a carving by stonemason Alf Roberts²⁵ over the entrance, depicting the tools used by all the tradesmen who helped build the Club (see Figure 14, below). The changes were successful and the users of the Club agreed that it was the right decision to extend it.

²⁴ The planning application and drawings for this expansion do not appear to survive in CA.

²⁵ Purkis (1982), p. 46. 'Roberts, Alfred, stonemason' is to be found in Spalding's street directories at 161 Mill Road (on the east corner with Sedgwick Street) between 1924/25 and 1935/36, and Roberts, F. C. & A. S., stonemasons' from 1936/37 to 1939/40; in 1948 Kelly's street directory (which does not give occupations) gives 'Roberts, Fredk. C.'.



Figure 14 Entrance to Romsey Labour Club

Despite this, the Cambridge Labour Party had not stopped looking for a central meeting place. This was due to the different interpretations of the word 'home'. The Cambridge Labour Party wanted the 'home' of the Cambridge Labour Party to be a serious place, and once they built the central building it housed many intellectual debates and political discussions. The Romsey Labour Club also had these things, but the members regarded the Club as a home-from-home and preferred 'beer and billiards' while retaining 'their inward-looking belief in the virtues of self-sufficiency, privacy and exclusivity'.²⁶

The Second World War

In 1939, Great Britain declared war on Germany and the whole country had to get behind the war effort. Understandably, the Romsey Labour Party used the Club as the main site for their fundraising efforts, and 135 club members would eventually be signed up to fight.

Thanks to the large annual repayments required on the Club's huge debt, the requisitioning authorities quickly acquired the hall for use as a Community Feeding Centre and the kitchen as a store for the local ARP wardens. The authorities also built a larger kitchen, which would

²⁶ Purkis (1982), p. 49.

be used for the feeding centre (see Figure 15, below). However, it was down to President William Briggs that the entire property was not taken over by the authorities, as he pointed out that the Club could be used as a recreational centre for decommissioned troops and evacuated persons. The requisitioning authorities agreed, and the Club was allowed to keep the rest of the facilities for that purpose.



Figure 15 The central hall, used as Feeding Centre during WWII

The Club enjoyed a close relationship with soldiers, and it began when the General Committee agreed unanimously that all members of the army were allowed free use of the Club, and free membership was given to the members who had joined His Majesty's Forces. This was used most prominently following Dunkirk, when many soldiers made use of the Club.²⁷ Thanks to the members' warm welcome, many friendships were forged between Club members and soldiers. When the soldiers had to go back to the front line, many letters of appreciation were received, and after the war some even returned to meet old friends.

Thanks to this relationship, and the fact that some of the Club's own members had gone to fight, the 'spirit of brotherhood began to show itself'.²⁸ The spirit most evident at the stone-laying ceremony was put to use, most obviously in the response to the gift-fund committee set up by P. W. Daldry. Women knitted gloves, socks and hats and sent them out to the

²⁷ Many of the injured from the Dunkirk evacuation were brought to the Mill Road County Hospital (requisitioned as a wartime emergency hospital) – now Ditchburn Place.

²⁸ Supply source of quotation.

troops, although this soon becoming unsustainable because of the strict rationing of wool. This did not stop the Club organising functions with the express intention of sending proceeds to the front. Thanks to the generosity of the members, it is estimated that money and goods worth over £1,000 were sent to the serving members. Understandably, the gifts were warmly appreciated and the Club again received numerous letters of thanks from the recipients.

A happy side effect of the war effort was that in 1944 the Club had lifted itself out of debt, and 'the aims of the Club members had at long last been achieved, the Club was free from debt and really owned the land, building and contents'.²⁹ A celebration was held to commemorate the occasion, and ownership was signified when William Briggs accepted the Deeds from the Social Committee, who also started a new fund for an expansion, with £300 already in the pot.

When the war ended in 1945, a 'Welcome Home' supper was organised and held at a local café. 370 people attended and it was described as 'a most enjoyable function'. The final action dedicated to the war was performed in 1947, when Cambridge's first Labour MP, Leslie Symonds, unveiled an oak memorial which remembered those who had fought for club and country. A service was then held to honour their fallen comrades.

Of the 135 members to serve, ten sadly died fighting for Great Britain. They are:



Buckerfield, J H
 Daldry, D P
 Ferguson, F
 Peck, L J
 Smith, F O
 Caldecoat, E G
 Dixon, W
 Fuller, A H
 Roberts, J
 Winter, A

Figure 16 The World War II Memorial

²⁹ Cite source.

After the War

Following the war, the Club ran a restaurant and continued to serve those whose rations were short. This service was vital to the local community, especially the workers who had been drafted into the area.

The Club resumed its place as a social hub. The youth club had over 100 members, and the old folks' club had more than 240! Thanks to strong links with the Working Men's Club and Institute Union, the social side thrived. Weekly dances were held, there was a dance band, and sub-committees were set up to organise numerous teams and events, including billiards, darts, fishing, cricket, football and socials.

The club also became a centre for political debate, thanks in part to great membership amongst leading political figures. President William Briggs was an Alderman and sometime Mayor, his successor Albert Stubbs, had been MP for Cambridgeshire, and the Club also boasted another MP, two Aldermen, nine Borough Councillors and three County Councillors.

With such an array of political thinkers, it was unsurprising that Club members hosted lectures at the Club. For example, Leslie Symonds, Cambridge's first Labour MP, hosted a lecture on nationalism and its benefits; Dr Alex Wood, a respected lecturer and builder of Romsey Labour Club, presented a lecture on Christian Socialism. In addition to this, the Club hosted debates with other Labour groups, such as a debate on food policies with the New Chesterton branch, and on the government with the Coleridge Labour Party .



Figure 17 Romsey Labour Club in 1949

The Silver Jubilee

Starting on Sunday 2 October 1949, the Club celebrated 25 years since it had gained the rights to build on the land, and also marked the 21st anniversary of the Club's opening. It has been speculated that the event was celebrated four years early, just because the Club loved hosting events!

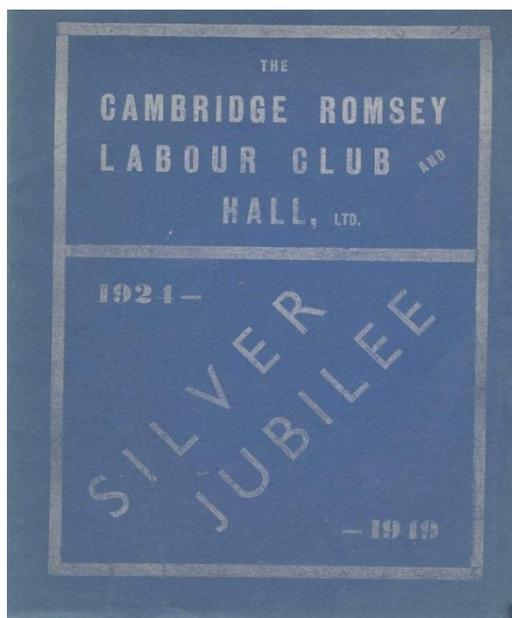


Figure 18 Silver Jubilee Programme

During the week, members were free to enter competitions hosted by the Club, generally with a cash prize for the winner. The biggest prize was available for the cribbage tournament, organised by the Amalgamated Sports section, where the victor received £2 for his or her efforts. Other events included an open darts match, a coarse fishing match and various billiard games. On the final day of the celebration (Saturday 8th), a social and carnival dance was held, and the bar was kept open to 11pm.

However, the big event happened on Thursday 6th, when a Grand Concert was held. After a period of recorded music, speeches were made by President Albert Stubbs, Hugh Dalton MP, ex-President

William Briggs and Alderman Clara Rackham. The rest of the evening was filled with various musicians and comedians, including 'Cambridge's leading comedian', Len Tibbs, and 'the delightful BBC soprano' Daphne Kelf.

The booklet itself featured short biographies of the two presidents, pictures of the Club and a detailed history of the Club (which helped me write this report!).³⁰

Thought for the day:

'Today is your day and mine, the only day we have, the day in which we play our part. What our part may signify in the great whole we may not understand, but we are here to play it, and now is our time. This we know. It is a part of action, not whining. It is a part of love, not cynicism. It is for us to express love in terms of human helpfulness. This we know, for we have learned from sad experience that any other source leads toward decay and waste.'

³⁰ Supply location of booklet.

The present day

In recent times, the Thomas a Becket Gym has occupied the west wing, and the Tube Gym the east wing. In 2015, the building is a shadow of its former self. The Club officially closed on 17 March 2014, ten years after the current owners took over and 90 years after the land was first purchased. Even in its last days, the Club continued to be a place to meet, but only for a much smaller group. Salsa classes and bingo nights were popular and it was with sadness that the then owners departed. In 2015, nothing is known of the Council's plans for the building. It would be very sad to see it converted into flats.

The Romsey Labour Club was built by hand, by volunteers who strove to make their dreams become a reality. President Briggs had wanted the Club to be a 'tower of strength and fellowship to the movement, and a beacon of light showing the way to those in political darkness', and by his death in 1957 he had achieved that. However, the Club fell out of use with the local Party, which preferred Alex Wood Hall in nearby Norfolk Street, and Labour members today say that, despite the name, there has not been an official link with the Club for years.

The future of the building may remain in doubt, but the people of Romsey can look back proudly on the history of the Romsey Town Labour Club.

KEY PEOPLE

Alderman William Layton Briggs, OBE, JP (1876 – 1957; Club President 1924–45)

THE CAM, JANUARY, 1937

Portraits No. 1



THE WORSHIPFUL THE MAYOR OF CAMBRIDGE
(ALDERMAN W. L. BRIGGS, J.P.)
ELECTED 9TH NOVEMBER, 1936

Figure 19 Alderman W L Briggs

William Layton Briggs was born in October 1876 and during his lifetime he became a key figure for both the Labour Club and Cambridge as a whole.

Having been born in Cambridge, Briggs' first job, unsurprisingly, was at the railway, when he was 15. During his time there, Briggs rose to the level of Chief Clerk and opened a National Savings Group for Cambridge railway employees, and was also chairman of the functional council of the eastern region railways. He worked at the railway for a long time, mixing it with his political career for a short time, before retiring from the railway in 1935.

Briggs' political career began in 1920 when he was elected Romsey Ward's city representative. He remained in this capacity until 1929, when he was elevated to the aldermanic bench. During his career on the Council, Briggs was on many committees and chairman of five, including Education, Entertainment and Civil Defence (during WWII). His work for the Civil Defence committee earned him an OBE.

However, the political highlight for Briggs has to be his two stints as town Mayor, the first Labour mayor of Cambridge. When he first took office in 1936, there were some doubts about the potential reaction of residents in Romsey, due to their traditional independence. Briggs allayed these fears in his opening speech

– 'I assure you that all of Romsey Town today will rejoice that you have taken the step of appointing one of their neighbours to this office'.

Throughout his life, Briggs regarded himself as a Romsey man, once claiming that 'Nearly everybody in Cambridge knows us', and it would not be surprising if this were true. In an article written after his death, Robin Goodfellow states that 'Almost everyone knew "Billy" Briggs – and liked him. His reliability, his steadfastness of purpose – a purpose all for good –

won him regard among people in all parties and all walks of life.’ Alderman Tom Amey, a contemporary, also speaking after Briggs’ death, said that ‘So far as the residents in Romsey were concerned, he was the person whom they could always approach if they were in any difficulty or trouble. They were always assured of the best advice and assistance possible’ and that ‘He was very conscientious in his work for the general wellbeing of the populace and in particular the people of Romsey Town’.

Throughout this history, you will have seen Briggs’ name appear, and it is no secret that he was one of the driving forces behind the Club’s early days and was a success as the Club’s first President. It has been noted that despite his wide-ranging career, he always worked hard for the Club. It was his influence that gained it the rights to the land in the first instance, and also his wish to install a bar – which was a popular feature right up until the Club closed in 2014.

When Briggs died aged 81, on 28 December 1957, tributes poured in to the local newspaper, and the mayor (B J S White) said ‘His record of service to the city as [*lists jobs*] was quite outstanding. His forthright manner and his complete honesty won the admiration and friendship of everyone’. The local magistrates’ chairman said he was ‘a man of forthright character, transparent honesty and the highest integrity’.³¹

One of the most striking opinions that came across in a number of tributes was his ability to stand above politics and do what he felt was best (much the same quality Club members admired in Ramsay MacDonald). Robin Goodfellow noted ‘Cambridge has lost a man of great integrity and sterling worth whose service to his fellow citizens was never cramped by narrow party considerations’, and the Reverend E. C. Essex claimed ‘His spirit soared above all narrow self-seeking party politics into the sublime heights of nobility of character’.

Clearly, William Layton Briggs was a remarkable man, an honest, hardworking politician who did all he could to help the people of Cambridge, and specifically the people of Romsey. Today, Briggs lives on alongside his friend Tom Amey – both having small courts named after them in Romsey. Tom Amey Court can be found a mere five-minute walk away from the Labour Club, on Ross Street, and Bill Briggs Court further down the same street.

Alderman Albert (Ernest/Edward) Stubbs, (1877-1962; MP (1946–??))

The Club’s second president was Albert Ernest Stubbs. Stubbs was born in 1877 in Yorkshire and during his career he was heavily involved in both politics and agriculture. Stubbs’ greatest achievement is probably serving as Cambridgeshire’s only ever Labour MP, outside of Cambridge itself.

Having grown up in Yorkshire, in 1914 Stubbs decided to move to Cambridge. By trade, he was a printing machinist, but it is unknown whether this had any bearing on his decision to move. Despite his career, Stubbs had a particular interest in agriculture. Throughout his life,

³¹ His death was covered extensively in *CDN*, 30 December 1957.

he was involved in a multitude of local trade unions, including one which helped local rural farmers, which became known as Stubbs' Union.

Stubbs quickly established himself in Cambridge, and by 1916 he was already President of the Cambridge Trades Council and Labour Party. In 1917 he was appointed a member of the Agricultural Wages Committee for Cambridgeshire and was the Chairman of the workers' side of the committee. Then, in 1919, he became the district officer of the workers' union for Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely. Stubbs believed strongly in workers' rights, and this can be seen in newspaper excerpts on the occasion of his death. In a letter to the *Cambridge Daily News*, the writer claimed that 'In his many discourses around the countryside he expounded the ideals for which he strived, for the betterment of mankind and peace of the world'.³²

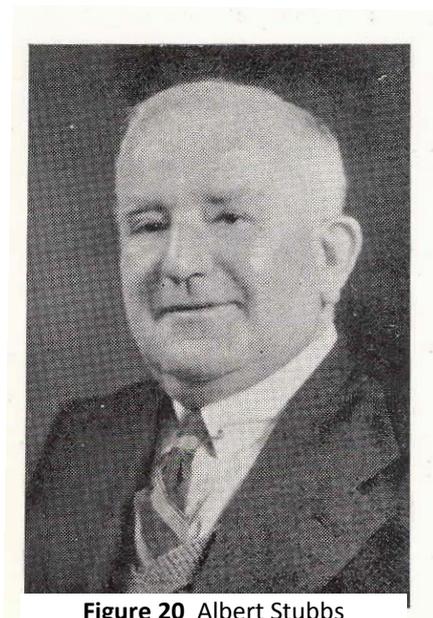


Figure 20 Albert Stubbs

Stubbs' local work was also recognised by the national government. The minister of agriculture appointed him to the county war Agricultural Executive Committee for the Second World War. By this time, Stubbs had also established himself in the local political scene. He was first elected in 1922 to the County Council and in 1923 to the Cambridge Borough Council. He lost his county seat, but regained it in 1933 and stayed there for the rest of his life. He was appointed to the aldermanic bench in 1942.

Stubbs' real claim to fame, however, is that he became Cambridgeshire's first (and so far only) Labour MP, outside the county town itself, in 1945. Stubbs had fought for the seat before, and was narrowly defeated by 679 votes in 1922. In another letter written to the *Cambridge Daily News* following his death, the writer remembered that in the 1922 election, Stubbs' campaign was chronically underfunded, all his expenses covered by local subscription and his only form of transport was his trusty motorcycle.³³ Stubbs held the seat for five years, until the conservative Gerald Howard won it in 1950.

Despite his busy life, it was noted that Stubbs was a very active member of the Labour Party. Sources are sparse on his leadership, but one imagines that he continued Briggs' work, having been a key figure during Briggs' time, and drove the Romsey Labour Club onwards. In his book, *Muck Spreader to Mayor*, E A Gill noted that 'he was a champion for the workers' and, having known him from their time together at the Club, it is likely that Gill based this assertion on his work with the Romsey Labour Club.

Stubbs' death on 3 January 1962 at the age of 83 prompted a stream of praise for the man, as we have seen in the letters written to the newspaper. The funeral itself was attended by a multitude of local people, including the Mayor and many local Labour party members.

³² *CDN*, 12 January 1962.

³³ *CDN*, 11 January 1962.

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Big thanks to the Cambridgeshire Collection at Cambridge Central Library for their help and huge newspaper resources.

APPENDIX : MEMORIES OF THE CLUB

Facebook reminiscences

A message posted on facebook by Allan Brigham on 11 June 2015 prompted a remarkable number of responses,. They give a vivid impression of Romsey Labour Club through the decades. Allan's message read:

'Do you have memories of Romsey Labour Club ? Or of your parents or grandparents involvement ? We are writing a short history now that it has closed, and any stories would be good to hear – either here, or email me at: townnotgown@btinternet.com. Many thanks'

The responses have been grouped under subject headings:

Early Days

Glynis Kester-Page

My parents were deeply involved, canvassing and promoting the work of the party in the 40s & 50s. They considered themselves friends of Albert Stubbs & were part of the great rejoicing when both the City & the County went RED when Arthur Symonds & Stubbs won their parliamentary seats in the 1945 election. I have photos of Stubbs wearing my mother's wide-brimmed hat, apparently dancing! They were friends of the Dosanjhs, who lived closeby & were, again, tireless workers for the party.

Keith Benton

My grandfather Walter Dean was as a railway union man very much involved with the Labour Party and I'm sure he told us that he helped build it with other volunteer tradesmen. He was a railway electrician. — There used to be a plaque inside with the names of those Romsey men who served as well as died in WW1 and my father Roy Benton I'm sure was on it. I really hope it's safe and salvaged. [It's still there. – Ed.]

Brenda Hunt

My grandad Caldecoat helped build it. My mum and dad met there – had their wedding reception there also in 1940. I went there as a child also when I was older – loved the place – sad when it closed – saw lots of changes over the years. My dad Ernest Caldecoat was killed in WW2. His name is on the memorial that hangs just inside the door as you went in.

Steve Coupe

My dear old grandad spent a lot of time in the Labour Club – he also helped with building it – such a shame it's not used as a club anymore – suppose they go up the rd to the Conservative Club.

Derek Haylock

My father Stan Haylock and his brother Cyril helped to build – lived in Great Eastern St.

Josephine Thwaites

My Grandad Percy Daldry helped to build it. — I remember going there as a child in the 60s with my Mum and Dad Joyce and Stuart Sainty – they always had pickled onions on the bar!!

Paul Lucas

First job when I started work at Kerridges in Sturton Street back in August 1963 as a trainee builders surveyor/estimator when I was 16 was to survey the front of that building and then draw it out to scale. Taught me how to measure the height by counting the brick courses. Quite a detailed elevation as a first project.

As a Social Club**Joan Curtis**

My husband John [Hemingford Rd, train driver – AB] was on the committee for several years and [I] remember Harry Gooch very well – our dear friend George Nicol also sang there – such lovely memories.

Peter Matthews

Have I got some tales of this place! – my dad was vice president and he caused most of the bother! And the pidgeon club ...

Alfie Wilmshurst

My father Frank Wilmshurst worked there in the late 70s.

Derek Haylock

Used to go on outings seaside and on the river – also wonderful Christmas partys – had my wedding reception there 1961. — A very popular place HQ for the Railway Strike in the 50s. — Does any one remember Ralph Brown the steward from Hobart Rd – good and nice man?

Alan Rogers

Could tell you loads of stories – my mum was in charge of the bar for years.

Brian Brooks

I played in the darts team, captain in the pool team, called the bingo, Committee member and did a skint doing the disco ... sometimes it felt I use to live there lol

Music, Dancing**Linda Gooch Stead**

My dad [Harry Gooch] used to sing there, all big band and Sinatra etc. — I was too young to go in so I was put outside near the loos with a packet of crisps and a coke.

Douglas Papworth

My 21st birthday there. And played there often with 'The Bluebirds'.

Lawrence Stocking

My father use to play there – band was 'Slimset' – he played piano bass player drums – my father was pianist in the 70s.

David Hinks

I enjoyed around 35 years ago playing guitar with a band called 'Rick Norton's Rockin Revival' there. Rick the vocalist would arrive to the stage from the back doors on a Norton Mororbike. Loud and smokey. We did a few shows there – a good fun place and nice people. One time Rick could not stop the bike at one show and dropped it into the front of the stage and the crowd had to help him up unhurt but the bike still running – all this whilst the band were playing his intro. Laugh yes we did !

Kevin Draper

Got offered regular disco dj work here in the 70s but only did 2 nights, and was finished. Not because I was crap, but because I got the bandit jackpot on both occasions, on my first coin in....

Simon Andreas Kyprianou

The last time i went in there ... only a few years ago was to see a Cambridge reggae band 'Living Roots' and thought it was a great music venue !!! My parents lived in Great Eastern St before starting Athena Cafe [Norfolk St. – AB]

Tony Jeevar

I was in a band that played there – got booed off and thrown out for being 'punk rock' in 1978. — We played a set of Chuck Berry songs and none of us were punks. Rock and Roll ...

Trevor Mappedoram

I did my apprenticeship at 'Kathleens' hair dressers right opposite ... with George and the boys ... Romsey Club used to have dance classes for rock and roll ...

Jill Pigott

I had dancing lessons there, latin american and ballroom, in the late 60s.

Vyv Mathews

Used to learn ballroom dancing there in the mid 70s.

Birthdays, Wedding Receptions etc**Linda Fordham**

My Mum and Dad, Hazel and Wally Fordham had their Wedding Reception there in 1950. They used their ration books towards it. Bless them!

Margaret Gillies

Had our wedding reception there in 1961. By the way, hello Douglas Papworth – had some good times dancing to your band – we often talk about the old times.

Ian Spaxman

Had my wedding reception there in 1966.

Susan Buttress

Had my wedding reception there in March 1969. Also my dad used to take us there every Boxing Day!

Heather Taylor

Went to a 21st there way back in 78-79.

Julia Pargeter

Had my wedding reception here and went here on Saturday nights sometimes. My mother in law Joyce Pargeter was a cleaner here for a number of years and my husband was a bottle boy here from the age of 11 to 16.

Bar & Other Memories:**Robert Turner**

Had my first pint of bitter in there – 1963.

Kathleen Mc

I had my first job in there at 14, was glass collector. Was practically brought up in there. Always used to be packed out at weekends. And there was always something to entertain the whole family. Total shame its gone.

Maureen Olive-Neaves

Worked behind the bar there early 70s, had my 21st there, used to work at Redland Purle and was our nearest watering hole. Me and Liz Roach had many drunken evenings and a few lunch times when we should of been back at work – great times!

Derek Smiley

Oh gosh we wos always fighting with some Scottish lads. 1970ish got slung out once for taking the mick out of this massive bouncer. He picked me up with one hand and the next thing I was flying across the steps and pavement. Sure it was a Thursday night ... not sure if they had a disco???

George Ingle

It was like a boxing ring in there – loved the place.

Gill Bassett

Had lots of good times on Saturday nights there. I believe Mac used to be the steward there. The families we went with were the Watsons, Norris, and Saunders. My dad used to love this place.

Brian Bennett

I was a member there and in the 70s – used to hang about with Andy and help set up

his 'Dream Machine' disco on a regular Thursday night booking. We would all watch 'Top of the Pops' first and then fire up the disco. Members would spend pounds on the one arm bandit near the bar hoping for jackpot. Happy days.

Diane Gaye

Yes me and my mate Liz Nightingale there on a Tuesday for disco then on a Sunday night in 1976. Such memories ...

Lawrence Stocking

We used to have christmas partys there.

Madeline Campbell

I remember the bingo when i was a kid – they used to sell (or give away) small bags of sweets to the kids before it started to keep us quiet! ahaha!

Sheila Solanki

Bingo was good.

John Abbott

Used to play Darts there!!

Ashley Pashley

Darts team 1986-1992 (Romsey A) done the disco on the Saturdays about 1988, drunkered from about 1987-1996.

Kathleen Mc.

Miss the club, especially when Doreen and Vic had it. They did the place proud.

Baz Hardingham

So many good times there!

Sheila Solanki

Yes many – should never have closed – bit of Cambridge gone x

Liz Lankester

Gone but not forgotten – I had some happy times there.