

A Short History of Churchill Hall, University of Bristol

Churchill is a mixed, catered Hall of residence providing accommodation for (in 2017) 353 residents, and is in Stoke Bishop, about 2.1 miles from the main University campus. Named after Sir Winston Churchill, the University's third Chancellor (1929-1965), it was opened in 1956.

The Early Years

Churchill was the second all-male hall built in Stoke Bishop, and came about as a result of the "Churchill Appeal", which had aimed to raise £300,000 (at 1946 prices) to provide additional student accommodation for the growing University.

When Churchill Hall opened on 3rd October 1956, it consisted of 111 male students, a Warden and three tutors, housed in one of the new-built blocks and three Victorian Houses: Claverton (just north of The Holmes) built in 1877, The Holmes built in 1879 (a separate history of The Holmes is available on this site), and Waltham built in 1874. These houses were acquired by the University in 1944 in the case of the Holmes, 1946 Waltham and 1949 Claverton. The three houses became part of Wills Hall in 1946 (Claverton 1949). (Note Claverton and Waltham were sold by the University in 1984, to help meet financial constraints). At first the dining room was in Claverton, which could seat at most 80 students, and the JCR in The Holmes.

The building of the rest of the Hall, (the main block plus A to K Houses) took place over the next two years, the official opening being delayed from 5th December 1958, due to Sir Winston being unable to attend, to the next Summer. However, as Sir Winston was still unable to attend, Lord Sinclair of Cleeve, the Pro-Chancellor, performed the ceremony on his behalf. Sir Winston never actually visited the Hall. He did, however, grant it use of his Coat of Arms (or part of it), and letters from him are displayed in the Hall.

The first Warden was Mr (later Dr) Alan Reynolds, who had previously been Sub-Warden of Wills Hall. He was a Bristol graduate, founding member of Wills, and an Ex-President of the Students' Union who lectured in English at the University from 1947 to 1975. He was to remain Warden till 1972 and was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters by the University in 1977. Dr Reynolds' background was hence rather conventional, but he created a more informal Hall, and is remembered as having carried out his duties with good humour, patience and discretion.

Against this background, the Hall settled down into one of its golden ages, with a traditional form of Hall life. There were regular formal meals overseen by Mr Caine the Hall Steward, who had been the Butler in The Holmes, daily room cleaning and such things as kidneys for breakfast on Sundays; but generally there was a more relaxed attitude and life style than in the other Halls.

In these early years, the Churchill Hall Association (CHA) was founded to keep former residents of the Hall in contact, and at that time life membership had to be purchased. The CHA held annual dinners during the then Convocation weekend and continued to hold successful events for many years.

The 1960s

Life in Hall appeared to continue through most of the 1960s as it had in the opening years of the Hall. Rising costs had resulted in some economies, but even so, by the end of the decade there were still three formal meals a week, Tuesday and Friday evening and Sunday lunch, and a cleaner visited rooms daily (but not at weekends).

However, things were changing. Firstly Stoke Bishop was becoming more built-up with Badock Hall opening in 1964, Hiatt Baker in 1966 and University Close 1972. The growth of the University, particularly following the Education Act 1962, which made it a legal obligation for all LEAs to provide full time university students with a maintenance grant, was also affecting the Hall. The increase in numbers of students resulted in a reduction in places for second and third years, which had knock-on effects on the nature of Hall life. The wider social changes were also having an effect, with such things as the hours visitors were allowed in Hall being extended from 10-30 pm to 2-00 am by 1970.

The 1970s

These were years of major change, with the rapidly rising cost base and increasing shortage of staff resulting in major economies - formal meals and room cleaning frequency fell to once a week by the middle of the decade. More fundamental factors were at work. By the early 1970s, most Halls of residences were mixed, and the three remaining single-sex halls were becoming increasingly less popular. These factors lead Churchill towards its lowest period, with only limited social functions revolving around the Hall bar.

Against this background, there were other significant changes. First, Dr Reynolds retired, after 16 years' service, at the end of the 1971/72 academic year. He was replaced by Mr Roy Parker, the first married Warden, who as a consequence did not live in Warden's flat in K House. Mr Parker was to remain Warden for only three years, before leaving due to family circumstances to take up a full time post in the School of Education. In the year 1975/76 Lt Colonel Arthur Graves, the Warden of Wills Hall (1973-82), was acting Warden. Then in 1976 Dr Alan Rump, an economics graduate who was then music lecturer and went on to become Senior Warden and the University's Director of Student Services, became Warden, remaining so until 2009. With the arrival of Dr Rump, Churchill entered a far more stable period that was to move into a golden age.

Following a long process which had lasted most of the decade, and which included a vote against going mixed by the JCR in 1973, Churchill became a mixed hall in the autumn of 1978, with the admission that year of 58 women students, most of whom did not know they were coming to what had been until then an all-male Hall. This was done in conjunction with the, then, all-women Manor Hall. This change, resulting in the generally more informal life style due to the presence of female students, and the consequent increasing variety of social life and activities, such as the Hall Ball, began to bring Churchill back to being one of, if not, the most popular Halls in the University.

The 1980s

Although the 1980s were a period in which Churchill settled down as a very successful mixed hall, with an improving social life, they were also to prove to be years of major change, with conflicting pressures on the University and hence on Halls. The University was still growing during this period, with the result that, to meet the commitment to provide all first year students with accommodation, the proportion of second and third year students had fallen to 30% by the beginning of the decade.

On a more positive note, in 1980 Churchill expanded with the opening of the new M/R blocks which provided 96 extra study bedrooms, four kitchens and two tutor's flats, as well as the hexagon common room. However, the increasing financial pressure on the University resulted in the sale of Claverton and Waltham Houses by the University in 1984 to help meet financial constraints, following a University Grants Committee ruling that the proceeds from the sale of residential properties could be used for general expenditure.

The 1990s

The 1990s were a period of progress, with Churchill maintaining, if not improving its standing among the halls of residence. However, changes were again at work, the University was growing, resulting in yet more pressure for accommodation for first year students, with the vast majority of places being required for them. The changing economic pressures also continued in changes such as further reductions in formal meals.

During the late 1990s the CHA in its original form began to run down, with small buffet receptions replacing formal dinners. Within a few years this had progressed to a point where the CHA had all but ceased to function, with no form of reunion taking place for some years.

The technological revolution was also coming to the Hall, and in 1991, partly as a result of a legacy from Dr Reynolds, a computer room was created. Also during this period a telephone system was installed in each room in the Hall, replacing the one payphone per block from earlier times. Now all replaced by Wi-Fi, of course.

More fundamental changes were taking place, with the Student Loans Company founded for the 1990/91 academic year to provide additional help towards living costs in the form of low-interest loans. However after the passing of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, tuition fees of £1,000 per annum started in the 1998/99 academic year. In addition, maintenance grants were replaced by repayable student loans for all but the poorest students. These changes would have a major effect over the coming years.

2000 to the Present Day

The last 18 years have in many ways been the period of greatest change in the Hall's history. Many things have changed, a few key ones being as follows.

In 2005 the University botanic collections (Botanic Gardens) were relocated to The Holmes gardens from Bracken Hill House, in Leigh Woods. The botanic displays include 4,500 plant species. These are divided into collections of evolution, Mediterranean, local-flora, rare-native, and finally useful plants. Although the move has been very successful, it did mean the loss of the croquet lawn and Holmes garden to the Hall.

Dr Alan Rump's long and distinguished wardenship ended in 2009, with Professor Robert Mayhew, who is Professor of Historical Geography and Intellectual History, becoming Warden and moving into the Holmes Cottage with his family. Professor Mayhew's appointment coincided with, and in some cases led to, a number of major changes in Hall life and the Hall itself.

Following a review carried out in 2007/08, structural changes in the management of Halls of Residence were introduced at the start of 2010/11. These changes resulted in the Hall ceasing to be an independent financial unit, with the Warden ceasing to have ultimate responsibility for facilities, catering and conferences. The Warden remained responsible for the student community, leadership and the growing area of pastoral care. These changes, and those linked to rising costs and changing student expectations, have led to a style of living in some ways very different from the early years of the Hall: residents now need to clean their own rooms, and formal meals are limited to three a term.

By the time of Professor Mayhew's appointment, the original parts of the Hall were showing their age, and this, linked to the changing expectations of students, meant that radical action was becoming necessary. Thankfully the University agreed to fund a very extensive refurbishment programme over a number of summer vacations up to and including 2016. The refurbishment was very extensive, including replacing all the key services, upgrading windows, and modernising the residents' facilities. However, as Robert Mayhew points out, the most striking fact about the refurbishment, apart from the fact that it had taken place, was that despite all the works, the Hall looks much as it always has, (although there is no more rust-coloured water in the bathrooms, which most ex-residents will remember clearly).

Also in this period and under Professor Mayhew's influence, the CHA was re-activated, but with some significant changes such as it now being open to anyone who has been resident in Churchill Hall. The CHA has held a number of very successful dinners in recent years.

Since the 1990s, a shift in the nature of the makeup of the student body, linked to changes in student requirements, together with rising student fees, increasing accommodation costs, increasing schemes of academic assessment, and together also with constant surveillance of students' private lives by social media, have all put pressure on the young people coming to the Hall. Although this has been partly met by increasing provision of pastoral support, anxiety, stress, depression and more severe forms of mental health issues are becoming increasingly common (across all higher education). Much of the responsibility for the well-being of first year students falls on the halls, and Churchill is responding, along with the other halls and the professional services of the University, to this very serious set of concerns.

At the time of writing a major review of pastoral care, and the management of the halls of residence is under way which may significantly change the orientation and management of the halls of residence.

Current Position

Churchill Hall is now one, if not the, most popular and successful hall of residence in the University of Bristol. To retain that position, it must evolve. While the future of the Hall structure is under review, and much may change in the next few years, the objective must be to retain our standing in the eyes of future, present and past residents.