

The Working Men's College

Personal thoughts from an ex-member of this college.

(This article was first printed in Cross-Ties in July 1995) During 1994 in the London Borough of Camden, heartland of the 'politically correct', a motion was put before the Council of The Working Men's College to change its name. A referendum was held, the proposal was defeated. The College, the oldest institution of its kind in Britain, would keep its name - until the next time! Founded in 1854, by F.D.Maurice, Charles Kingsley and a group of eminent Victorians, collectively known as The Christian Socialists, The Working Men's College was, and remains, one of the most fascinating and radical educational institutions in Britain. Its aims were then, as they are today, to provide a liberal education for the working man. (Maurice also founded the Working Women's College, later to become the Francis Martin College; the two institutions merged in 1964.) From the outset social divisions were minimised within the College environment; tutors and students shared the same facilities and only surnames were used. Tutors, drawn from the professions, Oxbridge and the civil service, gave their time freely, with no remuneration. Much the same applies today, only half the tutors are "professional" teachers, but all are professionals. The majority are now paid, but the idea of the voluntary teacher is far from dead. The practical idealism which underlies the College ethos has attracted tutors of the highest calibre, including Ruskin, Rossetti, Lowes-Dickinson, E.M.Forster, Vaughan Williams and Caradoc Evans. In more recent years tutors have included Lionel Colloms, the anti-McCarthyite lawyer; Jeremy Seabrook, the political writer and columnist; Prof. Michael Hancock, the geologist; High Court Judge John Byrt; Spanish Civil War veteran Brian Benjamin; Edward DuCann, past chairman of the Conservative Party; and former Labour Leader of the Greater London Council, Lord Macintosh of Haringay. (Lord Macintosh has also been a Labour Minister) The prospectus offers courses right across the academic range: politics, religion, languages (including Welsh, Latin and Greek), art, music, dance, mathematics, information technology, and others. The facilities are excellent and include a self-service restaurant, bar, large common room, a magnificent library, computer suite, full-sized gymnasium, concert hall, a small cinema and the muniments room. The last contains rare manuscripts and historical documents (including Lawrence of Arabia's letters) and is used by scholars from all over the world. The College has an orchestra, cricket, bowling and football teams and a very successful running club - The Mornington Chasers. Many years ago, the College decided that its independent status had to be preserved. To achieve this, money was (and still is) invested in the City and property. The income derived from these investments (worth several million pounds) is given to the College as an annual income by the College Trustees - the Corporation. This money is completely controlled by the College's governing body - the Council. The advantages are obvious. No one from outside can tell the College how to spend its income. Being comparatively rich and independent allows the College to pursue its collective goals without fear or favour. Throughout the 1980s it was effectively 'Thatcher-proof'. While all around, adult education institutions and colleges of further education were under severe pressure, the Working Men's College expanded. Through astute management and very low administration costs, the effect of 'Black Monday' on its income were minimised. Currently, there are some 2,500 students and 150 tutors. While all this is very impressive, the most remarkable aspect of the College, and what places it apart, is its unique governmental structure - a sophisticated constitutional democracy. The Council, the governing body, is elected. All tutors and students have an equal vote and representation. Elections are held every year with half the Council standing for re-election. No-one can serve on the Council for more than three consecutive two-year periods. All College Officers are also elected : Principal, Vice-Principal, Dean of Studies and Bursar. The council employs a full-time staff of only five to execute its policy. Council therefore has complete control of education policy, strategic planning, finance (£1 million a year) and management. All decisions are arrived at through motions put before and debated within the council. It works and has worked for 150 years. Consequently, the College cannot stagnate. Its democratic structure ensures that it has constantly renewed itself, changing its curriculum in response to need and demand. It gives its members the experience of true collegiality and above all teaches them to respect and work with all manner of people, no matter what their political views, racial background, religion or social class may be. To be a member of the College is a truly civilised and civilising experience and it stands as a shining example to all institutions. Albert Alan Owen was a tutor at the Working Mens College for 12 years and was the Dean of Studies from 1990 to 1991.