

A Day of Reminiscence, Reflection and Resolve

A Reunion of the Robert Hall Society

On 26 August Paul and I celebrated in style our forty-third wedding anniversary. We have the Robert Hall Society to thank for our meeting, since it was at a Sunday tea meeting of the Robert Hall Society that we first set eyes on each other at the beginning of the Michaelmas Term 1964 in one of the then dowdy schoolrooms at the back of St Andrews Street Baptist Church in Cambridge.

What on earth is the Robert Hall Society you may well ask! It was a society for Cambridge University students and was named after an 18th century Baptist 'divine'. Founded in 1902 by the celebrated classical scholar, TR Glover, it was the first of many Baptist student societies, which came together eventually to form the Baptist Students' Federation.

On Saturday 4 September almost seventy former members of the Robert Hall Society met for a reunion in Fitzwilliam College Cambridge. We had all been members of 'RHS', as it was affectionately known, during the years 1960 to 1965. This reunion was the brain child of Rev Dr Keith Clements together with some other friends from Cambridge days. Keith had devoted a vast amount of creative thought to the occasion and organised the day meticulously.

As the day neared, probably most of us felt a sense of curiosity and intrigue. Would we recognise people, would we ourselves be recognised by others? Interestingly, several commented that we could often be identified tellingly by our distinctive voices and tones – our DNA identifying feature, as it were.

Not only have we all changed over the years but also the Cambridge of today is very different from the Cambridge of the sixties. Professor David Thompson, a former RHS member and a fellow of Fitzwilliam College, began the day with a talk describing differences between the Cambridge of our time and today – the key change, of course, is that all the men's colleges now have women!

There was plenty of reminiscence about those intense undergraduate years in the form of recollections of War on Want lunches, a midnight hike, Free Church punt races, Winnie the Pooh parties – no, I cannot even begin to explain – Christmas parties, early morning breakfasts, falls into the river Cam and so on. We had shared in the heady, exciting, exclusive intimacy – fellowship we used to call it – of a small, youthful, supportive, intelligent, questing Christian community. It is likely that we all felt like echoing Wordsworth's sentiments – "Bliss was it to be alive and to be young was very Heaven!" All this memory dredging was probably somewhat tedious for some non-Cambridge spouses present who had not been there to experience it!

Along with reminiscence there was also reflection. Five former members spoke of what RHS had meant to them and brought us up to date as to where they are now. Each of them had had very different life journeys. As they shared their experience, probably we were all, at the same time, triggered to carry out a similar exercise as we looked back with awesome gratitude at the respective paths our lives have taken.

The post-prandial afternoon session light heartedly informed us about unlikely but true events that had occurred to people in the intervening years. Who would have guessed that one of our number had witnessed Sue Lawley, when just about to go on air in a BBC studio, lift up her dress completely in order to rectify her microphone! It was a time of entertainment and laughter – the relaxed atmosphere a sign that we all, even though we had not met for almost fifty years, went back a long way, shared a common slice of history and ease in each other's company.

Yes, there was much humour and frivolity at our reunion, just as there had been in those exciting times in the early sixties. However, as Paul trawled through old RHS papers, it struck him that we had been, on the whole, a serious, earnest bunch – with tea meetings graced by denominational figures and Cambridge theologians, early morning prayer meetings, weekly Bible studies, and preaching forays into the villages. One of those present talked about the “compost” which the society provided for our personal Christian growth. For most, if not all of us, our time in RHS was a remarkably formative period in our Christian lives. Significantly, for many, participation in RHS missions to places like Andover, Dorking and Altrincham had been life changing experiences. These years were truly vintage years. From this generation of RHS members eight entered the Christian ministry and several have played significant roles in Baptist church life in the succeeding decades. Moreover, many of our number have contributed outstandingly in their chosen professions and truly have been salt and light in the world.

The day was not, however, all reminiscence and reflection. Perhaps surprisingly, it also proved to be an opportunity, at this particular stage in our lives, to look forward to the future. Professor Haddon Wilmer had set us thinking in the morning session, when he referred to the challenges of growing old. After the closing act of worship in the college chapel we left with the words of the Welsh vicar/poet R.S Thomas ringing in our ears ...

“I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you”

We had received an unexpected bonus – the time and space, not only to meet with old friends, but to resolve to look forward to the next exciting chapter in our lives, confident in God’s grace.

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This is the original of a slightly sortened article that appeared on p5 of the Baptist Times of 1 October 2010, under the title “Robert Hall reunion”.