

History of the University of Birmingham Guild of Students

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The Guild of Students today is one of the largest Students' Unions in the country, representing over 27,000 members. It employs 60 full-time staff and over 300 student staff, and each year elects 7 sabbatical and 10 non sabbatical officers. It has an annual turnover of over £8million, much of which it generates itself and is currently in the process of becoming a charity in its own right for the very first time.

The Guild is currently 130 years old and has participated in seismic changes over the decades both to its own building and to the student population it represents, as well as society as a whole. A founding member of the NUS in 1922, the Guild continues to play a key role as one of the most effective student bodies in the country. Below is just a tiny sample of its incredibly rich and diverse history, and we very much hope that one day somebody will use our work as a starting point for a much more thorough and complete publication.

1828 Birmingham Medical School founded, a forerunner to the University of Birmingham

1875 Josiah Mason founds the Mason Science College, based in Edmund Street (another forerunner)

1880 Mason Science College opens, accepting 96 day students and 90 evening students at a cost of approx 4-5 Guineas each

Mason College students' General Meeting establishes an 'Association of Students' known as Mason College Union. Seen as the birth of the modern Guild of Students. Josiah Mason is life president.

1880 College societies begin to form, including the Botanical Society and the Cycling society

1884 A student common room is opened. The University's official history pessimistically describes the beginnings of Birmingham student activism...

A not very extensively supported Union flourished, or vegetated in the Students' Common Room
(Guild of Undergraduates 1951)

1895 A series of sub committees are established throughout the 1890s. Particularly active is the Dramatic sub-committee. A Canvassing sub-committee is formed in 1895, marking the beginnings of the Union's official lobbying element

1900 March 24th – Joseph Chamberlain MP successfully secures a Royal Charter

for the University of Birmingham (an amalgamation of Birmingham Medical School and the Mason Science College) and becomes its first Chancellor

Lord Calthorpe offers Chamberlain 25 acres of land near Bournbrook for a campus

Mason College Union becomes 'Birmingham University Union'. The word 'Union' however refers to the facilities used by the students, rather than the student body itself. The Union is overseen by a Union Committee, who are tasked with running the Union and organising social events for students

A 'Guild of Undergraduates' is formed. The intention is for the Guild to become the 'recognised means of communication between undergraduates and the University authorities' (University Archives Preliminary Catalogue 2008 pg 4). The Guild is overseen by an elected Guild of Undergraduates Committee, which is expected to work closely with the Union Committee to provide both social activities and political representation to Birmingham students

'Guild' is offered 3 representatives on the University Court (*NUS History of Student Representation*)

1902 In the first ever recorded minutes of the Guild of Undergraduates committee (March 11th 1902), a sub-committee is formed, tasked with achieving the abolition of lectures and other academic commitments on a Wednesday afternoon, allowing students the chance to pursue sporting and other extra-curricular activities. The President was not elected until the second meeting (*Special Collections 1902*)

1905 The 'University Club' (subsequently Guild Club) opens in Great Charles Street with an annual grant of £40.00, giving the Guild a degree of autonomy (and its first official block grant contribution). The Club included a 'Founder's Room' used for concerts

1907 Another student body, the Student Representative Council (SRC) is formed to represent the interest of all students. However this soon folds itself in the Guild of Undergraduates (*Guild of Undergraduates 1951*)

1909 A compulsory annual subscription fee is introduced for students to gain access to Union buildings

1920 Typical Guild Officer roles at this time are Warden, President, Vice-President, Honourary Secretary and Honourary Treasurer. It is customary until the 1970s for the President to be male, and the Vice-President to be female

A clerk is appointed to deal with administrative issues for the Union committee and Guild of Undergraduates Committee

1922 National Union of Students created, with Birmingham's Guild as a founding member

1928 Construction work begins on the Guild building, located on the East side of Edgbaston campus. Designed by Holland W. Hobbins, it was funded by a generous donation of £100,000 from Sir Charles Hyde and included a hall, refectory, library, tea room, common room and rest-rooms, all run by a Union Management Committee on behalf of the Guild of Undergraduates (though the Union Committee retained management of the actual facilities)

1929 An 'Amusements Sub-Committee' is formed to gain reductions for student admissions to places of amusement in the city.

1930 Guild officially moves into its new building on the Edgbaston site which was...

Celebrated with a grand ball and a formal dinner. It was a wonderful building, the essence of modern luxury – polished floors, carpets, deep armchairs and great open fires. The Refectory was a cheerful place for a quiet coffee or a good, reasonably priced meal and a chat with friends between lectures.

(Sheila Hayden, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

Management of the Guild of Undergraduates and its policies passed from the Guild of Undergraduates Committee to 'Guild Council', with a variety of sub committees feeding into it. Guild Council is formed of members elected from academic constituencies and meets fortnightly under the chairmanship of the Guild President

1932 The 'Saturday Hop' launches at the Union building...

The social event of the week was the Saturday Hop at the Union where we quick-stepped, slow-foxtrotted and waltzed, with an occasional tango executed only by the experts. The men wore sports jackets and flannels, with collars and ties, and the girls all wore long dresses. In the intervals we smoked our cigarettes and drank Gin and It.

(Sheila Hayden, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1933 The Union Committee orders the creation of a 'Black Book' containing reports of all incidents that take place. Included is an entry 'involving the unauthorised distribution of Communist literature' (University Archives, Preliminary Report 2008 pg 56)

1936 Guild employs a permanent member of staff, the first student body in the country to do so

University Newspaper 'Guild News' is established with the tagline 'the student's mouthpiece'. It covers campus and local news, features, sports, reports and personal ads. The first advert placed in it is for 'Red Star Motor Oils', purveyors of Upper Cylinder Lubricant (Guild News Jan 1936)

Following a national report by the University Grants Committee, Guild Council unanimously passes a motion calling for the introduction of seminars for all students (unheard of across the country in those days). The motion called for the dispensing of 'a large number of lectures which consist of mere dictation' and 'in the time thus liberated, tutorial classes consisting of not more than six students and a lecturer be instituted' (Ives, pg 241).

The entire Guild executive tender their resignations after being censured at an Extraordinary General Meeting to discuss their handling of the controversial building site location of the new St. Francis Hall chapel (Guild News June 1936). However they go on to win a Vote of Confidence at the next Guild Council and retain their posts.

Birmingham students gloat victoriously as they successfully steal Exeter College's Ram (an item of value and prestige equivalent to the Guild's Mermaid) and bring it back to Birmingham (Guild News Nov 1936)

1937 St. Francis Hall (the forebear to today's Chaplaincy) opens next to the Union Building as part of a desire to provide a home for the Student Christian Movement. Initially St. Francis Hall is very closely associated with the Guild though in later years the two entities become fully separate, though remain close in terms of cooperation

Guild Council agrees that nominees for the position of President must be, or have been, a member of Guild Council in order to be eligible to run in the election (Guild News Dec 1937)

1939 Guild News runs numerous front page articles castigating the Guild for its perceived favouritism towards its Edgbaston building over its Edmund Street Building (March 1939). Matters are not helped by the conversion of the popular Founder's Room into a Women's Common Room, opposed by many

As the Second World War begins, Guild News calls on every student to...

Create for ourselves a haven away from the turbulent currents of a war-torn land, detached in some measure but in no way unconcerned; and here in its comparative calm, we must train ourselves to know Democracy, to cherish it and to serve it. We must keep for ourselves somewhere to discuss and consider. The Guild can be such a place. It is here for us to use. If we do not do so, then this war is lost already for Fascism is assured of a warm welcome amongst us.

(October 1939)

1940 An 'Air Raid Precautions Committee' is formed to safeguard University Property. The Guild closes at 7pm each night in order to save costs and obey the blackout regulations during the Battle of Britain

There was an old tradition... In the Union building when anyone got up to speak at a debate or discussion, there were immediate cries of "socks" and

the chap concerned was expected to raise the bottoms of his trousers to show everyone his socks. One day a female student got up to speak. In those days all women wore a knee length skirt or dress and stockings, so it could be fairly argued that her 'socks' were already on show. Nevertheless, there were shouts of "socks" and the lady raised her skirt about one and a half inches. But cries of "higher" intensified and it became clear that some scallywags were intent on seeing the girl's underwear. She stood embarrassed, quite determined that no one was going to see anything more. Fortunately the chairman came to her rescue and she was allowed to speak without interruption. I am sorry to say that although I remember the incident of the skirt very clearly, I have no idea what she subsequently said!

(Rowland Caplen, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1942 The Guild Club on Great Charles Street is used for three years by the British Council 'to provide a meeting place for social and cultural activity in Birmingham for members of Allied and Dominion Forces stationed in Birmingham' (University Archives Preliminary Catalogue 2008 pg 10)

1948 Construction work begins on a 'South Wing' extension to the Guild building, made possible by a £20,000 donation from Sir Charles Hyde (who provided £100,000 for the original Guild building)

Guild Theatre Group (GTG is formed)...

Each academic year (up to 1951) we presented a Shakespeare play and a Gilbert and Sullivan opera with some success. As Secretary of GTG I was able to wreak vengeance on an unpopular lecturer who shall be anonymous. He insisted on a complimentary ticket for one of our productions in the theatre on the first floor of the Union building, and duly attended, arriving in his pre-war Austin Seven. During the performance the eight man scrum of the rugby team carried the car up the stairs and parked it outside the theatre doors. His darkened brow gave much satisfaction.

(Neville Bramhall, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1949 'Guild News' produces first photographs, and reports of increasingly drunken behaviour on Saturday night 'hops' in the Debating Hall, attracting over a thousand people each weekend

1950 An extension to the Guild building designed to accommodate a catering service is opened. This service provides food for over 1,000 students every lunchtime in 'what is probably the largest student-managed catering concern in the country' (Guild of Undergraduates 1951)

The 'Mermaid Tavern' on the Edmund Street Campus opens...

At the rear of the building was the Guild Club, the Edmund Street version of the much more splendid Students' Union at Edgbaston. This contained the Founder's Room, where most social functions took place, the refectory, various games rooms and, of course, the bar. This was presided over by the barmaid, Daisy, a formidable, stout, grey-haired lady with the forearms of a

navvy. She stood no nonsense from anyone and no student dared to defy her! She served a very palatable pint of Mitchells and Butlers Best Bitter to which many of us became quite partial, not to say addicted.
(Peter Collins, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1951 One of my contemporaries was Brian Priestley who later became a successful journalist with, I think, *The Birmingham Post*. He had a quirky sense of humour and he conceived the idea of forming 'The Seal Society', ostensibly with the aim of training a seal to swim the English Channel, smashing the existing record! Needless to say, no seal was ever acquired, nor was there any intention to do so. It was merely an excuse for some of the more outrageous and irresponsible escapades that students used to get up to. (Do they still? I hope so.) We attracted wide support throughout the Edmund Street community and the Seal Society events and activities were avidly followed and semi-seriously reported in *Guild News*, the student newspaper. Much beer was consumed.
(Peter Collins, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1955 Many functions at the Union ended with the singing of the National Anthem and the Birmingham Students Anthem, which was sung slowly and solemnly, with right hand on chest, to a well known hymn tune. The words were: "My old man's a fireman, now what d'you think of that, he wears cor-blimey trousers, and a little cor-blimey hat, he wears a something muffler, around his something throat, 'cos my old man's a fireman, on an Elders Dempster boat, Ahhhh, men".
(Dr. Peter Smith, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1957 A fire devastates large parts of the Guild's Edmund Street building

1958 University Chancellor and former Prime Minister Anthony Eden congratulates *Guild News* on its 21st birthday (February 1958)

1959 Elections Committee formed to oversee Guild elections

1960 The Guild is extended further to accommodate a 'West Wing' that helps to form the Mermaid Square

The University closes its Edmund Street Campus, meaning that all University and Guild operations are now based solely in Edgbaston

The role of Guild President becomes a full time sabbatical post

1961 The Mermaid Fountain, designed by William Boyle, is installed, thus completing Mermaid Square

1962 The 'Mermaid Bar' opens. Later named 'Fingals', then 'Beorma'

'Guild News' changes its name to 'Redbrick'

Age of majority is reduced to 18, making most students legally adult. This leads to further calls for increased student representation

The Anarchist Society is formally recognised by Guild Council

1963 The Guild sends a letter of condolence to the White House, signed by the Executive and over 1,000 students, following the assassination of President Kennedy

1967 Carnival RAG cause chaos in the city as the plant a fake bomb in a building site in order to raise publicity

1968 The Guild publishes a seminal report on the need for student representation on University committees including Senate and Council. Negotiations between the Guild and the University on this issue break down, resulting in over a thousand students occupying the Great Hall, Vice Chancellors Office and other administrative areas

*One serious event which always sticks in my mind occurred around the end of term in December 1968, the year of considerable upheaval and troubles on campus. Some bright spark decided to cheer us all up by painting bright red the private parts of the rearing horse statue outside the Union.
(Deborah Herrington, Your Memories, UoB Alumni Website)*

University authorities hunt for the half dozen Geology students who sawed through the valve that controlled water flow from the Vale lake, causing it to almost completely empty within 24 hours. Redbrick point out that 'a number of people know which students were involved, but no-one is talking' (September 1968).

1969 The Guild President is arrested after protesting at a demonstration against Enoch Powell

The Vale student village opens, relieving the Guild of the need to provide catering for residents of halls, though Guild catering remains generally popular with students

1971 The role of Vice President becomes a full time sabbatical post

The first female Guild President, Anne Naylor, is elected

1972 Following the Guild's hosting of the Gay Liberation Front Annual Conference, Redbrick prints a controversial article entitled 'Who's a Wanker?' describing the practical aspects of homosexuality. The article was reprinted due to high demand, but was eventually withdrawn by the Press Council

1973 Prime Minister Edward Heath visits campus, leading to student protests over the low level of grants and financial aid available

Paul McCartney and The Wings perform in the Deb Hall

The Union was a safe and scruffy haven where the sounds of Light My Fire, Knights in White Satin and Hey Jude were the standard music. The building always had a redolent smell of disinfectant, fried eggs and chips. I rarely dared to enter the Main Bar below which was quite a dump, but enjoyed occasional drinks in the Mermaid Bar which we considered somewhat up-market. There were wonderful TV lounges where we all crowded in to watch Monty Python and The Magic Roundabout - very highbrow entertainment!

(Deborah Herrington, *Your Memories*, UoB Alumni Website)

1974 Junior Common Room (JCR) Committees are established in Halls of Residence to provide social activities and political representation to students living in halls

1975 Following a proposed 30% rise in Halls of Residence fees, the Guild Executive calls a rent strike, attracting support from thousands of students

The Guild President gives up the chairmanship of Guild Council in favour of a new 'Independent Chair' position

1979 Student Union financing is changed to automatically include a Students' Union fee in the tuition fee, rather than the student paying the Union for membership separately. This leads to enhanced negotiations with Universities nationally over block grants

Duran Duran perform at the Guild

1980 The Guild celebrates its centenary year

Guild Officer positions include President, Vice Deputy President, Vice President Internal, Vice President External, Vice President Academic Affairs, Secretary, Treasurer, Independent Chairman and Deputy Independent Chairman

Permanent staff positions are Permanent Secretary, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Assistant Permanent Secretary, Finance Officer, Catering Manager, Bars Supervisor, Shop Manager, Travel Manager, Athletic Union Officer, Welfare Officer, Community Action Officer and Reprographics Officer

A 'Rent Fund Account' is set up by the 'Rent Strike Committee' formed of Guild and JCR Officers, and 856 students pay their hall fees there instead of the University Account. When the strike ends in 1981 (following various concessions including a £6 'linen allowance' and a commitment not to pursue legal action against the Guild) the Committee agrees to keep the interest accrued on the account and distribute it to the JCRs! (Special Collections 1981)

The Guild has an active 'Men's Group', created in response to the Women's Liberation Movement. The Men's Group is a chance for males to 'break with conditioning and support each other emotionally as men' (Guild Handbook 1979)

1981 Following drastic University spending and library opening hour cuts, 1,600 students talk part in a one night 'work-in'

A friend and I decided to start a University hang-gliding club. In order to get funding from the Guild, we had to show that there was enough student support so we set up a booth at the Freshers Fair and 400 students joined. The University agreed to buy a hang-glider, but none of the students had sufficient training and were not willing to undergo training. Therefore, my friend and I enjoyed the exclusive use of the hang-glider. However, a little while later, a professor decided he wanted to try hang-gliding and he went out with us one day to Swansea, where he ended up destroying the hang-glider by crashing into a tree!
(Fergus Wilson, Your Memories, UoB Alumni Website)

1982 The Guild receives a 5% cut in funding following reductions in spending by the University, leading to a focus on developing the Guild's commercial services in order to increase income

Priestley's Fast Food opens, 'the Guild's answer to MacDonaldis'. It is the first fast food outlet ever built in a Students' Union. (Guild Handbook 1983)

Baths and showers are available in the Guild all day for students. 'Plugs can be hired on surrender of a Guild Card, and towels are available for 10p' (Guild Handbook 1983)

1984 As the Miner's Strike erupts nationally, campus is awash with demonstrations and direct action both in support and opposition of the Government. Guild Council narrowly votes not to support the Miners, resulting in widespread anger, hostility and further direct action by students, including vandalism of the Guild building

1987 Redbrick becomes free for all readers following greater financial support from the Guild and external advertisers

1989 Control of all Guild societies is centralised, with groups banned from holding external accounts

1990 The Snooker Room is replaced by 'Berlin's Bar'

1991 LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) Committee established

1992 After a trip to America, senior management in the Guild propose the idea of centralising the support and administration of groups and societies (the beginning of the Student Development Department)

1993 The University provides funding for Student Representatives based in academic departments

'Regent's Bar' becomes 'Old Joe's Bar'

1994 Education Act passes through Parliament. Early drafts of the bill (including a section making all payments to the NUS illegal) prove hugely controversial and following a high profile campaign from the NUS the bill is watered down significantly, though all students now have the right to 'opt out' of their Students' Union (*NUS History of Student Representation*)

1996 Birmingham University Radio Network (BURN FM) founded and begins broadcasting

The Advice & Representation Centre (ARC) opens in the Guild

1997 'Fab', a new Saturday night event opens at the Guild, and swiftly becomes hugely popular with students looking to avoid the expense of the City Centre on the weekend

1998 Control of the Guild shop is handed over to Spar, a national store chain

1999 The JobZone opens, providing students with opportunities to find part time work

Control of major sports clubs and societies is handed over to the University from the Guild

A sabbatical position aimed at supporting groups and societies was created

2000 'Beorma' Bar opens

Carnival RAG organise their first 'Carnage' charity Bar Crawl in the city centre

2001 The Student Mentor Scheme, based in Halls of Residence, is established

The Guild takes over control of the Bars in Mason and Chamberlain halls, which are open until the development of the 'Hub in 2004

2003 Guild Officers are embroiled in legal controversy after apparently censoring a flyer advertising the forthcoming the visit of anti-war MP George

Galloway

According to Redbrick, incumbent Guild President Cat Little issues a scathing criticism of her newly elected successor, stating that 'the day Kirsten Jongberg is elected is the day Guild democracy fails'

Birmingham students mobilise in London to protest against the proposed introduction of 'Top Up' tuition fees

2004 After concerns of competition with the new 'Hub' social area on the Vale run by the University, Guild Council approves a motion allowing the Executive to look into relocating the Guild elsewhere on campus (though this idea is eventually scrapped)

The Government votes to introduce 'Top Up' Fees for tuition, meaning all students now pay £3,000 a year for their course. The motion only passes by 5 votes, the closest Tony Blair's Government ever comes to electoral defeat

Facing a £175,000 budget deficit, the Guild radically alters its staffing structure, including creating a new 'Venues' department from the separate 'Bars' and 'Entertainments' departments

Following a poor speech from the NUS National President, Guild Council narrowly avoids calling for a referendum on NUS membership, just one year after the last one was won by the 'Yes to affiliation' campaign

2005 The Guild bans the National Blood Service from attending Fresher's Fair over their policy prohibiting gay and bisexual men from donating blood (a policy that was overturned in 2009)

Guild agrees to take over the Residents' Association scheme from the University, and subsequently manages all RA committees elected by residents in halls of residence. The RA scheme has its origins in the initially autonomous Junior Common Room (JCR) committees formed in 1974

2006 Guild President Richard Angell attracts national media attention with his 'Ding Dong the Witch is Dead' Guild Council motion, calling for a party on the date of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's death (the motion narrowly falls)

The Times prints an article entitled 'Students ban Christians in Row Over Gays' in response to the Guild's derecognition of the Christian Union owing to their policies against open membership, committee elections and written constitutions (Times Online 25/01/2006)

'Chicken Joes', a food outlet based in the Guild, closes down

Community Warden scheme established in partnership with the University. The scheme employs students who proactively work to improve the standard of living for both students and local residents in Selly Oak

The Guild enters into partnership deals with some club nights in town as a means of generating extra revenue and promoting variety to students

Guild 'Common Room' is created as a non-alcoholic space within the Union

2007 'Subway', a sandwich franchise, opens in the Guild

Guild Council votes to allow Sabbatical Officers to run for a second term, but the two Officers that run are both unsuccessful

2008 Online voting is used for the first time in Guild Officer Elections, and special 'voting pads' are purchased for use in Guild Council meetings

Jennifer Larbie is elected the first black Guild President

Students vote 'yes' in a campus wide referendum, thus approving the Guild's transition to a charitable company limited by guarantee, with a trustee board made up of sabbaticals, students, university, alumni and lay members

2009 Guild Officers organise a campus demonstration against rising Hall Fees

The Guild opens its own lettings agent, the SHAC, a new business venture designed to both improve housing standards in the local area and diversify Guild income streams

The Guild clothing and gift shop is rebranded as 'Zest'

After a wave of popular protest, the Guild reverses its decision to close down its hairdressing shop

2010 Voter turnout in the Officer Elections breaks the 5,000 barrier for the first time, reaching 5,800, or 19% of the electorate

Johnny Davis, Vice President (Welfare) becomes the first sabbatical officer to successfully win re-election

Students vote in a referendum to reform the Guild's democratic structures, introducing a series of theme related forums and a streamlined Guild Council

Redbrick introduces a new sports pull-out section, named 'The Lion'

The Guild Officer Team leads protests on campus against proposed rises to tuition fees after it is announced that Birmingham's Vice Chancellor David Eastwood will sit on the Government Review Panel

University plans to close down parts of the Sociology department lead to grass roots protests by students and staff

The University hosts the third Prime Ministerial TV debate in the first General Election ever to hold them. The Guild and NUS actively lobby their members to 'Vote For Students' in key marginal seats

A £3million refurbishment of the ground floor of the Guild building is completed, including a new bar (which now serves food), square, student development and support services area

The Guild is awarded a bronze award in the Students' Union Evaluation Initiative (SUEI) process, only the eleventh Union in the country to have been accredited

The Graduation Ball returns to campus, with a music stage, two dinner halls, a silent disco and a funfair all located on the main square under the clock

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