

History of Devonshire House

The story

This is the history of Devonshire House, an organisation formed by senior personnel directors in an age of great industrial relations turmoil. The story reveals how Devonshire House has always adapted to opportunities and needs, and will continue to do so.

The Founder, Bill Nightingale

Bill Nightingale joined the British Institute of Management (BIM) after six years as Group Personnel and Training Manager with the Inveresk Paper Group. During his period with Inveresk, where he was the first group appointment in the personnel field, he became aware of the great need for training both in-house but also in most companies.

On joining BIM Bill's main brief was to increase the number of seminars, to initiate research into matters affecting personnel management and industrial relations and also to be the longstop for the information department who dealt with the day-to-day enquiries from member companies and matters affecting the whole field of management, but as far as he was concerned in particular personnel management.

During the time at Inveresk he had attended quite a few courses himself as well as initiating courses for general managers, foremen and management trainees. He needed to replenish his own bucket with information and he had made a note of those speakers who had impressed him. He also read most of the current magazines to see if he could find any possible speakers and one such was Oliver Clarke, who had written a very interesting paper on industrial negotiations. He invited him to lunch and found him not only extremely well informed (he was Director and Secretary of the London Engineering Employers' Association) but also very charming and they soon became good friends. Three or four times a year Oliver ran a seminar on industrial negotiations, which was extremely popular and well attended.

1967 – changing the style of seminars

One of the problems that was to emerge during the course of arranging seminars was that they appealed to a wide cross section of management and this was perhaps not always the best solution to the individual problems of those present. Attendees ranged from managing directors to new recruits and trainees, and at that time there was little involvement of those present in discussion although it was always stressed that questions were welcomed.

During mid 1967 Bill had a lunch meeting with Oliver Clarke to discuss various ideas he had, and also to get his contribution, and the outcome of the meeting was that they both agreed that senior managers and top industrial relations people were not impressed by being talked at; what they wanted were opportunities to discuss their problems and policies between themselves, with relevant information to hand and in a structured setting. They also discussed how this might best be achieved and a residential weekend was proposed where there would be more time for those present to discuss matters and to make their own views and contributions.

Bill followed up this idea with the help not only of Oliver Clarke but also of Ted Fletcher, who was at that time head of AIC/Inbucon Management Consultants: Ted had previously been with the TUC and had been in line to become general secretary. A programme was evolved between them and the two main contributors were Oliver and Ted. They also decided that there would be a formal dinner on the Saturday evening at which they would invite an important guest speaker.

1967 – the inaugural weekend

The first weekend, 27-29 October 1967, took place at the Royal Albion Hotel, Brighton with the title 'The Future of British Industrial Relations'. The programme stressed the need for discussion and debate and that everyone should make a contribution. The weekend targeted senior managers only. The publicity stated 'admission will be restricted to managing directors, directors, general managers and other senior executives who are responsible for determining their companies' policies'.

One further factor, again from Bill's days with the Inveresk Paper Group, was that he was aware of the feeling amongst the wives of most of the senior managers in the group that they resented never being involved in any of the group's activities and were never invited to participate at any functions. He therefore decided that the invitation should also include that wives would be welcome on this weekend, and in fact many participants were accompanied by their ladies (those were the days)!

Some 30 senior managers gathered at the Royal Albion and amongst them were names that were to become well known in the field of personnel management, such as Geoffrey Gilbertson, Peter Linklater and many other senior executives, and the organisers were able to persuade the Rt Hon Ray Gunter MP, the then Minister of Labour to come down on the Saturday evening. He chose as his subject 'The Government and Industry - some problems in the future of British industrial relations'.

The main conclusion from this weekend was that everyone had got on extremely well. People had been worked very hard and syndicate sessions had taken up a good deal of the time on both Saturday afternoon and Sunday afternoon, eventually concluding with tea on Sunday.

A winning formula

It became apparent that here was a formula which appealed to senior managers on a subject which at that time was particularly relevant and important, and therefore it was generally agreed that these weekends should be run twice yearly, normally one in the spring and one in the autumn. After one more visit to Brighton, although to a different hotel, the venue then became the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne for many years to come.

Experienced speakers were invited and in addition to Oliver Clarke others included Derek Robinson from Oxford University and Eddie Robertson who was then at the EEF, but subsequently moved to the CBI, and on the legal side Professor Cyril Grunfeld and also Olga Aikin. It was the latter who took over most of the legal side of our weekends. Others included Sir George Pollock, Lord Carron and Sir John Cassell, and on one important occasion Geoffrey Howe came to give us an outline of the Government's proposals for the future regulation of industrial relations. We had the support of both the Department of Employment and subsequent Secretaries of State for Employment, and we could usually count on either a speaker or a regular attendee from the Department of Employment.

The importance of Industrial Relations

In retrospect it was clear that in the early days attention to the subject of industrial relations was a very necessary one. It was of course a reflection of the times as it was painfully evident that Britain's industrial relations system wasn't working. In June 1968 the Donovan Commission report was published and this obviously was a subject for discussion, and then in January 1969 came the abortive 'In Place of Strife', followed by the Industrial Relations Act 1971, the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 and the Employment Protection Act 1975. The uncertainties at this time were such that the meetings provided a highly useful opportunity for senior managers to take stock and to discuss how legislation could be applied in their own companies. They continued to attract a very high level of participant as it became evident that it was also a very successful network for senior executives. Those attending referred to it as The Club.

1973 – cloud with a silver lining

At a weekend held at the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne, in 1973 it became clear that the financial difficulties BIM was experiencing due to its move to its new building in west central, called Management House, meant that the future of those who were providing training was threatened. It was decided that BIM would run no more training activities and, although in retrospect this was a strange decision, for it was the goose that was laying most of the golden eggs, the system of accounting at BIM at the time had laid most of the cost of running Management House on to the training activities and therefore they were carrying a burden which was quite beyond their means to meet. The reason for mentioning this was that the news came that Bill had been made redundant and that BIM would not be running such functions in future. At the conclusion of this particular weekend Bill was approached by Len Peach, Graeme Buckingham and others to say that these weekends had been far too valuable to be abandoned, and would he consider continuing them under his own steam. He was obviously very pleased to be asked and decided that, as his future employment was at that time uncertain, he would be happy to continue doing these weekends twice a year.

The name: Devonshire House

Bill wondered what he should call The Club as it had become known. One of his former colleagues at BIM had already started running sessions on NVO at a place called Iford House and this gave him the idea that he should use the name of his own house, (which was a modest enough semi in Devonshire Gardens, Chiswick), and so it became Devonshire House. This rather charming fancy led to one of the historic memories of regulars, when a full capacity dinner was awaiting the arrival of Lord Robens, previously a distinguished cabinet minister and at the time Chairman of the National Coal Board; unfortunately his chauffeur headed for Devonshire House, Chiswick and was puzzled to find no sign of a likely dinner venue! Meanwhile, back at the dinner, Douglas Houghton ad-libbed in his own inimitable way and the evening was saved. Incidentally, Devonshire House has a tremendous record of not being let down by its speakers – only once again has this ever happened.

Trustees are appointed

For the first two years when Bill ran Devonshire House under his own steam it was called Devonshire House Management Studies. But by the end of this period he was beginning to realise the financial implications of running this on his own and having to make decisions on so many subjects, including taxation and VAT, so he approached Olga Aikin to ask for her advice. After a little thought she said "Well, it's not going to help you at all if you form it into a limited company, for you will still have the same problems, I would suggest you form it into a trust and then let the trustees take the responsibility for the organisation." Bill was happy to accept this idea and approached those who had originally asked him to continue these weekends to become trustees, and invited Graeme Buckingham to become the first chairman of the trustees. This was one of the most important developments for the organisation, for it then became the property of its members, and at an early stage Len Peach suggested that the subscription should be for a period of three years, making it easier to administer and members would commit themselves to attend functions for the three years at a time. The membership would be the organisation's sole owner and they could actively play a part in its development.

Further developments

It must be stressed that Devonshire House just grew and there was little thought in the early days that it would survive and continue and be important to continuing numbers of senior managers. To begin with it was just a group of people holding posts at senior level who enjoyed the opportunity to meet and discuss matters of topical importance. The company was convivial, informal and helpful, so many lasting friendships were made:

Devonshire House - Scotland

An early development while it was still a BIM activity was the starting of the Club in Scotland. Bill had been told by senior colleagues at BIM that if he could get the support of Alan Blacklaws, who was held in high esteem by managers in Scotland, he could probably start activities for those in the north and in Scotland in particular. Bill went up to meet Alan Blacklaws, and fortunately he liked the idea and was impressed by its early successes and it was agreed they would run their first weekend in the spring of 1969 at the Peebles Hydro Hotel. At that time it was a popular resort but not particularly adapted for conferences, and the first dinner which was addressed by Alan was in part of the restaurant just divided by screens; so it was quite an effort for him to tell some of his inimitable stories as well as to develop the theme of the weekend. Scotland continued and likewise a committee of trustees was formed after 1973 and other hotels were used, later returning to Peebles Hydro which was by then more able to cope with conferences of this kind, and subsequently to Gleneagles. By this time the Scottish Club was thriving, in particular thanks to Garth Heron who though based in Scotland was also a trustee and later a Director of the Devonshire House Scotland.

Dinner meetings and seminars

Up until now the organisation had concentrated purely on weekends. These were the strong foundations on which Devonshire House was founded and it was the friendships and the fact that people could discuss in depth and with confidence matters affecting their day-to-day affairs as managers that made these weekends so popular with senior managers. It was not until around 1973-74 that the idea of holding one day seminars and also dinner meetings was discussed. Those attending as delegates had become eager to meet more frequently to discuss matters of current importance and at that time the trustees were meeting at the offices of Tarmac, hosted by Neville Patterson, Group Personnel Director, to discuss future developments. It was agreed that they should start to run both seminars and dinner meetings, and the important decision was also taken that the speakers at the dinner meetings should be national figures, well known for their views and for what they had to say. So from the beginning, speakers were senior figures from politics, industry, professions, civil servants and academics, and that established the reputation for Devonshire House of having leading and informed speakers to address their meetings. The seminars were at that time one day activities and covered a very wide range of interests but were aimed not only at members but also at colleagues in their companies or associates whom they might wish to send along. These seminars also proved very successful and helped to establish the reputation of Devonshire House for holding well conducted meetings led by informed and interesting speakers.

1976 - international networking

It was soon seen that to continue to interest our members Devonshire House must be adventurous and hold meetings which would enable them to develop further their interests in management and those matters particularly which affected the management of people. Around 1976 the first overseas visit took place to enable delegates to meet senior colleagues in overseas countries, to meet the employers' organisations and the labour unions and to visit companies who had made a notable success, both as profitable companies and in their management of the people side of the enterprise.

The first visit was made to Belgium and Holland and started on the Thursday so that meetings were arranged for the afternoon and throughout Friday and on Saturday morning, and then delegates had the opportunity to enjoy the capital and the country on the Sunday before further meetings on the Monday, returning in the evening. Right from the start these activities were not only popular but were highly praised as being one of the unique opportunities to meet overseas colleagues, employer organisations and unions, and subsequent visits were made to Denmark, Norway and to France. It should also be mentioned that Devonshire House received cooperation from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office who were able to offer help, advice and meetings at the Embassy.

Eastbourne weekends

The weekend events continued for some years at the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne and on the Friday evening it was always interesting to see warm greetings from delegates who had now become friends, and they grouped round the bar into the early hours of the morning. It had been mentioned earlier that one of the attractions of the weekend was that initially wives were invited, but this of course soon developed into partners as Devonshire House was happy to welcoming many lady delegates as well as men, and obviously if partners were present then children must also be welcome. This in fact became quite a norm and some of those children did in fact grow up to become quite famous, like the two Lockwood children, Victoria who married the Earl of Spencer and her brother who became the economic affairs correspondent for the Telegraph, and Pippa Buckingham who joined the Royal Ballet and subsequently joined the company in Holland where she played many starring roles. Others were successful in many fields, not least in the services where they quickly took on senior roles. Whilst we cannot claim any of this was due to the influence of Devonshire House, it is just interesting to note that it did offer an environment where both partners and children were happy and enjoyed the lighter side of the activities, and even from early days it was quite often that partners took part in the discussions and joined in the activities.

New venues

After some 10 years spent at the Grand at Eastbourne, for various reasons Devonshire House decided that there were a lot of other attractive hotels offering good facilities, and subsequent meetings were held in Stratford on Avon, Bath, Oxford and latterly Cambridge first at the Garden House Hotel, and then at the Holiday Inn, both of which had excellent conference facilities.

Young Managers Forum

Other activities became popular and important. Mention should be made of the Young Managers Forum which was run both in London and the Midlands, and in the Midlands Geoff Peters assisted by his wife Shelagh made this a most successful venue at the TSB College. These ran for many years and it is only latterly that the pressure on younger managers has been so considerable that it has not been possible, as firms downsized, to spare the younger manager to attend these valuable five part sessions.

Bill Nightingale retired

Bill continued to attend trustee meetings for many years, until his death, well in his eighties. Bill was actually in his 80th ear when he retired as Director, and he would be the first to say that administration was not his forte! Jeannie Rowlands had been Bill's administrative hub and in her own way she was as indispensable to the development of Devonshire House as Bill himself, and indeed it was her retirement which triggered Bill's.

1994 - Roger Straker takes over

The story continues, of course, and in January 1994 Roger Straker took over as Director, until September 2009. Roger had retired as Human Resources Director of London Underground, and had already been a member since 1985. This was a period of consolidation, as well as carrying on Bill's great work. Roger's early task was to have one single, accurate database, and something approaching 700 names were consolidated into a real membership of something over 400. Roger was supported on the administrative front by his wife Ann.

For the next few years Devonshire House continued to flourish, and it formally became a Company Limited by Guarantee (as strictly speaking it was not legally a trust, and the Directors decided that seeking formal trust status would be too limiting). The legal name became Devonshire House Management Club. Dinners were as popular and well attended as ever, attracting cabinet ministers and an up-and coming opposition spokesman, Tony Blair, as well as leading industrialists and economists, with average attendances of over 70.

Workshops

A full programme of workshops was offered to members and their staff, up to 10 per year, and although weekend events continued for a time, it became apparent that, much as they were enjoyed and appreciated by participants, a younger generation of managers, under increasing pressure at work and often working insane hours, simply felt that weekends must be for families and recuperation. So, sadly, the activity that set Devonshire House up in the 60's petered out in the late 90's.

Strategic Issues Forum

A new innovation, was the Strategic Issues Forum, where up to 30 senior managers got together to discuss high profile current topics, introduced by an expert speaker such as Professor John Hunt of London Business School. These events helped to fill the gap left by the weekends.

1999 – Jane Mann becomes Executive Director

In the autumn of 1999 Roger and Ann retired, and Jane Mann took over as Executive Director, to be succeeded, in the post of Administrative Director, by Sue Morris (who had been doing the administrative work on Jane's behalf).

The legacy of our Chairmen

What must not go unrecorded is the debt Devonshire House owes to its successive Chairmen. Graeme Buckingham was instrumental, with others, in building the membership. As first chairman, Graeme eventually handed over the reins to Roger Farrance in the early 90's. Roger was Chief Executive of the Electricity Association, and fellow trustees included many who had provided the strong foundations on which the organisation was built, not least Graham Buckingham, John Lockwood, Sir Len Peach and Judy Lowe. Another person who certainly should not be forgotten is Douglas Houghton, formerly General Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation and MP for Sowerby, who was the guest speaker at the first ever dinner in the 1970's. Douglas, later Lord Houghton, was Life President until his death, well in his 90's. He attended occasional dinners in his wheel-chair well past 90!

When Roger Farrance retired, and moved to South Wales, Professor Tony Eccles took over as Chairman, subsequently succeeded by Judy Lowe, Paul Williams and now John Gilkes, supported by Neil Hayward as Chief Executive - an honorary post, but one which helps to share the increasing load of overseeing the Organisation: John has already masterminded putting more structure into the role of directors.

Under Paul William's chairmanship, Devonshire House introduced new categories of corporate membership, designed to enable members to bring senior colleagues in other disciplines who are interested in the wide range of speakers Devonshire House is still able to attract. So, although at the heart of the organisation is the human side of business, there is a recognition that other business disciplines are, as they should be, interested in the same issues.

Dedication and commitment

What has to be stressed about Devonshire House is that, apart from the administrators, and a minimal input from external accountants, nobody has received any remuneration, and guest speakers have never been paid - they appreciate that they are joining a long line of very distinguished speakers, whose reward has been an interesting audience, keen questioning and a case of wine! (or equivalent donation to charity). Without the dedication of its honorary directors, Devonshire House would not have survived.

Today Devonshire House continues to flourish. And that, of course, is because its members continue to believe that it offers something of great value, even in the very different world over 40 years on from its origins.
