

Soroptimist International of Central Birmingham

The Soroptimist Club of Birmingham, as it was originally called, after changing its name to Soroptimist International of Central Birmingham (SICB/Club) in 1952-3, was the sixth to be established in the UK after Greater London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Edinburgh.

On 13 June 1928, a meeting was held at which the provisional executive committee was set up, and the requisite number of 25 women (the Founder Members) needed to form the Club was soon obtained. The Inaugural Dinner was held at The Three Counties Club in New Street, Birmingham, on 24 October 1928, when the Club received its Charter (Certificate of Membership) from Mrs Hetley, the President of the National Council of Soroptimism. The first President was Miss Lilian Knight Barrie, the Headmistress of King Edward VI High School for Girls, and niece of the playwright, JM Barrie of Peter Pan fame. The first weekly luncheon meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 30 October 1928 at the Imperial Hotel (now Imperial House), Temple Row, Birmingham.

Of the Founder Members, two played an important part in the wider world of Soroptimism, and two were beneficiaries of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, which permitted women to train as solicitors and barristers:

- Catherine Constable, reporter, and Women's Editor on the *Birmingham Gazette* from 1918 to 1930, was the editor of the *British Soroptimist* from 1931 to 1945.

- Florence Jukes, Master Printer and managing director of Frank Jukes Ltd, printed the *Soroptimist News*, for several years. She also made the film “Behind the Scenes” at the 1939 Federation Conference of Soroptimist international Great Britain & Ireland in Buxton, at <https://sigbi.org/soroptimistcentenary2021/sigbi-soroptimist-international-greatbritain-ireland-history/>. Florence became the fifth honorary member/honorary life member of the Soroptimist Clubs of Great Britain and Ireland at the Scarborough Conference in 1958.

- Mary Elizabeth Pickup, the first women solicitor in Birmingham, and one of the first four women to qualify as a solicitor in England.

- Henrietta Lilian Mary Gibbs, first woman to be called to the Bar in Birmingham, was the first President of the Midland Divisional Union in 1936 and President of SIGBI, 1938-9.

Several other SICB members have held office at Federation and Regional levels:

SIGBI: President

- 1966-67: Margaret Murray
- 1992-93: Irene Darlaston (while a member of Nuneaton Club, now SICB)
- 2019-20: Isobel Smith (formerly SICB, now SI Solihull)

SIGBI: International Secretary

- 1956-60: Kathleen Elliott

Midland Divisional Union of Soroptimist Clubs: President

- 1961-62: Margaret Murray
- 1969-70: Marjorie Morris

Midland Arden Region: President

- Margaret Kennedy (First President)
- Joyce Waggett (1978)
- Joy Pinder (1988)
- Pat Kirby (also served on Federation Executive Council in late 1990s)
- Anne Hill
- Isobel Smith

Midland Arden Region: Honorary Member

- Valerie Evans

Programme Action

Throughout its history SICB always had Programme Action as its raison-d'être, supporting many local, national, and international causes through fund-raising, action, and service.

SICB supported the work of VSO volunteers from 1983 onwards by providing financial assistance for volunteers working in a range of disciplines and areas around the world.

Other overseas projects included fundraising for:

- Sithabile Child and Youth Care Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, and

- Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as well as knitting blankets.

National charities with which SICB was involved include:

- Cardiac Risk in the Young where SICB members worked with members of the charity at sessions in the Birmingham area to identify vulnerable youngsters
- NSPCC
- Cancer Research, and
- National Missing Persons' Helpline.

Locally, SICB supported a great many causes, including:

- St Mary's Hospice (since 1975)
- Queen Alexandra College (which supports young people with visual impairment, a range of other disabilities and those with diverse needs), where Club held its meetings in recent years
- King's Heath Food Bank, established in conjunction with the King's Heath Baptist Church, which later took over the food bank
- Trees for Life, planting trees in memory of past members and the closure of SICB
- Red Cross, teaching English to Bosnian women refugees at the height of the Bosnian War
- Birmingham Crisis Centre
- Anawim, which provides support services to women and their children

- The ARK/The Life Centre delivering services that strengthen the local community, including clothing bank, counselling, crisis support, drop-in lounge, and food bank.

Each year, SICB hosted a Bridge Day to raise funds for a chosen charity. These included:

- NSPCC Birmingham Primary Schools Online Safety Project
- St Basil's, which works with young people to enable them to find and keep a home, grow their confidence, develop their skills, increase opportunities, and prevent homelessness
- British Heart Foundation
- Heart Research UK West Midlands, and
- Queen Alexandra College.

Members also endeavoured to keep abreast of local issues, for example the Lobbying Group kept an eye on issues affecting the local area which it was felt might impact on the life of Birmingham. In 2019 SICB took part in the Council's consultation process relating to the establishment of a Clean Air Zone in the City Centre. Information was provided to members, and discussions taken place, concerning plastic pollution.

In addition to supporting established charities, SICB did not shie away from setting up a project, where a need was identified. For example, in the 1990s a very successful Drug Awareness Campaign was launched in City Schools, which ran for about 10 years. In 2015, SICB hosted a 'Violence Against Women, Women Against Violence' Forum

(VAW), involving representatives from various NGOs and organisations across the city which support victims of violence.

Finally, no report on the Programme Action work of SICB would be complete without mentioning the most recent 'Loves Me/Loves Me Not' project, spearheaded by Jean Nutt. The VAW Forum concluded that Education was one way to halt the cycle of abuse, and so the project was born. The project grew enormously and continued to be supported by SICB, as well as gaining Big Lottery funding.

This project involved the provision of school assemblies and other materials looking at what constituted a healthy safe teenage relationship, which now forms a compulsory part of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Curriculum in all secondary schools. The venture, in addition to the number of pupils and schools reached (see above), was a huge success:

- 22,000 young people heard the presentation, in some 43 schools in Birmingham alone, by Easter 2020
- 7000+ cards were distributed to Soroptimist Clubs
- SI Hereford, Coventry, Kidderminster, Kenilworth, Worcester, Loughborough, Poole, and Salisbury were particularly active
- A presentation by Jean Nutt was made to 10 clubs/regions
- 1000+ cards were distributed to local Colleges/Universities/libraries in Birmingham
- Two "Domestic Violence" workshops, in conjunction with the Birmingham Crisis Centre, were held at a local boy's school

with excellent feedback from schools:

- “Thank you for coming into our school and speaking to our students. You were epic! Your talk was inspiring and hard hitting; a difficult balance but you did this amazingly.”
- “Can we come work for you, helping to spread the message” – Year 13 girls.
- “We have received a disclosure from a year 8 boy. He said it was your assembly that gave him the strength to speak out. Thank you.”

Closure of SICB

During 2019, for a wide range of reasons, SICB began to review and consider its situation and future. With great regret and sadness, SICB decided to put in motion the procedure for the closure of the Club. An Extraordinary General Meeting of the Club, with Midland Regional President and Vice-Presidents in attendance, was held on Tuesday 4 February 2020, and ratified the closure decision. After 91 years, SICB finally closed its “doors” on 31 March 2020.