

# The story of the little known Norwich Traffic Club

Established 85 years ago it is one of two clubs of its kind in the world, the other being in New York. Derek James tells the story of the little known Norwich Traffic Club. It flourishes thanks to a Norwich father and son we have much to thank for.

It was in 1896 when the first motor vehicle graced the roads of Norwich...by 1927 10,000 vehicles were competing for space on city roads designed for foot and horse traffic and by 1933 congestion was a subject of great concern.

You may think nothing has changed. Apart from the amount of traffic.



Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother with Lord Mayor and Mayoress (Mr and Mrs Charles Watling) and Mr H Harper-Smith deputy Mayor in October 1938

All those years ago a group of local businessmen met at Langford's famous restaurant in London Street, Norwich, to discuss the way forward. Lionel A Carey suggested that a club be formed with 31 members. the president was a man who played such a leading role in Norfolk life for so many years...Charles Watling.

As former head of Norfolk CID Maurice Morson, former President of the Traffic Club, points out Charles was the driving force behind the club at its birth. Described as a "parcel carrier" he was a man of many talents. He began in 1890 with a single horse and cart and in 1933 had just moved from a fleet of horse vans to all new motorised transport.

Charles was a man who got things done, a dynamic businessman serving as Sheriff of Norwich in 1929 and Lord Mayor in 1938 when he welcomed the King and Queen to the city for the official opening of City Hall.

"1933 was an age when transport developed at pace, if you forgive the pun," said Maurice.

"It was a time without speed limits, when policemen walked or chased runaway horses and the force acquired police cars – albeit they only had three wheels and they were discarded after a single wheel got trapped in tram lines and they went round corners they didn't want to go round," he said.

By the end of 1934 the Traffic Club had 65 members. Four years later membership was 120 and it was addressing traffic problems in an observing and advisory capacity.

The club stood down during the Second World War when the Luftwaffe altered the city in the heavy bombing raids.

"Reforming and concentrating on the city engineer's plan. Which included a ring road, the club was recognised by haulage and transport organisations, the Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Transport," explained Maurice.

Charles Watling was succeeded in his many businesses and at the Traffic Club by his well known and much-loved son Geoffrey.

History shows that Charles travelled to New York on the maiden pre-war voyage of the Queen Mary and Geoffrey made the same trip on the first post-war voyage.

As far as it is known only one other Traffic Club exists in the world, in New York, and the exchange visits between the clubs have taken place both ways, giving new meaning to the "special relationship."

Maurice says: "That the Norwich club continues to exist, indeed flourishes, owes much to its founding by Charles Watling and the generosity of Geoffrey Watling who took steps to ensure its financial stability.



Geoffrey Watling at Norwich City Football Club's centenary dinner in 2002



*Norwich City V Swindon. Iwan Roberts, Player of the Year, receives the Barry butler Trophy from Geoffrey Watling.*

“Geoffrey was of course a modern day champion of many institutions, notably the saviour of Norwich City Football Club as it lurched towards financial disaster in 1957,” added Maurice.

“The Norwich Traffic Club owes its inception and present stability to the determination and generosity of Charles and Geoffrey Watling, men of vision. Its present day membership recognises the men of history while looking at the traffic problems of our time.

“Only recently the club hosted a conference examining the future of alternative engine power. Gas powered vehicles?

We have come a long way from Charles Watling’s horse and cart,” said Maurice.

We certainly have.

**For more information about the club – the last story about I could find in our files was written back in 1983 - and how it operates in the 21st century go to [www.norwichtrafficclub.co.uk](http://www.norwichtrafficclub.co.uk)**

Derek James. 18/11/2018