

BRITISH LEGION'S NEW HEAD-QUARTERS OPENED

C.T. June 8, 1946



THE standards of a dozen British Legion branches from the surrounding district headed a parade through Christchurch on Saturday of be-medalled ex-service men—many of them veterans of two wars—on the occasion of the opening of the new Headquarters of the Christchurch Branch in Bargates.

It was a memorable day for the local members, for it marked the successful outcome of nearly three years' intensive work to secure a fitting home for the rapidly growing branch, the strength of which has increased from 50 to more than 500 since 1943.

The opening of the Headquarters in the afternoon was performed in the presence of a large crowd by Brig.-Gen. T. N. S. M. Howard, C.B., D.S.O., the County President, and in the evening the Social Club, which occupies the ground floor of the Headquarters, was opened by Col. O. E. Crosthwaite-Eyre, Member for this Division.

The parade, which assembled on the Quay, was marshalled by Mr. B. Cates and led by the Christchurch Town Band, under the direction of Bandmaster J. Hemmings.

The Christchurch standard was borne by Mr. T. Oxford and that of the Women's Section by Mrs. Mortimer. Other branches represented were New Milton, Winton and Moordown, Sway, Hordle, Poole, Sopley, Burley, Highcliffe, Milford-on-Sea, Bransgore, and the Lymington Women's Section. The County standard was also in the procession.

On arrival at the entrance to the Headquarters, the standard bearers formed a guard of honour while Brig.-Gen. Howard cut the tape in front of the doors. Prior to this he inspected the parade in company with the Mayor, Alderman D. Galton.

Among the special guests were about 20 ex-service men from the Douglas House, Southbourne, and they were entertained to tea in the Regal Cosy Cafe.

The ceremony inside the headquarters was presided over by the Branch President, Major T. Woombell, M.B.E., and was opened with the exhortation and prayer by the Vicar, the Rev. R. P. Price.

Major Woombell, in his introductory remarks, said it was a very proud day for him to be able to welcome so many in that splendid hall, and they were very grateful for the support of officials, standard bearers and other members from neighbouring branches.

During the many years which he had been associated with the Christchurch branch he said it had always been his ambition that they should have a home of their own. Those who had been members for a considerable period would remember the way in which they had wandered from place to place for their meetings.

In spite of the difficulties owing to lack of Headquarters, very good work has been done by the branch, and at the beginning of 1944 it became essential that they should look ahead for the return of their boys. A Building Committee, comprising members from the branch—the Women's Section, and other good friends—was formed with a view to a determined effort to find suitable premises for headquarters.

“Within a month or two we had obtained an option on these most desirable premises, which became our property in the following December, thanks to the confidence shown by those who were willing to advance the money to enable us to purchase them,” he said.

Major Woombell paid a tribute to the hon. general secretary, Mr. Durrant, for the most efficient way in which he has dealt with the enormous amount of additional work which has been thrown upon him and expressed thanks to the committee and all those who have helped in the success of securing the premises.

SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF.

The Mayor, after saying how gratified they were to see such a large gathering, reminded his audience that the acquisition of the new premises and putting them in order could not have been carried out but for a good deal of thought and hard work. “I think it is something of which the Borough of Christchurch should be very proud,” declared the Mayor, who then associated himself with the remarks of the President, in paying tribute to the work of the committee. He concluded by saying that it was a memorable day in the history of the Christchurch branch of the Legion.

Brig.-Gen. Howard, in an address which reviewed various aspects of British Legion work, congratulated the Christchurch branch on their “very sporting venture,” and remarked upon the big increase in membership since 1943—it had increased from 50 to over 500. It was a fine record of which they had every reason to be proud, he said.

The British Legion, he continued, had high aims and ideals to carry out, which required not only freedom but also a steadfast faith in the best that is in human nature.

GREAT HUMAN QUALITIES.

Those of them who had served through the worst that war could produce had firm faith, based on experience in action, in those great human qualities of service and comradeship. Those were not lukewarm emotions, they were the strongest fibre with which the texture of human love was woven.

It was possible that they might sometimes ask, “What was the use of the Legion?” They should let the answer come in the only convincing way by practising amongst themselves the two great qualities in human nature he had mentioned, remembering that always in the British Legion they attached more importance to the quality of the goods than the colour of the label.

Brig.-Gen. Howard then spoke of the three things for which the British Legion was pressing. They were a secure peace, employment for all who had served and houses for all. So far as a secure peace was concerned, let them remember that the last two great wars found them completely unprepared.

HUMAN MEMORIES WERE SHORT.

The lessons of the last war were still fresh, but he had lived through many wars and long enough to know that human beings had short memories. Security might not be a pressing danger at the moment, but in a world threatened with totalitarian doctrines they should remember that the safest principle was eternal vigilance.

So far as employment was concerned there were now very capable Government resettlement officers in the towns, and their advice should be more often sought than it was, and instead of rushing into any job untrained men should take advantage of the Government training centres now in existence.

As regards housing, that was now almost entirely the responsibility of local authorities, but it was up to the Legion to bring pressure to bear on those authorities whenever the need arose. The speaker then mentioned the Legion's suggestion for providing cottage homes throughout the country for disabled ex-service men as a form of war memorial.

LEARNED FROM EXPERIENCE

One of the values of the Legion, said Brig.-Gen. Howard was the fact that in the majority of cases its members had learned in the best of schools—the schools of experience. “For this reason we should not be afraid to make our influence felt both in local and national affairs in which the interests of the ex-service community are affected,” he declared. In this respect he mentioned that their House of Commons Branch, which consisted of men of all parties, was a great help to them.

“True democracy must not palm off its responsibilities entirely on its leaders ” he continued, “ it is we, the public, who are basically responsible for all that happens. The splendid work of the British Legion should be made more known to all, and from the increase in your membership in Christchurch it seems that the aims and objects of the Legion are better known than in some other places. I feel sure you are educating public opinion into a proper understanding not only of our ideals but our power to maintain them in times of stress and change,” he said.

THE LEGION'S WORK.

The county secretary, Mr. C. S. Jole, gave a brief survey of British Legion work, emphasising particularly what had been done in regard to pensions for ex-service men and their dependents. He referred to the forthcoming annual conference and mentioned that no fewer than 45 resolutions on the agenda related to pensions, allowances and insurance. In regard to houses for disabled ex-service men, he said that £100,000 had been earmarked from the Benevolent Fund for this purpose.

Expressing good wishes to the Christchurch branch, Mr. Jole said: “Your achievement here is all the more notable in view of the fact that you have acquired these headquarters by your own efforts and without assistance from any outside source.”

INCREASED MEMBERSHIP.

Reviewing the work of the Christchurch branch, the general secretary, Mr. L. R. Durrant, said that they had rather a poor start in that they were about six years behind, and the branch started at a time when people were not quite so enthusiastic as they were today. During the early years of the war the officers, in most cases, were serving again, and it was exceedingly difficult to keep things going. But for the work of the late Mr. J. H. Martin, who combined nearly all the offices in the branch, it would probably not have survived. Early in 1943, continued Mr. Durrant, they thought something ought to be done for the younger men when they returned. The membership was then only 50, but by Sept., 1944, it had increased to 157, and by Sept., 1945, it stood at 312. Since that time 315 new members had joined.

Mr. Durrant outlined the benevolent work which the branch had done, and spoke also of the work of the employment secretary, Mr. A. W. Hornby. Since taking over these duties, Mr. Hornby had interviewed 217 people and since January of this year had secured employment for 17, including 12 disabled people.

PENSION CASES.

Pensions cases, said Mr. Durrant, involved a tremendous amount of correspondence, and the committee dealt with six or seven cases each week. During the present year 29 cases had been submitted for pension and nine had been successful. Others were still awaiting the result of appeal.

Dealing with the work of the Entertainment Committee, Mr. Durrant mentioned that since 1943 they had raised more than £620.

Speaking for the Women's Section, Mrs. Conyers Morrell, its chairman, said they were very proud of the new headquarters and she hoped the men would call on the women to help them wherever possible.

At this juncture Mr. A. W. Hornby announced that the committee had decided to award Mr. Durrant with life membership of the Legion, and he asked the President to hand to Mr. Durrant his life membership card. Thanks to Brig.-Gen. Howard and other speakers were expressed by the branch chairman, Capt. A. E. Miller.

THE CLUB OPENING.

For the opening of the Social Club in the evening, the chairman of the branch, Capt. A. E. Miller, presided, and he extended a warm welcome to Col. Crosthwaite-Eyre.

In a brief speech before declaring the club open, Col. Crosthwaite-Eyre remarked upon the trail of troubles and difficulties which war left behind, and he thought one of the most difficult problems today was for the people to pick up the threads of their life again after five or six years in the Forces. For many reasons it might be impossible for them to go back into the trade they left, and he felt there was no organisation better suited to help solve this problem than the British Legion.

The motto of the Legion was "Service not Self," and in that was the whole kernel of what they were out for. What they wanted was a home for the ex-service men where they could enjoy companionship and receive help in their varying problems.

"I am certain your club is going to set a very high standard in this matter," said Col. Crosthwaite-Eyre, who added that they had established something which would not only do the Borough good, but which would help in solving some of the most difficult problems with which the country was faced.

"In declaring this club open, I wish you every success and I am certain that in the days to come we shall find in this room a centre for everyone who has been in the war where they can have companionship and help," said Col. Crosthwaite-Eyre.