

Formation

On 12 May 1854, Peter Slater's iconic statue of James Watt was unveiled in Adam Square, which is near to the present day Festival Theatre. After the unveiling around 60 gentlemen – the directors of the Watt Institution and School of Arts and their male guests – dined in the evening, in honour of the occasion, at the London Hotel, St. Andrew's Square. The students had a much livelier dinner in the Guildford Arms.

Mr John E. Vernon, an Edinburgh jeweller, proposed that a club should be formed *'whose object would be to sup together on the anniversary of the birth of James Watt...and also to promote the interests of the School, by raising a fund each year to provide prizes'*. The club was initially called The Watt Institution Club, but was renamed The School of Arts Watt Club in January 1855 on the suggestion of Leonard Horner, co-founder of the School of Arts in 1821. Mr. Vernon was elected the first President in alongside a committee comprised of the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary and 15 elected members.

The first celebration of the birthday of James Watt took place on 20 January 1855 at a dinner in the Café Royal in Edinburgh. It was attended by 50 members and cost 2 shillings and 3 pennies each (around £13 in today's money). Mr. Vernon, President of the Club, presented *'a very chaste and handsome baton'*, which remains in the possession of The Watt Club today.

The Early Years

The birthday dinner became an annual event and, alongside the Annual General Meeting, was the focal point of Watt Club events until 1979. The entertainment in the early days was not just confined to music; in 1862 the highlights were a solar microscope and an *'exhibition of a series of dissolving views which brought forth 'hearty marks of approbation from the audience'*. At the AGM on 30 October 1870 and a year after the Watt Institution Governors voted to admit ladies to classes, a motion was passed to *'allow ladies to compete for the prizes along with the gentlemen on the same terms'* and in 1871 it was agreed that ladies should be admitted to the annual dinner.

Membership of The Watt Club in the 1800s was for people interested in honouring the memory of James Watt and in supporting the activities of the Watt Institution and subsequently Heriot-Watt College. The majority of members were the gentry and

The Watt Club: A Short History



artisans of Edinburgh as well as members of staff at the School of Arts. Initial fees were 1 shilling per annum or £1 for life.

As the status of the Club grew, status of members increased and include senior academics and industrialists from across the UK, many Lord Provosts of Edinburgh (of whom three became Watt Club President), as well as the professional classes of Edinburgh. However, The Club was not yet a “graduates’ association”.

In the 1880s, the Club experienced its first downturn in membership and a period of inactivity (highlighted by a three year gap in the Club’s minute book) which led to questions being asked about whether or not the Club should continue. Continue it did, but by the early 1900s, membership was declining (to such an extent that the committee was reduced in size!) and in 1910, The Watt Club ceased to exist, although no formal record exists of the reasons for this.

Reconstitution

In November 1935, Heriot-Watt College received a request from the Science Museum in London to borrow artefacts related to James Watt, in particular a copy of the Silver Medal awarded by The Watt Club in the 1890s and early 1900s. This sparked renewed interest in the long defunct Watt Club and on 28 November 1935, The Watt Club was formally reconstituted and, although remaining separate from the College, graduates and former students of the College were permitted to join on application and without fee. The first Watt Club lecture was held on 17 January 1936 and Professor Alexander Horne, Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Heriot-Watt College was elected the first President of the reconstituted club.

As a registered charity, The Watt Club was run by a Board of Trustees comprising the President, the Vice-President (from 1952), the Honorary Secretary & Treasurer and three nominated Trustees.

Established in 1953, the Norwegian Watt Club was the first branch of The Watt Club and was followed in 1971 by the London Watt Club. Both branches, as well as the others established more recently, remain active in engaging alumni and promoting the University around the world.

Membership was first opened up to graduates of the then Heriot-Watt College shortly after the Second World War, although they still had to pay a membership fee. After

Heriot-Watt became a University in 1966, The Watt Club agreed to open its membership to graduates free of charge, although the University compensated the Club for loss of revenue.

Shortly afterwards in 1969, tentative discussions were held with Heriot-Watt University on links between The Watt Club and the Graduates' and Former Students' Association (GFSA). However, these discussions did not progress far and nothing further happened until 1981 when formal links were established between The Watt Club, the University and the GFSA when the Board of Trustees was reconstituted to include the Principal of the University and two of the GFSA's representatives on the University Convocation.

Becoming the Graduates' Association

By the early 1990s, it was clear that the roles and membership of The Watt Club and the GFSA significantly overlapped and discussions were held about formally merging the two bodies. This became effective in October 1994 when The Watt Club, as constituted in 1935, was dissolved and formally incorporated into the Graduates' Association of Heriot-Watt University, which also took the name 'The Watt Club'.

At the end of the 2008/9 financial year, The Watt Club ceased to be a separate charity, although all charitable activities had long been assumed by the University. In 2015, the Club and the University undertook a significant review of the Club's governance and organisation. This extensive exercise resulted in a new Constitution that was agreed to by members at the 2015 AGM and subsequently endorsed by the Court of the University, which confirmed the adoption of The Watt Club as the Graduates' Association of the University.

Today, The Watt Club has over 100,000 members worldwide and continues to support the aims of the Club as defined in 1854 to enable members to maintain contact with the University and to encourage members to maintain interest in the University so as to promote the interests of the University and to do honour to the memory of James Watt, as well as continuing to support the award of medals to the top students in each discipline.