

## Structure Handbook

### Introduction 2. A brief history of AA in Great Britain

Guide to alterations:

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It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the Fellowship was established in Great Britain. During 1945 and 1946 a few individuals tried to achieve sobriety through correspondence with the Alcoholic Foundation in New York. There was also a lady AA contact living in London who gave her name and address to New York as a contact with her heart in the work. She certainly answered many letters of enquiry sent to her during the year she was in London, but they do not appear to have borne much fruit.

In March 1947, an American lady member, Grace O., who was visiting this country with her husband, wrote to the five members who were in contact with the Foundation and arranged a meeting which took place in her room at the Dorchester Hotel, London, on 31 March of that year. A Canadian member, Canadian Bob, whom she had met in a London restaurant on the previous Saturday and another lady member of the Hollywood Group, whom she met on the boat coming over, also attended. There were eight present at this meeting in the Dorchester, and it was probably the earliest AA meeting to take place in Great Britain.

From then on there were meetings, which were held in a variety of places: cinemas, cafes, restaurants and homes. After a time, the members decided to advertise the existence of the Fellowship and an advert was produced which read 'Alcoholism – a small body of anonymous ex-sufferers place themselves at the disposal of any requiring help; the offer is quite gratuitous.' Fifteen national newspapers either temporised or rejected the advertisement. One enquired how requests for help would be dealt with. The explanation resulted in a decision that the advertisement could not be accepted. Only one newspaper, the Financial Times, finally agreed to run the advertisement and 'the few' braced themselves for the expected deluge of letters. To their bitter disappointment there were only two letters, one post-marked 'Skegness' and the other 'North Wales'. However meetings continued to take place more or less regularly in the homes of members and well-wishers and in other places.

In the autumn of 1948, the first London Group was formed and began meeting in a room at 11 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square. There were only about a dozen members but in January 1949 they produced the first monthly Newsletter – 25 stencilled copies. This included a notice about an open meeting to be held in February, together with articles on Twelfth Step work and Sponsors, and it concluded: 'Let's stay sober. Just a reminder that we are alcoholics and that we should never be fooled by the thought that we can have just one for today.'

Contact had by now been made with two or three loners outside London, and in December 1948 the first provincial group of about five members met in Manchester.

If the message was to be spread and new groups established, a bare minimum of organisation was required and so an Advisory Committee consisting of four members was formed early in 1948. This Committee's terms of reference required it to maintain liaison between members and new groups, and to provide all possible assistance and experience to the new group leaders. It also gave guidance on matters of publicity, distributed literature and directed enquiries from potential members to the appropriate groups. In October 1949 it was recognised that the title 'Advisory Committee' was inappropriate, and the Committee became known as the 'Central Committee' with the same members serving.

The early days of the Fellowship in Scotland were somewhat similar to those in England. A lone member from Glasgow had registered with the Foundation in New York in 1946.

In 1947, however, a gentleman farmer living in Campbeltown in the West of Scotland with a history of problem drinking went to a Christian Association Conference in the United States in the hope of finding a solution to his problem. At this Conference he met a lady who introduced him to AA and he attended a meeting. He was so deeply impressed that on his return he devoted all the time he could spare to carrying the message, visiting prisons and hospitals to seek out alcoholics who wanted help. A few of those he contacted started meetings in their homes in Glasgow and Edinburgh. However, these few knew little about the Fellowship and how it worked and were having difficulties when early in 1949 they had a visit from an American member. Between his experience and the undaunted enthusiasm of the farmer from Campbeltown, the first two groups in Scotland were established and registered in May 1949. These were Glasgow Central, meeting in the St Enoch's Hotel, Glasgow, and First Edinburgh, meeting in Mackie's Restaurant, Princes Street, Edinburgh.

Then, as in England, the message spread and groups were established at Perth, Ayr, Dundee and Larbert, Stirlingshire, leading in time to the formation of the Scottish Intergroup Committee.

The first known meeting of a group in Wales took place on 13 April 1951 in a room in Cathedral Road, Cardiff. Present were four alcoholics from South Wales and a member from Ireland. At this meeting it was decided to register with London and New York. At about the same time there were one or two alcoholics in North

Wales struggling to achieve sobriety through correspondence. They were referred by London to the newly-formed Liverpool Group and, despite the difficulties of travelling; they managed to get to some of the meetings in Liverpool. By 1954, there was the nucleus of a group in North Wales with meetings in members' houses at Corwen, Bangor and Llandudno. The original Cardiff Group did not last, but a new group was established in 1960. This was closely followed by the formation of a group at Caerleon.

In the summer of 1950, our Co-Founder Bill W. and his wife Lois came over from New York to visit groups in England and Scotland, and talked at several group meetings. At a specially-convened meeting of group representatives, Bill presented 1500 copies of the Big Book from the American Alcoholic Foundation, the sale of which was to assist in the growth of the Fellowship in Great Britain and promote the carrying of the message in Europe. To manage the distribution and income from the sale of these books, a separate Pre-Foundation Committee was formed, consisting of five of the very early members. By 1952, this Committee included well-established members from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Eire.

In 1953, this Committee was incorporated as the Publishing Company, and duly registered. It took over responsibility for the distribution, sale, and, subsequently, the printing of AA literature in Great Britain.

The steady growth of the Fellowship had been such that early in 1951 it was felt that the time had come to consider drawing up a constitution to provide for regular meetings of group representatives to deal with the various activities of the Fellowship.

At a meeting of group representatives held on 16 March 1951, the first Group Representative Committee was formed to be responsible for all matters relating to the growth, welfare and activities of the Fellowship in England and Wales. A Central Committee of five members with at least one year's sobriety was made responsible for safeguarding the Traditions and, so far as was in their power, the functioning of the London Service Office and liaison between the groups and the Foundation. The Central Committee was also required to take whatever steps it considered necessary for the welfare and development of the Fellowship both in Great Britain and overseas, as advised by the Group Representative Committee. In February 1952, the London Service Office was opened at 11 Redcliffe Gardens, London SW10, having previously been run from the office of one of the early members at the London Fruit Exchange, London E1.

In 1953, a loner in Dumfries wanted to establish a group there, and at his request a number of Midlands and Manchester members decided to hold a meeting in the town. Invitations were sent out in the form of a challenge to the various groups in Scotland – the English were once more invading Scotland! The Scots rallied to the old Border war cry “Blue Bonnets over the Border!” and an amazing weekend of sharing took place, which has continued to be held each year ever since. The Blue Bonnets Gathering was the forerunner of the English and Scottish Conventions.

The General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous (Great Britain and Ireland) Limited had its inaugural meeting on 29 June 1957 and was incorporated in accordance with the Companies Act (1948) on 16 July 1957.

The Fellowship continued to grow and later in 1957 the first intergroup in England, the North-West, was formed. About the same time the Glasgow Central Group had to stop meeting in the St Enoch's Hotel, because of alterations taking place within the hotel. It was felt that the Fellowship in Glasgow should have its own premises, and in due course premises were obtained at 114 West Nile Street

leading to the establishment of the Glasgow and District Intergroup. In a very short time the rooms were used every night of the week for group meetings and they also became the AA Central Office for Glasgow.

By the late 1950s there were about 100 groups in England and Wales and about 30 in Scotland. Intergroups like those in Manchester and Glasgow were being formed in other parts of the country. In England and Wales the group Representative Committee was extended to become the Area and Group Representative Committee, and the first meeting of this new Committee took place in London in June 1958. This Committee met three times a year, once in London, and usually once each in Birmingham and Manchester. One of the sub-committees of the Area and Group Representative Committee, called the General Purposes Committee, was given responsibility for the Central Service Office at 1 Redcliffe Gardens and its services.

As early as 1952, Scottish Intergroup was formed in the realisation that there was a need for an adaptation of the service structure in Scotland because of the marked differences from England and Wales in culture, education, law and government systems. By 1972, the Scottish Intergroup had evolved into the Scottish Service Committee. With regionalisation in 1977 the Scottish Service Committee continued to serve the Fellowship in Great Britain and helped establish the regions in Scotland. The committee was disbanded in 1999 when it was felt that there was no longer a requirement.

The growth continued. New groups continued to be formed and by 1964 there were nearly 200 in England and Wales. The General Service Board considered that the Fellowship had, by then, grown to a size which justified the convening of a General Service Conference. In May 1964 a suggestion to move towards the formation of such a Conference was put to the Area and Group Representative Committee by the Board. At the end of October 1965 an exploratory Conference took place in Manchester to consider the formation of a General Service Conference Great Britain. In January 1966 the decision was taken to proceed and Conference was born.

The first Conference was held in Manchester in October 1966. Over 100 delegates from throughout Britain attended this first Conference, the theme of which was 'Working with Others'. It was held to be most successful – to such an extent that it has become an annual event and indeed the Fellowship in Great Britain celebrated its 40th Annual Conference in 2005.

In 1969 the Fellowship's first World Service Meeting was held in New York and two delegates from AA Great Britain attended. Three years later in 1972 AA's monthly magazine 'Newsletter', which had been going for twenty-five years, changed its name to ~~SHARE~~ Share, and this in turn has continued as a monthly publication ever since. At that time the monthly circulation was about 2500 copies. In 1982, Share celebrated its 10th anniversary by which time its monthly circulation had risen to over 5000 copies. In 2007, Share celebrated its Diamond Jubilee with an Anniversary Journal.

In 1974 the Fellowship in Great Britain was awarded the privilege of hosting, in London, the first AA World Service Meeting to be held outside of the United States.

The first AA handbook 'The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain' was published in 1974, and was reviewed annually until 1998. It was then superseded by the 'Group Handbook', renamed 'The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain' which was in use until 2012. This was then divided into two books 'The AA Structure Handbook for Great Britain', approved 2012, and 'The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain', approved 2013. These are used today and are updated annually.

AA's growth in Great Britain continued rapidly and in 1977 the 1000th group was registered. This was followed in the next year by the establishment of the European Information Centre at the General Service Office in Redcliffe Gardens, London in response to the increasing demand for information from English-speaking members in mainland Europe.

In 1980 it became apparent that some change in the structure of the Fellowship in Great Britain was required and to this end the format of regionalisation was adopted. Ireland had formed its own service structure and Board of Trustees in 1978. In 1981 the registration of the 1,500th group in Great Britain was recorded and this growth was mirrored by the ongoing development of English-speaking AA in Europe culminating in the first European Service Meeting (ESM) held in Frankfurt in October 1981 and the second ESM held early in 1983.

~~In 1982 SHARE celebrated its 10th anniversary by which time its monthly circulation had risen to over 5,000 copies.~~

In order to keep abreast of modern methods of communication and to assist in passing the message of sobriety through AA, the annual Conference in 1983 recommended that an AA video be produced. This was filmed early in 1984 and approved by Conference 1984. The video was entitled 'One Day at a Time' and to date well over 2000 copies\* have been sold.

In 1985 AA worldwide celebrated the 50th anniversary of the historic meeting of Bill W. and Dr Bob in Akron, Ohio, and many special meetings and conventions were held throughout the UK.

It was now becoming increasingly clear that the continued siting of the General Service Office (GSO) in London was not feasible – a massive proposed rent increase being perhaps the major reason - and in 1986, GSO moved to new premises in Stonebow House in the centre of York. [It was then subsequently moved to Toft Green in 2007.](#) Also at this time, a problem arose when AA in Great Britain, in accordance with our tradition of self-support, had to refuse a substantial legacy. In order for AA to so refuse and yet to continue in its status as a registered charity, a special Legacies Act had to be passed by Parliament.

In 1987 AA in Great Britain celebrated its 40th anniversary with regions and intergroups holding special meetings or conventions. Also in this year, a computer was installed at GSO.

In 1988 Bill W's widow, Lois, died and thus was lost the last remaining link with the past, although the memory of Lois is continually recalled in the continuing growth of AA in Great Britain and elsewhere of Al-Anon. This was the year that Conference recommended the adoption of 'Gratitude Week' by all groups.

Following on from the success of the video 'One Day at a Time' and in response to the increasing number of younger AA members, Conference 1990 recommended that a video for young people be made. This was done and the resulting 'Message to Young People' became available at the end of 1991. To date, over 500 copies of this video have been sold\*.

In an effort to rationalise the expansion of the Fellowship in Great Britain, the Twenty Fifth Conference in 1990 recommended the introduction, where feasible, of multi-meeting groups. In 1992 the Twenty Seventh Conference introduced for a trial period, a further tier between intergroups and region, to assist London Region with handling over 450 groups through 18 intergroups. The number of group meetings had by this time reached 3000.

As the result of a recommendation at the 29th Annual Conference in 1994 a pilot scheme for a single AA telephone contact number was instituted in the South-East Region in October 1994, and in two regions in Scotland in August 1995. It was known as '0345 scheme' and ran for four years, with reports being given to Conference every year. This was then later changed to an 0845 number in 1998, and by 2022, it was in use by all regions. In 2015 the number changed again to an 0800 free phone number.

In 1994 the Fellowship was made aware of changes in the Charities Act and the Companies Act in Great Britain which, in order that AA in Great Britain could remain within their respective provisions, required the adoption of a Conference Charter and Twelve Concepts for Service in Great Britain (This was done by adapting the relevant sections in the then current The AA Service Manual).

Fifty years of Fellowship in Great Britain were celebrated at Blackpool in 1997, when approximately 8,000 members of AA, Al-Anon and their families gathered at the Winter Gardens and Boating Lake. This was also the year that the GSB took responsibility for the Northern and Southern Service Offices to comply with legal requirements.

1998 saw the creation of the AA website, and by the year 2000, it was receiving more than 45,000 hits per month.

In 2001, the 4th edition of the British version of the Big Book was published. In 2003, the first advert for AA appeared on British television. In 2004, the 'Blue Bonnet' Convention received a 50-year recognition plaque from Dumfries and Borders Council.

In 2005, the first AA parliamentary event was held at Westminster followed quickly by events at the Scottish and Welsh parliaments. 'Traditions Week' became an annual event in AA.

Between 2005 and 2009, the GSB formed four new Sub Committees - Electronic in 2005, Health in 2006, Armed Services in 2008, and Probation 2009.

In 2010 to mark 60 years of co-operation of AA with Barlinnie Prison, a celebration event was held.

The end of 2012 saw the launch of Alcoholics Anonymous Awareness Month. Its intention was to raise AA's profile, and to increase public understanding of alcoholism.

In 2016, the 'Chat Now' function went on the AA website, opening up an entirely new access point in reaching out to the still suffering alcoholic, and attracting newcomers to the Fellowship.

In 2017, Great Britain's first AA museum exhibition, 'Darkness into Light', was hosted for four months at Kelvingrove, one of Scotland's leading museums. It was opened by Sir Philip Dundas's (credited with bringing AA to Scotland) daughter and granddaughter. The exhibition was a world first co-operation between AA and a National Body, and has been visited by over 350,000 people.

The Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain Archive Cataloguing Project began at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York in 2018. Also in this year, there was an event in Winchester Cathedral celebrating the 100-year anniversary of Bill's visit to the graveyard, and his subsequent passage in his story regarding the Hampshire Grenadier.

In 2020, the COVID19 pandemic arrived, and the world changed. It meant the closure of physical meetings. The Fellowship responded by changing their existing meetings to online, and in some cases, by the following week. The AA Conference was cancelled, and was held online in 2021.

In 2022, The Fellowship celebrated 75 years in Great Britain with a 75th Anniversary Convention in Leeds.

Televised in early 2023, the BBC 2 documentary 'I'm an Alcoholic Inside Recovery', a look inside Alcoholics Anonymous was the BBC's first ever access to an AA meeting. There was an upsurge of inquiries to GSO by members of the public after this documentary.

\* This is historical information as neither video is produced now.