

Geoffrey Watling



Geoffrey Watling with Count Basie, 1959



Samson & Hercules, c.1960

Alan Watling, Geoffrey's nephew, has fond recollections of the Samson: 'The ballroom was very much part of my upbringing, in fact as a lad I used to earn my pocket money working there. My earliest memories of the Samson date back to 1949, I was just 7 and taken to a tea dance to celebrate a family birthday. Then in 1953 I started helping out on Saturday mornings, clearing up after the big dinner dances. The dances were grand occasions, the sort of event that we just don't have today. Another job I was often given at short notice was blowing up balloons by the gross (144). The most I did with my brothers was nine gross in a single day. During the summer holidays we branched out. Then we used to repair the chairs, which was quite a job, and also we cleaned the walls with sugar soap. They were pretty brown – the effect of cigarette smoke.

'The basement still contained the swimming pool, emptied of course, that had been installed by Teddy Bush in 1935. Most of the white tiles that originally lined it were still on the wall. It was a tapered pit running from a shallow to a deep end. It was used for storage. We'd dump damaged canvas chairs down there, until they could be repaired. It was also a good place to store the furniture that was used for the outside catering business which

was organised from the Samson. Upstairs there were rooms, particularly off Wagon & Horse Lane, which had clearly originally served the pool. 'Obviously it was a very old building, and the ballroom was difficult to heat, but Geoffrey always said, "Keep it hot, because they'll drink more". He was ever the business man. There were many bars around the Samson. These included the main balcony bar, which did most of the business, and a side bar, down the stairs from the ballroom towards the Wagon & Horses Lane entrance. At one time there was a lounge bar, in the basement at the front of the building. It wasn't much used, and so in 1958 this was converted into a snack bar.

'Originally Geoffrey had to work through a licensed victualler. But in the mid-1950s he was granted his own licence, which he was very pleased about, because alcohol sales was the big money earner. It didn't cost a lot to get in, I think that it was 3s. 6d. for Saturday, and lower midweek. In 1959 when Geoffrey started "On the Record" nights he charged a bob, but because the event was designed for youngsters he had to totally clear the bars of alcohol for those evenings and replace it with Coca-Cola and Fanta.

'The Samson was a popular venue for wedding receptions, which were held in rooms throughout the building.

Weddings weren't like they are today, but they were still lucrative, and so bookings were rarely turned down. In fact on some Saturdays they'd get two receptions in.

'Upstairs, on the first floor was the Oak Room, which was very small. The rest of the area was taken up by the Flixton Rooms, installed in 1952. Although there was a separate entrance to the Flixton Rooms, sliding panels could be opened to give a view over the ballroom. The second floor was the location of Geoffrey's offices. The Flixton Rooms had their own kitchens, but the main kitchens were tucked away on the ground floor, at the end of the ballroom. I don't think they would have met today's health and safety standards. They had concrete floors, but probably the worst thing was that all the rubbish had to go through the kitchens, to the bins outside.

'There were quite close links between Geoffrey and the Norwich school. He went there for a few years before transferring to the Paston School. Also, in the 1950s the younger boys, the under 11s, used to go across every day to the Samson for lunch.

'Sadly I never went to an official do at the Samson. When I was 18, Geoffrey sold it, and to be honest having spent so much time working there, I didn't really want to socialise there as well.



Geoffrey (right) with brother Frank, c.1934



Geoffrey, Elsie, Frank, Charles, and Fenella Watling, celebrating Charles & Fenella's golden wedding, at the Samson, 1948

The Lasting Legacy

Alan Watling recalls: 'Geoffrey was very conscious of the City's heritage. Wherever he was, he always wanted to be somewhere else – but he always wanted to come home.' Keith Gregory, Geoffrey Watling's friend and business associate, also recalls Geoffrey's fondness of the City's heritage: 'Geoffrey's conversation in his later years invariably turned to the "Old Norwich" of his youth, it was usually tinted with humour. I remember once, when talking about the Samson and Hercules, he would relate how the ballroom floor was

placed over the redundant swimming pool beneath. He reckoned that many a wartime British serviceman would have thanked Teddy Bush [who owned the Samson at the time] if he had been able to have the floor moved aside to drop the American

servicemen, now dancing with their girls, into the pool.'

In 1993 Geoffrey set up the Geoffrey Watling Charity, in memory of his daughter Carol, designed to support local charities. With his death in 2004 most of his estate was passed over to the Charity, and so to this day he continues to promote and support the City he loved.

In 2013 the Geoffrey Watling Charity commissioned a Go Go Gorilla. Sandy Jones, Artist painted the gorilla to represent different aspects of his life. To this end she coloured it in NCFD colours, and included images of the speed boat he used to race, the president's badge of the Norwich Traffic Club (a club created by Geoffrey's father Charles – both Charles and Geoffrey were presidents) and on the great beast's forearms were pictures of Samson and Hercules - recalling the ballroom which will always be associated with this great man.

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