CLUB CALL

A NEW DAWN
A NEW NAME

As part of a new series looking at membership growth in Rotary, Dr Cathy Ryan, Immediate Past President of the Suffolk-based Blyth Valley Rotary Club explains how they have managed a successful year.

L IKE many Rotary clubs, our membership was dwindling so thoughts turned to: how can we change the image? We needed a shake-up and a makeover.

The seaside town of Southwold in Suffolk has an image of the wealthy and elderly. It's a place where people go for an upmarket holiday.

Our club, Southwold and District, did not have that vision, and we needed to fix it! Over the years, we had considered changing the club's name, but it seemed to be a complex process, so we didn't pursue it.

However, by using a more flexible and positive approach to membership, it was agreed to try again. Out with Southwold and District Rotary and in with Blyth Valley Rotary which certainly widened our catchment area to hopefully draw in new members.

Taking the reins for my second term of office was quite daunting at this time of intentional change, but we agreed that the changes MUST happen if we were going to carry on as a club.

Firstly, we needed a more inclusive and wide-ranging name.

We hoped that by doing so we might gather a few members from local Rotary clubs which had disappeared over the years. We re-launched with a cheese and wine evening inviting several 'targeted' guests, coupled with an 'open door' invite. It was a great success.

Building on this, we recognised how important public relations is. Our name needed to be visible at all local events; raising the profile of volunteering with being at the forefront of that concept was definitely the way forward.

Blyth Valley Rotary Club has firmly planted itself at the centre of our community, which has been the secret of our ongoing success.

Social media and networking with other local groups was our focus. Community Radio has become invaluable, reminding us that networking is the key to membership.

Gaining publicity and new members, volunteers, and friends has been and still is a huge effort.

We are fortunate to have members with excellent IT skills and some time to commit to managing the PR angle.

However, the rest of the club must do its part by supporting the concept of being visible. This takes dedication and commitment and is not for the faint-hearted!

To date, we have recruited 12 new members who have energised and motivated the club, challenging us to bring our club into the 21st century. New
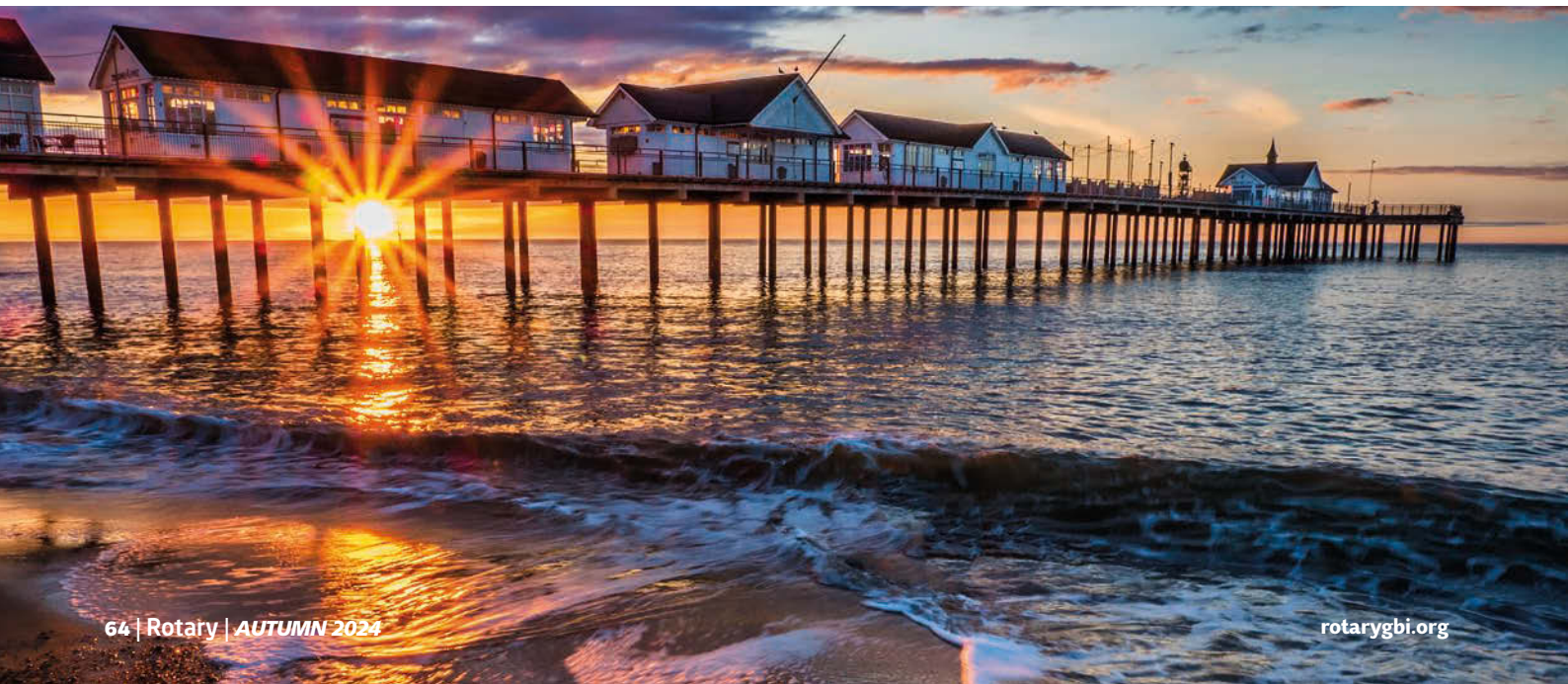
"OUT WITH SOUTHWOLD & DISTRICT ROTARY, AND IN WITH BLYTH VALLEY ROTARY, WHICH CERTAINLY WIDENED OUR CATCHMENT AREA TO HOPEFULLY DRAW IN NEW MEMBERS."

ideas, new opportunities, new business contacts and a brighter future.

The challenge is to recognise and accept flexibility, but this means managing expectations, availability and new working methods.

Along with new members, there needs to be a host of volunteers and friends who can provide support.

Working in partnership with other organisations, clubs and societies has brought additional rewards.

Everyone needs to share their resources, and expertise; we cannot work in isolation as a club, we need to work in partnership with others.

We also need to tell people our story and be proud of our achievements.

Our rolling programme of events is often admired and our work ethic is extraordinary.

We always start our Rotary year by giving beautifully illustrated dictionaries to the year 6 children in all our local schools, and we then celebrate with 'Brass on the Grass', a free community event on the village green in Reydon. This is a great profile booster, encouraging local charities to have a stall as the award-winning Wrentham Brass Band entertains crowds.

During the summer, we support many organisations at fetes and festivals, either with our infamous 'teddy stall' or by our expert marshalling and car parking management.

Car park management at big events is becoming a successful way for us to raise funds and our profile such as the Henham Steam Rally and Country Show which has become our 'club away week'.

Many members camp out to support this massive annual country fair where both our Rotary flag and our reputation fly high, providing funds to support charities for the coming year.

Encouraging new members to take the lead to try out events is also essential.

So this year we added a wine tasting and 'Pop on the Green' and also worked with the Southwold Arts Centre to organise the Southwold Arts Street Festival.

And that's just an introductory flavour to some of the activities which include the 'Coats4kids' project, working with schools to plant crocus bulbs for End Polio Now, a Christmas Day sea dip in aid of the RNLI along with a Starlight 10k Walk to raise funds for Dementia UK and the Sole Bay Care Fund. We also organise a Rising Star Award to recognise under-18s in our community.

Hot off the press, we started Blyth Valley RotaKids in September working with St Felix School in Southwold.

We have 50 children registered as members and hope to work with two primary schools too.

Blyth Valley Rotary is growing having raised around £25,000 in the past year. We are an amazingly dedicated and totally committed team, who put 'service before self' to make sure our club survives. We have shown our community that Rotary is here to stay! ●

BLYTH VALLEY FACT FILE

● Blyth Valley Rotary Club (Previously Southwold and District Rotary).

● Chartered: April 26th, 1960.

● Meets: Sole Bay Club Bowls Club, Reydon, Southwold, Suffolk. Every Thursday.

● Membership: 27 members and 5 honorary members.

CONTACT US ➤

What has your club done to grow Rotary and its impact in the community? Share your story in *Rotary Magazine* by writing to: **editor@rotarygbi.org**