# Cadbury's Corporate Philanthropy in the Great Depression: Contributions to Workers' Education

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## Abstract

Founded in Birmingham, England, Cadbury is renowned not only for its chocolate business but also for its enduring commitment to social responsibility. Among its many philanthropic initiatives, one of the most significant was its support for adult education. This paper focuses on Fircroft College, a residential workers' college established by the Cadbury family in 1909, and examines its role during the economic crisis of the 1930s. Fircroft was part of the Selly Oak Colleges—a group of institutions backed by the Cadbury family as part of their broader educational vision. Its founding was influenced by the Scandinavian Folk high school tradition, a respected model of residential adult education in Northern Europe. The college offered not only academic instruction but also a holistic environment that fostered community, reflection, and civic responsibility. During the Great Depression, Fircroft's mission was tested by rising unemployment and social hardship. Through close analysis of primary sources—including *The Fircroft Year* annual reports from 1932 to 1938—and contemporary British newspapers, this study explores how Fircroft supported the education and development of working-class individuals during a time of national uncertainty. The research elucidates how this Nordic-style residential college empowered workers during a period of crisis and discusses the implications for contemporary business engagement in adult education.

*Keywords:* Fircroft College, adult education, corporate philanthropy, social responsibility, folk high schools

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## Introduction

During the early twentieth century, the Cadbury family's business success was underpinned by a robust commitment to social responsibility. Beyond improving working conditions for their factory employees in Bournville, the Cadburys made substantial investments in educational and community development initiatives. A significant catalyst for George Cadbury's engagement in social reform was his involvement in the adult education movement. It brought him into direct contact with the poor and supplied him with that first-hand knowledge of the problems of industry which made him a pioneer in social reform (Gardiner, 1923). From the age of 20, George Cadbury served as a teacher at an adult school founded by Joseph Sturge and his brothers on Severn Street in Birmingham. As his class expanded, it eventually became established as a separate branch in Selly Oak (Crosfield, 1985). The group of institutions he founded subsequently became known as the Selly Oak Colleges.

While the majority were grounded in his Quaker beliefs—emphasizing the education of Sunday school teachers and missionaries—one institution diverged from this focus: Fircroft College, a residential college for workers inspired by the Nordic folk high school movement. Established in 1909 under the leadership of George Cadbury Jr., the son of George Cadbury, Fircroft College adhered to the Danish folk high school tradition, offering a non-traditional, holistic approach to adult education. This approach emphasized residential community life, personal development, and the cultivation of civic responsibility over formal examinations or qualifications. Through the shared experience of communal living and study for durations ranging from several months to a year, working-class students were intended to acquire not only academic knowledge but also a revitalized sense of purpose and enhanced social awareness.

The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 presented considerable challenges to the mission of Fircroft College. With unemployment rates reaching nearly 22% in 1932 (Denman & McDonald, 1996), the proportion of unemployed individuals among Fircroft's entrants increased significantly. This context prompts two critical inquiries: What role can a residential workers' college fulfill during an economic crisis? Can such an institution merely provide sanctuary and education to a limited cohort, or might it contribute significantly to broader social recovery? Analyzing Fircroft's response to the crises of the 1930s yields valuable insights for contemporary initiatives aimed at engaging businesses in adult education—initiatives that are vital for fostering resilience in the face of economic volatility, technological disruption, and social inequality.

## Literature Review

As previously noted, the Great Depression, which commenced in 1929, presented numerous challenges for Fircroft College, with the most significant alteration being the increase in the number of unemployed students. According to Pumphrey (1952), the proportion of unemployed students consistently surpassed 50% during the academic years 1929–30 through 1933–34. Consequently, facilitating graduate employment became an urgent issue. Many students at that time faced severe financial hardship and experienced anxiety regarding future unemployment, which hindered their ability to concentrate on their studies during the third term (Pumphrey, 1952).

Previous studies have indicated that, when confronted with psychological and economic challenges, students at Fircroft received support from faculty and staff not only through

formal classroom instruction but also through a wide range of extracurricular and residential activities that enhanced their overall well-being. For instance, Pumphrey (1952) emphasizes that, in addition to engaging and interest-driven classes, educators actively participated with students in various activities, including football, birdwatching, Whitsuntide excursions, and handicrafts, thereby integrating learning opportunities into daily life. Similarly, Leighton (1959) observed that "apart from the formal academic studies, college life is enriched by informal and social activities," detailing a dynamic range of extracurricular experiences, such as participation in men's clubs and visits to factories, art galleries, museums, and other institutions. Some students further pursued enrollment in the Bournville School of Art or undertook apprenticeships in carpentry.

In the context of curriculum development, previous research indicates that Fircroft College has consistently adhered to the liberal arts tradition that has been foundational since its inception. Despite the pressing practical concerns regarding employment, Principal Wulstan Lee, who led Fircroft during the 1930s, asserted that "it would be unwise to set out deliberately to train men for this type of activity" and explicitly warned against adopting an excessively vocational approach (Bartlett, 1993). Concurrently, Lee enacted significant curricular reforms to ensure that Fircroft's program remained robust and relevant. According to Bartlett (1993), upon assuming the role of principal, he reorganized the curriculum to strike a balance between depth and breadth: students would cultivate expertise in a specific area while also engaging with a diverse array of subjects. The study of the English language was mandated for all students, and subjects such as Ethics and Logic were incorporated as distinct components of the syllabus. Lee also introduced innovative instructional methods, notably the establishment of small study groups and tutor-led discussions. Four interdisciplinary study groups were created, concentrating on areas such as English composition, History, Principles of Economics, and Literature, including Biblical studies. Group learning became a defining characteristic of Fircroft's pedagogical approach. Leighton (1959) notes that these groups explored both contemporary issues and classical texts, with topics ranging from the Indian independence movement and the 1931 Macmillan Report on finance to analyses of local government and readings from Plato's Republic.

While previous studies have provided valuable insights into key aspects of Fircroft College during the 1930s—such as students' employment status, their economic and psychological anxieties, the dedicated support offered by faculty and staff both inside and outside the classroom, and the curriculum reforms implemented under Principal Wulstan Lee—several areas remain inadequately explored. First, there is a paucity of information regarding the admissions process for the residential course during this period, specifically concerning the characteristics of admitted students and the selection criteria employed. Second, there has been limited analysis of students' learning outcomes. Third, insufficient attention has been given to how these educational outcomes were intended to be disseminated more broadly within society as part of Cadbury's corporate philanthropy. This study, therefore, addresses the following two research questions:

RQ1: What types of students did Fircroft College seek during the Great Depression, and what admissions criteria were applied?

RQ2: How did Fircroft College, as part of Cadbury's philanthropic initiatives, aim to translate educational outcomes into broader social contributions during a period of social instability?

It is important to acknowledge that Fircroft College offered additional programs during this period, including correspondence courses. However, this study is exclusively focused on its

primary residential program, which enrolled approximately 20 to 30 young adult men during the specified timeframe.

## Methodology

This research constitutes a qualitative historical case study of Fircroft College during the 1930s, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. The principal primary sources include the annual reports of Fircroft College, published in *The Fircroft Year* from 1932 to 1938, which are archived at the Wolfson Centre within the Library of Birmingham. It is noteworthy that the 1935 issue of *The Fircroft Year* could not be procured and is consequently excluded from the analysis. This publication was originally issued multiple times per year under the title The Old Fircrofter; however, due to increasing printing costs, it was subsequently transformed into an annual format titled The Fircroft Year. Despite this reduction in publication frequency, it remains a significant resource, providing unique insights into the college's enrollment, curriculum, and educational philosophy during the Great Depression. Furthermore, this study incorporates secondary sources, including newspaper articles from the same period. Specifically, 170 articles containing the keyword “Fircroft College” were identified and analyzed through a search of the British Newspaper Archive.

## Results

This section presents the findings in relation to the study’s two research questions. Sections 4.1 through 4.4 address Research Question 1 (RQ1), which concerns the admissions policy, student background, and educational outcomes during the 1930s. Section 4.5 synthesizes these findings to explore Research Question 2 (RQ2), which considers how Fircroft College's educational activities contributed to wider society as part of Cadbury’s philanthropic vision.

### Unemployed Students and Their Post-completion Employment Status

Before analyzing the characteristics of education at Fircroft College during the 1930s, it is essential to first clarify more precisely the extent to which the student population during this period consisted of unemployed individuals. Table 1 provides data on the number of unemployed individuals who enrolled at Fircroft College between 1932 and 1938, as well as those who remained unemployed upon completion of the program. These figures are sourced from annual reports published in *The Fircroft Year*. The column indicating the UK unemployment rate (%) is extracted from Denman and McDonald (1996).

As illustrated in Table 1, the national unemployment rate in the United Kingdom reached a peak of approximately 22% between 1931 and 1932, followed by a gradual decline through 1938. In contrast, the enrollment of unemployed students at Fircroft College attained its zenith somewhat later, during the 1933–1934 academic years, and subsequently remained at a relatively elevated level. This temporal discrepancy suggests that Fircroft served as a transitional educational institution for individuals who continued to face unemployment despite early indications of economic recovery. Internal reports from the college further elucidate the underlying structural challenges. *The Fircroft Year* 1933 observes that “the man that has a job is not likely to risk losing it, and many firms are unwilling or unable to keep positions open for the three terms” (p. 4). This indicates that even as national unemployment figures began to improve, there were not sufficient prospective students who could enroll at Fircroft with the assurance of resuming previous employment upon completion of their

studies. Consequently, it may be inferred that the proportion of unemployed individuals among new entrants showed only limited decline in the years that followed.

**Table 1**

*Number of Unemployed Students at Entry and Their Employment Status After Completion at Fircroft College, 1932–1938*[1]

| Year | Unemployed upon Entry | Still Unemployed after Completion | UK Unemployment Rate (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1932 | 9 | Up to 5 (1–2 were intermittently employed) | 22.1 |
| 1933 | 12 | Up to 5 | 19.9 |
| 1934 | 15 | 7 | 16.7 |
| 1936 | Not specified | Not specified (6 found employment after the course) | 13.1 |
| 1937 | 10 | Up to 3 (some had personal barriers to employment) | 10.8 |
| 1938 | 9 | 5 | 12.9 |

*Source*: Author's compilation from *The Fircroft Year* (1932–1938); UK unemployment data from Denman & McDonald (1996).

## Admissions and Selection of Students

In the subsequent sections, this paper conducts a comprehensive examination of the student intake, selection process, and educational content at Fircroft College during the 1930s, in alignment with the research questions previously delineated. First, what type of students did Fircroft College seek as candidates for its residential course? *The Fircroft Year* 1936 (p. 7) provides a clear statement—albeit specifically referring to unemployed applicants—indicating that students were "selected not because of their unemployment, but because of their ability and character." What specific abilities and character traits did Fircroft College prioritize in its student selection? To address this inquiry, *The Fircroft Year* 1938 (p. 4) identifies two primary criteria:

1. The criteria for selecting men who will profit by a year's study in a residential college cannot entirely be found in previous class records.
2. Only men with some background in serious study or in practical social or political work are likely to make good use of a course that ought to be exacting in its demands on them.

These passages clearly indicate that Fircroft College valued not only academic qualifications but also sought individuals capable of translating their year of study into meaningful contributions to social or political initiatives. Then, how did Fircroft College successfully recruit students during this period? At that time, Fircroft College disseminated recruitment advertisements and articles across a range of publications. Furthermore, as noted in *The Fircroft Year* 1934, the institution actively encouraged nominations from the Co-operative Movement, Joint Industrial Councils and Committees, and various social and educational settlements, irrespective of the nominees' employment status. However, it appears that even in years when scholarships were available, nominations from these organizations did not consistently align with expectations (*The Fircroft Year* 1934, p. 15).

[1] The 1935 issue of *The Fircroft Year* was excluded from the analysis.

Regarding the selection process for the residential course, although the annual reports lack comprehensive details, a more concrete reference can be found in the Birmingham Daily Gazette, dated Saturday, 25 May 1935 (p. 13). Within this publication, an advertisement for a £50 scholarship to Fircroft College specifically targeted members and employees of the Ten Acres and Stirchley Co-operative Society. The advertisement stipulates: "Candidates must be between the ages of 20 and 35 and possess an adequate record of previous study. Acceptance is contingent upon an interview and the submission of the remaining £25." When considered alongside *The Fircroft Year* 1938 (p. 4), this evidence suggests that Fircroft College assessed not only the academic backgrounds of applicants but also, likely through interviews, their potential for sustained study and their engagement in social and political movements.

**Students' Learning Experiences and Outcomes in the Residential Program**

According to *The Fircroft Year* (1932), the three primary subjects offered at that time were Literature, History, and Economics. By 1936, International Affairs had been integrated into the curriculum, and in 1937, Psychology was reintroduced. Annual reports from this period consistently emphasize Economics as the discipline in which students exhibited the greatest interest and engagement. The 1932 report highlights the significance of analyzing the foundational principles of economic and social systems, asserting: "They have now some chance of taking a wide survey and seeing things as a whole, before they return to play their part as citizens and industrial workers" (*The Fircroft Year*, 1932, p. 5). Furthermore, Economics emerged as the most frequently discussed subject in group study sessions, as illustrated in Table 2, alongside other critical themes such as Politics.

**Table 2**

*Topics Discussed in Group Study Sessions at Fircroft College, 1932–1938*

| Year | The Topics of Group Study |
|---|---|
| 1932 | Macmillan Report, The Indian Question, The Problem of Government |
| 1933 | The Macmillan Report, The Lytton Report, Mr. Cole's Guide through World Chaos, India; Representative Government, Bridges' Testament of Beauty |
| 1934 | The Machinery of Government, International Relations, India, Mandates, The present Economic Situation |
| 1936 | Mandates, Political Theory, History of Economic Theory, Psychology, Problems of the Workers in Industry |
| 1937 | Psychology |

*Source*: Author's compilation based on *The Fircroft Year*, 1932–1938.

Descriptions in the annual reports indicate that literature presented a significant learning challenge for many students at Fircroft College. For example, *The Fircroft Year* (1934, p. 5) notes "a lack of adequate previous reading and the difficulty of making up for this deficiency during the period of residence." Similarly, *The Fircroft Year* (1937, p. 7) emphasizes "a very common feeling that literature is a subject rather for passive enjoyment than for hard work," which often impeded students' active participation in English literature. In response to these challenges, the college implemented consistent and pragmatic instructional strategies, such as paraphrasing and précis writing, which reportedly resulted in measurable progress (*The Fircroft Year*, 1937, p. 16). Consequently, the 1938 report indicates that many students began to understand that the purpose of studying literature was "not merely technical proficiency in writing, but nourishment from exemplary texts" (*The Fircroft Year*, 1938, p. 4). This shift in perspective suggests that literature education at Fircroft gradually transitioned beyond the acquisition of basic skills, aiming instead to promote broader objectives of personal growth

and human development—an approach that closely aligns with the educational ideals espoused by Nordic folk high schools.

**End-of-Term Examinations as a Form of Student Support**

One of the more notable innovations at Fircroft during the mid-1930s was the introduction of end-of-term examinations. This development is significant given that Fircroft's educational philosophy was originally inspired by the Danish folk high schools, which traditionally eschew examinations and grading. Grundtvig's initial model for folk high schools emphasized education for life and the intrinsic joy of learning, intentionally rejecting examinations as contrary to its foundational principles. Indeed, the Danish Folk High School Association explicitly states that "it is not a test oriented school, there are no exams, no grades and you do not get a degree at the end of the course" (Danish Folk High School Association, n.d.). This philosophy posits that education should be free from the constraints of testing to concentrate on enlightenment and character development. Over time, as the folk high school concept disseminated to other Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Finland, some institutions adapted to include more academic components, occasionally integrating examinations or certifications in response to local demands for measurable educational outcomes. Within this broader context, Fircroft's decision to implement end-of-term examinations indicates a subtle shift away from the purely Danish model toward a more academic framework that incorporates both formative and evaluative practices.

According to *The Fircroft Year* 1933 (p. 4), two primary reasons were identified during the deliberation of the concept of end-of-term examinations. First, the increase in social and sporting events during the summer term significantly hindered students' ability to maintain focus on their academic studies. Second, as the academic year concluded, students experienced heightened anxiety regarding post-graduation employment opportunities, which often detracted from their concentration on academic responsibilities. Consequently, the absence of a structured framework towards the end of the academic program rendered students susceptible to distractions—either from the appeal of summer activities or from concerns about their future. End-of-term examinations were subsequently introduced in 1934 following discussions with students earlier that year. The implementation, as documented in *The Fircroft Year* 1934 (p. 16), comprised two components:

1. a week of final examinations at the end of the summer term, approximately equal in extent for every student;
2. the preparation of pieces of written work longer and more exacting than the ordinary essay.

In essence, each student, irrespective of their academic focus, was required to complete a set of examinations of comparable breadth, alongside the submission of more substantial written work in addition to routine coursework. These initiatives instituted a level of academic rigor and deadline-oriented focus that had previously been lacking.

The results of this experiment were favorably evaluated in the 1934 report. The principal noted: "These final examinations not only strengthened the studies of the summer term but also improved the tone of the College. As the end of the term approached, students, with no clear prospects of occupation before them, appeared less worried and unsettled than usual (*The Fircroft Year* 1934, p. 16)." Thus, the examinations served a dual purpose. Academically, they enhanced students' study efforts; students approached their coursework with greater seriousness and consistency, recognizing that a comprehensive examination awaited them.

Psychologically, the examinations provided a constructive focus that seemingly alleviated some of the aimlessness and anxiety typically experienced by students nearing the end of their academic year at Fircroft. This engagement kept them productively occupied and, as the report suggests, notably less anxious than cohorts in previous years. In this context, Fircroft's adoption of examinations was not a deviation from its founding ideals but rather an adaptation to address the support needs of its students. The examinations were implemented not merely as assessments, but as a form of student support designed to enhance focus and provide a sense of closure and accomplishment. This innovative balance—honoring Grundtvigian educational ideals while pragmatically introducing structured evaluation—demonstrates how Fircroft navigated the intersection of philosophy and practicality. The college achieved a unique equilibrium by utilizing examinations as a tool to improve educational outcomes and student well-being, indicating a nuanced evolution of the folk high school model in response to the pressures of the Depression era.

**Social Vision and Broader Impact of Education**

This section addresses Research Question 2 (RQ2). Based on the analysis presented in Sections 4.1 to 4.4, the one-year residential program at Fircroft College during the Great Depression demonstrates that it was not conceived as a short-term response to unemployment; rather, it was envisioned as a long-term investment in social transformation. Firstly, enrollment was restricted to 20–30 students per year, ensuring that admission was determined not solely by need, but also by merit, motivation, and potential for leadership. The college sought to select individuals capable of applying their education for the benefit of others, reflecting a strategic approach to corporate philanthropy. Rather than providing direct charitable aid, the Cadbury family supported profound, transformative learning for a select group who could emerge as agents of change within their workplaces and communities.

The curriculum further exemplified this transformative purpose. Rather than offering narrowly focused vocational training, Fircroft provided a liberal education that emphasized personal growth, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. Disciplines such as history, literature, and economics were presented as instruments for understanding society and one's role within it. For instance, students' keen interest in economics was directed toward the analysis of social problems and the conceptualization of solutions. Group study sessions on contemporary issues encouraged discussion and critical engagement, thereby preparing students for active civic participation. Even the introduction of end-of-term examinations in 1934—seemingly inconsistent with the school's Grundtvigian roots—was implemented with the students' well-being in mind. Reports suggest that examinations provided structure and psychological stability during a time of uncertainty, assisting students in managing feelings of aimlessness and anxiety.

Fircroft's approach was also informed by the Quaker values of the Cadbury family, particularly the conviction of uplifting a social class through education. The words of George Cadbury Jr., prominently featured on the college's website, encapsulate this philosophy: "We are anxious that it shall be understood that the object of students at the new settlement shall be to return to their work and dignify it, and to help their comrades, not to rise to a superior class, but to raise their class" (Fircroft College, n.d.). Students were expected to return to their communities—whether in factories, offices, mines, or unions—and utilize their broadened perspectives to enhance collective conditions. Success was not gauged by individual social mobility, but rather by the extent to which graduates contributed to the betterment of their peers and working environments. This vision of educational outcomes

starkly contrasts with conventional metrics and highlights the distinctiveness of Cadbury's philanthropic strategy: to cultivate leadership from within the working class, rather than from above it.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

This study investigates Fircroft College's response to the Great Depression through a comprehensive analysis of its admissions criteria, student demographics, and educational outcomes. The findings indicate that the College strategically facilitated the development of unemployed young men, promoting not only individual growth but also a sense of civic responsibility. This approach is consistent with Cadbury's philanthropic objectives of social reconstruction via education. The Fircroft model maintains considerable relevance in contemporary discourse surrounding corporate social responsibility. It illustrates that, particularly in periods of crisis, corporations can assume a pivotal role by endorsing educational initiatives that cultivate not only vocational skills but also civic values and ethical purpose.

This study has concentrated on a single institution and primarily utilized annual reports. Future research could enhance this analysis by exploring additional sources, such as newsletters or student correspondence and oral testimonies, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of participants. Comparative studies with other Selly Oak Colleges and workers' colleges could elucidate what rendered Fircroft unique within a broader educational movement. Government inspection reports, such as those produced by the Board of Education in the late 1920s and 1930s, may also provide insight into external evaluations of the college's effectiveness. These inquiries would deepen our understanding of how educational practice, philanthropy, and social policy intersected during a particularly turbulent period in modern history.

Nevertheless, the findings presented herein already offer valuable historical insights: in an age of widespread despair, a small college—supported by a socially committed enterprise—endeavored to instill hope, agency, and dignity through education. This legacy remains highly pertinent in contemporary society.

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## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author utilized OpenAI's ChatGPT to enhance the linguistic quality of the manuscript, focusing on the improvement of clarity, coherence, and academic tone. This AI tool was employed solely for the purposes of linguistic and structural support, based on the content and ideas conceived by the author. The AI did not generate any original content, data analysis, or interpretative insights. All intellectual contributions, critical analyses, and final decisions were made independently by the author.

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