Ernest Major was the first Warden of Carnegie College of Physical Training from 1933 to 1939. He was born on 28 July 1898 in Blackburn, Lancashire. In 1901, his father, William Major, was a Gymnastic and Fencing Master at the Thomasson Gymnasium in Bolton; he later became a Gymnastics Instructor for the Municipal Borough of Leigh in Lancashire. From the very beginning sport had a significant influence on Ernest and he would go on to emulate his father and become an influential advocate of gymnastics, especially in relation to physical education.

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Prior to Ernest’s appointment as Warden of Carnegie he was Organiser for Physical Education in the city of Manchester University and in 1932 was made a member of the Carnegie Advisory Body. Across Britain the authorities had become keenly aware of the deplorable physical condition of the general populace, something that became obvious during conscription in the First World War. Carnegie College of Physical Training was set up in 1933 against a backdrop of concern for the physical and consequently mental wellbeing of the general populace. The first course was held at the College in September 1933. 55 unemployed men were selected from across the country. Predominantly they came from Northern England, from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cheshire, Durham, Derbyshire, Cumberland and also South Wales and Scotland. Among the activities the men tackled were swimming and lifesaving. The College went to some lengths to point out that the physical activities were not some form of military training, which probably reflects the war weariness and sensitivity to the political situation in Europe at the time. Within another six years the country was yet again thrown into a desperate conflict. It was noted that on the whole the men’s state of health was improved. The scheme was run again in April 1934. By September 1934, 90 applications were received from regular students and courses for the 1934-35 academic year began.

When Ernest had been appointed Warden of the newly formed College in Leeds he was the only full-time member of staff. His list of responsibilities seemed Herculean in their scale. Apart from his responsibility for the general college administration and organisation as Warden, he gave lectures in the theory of physical education, the theory and practice of remedial gymnastics, the history and organisation of physical education, the special method of teaching gymnastics and a certain amount of practical gymnastics and supervision of teaching practice.

Ernest’s leadership as first Warden of Carnegie created the foundation of Carnegie’s reputation as a centre of quality in the teaching of physical education at both a national and international level. An example of the latter was Carnegie’s inclusion in The International Sports Pedagogic Congress (Das Internationale Sportstudentenlager) which ran in conjunction with the 1936 Berlin Olympics between 23 July and 17 August. One thousand students from 30 countries were invited, with the Carnegie College of Physical Training representing Great Britain. Twenty-one Carnegie students attended the Congress accompanied by two members of staff, Ernest Major and Stanley Wilson, his deputy on the trip.

In 1938, one of Major’s most forward looking actions as Warden was to negotiate further funds to allow extensions to Carnegie Hall to take place, which included a second gymnasium. During the Second World War the College was closed, only reopening in 1946 with Edwin Bouffler appointed as Warden, the College also changed its name to Carnegie College of Physical Education. During the war Ernest served as Lieutenant in the 51 Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment, and was promoted to Major in 1945 and awarded an MBE (Military Division). In 1946, he became HM Staff Inspector for Physical Education retiring in 1968 and awarded an OBE for services to sport and physical recreation in 1977.

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