

# LAST OF THE MID SIR GEOFFREY MANDER, LIBERA WOLVERHAMPTON EAST 1929 —

Geoffrey Mander (1882–1962) was the last in the line of Black Country nonconformist radical politicians; as his obituary put it, ‘he was supremely a man of causes’. He held his parliamentary seat in Wolverhampton East for the Liberal Party against all comers from 1929 until 1945. His cousin, **Nicholas Mander**, recounts his career as a Liberal MP, industrialist, art collector and philanthropist.

Geoffrey Mander  
(1882–1962)



# MIDLAND RADICALS

## AL MP FOR

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**S**IR GEOFFREY Le Mesurier Mander (1882–1962)<sup>1</sup> was a Midland industrialist, an art collector and impassioned parliamentarian, the Liberal specialist on foreign policy between the wars. From a nonconformist and radical background, he held a strong patrician sense of public service and philanthropy. As a politician he spoke up as an anti-appeaser and a crusader for the League of Nations between the wars. He made a reputation as an oppositionist, for his determined use of parliamentary questions; a gadfly who never spared to wing into the attack whenever sloppy thinking and deceit threatened to obscure the issues of the day. He represented Wolverhampton East from May 1929 until the 1945 Labour landslide.

Geoffrey Mander came from a strong Liberal tradition. The Mander family were in the vanguard of the Industrial Revolution in the Midlands.<sup>2</sup> From 1773 they established in

Wolverhampton a durable cluster of businesses as manufacturers of chemicals, gas, japanware and (mostly successfully) varnish, paint and printing ink. By 1827 they already operated 'one of the largest chemical elaboratories in the kingdom', trading from China and the East Indies to the Americas. As the business prospered with the Industrial Revolution, they became established as the varnish kings of the Empire, and were given the means and leisure to become active and progressive philanthropists.

In the early nineteenth century, they campaigned against the slave trade, lobbied for the reform of the criminal code, and set up a union mill to provide cheap flour and bread in the difficult aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Four Manders at the same time were Town Commissioners in Georgian Wolverhampton. They pursued a twenty-two-year chancery suit for the protection of nonconformist chapels and

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endowments, a test case which was heard by Lord Chancellor Eldon and was to lead to an act of parliament by 1844. In 1817, Charles Mander rode to London to petition the Home Secretary, Sidmouth, for the reprieve of two innocent soldiers condemned to death for stealing a shilling coin. It was a romantic incident which appealed to the imagination of contemporaries and became the inspiration of a forgotten Methodist novel by Samuel Warren.<sup>3</sup> It led, with the help of Samuel Romilly in Parliament (the Manders' first counsel in their litigation), to the repeal of the Blood Money Act (1818), 'one of the worst acts ever to disgrace the Statute Book'. The family founded chapels, fountains, free libraries and schools, and became progressive mayors, filling nearly every public office in the county. Geoffrey's younger brother, the Hollywood actor and novelist Miles Mander (who married an Indian princess), summarised

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the background, writing 'to [his] son in confidence' (1934):

The Manders have nobly vindicated themselves. At the time of writing, they have produced one baronet, one Member of Parliament, High Sheriffs, Deputy Lieutenants and several of the lesser municipal dignitaries such as Mayors, Magistrates and Councillors. In fact, we are quite obviously worthy people ... Your Canadian great-grandfather was in the Ottawa Parliament, your grandfather, Theodore, was one of the most prominent Liberals of his day, your Uncle Geoffrey is at present a Liberal Member, and I am hoping to be in the House shortly myself.<sup>4</sup>

Geoffrey Mander was the eldest son of Theodore Mander (1853–1900), a Gladstonian Liberal and strict Congregationalist. Theodore married Flora Paint, a Canadian from Nova Scotia of Guernsey extraction (from whose forebears Geoffrey derived his second name), whose father was himself, as Miles states, MP for Richmond county in the Dominion Parliament in the 1880s. Theodore was a man of refined tastes and sympathies, a collection of whose diaries and letters was published in 1993 as *A Very Private Heritage*.<sup>5</sup> He is remembered today as the builder of Wightwick Manor (1887–93), a half-timbered aesthetic house of exquisite craftsmanship and detailing, with outstanding William Morris furnishings and Pre-Raphaelite collections.

Theodore in own his day was known as a Liberal and a philanthropist. As a young man, he was active in public life in the arts and education and was one of the founding benefactors of Mansfield College, Oxford, which was the first nonconformist college in the university. He described Henry Fowler, first Viscount Wolverhampton, as 'his political mentor', chairing his election committee. In June

1895, he was offered the Mid-Worcester seat in parliament. William Woodings of the Midland Liberal Federation wrote to him: 'Your name would be well known and you have almost a local connection ... The constituency is Liberal in tendency and is not difficult to work.' He was still committed to municipal affairs, however, and did not live long enough to contest the seat. He was a successful Mayor of Wolverhampton at the turn of the century, but died in office in 1901, following an operation on his kitchen table. He was aged just forty-seven.

Geoffrey was sixteen and still at Harrow at the time of his father's death. His mother Flora died soon after, in 1905, leaving him to assume the responsibilities of his father's estate early. He was a prickly, cross-grained youth, described by the paterfamilias, his father's cousin, the staunch Tory Sir Charles Tertius Mander, as 'an impossible young cub ... It is time we brought him up with a round turn ... he is very self opinionated, has no judgment or tact & is much too big for his boots, & has been ever since his father died.'

He went up to Trinity, Cambridge, where he followed family tradition by reading Natural Sciences. At Cambridge, he soon continued in the mould of public service, now with a radical slant. He joined the Union and the University Liberal League, and 'a thing called the Cambridge University Association for promoting Social Settlements. I have not the remotest idea what it's about, but I hope it's not socialism.' He founded a dining and debating club called 'The Dabblers'. As Stephen Ponder writes:

From an early age he had a strong sense of social responsibility and interest in public life ... He was typical of a particular sort of English radical, a man of wealth and position who devoted himself to public service, supporting and proposing

measures at odds with his background and private interests.<sup>6</sup>

Like most members of the family, he became a magistrate, in his case at the age of twenty-four, and in due course Chairman of the Bench, serving for fifty years. By the time of the Kingswinford by-election in 1905, the press was describing him as 'a Liberal member of a distinguished local Conservative family'. He supported the Labour candidate for West Wolverhampton in the 1906 election against a family friend, Sir Alfred Hickman. As he wrote later: 'My action caused great indignation in Conservative circles in the neighbourhood and I found myself cut in the hunting field by some of them.' His second wife Rosalie described how, like many radicals who refused to conform to the conventions of the 'county' pattern, he was looked upon askance by many families. This attitude only changed after the Second World War, 'both because party bitterness in general had died out and because Geoffrey Mander's sincerity and his devotion to the causes in which he believed won respect all round':

A tolerant 'man of goodwill' himself, who never spoke or acted out of malice or spite, he was glad of this development and appreciated being invited to social functions in the neighbourhood – more perhaps than he enjoyed attending them.

He cut his teeth as a Liberal member of the Wolverhampton Borough Council (1911–20). He shocked the councillors, showing a foretaste of later interests, when he proposed a minimum wage of 23s. for all municipal employees.

He was High Sheriff of Staffordshire in 1921. He again created a stir when he proposed a woman as his successor, Lady Joan Legge, daughter of Lord Dartmouth. The Privy Council wrote to her father to inquire

**'The Manders have nobly vindicated themselves ... we are quite obviously worthy people.'**

whether she had the necessary property qualifications, and she was not appointed. But he did secure the selection of the first woman to serve on the grand jury, Mrs Kempthorne, the wife of the Bishop of Lichfield.

Mander was active in the Liberal Party organisation from the early 1920s, as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Liberal Federation and a frequent speaker at party assemblies. He stood unsuccessfully as a Liberal candidate for the Midland constituencies of Leominster in 1920 and then Cannock and Stourbridge, and then in 1929 he finally realised his early ambition by entering Parliament as Liberal MP for East Wolverhampton,

He made a reputation as a parliamentarian by his skilful use of 'awkward' parliamentary questions. The journalist Percy Cater recorded his memories of:

... the pinkly pugnacious Mr Mander waving above the battle of question-time like the banner of some cause or another, accompanied by orchestral splurges of derisive laughter or 'Sit down' ... one of the hornets or gadflies who animate the political scene, infuriating the stung and keeping the unstung in a lively state of tension. Baldwin once said, in one of those shrewd epigrams which come from him as easily as blowing the smoke from his pipe, that Mr Mander would 'tread honestly and conscientiously on every corn from China to Peru.'

Mr Mander ... is not pompous. A mild and benevolent eye darts from sandy brows in a face which is conspicuously equable and good humoured. He is a good, if not a great man. He is a sort of pocket edition of noble indignation. See him pouncing up to ask a question. There you see fire, purpose, an inextinguishable soul.

No good a Baldwin bobbing up and answering Mr Mander briefly and completely, 'No, sir,'

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and rousing shocking laughter. No good a Chamberlain using the iron hand from Birmingham. Sharp as a game-cock and as perky, Mr Mander dashes in for some more of the fight.

His special interests in Parliament were industrial relations, on which he spoke with authority and sympathy as a manufacturer through the Depression, and foreign affairs. Between the wars he became the Liberal expert on international relations, peace and disarmament, and the most ardent defender of the League of Nations system of collective security; 'the most persistent speaker and questioner on foreign affairs in the 1930s and altogether a zealot for the League'.<sup>7</sup> He was one of the first to foresee the consequences of not taking a firm stand against the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Into a House of Commons debate mainly devoted to currency, commerce, industry and tariffs, typically he intruded Manchuria and put forward the League position:

It is a test question. We have to decide whether war is to be permitted ... We have the whole of the League plus America on the one side and Japan on the other. [I hope the Council for the League would] use all the moral force they possibly can ... and if that were not enough use financial and economic pressure and, if that will not do, use pressure in the way of a blockade in preventing goods from going into or coming out of Japan ... We have to take a bold and courageous view and, without using any physical force – that will not be necessary – mobilise all the different methods of economic, financial and moral pressure which are available to force Japan to realise that war is not going to be permitted to break out again ...<sup>8</sup>

As war again threatened again in the 1930s, he was one of the first

to speak out against the dictators. He tabled the International Economic Sanctions (Enabling) Bill of 17 May 1933, which made him 'one of the first to call attention to the German danger publicly in Parliament and at the same time make definite proposals for dealing with it'; supporters included Sir Austen Chamberlain. The Peace Bill of 23 May 1935 (and subsequently) incorporated machinery embodied in the Covenant of the League of Nations for the settlement of international disputes.

Along with Churchill, Eden and Sinclair, Mander became a vehement, articulate critic of Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. He later said that it would remain 'one of the regrets of my life that I did not make some sort of speech ... when Mr Chamberlain announced his intention of flying to Munich ... If the Debate had been kept up, the spell would have been broken ... Others would have followed and the dangers inherent in what was happening would have been exposed.'<sup>9</sup> His polemic was set forth in his book, *We were not all Wrong* (1941), arguing that many people and parties foresaw the disaster to which errors of policy in dealing with 'the Nazi menace' in the 1930s would inevitably lead:

Munichers should never again be allowed to control our destinies. It is too ghastly to think of the same unimaginative, isolationist, naïve, complacent attitude, however well meant, being adopted after the war. Absolute national sovereignty has outlived its usefulness in the world in which we now live, just as has the Divine Right of Kings internally. Old loyalties, deep-rooted, historic and admirable, remain – It is our responsibility as it is in our power in the great adventure we must lead: England cannot afford to be little, she must be what she is – or nothing.<sup>10</sup>

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When Mander spoke up in the House of Commons in support of sanctions against Italy after the invasion of Abyssinia, Mussolini fired off a personal diatribe against him in his paper, the *Popolo d'Italia*. In 1938, in a climate of international tension, *Il Duce* took reprisals against the Milan branch of 'Fratelli Mander' and asked customers to boycott their goods.

He was far sighted in many of his peace campaigns. He was one of a handful of MPs who inveighed against Hitler's territorial ambitions in the Ukraine in 1935. As war broke out in 1939, he pleaded the Jewish cause, telling Parliament in July that government immigration policy was leaving Jews with no escape from Germany 'other than by illegal immigration into Palestine'. In April 1941, he wrote in the *Jewish Standard*: 'The cause of the Jews throughout the world is the cause for which Great Britain and her allies are fighting.'

During the war, when the Liberals were asked to join the government coalition under Churchill, Mander became Parliamentary Private Secretary (1942–45) to their leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair (later Lord Thurso), the Minister for Air.<sup>11</sup> He lost his seat in the Labour landslide of the 1945 general election and was knighted in the same year (KB). His was a great loss to Parliament. Thurso regretted the 'massacre' of so many 'able, experienced and popular' candidates such as he.<sup>12</sup> There was a rumour for a time of his being given a peerage, and the press proposed he be gazetted with the equivocal title 'Lord Meander', in commemoration of his tireless crusades and pertinacious questions, seamless diatribes and string of private member's bills in the House.

In 1948 Mander joined the Labour Party, arguing in his 1950 pamphlet, *To Liberals*, that it had become the logical successor of the Liberal tradition. In due course he became a Labour member of the County Council.



To many members of a family whose traditions stretched to radical Whiggery, this was beyond the pale. But he did say privately that, if he had not lost his seat, he would have remained a Liberal, and most likely have been appointed Chief Whip of the Liberals in parliament.

Geoffrey Mander the politician was not quite forgotten by an older generation. The first question Rab Butler asked me when I followed Cousin Geoffrey to Trinity, Cambridge was ‘How are you related to that b\*\*\*er, Geoffrey?’<sup>13</sup> My own memories are of a fusty, Edwardian patriarch, small in stature, with a watch chain, who called in after church with his political friends like Clem Attlee. Apart from his public service in politics, his Liberalism is vividly exemplified in his career as an industrialist and an art patron.

The family company, Mander Brothers, was known between the wars as a model company. Geoffrey Mander, as the eldest of his generation, was chairman, while his cousin, Charles Arthur (the second baronet), was managing director. Sir Charles was ‘wet’ as a Tory, active in local government and Midland affairs, and deeply interested in everything that touched the human side of industry.<sup>14</sup> In parliament Geoffrey had pushed through the Joint Industrial Councils and Work Councils Bills. Together they implemented typically progressive initiatives in industrial welfare, to foster peace in industry. These included a joint works’ council providing a workable system of joint consultation (1920), a welfare club (1920), profit-sharing schemes for employees, holiday schemes, suggestion schemes (1925), works pensions (1928), a house magazine, staff pensions (1935), and a ‘contributory co-partnership scheme’ setting aside shares for employees, with provisions to pay for shares by instalments.

Most notably, Manders was the first company in the country to introduce the forty-hour

week. The historic agreement, the first of its kind in Britain, was brokered and signed by Ernest Bevin, general secretary of the Transport and General Workers’ Union, in September 1932.<sup>15</sup> ‘Bevin was very proud of signing that agreement’, said Mander later: ‘He used often to refer to it when were both in the House of Commons.’ The press wrote: ‘In the history of industrial welfare, Manders may claim a high place’, where welfare had been ‘part and parcel of the outlook of Manders as employers almost since the company’s foundation in [1773]’. Mander was reported summarising:

My ancestors were very religious people. They always used to open the day’s work with prayers and lead hymn-singing at the end of the day. Those religious principles which coloured their dealings with the then small number of work-people were the forerunners of welfare principles as we know them today. In the history of industrial welfare Manders may lay claim to a great deal of pioneering work.

As an art patron and conservationist Mander’s contributions to Wightwick Manor have been his most secure legacy. His taste was decisive in creating the ensemble we see today, improving and deepening not only the collections, but also the garden.

Mander first married, in 1906, Florence Caverhill, a Canadian like his mother. His second marriage in 1930 was to Rosalie Glynn Grylls (1905–88).<sup>16</sup> She was an early female graduate of Oxford, elegant, intellectual and talented. Elizabeth Longford was one of the last to remember this exceptional ‘Cornish’ girl at Lady Margaret Hall reading Modern Greats, ‘brown eyed, dark haired, with teeth really like pearls ... who went on from strength to strength’. She described her as amusing and amused, full of anecdotes, a vivacious speaker,

quick thinking and always exquisitely dressed; she was also ‘the last of the militant atheists’. Her husband, Frank, who took Schools on the desk beside her, was taken by ‘the exceptionally pretty young girl whose arrival was always heralded by the tap of elegant shoes’.

Like Geoffrey, Rosalie also entered politics, as a prospective Liberal candidate for Reading, when the party was enjoying its late 1920s revival. She was nearly twenty years younger than he, of course, and was secretary to the Liberal MP, Edgar Granville. Before the time came for her to face the electors, she married Mander in the crypt of the House of Commons. She was eyed with suspicion as a blue-stocking in the wider family, and soon became known to them – who tended to pious disapproval of divorce and remained wary of radical politics – as ‘The Secretary’.

Rosalie never lost her interest in progressive politics. However, she went on to pursue her literary interests as a highly regarded biographer, lecturer and scholar, particularly of the Shelley/Godwin circle and the ‘Pre-Raphaeladies’. With her knowledge and encouragement, Mander began in the 1930s to develop and extend the collections at Wightwick and they became pioneers and authorities in the overdue reassessment of Victorian art. They were among the first collectors to take a serious interest in the art and literary manuscripts associated with this late Romantic flowering, coming to know the survivors and successors of the circle of artists, designers and writers themselves. They fostered links with the romantic Utopian socialism preached by William Morris, and many of the radical politicians and thinkers of the day visited what became a Midland political fortress. In 1947, Mander intervened to save William Morris’s Red House, at Bexley in Kent, offering to present it to the National Trust for the nation

(Left) Geoffrey Mander at Wightwick with Anthea, John and Rosalie (at typewriter), c. 1948; Wightwick Manor; Wightwick – postcard from Geoffrey, 1932.

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if a body such as the Trades' Union Congress could be persuaded to take it as their headquarters building.<sup>17</sup>

In December 1937 the future of Mander's own house at Wightwick, with its collection, was finally secured when he presented it to the National Trust, with an endowment of 20,000 Manders shares. He was encouraged by the Trevelyan ('of another Liberal and eccentric family', wrote Rosalie, who gave their house Wallington to the Trust shortly afterwards) and Professor W. G. Constable.<sup>18</sup> Rosalie Mander wrote: 'He never regretted it, for he liked to think that the public should enjoy what had been his private property.'<sup>19</sup> He delighted in showing visitors round the house, and insisted on keeping no quarters barred from public view, his dressing room and bathroom included.

Mander had installed a squash court in 1928 and continued to play tennis until just shortly before he died, aged nearly eighty, in 1962. Lord Longford (then Frank Pakenham) wrote in his *Times* obituary that he was an 'issue man':

There was never a more selfless politician ... Perhaps he should not be thought of as a politician at all, for all his love of the House of Commons and the political life. He was supremely a man of causes. Abyssinia, Czechoslovakia, anti-Fascism, Collective Security – he preached them indefatigably and inflexibly, though with unflinching good humour, and what he preached he practised.

He was the most modest of men and would have disclaimed the slightest comparison with Lord Cecil; yet even Lord Cecil did not embody more completely the idealism of the League of Nations and all it stood for. His horror of the whole policy of appeasement culminating in Munich led him to harry the government

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with an endless stream of questions in the House of Commons, to the irritation of his opponents and the admiration of his friends.

In all the developments leading up to the establishment of the United Nations and throughout the years that followed, his staunchness and energy in the struggle for peace never flagged. It was the greatest of pities that he was without a seat in either House during the post-war years. But whether in his own Midlands or in the national and international politics he continued to find ways of rendering service that counted.

*Nicholas Mander is first cousin twice removed of Geoffrey Mander. He was co-founder of Mander Portman Woodward, a group of tutorial schools in London. He has recently published Varnished Leaves, a biography of the Mander Family of Wolverhampton 1750–1950. He lives at Owlpen Manor in the Cotswolds, a romantic Tudor house open to the public with Arts and Crafts associations. He is an FSA and the fourth Mander baronet.*

- 1 The fullest account is a booklet life, prepared by his widow mainly for sale at Wightwick: R. G. G. Mander, *Geoffrey le Mesurier Mander (1882–1962), Donor of the House* (Oxford, n.d.). He left an autobiographical fragment (1924–57) in the National Liberal Association archives at Bristol University Library (DM668).
- 2 For an account, see Geoffrey Mander (ed.), *The History of Mander Brothers* (1955) and the author's own *Varnished Leaves: A Biography of the Mander family of Wolverhampton* (2004) – with bibliography.
- 3 *Now and Then* (1848).
- 4 Miles Mander, *To my Son – in Confidence* (Faber, 1934). Lionel ('Miles') and his brother Alan both married daughters of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar (see Sunitee Deveen, Maharani of Cooch Behar, *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921), pp. 43, 203–04).
- 5 Patricia Pegg (ed.), *A Very Private Heritage: The Family Papers of Samuel Theodore Mander of Wolverhampton, 1853–1900* (Malvern, Images Publishing, 1996).

- 6 *Wightwick Manor*, National Trust guide (1993).
- 7 R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement* (1993), pp. 40, 52, 54.
- 8 259 HC Debs, cols. 1189, 45, 60, 201–02; Parker, pp. 40–41.
- 9 Geoffrey Mander, *We were not all Wrong* (1941), pp. 87–89.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- 11 Archibald Sinclair (1890–1970), first Viscount Thurso (1951).
- 12 G. J. de Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (1993), p. 227.
- 13 The answer, like a four-move chess problem, is that I am his first and second cousin, twice removed.
- 14 He was president of the local Conservative Party association for many years, but resigned in 1946 when he came out publicly in agreement with Labour Party housing policy. He was involved with a number of 'liberal' causes; for example, as vice chairman of the National Savings Committee, working closely with the Liberal peers, Lords Mottistone and Kindersley.
- 15 The agreement is quoted verbatim in *The History of Mander Brothers*. See also Mander Brothers Ltd., *An Account of the Internal Organisation of the Business of Mander Brothers, Ltd., Wolverhampton, In its relationship to the Employee (Approved by the Joint Works Committee)*, 1925, revised 1934, 1939.
- 16 See obituaries in *The Times* (4 Nov. 1988); *The Daily Telegraph* (in part by Elizabeth Longford, 4 Nov. 1988); and Martin Drury (*National Trust Magazine*, Summer 1989).
- 17 The National Trust turned down the offer, as they doubted a tenant could be found in such a rural area (see Jane Marsh, *William Morris and Red House*, 2006, and the National Trust archives in Swindon).
- 18 Director of the Courtauld Institute, London, and Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge. Another kindred spirit in the League of Nations, connected (distantly) by marriage through the Turnbull family, was Roger, ninth Lord Stamford; the tenth Earl presented Dunham Massey to the National Trust in 1976.
- 19 M. Waterson (ed.) *The Country House Remembered* (1985).

See page 2 for more details of *Varnished Leaves*, the biography of the Mander family of Wolverhampton, 1750–1950, written by Charles Nicholas Mander.