

LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

WINTER 2009–10

Liberal History News

is a new regular feature in the *Journal*, reporting news of meetings, conferences, commemorations, dinners or any other event, together with anything else of contemporary interest to our readers. Contributions are very welcome; please keep them reasonably concise, and accompany them, if possible, with photos. Email to the Editor on journal@liberalhistory.org.uk.

John Bright remembered in Birmingham

ON 23 October 2009, a statue to John Bright MP was unveiled inside Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The statue, an exact replica of which stands in the Westminster Parliament, was first unveiled in Birmingham in 1888 but it was taken down about forty years ago for cleaning and never put back. Birmingham Liberal Democrat councillor Ernie Hendricks found out about the statue and worked with Museum and Art Gallery staff to ensure its restoration ready for the 200th anniversary of the birth of John Bright in 2011. It has been replaced in its original position at the top of the Museum's main stairs.

John Bright was a Quaker, a great Victorian moralist and orator. He is best remembered for his part in the campaign against the Corn Laws, leading up to their repeal in 1846. The Corn Laws artificially inflated the price of bread, which the poor could ill afford, and repeal immediately improved the standard of living for ordinary people.

Bright also campaigned to extend the vote to skilled

working men at a time when only a limited number of men (and no women) had the vote; Bright wanted all men to have the vote because only in this way did he feel that government would be responsive to the needs and wishes of the people. The result was the Reform Act of 1867, passed by Disraeli's government, which gave the vote to skilled working men in the towns.

Bright was MP for Durham and Manchester before becoming Liberal MP for Birmingham from 1858 until his death in 1889. He fell out with Manchester following his attacks on Britain's involvement in the Crimean War. He was briefly a minister under Gladstone, the first ever Quaker to sit in the Cabinet, but he did not believe in Irish Home Rule and like that other great Birmingham Liberal, Joseph Chamberlain, he fought Gladstone in 1886 as a Liberal Unionist.

It was Bright's connections with the United States which were to feature most heavily in the speech delivered by Cllr

Martin Mullaney, Birmingham's Liberal Democrat Cabinet member for Culture, at the statue unveiling. Bright was admired by President Abraham Lincoln, who described him as 'the friend of our country, and of freedom everywhere'. Bright was highly influential in preventing Britain from supporting the Confederacy in the American Civil War, even though Britain had strong commercial interests in breaking the Northern blockade of the South to obtain cotton supplies.

Bright's letters to US Senator Charles Sumner were regularly read to Lincoln throughout the war, and through this correspondence Bright has been identified as a key influence on Lincoln's decision to free the slaves. When Lincoln was assassinated, a newspaper article about the presidency written by Bright was found on his body. One of the two paintings in Lincoln's study was a portrait of Bright. Today, just inside the main entrance of the White House is a bust of John Bright, which was



found by Jackie Kennedy in the 1960s in the basement and put back on display.

Given this background, it was therefore only appropriate that Stephanie Hightower, the president of USA Track and Field, the national governing body for athletics in America, helped unveil Bright's statue in Birmingham. The US team for the 2012 Olympics has announced it will train in Birmingham ahead of the Games and Ms Hightower said she was pleased to be associated with Bright's connections to America.

John Stuart Mill conference, November 2009

AS ADVERTISED in the last issue of the *Journal*, on 14 November 2009, the Liberal Democrat History Group, the London School of Economics and the British Liberal Political Studies Group co-hosted a one-day symposium to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

An audience of about fifty heard and discussed a series of papers covering different aspects of Mill's life and significance, both to Liberal history and to politics more broadly. Participants were also able to visit the archive of papers left by Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor and held at the LSE.

We are currently planning to publish at least some of the papers from the symposium – suitably redrafted to reflect the discussions – in a future special issue of the *Journal*.



One hundred years of Pickering Liberal Club

IN AUGUST 1909, crowds gathered to celebrate the opening of the Liberal Club in Pickering in the Thirsk & Malton constituency in North Yorkshire. In the absence of a Liberal MP for Pickering itself, the Club was opened by John Edward Ellis, the MP for the Nottinghamshire constituency of Rushcliffe. Ellis had Yorkshire connections: he had served his apprenticeship at a firm of Leeds engineers, his wife came from Scarborough and was a member of the Yorkshire Quaker Rowntree dynasty, and Ellis also owned a country estate at Wrea Head, Scalby.¹

Over the following hundred years, Pickering Liberal Club managed to withstand the political and economic forces which saw the Liberal Party decline and hundreds of Liberal Clubs all over the country go out of business. In 1931, David Lloyd George visited the Club and addressed a huge crowd outside. But Pickering never boasted a Liberal MP until 1986, when Elizabeth Shields won the Ryedale by-election² and the Club was visited by the then Liberal leader David Steel as part of the by-election campaign.

The Club has been housed in the present imposing building, overlooking Smiddy Hill, since Victorian times and is still the headquarters of Ryedale Liberal Democrats. The original Club is described as having been located in Hall Garth but may have occupied the same site as the present Victorian building. It was built



Top: David Lloyd George speaks at Pickering. 1 May 1931.

Below: Thirsk & Malton Liberal Democrat celebrations, August 2009. From left: Cllr Jane De Wend Fenton, former MP Elizabeth Shields, Lib Dem PPC Cllr Howard Keal, Cllr Stephen Jenson. (Photo credit: The Press, York.)

after a local benefactor, John Frank, gave two cottages to the Liberal Party for the creation of a headquarters and it was probably at the location in Pickering where the cattle market was held generations ago. The fact that Smiddy is a derivative of Smithy suggests it was also near the spot where farm horses were shod.

For many years, the Liberal Democrats used the building as a social club, but today it is the home of a weekly flea market and party offices, while the remainder has been converted into two flats. The centenary on Saturday 15 August 2009 was celebrated with champagne and strawberries. Guests of honour included Elizabeth Shields, Cllr Howard Keal (the present Lib Dem PPC for Thirsk & Malton) and Keith Snowden, great-grandson of Councillor John Snowden, who laid the foundation-stone of the club in 1908. A ceremonial silver key to the building, itself kept under lock and key off the premises, still forms part of the Club archive.³

Some of the organisers of the Mill symposium

¹ Alan R Griffin, 'John Edward Ellis', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online, OUP 2004–09.

- 2 Elizabeth Shields, *A Year to Remember* (Liberal Democrat Publications, Dorchester, 1995).
- 3 *Gazette and Herald*, Malton, 12 August 2009.

Baron de Forest dinner, Southport

THIS YEAR, 2010, sees the centenary anniversary of the 1910 general election and Southport Liberal Democrats are celebrating the event with the Baron de Forest dinner at the Royal Clifton Hotel.

As well as a splendid dinner, the local political historian and popular after-dinner speaker Michael Braham will be telling the story of the Southport Division election campaign in which the Liberal candidate was the Baron de Forest. It is a fascinating and entertaining tale of dirty tricks, anti-Semitism and more, in an age when the voters attended political rallies in their thousands.

Do come and join the dinner on 13th February. The Royal Clifton Hotel are offering a special discount on rooms for anyone attending the dinner. To find out more or to make a booking, please phone Rachel Howard on 01704 533 555 or Pat Sumner on 01704 576 660, or email rh@southportlibdems.com

Baron de Forest, Liberal candidate for Southport in the January 1910 election



Palmerston archives

ISSUE 64 of the *Journal of Liberal History* (autumn 2009) carried an article on the archives of third Viscount Palmerston at the University of Southampton Library. Lord Palmerston's papers, along with those of second Viscount Melbourne and the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury – all of which form part of the Broadlands Archives – have now been put up for sale by the Trustees of the Broadlands Archives. The collection has been offered to the University, with the expectation that if the negotiations fail the material may well be broken up and sold at auction.

Beyond the Palmerston material and its links to Liberalism, the archive contains a whole range of materials of the first rank – including, for example, the papers of Lord and Lady Mountbatten, effectively the foundation archive for the states of India and Pakistan. It is immensely important and the University has a determined campaign under way to make sure that it continues to remain available in its entirety to the public and researchers.

The net price is £2.85 million and the University is undertaking a major fund-raising campaign to assure the future of this immensely important collection. The University is publicising the sale and the fund-raising campaign as widely as possible and would very much appreciate any support readers of the *Journal* can give. Further information on the situation can be found at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/archives/Broadlands/index.html>.

Gladstone lecture given at Liverpool

ON 27 October 2009, David Alton (Lord Alton of Liverpool) delivered a Roscoe Lecture at Liverpool John Moores University on 'Gladstone – son of Liverpool, scourge of tyrants', marking the 200th anniversary of Gladstone's birth. The lecture series is named after William Roscoe (1753–1831), a historian, campaigner against slavery and native of Liverpool. A podcast of the lecture can be downloaded from <http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/roscoe/97603.htm>.

LETTERS

Liberals in Schism (1)

My active research does not stretch beyond 1921, and finished over thirty years ago. Nevertheless, as a Walthamstow resident, I have kept an eye on all references to Sir John Simon, our most eminent Liberal MP (he left us in 1918). Might I use Dr Baines' review of Dr Dutton's *Liberals in Schism* (*Journal* 64, autumn 2009) to comment on the events of 1931–32? Sir John Simon's summer 1931 resignation of the Liberal whip was a manoeuvre designed to replace MacDonald with Baldwin as Prime Minister, though MacDonald forming a National Government trumped that.

The dissolution of October 1931 occurred with Lloyd George in hospital, and Sir Herbert

Samuel as Acting Leader / Deputy Leader. The quite astonishing number of the existing Liberal MPs who applied for the Simonite whip rather than the Samuelite one is in my view best explained by a desire to avoid Conservative opposition at the subsequent general election. The results bear this out: 35 Simonites elected on 3.7 per cent of the national vote, 33 Samuelites on 6.5 per cent.

I would therefore suggest that the positions taken in 1931 and an eye on the election after had as much to do with who went where in 1932 as the degree of tolerance of government intervention during an economic crisis.

Dr Peter Hatton