

# FRANCES STEVENSON AND THE SURREY – SUSSEX DIMENSION

**Ian Ivatt** looks at David Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson's connections in Surrey and Sussex. The two of them nurtured friendships in the southern counties, undertook house purchases and appreciated the tranquillity of the region's golf courses. The main British proposals for the post-war peace treaty at Versailles were drafted by Lloyd George and the War Cabinet at Danny House, in Sussex.

**D**avid Lloyd George (1863–1945) was the first native Welshman to achieve inclusion in the British Cabinet and to go on to be Prime Minister. As a young politician, he was mainly associated with the Radical movement in Wales, nationalism, and non-conformism. His parents, William and Elizabeth (Betsy) George, both keen Baptists, briefly resided in the lower-middle-class suburb of Chorlton, Manchester, and it was during this period that David Lloyd George was born. William Lloyd George was headmaster of a Manchester elementary school but quickly turned to farming and was to die when young David was only a year old. The family returned firstly to Pembrokeshire, and then to Llanystumdwy in North Wales where Betsy's brother and mother lived.

Lloyd George later married Margaret (née Owen) in 1888<sup>1</sup> after a three-year courtship, although her parents had some doubt about his suitability. Margaret herself had deep Methodist

convictions, and these acted as an unusual complement to Lloyd George's strict lifelong Baptist ideals, yet later blended with his own brand of free-thinking attitudes. Whilst the relationship was stormy, even bittersweet, and became effectively a sham marriage, it nevertheless lasted nearly fifty-three years, despite them being essentially estranged after 1922.

Lloyd George's relationship with Wales was somewhat ambivalent. He retained his Welsh parliamentary seat throughout his career but, as he moved upwards in the political world, claiming, when appropriate, that his rise was that of the 'cottage-bred man', he spent a decreasing amount of his time in the Principality. The icon of Welsh identity seems in practice to have preferred to view his homeland from afar and to spend much of his time in Southern England, in particular Sussex or the Sussex–Surrey borderlands.

His connections with Sussex seem to have been nurtured just before and during the First World War. Brighton was viewed as an excellent retreat,<sup>2</sup> and nearby

# ON, LLOYD GEORGE



Lewes Golf Course had significant appeal. He had close friends and political allies such as Stuart Rendel, Sir George Riddell and Sir Albert Stern, who had houses in the county, but we can also perceive that an affection for the area developed in parallel with a shift in his political career, which saw him move close to the political centre and eventually lead the coalition government, and with a significant move in his private life as Frances Stevenson (1888–1972) became firmly ensconced as his mistress. Notorious for his flirtations and affairs, Lloyd George's love life from early 1913 was mainly confined to Frances, formerly a school teacher and later secretary. By some coincidence, Frances had actually been at school with Lloyd George's daughter, Mair, who tragically died (of a burst appendix) in 1907, to his lasting grief. The secrecy of the affair was vital, to avoid scandal, and they both accepted this – with Frances enduring two if not three abortions.

Lloyd George became Prime Minister in December 1916, and his term of office lasted until

October 1922; during his entire premiership, he was dependent on Conservative Party support. The pinnacle of his time in coalition was the peace-making after the First World War and the earlier treaty planning meetings, especially the decisive treaty discussions in October 1918, organised at a sixteenth-century manor house in Sussex.

As the hostilities progressed into the second part of 1918, much thought was given to the eventual treaty terms. In July of that year, Lloyd George's affluent friend and confidante, Sir George Riddell (proprietor of the *News of the World* newspaper), leased the Elizabethan mansion at Danny, in Hassocks (now in West Sussex) from the Campions, a family of the Tory local gentry. A. J. P. Taylor, in his book *My Darling Pussy*,<sup>3</sup> provides an interesting insight into the undoubted deep fondness between Lloyd George and his secretary, Frances Stevenson, by reproducing key personal letters that have survived. Frances was not always present at Danny, but in October 1918 she remained

**David Lloyd George in 1916; Frances Stevenson in her office in Whitehall.**

at Hassocks endeavouring to shake off a severe cold. Meanwhile Lloyd George was in Paris with his French and Italian prime ministerial counterparts to prepare armistice and peace terms.

The Danny House archives reveal that Lloyd George was at Danny several times during the Great War and, when there, invariably climbed the challenging nearby hill at Wolstenbury. Once, when doing so, he inadvertently let Cabinet papers fall from his pocket. A faithful secretary was despatched to retrieve them safely.

An inspection of the visitors' book reveals that even earlier, on 14 July 1918, Lloyd George was at Danny, again with Riddell, and also with Imperial War Cabinet members, both military and political: Jan Smuts, Viscount Milner, Admiral Wemyss, Sir Henry Wilson, and Cabinet Secretary Hankey. Interestingly enough his wife Margaret and daughter Megan were also present on that day – with Frances Stevenson!

On the wall of the Great Hall at Danny, which now displays portraits of the high and mighty

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from past ages, there is a commemorative plaque recording the vital meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet on 13 October 1918, including such eminent persons as Lloyd George himself, Churchill, Bonar Law, Balfour, Wemyss and Hankey, plus Kerr and Lord Reading (Rufus Isaacs).

Thus, the main British proposals for the peace treaty at Versailles were drafted by Lloyd George and the War Cabinet at Danny House in Sussex. The final details were promptly cabled to President Woodrow Wilson for his seal of approval. Later, in March 1919, Lloyd George attended the peace conference itself in Paris, and Frances, who went with him, was treated generally as his unofficial spouse.

Amidst a resurfacing of the Irish troubles, Lloyd George formed a separate friendship with Major Stern (later Sir Albert Stern, 1878–1966) who had the use of his brother's property, a superbly beautiful house, with splendid views, as the name might suggest, at Highdown in Worthing, Sussex. Both Lloyd George and Frances spent weekends there; apparently, Major Stern had a reputation for being an excellent entertainer. He was also involved in tank design and was, accordingly, an important man in the military. Frances Stevenson dutifully records their meetings with Stern in her well-maintained diaries – including a comment that there was even some talk of her marrying Stern, by then, in 1917, promoted to Colonel. She writes on 14 April 1917, referring to Stern, 'I like him, though he has an unlovable side, but he is most kind and considerate.'<sup>4</sup> Later, in 1919, one of Stern's friends ventured to ask why Frances did not marry him, only to receive the half-reproach: 'one excellent reason is that he has never asked me'<sup>5</sup>. Frances equally and correctly knew that Stern was very much aware of her relationship with Lloyd George. Nevertheless, she was astute enough to realise that Stern would leap at the chance of marrying her, should she give even the slightest encouragement.

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Earlier, in 1915, there were other letters, which Lloyd George knew about, from a Captain Hugh Owen, with more than hints about marriage to Frances. On 5 October 1915 Frances wrote in her diary: 'I cannot marry Owen. I have told him so.' Owen in turn wrote to Frances (20 October) accepting the finality of the situation.

Before the Great War, Lloyd George had cultivated a friendship with Stuart Rendel (1834–1913) a former Liberal Member of Parliament for Montgomeryshire (1880–94). Like Lloyd George, Rendel had not been born in Wales, but at Plymouth in Devon. Rendel, far from being poor, had acquired property in Clarendon Terrace, Kemp Town, Brighton (he also had a house near Guildford and a villa in Cannes) and he readily placed his Sussex home at Lloyd George's disposal as an escape from his government business. This was accepted with great joy. Lloyd George had, before that, tended to spend weekends in a suite at the Royal Albion Hotel, in Brighton. Lloyd George might scoff at public schools and universities but he swiftly despatched young Olwen, one of his five children (born 1892), off to the exclusive Roedean School, near Brighton. *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel*<sup>6</sup> provide a clue to Lloyd George's wife's attitudes to this friendship: it was through these weekends at Brighton that 'my husband's health was saved from breaking point when he piloted the 1909 Budget through the House'.<sup>7</sup>

By 1922, Lloyd George was looking for a Home Counties base, with excellent rural views, nearer London. Frances came to the rescue and recommended a house and fifty acres (later purchasing a further 950 surrounding acres, including farms) in Churt, Surrey. The property was chosen because Frances favoured the south-facing views and Lloyd George promptly authorised her to buy it. Later it was discovered that the 'perfect' house actually faced north but Lloyd George built a beautiful

home there, naming it 'Bron y De',<sup>8</sup> which means 'breast of the south'. The Surrey village of Churt is on the edge of Sussex, as well as bordering on nearby Hampshire. They both eagerly set about cultivating the fields for vegetables, planting orchards (Lloyd George had a great fondness for soft fruit), growing tomatoes in greenhouses, keeping cows and pigs, even bees, with Ann Parry, Lloyd George's Welsh Secretary, doubling up as bee-keeper.<sup>9</sup>

Frances bought land adjoining the Bron y De estate, which she farmed until Lloyd George's death in 1945. Meanwhile in 1934–35 Frances built nearby 'Avalon' for herself where her daughter Jennifer,<sup>10</sup> who was born in 1929, resided. It would appear that Lloyd George never visited Avalon but Frances stayed there particularly on the occasions when Margaret and Megan came to Bron y De. Otherwise, when not at school Jennifer travelled the one mile to Bron y De to see her mother and Lloyd George, whom she undoubtedly believed was, at the very least, her stepfather. Jennifer called Lloyd George 'Taid' (Grandfather) from an early age, although she knew perfectly well he was not her grandfather – but Lloyd George was aged sixty-six when Jennifer was born, so this subterfuge seemed fitting.

During the summer holidays, before the Second World War, Frances rented 'Grassmead' – a house in Felpham, near Bognor Regis in Sussex, with a private road running down to the sea – for two or three weeks each year. Jennifer is sure Lloyd George never came to Felpham, but Margaret, the cook, and Rose, the maid, came over from Avalon, with the boy John Brook, Elizabeth (Lizzie) May Morris and her mother, 'Auntie Elsie'. Certainly, Frances wrote to Lloyd George from Felpham from 1932, and the 1931 *Kelly's Directory* shows the resident of the house in First Avenue, Summerley Estate, Felpham as a Miss Stevenson. Later, in 1939, Frances purchased a bungalow on the same estate at Felpham, but this was let

## FRANCES STEVENSON, LLOYD GEORGE AND THE SURREY–SUSSEX DIMENSION

out for a very small sum and sold to the tenant after the end of the war. Curiously enough, whilst Frances's parents were both born outside England, they, nevertheless, retired, firstly to Bexhill, then to Bognor, and later to Worthing, all in Sussex.

Leaving aside the political aspects that were common to both of them – although Frances had 'modern' views and was mildly supportive of the earlier suffragists<sup>11</sup> – Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson also had a shared interest in golf. Frances's diaries reveal golfing days with herself, Lloyd George, and a combination of Sir George Riddell, Sir Philip Sassoon, or Lloyd George's eldest daughter, Olwen (by now Mrs Carey Evans), with a secretary or two to make up any appropriate foursome. Generally courses at Walton Heath or St George's Hill, both in Surrey, were favoured and Lloyd George greatly encouraged Frances in the skills of the game.

Additionally, as a separate event, Frances's diaries refer to 'Cuckoo' Bellville, a well-known name in Mayfair who had a high-class dress shop. Both Lloyd George and Frances, together with invited members of high society, including the King of Spain and the Prince of Wales, attended a party of hers on one occasion, although the previous weekend was a much quieter affair at Bellville's country cottage retreat at Herstmonceux, also in Sussex. Where necessary, Lloyd George was 'at home' with the affluent – particularly where such attachments helped his political and welfare aspirations.

On the political front, Lloyd George attained the premiership, although his coalition government collapsed in the autumn of 1922 due to a Conservative volte-face. Lloyd George resigned and was never to hold government office again. He remained, nevertheless, a key yet solitary political figure – still much respected and even feared. Despite his narrow escape from the pre-war Marconi share involvement, the alleged sales of titles and honours and previous personal dalliances with money

men and supposedly other men's wives, he still retained popular appeal and was nominally true to his nonconformist Liberal ideals. Lady Margaret Lloyd George died in 1941, leaving Lloyd George to make the patient Frances his second wife. They were married at Guildford Registry Office on 23 October 1943 – Frances' sister Muriel acted as a witness, as did Lloyd George's long-suffering private secretary, A. J. Sylvester (also best man) – not that far from the Sussex border.

Lloyd George was laid to rest in Wales on his death in 1945, and on her death in 1972 Frances's ashes stayed at Churt, Surrey. In life they were together for many years, yet in death they were not united. Even so, the legacy of the great man lingered on in Churt – where during his life he was revered as a fair employer of local labour. Close by at Wormley, Frances's daughter Jennifer Longford still resides, and she still remembers her Sussex childhood holidays with her mother and friends with treasured affection. Jennifer has speculated that if there had been no (Great) War, Lloyd George might well have become a great reforming prime minister, bringing in measures that had to wait many more years. If so he may well have conceivably chosen to spend even more time relaxing from government pressures in his favoured Brighton.

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<sup>11</sup> 1888 was a significant point in his life. Additionally he won the nomination for the Liberal candidature of Caernarvon Boroughs, and the family

firm of solicitors, Lloyd George and George, was founded in that year.

- 2 Additionally Lloyd George was recommended to a masseuse, a Mrs Walden, who specialised in improved circulation techniques, who lived there. Source: *National Library of Wales*, MS 23660E 41–48 (re. Frederick Edward Guest, MP for Dorset East). The Bedford and Royal Albion Hotels were, furthermore, of great attraction.
- 3 A. J. P. Taylor, *My Darling Pussy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).
- 4 Frances Stevenson, *Lloyd George, a Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), p. 151.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 6 F. E. Hamer (ed.), *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel* (London: Ernest Benn, 1931), p. 234.
- 7 Colin Cross, in *The Liberals in Power 1905–1914*, p. 102, also refers to Lloyd George drafting the final text of the Budget during a weekend in Brighton.
- 8 Burnt down after Lloyd George's death and renamed 'Churt Place'.
- 9 After the necessary property alterations and improvements, young Megan Lloyd George (born 1902) was 'chaperoned' by Lady Mond, but Megan was not especially happy. Lord Alfred Mond helped propel Lloyd George to the premiership in 1916.
- 10 Jennifer was, in all probability, the daughter of Frances Stevenson and Colonel Thomas Tweed, Lloyd George's political adviser from 1926.
- 11 Lloyd George was, additionally, in favour of votes for women, but not necessarily how some females sought to achieve this. He was certainly not amused when the suffragettes, in their campaign for female franchise, blew up part of the small house earmarked for his use at Walton Heath.

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