

# A MEETING PLACE

The National Liberal Club was founded in 1883. In November the following year Mr Gladstone laid the foundation stone of the new and permanent Club House, at 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1, and the building was opened in 1887. With aims including the provision of an inexpensive meeting place for Liberals and their friends, the furtherance of the Liberal cause, and the foundation of a political and historical library, the Club has witnessed many scenes of Liberal triumph – and less happy events – over the past century and a quarter. **Peter Harris** recounts the story of the National Liberal Club and gives a brief guide to its building.



# CE FOR LIBERALS

**O**n 4 November 1884, Mr Gladstone laid the foundation stone of the new and permanent Club House of the National Liberal Club. The Club itself had been launched the previous year and only six weeks after being announced had a list of nearly 2,500 intending members. By the date of the laying of the foundation stone the Club was already active with 4,480 members. At that time, and until the opening of the new Club House in 1887, the Club met in premises leased on the corner of Northumberland Avenue, overlooking Trafalgar Square. To celebrate the opening of the Club a great inaugural banquet was held at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster. This was a brilliant affair, at which the Earl Granville was the Chairman, and Mr Gladstone the principal speaker. The magazine *Punch* reported that 200 dozen bottles of Pommery champagne were ordered for the occasion.

The permanent housing of the Club was achieved with funds subscribed to a joint stock company bearing the name of 'The National Liberal Club Buildings Company'. Although incomplete, the building was opened for the use of members in time for the Jubilee of 1887, so that on 20 June of that year they were able to watch the procession from its windows and terrace. Two days later the membership reached a total of 6,000, two-thirds being country members.

The building, designed by Alfred Waterhouse, contained

various features which were novel or uncommon, among them being the electrical passenger lift, which was one of the earliest, if not the first, to be installed in a London building.

The avowed objects of the Club were:

1. The provision of an inexpensive meeting place for Liberals and their friends from all over the country.
2. The furtherance of the Liberal cause.
3. The foundation of a political and historical library as a memorial to Gladstone and his work.

With the opening of this permanent home, the first of the objects of the Club was seen to be achieved, whilst the third was attained by the opening of the Gladstone Library on 2 May 1888 by Gladstone himself. The Library, ranking as the most extensive of the Club libraries of London, provided a valuable aid to Liberals on the intellectual side, whilst also serving as a most pleasant place for study for those members whose tastes were more literary than political.

The second object of the Club, by its very nature, continues as long as any force remains in Liberalism, and the record of the Club shows how much the Liberal cause, not only at home but in the world at large, owes to the existence of this place and the maintenance of its tradition.

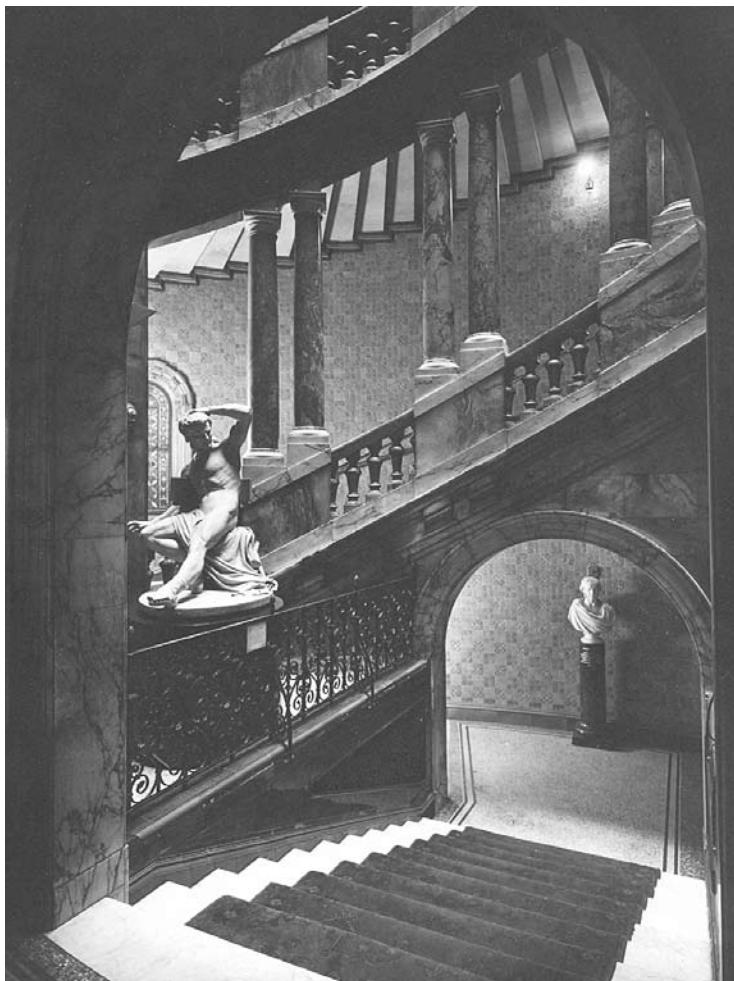
From 1887 onwards, event followed event in a stirring sequence, and in victory and defeat, in expansion or decline, the Club performed the function

of being the focus and centre of reform in the United Kingdom. The first half of the twentieth century alone renders the following list of more notable political issues: the Home Rule controversy and the split in the party which it caused; the 'flowing tide' of success during the early 1890s, and the temporary eclipse at the time of the South African War; the tremendous uprising of Radical enthusiasm from 1903 to 1905, with its triumphant culmination in the 1906 election, and its renewal in 1910; the epic struggle over the Parliament Bill, under the leadership of Mr Asquith; the long series of measures creating, improving, or extending the social services; the acrid course of agitation about women's suffrage – all these have had their intimate connection with the Club, for it was the mainspring of Liberal activity.

In personnel also, the Club had a dazzling record as the following list of names shows: Harcourt, Joseph Chamberlain, Lincolnshire, Morley, Grey, Birrell, John Burns, Carson, Haldane, Samuel and Simon. One special group deserves to be mentioned – seven Prime Ministers: Mr Gladstone, of course, Lord Rosebery, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, H H Asquith, David Lloyd George, Ramsay MacDonald (briefly a member at the time of the First World War), and last – so far – Sir Winston Churchill. They were a mixed bag in their political affiliations when they took office but were all at some time at home in the Club.

**(Left) The National Liberal Club at its opening. (All photos supplied by the National Liberal Club.)**

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Left: the original staircase; the Lady Violet Room.

Gradually, from about 1922 onwards it became evident that the high tide of political success was receding. In general membership, however, more could be found who had joined a club rather than a hive of politicians. Civil servants, journalists – these, no doubt, finding the premises a convenient half-way house between Westminster and Fleet Street – literary and professional people had always been represented in the membership and were now becoming a more notable part of it.

A few high spots stick in the memory of the post-war years. Outstanding among them were the Coronation, with the Club full of members and their guests, to watch the procession along the Embankment as they had also in 1937, and election nights, when the Smoking Room was crowded, the results announced as they came in. There was also the dinner to celebrate the centenary of Gladstone's first administration, which received its seals of office on 9 December 1868. In the packed Dining Room there were speeches from Lady Asquith (herself a Prime Minister's daughter) and the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1984 there was another centenary to celebrate – the laying of the foundation stone – and members gathered in the vast wine cellar of the Club to toast Mr Gladstone in front of the very stone that he had laid.

By 1976, the Club began to realise that the pattern of life had changed. Shorter working hours and the five-day week had taken their toll; weekend use of the Club had diminished drastically. Inflation, recession, the various attempts of successive governments to deal with them, all affected the running of the Club. Frankly, the building was too large for its post-war membership and maintenance was becoming an impossible burden. Closure seemed the only possible course but at the last possible minute hope was revived and with the generous help and energetic leadership of one of the



Right: the dining room; the smoking room.



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members, Sir Lawrence Robson, a company was formed to manage and finance the Club and its building. The accommodation used by the Club is now somewhat smaller but the Club rooms have been restored to their former splendour and the Club looks to the future with confidence.

### The building

Alfred Waterhouse, the architect finally employed by the Trustees of the Club, was born in Liverpool in 1830. His first commission was for the Grosvenor Hotel at Chester. His winning the competition for the Manchester Assize Courts, followed by other municipal buildings in that area, started his long career of important works.

Waterhouse had not been originally intended as the architect. The Club had been anxious to obtain some of the Crown land on the Embankment which was being developed by John Carr, an early member of the Club. However, Carr's plans were not to the Club's liking and eventually Waterhouse was commissioned. He was already well known among leading Liberals.

The limited company formed to build the Club House had a share capital of £200,000, and Waterhouse was commissioned within a fortnight of the company's launch. Determined to be a leader in style, the Club was to be designed in Italian style rather than solid gothic. Waterhouse's designs allowed for splendid club rooms and also the largest number of bedrooms of any club in London. It was designed for a membership who were accustomed to being at least weekly 'boarders' in town.

Waterhouse's designs offered ingenious solutions to a very awkwardly shaped triangular site. The building is centred around its grand staircase of white Sicilian marble. Not only did Waterhouse design the glittering rooms, displaying wonderful faience tilework manufactured by Wilcock & Co, but also the furnishings,

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down to even the Dining Room chairs. The structure was carefully composed of load-bearing steelwork, the exterior being faced in Portland stone. The design was to be of fireproof construction throughout. The latest systems of heating and ventilation were used. The electric lighting was by the pioneering firm of Edison & Swan. There was also to be a unique lift/railway designed to bring the wine bottles up from the vast cellars. The final cost of the building itself was £165,950.

The Entrance Hall sets the tone for the whole of the building. The walls are panelled with different shades of tilework and the woodwork is executed in mahogany. The reception counter on the left fills what was once the waiting room for members' guests. The large blocked up archway on the right once led through to the main reception area. The Entrance Hall was designed as a preparation for the Grand Staircase which was designed as one of the main glories of the building. The original staircase was based on that in the Barbarini Palace in Rome and was executed in marble and alabaster. Waterhouse was encouraged to design something that would simply be the best in London and certainly to outdo Barry's work at the Reform Club, a club from which many of the original members of the NLC came. The original staircase was destroyed by enemy action and is the greatest loss that the building has ever suffered. The flights of the staircase were joined by pairs of marble columns and in parts, the staircase quite literally 'floated' on bridges over voids created in the design. The walls of the staircase were tiled and in parts pierced by arched openings through to the corridors leading off the landings.

The staircase was rebuilt in the 1950s to a much simpler and, at that time, more fashionable design. The present steps and balustrade are remnants of the original. The corridors on each floor of the Club building retain all

their original tilework, rising the full height.

The Lloyd George Room was originally the Grill Room and the original grill and oven remain. Once again there is much tilework in different shades of beige, green and, uniquely in the building, blue. Early photographs show the room set up with individual tables, each on their own Persian style carpet, with dining chairs specially designed by Waterhouse.

The Lady Violet Room was originally dedicated to be a small drawing room / reading room. On the plans it had been designated as an anteroom to the 'grand room' next door which was to be used for lectures, etc., and there are designs for a platform at the end of that room reached by a doorway from this room. Early photographs show a handsome overmantel above the fireplace and a set of large, square, mahogany-framed mirrors, similar to those still existing in the Lincolnshire Room above. Later in the Club's history this room was used as the Ladies' Drawing Room.

The Smoking Room is one of the chief glories of the Club. Along with the Dining Room it is lined with great tiled Corinthian columns which are remarkable in their own right. The triangular shaped tiles will only fit at their particular level since each row is smaller as they ascend and are curved specifically to match that point on the column. The tiles sheathe steel columns within. The Smoking Room was originally placed in the room below but at a very early stage in the history of the Club was moved to the present room. As such it has witnessed many of the great events of Liberal history.

The Dining Room with its bar leads out of the Smoking Room by way of an anteroom leading to the Embankment Terrace. Some of the tilework here is different from that in the rest of the building, having a somewhat Chinese theme.

Mindful of this splendid Club House and great history, the National Liberal Club is as alive today as it ever was and remains a meeting place for Liberals to further the Liberal cause. Members continue to be drawn from all walks of life

and enjoy the very best club services and a wide variety of cultural, political and social events. As such a place with so great a tradition, it has a supreme appeal to those who love Liberal ideas, and value the corporate life. Each day

we are reminded by Gladstone's bust which guards the front entrance, of the famous quote from his speech in Chester:

qualified by fear; the principle of Liberalism is trust in the people, qualified by prudence.

The principle of Toryism is mistrust of the people,

*The Revd Peter Harris is Honorary Archivist and Art Curator of the National Liberal Club.*

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

**Hubert Beaumont MP.** After pursuing candidatures in his native Northumberland southward, Beaumont finally fought and won Eastbourne in 1906 as a 'Radical' (not a Liberal). How many Liberals in the election fought under this label and did they work as a group afterwards? *Lord Beaumont of Whitley, House of Lords, London SW1A 0PW; beaumontt@parliament.uk.*

**Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65).** Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see [www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden](http://www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden)). *Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.*

**Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.** Researching the relationship through oral history. *Kayleigh Mildren, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; KMSMilden@aol.com.*

**Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s.** Focusing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN; mmjkelly@msn.com.*

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** *Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

**The Liberal revival 1959–64.** Focusing on both political and social factors. Any personal views, relevant information or original material from Liberal voters, councillors or activists of the time would be very gratefully received. *Holly Towell, 52a Cardigan Road, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3BJ; his3ht@leeds.ac.uk.*

**The rise of the Liberals in Richmond (Surrey) 1964–2002.** Interested in hearing from former councillors, activists, supporters, opponents, with memories and insights concerning one of the most successful local organisations. What factors helped the Liberal Party rise from having no councillors in 1964 to 49 out of 52 seats in 1986? Any literature or news cuttings from the period welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; 07771 785 795; ianhunter@kew2.com.*

**Liberal politics in Sussex, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight 1900–14.** The study of electoral progress and subsequent disappointment. Research includes comparisons of localised political trends, issues and preferred interests as against national trends. Any information, specifically on Liberal candidates in the area in the two general elections of 1910, would be most welcome. Family papers especially appreciated. *Ian Ivatt, 84 High Street, Steyning, West Sussex BN44 3JT; ianjivatt@tinyonline.co.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**The Liberal Party in the West Midlands from December 1916 to the 1923 general election.** Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. *Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com.*

**Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

**Life of Wilfrid Roberts (1900–91).** Roberts was Liberal MP for Cumberland North (now Penrith and the Border) from 1935 until 1950 and came from a wealthy and prominent local Liberal family; his father had been an MP. Roberts was a passionate internationalist, and was a powerful advocate for refugee children in the Spanish civil war. His parliamentary career is coterminous with the nadir of the Liberal Party. Roberts joined the Labour Party in 1956, becoming a local councillor in Carlisle and the party's candidate for the Hexham constituency in the 1959 general election. I am currently in the process of collating information on the different strands of Roberts' life and political career. Any assistance at all would be much appreciated. *John Reardon; jbreardon75@hotmail.com.*

**Student radicalism at Warwick University.** Particularity the files affair in 1970. Interested in talking to anybody who has information about Liberal Students at Warwick in the period 1965–70 and their role in campus politics. *Ian Bradshaw, History Department, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL; I.Bradshaw@warwick.ac.uk*

**Welsh Liberal Tradition – A History of the Liberal Party in Wales 1868–2003.** Research spans thirteen decades of Liberal history in Wales but concentrates on the post-1966 formation of the Welsh Federal Party. Any memories and information concerning the post-1966 era or even before welcomed. The research is to be published in book form by Welsh Academic Press. *Dr Russell Deacon, Centre for Humanities, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff CF23 6XD; rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk.*

**Aneurin Williams and Liberal internationalism and pacificism, 1900–22.** A study of this radical and pacifist MP (Plymouth 1910; North West Durham/Consett 1914–22) who was actively involved in League of Nations Movement, Armenian nationalism, international co-operation, pro-Boer etc. Any information relating to him and location of any papers/correspondence welcome. *Barry Dackombe, 32 Ashburnham Road, Ampthill, Beds, MK45 2RH; dackombe@tesco.net.*