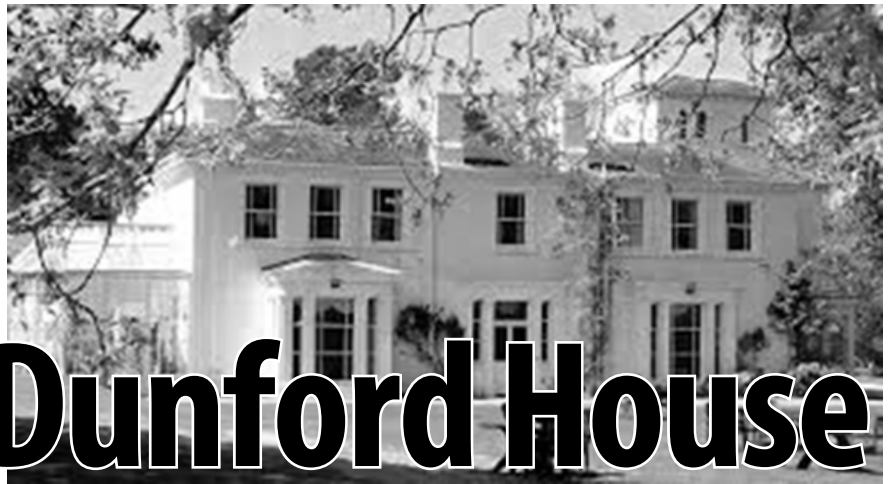


**Anthony Howe**

on the threat to Richard Cobden's  
Sussex home



# Saving Dunford House

**S**INCE THE EARLY 1950S Dunford House, the home of the great Victorian Liberal Richard Cobden, has been in the possession of the YMCA, operating for many years as a conference centre, hosting, inter alia, the Richard Cobden Bicentenary Conference in 2004. The YMCA is currently intending to dispose of Dunford House, and a family-led 'Cobden Foundation' is in the process of formation, with a view to re-acquiring it in order to retain it as an educational centre and as a deeply important historic home.

Dunford's significance in the history of liberalism is threefold.

First, Dunford is a unique example of the home of a leading middle-class politician of Victorian Britain. Most preserved Victorian houses tend either to be those of the aristocracy or of wealthy capitalists imitating their lifestyle. Dunford, however was rebuilt, c. 1848–53, as a family home for Britain's leading Liberal – but by no means wealthy – politician. It has therefore ever since been associated with the values of free trade, peace, and international good will which Cobden's career exemplified. From Cobden's letters we can gain a good sense of the rebuilding process, with its characteristic Victorian features such as the Paxtonesque glasshouse and the delightful and pleasing library in which some of Cobden's own books are still displayed (although regrettably others, including his copy of the Great Exhibition catalogue, have recently been disposed of). Dunford, as much as Parliament, was the base of Cobden's later political career from which he wrote thousands of letters designed to influence his contemporaries and political life. He also received many

political friends and foreign visitors, some of whom recorded the impact of 'fireside chats' at Dunford on their future careers. Dunford is therefore unique for its insights into the domestic basis of Victorian middle-class Liberal political culture, and this is reflected in its surviving artefacts, including family portraits.

Second, Dunford was an important cradle of feminism, exemplified by Cobden's daughters. After their father's death, the Cobden sisters who had been brought up at Dunford and lived there for some time afterwards were to play an unusual part in later Victorian life. Annie (1853–1926) who married the Arts & Crafts publisher Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, became a leading suffragette, while Jane (1851–1947), who married the Progressive publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin and who retained a strong local presence into the 1940s, was a leading suffragist and one of the first women members of the London County Council; she also supported many other radical causes. A third sister, Ellen, later a novelist (Dunford appears thinly disguised as Dunton in one of her novels), married the leading artist Walter Sickert. Family portraits and related artefacts are preserved at Dunford, while the library contains volumes bearing the nameplate 'The Daughters of Richard Cobden'. Dunford therefore played a highly significant part in the genesis and development of later Victorian and Edwardian feminism.

Third, Dunford in the twentieth century became a centre for global society and the international community, so that Cobden's career as the 'International Man' has been fully reflected in its later history. Although this has not been

extensively documented, in the Edwardian period the house acted as a port of call for many foreign visitors attracted by its associations with free trade and peace, such as the French Society of Economists. After a brief spell as a weekend retreat for students and staff of the London School of Economics (1920–24), in the later 1920s it became a real microcosm of aspirations towards a global society, hosting a series of conferences (including the first in Britain devoted to a 'United States of Europe') while the Dunford House (Cobden Memorial) Association organised a series of lectures by distinguished internationalists such as Nicholas Murray and Moritz Bonn. Artefacts relating to this period (for example, a visitors' book) are preserved at Dunford, as well as many archives in the WSRO. Nevertheless, the 1930s proved less conducive to the values of Cobden's internationalism and the property of the Dunford House Trust was offered to the National Trust in 1935–36. But into the 1940s it remained under the aegis of Francis Hirst, a leading Liberal publicist and former editor of *The Economist*, who had married a great-niece of Cobden's in 1903.

The campaign to save Dunford is spearheaded by Cobden family members led by Nick Cobden-Wright, but also has much local community and wider national support, including that of the Reform Club. It is now seeking further support from those willing to contribute financially as patrons or as members of the 'Cobden League of Friends'. If you are willing to help this appeal in any way, or for further information, please contact: Nick Cobden-Wright, nickcobdenwright@icloud.com