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The origins of the York House Society

by Michael Lee (25/10/2003)

An address given to the Society by Michael Lee on 19 September 2003.

There is a precedent for this talk. Noel Viner-Brady on 22 March 1928 spoke about the first five years of the society. He had an audience of 97 and an advantage over me—he could make assumptions. He had no need to say what they all knew. We are now sufficiently far from the events for the text of his speech to require interpretation. What he did not say has to be revealed.

I am assuming that you are not all familiar with Twickenham in 1922. Hence the map I have distributed. The town was then composed in round numbers of 8,500 families making up a population of 35,000. There were 10,000 working men—500 in the professions, and 600 on the railways, trams, and buses. The town hall in King Street was not owned by the council, but was on a lease. There were 24 urban district councillors. The circumstances of the property market in 1921-22 compelled the council to come to some kind of decision about the layout of the centre of the town, dominated as it was by the tramway junction. The three big houses of the centre came up for sale within a few months of each other: Poulett Lodge in November 1921, York House in February 1922, and Richmond House in October 1922. Poulett Lodge was acquired by a property developer, Mr. Foulkes, the builder from Hornsey who had constructed the houses, shops and flats of East Twickenham near Richmond Bridge. There seemed to be a strong possibility that the other two houses would be demolished and replaced. The council faced the question: what was in the public interest for the future of the town?

The decisions taken were coloured by the circumstances. I want to give you a feel for this context and then ask three questions:

Who were the original 19 members of the York House Committee?

Why did they want York House to be the town hall?

Why did the committee continue as a society?

The York House Committee first met on 14 October 1922 at a time of international crisis and of extreme tension in British government. The coalition government under Lloyd George was threatened by a rebellion of Conservative MPs which would force a general election. During that week if you had opened your newspapers, you would have seen pictures of British troops caught between the opposing armies of Greece and Turkey, and of British warships lying off the port of Smyrna which had been burnt down by the Turks. The Conservative rebels thought that they had an opportunity to condemn Lloyd George's handling of this situation. The MP of Twickenham, Joynson-Hicks, had long been an advocate of the breakup of the coalition. Also in that week the BBC was formed, and gave its first broadcasts on the general election which the prime minister had been compelled to

call and through which he then lost office. The York House Society is four days older than the BBC.

International relations determined the state of the national economy, and British conceptions of the future of world politics. Nobody could ignore the importance of the management of currencies in world trade, or the threat of communist party revolutions after the Bolsheviks had gained power in Russia. Germany was struggling to survive the burdens laid upon it by the Allies seeking reparations after the war. The republican revolution which took place after the Kaiser's abdication created very unstable social conditions. Hitler was biding his time in a round of political assassinations; Mussolini took power in Italy. It looked as if communism and fascism were becoming alternatives to democracy. The German example demonstrated how easily the middle classes could lose all their savings through rampant inflation. By August 1923 the exchange rate for the American dollar had surpassed a million marks.

Within Britain the future of the party system seemed in doubt. The instability of the coalition and its successors led to general elections three years in a row: 1922, 1923, and 1924. Nobody could quite foresee the effects of extending the franchise to working men and women over 30—actions taken by the coalition which feared the unemployment of demobilized soldiers. The Liberal Party, which had split when the coalition was formed, seemed likely to be replaced by Labour. Few people at the time of the 1922 general election anticipated the formation of a minority Labour government under Ramsay Macdonald in 1924.

Many feared the consequences of what seemed to be an increasing number of confrontations between capital and labour, with greater militancy on both sides. The 1919 railway strike had shown the vulnerability of public services. The lockout by employers in engineering and shipbuilding in 1922 provoked organized trade unions. There were a number of attempts to bridge the gap. The Middle Classes Union was formed in 1919 to mobilize those who felt under pressure from both sides of industry. Winston Churchill in 1924 attempted to form a new anti-socialist political party with Middle Classes Union support. He stood on this platform at the Westminster bye-election, splitting the Conservatives, and lost by only 43 votes.

Twickenham Urban District Council was caught in the crossfire between different authorities, because it was not controlled by a party caucus with national affiliations. The council's major concern was to secure the grant of a charter that would confer borough status. This ambition was closely tied to the political fortunes of its MP, Joynson-Hicks, who while the coalition was in office aspired to lead the Conservative Party. The petition for a borough charter submitted to the Privy Council in 1919 stemmed in part from the boundary changes which made Twickenham a parliamentary constituency under its own name. It had previously been part of the Brentford division of Middlesex. Stanley Baldwin's election as Conservative leader put pay to Joynson-Hicks's ambitions, but Baldwin's inclusion of Joynson-Hicks in the Cabinet increased Twickenham's chances of securing a charter. Consideration of Twickenham's petition had been delayed while the Lloyd George coalition was still in power, because London County Council, on which the Conservatives were trying to undermine coalition politics, had succeeded in getting the appointment of a Royal Commission on London Government. There was a threat that Richmond, Kingston, and Twickenham might be absorbed into London.

This description of the conditions in 1922 helps an understanding of the origins of the York House Society. I would like with this background to answer the three questions I have posed. I am interpreting the evidence in the York House Society records which have been deposited in the library.

First, who were the original 19 members of the York House Committee, and how did they know each other? What brought them together?

The handout I have given you shows that I have been able to identify only 13 of the 19. I would welcome any evidence you might have on the other 6. What is striking about these names is their wide age range, their many different occupations and I suspect their differences of income and life style. They were not public school men, and not university graduates—except the three members of the clergy. They seem to me to be ambitious self-made men making the most of their connections. A high proportion seems to have commuted daily into Waterloo. Several of them were very well informed about the property market.

Some came from fairly humble backgrounds. Robert Gee had been a blacksmith and a regular soldier; he was not commissioned as an officer until late in the war and then awarded the Victoria Cross for the incredible feat of killing all eight members of a German machine gun post being armed only with a revolver in each hand. Mr Aspinall was born in the Mile End Road, and had been a draper's assistant. Mr Heptinstall lived above the shop which is now Crown Road newsagents. The lady who I assume was his mother in Crown Road itself called herself a "professor of music", which I suspect meant she taught pupils to play the piano in her front room. Even the university men were not well connected. Mr. Mitchell had won a scholarship to Cambridge from a Board School. Mr. Tapply, although he enjoyed a reasonably comfortable middle class upbringing in the small boarding school which his father ran in Folkestone, took his degree at Oxford not through a college, but externally through St.Catherine's Society.

They all knew each other through the Twickenham branch of the Middle Classes Union founded in February 1920 which held its committee meetings in the Bradys' house, Ferryside. The York House Society was the Middle Classes Union in another guise. In April 1921 the Middle Classes Union branch had put forward its own candidates and won all eight seats on the urban district council that were up for election that year. In February 1922 Messrs Brady and Burgess had stood as Middle Classes Union candidates for election to Middlesex County Council, and were returned unopposed because the Labour Party decided not to challenge them. In March 1922 Messrs.Tapply and Gee stood as Middle Classes Union candidates in the urban district council elections, and won. Presumably all these decisions to stand were taken in the Bradys' drawing room. Burgess and Webber were respectively the chairman and the secretary of the branch. During 1921 while Burgess was away in India, Frederick Ayland, a prominent member of the Liberal Party and a commercial traveller in timber, took the chair in his absence. In wishing to convene a committee on the future of York House, Noel Brady—he became Viner-Brady in 1926—simply had to bring together his Middle Classes Union colleagues. Ferryside had been their regular meeting place, although the principal public events organized by the branch were in schools, church halls and the public library. After the formation of the York House Society in March 1924 the Twickenham branch of the Middle Classes Union appears to

fade away. At its AGM that year neither Alfred Burgess nor Edward Merrick would agree to be its chairman. The meeting broke up with only a temporary agreement about a vice-chairman. I have not so far found any evidence of the branch continuing to meet in 1925 or 1926.

Second, why did the York House Committee want York House to be the town hall? It is difficult to explore their motives. Obviously those in the immediate neighbourhood had strong personal interests in preventing York House being demolished and replaced with a housing estate. But the list of 19 names and addresses shows that they were not all going to be affected by such a change of use. We need to ask the questions: who on the Middle Classes Union branch committee were not invited to join the York House Committee, and why? I have provided you with a copy of the main clue. The manuscript notes on the way councillors might vote—not very well copied on my scanner I am afraid—written on a letter from Edward Merrick to Noel Brady—expose the way in which the urban district council was managed.

The York House Committee was composed of Middle Classes Union members who did not trust the ruling group on the council—the Economy Party. Indeed, I suspect that those labelled as “independents” were the councillors who refused to submit to this party caucus, and were as a result excluded from service on the committees of their choice. Evidence about this kind of faction fighting is difficult to find. Without the gossip columns of the Richmond & Twickenham Home Journal it would be hard to reconstruct the sequence of events. The two members of the Middle Classes Union branch committee who were not invited to join the York House Committee were the leader and the deputy leader of the ruling group—Arthur Bridge, a retired lightering contractor from Battersea, and Thomas Wheelhouse, an ex-warrant officer who on leaving the army became a coroner’s official. The formation of the York House Committee was a major step in the breakup of the ruling group. In November 1922 Councillor Slade defected. By April 1923 the whole clique was beginning to collapse.

The origins of the ruling group in 1912 had been honourable, and part of the campaign to secure a borough charter. But by 1915 various rifts had opened up. The Whitehall officials of the Board of Education were so scandalized by the group’s behaviour that they threatened to withdraw the central government’s grant to the council. Their inspectors had discovered that the council was saving money by deliberately failing to fill any vacancies in the schools’ teaching staff caused by death, resignation or retirement. Twickenham teachers were overworked and underpaid. The council had declined to join negotiations on teachers’ pay. Only the Board of Education’s threat to withdraw the grant compelled the council to conform.

Noel Brady convened the York House Committee to accelerate the breakup of the ruling group and to give a better tone to the campaign for the charter. The main motive for trying to persuade the council to buy York House was to secure adequate premises for borough status, if it were conferred. The old town hall in King Street was patently inadequate. Improvements seemed to lie in the history of York House which was misinterpreted to advantage. The York House Committee emphasized Ironside’s speculation in 1797 that York House had been the home of royalty, James II and his daughters, Mary II and Anne. Dick Cashmore’s work shows that there is no evidence to support this claim. The error had been given a certain status with Twickenham’s 1913 application for a coat-of-arms.

Twickenham wanted royal connections, like Richmond. In 1923 the recently married Duke and Duchess of York were the local royalty living in the White Lodge, Richmond. Noel Brady organized a petition and a delegation in favour of the purchase of York House. On the Saturday before the Tuesday on which the Finance & General Purposes Committee was to decide York House's future, the Duke and Duchess visited Marble Hill and Eel Pie Island after a formal opening of the riverside footpath. The committee's voting pattern is not recorded. But a sufficient number of councillors voted in favour of the purchase of York House.

This vote was a considerable achievement for Viner-Brady, because the council had already committed itself a few weeks earlier to the purchase of Richmond House next to the old town hall. There had been a hitch. The sanction given for a loan to the council had not provided a sufficient cover for the price which Richmond House had been sold at the auction. The building passed temporarily to Joseph Mears, the owner of the boatyard on Eel Pie Island and a major entrepreneur with several cinemas, steam launches and charabancs. Those in favour of securing Richmond House for the council wished to see a purpose built civic centre on what we now call the swimming pool site. The public inquiry into the purchase of both York House and Richmond House was not held until 18 September 1923. These delays meant that the transactions for the purchase of these buildings took place during the minority ministry of Ramsay Macdonald. The general election of October 1924 brought a Conservative administration back into power. The appointment of Twickenham's MP as Home Secretary in Baldwin's Cabinet improved the chances of the town's application for borough status. The decision to acquire York House was interpreted as a premonition of success.

Third, why did the York House Committee decide to continue as a society, having achieved its original objective? Again it is difficult to ascertain their motives. The decision to continue was taken in March 1924 at the same time as the local branch of the Middle Classes Union had failed at its AGM to find a chairman. Did the obvious candidates for the post (Brady, Burgess, and Merrick) prefer to see their future in a new society?

What seems clear from the evidence is that the character of the York House Society was transformed by the destruction of Orleans House in March 1926 a short time before the General Strike. Until that point the society had concentrated on its first terms of reference which were to put York House to its best possible uses: "what the council would allow". The society added tone to the urban district council proceedings even before borough status had been confirmed. The loving cup was presented on 4 June 1924. By that date the delay imposed on Twickenham's petition for borough status had been removed. The Royal Commission could not agree on a new authority for London. But there continued to be difficulties, partly because of Middlesex County Council discussions. The Order in Council permitting the grant of a charter was not made until 10 August 1926, although strong hints had been given of this outcome while the debate on the future of Orleans House was at its height, from September 1925 to March 1926. The public inquiry on the proposed incorporation of the borough was not held until 8 March 1926. With the prospect of celebrations the society became deeply committed to ensuring that the ceremonies and accoutrements were appropriate. They discussed whether to have a dinner, a buffet or a ball. Their style may have been affected by what they knew about city livery companies. Noel Viner-Brady was a Scrivener.

The joy of becoming a borough was accompanied by the sorrow of losing a major building. The York House Society adopted the techniques it had used to preserve York House, but failed to stop the destruction of Orleans House. Only the intervention of the Hon.Mrs.Walter Levy (later Basil Ionides) saved the Octagon Room. The gravel company ignored all the negotiations for a purchase by a public authority, came up with the cash, and immediately demolished the property.

This experience appears to have given the society a much clearer sense of what roles it might play beyond those of helping the council. It had already in 1924 begun to speak of “promoting the civic and social interests of the town’s inhabitants”. Its first major dispute was with the urban district council in 1925. Members of the society before borough status had been secured were unhappy about proposals for a depot in which the surveyor’s carts were to be kept. The failure to keep Orleans House seems to have helped them to focus on conservation questions. Viner-Brady’s talk in March 1928 explained that the committee had continued as a society in order to encourage a civic spirit and to liaise between all the associations in the town. He began to give voice to a definite objective: to preserve the amenities of Twickenham. In later years he was instrumental in setting up the Radnor House Preservation Society in 1937 and the Embankment Preservation Society in 1939.

What Noel Viner-Brady did not say in March 1928 is interesting. His omissions help an understanding of the society’s formation. I have tried to show that its first members came together in the political climate of the early 1920s. On the international front there were growing fears of communism and fascism, and evidence long before the Great Crash of 1929 of the middle classes losing their capital. On the national front a new party system was being forged, as Stanley Baldwin’s Conservatives faced Ramsay Macdonald’s Labour. On the regional front the boundaries of local authorities in the area of greater London seemed likely to be revised. In its evidence to the Royal Commission in 1922 Twickenham had hinted that it would be prepared to join Teddington and the Hamptons to form a single “riparian authority”—an administrative unit following the line of the Thames. This statement was the beginning of a long drawn out battle between authorities, with Hampton taking its case to the House of Lords and losing. The York House Society was a creature of these special circumstances.

Mr.Viner-Brady in 1928 made no mention of the Middle Classes Union, partly because everyone in his audience knew about it, but also partly because by that time it had begun to have affiliations with fascism. Twickenham had a poorly disciplined Conservative Party which was easily seduced to join Beaverbrook’s campaign for Empire food, but it never gave any major support to Oswald Mosley. Viner-Brady also made no mention of the Economy Party. By 1928 most people in Twickenham were happy not to be reminded of this episode in its political history. Arthur Bridge had been defeated in the first borough council elections of 1926. Viner-Brady also failed to refer to changes in the society’s terms of reference. By 1928 it seemed impolite to be reminded of earlier uncertainties and failures. The omissions in his speech show how distinctive was the 1922 setting.

Finally why was action not taken earlier in February 1922 when York House originally came on the market? Readers of The Times during that month saw a large advertisement for the sale on the back page every Saturday morning. Why was nothing done on behalf of the town until October? The only evidence on this problem is that provided in the joke recorded by Dick Cashmore . Noel Viner-Brady’s daughter remembered that her father had

in jest claimed the “naked ladies” statues in York House garden as a conveyancing fee! I suspect that there may have been an earlier offer to purchase York House which then fell through. This might be the clue to the whole operation. If Noel Viner-Brady were the solicitor of the vendor, Lady Tata and her trustees, he would have had inside knowledge. He may have acted in October because he had already seen the withdrawal of a previous prospective purchaser. Perhaps the story depends on this kind of initiative. We just do not have the evidence on which to judge. What I have tried to do is to interpret the evidence I have seen.