

THE WIMBLEDON SOCIETY
(Formerly the John Evelyn Society)

B. I.
Boyle

**CHRONICLES OF THE
WIMBLEDON LITERARY
AND
SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY**

by
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Membership of the Wimbledon Literary and Scientific Society has always been by invitation. The residents of Wimbledon and the neighbourhood who have accepted such an invitation since the Society was founded in 1891 have mostly been notable for their knowledge of, and interest in, matters literary or scientific (using these words in their widest sense, and as extending to both work and leisure). They have readily shared their knowledge and their interest with other members through formal lectures, amusing entertainments and informal discussions.

Mrs Joanna Spencer volunteered to read and study the Society's minute books and other records, and in the two lectures that resulted from her research into this mass of material she described, with a light touch and good humour, the oddities of some very learned and distinguished people. She can indeed talk sympathetically and interestingly about almost anything. This is not surprising; she had a distinguished and varied career herself as a librarian and a Civil Servant, as was recognised by the honours conferred on her.

Many have suggested that her lectures should be printed. They are well worth reading, and I commend this booklet to the Society's members and to others interested in Wimbledon. And on behalf of all, I thank Mrs Spencer for the time and trouble she has taken in researching the facts, in so vividly and wittily describing what she found, and in setting it all down for many to enjoy.

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Alfred A. Baden Fuller

President

December 1987.

Foreword

In 1984 the Committee of the Wimbledon Literary and Scientific Society entrusted me with the preparation of a paper on the history of the Society. The minutes from 1891 onwards provided so much excellent material that, to do better justice to it, the Committee later agreed that there should be two papers. They were read before the Society in 1986.

This booklet reproduces the papers, slightly adapted to suit the printed form.

My thanks are due to the Committee for allowing me to borrow all the minute books; to Mr A.P.Whitehead for his kind permission to quote from Mrs Winifred Whitehead's *Wimbledon 1885-1965*; and to Mr Cyril Coffin for his help in preparing the text for the printer and seeing it through the press.

Joanna Spencer

20th November 1987.

The Society's Life and Times

Let us begin at the beginning. Who founded the Society? There are at least two myths current. One was made known to me last October. 'But surely', my interlocutor cried, 'Mrs Peggy Pyke-Lees founded the Society!' This is a most attractive idea, but it will not do. She is too young.

The second myth is more strongly rooted. In February 1934 Dr Macgregor, then Minister of Trinity Presbyterian Church, reminded the Society that that very week saw the centenary of the birth of their founder, Sir William Preece. More recently Mr E.C. Baker wrote a biography of Sir William, and in it related that he, with other Wimbledon gentlemen, formed the Society, was elected President at its inaugural meeting and gave the Society's first paper. None of this is true.

Then who did found the Society? Five gentlemen meeting in the house of Dr William Irving Page on a day in November 1891. The day of the month is not recorded. I suspect, though there is no proof, that Dr Page was the moving spirit. He seems to have been a man of parts - an M.R.C.S., an F.R.G.S., and interested in physics. It is probable that he retired at about this time from a partnership practice in Wimbledon High Street, which would mean leisure for new activities. He presided over the first meeting, called at his house; he gave the first paper; and he chaired the first Annual General Meeting, also called at his house.

Of the other four, I have been able to find out nothing about Mr F. Conway. We know, however, that Mr Van Sommer and Mr Wilfred Godden showed oil and watercolour paintings at the exhibitions of the Wimbledon Arts and Benevolent Society, with which our Society has had many members in common and one special, and happily continuing, connection. Just before the Great War, a watercolour of a daffodil was shown in the Junior Section by an artist aged five. His name was Master Alfred Baden Fuller, and since 1969 he has been the President of our Society. The fifth member of the founding quintet was the Reverend Henry London, Curate of Wimbledon, who was asked to act as Honorary Secretary - 'pro tem.', say the minutes. I do not know what the members expected 'pro tempore' to mean: but in Mr London's case it meant fifteen years, until he left Wimbledon to become Vicar of East Greenwich.

These five men then and there set up the Society, to encourage the study of literature and science in Wimbledon and its neighbourhood. They were to read papers, not more than half an hour in length, and to meet at each other's houses. It was to be a private Society, membership by invitation.

Now a word about the conditions of life of the top-of-the-hill people from whom members were drawn at the end of last century. They have been excellently described in Mrs Winifred Whitehead's booklet *Wimbledon 1885-1965*. Wimbledon

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then neighboured the country. There were big houses, guarded by trees, standing in spacious grounds. Carriages, carts and cabs were horse-drawn. Donkeys pulled Bath chairs round the Green.

Of the home life of the residents, Mrs Whitehead says:-

'In all I have written, I have taken for granted the indispensable adjunct to our spacious late Victorian life, Domesticity. The nurses, gardeners, cooks, parlourmaids, coachmen, housemaids etc. Our way of life took all these splendid

people for granted and one did not give it a thought.

To be able to get skilled help in the house and garden made it so easy to give dinner parties, lunch parties, garden parties, and to keep the garden well stocked with fruit and vegetables and a beautiful, well-groomed place to give parties in.

To be able to go out and know that one's children were perfectly safe and happy.....'

With this background in mind, let us revert to that first meeting. Those declared to be connected with the Society's foundation and to constitute the original members were:- Mrs London, Miss Grenside, Miss Godden, Miss Preece and the five men. Now you may say 'How splendid! Equality from the start - no male chauvinist pigs in our Society!' You may be right; but the meetings took place in private houses, and willing hostesses were as necessary as authors of papers. Miss Preece, for example, was the lady of the house at Gothic Lodge.

In 1893 the Committee decided 'that owing to the difficulty of holding meetings in private houses, if the Society assumed too large proportions, the number of members be limited to eighty'. But the numbers kept on growing, and fortunately the number of willing hostesses with large houses grew too. Mount Ararat, Gothic Lodge, Chester House, Stamford House, The Keir, Margin House, Ingarsby, Ricards Lodge, Wimbledon Park House, Merton Park Manor House - these are only some of the names. Meetings started at nine, which would allow time for the servants to clear away the aftermath of dinner and get all ready for receiving. It is said that in the early years refreshments were lavish and delicious.

So all went well for more than two decades. Then came the Great War. The Society never faltered; regular meetings were held throughout, and still at nine o'clock, although the street lamps were two-thirds obscured with dark paint because of the Zeppelins. Nothing in the minutes reflects those appalling casualty lists appearing day after day after day. But the conditions of life changed rapidly. Houses were lost to the Society; horses were commandeered; women servants went into munitions factories; the younger male servants enlisted in Kitchener's army, or were conscripted from January 1916 onwards; and food rationing began in 1917.

The Committee did their best to introduce sumptuary laws. The question of Refreshments at meetings was discussed, and it was decided that, while it would be inappropriate to give any instructions to hostesses in the matter, some uniformity of

...which was advisable; and that the Secretary should convey to the various hostesses the feeling of the Committee that the wishes of the Food Controller should be complied with as to solid refreshments as far as possible. 'No refreshments, or at the most liquids only, was the correct form; but (so the minutes say) 'some of the hostesses seemed a little unwilling about adopting it'.

After World War I there was chronic servant trouble. Saturday night was difficult - it was the usual evening off for servants. Many hostesses pressed repeatedly for a change to Friday. But Saturday suited the majority who did not have to negotiate with volatile staff, and the hostesses had to battle on as best they might.

From time to time bad manners caused trouble. The drill was that the Secretary sent a card to each member for each meeting, specifying the lecturer, the subject, the venue, and the name of the lady inviting the Society: R.S.V.P. Each member might bring one guest. But some brought more than one, or brought guests without warning. This was impolite and inconsiderate, and the ladies were much annoyed. Rebukes were delivered by the Secretary, and more than once members were warned publicly that 'all guests must be named before being introduced into a private house'.

So things went on, with constant appeals for hostesses with large rooms, and with everyone refusing to recognise that the conditions of life in England had changed for good. The Preeses left Gothic Lodge, and Mrs Braithwaite moved in. In the twinkling of an eye she was invited to become a member, and she invited the Society. That evening, in Mrs Braithwaite's presence, the members, in what I think a barefaced way, expressed much satisfaction at having regained Gothic Lodge for the Society.

World War II and the Essential Works Order stopped meetings dead. Then, cautiously, two meetings and the AGM were held in 1940. After Dunkirk, a blank. Then three meetings a year from 1943 to 1945. All these wartime meetings were at three in the afternoon because of the blackout. There was no nonsense about competitive entertaining: ladies took a little milk or tea to each other's houses to help out. To the Seligman and Boas families above all we owe the preservation of this spark of life in the Society, and to Dr Seligman, who became President in 1945, we owe its re-creation after the war. He recruited members and chaired all meetings up to the end of 1948, by which time the Society was firmly re-established.

No servants, smaller houses, not enough chairs. From 1946 the Committee was ready to meet the cost of hiring chairs. Alas, members would unthinkingly say that they 'hoped to be present'. 'Be more definite', begged the Secretary. 'If your hope is unfulfilled, your chair still costs 1/3d!' Food rationing of course continued. So long as bread was still rationed hostesses were requested to provide drinks only.

Slowly, unwillingly, the Society moved from private houses to public rooms. Several ladies would join together to entertain members, first in private houses, then in the Town Hall committee room suite or in a church hall. The AGM in 1960

agreed unanimously to bear the cost of meetings held in the Town Hall. The subscription was raised to 10/- to meet this. In 1892 it had been 1/-; now it is £4 (or £5 for laggards). The committee room suite was liked, but in 1975 the Society was driven out even from this pseudo-Paradise, and since then has usually met in a church hall.

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The first season ended in the summer of 1892 with an extra-curricular excursion to Reading, to see the Roman remains in the museum, and to Silchester, to see the Roman excavations. The Society could always produce somebody who knew somebody. Introductions to the museum's curator and to the archaeologists on the site had been provided by Sir Thomas Jackson. 'An exceedingly pleasant and instructive excursion'.

Next year it was Winchester, with plenty to see, and after Eversong in the Cathedral Mr and Mrs Cardew had laid on the Dean, who acted as cicerone to those vast stores of objects of antiquarian interest. Then tea with the Dean and Mrs Kitchen. 'Home in time for dinner'.

Then Oxford, and again Sir Thomas had provided nobly for the excursionists. He had won the design competition for the New Examination Schools in 1876, and for the next thirty years there was hardly a new building or restoration in Oxford in which he did not have a hand.

Salisbury: a comfortable and cheap journey owing to the kind influence of the President. That was Sir William Preece, who did a lot of work on electric signalling for the railways. From Salisbury (the Cathedral, and lunch) the party went on 'by brake and bicycles' to Stonehenge. Can you not see the cyclists? - the ladies in straw boaters, high-necked blouses with leg-of-mutton sleeves, and tailored skirts, the whole nipped in at the waist by petersham belts with silver buckles; the gentlemen in caps, Norfolk jackets, knickerbockers and knee-stockings. 'A lovely day. A most enjoyable excursion'.

I am sure Mr London was a cyclist. When they went from Rochester to Cobham Hall he says dismissively 'Non-cyclists in a brake', and then 'A pleasant run back to Rochester - a day rendered happy by perfect weather'.

Windsor - the most charming of river weather'. Cambridge - Dr Frank Penrose had organised everything beautifully, including luncheon in Magdalene College hall. Canterbury - special arrangements with the railway and for luncheon (Sir William again). But after 1906 there was not enough support for excursions any more. People were beginning to explore the countryside by motor-car.

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