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LIFE IN THE MANSION HOUSE AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Read by Tommy Tucker

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Introduction

What on earth do you expect me to say about “Life in the Mansion House at the end of the 20th Century”, with one of my own ex-Lord Mayors as your President? He certainly won’t allow me to get away with any of my usual risqué stories!

Let me therefore set out my stall with a couple of philosophical platitudes!

I believe that “history” like “truth in politics” depends on your standpoint as to how it comes out! This I have found to be fact whether it be recorded in detail and supported by 20/20 hindsight or a recent event reported in the media.

The first was proved to me when I lived in the Sudan and became the resident expert on the Battle of Omdurman. Although the facts are indisputable, the jingoistic story taught to me at school differed greatly from that told by the Sudanese I met on the spot. And in 1982 I did meet two Sudanese who were actually there on 2 September 1898.

The inaccuracy of media reporting was driven deep into my consciousness on many occasions in Northern Ireland when I took part in an operation which made news and found it impossible to match the facts I had experienced with those which appeared in print.

My second platitude is that the micro social history embodied by the Mansion House, just like the macro kind affecting Nation States, are both the result of power struggles.

With those points in mind and the fact that I have been consigned to history myself, may I spell out my *very personal* view of life in the Mansion House?

Lord Mayors make history

I believe that every Lord Mayor creates a deal of history during his year of office. Let me illustrate this, most irreverently, by taking each of those with whom I came in contact.

Dame Mary Donaldson

Dame Mary made epoch shattering history by being the first and only female in the eight century sequence of Lord Mayors.

Although I was not at the Mansion House in her time, she was one of the team who hired me and towards the end of the interview she asked me: “As you have spent all your life in the Army working with men, what would your reaction be if you were asked to serve a woman?” I remember suggesting that perhaps she might care to rephrase that question!

Another story which appeals was told to me by St John Brook-Johnson, my predecessor. He claimed that Dame Mary also made history when, “taken short” during an official visit to the Vatican, she became the only lady ever to make use of the Pope’s private privy.

Sir David Rowe-Ham

Sir David Rowe-Ham, my first Lord Mayor, should be recorded as the first to address the influential Kangaroo Group of the European Parliament at Strasbourg. He was due to speak on “The City’s reaction to EU proposals to dismantle all border customs checks”. He was flown to the meeting in Sir Basil de Feranti’s private jet and briefed in detail on what to expect by the man himself en route.

My memory of the meeting recalls only that it was the one occasion I ever witnessed when a Lord Mayor was stopped in mid speech. Sir Basil told him that the meeting did not want a formal statement, Sir David started again without his script!

Sir Greville Spratt

Sir Greville Spratt, as an old soldier who had served in the Gulf with Glubb Pasha, made history by revisiting the troops in the Gulf immediately after the war.

I believe that he should also be remembered for making the best Mayoral speech to a Livery Company. In those “good old days” it was the form that the Company doyen propose the toast to the Lord Mayor. On this occasion the proposer, seemingly at least 100 years old, started talking about the Second World War. After 25 minutes he had just reached 1942 when catching sight of the furious gestures being made by the Master he sat down, completely forgetting to propose any toast at all.

Without announcement Sir Greville rose to reply saying, “Thank you so much for that splendid story. May I come back next year to hear the rest?” He then sat down to a rousing ovation.

Sir Christopher Collett

Sir Christopher Collett, of course, is on the record for his celebration of 800 years of the Mayoralty and the scholarships which resulted.

I remember particularly many of the scholars and their delight at being given the opportunity to travel to exciting places.

Sir Hugh Bidwell

Sir Hugh Bidwell ended an era by being the last Lord Mayor to attend an overseas function in full regalia. He opened a British Trade Fair in Tunis in “Full Fig” whilst presenting the President with a silver statue, on behalf of the Jockey Club, of the Arab stallion Godolphin who was one of the “founding fathers” of the UK thoroughbred stock

My private history records an equally “warm” occasion in his Mayoralty when we visited Liverpool. The Sheriff and I were late to arrive: there was an earth tremor during the Civic lunch which resulted in most of a chandelier landing on the top table and our train caught fire on the way home! Perhaps you can imagine Sir Hugh’s reaction!!

Sir Alexander Graham

Sir Alexander Graham made history by being the first Ministerial ranked visitor to Argentina after the Falklands war. The programme I arranged for him entailed getting from Santiago in Chile to Buenos Aires. Relations between the two countries were still strained at that time and there were no interlinking civil flights. However as a gesture of good will President Menem agreed to our being flown in by the Chilean airforce. The Chileans decided to take full advantage of that decision and delivered us to the Argentinean capital in an executive jet with a whole squadron of fighters in support.

Luckily such antics were taken in good part.

Sir Brian Jenkins

Sir Brian Jenkins should be remembered for his Southern African odyssey just before the ANC became the government of the Republic of South Africa. Before their election the media were predicting possible mayhem throughout the area so the Lord Mayor was asked by the City to judge the situation himself.

To that end Sir Brian held meetings with 5 Heads of State/Prime Ministers, 19 senior Ministers/Politicians, 14 Civic Heads, made 36 speeches and held 37 Press/TV interviews.

He correctly forecast the outcome of the South African elections.

Standing out amongst my memories of that hectic month is our 2 meetings with Nelson Mandela, then recently out of prison. Those meetings later led to my looking after the great man in the Mansion House when he was given the Freedom of the City. I will forever be a fan!

Sir Frank McWilliams

Sir Frank McWilliams' claim to history could be based on his close ties with Malaysia and the resultant improvement in Malaysian/UK relations. The mercurial Malaysian PM had, you might recall, previously been responsible for a "Don't Buy British" campaign. That PM is now an honourable Liveryman of the Carpenters' Company.

My main memory and indeed that of one of his Sheriffs, must be of his golfing jokes. Tony Moss was invited by the Lord Mayor to recount one of these after a convivial lunchtime engagement. I can assure you that your Secretary is not good at Scottish accents and the punch line was completely lost on our Japanese hosts.

Sir Paul Newall

Sir Paul and Lady Newall broke new ground by taking a business delegation which included female financiers to Saudi Arabia. The ladies gained entry, for the first time, to a very wealthy fraction of Saudi female society. They were even invited to dine at table with one of the Saudi Princes. A unique honour in that most fundamental of States.

My memory includes the time in Japan when Sir Paul and I, whilst staying in a spa built over natural hot springs, both found ourselves in our natural state, in the ladies' side of the baths by mistake.

Sir Christopher Walford

Sir Christopher Walford again created a precedent by visiting all of the prospective EU members in Eastern Europe as an ambassador for Britain.

I also know him as an excellent judge of horse flesh and form. I won a deal of money by betting on his tips whilst attending the Easter races in Sydney.

Sir John Chalstrey

Sir John Chalstrey represented the UK and London at the Greek Centenary Celebrations of the New Olympics. He carried the torch in the original Olympic arena in the parade with 44 other civic leaders of cities who had hosted the Olympics in the intervening years.

Besides this unforgettable experience I particularly remember him taking immediate action to save the life of the man who, whilst "wiring him for sound", before Sir John addressed 150 delegates at a medical conference in Malta, collapsed with a brain haemorrhage.

Sir Roger Cork

Sir Roger Cork played his part in history by being the senior host on HMS Britannia in both Karachi and Bombay on its final voyage. Business seminars, held on board in both locations, were rounded off with an evening reception and the Beating of Retreat by the Royal Marines.

My sense of history was tickled at both ports during the finale when the National Anthem of the country concerned was followed by the playing of the Queen. The Lord Mayor, Head of the Royal Household and the Captain, together with senior local guests lined the rail to take the salute. Discipline amongst local guests could be called lax during the playing of their own Anthem, but all sprang to attention for the Queen.

Such is the lingering power of the Empire!

Sir Richard Nichols

Sir Richard Nichols could again claim an historical first in being the first lord mayor to visit Romania after Ceausescu's departure.

To try to explain the role of the City of London to an audience who had no concept of private ownership, personal banking or individual share holding was difficult in the extreme. To try to explain the role and power base of the Lord Mayor was impossible.

Lord Levene

Lord Levene carved a major niche in the history of the Mayoralty by his achievements in raising the profile of the Corporation. His tireless use of political, banking and business contacts at home and abroad in order to bring that about was admirable.

I can add to his unrivalled reputation by saying what a privilege it was to help plan his hectic programme and to try to keep up whilst carrying it out.

Sir Clive Martin

Sir Clive Martin will be forever linked with the Millennium. He will also be remembered for his military achievements and for cementing relations with the Livery.

I will remember him as my last Lord Mayor and for presiding at the joint Freedom Ceremony for my four sons at Guildhall. I believe that four brothers had never before been granted that privilege together and it remains a unique occasion.

Mansion House power struggles

Finally a word on micro power struggles!

You are all well aware of the original battle between the Mayor and the Sheriffs which the Mayor won back in the 13th century. More recently many of you took part in the flexing of muscles between the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Members. You may not have been aware that there was also a mini power struggle going on at the same time in the Mansion House.

Over the 14 years of my tenure the role and status of the Lord Mayor's Esquires diminished markedly as the influence of the Corporation in determining the Lord Mayor's policy and programme grew. At the same time the Private Secretary, became the major link with Guildhall, correspondingly growing in stature and becoming the major Mayoral policy briefer.

Maybe this is just a reflection of the changing role of the Mayoralty, but if it continues I predict that the next generation of Esquires will be very different people from those you have all become used to.

No bad thing you may say!!