



ILLUSTRATION: ALISA PARICHAN

The view from the riverbank



For the first hundred years of its life, LSE was architecturally retiring, a

hidden city of bits and pieces up side streets, round corners, down alleyways. It lurked above pubs, behind offices, insulated from the rush of Kingsway and the clatter of the Aldwych. It was not so much a campus, more a series of occupations. You were never quite sure whether you were entering the Department of International Relations or the Olde Curiosity Shop. The tradition was carried on even when the School began using the Kingsway theatre, since it shared the stage with all manner of non-academic theatricals, and you were as likely to find yourself at *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo* as at Monetary Economics One.

But that was a different era. Shy, retiring locational diffidence changed when we took up residence in Clement House, and presented a flamboyant front of corporate bombast, the pomp and circumstance of mahogany and marble, to the public bustle of the streets linking Westminster with the law courts and the City. Now the School has gone further down, or up, the same road, acquiring some of the glass and concrete blocks shining alongside the Royal Courts of Justice. No more the little institute down a back street, LSE looms over the approaches to Fleet Street, and glitters against the law courts in a building called Tower 1.

The buildings look to a different urban future from the fog-encrusted rambling alleyways of the School's foundation. The contrast is given a further dimension if you cross the Strand to the premises of what used to be Child's Bank. It is a fine Victorian banking hall, with marble columns

and dark wooden counters. It also has a gun cabinet. High on the wall is a large glass case, containing ten muskets with bayonets. The wood is polished to the sheen on a chestnut horse, and the brass fittings shine. The muskets were bought after the Gordon riots of 1780, when Lord George Gordon incited anti-Catholic, and simply criminal, mobs to rampage through London, attacking persons and property. Child's Bank was unharmed, but the governors were so alarmed at the threat to public order, and more particularly to their own premises, that they purchased the firearms for use by their staff in any future commotion.



They proved unnecessary. Although the people of London frequently demonstrated their displeasure at the arrogance of power and the cupidity of bankers, they did not repeat the attacks of 1780. But they realised the symbolic powers of demonstration. Return from Child's Bank and you will see, on one of the School's newest acquisitions, a large plaque marking the site of the house from which the journal *Votes for Women* was published, and from which the feminist suffragists of the Women's Social and

Political Union campaigned for formal political equality between the sexes. The suffrage campaigners inverted the logic of urban violence, and with devastating effect in their use of hunger strikes became magnets for violence, providing an example of heroism without harm to others which baffled the male politics of Edwardian Britain.

The suffrage campaigners pioneered not just the hunger strike, but the whole politics of theatrical communication. Underlying their demonstrations was the realisation that messages are conveyed not only in print but by peaceful symbolic action. It was a lesson applied with spectacular effect three quarters of a century later, when feminist campaigners at Greenham Common, rather than meet the arguments of the proponents of Cruise missiles with matching strategic detail, pulled the rug from under military bombast by ridiculing it: 'Take the toys from the boys'. Easter picnics on missile silos, without making military strategies one jot less dangerous, certainly made them seem more absurd.

For LSE the suffrage plaque is a challenging symbol. The beaver has always been an ambivalent emblem. '*Rerum cognoscere causas*' makes it sound as if our heraldic beast simply sits on the river bank and watches the flotsam flow by. 'Hmnn, there goes another log. That's 20 this week. Wonder where they came from? Time for a bit of log linear analysis.' But the beaver also gnaws down trees and builds dams. As another ancient burrower and gnawer almost put it: 'Water rats have interpreted the river. The point, however, is to change its course.' The suffrage plaque is a more hopeful sign in that direction than the Child's muskets. ■