

# When royalty called

As the Centre Buildings project to re-shape Houghton Street gets under way, **Sue Donnelly** looks at an earlier building project which had a lasting legacy for LSE.

On 28 May 1920 George V and Queen Mary left Buckingham Palace in an open carriage escorted by the Life Guards and accompanied by Herbert Fisher, Minister for Education. As they approached St Clement Danes the church bells rang out and the Royal Standard was raised as the party entered Clare Market. George V had arrived to lay the foundation stone of a new LSE building.

By 1912 the School had outgrown Passmore Edwards Hall, opened in 1902, but the outbreak of the first world war blocked any building plans. Fortunately, funding for a new building came with support for the new Commerce degree – a response to calls in the City and government for improved commercial higher education. Donations for the new course came from Westminster Council, Parr’s Bank and the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust which pledged £150,000. A third of the donation was earmarked for a new LSE building.

The Commerce degree was launched in 1919 and the foundation stone of the new building was laid the following year.

A ceremonial dais on Houghton Street seated 700 guests and 250 standing students, and the waiting audience was entertained by the string band of the Scots Guards and songs from the students. At noon the royal party processed out, accompanied by Dr Russell-Wells, Vice Chancellor of the University of London, and LSE’s new Director, Sir William Beveridge, with other officials. The party was greeted by cries of “Polycon, hush, hush”, the LSE chant – apparently a contraction of “Political Economy”.

The ceremony began with the Lord Mayor of London presenting a deed of gift for £50,000 on behalf of the Commerce Degree Appeal Committee. Four students presented the king with items for a “time capsule”, including a set of newly minted British currency and

a copy of *Wealth* by Professor Edwin Cannan. The king then spread the mortar for the stone and tapped it into place. The king’s speech emphasised the importance of university education in Britain’s post-war reconstruction, praising the pursuit of “useful subjects” – no doubt a reference to the Commerce degree.

The royal party departed after signing the LSE minute book and the Student’s Union visitors’ book, and the Royal Standard was lowered. While the guests enjoyed refreshments the students kidnapped a figure of Sir Walter Raleigh from a local tobacconist’s and enrolled it as a student.

In 1921 the building opened, with the arched entrance and lecture theatre now part of the Old Building. The foundation stone can be found between the entrance and Wright’s Bar. ■



**Sue Donnelly**, LSE Archivist, cares for the School’s historical record and raises awareness of its fascinating history.



# Laying the FOUNDATIONS

What started as a distinctly “odd adventure” has flourished into a world-leading social science institution. To mark the end of LSE’s 120th Anniversary year, **Michael Cox** takes a look at LSE then, and LSE now.

We all know, or by now should know, that LSE left harbour in 1895, venturing forth onto what Michael Oakeshott – a famous LSE professor – would have termed “a boundless and bottomless sea” where there was “neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage”. The story about the School – the brainchild of Fabian socialists (Sidney Webb in particular) and the result of a large and quite unexpected bequest – has been told many times before. Indeed, 20 years ago, one of LSE’s most successful directors – Ralph Dahrendorf – wrote a wonderful and affectionate history of the School that by any measure can be termed “definitive”.

But what sort of world was LSE launched into? And what sort of year was 1895 itself? An eventful one by any measure. Indeed, in January, while Sidney was busily planning a new “London School” based on the experience of the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris, France was being torn apart by the Dreyfus affair. In February, Britain and the United States worked out a way not to go to war over Venezuela, laying the foundation for what subsequently became known as the “special relationship” (a relationship that has benefited LSE over the years). Several thousand

miles away, in May, Japan was beginning to flex its imperial muscle in Asia (much to the Webbs’ delight if truth be told), while in June, Germany completed the Kiel Canal, proving to many in Britain – though not at first to the Webbs (great admirers of most things German) – that their Anglo-Saxon cousins across the North Sea were up to no good. Finally, in the autumn, LSE opened its doors to all who could profit – “whether men or women” – through the serious study of subjects such as economic history, economic theory, statistics, commercial geography, banking and political science. What Sidney Webb saw as the deficiency in British higher education was about to be rectified.

These were the most exciting of times, and especially busy ones for the hyperactive Webbs. In 1893, Sidney had issued his optimistic Fabian pamphlet detailing what he believed would be the inevitable progress made by the “English” towards “Social Democracy”. A year later, he and Beatrice published their truly monumental *History of Trade Unionism* (through which Lenin learned to understand English). In 1895, both were heavily engaged in politics. But the School took pride of place. It was,

in a way, their only child. Born out of a very real dissatisfaction with Oxford and Cambridge, and a keen desire to create something that would help educate the London professional classes (and foreigners too), LSE was indeed what Beatrice Webb called a very great, but distinctly “odd adventure”, with of course no guarantee that it would last more than a few years. As Sidney later admitted in one of his many thousands of letters to Beatrice: “I got nervous last night thinking that it would all collapse like a pack of cards. And if it does collapse, well then it must. We shall have done our best” (28 April 1899).

So LSE in its early days was hardly the “lusty child”, as characterised by Janet Beveridge. The project, moreover, faced a good deal of opposition. Even Sidney’s closest comrade in arms – the playwright George Bernard Shaw – attacked his friend for not appointing enough genuine “collectivists” to the teaching staff. Nor did it end there, with Ramsay Macdonald (a future Prime Minister) attacking Sidney a few years on for misusing the original bequest. In



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fact, ironically, having been accused by erstwhile friends on the left for having compromised with the establishment, he was then attacked by some of the School's grandees – including several influential railways-owners – for running a school for socialists. Indeed, the charge directed against Sidney for overseeing a radical institution full of anti-capitalist intent (while regularly appointing staff of a distinctly respectable pedigree!) was one that was to come back to haunt the School throughout its history. And not entirely without reason.

Take the Webbs. Moderate reformers they may well have been, with some very rich friends in some very high places, but, nonetheless, they remained devoted socialists. Indeed, it was Sidney no less who

LSE then: archive pictures from LSE Library collections, see [www.flickr.com/photos/lselibrary/albums](http://www.flickr.com/photos/lselibrary/albums)  
LSE now: pictures by LSE photographer Nigel Stead

1. After the laying of the foundation stone in Houghton Street, 28 May 1920
2. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, c1895
3. William Hewins, LSE's first Director, c1900
4. Main entrance with original doors and windows, c1940
5. Last days of the old library in the Old Building, 1978
6. LSE dinner in the refectory, c1930s
7. LSE students, c1910
8. LSE campus, Old Building
9. LSE Library
10. LSE campus, New Academic Building
11. LSE graduating students, 2015
12. LSE campus, Saw Swee Hock Student Centre



wrote the Labour Party Constitution in 1918 with its famous Clause calling for “common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange” (the same clause which Tony Blair deleted three-quarters of a century later).

Then there were the academics at the School itself. Few, if any, were Marxist: its first two directors were imperialists while its fourth, William Beveridge, was strongly anti-Keynesian. A fair number, especially in the Economics Department, were decidedly anti-collectivist in character. Still, there were enough key figures like Harold Laski, R H Tawney, Evan Durbin, Eileen Power and Kingsley Martin (who went on to edit *The New Statesman*) to give some substance to the idea that the School was, if not full of communists – a common charge throughout most of the 1930s – then many degrees further to the left than most of its educational rivals.

But nothing remains the same for ever. The progressive tide that had swept the Labour Party into office in 1945, and with it a large number of LSE-educated Fabians, started to ebb, and by 1951 Labour was out of office. Nor was this the only change. The Webbs finally passed from the scene in the 1940s, their ashes later being interred in Westminster Abbey.



“I got nervous last night thinking that it would all collapse like a pack of cards. And if it does collapse, well then it must. We shall have done our best.”

SIDNEY WEBB, LETTER TO BEATRICE, 28 APRIL 1899

In 1944, LSE academic Friedrich Hayek published his enduring polemic against planning, *The Road to Serfdom*. Two years later, Karl Popper was brought



to the School, largely as a result of Hayek's efforts. In 1950 Laski died, replaced in 1951 by the sceptic and conservative Michael Oakeshott. Meanwhile, internationally, hopes of a great-power post-war alliance had dissolved into a bitter Cold War that divided the School as much as it did the world.

Of course the School retained a good deal of its old reputation and even some of its appointments – Ralph Miliband in 1949 and Richard Titmuss in 1950 – seemed to indicate that the flame had not gone out altogether. It continued to be as engaged as ever and when the rather conventional 1950s gave way to the altogether less conventional 1960s – Malcolm X spoke at the School in 1965 – that engagement took what many on the School staff regarded as a decidedly dangerous turn.

Still, in spite of those famous *événements* along Houghton Street, the School had hardly become a hotbed of world revolution (though the student newspaper *The Beaver* did for a while read like the Trotskyist *Red Mole*). Indeed, with the imaginative appointment of Ralph Dahrendorf in 1973, LSE took on a new lease of life, and under his direction grew in ambition, academic reputation and size.

But, the world was fast changing and with it LSE. Born into a world before the welfare state, before the three great wars of the 20th century, and obviously long before the rise and fall of the Soviet Union (not to mention the Thatcher revolution in which quite a few from the School made their own contribution), the School forged by the Webbs and their comrades in perhaps more optimistic, idealistic, times could hardly stand still.



Which of course poses the obvious question: what would the Webbs have to say about the modern LSE? One can only guess. But being the empiricists they were it is quite possible they may have concluded that, having changed Britain for the better – could one imagine the modern welfare state without the School? – LSE would simply have to face those “facts” of which the Webbs were so fond and attempt to define a new role for itself. And there was still so much to do: even, or perhaps especially, in a world where those economic “individualists” against whom they had polemicised in the late 19th century were once again in the driving seat.

The world into which the School was born may have changed beyond recognition. The market may have triumphed. The Webbs' form of socialism may have been consigned to that proverbial dustbin of history. But there will always be a need (I think the Webbs might argue) for social scientists to think creatively and critically about a future in which peoples everywhere – not just in Britain – are able to fulfil their potential in a world confronting challenges every bit as complex as those which faced the founders of the School back in 1895. ■



# A tour in time

Who laid LSE's foundation stones? What popular TV show was filmed in the Peacock Theatre? And which building is on the site of a 16th century rubbish pit?

To find out the answers to these questions, and see just how much our campus has changed through the years, take a tour in time with a new interactive guide to the history of LSE's key buildings.

Based on LSE Library's archive photos and historical trivia from our archivist, this tour has been produced as part of our 120th Anniversary celebrations and is online at the LSE history blog: [blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory)

