

Manuscript of the Month April 2012

Primrose League diploma awarded to Sir Henry Ainslie Hoare Bt, 1892



How many people know that 19th April is Primrose Day? And yet a hundred years or so ago thousands of people would have sported primroses in their buttonholes or visited Westminster Square to view the primrose wreaths beneath Disraeli's statue. For as the *Daily Telegraph* noted in 1888: *Never have primroses been so largely worn. Merchants in the city, ladies in the*

West-end, cabmen on their hansoms, 'bus drivers, errand boys, and nursemaids were alike in their tastes. These people were all part of one of the most powerful political movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the Primrose League.

The Primrose League was established in November 1883 by a group of prominent Tories that included Lord Randolph Churchill (father of Winston) and bank customer Sir John Eldon Gorst. And it emerged during a difficult time in the Conservative party's history. After six years in power, the Tories had lost the general election of 1880. A year later, on 19 April 1881, their long-time leader, Benjamin Disraeli, died. Moreover, it seemed to Churchill and other staunch Tories that Gladstone's Liberal government was intent on destroying everything Disraeli had fought so hard to achieve. It was Disraeli, after all, who had proclaimed Queen Victoria Empress of India; who had secured a £4M stake in the Suez Canal; who had steadfastly maintained a military presence in Afghanistan. Yet under Gladstone the British garrison at Kandahar was abandoned, leaving Afghanistan vulnerable to Russian encroachment, which in turn jeopardized British trade with India. Turmoil in Egypt and Sudan was allowed to continue more or less unchecked, endangering both Britain's imperial ambitions and her Suez investment. Closer to home, public expenditure and taxes were on the rise, while a flood of cheap goods into Britain, made possible by the emergence of railways, steamships and refrigeration, had led to a slump in agricultural prices, rents and wages. And to cap it all, the Liberals were planning not only to widen the franchise, but to support Irish Home Rule, an issue that threatened to tear the United Kingdom apart.

It was against this backdrop that the Primrose League was formed. Named after Disraeli's favourite flower, the League had three objectives: *the maintenance of Religion, of the Estates of the Realm, and of the unity and ascendancy of the Empire.* An office was rented in Essex Street and membership fees set at a nominal 2/6d per annum, to encourage as many people as possible to join. Cannily, the League's leaders played on the Victorian yearning for all things medieval. Local associations were referred to as Habitations, members as Knights and Dames.

Within three years the Primrose League had attracted over 245,000 members and set up 1,200 Habitations across the country, from Paisley in the north to Exeter in the south. Women, who made up nearly half its membership, were given equal status and a junior branch, the Primrose Buds, was formed for children aged seven and over. To foster a sense of fellowship, the Primrose League set out to be as sociable as possible. An annual Grand Habitation, held on the anniversary of Disraeli's death (19 April) was the highlight, but there were numerous more modest entertainments throughout the year, including balls, bazaars, picnics, concerts, lectures, fêtes and sports' days. The League's Grand Councillor, the Marquis of Salisbury, regularly threw open the gates of Hatfield House for Habitation visits, complete with teas, speeches and brass bands, while at a North Kensington Habitation concert in 1894 *songs, recitations and violin solos were intermingled, and Mr Alfred Heald brought down the house by a spirited rendering of 'Tommy Atkins'*. Music was to play an important role in spreading the Primrose League's message. There were songs, of course, with such stirring titles as 'Grasp the Flag', 'True Britons All' and 'The Primrose Maid', but also waltzes and marches, available as sheet music for use domestically or at local gatherings.

Crucially, this coalescence of support occurred at a key moment in British political life. From 1883 political parties were no longer allowed to employ paid canvassers. A year later an additional 2M men, mainly agricultural workers, were given the vote, increasing the electorate by 25%. The Primrose League offered the Conservative party a way of reaching out to these new voters, many of whom were Liberal by inclination, along with a vast army of unpaid canvassers and the machinery to back them up – speakers for local meetings, leaflets on a wide range of topics, from *Conservatism and English Liberty* to *How the Public Purse is Filled*, even lantern lectures *in order that the Habitations may find...the material for a healthy entertainment*. The lantern lectures on offer were a mixture of the political – *Our Glorious Empire* or *Our Imperial Navy* – and the entertaining – *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll), *The Death of Little Nell* (Dickens) or *The Wreck of the Hesperus* (Longfellow). To encourage members to work for the cause, an honours system was introduced that spawned a series of clasps and badges (including the one pictured here) embellished with primroses and the League's motto, *Imperium et Liberta* (Empire and Liberty).



One of the Primrose League's earliest members (no 65) was Sir Henry Ainslie Hoare Bt. Born in 1824, the eldest son of bank partner Henry Charles Hoare, Henry Ainslie inherited his baronetcy and the Stourhead estate in Wiltshire from an uncle in 1857. Although initially a Liberal MP, Henry Ainslie's growing distrust of Gladstone prompted his defection to the Conservatives in the mid 1870s, a move he was later to describe as the strangest event in his existence. By the early 1880s, Henry Ainslie was a familiar figure in Tory circles, much in demand as a speaker. So familiar did he become, in fact, that *Vanity Fair* made him the subject of one of its famous 'Spy' cartoons in 1883.

Henry Ainslie's experiences perfectly illustrate the widespread unease that led to the formation and subsequent flourishing of the Primrose League. In December 1882 he wrote to his mother: *where are we going to!! & what is going to become of us in this increasing ever growing inclemency of atmosphere & climate & the revolutionary tendencies of the age fostered by the fiend Gladstone.* A few months later, the agricultural depression forced Henry Ainslie to sell off part of his estate and many of Stourhead's treasures: paintings by Rembrandt, Titian and Canaletto, as well as statues, porcelain, silver and books. Small wonder, then, that when the Primrose League was first proposed, Henry Ainslie was quick to offer his support.

By 1885 the outlook was no less uncertain, as a letter to Henry Ainslie from Sir Stafford Northcote, a future Tory Foreign Secretary, indicates: *How fast the Government are breaking up the Empire! I am very uneasy at the look of things in Egypt, whether from a political or a military point of view. And what has become of Gordon?* General Gordon's death at Khartoum on 26 January 1885, two days before the arrival of a relief force and three days before this letter was written, caused an outcry in Britain. Two weeks later, at a Primrose League meeting in Cheltenham, Henry Ainslie deplored *the shilly-shallying policy of the Government*, which had led to Gordon's death or capture and threatened Britain's trade with India. As he put it, *Trade followed the flag, and if the flag did not flaunt high, trade would diminish.*

The general election of 1885 saw Henry Ainslie stand as the Conservative candidate for East Somerset. Times might have changed, but as the local landowner he was still expected to win. His defeat, therefore, left his friends stunned. One, local solicitor Henry Dyne, knew exactly who to blame: *all the party are disgusted at the treachery and ingratitude of the Agricultural labourer – who after being taken to the Polling Booth by his Master, has turned round & forfeited his promise to him – it has been a cruel fraud & entirely dissipates the idea we have hitherto entertained of the honesty of the British labourer.* Henry Ainslie did not stand for Parliament again, but he remained an active supporter of the Primrose League, sitting on its Ruling Council and speaking at Habitations up and down the country. Primrose Day 1888 found him attending the Grand Habitation at Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket, where, on a Union Jack-swathed stage, beneath a banner proclaiming 'Success to the Primrose League', he urged an audience of 3,000 to oppose the idea of 'one man one vote'. That year, Henry Ainslie's services to the Primrose League were recognized with the award of the Grand Star. Four years later he was made a Knight Imperial.

At the time of Henry Ainslie's death in 1894, the Primrose League's membership stood at over 1.2M. Numbers peaked at 2M in 1910, but fell away during the 1920s and 1930s as constituency associations developed and imperialism gave way to nationalism. Even the terminology that had appealed so much to Victorian sensibilities – Knights, Dames and Habitations – came to be seen as anachronistic. By the 1980s, the Primrose League existed in little more than name only, although it was not formally wound up until 2004.