

Joseph Chamberlain - An Introduction



Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) was a social reformer, radical politician and Imperialist, who despite never becoming Prime Minister, was one of the leading political figures of late Victorian and early Edwardian Britain.

Chamberlain became a major figure in national politics and played an important and often controversial role in the major political issues of his day such as Irish Home Rule, The Anglo-Boer War (1849-1902) and international tariffs.

Throughout his career Chamberlain retained a strong political base in Birmingham which was known as his 'Duchy' and centred on his home of [Highbury](#).

Chamberlain aged 18 joined his uncle's screw-making business, Nettlefolds of [Birmingham](#), in which his father had invested. During the business's most prosperous period, it produced two-thirds of all metal screws made in England, and by the time of Chamberlain's retirement from business in 1874 it was exporting worldwide. He was a self-made businessman, who never attended university and had contempt for the aristocracy.

By his late 30s he had made enough money to retire, but had developed an appetite for local politics and in 1867 joined what was then Birmingham town council. "He was strongly influenced to enter into politics by the Unitarian church, who believed the only form of faith was what they called 'up and doing' - putting a civic gospel into practice," said Dr Ian Cawood, from Newman University in Birmingham.

Chamberlain became mayor of Birmingham in 1873, which was not granted city status until 1889. His party inherited the city's municipal administration, which was notably lax with regards to public works, and many urban dwellers lived in conditions of great poverty. As mayor, Chamberlain promoted many civic improvements, promising the city would be "parked, paved, assized, marketed, gas & watered and 'improved'".

His first major decision was to buy both the Birmingham and Staffordshire gas companies and affect a hostile takeover of Birmingham Waterworks. The city's water supply was considered a danger to public health at the time and approximately half of the city's population was dependent on well water, much of which was polluted by sewage. Piped water was only supplied three days per week, compelling the use of well water and water carts for the rest of the week. Deploring the rising death rate from contagious diseases in the poorest parts of the city, in January 1876 Chamberlain forcibly purchased Birmingham's waterworks for a combined sum of £1,350,000, creating [Birmingham Corporation Water Department](#), having declared to a House of Commons Committee that "We have not the slightest intention of making profit...We shall get our profit indirectly in the comfort of the town and in the health of the inhabitants".

The following year he launched his £1.75m city improvement scheme, which used money from the gas industry and public funds to build libraries, schools and swimming pools. During Chamberlain's tenure of office, [Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery](#) was enlarged and a number of new parks were opened. Construction of the [Council House](#) was begun, while the [Victoria Law Courts](#) were built on Corporation Street. It also included clearing slum housing to build the "Parisian boulevard-style" road, Corporation Street as seen below.



Corporation Street Birmingham

The mayoralty helped make Chamberlain a national figure. His pioneer efforts in educational reform, slum clearance, improved housing, and municipalisation of public utilities vaulted him into national prominence. In 1876 he was elected to Parliament, where he was distrusted as a Dissenter and an upstart, and his genuinely radical speeches, delivered with a haughty confidence, frightened the Conservatives, however his industrial middle-class constituency in Birmingham adored him,

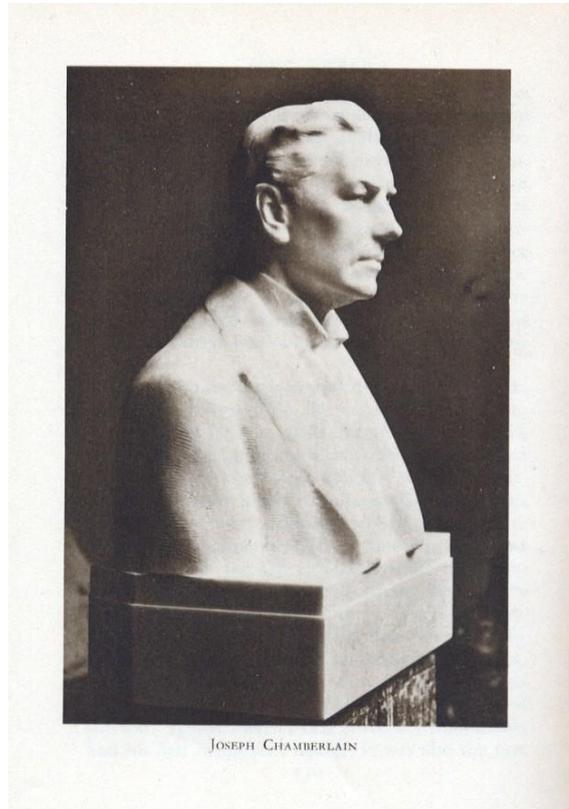
At the age of 40, the “gas-and-water Socialist,” widely caricatured for his spare frame, incisive features, and ribboned monocle, was one of the most successful men in England. Contemporaries commenting upon his youthfulness and dress, including "a black velvet coat, jaunty eyeglass in eye, red neck-tie drawn through a ring" He would always wear a monocle, and an orchid in his buttonhole.



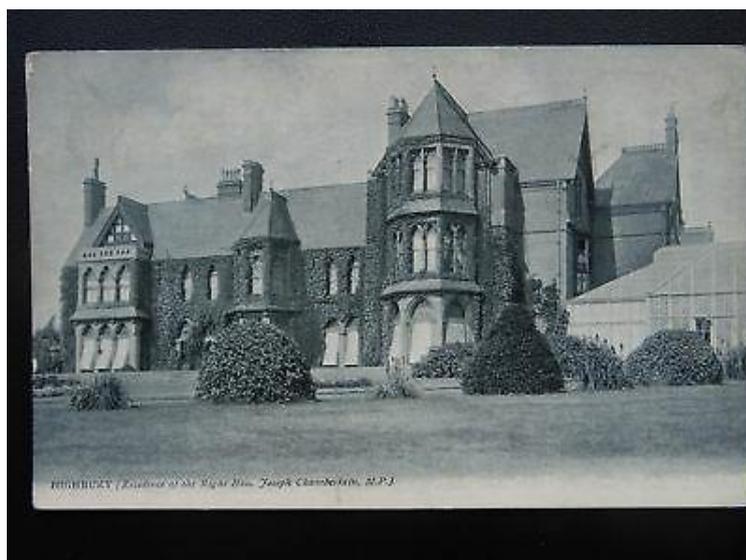
Joseph Chamberlain 1900

Chamberlain celebrated his seventieth birthday July 8th 1906 and Birmingham was enlivened for a number of days by official luncheons, public addresses, parades, bands and an influx of thousands of congratulatory telegrams. Tens of thousands of people crowded to hear Chamberlain make a passionate speech on 10 July, promoting the virtues of Radicalism and imperialism. Chamberlain suffered a stroke that paralysed his right side and ended his political career 13 July 1906, 7 days after his 70th birthday,

He died in July 1914 aged 78 and is buried in Keyhill Cemetery, Birmingham, after his family turned down the offer for him to be laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. He is buried in the same grave as his first two wives, and close to that of his parents. On 31 March 1916, the Chamberlain Memorial, a bust created by sculptor Mark Tweed, was unveiled at Westminster Abbey.



Highbury estate, which includes Highbury Park, has been run by Birmingham City Council under the terms of a trust set up by the Chamberlain family in the 1930s.



Highbury - Residence of Joseph Chamberlain MP

Professor Emeritus Peter Marsh, who wrote Chamberlain's biography in 1994, said: "Under his guidance Birmingham was known as the best-governed city in the industrial world.

"Although he had his critics, the thinking then was if you could carry Birmingham you could carry the country - it had huge national prominence."

Dr Ian Cawood said Chamberlain was seen as Britain's "first truly modern, professional politician". He is credited as the first MP to print and hand out propaganda leaflets, much like today's election flyers, he said.

But while his public persona grew, his ambitions to land the job of prime minister all but ended in 1886, when he resigned from the government over William Gladstone's Irish Home Rule proposals. His highest position within government was secretary of state for the colonies.

In Birmingham there are a number of memorials to Joseph Chamberlain, but no statue. There is the "Old Joe" clock tower at the University of Birmingham and a monument in Chamberlain Square.



Old Joe Clock Tower Birmingham University