

## JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN, 1836–1914

An English statesman, Joseph Chamberlain was born at Highbury in London on July 8th 1836. He came to Birmingham in 1854, at the age of 18, to represent his father in the screw-making business of his uncle John Sutton Nettlefold. Previously he had worked in his father's wholesale footwear business in Milk Street, Cheapside, London. Most of his public life was spent as a Member of Parliament, but not before he had set in train the remarkable and far-reaching reforms for which he is remembered and honoured in his adopted town.

Birmingham was not much of a place when he arrived. It had some of the worst slums in Europe, sanitation was non-existent, water supplies were inadequate and polluted, and illiteracy was widespread; there was no public cemetery, no art gallery, no public library. Joseph Chamberlain did much to alter all this once he was elected to the town council in 1869.



*Joseph Chamberlain*

He became mayor in 1873, an office which he continued to hold for the next three years. During those years he led a reforming council to take over the gas, water and sewage works. The gas undertaking was soon justifying the town's investment by running at a profit while reducing the cost to users. The water supply was extended and improved by the laying of new mains, the sinking of artesian wells and the building of a large storage reservoir at Shustoke, thus ensuring cleaner, more plentiful and cheaper supplies. Profits from these enterprises went towards further improvements for the benefit of the town's inhabitants.

Many other improvements to further the health of the town were set in train at this time, but perhaps Joseph Chamberlain's greatest achievement, the one for which he is principally remembered and honoured by the citizens of Birmingham, was the Improvement Scheme. This affected some 93 acres of land in the town centre, consisting mostly of slums. The whole area between the two railway stations, New Street and Snow Hill, was demolished and rebuilt. Thus Corporation Street was born.

In 1876 he was elected to Parliament where he became closely involved with such 19th-century controversies as Ireland, the Transvaal, and Tariff Reform. He held office under

Gladstone and Lord Salisbury. But this did not stop him continuing to work and fight for Birmingham. It was largely thanks to his efforts that Birmingham University was founded in 1900 with him as its first Chancellor. He had always been a keen supporter of education. Before his mayoralty he and his father had given financial support to the Birmingham Education League which was founded in 1867. This body, of which he became chairman, later became national and paved the way for universal education.

He had a colourful private life, but with much sadness. He was married three times, and he was loved - against her better judgement - by Beatrice Potter, later Beatrice Webb. Joseph's first wife, Harriet Kenrick whom he married in 1861 when they were both twenty-five, died in childbirth two years later leaving him with two small children, Beatrice and Austen who was to become a statesman like his father. Harriet's family, who lived at Barrow Court in Edgbaston, immediately provided them with a home. It was here that he first became interested in the cultivation of orchids for which he later became famous, always wearing a fresh one in his button-hole.

Meanwhile Joseph senior sold his business and moved to Birmingham, renting Moor Green Hall in Moseley. Five years after Harriet's death, Joseph married her cousin Florence who bore him four children, Neville (who was later to become Prime Minister), Ida, Hilda and Ethel. In 1875 Florence also died. Chamberlain was bitterly unhappy for thirteen years, and found some consolation in his work. During this period he built himself an elaborate mansion in Gothic style at Moor Green, calling it Highbury after his birthplace. He moved there in 1880. It was at this time that he courted Beatrice Potter, but nothing came of it: she hated Highbury and never liked going there.



*Highbury*

In 1887, in the United States as one of the three Commissioners appointed by Lord Salisbury to arbitrate over the fisheries dispute between that country and Canada, he met Mary Endicott, daughter of the American Secretary of State for War. They were married in 1888, and she brought great happiness both to him and to his children. She was a great asset to his social life, entertaining many guests from both Birmingham and London. Winston Churchill spent two days at Highbury when he was on a tour of the Midlands as a War Correspondent during the Boer War.

In 1906 he suffered a stroke and was unable to carry out any further political duties. He died in London on July 6th 1914. A funeral in Westminster Abbey was offered, but his family preferred to bring him home to his adopted city of Birmingham. He was buried at Key Hill Cemetery in the park, paved, assized, marketed, gas and water—improved city which is a far more enduring memorial to him than the fountain erected in Chamberlain Square in 1880.

Joseph Chamberlain was surely one of the greatest benefactors to Birmingham.

*Ellen Wilkins*

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