



## **No.19 Curzon Street**

### **Benjamin Disraeli, Sir John Soane and Curzon Street nobility**

During 1880-1 No.19 Curzon Street was the former home of the first and only Jewish Prime Minister, who is attributed with the creation of the modern Conservative party, Benjamin Disraeli. It also features an architectural addition by Georgian architect, Sir John Soane. Over the last 250 years this Georgian terraced house has been the home of many prominent residents including many amongst the nobility of England and Ireland. Along with Benjamin Disraeli, No.19 Curzon Street has been home to a number of politicians including the third Earl of Marchmont, George Ponsonby, Baron King, the Earl of Tankerville and Lord William Powlett, who also found himself accused of stealing slippers from Burlington arcade!

#### **Brookfield, the May Fair and the Curzon family**

Mayfair instantly inspires thoughts of prestige, luxury and elegance, but in fact the early history of the area originated with the notorious May Fair which was known for its violence, debauchery and crime. The fair was held during the first two weeks of May and was established in the area known as 'Brookfield' in 1688, where Shepherds Market and Curzon Street are today. The fair was closed down in 1708, but only finally ceased when Curzon Street was built up during the 1750s. The name Curzon originates from the Curzon family who owned this area of Mayfair from the 17th century. The land passed to Sir Nathaniel Curzon and under his direction he set about developing the land from the 1720s.

#### **No.19 Curzon Street completed**

No.19 Curzon Street was completed in around 1758-9. At this time the houses were numbered differently and No.19 was in fact known as No.17 Curzon Street. The parish rate books show people starting to move into this western stretch of Curzon Street during the early 1760s, with the first occupant at No.17 recorded in 1764, the Earl of Marchmont.

#### **First resident – third Earl of Marchmont**

Hugh Campbell, third Earl of Marchmont was a politician and a member of the House of Lords for 34 years. He was a friend of Alexander Pope and Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough and a prominent landholder in Berwickshire. Shortly before moving to Curzon Street Marchmont was completing his country home, Marchmont House in the Scottish borders, which still stands today.

#### **Sir John Seabright**

The Earl of Marchmont remained in the house until around 1786 when it became the home of Sir John Seabright. Sir John Seabright made a name for himself as an avid scientist, in particular in the area of breeding. In fact, one of the oldest breeds of British chicken is named in his honour – the Seabright Bantam. Charles Darwin called Sir Seabright one of the clearest writers on the subject of breeding and by some is considered the father of the science.

#### **Sir John Soane alterations**

By 1800 the street numbers had changed to what they are today and in 1802 Sir John Seabright commissioned renowned architect, Sir John Soane (who had already worked on his country estate, Beechwood in Hertfordshire) to make alterations to No.19 Curzon Street. Original drawings show the main addition of a west-facing room on the ground, first and second floors. Architectural historian and Soane expert, Ptolemy Dean, explains that "This is a very rare and important example of a surviving Soane townhouse addition".

#### **George Ponsonby and Lord Peter King**

Sir John Seabright lived at the house until around 1813 but records show that Seabright continued as the owner until around 1820. Between 1813 and 1819 Seabright leased the house firstly to George Ponsonby and then Lord King.

The Right Honourable George Ponsonby was the grandson of the third Duke of Devonshire of Chatsworth in Derbyshire. He had a long and successful political career culminating in his role as Lord Chancellor of Ireland in 1806 and Leader of the Whig Party in 1808-1817. George Ponsonby died at No.19 Curzon Street in 1817.

Peter King was the seventh Baron King and another politician to grace No.19 Curzon Street. Lord King gained the title at the age of 18 and throughout his career published a number of pamphlets and books including, *Life of John Locke*, in 1829.

#### **Lord William Vane Powlett and the slippers**

In 1820 No.19 Curzon Street became the home of Lord William Vane Powlett. Lord Powlett became an MP from the age of 20 in 1812 and remained in Parliament until 1857. Powlett was connected to an unusual event in 1847 when he was “charged with having stolen two embroidered slippers worth 12 shillings” from a shop in Burlington Arcade. The court trial was recorded in *The Times* giving great detail of the alleged crime, but was thrown out with comments like “it was rather singular for a nobleman to carry away slippers in his pocket”, especially as the two slippers did not match and “that two odd slippers could have been of no use to any one”.

Powlett lived at No.19 Curzon Street for over 40 years and at the time of the 1861 census was recorded as “landed proprietor” with his wife Lady Caroline and 12 live-in servants. Lord Powlett passed away in 1864, in the same year he inherited the Dukedom of Cleveland from his brother.

#### **The Earl of Tankerville**

The next occupant, in 1865, was Charles Bennet, Earl of Tankerville, later Lord Ossulston. Tankerville lived at Curzon Street with his wife, Lady Olivia until around 1879-80. At the time of the 1871 census the Earl and Countess were recorded in the house with their three youngest children and 12 live-in servants. Tankerville was an MP until 1859 when he was called to the House of Lords under the Barony of Ossulston. He was Captain of the Gentleman-at-Arms in 1866-7 and Lord Steward in 1867-8.

#### **Benjamin Disraeli – Earl of Beaconsfield**

It was in 1880 that writer and former Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, the Earl of Beaconsfield moved to No.19 Curzon Street. Disraeli bought the lease with the proceeds of one of his most successful books, *Endymion*.

Disraeli first entered parliament as MP for Maidstone in 1837 and it was the beginning of a long political career. He rose to become Leader of the Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord Derby’s government in 1852 and after the resignation of Derby in 1868, Queen Victoria invited him to be Prime Minister. During the height of his career Disraeli held a bitter rivalry with opposition leader William Gladstone. He became Prime Minister for the second time in 1874 until 1880 and was created Earl of Beaconsfield in 1879. When Disraeli moved to Curzon Street he was still walking to Westminster until a month before his death.

Disraeli was recorded in the 1881 census as a widower aged 75 with the occupation of “Ex Prime Minister” and had 13 live-in servants. A later note was added to the census return, “died 19th April 1881 - R.I.P”. Newspaper reports later claimed that “in the closing weeks of his life increasing crowds gathered round his house and his passing was followed by a general burst of sorrow.”

#### **The Countess of Stafford**

By 1888, No.19 Curzon Street became the home of Dowager Countess of Stafford, widow of George Byng, the 2nd Earl of Stafford. Harriet, Countess of Stafford was the daughter of Charles Cavendish, 1st Baron Chesham and was also directly related to the Cavendish’s of Chatsworth House. Both the court directories and the census records show the Countess of Stafford at No.19 Curzon Street along with her children, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Byng; Captain Lionel Byng (later Major Byng); Honourable Julian Byng (later Field Marshall Sir Julian Byng, Viscount Byng of Vimy); and her daughters, Susan and Elizabeth. The census also shows that in 1891 the Countess of Stafford had 14 live-in servants.

The Countess of Stafford passed away in 1892 and *The Times* in December of that year shows some of the contents of the house on sale, including “valuable plate...Louis XIV tortoiseshell clocks, bronzes...coloured engravings, also a few lots of Havannah [sic] cigars.”

#### **Lady Brabourne**

By 1893 No.19 Curzon Street had become the home of the Honourable Mrs Knatchbull-Hugessen, Lady Brabourne, wife of the 2nd Baron Brabourne. The 1901 census records Lady Brabourne at No.19 Curzon Street with her daughters, Margaret and Bettine, along with eight servants including a governess and a French



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cook. It was during the occupancy of Lady Brabourne that the house was used for musical concerts and in May 1896 one such concert was reported in *The Times*, with mezzo-soprano singer, Miss Simons. Lady Brabourne remained at No.19 Curzon Street until just after World War I when she leased it to Dowager Lady Leven and Melville. However, by 1920 Lady Brabourne was selling the house and contents and *The Times* records valuable contents including - 18th century decorative furniture, a Boudoir grand piano, Persian carpets, oil paintings and a Chippendale bedstead.

**20th century Curzon Street**

Very little is known about the house during the 1920s and 30s and by the end of World War II the house was converted into office space for a number of businesses. No.19 then became known as Disraeli House for a short time. It was during the 1990s that large scale redevelopment came to the western end of Curzon Street with the addition of new offices facing Park Lane and the creation of the secluded Curzon Square.

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