

The Primrose League

Founded in 1883 by Sir Winston Churchill's father, Lord Randolph Churchill, and other leading Conservatives, the League was a ploy to boost support for the Conservative Party across all classes and increase the likelihood of Conservative candidates winning elections. The League was very successful in attracting members. In 1888 the West Riding of Yorkshire had 18,684 members in 21 Divisions and 64 Habitations (Branches). Overall there were 527,179 members in England in 1888, an extremely rapid growth for the movement over a five year period. The membership passed one million by 1891 and two million by 1910.

The Primrose League certainly attracted leading members of the community in Tickhill and the surrounding area. The inaugural meeting of the local branch, the Scarborough Habitation, was held in the drawing room of Firbeck Hall on 4 May 1886. Evidence of a subsequent meeting can be found in the 13 May 1893 issue of 'The Primrose League Gazette':

Yorkshire West Riding, Doncaster Division, Scarborough Habitation (no. 1417) The annual meeting of this Habitation was held in the Conservative Club, Tickhill, on the 20th ult the Ruling Councillor Mrs Jebb presiding. The balance-sheet having been submitted and adopted the following were elected as officers of the Habitation for the ensuing year:- Lord Scarborough, Patron; Mrs Jebb, Ruling Councillor; Mr Whitaker, President; Major Hall hon. Treasurer; and Miss Phillips and Miss Maud Phillips, hon. Secretaries. The Executive Council was appointed as follows:- Rev H G Jebb, Rev C T Duffin, Messrs W H Crossley, Arnold Summers, G G Phillips, T A Wise, Captain Gray, R.N., Miss Jebb, Mrs Schofield, Mrs White, Miss Poole, Mrs Gray, Mrs Curtis, Miss Phillips, Miss Maud Phillips, and all the officers of the Habitation. The following were chosen as Wardens:- Miss Jebb, Firbeck; Mrs Schofield, Maltby; Miss Poole, Letwell; Mr G Summers, Sandbeck; and Miss Phillips, Miss Maud Phillips and Miss Walker, Tickhill. Captain Gray and Mr Wise were elected auditors, and Mr Whitaker and Mr Crossley delegates to the Doncaster Divisional Council. The Habitation is increasing, and now numbers about 500 members.

From the founding of the Primrose League women had the same status as men, the first political organisation where this was so. Even after a separate Ladies Branch and Grand Council were created in 1885, women still played a key part in local branches. In this area Mrs Jebb of Firbeck Hall was Ruling Councillor and chaired meetings. Amongst people in Tickhill who supported the Primrose League were the local Medical Officer of Health, Dr George Griffith Phillips and his daughters who lived on Northgate. Valerie Oxley has researched the census data for the family as part of her interest in Park Hill School attended by one of Dr Phillips' daughters, Guendoline, in 1901 when she was aged 14. Her two older sisters were Ellen May aged 29 in 1893 and Augusta Maud then aged 20. These two were the League's honorary secretaries and local wardens. No mention is made of their mother, Mrs Ellen Phillips, in the 1893 article. Possibly she was busy enough with her voluntary work as District Visitor responsible for liaising with families who lived on the east side from Mangham Lane to the Wadworth end of the village.

Another meeting, this time at Loversall Hall, gives a flavour of how new members were attracted to the Primrose League through a social activity, as reported in 'The Primrose League Gazette' 1 February 1899:

The first of a series of Primrose League meetings, promoted by the Doncaster Habitation of the League, was held at Loversall Hall, by kind permission of Colonel and Mrs Skipwith, on December 12th. The meeting which was of a social character, was held in the large dining room, and about 120 persons were present, some of the company having come from Wadworth and houses in the vicinity. A platform had been erected at one end of the room, and was fitted up with a curtain and other stage like accessories. Colonel Skipwith presided, and made an excellent chairman. Mr H J Pettifer, of London, who has often spoken at meetings in this division was the chief speaker....In opening the meeting Colonel Skipwith said that they had met together to promote the interests of the Primrose League, and if any of them wished to join he asked them to see Mrs Skipwith, who had been appointed warden for the district. Mr Pettifer then delivered a most humorous and instructive address. The following programme was rendered: Gigelira [xylophone] solo, Miss Tottie; song, 'Soldiers of the Queen', Mr G Simpson; song, 'Life's Lullaby', Miss Sheppard; Whistling solo, Miss Tottie; song 'The Happy Fatherland', Mr Leigh Bennett; song 'The Green Broom' Miss Sheppard; song, 'Jack's the Boy for Work', Mr G Simpson; song, 'The First Cigar', Mr Leigh Bennett; duologue, 'The Lady Interviewer' Miss Tottie and Miss Sheppard. The Chairman proposed a vote of thanks to Mr Pettifer and to the vocalists, which was seconded by Mr Sykes, and carried with acclamation.



The Primrose League badge, left, has gold coloured letters on a yellow enamel background. The League had a variety of badges signifying, for example, ordinary membership (a few pence for associate members, 2/6 p.a. for full membership), membership of the Grand Council and recognition of noteworthy work for the League. All incorporated this emblem in some form, some badges even being set in diamonds. The primrose symbol was adopted as it was allegedly the favourite flower of Benjamin Disraeli who died in 1881.

Further details of the Primrose League can be found in websites <<http://primrose-league.leadhoster.com/history.html>> <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/9088/sheets_PhDDissertation.pdf> and <<https://www.newspapers.com>> (for 'The Primrose League Gazette').