

THE STIRLING UNIONIST CLUB 1901 to 1919

David Perry

On Friday December 20th 1901 the following notice appeared in the *Stirling Journal & Advertiser*:

Unionist Club for Stirling

We beg to remind our readers that the Unionist Club in the Union Hall, Thistle Street will be opened at 8 o'clock. All Unionists will be welcome.

And so it was that the Stirling Unionist Club formally came into being. The *Stirling Journal & Advertiser* reported on this momentous event thus:

Opening of a Unionist Club in Stirling

Some time ago the leaders of the Conservative & Unionist Party in Stirling leased a portion of the old Union Hall in Thistle Street in order to fit it up as a political club which has been for long a felt want in Stirling. Tradesmen have been engaged on the premises during the past few weeks making the necessary alterations, & this work has now been completed as far as it is to be carried out at present. The result is a commodious and comfortable club where members can meet from time to time to read the magazines and papers, or spend an hour at billiards, chess or draughts. The opening ceremony took place on Friday night.

J.B. Richardson was in the Chair and the platform party consisted of: John Paton, Ex-Provost Yellowlees, John Monteath, D.W. Logie, Charles Wilson, A.G. Graham, T.W.R. Johnstone, M. Yorke, A.C. Buchanan, Henry Robb and Robert Whyte.

The Chairman welcomed the company to the first meeting of the club. It was by name a Constitutional or Unionist Club and all the members were expected to be loyal to King Edward VII and to the British Empire (Applause).

It was a social and educative club, not merely a club for amusements and pastimes, but a club to educate working men of this burgh in a proper way of thinking.

The Chairman had read a paper a few weeks ago "Organisation" at the Albert Hall on the need to improve their organisation. Now they had a club to meet in. Their main interest was to do everything in their power, leaving no stone unturned, until they had ousted Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman from these burghs. They had thrown down the gauntlet and they could not look back. Every man of them must go forward and do his utmost for that purpose.....

There was much more in this vein.

Thus the Stirling Unionist Club was set up to pursue the political aims of its founders. The club was there to provide social activities for its (gentlemen) members, but they were meant to support the political objectives:

- to ensure Ireland remained within the United Kingdom,
- to support the British Empire,
- and to oust the Liberals from power and replace them with Unionists.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AROUND THE TIME OF THE FORMATION OF THE CLUB

Towards the end of the 19th century there were two political parties: the Conservatives and the Liberals. The Conservatives were led by Lord Salisbury and the Liberals by William Gladstone (died 1898).

Gladstone was very keen to solve the "Irish Question". The country of Ireland was then one unit, and wished to be independent of Great Britain. Gladstone supported Irish Independence and in 1886 unsuccessfully introduced his Home Rule for Ireland Bill. Ireland would have Home Rule, but would still pay taxes to Britain and send members to Westminster. Many politicians were against independence and wished Ireland to remain united with the rest of Britain, and hence they called themselves Unionists. Both the Liberal and Conservative parties had Unionist sympathisers and hence there were both Liberal Unionists and Conservative Unionists.

The Liberal Unionists were led by Joseph Chamberlain and their policies were much the same as the Conservatives. From 1886 to 1892 the Conservatives were in power, in alliance with the Conservative Unionists and Liberal Unionists. Gladstone's Liberals won the election of 1892 and made one last attempt to bring home rule to Ireland. Gladstone personally piloted the Bill through the Commons but he was defeated by the Lords. He then resigned and the new Prime Minister was Lord Rosebery. His government resigned in 1895 and the Conservatives, again supported by the Unionists, resumed power.

At the time the Stirling Unionist Club came into being (December 1901) the government was Conservative and Unionist, led by Lord Salisbury. However the member for the Stirling Burghs was the Liberal Leader of the Opposition, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who was not a Unionist. He strongly advocated Home Rule and was a considerable thorn in the flesh of the Stirling Unionists at the turn of the century.

Another major issue at this time was the war in South Africa. What we now know as the Union of South Africa comprised the four provinces of Cape of Good Hope and Natal controlled by the British, and Transvaal and the Orange Free State, controlled by the Boers (the descendants of the original Dutch settlers).

Joseph Chamberlain (a Liberal Unionist Alliance MP within the Conservative government) was the Colonial Secretary, and he, together with Cecil Rhodes, had expansionist ideals. They wished to annexe Transvaal and the Orange Free State but the Boers had other ideas. The war began in 1899. At first the Boers were successful and laid seige to British strongholds in Mafeking and Ladysmith. However the Boers were mainly farmers and were overwhelmed as British professional soldiers were poured in. The main war was virtually over by the end of 1900, but a guerilla war ensued until peace was finally made in May 1902.

Campbell-Bannerman's particular interest was South Africa and he accused

the Conservatives of being warmongers. He was prepared to strike a deal with the Boer Generals and accused the British Government of excessive brutality in carrying out the war effort. The Unionists were incensed and responded that the Government had done everything they could to prevent the war starting, but now they were in it they were determined to bring the Boer Colonies into the British Empire. Consequently the Stirling Unionists were implacably against Campbell-Bannerman.

The enthusiasm and drive of local businessmen James Brown Richardson and Ex-Provost Robert Yellowlees led to the formation of the Unionist Club where members could meet in comfort and indulge in political debate. The presence of T.W.R. Johnstone on the committee was extremely significant. As editor of the *Stirling Journal*, publicity could be given to the activities of the club. Many a vitriolic article was published rubbishing the speeches of the Stirling Burghs MP Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman.

A LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER

June 6th 1902 was a big day and the Committee resolved to send a letter of congratulation to the Prime Minister the Marquis of Salisbury and members of the government on the conclusion of the South African war. The letter was couched as follows:

The members of the Stirling Unionist Club unite in congratulating His Majesty's Government on peace being proclaimed in South Africa and on the eminently satisfactory terms of settlement by which it has been attained. They feel that the country has been laid under a deep debt of gratitude to them for the determined and yet most humane manner in which the prolonged struggle was maintained, for having steadily kept in view and completely secured the objects for which the war was waged, and for the admirable diplomatic skill by which an amicable pacification may now be regarded as assured. It was further resolved that a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the Most Honourable Marquis of Salisbury, Right Hon A Balfour, Right Hon Jas Chamberlain, Rt. Hon John Roderick and James McKillop MP.

THE PRIME MINISTER RETIRES

The committee liked to make their presence felt and on 20th July 1902 decided to send a letter of congratulation to the new Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour following the retirement of Lord Salisbury (Robert Cecil). Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman still of course represented Stirling Burghs.

The Stirling Unionist Club cordially offer you their sincere congratulations on your being called to be Prime Minister: and especially on the unanimity with which all parties have concurred and rejoiced in your promotion to the dignified office. Although on political questions we cannot agree with the present representative of the Stirling District of Burghs, we feel that when, in his place in Parliament, he addressed you in words of welcome and of appreciation he

expresses the sentiments of all his constituents, and not least of those who are members of this club. With the assurance that by the blessing of Providence the affairs of the British Empire are safe under your guidance, and wishing you much personal satisfaction and great success in the discharge of your more onerous and yet most honourable duties:- I am, sir,

Yours respectfully

J. B. Richardson

President of the Stirling Unionist Club

The committee further decided to send the following extract from the minutes to the Marquis of Salisbury:

The Stirling Unionist Club join in the universal regret that Lord Salisbury has now asked relief from the position of Prime Minister which he has occupied for seventeen years with the greatest dignity, wisdom and success. They trust that the noble Marquis may yet be spared many years to enjoy the retirement so nobly earned; and that as opportunity offers the Empire may yet continue to profit in home affairs and in foreign relations by his matured experience, his clear vision, his wise counsel and his high ideals.

Letters of acknowledgement and thanks were received from the recipients.

THE FIRST AGM

The first AGM of the club took place on October 10th 1902. The membership had reached 560.

The Vice-President, ex-Provost Yellowlees said that the club had attracted many members and was in good financial health. As an educative agency many lectures on political subjects had been given. Members have had an opportunity of being grounded in Unionist principles; the club also supplied recreation for the young men of Stirling, to have unrestrained intercourse with their friends and engage in healthy amusements free from insidious temptation (Applause).

On the 9th November, the club faced a major loss with the sudden and unexpected death of their President James Brown Richardson (aged 65). J.B. Richardson was the major force in starting the Stirling Unionist Club. He started his working life with George Younger and Co., Brewers of Alloa, as a traveller for 22 years. He left to go to James Harvey and Co., Distillers of Paisley, which he eventually took over. He had been a Unionist since the start of the movement 18 years earlier, and was actively involved in making speeches throughout the Stirling Burghs. He appreciated the need of effective organisation which included the formation of a formal club. His energy brought the club into being and his enthusiasm contributed mainly to its success.

The death of J.B. Richardson hit the club very hard, and no political meetings took place during the winter of 1902/1903. However, the social and recreational activities continued. Ex-Provost Yellowlees was elected as the next President.

On August 22nd the ex-Prime Minister Lord Salisbury died at his home Hatfield House. Sadly he had survived only thirteen months in retirement despite the best wishes of the Unionist Club. Born Robert Cecil in 1830, his family had been in the ruling classes since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

The second AGM was held on October 9th 1903 and decided to resume the practice of holding monthly meetings.

The first of these concerned the fiscal question. The Conservative and Unionist Government wished to impose tariffs on imports just as other countries did, giving preferential rates to British Empire countries where possible. Some Liberals, led by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, opposed tariffs because they would increase prices and be unfair to those on fixed incomes. These Liberals were called Free Traders. Speakers were invited who supported the Unionist position. History reveals that the policy of imposing Tariffs was disastrous and led to a Conservative and Unionist wipe-out in 1906.

1904 was a quiet year, the monthly meetings being of a more sedate and recreational nature. At the AGM on October 14th the Chairman put the lack of political activity down to the unsettled condition of the Parties. He said that in the Stirling Burghs constituency they had in the person of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman someone of high position in the political world, and they needed to find a worthy opponent.

THE ELECTION OF 1906: CHARLES KENNETH MURCHISON

The Unionists knew that a General Election would have to take place towards the end of 1905. During the winter of 1904/05 a candidate was found in the person of Charles Kenneth Murchison. He lived in Hertfordshire, England. Aged 33, he was of Scottish descent, a partner in Basil Woodd & Son, Wine Importers. He was a member of Hertford Town Council and had been Mayor in 1902/03. He was a good speaker, a keen Unionist and prepared to stand against Sir Henry.

The Unionists swung into action. Murchison was introduced to the members of Stirling Unionist Club on 30th March 1905. A full account is given in the *Stirling Journal & Advertiser* of 31st March.

Over the next months, Kenneth Murchison addressed meetings throughout the constituency, which included Dunfermline, Inverkeithing and Culross. At the fourth AGM on the 10th October 1905 much was made of the opportunity to oust Sir Henry. The invited speaker, Mr C. Murray Stewart of Dunblane said that they had a good candidate who had courageously set out to attack the Radical's Goliath and it was a task that deserved every encouragement and unswerving support. (Unionists referred to Liberals as Radicals).

At the end of November 1905, Balfour and his Unionist Government resigned, and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman became Liberal Prime Minister. He was 70 years old and in poor health and his advisers wanted him to go to the House of Lords. But he wanted to be Leader of the House of Commons and his will prevailed.

Sir Henry called the now overdue election for Friday 19th January 1906. The moment the Unionists had been working for had come. Murchison was formally adopted as candidate for the Stirling Burghs on Saturday, 6th January. He was due to address his first meeting on Monday, and there followed a heavy schedule.

The day after his adoption, Murchison was struck by a severe bout of influenza. His temperature after two days reached 104.6°, and his doctor recommended that he should not get up that week. The election committee filled in for his meetings but realised that, as a relative stranger to the district, personal appearances by the candidate were essential. Therefore on 12th January the Unionists withdrew their candidate leaving Sir Henry to be elected unopposed.

What a bitter pill this must have been to swallow! Actually there was probably little difference whether or not the Unionist candidate stood. In this election the Liberals won a landslide victory. In the neighbouring constituency of Stirlingshire the Unionist sitting member, the Marquis of Graham, was beaten by the Liberal D. Smeaton. And in his home constituency, the Prime Minister was unlikely to lose.

As a post-script to Kenneth Murchison, his troubles were not over. On the day of the election he was declared out of danger. Two days later he was diagnosed as having scarlet fever, and was confined to the Combination Fever Hospital at Kildean for three weeks. He formally withdrew as a future candidate on 6th August 1906. But his luck changed and six months later he was elected onto London County Council.

THE CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN YEARS

On 30th November 1906 an editorial in the *Stirling Journal and Advertiser* (which was unashamedly Unionist) reflected the voting habits of the time. The Prime Minister wished to put through a Bill that one man should only have one vote. A man had a vote if he had property. If he owned property in more than one constituency he was entitled to vote in each. The Government wanted to exact severe penalties on those who voted more than once. The *Journal* stated the Unionist position: the Bill was a move by the Radicals to favour their party at the polls because they thought that Unionists were more likely to be multiple property owners and should be disenfranchised.

Then there was the problem of female suffrage. A widow may have considerable property and no vote. But supporters of female suffrage wished all married women to have the vote – to which there were grave objections. Ladies could only be prevented from gaining admission to Parliament with great difficulty. Few people could contemplate without dismay the prospect of a Parliament with both sexes.

Meanwhile women Unionists were becoming active, and a Women's Unionist Association was started in Stirling in 1906. The leading members seemed to be the wives and daughters of members of the Unionist Club. They

of course could not meet in the Club, but held meetings in the YMCA Hall, Dumbarton Road.

The leader of the local suffragettes was Mrs T.W.R. Johnstone, the wife of the editor of the *Stirling Journal & Advertiser*. She invited Miss S. Pankhurst to address them at the lesser Albert Hall in November. The ladies were becoming more numerous and active than the men.

Throughout 1907 there was a noticeable falling off in attendance at the monthly Unionist Club political meetings and at club evenings. The excitement of the election was past, and members did not support the political meetings.

In an effort to regain the interest of members, a new prospective candidate was adopted in November 1907: Mr. William Whitelaw of Nairn. He was Chairman of the Highland Railway Company and thought that the fifty or so railway companies in existence were not efficient for the conduct of trade and the safe carrying of the public. Amazingly, he recommended nationalisation of the railways.

Simultaneous with this adoption, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman fell suddenly ill during an address at Bristol. All of Stirling Burghs, including the Unionists, expressed their regret. The Unionists thought that it was unlikely Sir Henry would remain in office, and there might be an election. Mr Whitelaw addressed meetings at Dunfermline, Inverkeithing, South Queensferry, Culross and Stirling. At one meeting a Radical was heard to remark "That's the best man the Tories have brocht forward yet." High praise and thought to be well deserved by the Unionists. His main platform was Tarriff Reform, the implementation of taxes on foreign goods so that they could be sold on an equal basis with home goods. He also wished to ride on the tide of Imperialism, emphasising that voters were members of a nation and an enormous empire.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman remained Prime Minister until April 1908. In February, his health deteriorated due to heart problems. He hung on till April 3rd and then resigned. He died 19 days later. He was regarded as of average ability in opposition yet became a successful Prime Minister.

The Unionists joined with the general population in mourning the passing of Sir Henry but relished the prospect of a bye-election. Sir Henry had been the member for Stirling Burghs for forty years and the voters looked on him as their own. Now all this had changed and the voters were free to choose for themselves.

The Unionists thought that the Liberals might offer the seat to Winston Churchill. He had not won a seat at the General Election and had just been defeated at a bye-election at Northwest Manchester. However the Party officials decided against this move, and Arthur Ponsonby, Sir Henry's Private Secretary, was the chosen candidate. The Stirling paper noted "The Stirling Burghs were fortunate enough to escape from the embraces of Mr. Winston Churchill."

The Stirling Unionist club now prepared a punishing series of meetings for

their candidate during a short sharp campaign of three weeks. On May 22nd 1908, Ponsonby was returned as Liberal member with a majority of 1361. In the national papers, Whitelaw was regarded as a good Scottish candidate who polled the greatest number of Unionist votes ever. However the Liberals had turned out in great numbers. The *Scotsman* noted "Stirling Burghs rejected a good Scotsman because he is a Unionist and returned an untried Englishman because he says he is a Liberal."

THE YEARS 1908-1914

On 14th December 1908, another stalwart and founder member Ex-Provost Yellowlees died, aged 66, after a bout of pneumonia following a chill. He had worked in his father's tannery business. In 1878 he was elected to the town council and became Provost in 1882, a post he held for nine years. Originally a Liberal, he had opposed Gladstone's Home Rule for Ireland Bill and from that time was a committed Unionist. The Unionist Club benefited from his business knowledge and his unswerving loyalty to the Unionist Party which made him a President who commanded respect.

In April 1909, Chancellor Lloyd George introduced a familiar budget to overcome a £15m deficit, which had built up to pay for naval increases and old-age pensions. There was increased duty on spirits, licences and tobacco and new duties on land and petrol. Income tax was increased to one shilling and twopence, and there would be supertax on incomes over £5000 per annum.

There was an unprecedented campaign which delayed passage of the Finance Bill. The House of Lords refused to pass the Bill, saying that it should be submitted to the judgement of the country. Prime Minister Asquith proposed a motion that the refusal of the Lords to pass the budget was a breach of the constitution. Parliament was dissolved on 8th January 1910.

A new prospective parliamentary candidate was found. Mr R.K. Cochran-Patrick was a graduate of Cambridge and Edinburgh Universities, and had been called to the Bar in 1890. He was very active and gave speeches at Dunfermline, Stirling, Inverkeithing, Culross, and Queensferry. At the general election in January 1910 the Liberals again won, but the parliamentary majority was now narrow. Cochran-Patrick lost by 2052 votes to the Liberal Ponsonby.

In the House of Commons the Liberals and Tories were now about equal in number. The new Labour party had been reduced from 53 to 41 seats. Nevertheless the Labour Party and the Irish Nationalists now had some power. The Irish used their muscle to reduce the power of the Lords by demanding three resolutions:

- a) the Lords could not reject a money Bill:
- b) a Bill passed three times by the Commons yet rejected three times by the Lords still becomes law; and
- c) Parliament should be limited to 5 years.

All this was adopted. Then King Edward died in May 1910. The politicians felt that it would be unseemly to squabble until the period of mourning had passed.

The delayed general election was called for 13th December 1910. However the Unionists were not active as Cochran-Patrick had now withdrawn from the political scene. Therefore Ponsonby was elected unopposed.

The overall result was as before with fewer people voting. The Liberals were still in Government with the minority parties holding the balance of power. The power of the Lords was reduced according to the formula above, eventually by invoking the Royal Prerogative, which over-rides the Lord's wishes.

The Home Rule for Ireland Bill was introduced in 1912. But Ulster, the north-east province of Ireland did not want to be forced into an all-Ireland community. The Ulstermen raised an army to oppose Home Rule in their province, and the Southern Irish raised the IRA to conquer Ulster. Conflict followed in 1914, and in March the four counties of Ulster were offered exclusion (increased to six in 1918).

War broke out in August 1914 which put an entirely different complexion on matters.

THE WAR YEARS

On Wednesday 5th August 1914 the military authorities took possession of the club premises for the purposes of billeting troops.

A political truce was observed in Stirling. At the AGM on 8th October 1915 the committee reported that the political side of the club had become completely submerged as a result of the devastating war raging throughout Europe. They had carried out the wishes of the Coalition Government and lent their help to the town of Stirling to any duty which they considered might bring the war to a speedy conclusion.

At the AGM of 18th October 1918, the members debated changing the constitution. The Club as a Unionist Club should be wound up, to be decided after legal opinion had been sought. The members unanimously agreed to this.

The headline in the local paper of November 14th 1918 was:

"Germany admits defeat. How the great news came to Stirling. And the reception it received"

Bells rang out, and most people took an impromptu holiday.

Bonar Law called for the continued support of the Coalition Government. "The thing we care for most is to make the conditions of life of the vast majority of the people of this country as good as it is possible to make them."

THE END OF UNIONISM

A Special General Meeting was held on Saturday 10th May 1919. All reference to political activity and Unionist principles were deleted from the Constitution which was approved. The club's name was changed from The

Stirling Unionist Club to the Stirling Union Club. There was still Unionist activity in the Stirlingshire constituencies. But as far as the Club was concerned, members had no further interest in politics. In future the club was purely social.

Just as well because the main reasons for the Unionists' existence disappeared over the coming years. They would have been bitterly disappointed when the Home Rule for Ireland bill was passed in 1920, giving independence to all but the Ulster counties. And gradually the Empire was broken up as countries gained their independence and joined the voluntary organisation – the Commonwealth.

The club still exists today, although in a completely different form:- as a bridge club in Colquhoun Street, Stirling. They celebrated their centenary of existence on 20th December 2001.

BOOK REVIEWS

Scotland's Millennium Canals: the survival and revival of the Forth & Clyde and Union Canals. Guthrie Hutton. 2002. Stenlake Publishing. 160pp. ISBN 1 84033 181 X. £25.

The author as a key writer on, and campaigner for, mid Scotland's canals, here authoritatively and readably takes us through their origins and developments from the early years 1768-1820s, on through to the Millennium Link. restoration and a new beginning 1994-2002. Well illustrated throughout with the tenth and final Link chapter in colour, it has a four page bibliography, and a helpful index.

Shipping of the River Forth. William F Hendrie. 2002. Tempus. 128pp. ISBN 0 7524 2117 4. £12.99.

Another notable handsomely illustrated work from Hendrie, author of the Discovery series books on the River Forth, and the Firth of Forth, reviewed in FNH volumes 19 and 21. Of particular interest is the Upper Forth area, and especially noticed the Edinburgh Castle paddler at Stirling harbour.

Old Alloa. Guthrie Hutton. Stenlake Publishing. 2002. 50pp. ISBN 1 84033 132 1. £7.50.

Handsome illustrations well annotated with history, and with further reading guidance.

Forth area readers might note at times interests in the journals *History Scotland* from Aberdeen University and the *Scotland Magazine*.