

Richmond's 'Imps': The Junior Imperial League in the 1920s

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In January, 1925, the local press in Richmond announced that a branch of the Junior Imperial League (JIL), otherwise known as the 'Imps', had been officially formed, with an inaugural meeting planned for Monday, February 23rd at the Howitt Rooms in Richmond. Membership was open to 'boys and girls aged 14-25', and 'junior residents' from across Richmond, Kew and East Sheen were invited to sign up. The President of the new Branch was Sir Newton J. Moore, M.P., and the Honorary Secretary was Mr. R.S. Towell, of Palewell Park, East Sheen.¹

The 'Imps' had their roots in the Junior Imperial and Constitutional League, which had been formed by the Conservative party in 1906 to encourage 'practical political work' among the younger generation in Parliamentary Divisions in the country and across the Empire. By 1909, there were 30 branches, and by 1914 this had increased to 330-350 branches across the nation, with an estimated 200,000 members. However, the First World War had a devastating impact on the JIL, including the loss of 100 branch secretaries who had joined the armed forces to serve on the Western Front.²

In the post-war world of the 1920s, Conservative party activists were thus keen to rebuild the League. The objective, as they saw it, was to put renewed vigour into enthusing the 'younger generation' about politics and, in the process, sign them up to the Conservative cause. At the 50th annual conference of the National Unionist

Conference, held in London in December, 1922, a resolution was passed to extend the operations of the JIL, particularly in light of the 'advance of Socialist ideas'. Senior figures in the Conservative party said they wanted to create 'practical interest' again in political work and organisation amongst the young men and women of Britain and the Empire.³ Moreover, they increasingly saw the need to attract young women as well as young men, fearing that young female 'flappers' (as they were called) might be tempted by Socialism. Such views were shared by Stanley Baldwin, who became Conservative party leader and Prime Minister in May, 1923. He was determined to speed up the modernisation of the party and widen its appeal. With this in mind, in February, 1924, Baldwin announced a wholesale revision of the party's organisation, policy and propaganda. This was designed to reach out to new sections of the electorate, an approach which became known as the 'New Conservatism'.⁴ By 1926, it was being reported that the Junior Imperial League had seen significant growth again, reaching 961 branches, and by 1928 there were an estimated 1,500 JIL branches.⁵

In 1925 the Richmond branch of the 'Imps' was based at Bellevue House, Petersham Road, in Richmond, and, during the course of the next few years, JIL activities in the town saw a combination of political initiatives and regular social events. Indeed, the 'social' side to the League was viewed as a particularly important way of drawing in young people and gradually introducing them to Conservative ideals. The social activities included concerts, dances, walks, sports events, special debates, and speeches by invited guests.

In September, 1926, for example, the *Surbiton Times* reported on the second Annual Regatta of the Boating Club of the Richmond and Twickenham branches of the Imps, a 'pleasant day of sport' which was held at Marble Hill, Twickenham. At the

close of the afternoon, competitors and spectators then proceeded to the Bellevue Club, the HQ of the Richmond branch, where prizes were distributed by Mrs. Shadwell, of Ham, who was described by the newspaper as 'an enthusiastic supporter of the "Imp" movement'.⁶ Her husband was Dr. Arthur Shadwell, a well-known Conservative sympathiser and political writer, who was often seen as an eminent authority on industrial and social topics.

Members of from other JIL branches, or from non-Conservative organisations, were also regularly invited over to Bellevue House as guests to engage in debates with Richmond's Imps. The Richmond branch would also visit their guests in return. In August, 1926, for example, the *Richmond Herald* reported that the Richmond branch of the JIL 'has been making great strides of late' and its members had won a debate in Ealing on the topic of the 'sensationalism of the modern press'.⁷

Politics, of course, remained a very important part of JIL culture. Special guests from the world of politics or industry, or with a record of 'service' of some kind (such as a military career) would often give speeches to the Richmond JIL. Unsurprisingly, anybody with a record of strong service to the British Empire and its colonies was especially welcome to speak to the Imps. A good example of this came in the summer of 1927. In July, the *Herald* reported that the JIL had been addressed at a garden party in Scarth Road in Barnes by Lieut.-Colonel Reginald Tyrer, of King's Road in Richmond, who had joined the Army in 1896, and had served in both Africa and India.⁸ Tyrer, in fact, was quite an outspoken local defender of all things 'imperial', disliked Socialism intensely, and was a regular contributor to the local Richmond press of letters and articles on the big issues of the day (often writing under the *nom de plume* of 'Remus').⁹

Tyrer appeared to be very keen to help spread the 'Imp' gospel and educate younger people in contemporary political affairs. To this end, in July, 1927, just a short while after his garden party speech to the local Imps, Tyrer penned an article for the *Richmond Herald* in which he argued that the JIL was 'spreading very rapidly in Richmond' and had, in his view, two objectives: first, to 'inculcate sentiments of loyalty and adherence to our Constitution' and broaden the views of the 'rising generation', imbuing the twin ideas of Home and Empire. The second objective was to 'bring young people together in social intercourse'. Tyrer also took the opportunity in his article to warn that there was 'a common enemy stalking in our midst – the evil of Communism – destroying ambition, energy and advancement, internally and externally'. He claimed there was a need to 'extirpate this danger from our midst'. He added that anyone who wished to join the JIL could write to the Conservative agent at Richmond.¹⁰

Tyrer's enthusiastic support for the Richmond Imps also encompassed other nearby branches. In August, 1927, it was reported that Tyrer had given a speech to the 'East Sheen and Mortlake' branch of the JIL, on the subject of 'The Dardenelles: Its Influence on International Strategy'. During the course of his address, Tyrer reflected on what would happen if Russia came to control the Dardenelles. In his estimation, Russia would then be able to directly menace the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. Speaking about JIL philosophy generally, Tyrer also went on to tell his young audience that they should keep ideas of patriotism 'always in front of you, and remember that there is much good done by British rule in the world'.¹¹

The Richmond branch of the 'Imps' was also soon joined by other branches in the local area, including branches at Teddington and Hounslow, and Richmond members would often provide help and support to these other branches and their

local meetings. Indeed, as with both the Liberal and the Labour parties in the late 1920s, it is clear that the Conservative party had woken up to the need to have a more organised and professional support network for their local constituency branches across the country. This trend was certainly noticed by the local press in the area. In May, 1928, the *Thames Valley Times* devoted an editorial to the topic, entitled 'Politicians in the Making'. The newspaper noted that 'one of the most helpful features' in connection with the political life of Twickenham was the work of the junior branches of the various political organisations. The paper pointed out to its readers that, within the previous two years, there had come into 'active being' the Junior Imperial League of the Conservatives, the League of Young Liberals, and the Guild of Youth of the Labour Party. The editorial asserted: 'This is all to the good'.¹²

Significantly, in the very same edition, the newspaper reported that, as a successful 'Counter Attraction' to the Labour party, the local JIL activists had held the first of a series of open-air meetings in Teddington at precisely the same time and in the exact same location as the Labour activists, and that 'a battle of words ensued', with heckling that was 'fast and furious'. In fact, this particular spot – Clarence Square – had become known locally as Teddington's 'Hyde Park Corner' during the summer of 1927.¹³

Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative party leader, was especially keen to 'modernise' the way his party canvassed for votes at the local level. He encouraged the use of mobile propaganda vans to visit towns, including in the Thames Valley area, together with use of Conservative party newsreels in local picture-houses, and public broadcasts of his speeches via gramophone records played at local fetes or other events. He saw the JIL's young activists as an important part of this process. Baldwin also emphasised the role of 'service' to the country and Empire, and how

being an 'Imp' could serve this philosophy of civic patriotism. In 1928, he issued a personal message to JIL members on an LP gramophone record, telling them that a young person should not get into politics 'for what you can get' but 'for what you can give and do'.¹⁴

A major theme and purpose of JIL membership was evidently the 'training' of a younger generation of activists who would help out the main Conservative party members at election time, and ensure that the party received regular injections of new energy when it came to the hard graft of door-step campaigning. In August, 1929, the *Thames Valley Times* reported that local JIL students had been studying at the New Bonar Law College, at Berkhamstead, in Hertfordshire, undergoing two weeks of 'instruction'. The newspaper revealed that four members of the Kingston JIL branch and one member of the Richmond Imps branch had attended a course where the tuition involved 'current political problems', 'elementary economics', and 'public speaking', and that upwards of 100 students from across the country were in residence at the College.¹⁵

Reliable information on the actual size of the membership of the Richmond JIL is difficult to come by. In 1923, the nearby Brentford and Chiswick branch, formed in June, 1923, saw 250 people sign up to be members at its very first meeting; within a year this had grown to a membership of nearly 400.¹⁶ Similarly, in 1925, the Kingston branch reportedly had 200 members, while the Surbiton branch had 160 Imps, and the New Malden branch 100.¹⁷ It is possible that the Richmond branch also grew to a similar size in the late 1920s. More research is required on the organisation at local level.

Although the JIL as a national network and movement continued to exist well into

the 1930s, historians do not really regard the League as being all that successful in its stated aims of attracting much larger numbers of young people into Conservative politics, a pattern that was also echoed in the rival youth organisations run by the interwar Liberal and Labour parties.¹⁸ However, the local 'Imps' still remained active in the Richmond area. In January, 1939, for example, the Richmond JIL held a debate with the Brentford and Chiswick JIL branch on the poor state of the railways, during which Richmond's Imps made the case for a better deal for rail transport from the government.¹⁹ The branch continued to be a feature of the local political scene in the run-up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Notes

1. *Richmond Herald*, 31st January, 1925, p.8.
2. *Chiswick Times*, 22nd June, 1923, p.2.
3. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Conservative Party Archive, NUA 2/1/38, Annual Conference Minutes, 1922.
4. Duncan Watts, *Stanley Baldwin and the Search for Consensus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996) pp.42-44.
5. *Surbiton Times*, 24th December, 1926, p.5; *Surbiton Times*, 28th December, 1928, p.7.
6. *Surbiton Times*, 24th September, 1926, p.3.
7. *Richmond Herald*, 14th August, 1926, p.10.
8. *Richmond Herald*, 9th July, 1927, p.20.
9. *Richmond Herald*, 8th December, 1928, p.14.
10. *Richmond Herald*, 30th July, 1927, p.5.
11. *Richmond Herald*, 6th August, 1927, p.5.
12. *Thames Valley Times*, 30th May, 1928, p.2.

13. *Thames Valley Times*, 17th August, 1927, p.4.
14. HMV record: 'The Prime Minister's Message to the Junior Imperial League, 1928', Catalogue no.C2, Speech OW196.
15. *Thames Valley Times*, 21st August, 1929, p.4.
16. *Chiswick Times*, 16th May, 1924, p.5.
17. *Surbiton Times*, 23rd October, 1925, p.8.
18. Stephen Heathorn and David Greenspoon: 'Organizing Youth for Partisan Politics in Britain, 1918-1932', *The Historian*, vol. 68, no.1 (2006) pp.89-119.
19. *Brentford and Chiswick Times*, 20th January, 1939, p.5.

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