

Local, Global and Appealing to Women: The launch of the League of Nations Union in Richmond

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Richmond during the 1920s and 1930s saw considerable activity by a local branch of the League of Nations Union (LNU), which often campaigned in conjunction with other local LNU branches. The League of Nations Union had been founded nationally in November 1918 to lobby for the whole-hearted acceptance of the League of Nations by the British people, and also to raise awareness of international and global issues. Recent research suggests that the Union became one of Britain's largest voluntary associations during the interwar period. National membership peaked in 1931 at just over 400,000.¹

The foundation of the League of Nations came about as a direct consequence of the trauma and bloodshed of the First World War. In January 1918, President Woodrow Wilson formally set forth the war aims of the Government of the USA. At the end of his statement, Wilson called for the creation of a general association of nations to help guarantee the political and territorial independence of all states. Events moved quickly. When the Peace Conference met at Versailles in January 1919, a draft Covenant for the new League of Nations was drawn up. The Covenant was approved by the Peace Conference in April 1919. Its core framework endured throughout the interwar period until the League was formally dissolved in 1946.

In Richmond, a local Branch of the League of Nations Union was formed in May 1919, after a public meeting held at the Castle Theatre. The meeting had been organised by the Revd L R Hancock (then vicar of the Holy Trinity Church), along with the Revd F W Aveling (of the Vineyard Congregational Church) and others. The main speeches were given by the former Home Secretary and ex-MP for Kingston, Viscount Cave, together with the Labour MP J R Clynes. It would appear that, inspired by what was said, 'a large number of application forms were handed in.' As a result of the enthusiasm shown at that meeting, a local branch of the LNU was formed a few weeks later.²

It was not all plain sailing. As the branch's first Annual Report recorded, the difference between the enthusiasm shown at the launch and the willingness to work in order to establish a strong branch was soon apparent, but - by 'dint of perseverance on the part of a

few' - the early difficulties were overcome, and the branch was formally launched at an Armistice Day meeting held in the Holy Trinity Parish Room in November 1919, with a membership of about eighty.³

During the course of 1919 and, in particular, during 1920, one can see evidence of the League of Nations and its general aims being discussed by a variety of organisations at local level in Richmond. What is striking is the extent to which women especially saw the League as a new and worthy cause with which to become involved. More generally, there was clearly a wide range of local reactions to the idea of a new international instrument designed to prevent war, ranging from open hostility or polite caution to hopeful optimism and, in some cases, evident excitement. Increasingly, some people in the town voiced the idea of the need for a broad cross-party campaign to create a consensus in favour of the League and its work.

The year 1920 certainly saw raised awareness of the League. In January 1920, for example, the *Richmond Herald* reported that the League had formed the subject for discussion at a meeting of the Richmond Labour Party held at the Pagoda Café. One participant, Mrs Helena Swanwick from Kew, was critical of the victorious Allies for their 'insane desire' to grab all they could from Germany, impoverishing a country that was also expected to pay the full cost of the First World War. The Labour Party, she said, 'wanted a really genuine League of Nations, and not a sham one.' Another speaker said he believed the best method of preserving the peace of the world was to set up an international court, composed of elected representatives of 'every civilised nation on the face of the earth.'⁴

Early in January 1920, Lady Nott-Bower presided at a meeting held under the auspices of the Richmond Branch of the British Women Citizens' Association, which took place at the Women's Christian Association Rooms in Church Road. The British Women Citizens' Association had been founded in 1917 and was designed to stimulate women's interest in social and political issues. There were various speeches on the newly formed League. Miss Chick, from the Ealing branch, said they recognised that 'women's sphere was no longer limited to the home. They had a share and active part to take in national and international affairs.' She added that war did not settle anything and did not bring peace. Many believed, she claimed, that the 'Covenant of the League of Nations was the hope of the future', and a better understanding between nations should be worked for. Another speaker was Mr Whelan, of the national headquarters of the British section of the League of Nations. He

noted that a few days ago peace had been formally ratified at Paris, and he argued that 'already the League of Nations had become a very potent and worldwide instrument.' He claimed that the last ten days had seen 'what would probably be the most noble revolution in the world's history.' He warned, however, that people must be interested in the League 'or its influence would necessarily be dwarfed.' He appealed to those present to do all they could to back up the League of Nations.⁵

A few months later, in April 1920, it was reported that there was a good attendance of women sympathisers of the League of Nations at a meeting held in the Vineyard Congregational Lecture Hall, under the presidency of Councillor Ellen Edwards. At the outset of the meeting, Mrs Beatty explained that, as several efforts had been made 'unfortunately unsuccessfully' to end war, the aim of the League of Nations was not a new one. But now things had gone a step further, she said, and the aim and ideal had become a part of the Peace Treaty. The League, she argued, endeavoured to promote international peace and security, 'first by bringing about international justice and coercion for lawbreakers.'

Another speaker, Miss F Underwood, who was the secretary of the Women's Freedom League, declared (in what the *Richmond Herald* described as 'a racy address') that she had no fear as to enfranchised women doing their duty in the cause of peace. The League of Nations, she asserted, 'was the world's only security for peace, and the only thing between the world and destruction.' She said it had taken the horrors of war to teach us the elementary truth that the common interests of nations were more important than their antagonisms, and that: 'there was more common-sense in the ideal of the brotherhood of man than of the doctrine of the survival of the fittest.' Behind the League, Miss Underwood proclaimed, 'there must be the driving power of an instructed and well-informed public opinion.'⁶ Also present at the meeting was Mr T W Bishop, who was described as the secretary of the Richmond branch of the LNU.

Discussion and debate over the League of Nations also emerged within local Liberal circles. In July 1920, chaired by Lady Yoxall, a drawing-room meeting of the Richmond Women's Liberal Association took place in Marchmont Road, when an address on 'The League of Nations' was given by Mrs Corbett Ashby. She told the audience that they wanted to make the League 'a real living force', but that one of the great difficulties they faced 'was the attitude of those who said that they did not believe in the League and, having said that, went to sleep.' They needed to challenge such people, she said, and ask them what their

idea of the future was. Corbett Ashby argued that the next war would mean the destruction of civilisation as we knew it in Europe. What was needed, she asserted, was to 'build up public opinion' so that it would force diplomats to look at questions from an international point of view.⁷

The message was evidently taken on board by some of the town's citizens. By late July 1920, the local press was reporting that the LNU in Richmond had seen 'a substantial accession of members lately', and the Branch numbers were now well over 100.⁸

Nevertheless, some local suspicion and scepticism towards the League of Nations remained. At a meeting of the Richmond Labour Party held at the Pagoda Café in the autumn, Arthur Ponsonby gave an address on 'Labour and the League of Nations'. He told Labour members that the League was not what the Labour Party desired, 'but something very different.' He noted how some people said it was 'of no earthly use', but he felt that was mistaken. His own view, he said, was that they should 'wait and see how it worked, and whether those behind it wanted it to work.' The weakness of the League was that it was an alliance of victorious governments. He said he did not want to scrap the League, but to strengthen it, and have behind the League, not men of the 'old order', but 'men of international mind, of European spirit.'⁹

Yet, by late November 1920, the Richmond LNU branch was sufficiently well established to be able to hold its first Annual General Meeting, where there was 'a very encouraging attendance'. The audience included a range of local dignitaries. It was held in the Ormond Road Gymnasium and presided over by Mr S W Gladwell (the chair of the local LNU). The Hon. Secretary, Mr T W Bishop, presenting the first Annual Report of the branch, revealed that 'a good deal of propaganda work in the interests of the Union and its aims had been carried on.' Mr Bishop also reported that: 'At present they felt that they had done no more than make a good start in the crusade. A great work lay before them in permeating every church, trade union and political organisation in the district with the principles for which the League stood.' Moreover, to help to save the world from an awful calamity should war break out, the branch called for 'all persons of good-will to give their practical support by joining the Branch.'¹⁰

The local LNU did indeed succeed in becoming a regular feature of local affairs in interwar Richmond, sustained by a loyal circle of activists. Interestingly, even though many branches closed down on the outbreak of war in 1939, such was the commitment of local

members in Richmond that the Branch was still able to sponsor local LNU discussion groups well into the dark days of 1940.¹¹ And, indeed, members formed the core of the local branch of the United Nations Association after the Second World War.

Notes

1. Helen McCarthy, *The British people and the League of Nations: Democracy, citizenship and internationalism, 1918–45* (2011) pp. 2-3.
2. Details on the Annual Report are from the *Richmond Herald*, 20 November 1920, p. 16.
3. *Richmond Herald*, 20 November 1920, p. 16.
4. *Richmond Herald*, 17 January 1920, p. 8. Mrs Swanwick was later a British delegate to the League in Geneva.
5. *Richmond Herald*, 24 January 1920, p. 8.
6. *Richmond Herald*, 24 April 1920, p. 8.
7. *Richmond Herald*, 24 July 1920, p. 9.
8. *Richmond Herald*, 31 July 1920, p. 6.
9. *Richmond Herald*, 13 November 1920, p. 7.
10. *Richmond Herald*, 20 November 1920, p. 16.
11. See, for example, *Richmond and Twickenham Times*, 24 February 1940, p. 10; 2 March 1940, p. 10; 9 March 1940, p. 9; and 11 May 1940, p. 9.