

# PRE-MEMBERING JOE POPULARITY, POLITICS OR PRIDE?

Pete Bounous

In the days following the death of Joseph Chamberlain in July 1914, the streets of Birmingham were host to the most extraordinary scenes of public adoration, the likes of which have not been witnessed before or since. Indeed, a strong desire was expressed by many for a flamboyant Westminster funeral of the type usually reserved for royalty and heads of state. Yet, in accordance with his Unitarian family's wishes, such ostentation was forgone in favour of a small private ceremony and a relatively understated grave at Birmingham's unofficially Non-Conformist Key Hill Cemetery.



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The people of Birmingham lined the streets as Joseph Chamberlain's funeral cortège made its way to his final resting place at Key Hill Cemetery, 1914.

**I**t was an ironic decision considering that, in life, Joe himself appears to have shown no such inhibitions. Certainly, the restrained nature of this event stands in stark contrast to the public commemorative practices during his lifetime when his personal material celebration could be said to have bordered on the prolific in comparison to that of his peers. The Chamberlain Memorial Fountain, erected in 1880, is arguably the grandest monument to an individual in the entire city; it stands in the centre of Chamberlain Square in what was the very heart of Victorian Birmingham. His name is emblazoned upon the

foundation stone of the 135-year-old Council House for all to see. A clock dedicated to him in 1903 dominates the centre of the Jewellery Quarter, one of the city's most important manufacturing districts. The University of Birmingham's clock tower – begun in 1900 and the largest of its type in the world – is officially named in his honour.

Yet was this phenomenon of his 'pre-membrance' a genuine sign of public affection, the symptom of a wider political trend in the use of memory and reputation as a political commodity, or simply self-aggrandisement on his part?





Courtesy P. Bounous

The Joseph Chamberlain Memorial Clock was another conveniently-timed reminder to the electorate of Joe's benevolence.

Of course, such a claim could be dismissed as purely coincidental, were it not for the fact that it was not an isolated case: during the past decades of Liberal rule, a number of public memorials to 'great men' of the town were erected, the allegiances of whom were – conveniently – almost unanimously Liberal. Indeed, the only Conservative to achieve such physical immortality in the town during this period was national hero and 1880 parliamentary candidate Colonel Fred Burnaby. Yet even he could only achieve a simple obelisk, relegated to the churchyard of St. Philip's – significantly, one of the few pieces of public land within the town over which the Council had no jurisdiction.

It is also notable that in the early 1880s, as pressure mounted on the BLA from an increasingly organised Tory party under Lord Randolph Churchill, these Liberal 'statements' increased in regularity with five monuments being erected in as many years in the first half of the decade. Thus, Joe's fountain was part of an already-established trend, utilising physical structures to anchor Liberal dominance in the consciousness of the town's population. It was a strategy that, even at the

time, did not go unnoticed by a sceptical minority – as the *Dart* cartoon on page 37 clearly shows.

### Joe's Two Towers

Nor is this the only one of Joe's monuments to have been erected at a politically convenient time and location: the construction of the clock tower in the centre of the Jewellery Quarter, ostensibly in honour of his visit to South Africa, coincided almost exactly with his decision to resign his cabinet post to campaign for protectionist tariff reform – an endeavour for which he would clearly require the support of the city's leading manufacturers. The jewellers were one such large and influential group and, given Joe's valuable support for the abolition of silver plate duties over a decade earlier, this was much to their advantage. It seems likely that this memorial may have served as a timely reminder of his previous benevolence.

Similarly, the clock tower at the University, possibly intended to be named in honour of John Henry Poynting, one of the institution's first academics, was instead dedicated to Joe. Conveniently, this decision appears to have been made when Joe's national popularity was diminishing due to his questionable handling of the second Boer War in his role as Secretary of State for the Colonies. This physical reassociation of his name with education, a positive cause for which he had been well known since the beginning of his political career, would have been an opportune retort to such negative publicity.

### Council House and Corporation Street

Finally, in addition to these political motives, there appears to have been an element of vanity too: the new Council House was neither Joe's idea, nor was its commission a result of his mayoralty – he was merely the incumbent at the beginning of construction. Despite this, it was still his name that went on the foundation stone, having never been involved in its inception. Indeed, by the time of the construction of the University's clock tower, he already had a central thoroughfare, an impressive memorial and the city's main civic building dedicated to him. Yet this still appears to have been insufficient.

### Ephemeral Memorabilia

Of course, there remain a whole host of other memorials and testaments to Joe which are less than complimentary, such as the cartoons of satirical journals and even music hall songs. Crucially, however, of those that portray him in a positive light, many seem to have been instigated under the auspices of either himself or his colleagues and, conveniently, at times when it was politically advantageous to remind the electorate of his achievements. It is too simplistic, therefore, to assume that these memorials are irrefutable proof of Joe's overwhelming public popularity.

Whilst there is evidence that this is the case, there are also strong indications that there are political motives and, possibly, those of sheer personal indulgence as well. The 'pre-membrance' of Joseph Chamberlain, it seems, may say as much about his own ambitions and those of his political peers as it does of the wider population of Victorian Birmingham's affection for him. ●

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#### Further Reading

*The Dart*, 1876-1911.

Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).

G.T. Noszlopy, *Public Sculpture of Birmingham* (Liverpool University Press, 1998).

Roger Ward, *City-State and Nation: Birmingham's Political History 1830-1940* (Phillimore, 2005).