
Josiah Wedgwood and the defence of democracy



Colonel Josiah Wedgwood by Margaret Oldridge, 1930

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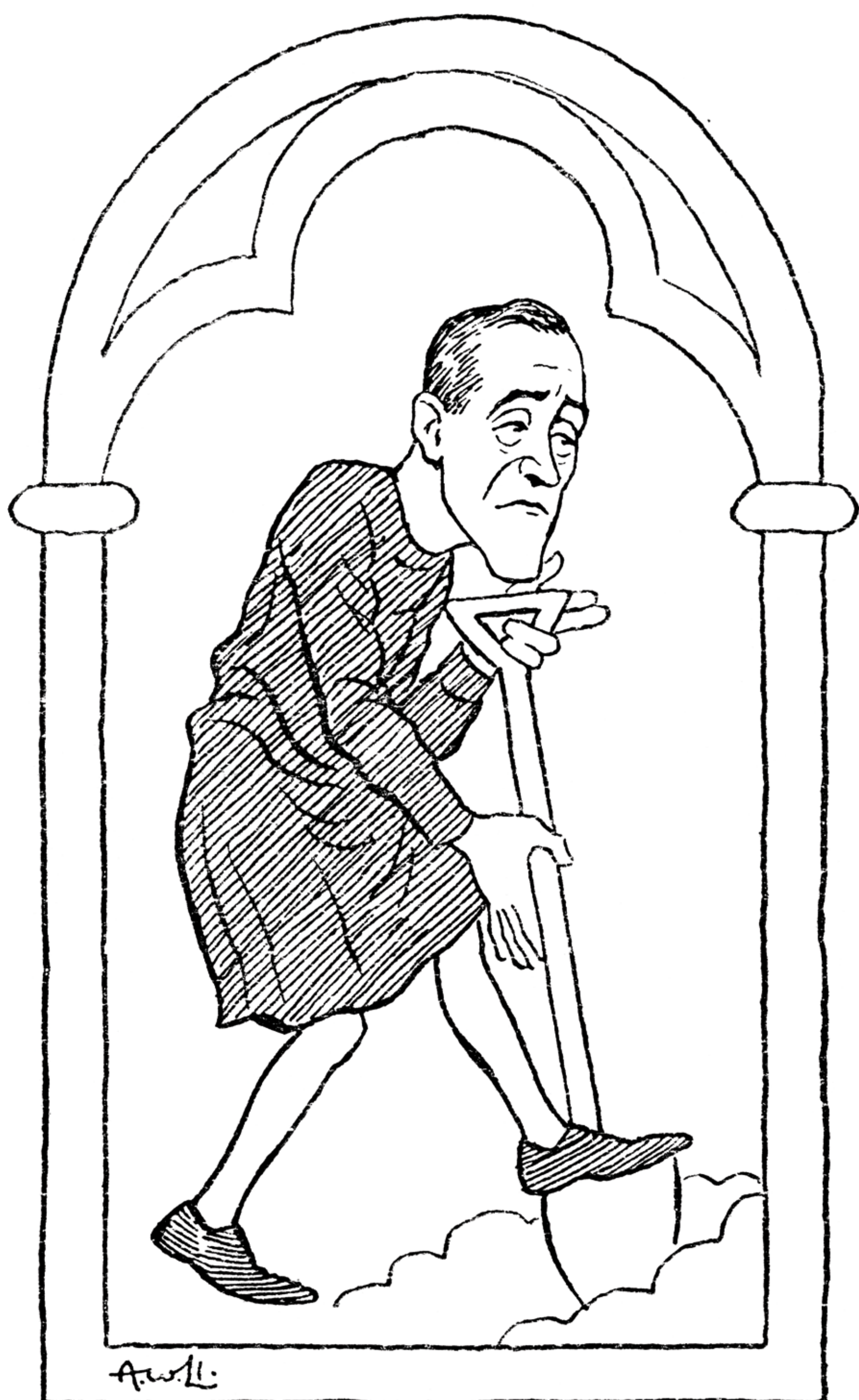
Additional thanks to Dr Paul Mulvey, Dr Paul Seaward and
the Remembering Eleanor Rathbone Group for their support

And, thanks to the History of Parliament's Oral History
Project volunteers:

Dr Priscilla Pivatto, Emmeline Ledgerwood, Isobel White,
Richard Stowell, Eleanor O'Keeffe, Andrea Hertz
and Barbara Luckhurst

Designed by the House of Commons Design Team

Introduction: Wedgwood the man



WHEN JOSH DELVED.

[Colonel JOSIAH WEDGWOOD, M.P., one of the Committee appointed to produce an official account of the membership of past Parliaments, stated at University College that the personal records recently unearthed throw a new light on Parliamentary history.]

‘When Josh Delved’, *Punch*, 23 October 1929

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House of Commons, 1914 by Leopold Braun, c.1914.

Wedgwood sits third from the left on the last government backbench.

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Churchill: “Were I asked for the best evidence of the virtues of our democracy I would cite the whole political life of my old and gallant friend, Jos. Wedgwood.”

‘Foreword’ to Josiah C. Wedgwood, *Memoirs of a Fighting Life*, 1940

Josiah Clement Wedgwood (1872-1943) was a member of the notable Staffordshire Wedgwood family famous for their pottery. Trained as a naval engineer, he worked in South Africa and fought in the Boer War, before breaking with the recent family tradition of Conservatism to be elected as Liberal MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1906. He held his seat until Churchill appointed him to the Lords in 1942.

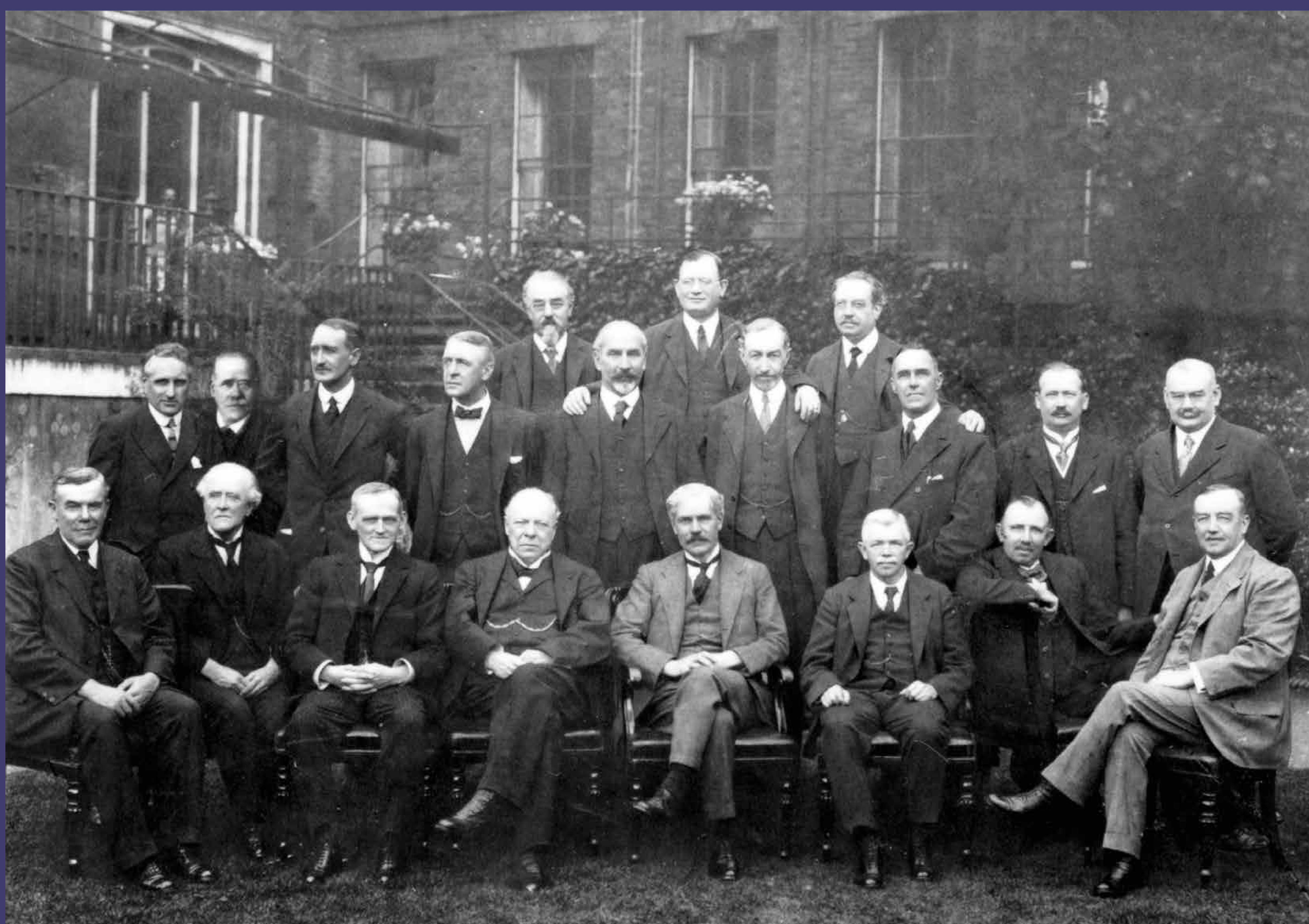
Wedgwood served at Gallipoli with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve during the First World War and visited revolutionary Russia as an emissary for the Foreign Office in 1918.

In his day Wedgwood was one of the best-known voices in the House of Commons and featured frequently in the press. He was a true radical: outspoken, and although not politically successful in the traditional sense, he heavily influenced wide ranging campaigns and debates in the Commons.

Wedgwood was a keen amateur historian. His *Staffordshire Parliamentary History from the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, published in 1917, took 20 years to research, and was the inspiration behind his History of Parliament project.

Wedgwood had a fierce attachment to parliamentary democracy. He felt that the recording of parliamentary history would better connect Parliament with the population at a time when democracy was being threatened by totalitarian regimes.

Inter-war politics: an ‘exceptionally active’ MP



The First Labour Cabinet, 1924

Back row: Sydney Webb, John Wheatley, F.W. Iowett **Second row:** C.P. Trevelyan, Stephen Walsh, Lord Thomson, Viscount Chelmsford, Lord Olivier, Noel Buxton, **Josiah C. Wedgwood**, Vernon Hatershorn, Tom Shaw **Sitting:** William Adamson, Lord Parmour, Philip Snowden, Lord Haldene, J.R. MacDonald, J.R. Clynes, J. H. Thomas, Arthur Henderson

© Parliamentary Art Collection, WOA 2270

“With impulsive rashness I became Labour only to discover that the Labour Party neither in the House nor in my constituency were enamoured of the new recruit.” Josiah C. Wedgwood, *Memoirs of a Fighting Life*, 1940, Ch. 9

By the end of the First World War Wedgwood was established—following his campaign to reform land tax—as a radical Liberal, but the 1916 split between David Lloyd George and Herbert Asquith left him disillusioned with the party. In 1918 he stood as an independent.

In 1919 Wedgwood joined the Independent Labour Party, but soon discovered that his radical views did not quite fit there either.

He was accepted into the Parliamentary Labour Party and was given a position in the first Labour government in 1924. Wedgwood felt he would be best suited to a role in the Colonial Office, the India Office (Indian self-government was one of his many campaigns), or the Admiralty, but he was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

The Labour leader, Ramsay MacDonald, thought Wedgwood was unpredictable; he was wary of his outspokenness in the press and his radical ideas. Wedgwood regretted supporting MacDonald for the leadership.

After the short-lived Labour government fell Wedgwood returned to the backbenches. Pursuing a series of causes which reflected an unfashionable conviction that it was the purpose of government to enable people so far as possible to govern themselves, Wedgwood was often at odds with the Labour Party.

The History of Parliament project

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF LIVING MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT.
(Answers to Questions).

| | |
|--|---|
| 1. When did you first become interested in national politics? Why? | 1868. Remember Election. |
| 2. What influence started you on this line of thought? | Every Welshman a politician. |
| 3. What books formed your political views? | Carlyle, Victor Hugo, Ruskin, Fabian Essays, Kidd's Social Evolution, Macaulay. |
| 4. What were your religious convictions? | Nonconformist. |
| 5. Which was then your favourite newspaper? | Liverpool Mercury, Daily News, Weekly Welsh papers. |
| 7. What or who first led you to think of it as a career? | Michael Davitt, Michael Jones, Principal of the Bala Congregational College. |
| 8. What was your trade, profession or occupation? | Solicitor. |
| 9. Annual income, earned and un-earned, when first you stood for Parliament? | £500 - £1,000, but do not clearly recollect. |
| 10. Had you experience of public work - if so, what? | County Council. |
| 11. How did you first get a seat? | Living in Caernarvonshire, and practising there when vacancy occurred, and was chosen by local Association. |
| 12. What was your chief political interest? | Fair play for the underdog. |
| 13. On what did you, in fact, concentrate most in Parliament? | Do. |
| 15. Who, at that time, was your ideal living British statesman, or dead statesman of any land? | Gladstone - also a great admiration for Joseph Chamberlain. |
| 16. How did Parliament modify your views? | Not conscious that it did, except that it gave me a very unpleasant impression of the difficulties of getting things done and of the tremendous power of vested interests in every direction. |
| 17. How did being an M.P. affect your earning capacity? | But for the fact that I had a very self-sacrificing brother who kept the practice going, with very occasional assistance it would have very substantially reduced my income. |

July 23rd. 1936 D. LLOYD GEORGE.

David Lloyd George's answers to Wedgwood's questionnaire, 1936

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EDEN LODGE,
TILFORD,
Nr. FARNHAM.
TEL. FARNHAM 28.

Aug. 5th. 1936

My Dear Josiah.

For once in my lifetime I am inclined with MacDonald, but I will not go so far in my abomination of your questions as to refuse to answer them. So here is the Questionnaire returned.

You must have taken on a devil of a job in editing this Parliamentary History.

How are you and Mrs. Wedgwood getting on? It is such a long time since I saw you. I wish you could run down to see us some time. I would enjoy it very much.

My wife asks to join in sending our love to you both.

Yours sincerely
Snowden

Lord Snowden's letter of response to Wedgwood's questionnaire, 5 August 1936

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“Now two printed volumes stand as a monument for all time; and if they stand alone, I have shown what can be done and I have other things to do” ‘Foreword’ to Josiah C. Wedgwood, *Memoirs of a Fighting Life*, 1940

Inspired by his previous work on Staffordshire, Wedgwood began his campaign to enlist the support of fellow parliamentarians and secure funding for his History of Parliament project in the late 1920s.

This was an ambitious plan to identify and write a biography of everyone who had ever served as a Member of Parliament. He saw The History of Parliament project as a call to arms against the worldwide threats to parliamentary democracy in the 1930s.

Wedgwood won over key allies such as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, who nominated him as chairman of a select committee to begin research to determine the project's scope and cost. By 1934 the History of Parliament committee had raised £30,000 to start work.

As part of the project, in the mid-1930s Wedgwood sent out questionnaires to his fellow MPs, in an effort to capture and memorialise the experiences and opinions of MPs active during the First World War.

Wedgwood's approach, however, did not chime with historians of the day. Seeing it as simplistic and romantic, many initial supporters, such as A. F. Pollard and Lewis Namier, left the project. He published the first volumes with the help of Anne Holt. His niece, historian Dame Veronica Wedgwood gave him a favourable review but several professional historians criticised the volumes as inaccurate and romantic. Wedgwood believed this criticism was political, and with his health failing he was forced to retire.

Campaign against fascism



Jewish children from Berlin and Hamburg arrive at Waterloo Station, February 1939

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Churchill: “The distressed of the whole world have learnt to look to him, and through him to Parliament, for a patient hearing and the redress of wrongs.”

Josiah C. Wedgwood, *Memoirs of a Fighting Life*, 1940, Ch. 9

When Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, Wedgwood immediately felt that the British government should do more to oppose the regime. At first there were few other MPs who believed the regime was a direct threat to the British way of life, though they included Winston Churchill. But as the 1930s progressed, others began to oppose British policy.

Wedgwood’s opposition to fascism developed from his liberal politics and historical worldview: he believed that the hard fought-for British parliamentary system faced a dire threat. This was partly due to his romantic ‘Whiggish’ view of British history, but also led him to virulently anti-Catholic ideas. He would come to view the struggle against fascism as a repeat of the battle between the Protestants and the Papacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Throughout the 1930s he was particularly concerned for the plight of Jewish refugees. A lifelong supporter of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he continued to campaign on this issue, although his plans did not receive the backing of the international Zionist movement.

He was an active supporter of the Committee for Refugees, which was co-founded by MP Eleanor Rathbone, and in 1938 introduced an unsuccessful bill to allow Austrian and German MPs to come to the UK. A more successful scheme was the ‘Kindertransport’ initiative, which celebrates its 80th anniversary this year. Following the violence of Kristallnacht in November 1938, the British government allowed nearly 10,000 unaccompanied children to settle in Britain.

Wedgwood personally supported the applications of over 200 refugees—eventually the Home Office refused to accept his applications, so he badgered friends to apply for him.

‘Guilty Men’



Neville Chamberlain waves the Munich Agreement after returning from Germany, September 1938

Shawshots / Alamy Stock Photo

“...we are getting to a time now when we have got to make up our minds whether or not there is something worth fighting for, and to my mind the freedom of this country, the democracy of the world, is something that is worth fighting for.”

Josiah C. Wedgwood, House of Commons, 4 Oct 1938

In 1938 Adolf Hitler threatened to invade Czechoslovakia. After several tense weeks of negotiations in September, Hitler agreed to British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain’s plan—to hand the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis—and war was averted. Chamberlain was welcomed home from Munich as a hero—infamously proclaiming ‘Peace for our time’.

Wedgwood and a growing list of other politicians spoke out against the Munich agreement including Labour leader Clement Attlee.

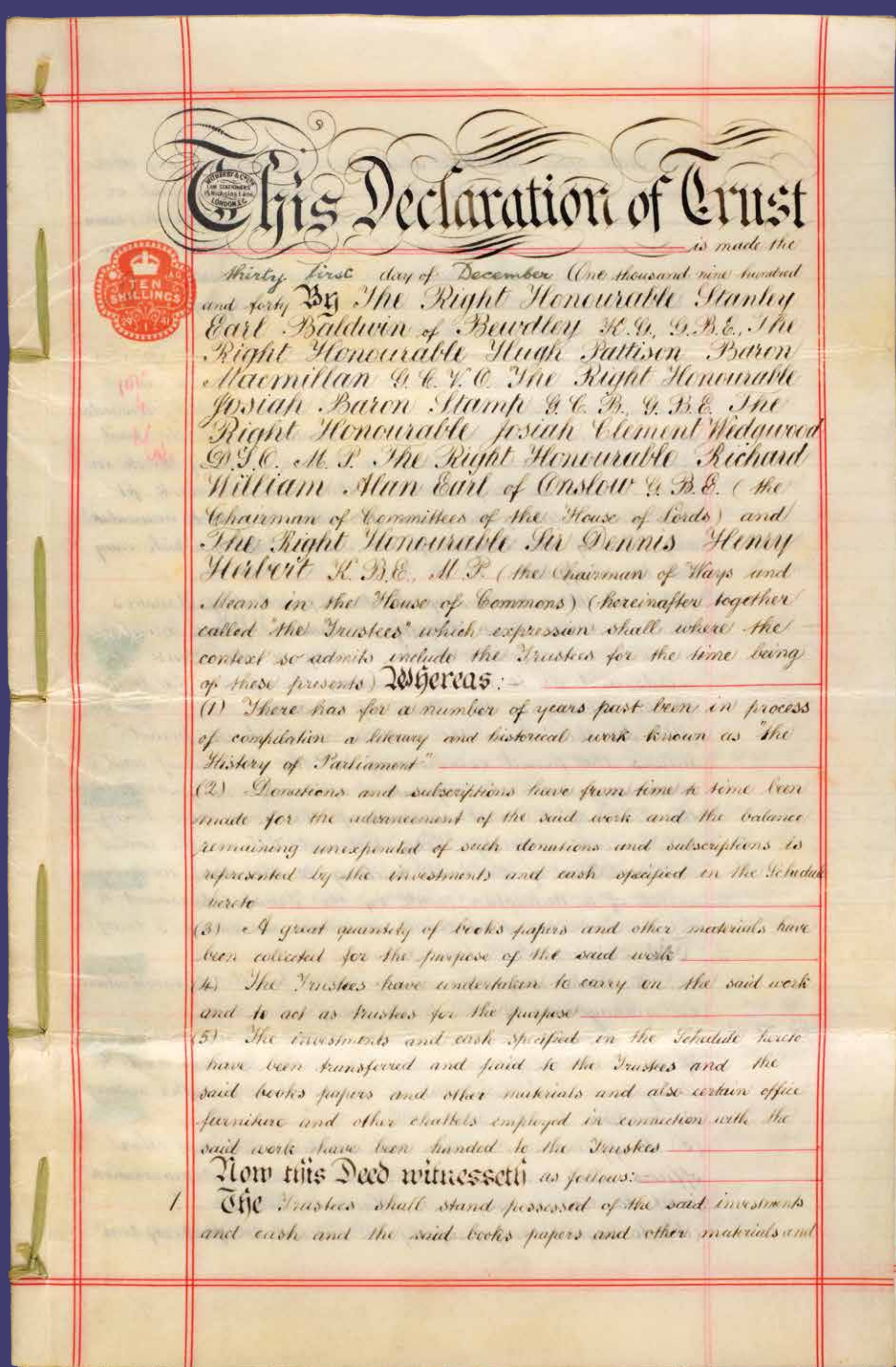
When war broke out in September 1939, Wedgwood was relieved that Britain was finally prepared to fight for its democracy.

He was not done campaigning: he outspokenly opposed the internment of German nationals in Great Britain, and wrote in his memoirs that ‘his chief political aim’ at this time ‘was to get Churchill for Prime Minister’. He got his wish in 1940, following the fallout from the disastrous naval campaign in Norway.

Churchill became Prime Minister just as the Nazis swept across Western Europe, leaving Britain to fight alone.

Wedgwood joined the Home Guard and did his share of fire duty in Parliament during the Blitz. In 1940 he published his most successful book, *Forever Freedom*, an anthology of poetry on liberty. He toured America in 1941 hoping to encourage support for the war. On his return he became Baron Wedgwood, resigning his Newcastle seat after 36 years. He died in 1943.

Legacy: The History of Parliament Trust



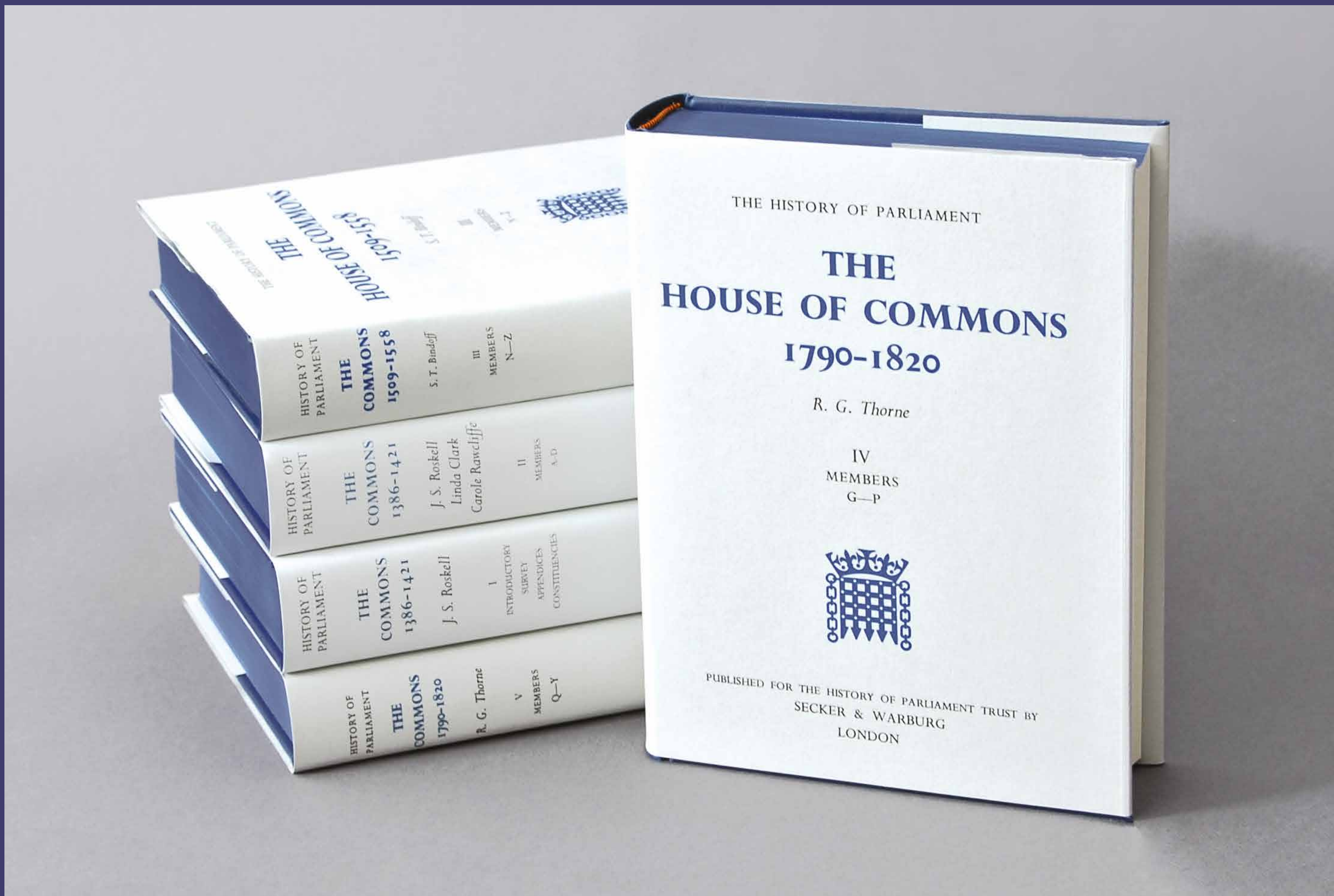
Deed of Trust for The History of Parliament Trust

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Sir Lewis Namier by Elliot & Fry

© National Portrait Gallery, London



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Wedgwood's most lasting legacy is the work of the History of Parliament Trust, which still continues to research Parliament through the lives of its members.

The Trust was set up in 1940 to ensure the continuation of Wedgwood's project. However, in reality very little was done until the project was revived, with support from the Treasury, from 1951, now associated with Britain's most eminent historians. Among them was Sir Lewis Namier, who had been one of the critics of the original project, but whose name became closely associated with Wedgwood's original concept.

The new project, overseen by a Trust largely made up of parliamentarians, concentrated on producing biographies, but now included work on constituency politics and the development of Parliament as an institution. Gone, though, was Wedgwood's crusading belief in liberal progress.

Namier died before the Trust published its first set of volumes, which he edited, The House of Commons, 1754-90. Since then, ten further projects have been published: nine on the Commons, ranging from 1386 to 1832, and one on the Lords (1660-1715). Most of this work is now available, for free, on thehistoryofparliamentonline

The Trust's academics continue to research Parliament throughout the ages. Three long-running projects are due to publish in the next few years, and a further two are underway. The Trust also organises events and exhibitions to discuss and celebrate parliamentary history and provides resources for schools.