



Clement Attlee: Toynebbee Hall President and Post-war Labour Prime Minister

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TOYNBEE
HALL



For a future without poverty



An elderly Clement Attlee circa 1960

Clement Attlee is well known as Britain's post war Labour Prime Minister, however, he is less well known for the life he led prior to his time in Government. Attlee's experiences in London's East End, volunteering at the boys club in Stepney and residing at Toynbee Hall, sparked his interest in social work during his thirties. Yet these experiences were fundamentally important in shaping Attlee into the Labour party leader he became.

Attlee: The Early Years

Clement Richard Attlee was born on the 3rd January 1883, the seventh of eight children, to Henry Attlee, a solicitor and liberal, and Ellen Bravery Watson. He grew up in Putney, which at the time was similar to a small country town, surrounded by fields and farms in the outer suburbs of London, and which was beginning to experience suburban development in the decade of the 1880s. Attlee had a traditional childhood growing up in Victorian England; he was instilled with a sense of Christian values and developed an attachment to the British monarchy.

Up until the age of nine Attlee was taught by his mother, his sisters and governesses and did not attend public school. One of the governesses, who taught Attlee, a Miss Hutchinson, was also responsible for teaching the young Winston Churchill prior to her post at the Attlee household. In 1892, Attlee attended a prep school at Northaw Place, Potters Bar, Hertfordshire. In 1896, after passing the entrance examinations, Attlee attended Haileybury College, and then in 1901 he attended University College Oxford where he studied for a BA in Modern History.

Attlee enjoyed his time at Oxford, he made a wide circle of friends and also decided upon his career as a Barrister, which was not surprising considering his father's position as a solicitor.

Whilst not largely political during his university days, recalling them in his 1954 autobiography he commented that although the university was predominantly conservative, there was a strong liberal group at Balliol. He further recalled that whilst there were no great discussions on politics there was a great deal of interest in social reform.¹

¹ C.R. Attlee As it Happened. (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1954) p17



Attlee with some of the boys from Stepney

Despite not being involved in liberal discussions, as Attlee was at this point rather conservative, being at Oxford exposed him to alternative political thought. His years at university certainly influenced his future political decisions and standing, along with providing motivation behind the activities which he became involved in directly after his Oxford days. He would go on to become the first Oxford graduate to be elected as a Labour MP.

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This, then, was the pattern of my days when in October, 1905, an event occurred which was destined to alter the whole course of my life.”



Attlee in East London

Attlee's family had close ties with social service, in 1905 Attlee became involved with a boys club in Stepney, East London. In October of that year, Attlee and his younger brother Lawrence visited the club in the East End of London, an area which both were unfamiliar with. Driving this visit was the knowledge that Haileybury College, where Attlee and his brothers had attended school, gave support to the boys club and had contributed towards its establishment. The two brothers set off for Limehouse, Stepney to see what was being done. As Attlee himself recalled, this decision to work in East London was indeed one of the most life changing decisions he was to ever make.

In his introduction to the boys club Attlee was exposed to the district and its problems, yet he was also shown the extent of what could be accomplished through voluntary social work. The club, led by Cecil Nussey aimed to bring a balance of healthy recreation and discipline to the boys. Yet, while Nussey's work had shown the difference one individual could make, it also highlighted how the boy's ultimate fate in the industrial workforce would remain unchanged.²

The impact that the boys club had upon Attlee is an area which has been discussed on numerous occasions. Indeed, it seems that the young boys helped to change Attlee's views in the most fundamental way. They helped to shape his political beliefs and helped to concrete his commitment to 'the poor' by showing that their life opportunities would never be substantially changed without national reform.³ In 1907 Attlee agreed to take over the position as club manager, he moved to permanent residence at Haileybury House, Stepney, the first move of a fourteen year stay in East London.

Attlee surrounded by children in the East End on the campaign trail in 1950.

2. Frank Field, ed. *Attlee's Great Contemporaries: The Politics of Character*. (London: Continuum, 2009) pxxii

3. *Ibid.* pxxiv-xxvi

Involvement with Toynbee Hall

Attlee's history with Toynbee Hall is one which spans decades. In 1910 he accepted the secretaryship of Toynbee Hall and went on to live in the grounds for a year. His new post as secretary exposed him to further social reform needs, and whilst busy with his new responsibilities, he kept contact with and helped at the Stepney boys club where possible.

Whilst at Toynbee Hall Attlee participated in the 'Smoking Debates' which were held on Thursday evenings and aimed to ignite discussion amongst the people of East London. Smoking debates were crowded affairs and were as valuable to locals as they were to the residents and visitors of Toynbee Hall. Such discussions enabled all to 'understand the workers point of view, not only by the words of the speakers but by the faces of the audience'.⁴ In 1909 Attlee led a debate on Railway Nationalisation.⁵

Attlee also contributed towards articles which were featured in The Toynbee Record, for instance, in January 1910 he wrote a piece entitled The Teaching of Citizenship in Public Schools,⁶ and in June 1910 The Labour Exchange in Relation to Boy and Girl Labour.⁷

One of the most significant indications of the influence working and living in the East End had upon Attlee's political thought can be seen in the publication of his book The Social Worker in 1920. In his work he set out ideals which would underpin and determine his political actions years later. He wrote,

'The social service movement of modern times is not confined to any one class, not is it the preserve of a particular section of dull and respectable people. It has arisen out of a deep discontent with society as at present constituted. It is not a movement concerned alone with the material, with housing and drains, clinics and feeding centres, gas and water, but it is the expression of the desire for social justice, for freedom and beauty, and for the better apportionment of all things that make up a good life.'⁸

4. Toynbee Hall 23rd Annual Report. Year ending 1907, p13

5. Toynbee Hall 25th Annual Report. Year Ending 1909.

6. The Toynbee Record, January 1910, p51

7. The Toynbee Record, June 1910, p129

8. C.R. Attlee, The Social Worker. (London: G Bell and Sons Ltd, 1920) pp2-3



Attlee with King George VI in July 1945



From right to left, Herbert Morrison, Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden during VJ Day Thanksgiving celebrations, September 1945

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In the interwar years Attlee became increasingly involved in politics. In 1922 he returned to Parliament and became the Labour MP for Limehouse, a position he would hold until 1950. In the same year he also married Violet Helen Millar and together they had four children, Janet, Felicity, Martin and Alison.

During the Second World War Attlee became deputy prime minister, with Winston Churchill leading the Conservative-Labour coalition government. However, in 1945, the Labour Party won the election and Attlee rose to the position of Prime Minister. During this year he was also named President of Toynbee Hall, a position which was reported in the Annual Report of the time as something which was welcomed with ‘immense pleasure and pride’.⁹ During this time Attlee continued to work alongside his close friend and warden of Toynbee Hall, Jimmy Mallon, and maintained his links with the settlement up until the end of his life.

Arguably, the social and welfare policies of Attlee’s post war government stemmed back to his time and experiences with the working class communities in London’s East End.

⁹. Toynbee Hall Annual Report 1939-46, p27



Violet and Clement as leader of the Labour Party and of the opposition. Circa 1945

The years he spent in Stepney acted as the driving force behind his passion to abolish the crippling and destructive impact of poverty on the people he had become so close to and had built relationships with.¹⁰ Indeed, at the start of his time as Prime Minister he wrote back to the boys club acknowledging their role in his life, 'I never forget that almost forty years ago I took the first step which has led me to my present position by going down to visit the Haileybury Club that started my connection which Limehouse which has continued to the present day.'¹¹

Under Attlee's leadership, the National Health Service was created in 1946, an aspect of the welfare state which sought to provide care from the 'cradle to the grave'. Interestingly, William Beveridge, who was responsible for writing the Beveridge Report, which outlined the need for a comprehensive national health service, was also a fellow resident of Toynbee Hall.

Attlee's government also passed the National Insurance Act 1946, the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946, the Electricity Act 1947, the Transport Act 1947, the Town and County Planning Act 1947, the Children Act 1948, the Nurseries and Child Minders Regulation Act 1948, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949; in total Attlee's government nationalised one fifth of the British economy.

10. Frank Field, ed. Attlee's Great Contemporaries (London: Continuum, 2009) pxxvi

11. Quoted in Kenneth Harris, Attlee (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1984) p9.

12. Toynbee Hall Report 1967, Foreword

13. Toynbee Hall 24th Annual Report, Year ending June 1908, p11

Attlee's Toynbee Hall Legacy

One of the most detailed accounts of Attlee's time at Toynbee Hall can be found in the Annual Report of 1967 where an obituary was written about his time at the settlement.

'When he died he was still our president and all will remember his numerous and in many cases informal visits right up to his death. His whole public life was devoted to the problems of human beings especially young people and even when he held the highest office their problems were never forgotten.

Toynbee hall will always owe immense debt of gratitude to Earl Attlee for his unswerving devotion and his sustained guidance, enthusiasm and encouragement. He is remembered with deep affection and real grief by everyone connected with the settlement. We mourn our President, Mentor and Friend.'¹²

Not only did working in the East End and at Toynbee hall have a significant impact upon Attlee, but his presence at Toynbee hall, along with the other residents who visited, contributed towards what it is today. As was noted by the Warden of the time, Mr. T. E. Harvey, in the Annual report 1907-8, 'The real work of Toynbee hall can indeed be never recorded upon paper; it's only record is in the lives of men'. Toynbee Hall is 'the collective life of a group of persons into whose thought and work...have made Toynbee Hall what it is today'.¹³

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Attlee examining his fruit trees on 18th May 1940



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A poem by Clement Attlee

*In Limehouse, in Limehouse, before the break of day
I hear the feet of many men who go upon their way
Who wander through the city
The grey and cruel city
Through streets that have no pity
The streets where men decay*

*In Limehouse, in Limehouse, by night as well as day
I hear the feet of children who go to work or play
Of children born of sorrow
The workers of tomorrow
How shall they work tomorrow
Who get no bread today?*

*In Limehouse, in Limehouse, today and every day
I see the weary mothers who sweat their souls away:
Poor, tired mothers, trying
To hush the feeble crying
Of little babies dying
For want of bread today.*

*In Limehouse, in Limehouse, I'm dreaming of the day
When evil time shall perish and be driven clean away
When father, child and mother
Shall live and love each other
And brother help his brother
In happy work and play.¹⁴*

This poem was written by Attlee in Limehouse, 1909. It provides a snapshot of the social conditions in the East End and how Attlee felt about them.

14. Joshua Muravchik, *Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism*. (California: Encounter Books, 2002) p176

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