

# EXPLORING THE ARCHIVES

## THE CHAMBERLAIN FAMILY PAPERS

Helen Fisher

The Chamberlain family, and in particular Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), were instrumental in the development of the University of Birmingham from its foundation in 1900. The Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections holds personal and political papers of Joseph Chamberlain and also of his children and his third wife, all of which are a rich source of information for the study of their lives and careers.



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Joseph Chamberlain with his wife Mary and children, Beatrice, Austen, Ida, Hilda and Ethel, at Highbury, c.1890s.

**T**he Chamberlains had a strong connection with the University of Birmingham. Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940) had attended its predecessor, Mason Science College, in the 1880s and his sisters, Beatrice, Ida, Hilda, and Ethel, attended modern language classes there. Neville was also heavily involved in the development of the University after his father's death.

Papers of Joseph Chamberlain and his elder son, Austen (1863-1937), were generously presented as a gift to the University by the family in 1960. Neville Chamberlain's papers and the papers of the Chamberlain sisters joined them in the 1970s. Alongside them are papers of Mary Endicott Chamberlain (1864-1957), Joseph's third

wife, which include her photograph albums depicting the gardens and grounds at Highbury, the family's Birmingham home, and her extensive personal correspondence. The papers of Austen and Neville Chamberlain contain significant material relating to their respective political careers, and the sisters' papers provide an important insight into aspects of the family's activities in Birmingham and London and their own public and voluntary work.

### Joseph Chamberlain and Birmingham

Given his impact on municipal politics, the papers contain relatively little material concerning Joseph Chamberlain's time as Mayor. However, the archives do include a copy letter book with letters in

his handwriting, dating from 1873–1874, which consist of enquiries about Birmingham municipal affairs, but also touch on educational reform and Chamberlain's unsuccessful Parliamentary candidature at Sheffield in 1874. There are also papers relating to the affairs of the Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association, and concerning the Birmingham School Board. Chamberlain was elected Liberal MP for Birmingham in a by-election in 1876 and was appointed President of the Board of Trade in Gladstone's second administration in 1880.

## National Divisions

Chamberlain used his position in government for social reform, and campaigned for free education, improved housing for the poor, and benefits for agricultural labourers, but he became diverted from his radical domestic agenda by the issue of self-government for Ireland. Chamberlain's preferred solution was at odds with Gladstone's support for Irish Home Rule, and led to his resignation from the government and the formation of the Liberal Unionist Association.

The papers contain a small amount of correspondence concerning his need for personal protection in the 1880s in light of rumours of an Irish nationalist threat to his life, and there are substantial papers concerning Irish affairs during this period, particularly in connection with Home Rule legislation.

The Liberal Unionists entered a coalition with the Conservatives at the 1886 General Election, but Chamberlain did not take up a government post with the Tories until 1895.

## Colonial Secretary

Chamberlain formally joined Lord Salisbury's government as Colonial Secretary, and the archive is a particularly strong record for this period of his life. It includes official correspondence with Governors of British colonies including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Caribbean Islands, Ceylon, Hong Kong, and British controlled areas of West Africa.

Perhaps the most substantial sections of these papers focus on his attempts to increase British influence in South Africa, shedding light on his handling of the Jameson Raid in 1895 and the Boer War of 1899–1902 and providing a detailed record of the tour of South Africa which he and Mary undertook in 1902–1903 in an attempt to unite the British Empire and promote reconciliation after the conflict.

There is some material relating to his other activities as Colonial Secretary, including his work to fund railway schemes and develop infrastructures, and to improve public health in countries affected by malaria and other tropical diseases through research and education which resulted in the establishment of the London School of Tropical Medicine.

Chamberlain resigned in 1903 to launch a nationwide campaign for the introduction of preferential tariffs in favour of colonies that offered comparable preference to British exports, at a time of anxiety about industrial competition with Germany and the United States. The archive is rich in detail about the Tariff Reform campaign and its divisive impact on national politics.



Souvenir postcard issued for the royal opening of the University buildings at Edgbaston, 1909.

## Founder of the University of Birmingham

During this period of responsibility for imperial policy, Joseph Chamberlain also played a major role in the transformation of Mason Science College into the University of Birmingham. The papers, combined with material in the University Archives, document this campaign. Chamberlain used his influence to raise funds, acquire land from Lord Calthorpe's Edgbaston estate, and lobby for new buildings and the development and expansion of subjects taught at the new institution.

There are important sequences of correspondence between Chamberlain and major donors including the industrialist Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), and with Oliver Lodge (1851–1940), the first Principal. Chamberlain prioritised spending on the buildings at Edgbaston designed by Sir Aston Webb and Ingress Bell, and the clock tower in the centre of this complex is dedicated to him. Although he was the University's first Chancellor, he was not able to attend the opening of the buildings in 1909 by Edward VII due to the severe stroke he suffered in 1906, which ended his active political life. Nevertheless, he featured strongly in souvenir postcards produced for the event, and his wife, Mary, and granddaughter, Hilda Mary Richards, attended the ceremony on his behalf. ●

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### Further Reading

Catalogues of the Chamberlain Papers [www.calmview.bham.ac.uk/](http://www.calmview.bham.ac.uk/)

Cadbury Research Library resource guide to the Chamberlain Family Papers

[www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/rlt/subject.aspx](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/rlt/subject.aspx)

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