

Building The House

It is just 40 years since I met the newly elected Newcastle MP Mike Thomas. Although on different sides of the House we hit it off immediately, and when he had been in the Commons for a few months he talked to me of his plans for a parliamentary magazine. We were almost of an age, but I had been in the House since 1970 and did warn him that some of our senior colleagues, on both sides, would think this was a risky – even foolhardy – idea. I welcomed it, and we continued to talk. Mike assembled one or two backers, including one Richard Faulkner – since 1999 Lord Faulkner of Worcester!

His persistence paid off and in November 1976 the first issue of the magazine appeared. It was printed on fairly light paper and contained one or two grainy photographs, but its distinguishing feature was a front cover cartoon of a Member drawn by Glan Williams, a particularly fine caricaturist. His first victim was George Strauss, the Father of the House, who had first been elected in the 1920s. His backing, by association, was valuable support, but the Colonel Blimps on both sides continued to express disapproval at this new-fangled intrusion, even though the early issues were little more than a detailed parliamentary diary of what had been done in the previous week and what was planned for the next one. There was a diary/commentary page written by someone who styled himself ‘Guy Fawkes’, but it was all fairly tame stuff. We got our own back on the Blimps by featuring a fictitious one on the cover a few months later. Several of his colleagues were taken in.

Mike realised that for the magazine to have any chance of success (for he neither received nor sought any financial backing from the House) it must become

Lord Cormack looks back on the gestation and growth of the magazine he helped to found

accepted, and that meant its impartiality must be guaranteed. So he asked me if I would form and chair an editorial board of parliamentarians and officials, and I set about doing so. Among those I managed to recruit were the then Sergeant at Arms and the Clerk of the House, together with a clutch of parliamentarians from both sides of the Commons. *The House Magazine* in those days was a Commons publication with barely a reference to the other place. One of those who came on board early and was particularly helpful was a young Conservative lawyer who was clearly going places – Geoffrey Howe. His increasing responsibilities meant his board membership was short lived, though he rejoined the moment he stepped down from government in 1990 and has been with us ever since. The Speaker, George Thomas, was very supportive and allowed us to use Speaker’s House on occasion, as did his successors.

But the magazine struggled and clearly needed someone who would put money into it without any expectation of an early reward. That person came in the form of Keith Young, who purchased the magazine about two years after it had been founded and was

the ideal proprietor. He never interfered editorially, but felt that the magazine needed a parliamentary editor – or editors – and in 1979 Chris Price, the Labour MP for Lewisham, and I became joint editors and I remained as chairman of the editorial board as well. Chris lost his seat in 1983 and was succeeded as senior assistant editor by Austin Mitchell, who remains on board to this day. Shortly after, Charles Kennedy became the third member of the editorial team.

We used to meet weekly in my room and plan the contents and coverage. From the beginning, those meetings were stimulating and good humoured. We talked frankly and freely in what Charles often referred to as the most enjoyable hour of his week. My job, among others, was to read every word of every piece that went into the magazine. Even when I was on holiday I would have everything faxed to me. I shall never forget my wife’s face when, sitting at breakfast outside our hotel on the Grand Canal in Venice, I was presented with an enormous sheaf of papers containing the text of the party conference issues for that year. Of course things went wrong sometimes, but only once in a dramatic way. Because of an oversight, I had not been sent an article which turned out to be a little less than impartial. Keith Young’s decision, when I told him what

had happened, was instant: the issue must be pulped. Nothing must threaten the magazine’s reputation for impartiality.

The magazine flourished, not least because of a decision in the 80s to include the House of Lords on a weekly basis. Shortly after that, peers were invited

“ Nothing must threaten the magazine’s reputation for impartiality ”

to join the editorial board. The board still exists with members from both Houses and all parties, and from the crossbenches. It meets two or three times a year, but my successor as editor, Gisela Stuart, has maintained the tradition of weekly meetings of the editorial team.

There have been many

milestones along the way. We had a dinner in Speaker’s House to mark the Silver Jubilee in 1997 presided over by Madam Speaker Boothroyd who, as Baroness Boothroyd OM, is now a valued member of the editorial board. There was another celebration, hosted by Mr Speaker Martin, to mark the 30th anniversary.

When I stepped down as editor I was invited to become Life President by the new owners of the magazine who had acquired it from Keith Young just after the turn of the century. Now we are part of the same stable as Dod’s Parliamentary Companion, which has a history dating back to the Reform Bill of 1832. Another stablemate is Vacher’s Quarterly, and we have, of course, embraced the electronic age.

The magazine today bears little physical resemblance to that very slight publication of November 1976 but impartiality and information remain its hallmarks, and although it is so much bigger and more

comprehensive, it still contains long-established features like the diary (there is now one from each House) and the profile, which is no longer illustrated by a caricature but by stunningly good photographs.

In two years’ time the magazine will marks its 40th birthday, and I have every confidence that it will still be flourishing 10 years after that and, I hope, long beyond. It has been a privilege to be associated with it throughout its history and the weekly editorial meetings are still as leak-proof and laugh-filled as they ever were. You could not have an impartial magazine unless colleagues from different parties and Houses were able to totally trust one another.

But the magazine could not have become a unique window on Westminster without a small and talented team of full timers. It is now led by the consummately professional Paul Waugh whose predecessors include John Healey, Daisy Sampson, Richard Hall and Sam Macrory. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

