

Our House

Four of this publication's old hands share their memories of working on the magazine through the years



Today's reader of *The House* would not recognise the magazine we first published 38 years ago. Printed on plain matt paper and rarely running to more than 24 pages, it carried no editorial photographs – our one illustration was a Vanity Fair-

style caricature of a Member on the front cover. The editorial matter consisted of factual timetabling of the coming week in both Houses, a summary of upcoming committee sittings, detail of the progress of legislation and a gossip column written by one 'Guy Fawkes'. The advertisers were a pioneering group of companies and organisations, most of whom backed us bravely, not entirely sure they were not risking a spell in the Tower for a breach of parliamentary privilege.

It's hard to believe that the fundamental right of any organisation to communicate its views to MPs could have been viewed with such trepidation, but the fear of it being at least *infra dig* to advertise in a publication aimed at MPs was in the back of the minds of many of our potential advertisers. Ironically, those who feared the magazine would become the cat's-paw

of the lobbyists had failed to realise that some of them were actually our greatest enemies, as we threatened to make easily accessible information they charged large amounts to provide to their clients.

Now that all scheduled parliamentary business is published on the UK Parliament website, no one remembers that the basic information about Parliament's weekly

agenda was not then collated anywhere and, until the magazine started, had to be gleaned (even by Members) from several disparate offices within the Palace (including the whips' offices). Happily, by the time the Library caught up, *The House Magazine* (as it was then styled) had established itself as an independent journal, respected throughout Parliament and able to move into the area of sophisticated review of

policy matters – something we had cautiously chosen to eschew in the early days.

1,500 issues, eh! I still have the letter from the Member who, after a rude and abrupt beginning, told me: "It won't last six weeks." 🍷

Mike Thomas was Labour MP for Newcastle upon Tyne East from 1974 to 1981, SDP MP for the same constituency until 1983 and founder of *The House Magazine*



I have so many wonderful memories of my time writing profiles for *The House Magazine*, but the one that must stand out beyond the rest was my interview with Baroness – then Mrs – Thatcher shortly after she resigned as Prime Minister (reprinted on page 36).

She had agreed to do the interview before her resignation, and I think it was the only one she kept in her diary in the immediate aftermath.

“In short, it was every journalist's nightmare”

I was quite nervous and she seemed pretty shellshocked and a bit distracted, so I didn't take much notice of the fact that she kept staring oddly at my tape recorder. It was only after the interview had ended and I was outside that I realised the tape recorder had stopped shortly after we began talking, and I had taken a not very good shorthand account of our discussion! In short, every journalist's nightmare.

Luckily for me, she had a very kind and supportive press officer, Christine Wall, who had left No 10 to continue working with Mrs Thatcher in retirement. Christine had also recorded the discussion and helped me to fill in the gaps. So altogether an unforgettable afternoon, in more ways than one. 🍷

Fiona Millar is a journalist and former No 10 aide



From *The House Magazine's* earliest days it was necessary to attract large-scale corporate advertising to make the publication viable (though never profitable). A year after Mike Thomas and I started it in 1976, the British Railways Board came to us with a series of advertisements with strongly political messages which ran at weekly intervals – 'The most cost-effective railway in Europe' was one such example.

There was one ad which we ran on 22 May 1978 that caused a huge storm. It was inserted by BRB's chief freight manager, Frank Paterson, had the headline 'In 1978 Highway Robbery still exists on a huge scale', and depicted a lorry driver dressed as a burglar privately extracting money from the wallet of a hapless motorist.

While researching our book *Holding The Line – How Britain's Railways Were Saved* (reviewed generously in *The House* on 21 January 2013 by Lord Fowler), my co-author and I wrote to Frank Paterson about this particular advertisement. Paterson wrote back:

"The cartoon created a tremendous furore, principally from the Road Haulage Association, the British Roads Federation and the TGWU. In addition to contradicting the figures I'd quoted, we were accused of maligning the industry and lampooning truck drivers and generated quite a lot of vitriolic letters in the press and the trade magazines.

"I then got a message from the Department of Transport that Sir Peter Baldwin, the permanent secretary, wanted to see me. I dealt at principal level so I asked my contact, Jenny Page, to find out what it was about. Deathly silence. Bob Reid was my boss but wasn't around, so

In 1978 Highway Robbery still exists on a huge scale.



I went to see Bobby Lawrence, deputy chairman, and asked him if I should go.

"I still remember his words: 'If the permanent secretary sends for you, you go boy.'" So off I trotted to Marsham Street. I was waiting in the outer office when the director-general of the British Road Federation arrived. I knew him quite well through the Institute of Transport. He was one of the leading public critics of *The House*

Magazine entry and had also been summoned by Peter without being told why.

"We were then together escorted into the 'presence'. Baldwin sat us down in front of his desk and proceeded to lecture us as though we were sixth formers in front of the headmaster: 'Don't think you'll impress politicians by this kind of rabble – go away and behave yourselves.'

"It was unbelievable, and when I reported back to Bobby he just laughed like a drain. Sadly it didn't change anything, but it was a good way to get a message across." 🍷

Lord Faulkner of Worcester is a Labour peer



I had a great 18 months working on *The House Magazine* in 1983-84, when we still used scalpels to cut and paste the layout

of each page before walking the proofs round to the printers in Clerkenwell around 2am on Friday mornings.

The best part of the week, however, was humping two boxes of freshly printed magazines down to the House to hand-

“The best part of the week was humping boxes of the freshly printed magazine down to the House”

deliver on Friday afternoon.

From the Public Bill Office to the police canteen in both Commons and Lords, 'the man from *The House Magazine*' got a great welcome from everyone. Sometimes they were pleased with the magazine, but in truth they were always pleased to see me because my arrival marked the end of their working week. 🍷

John Healey is Labour MP for Wentworth and Dearne