The Most Famous Street in the Empire

By Michael MacDonagh

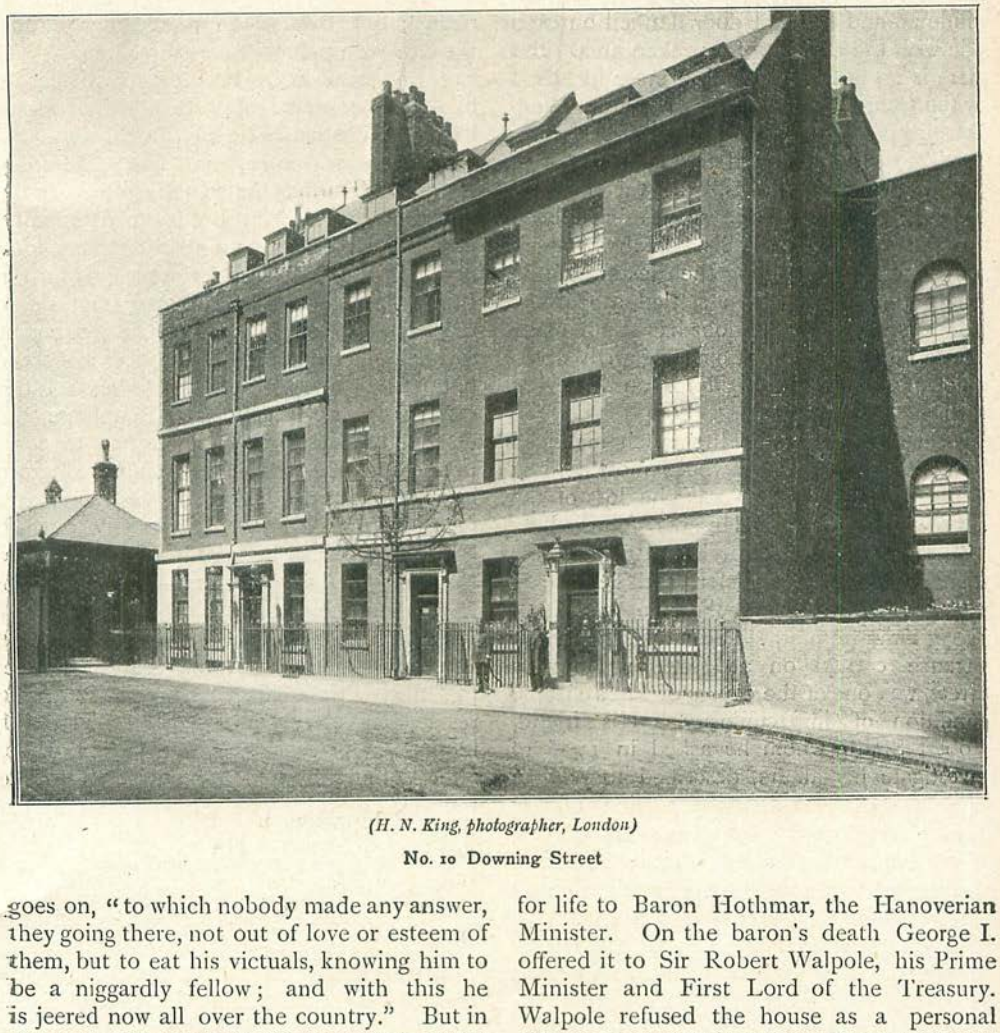
DOWNING STREET is the centre of the government of the British Empire, and as such its renown is world wide. Yet it is curious to find Bagehot, one of the most acute commentators on the British Constitution, declaring in a work, written not more than fifty years ago, that if you tell a cabman to drive you to Downing Street he most likely will never have heard of it, and will not in the least know where to take you! Surely, Downing Street is one of the best known London streets; and to-day, at least—if it were not so half a century ago—a London cabman would have no more doubt where you wished to be taken to on saying "Downing Street" than on saying "Strand" or "Piccadilly."

Downing Street appropriately lies in a district which has been associated for centuries with the Throne and Parliament. Midway between Trafalgar Square and Westminster Abbey, on the right-hand side, just where Whitehall ends and Parliament Street begins, there is a short, narrow, and by no means imposing street, about one hundred yards long and twenty feet wide. That is Downing Street. It is almost invariably described in London guide-books as a *cul-de-sac*. That, however, is inaccurate. It is not a blind alley, or a street with an entrance but without an egress, for there is a thoroughfare through it for pedestrians, and at its end a flight of steps leads to the wide-spreading reaches of the Horse Guards Parade.

By a strange irony of fate this street, the headquarters of the "Ins," or the Party in power, as well as the centre of the most secure and stable government in the world, is called after a politician whose name might be accepted as a synonym for one who is ever ready to reconcile his political views with his personal interests, or as an alternative word for "trimmer" and "place-hunter." Anthony Wood, the Oxford biographer, describes Sir George Downing as "a sider with all times and changes." The son of a London merchant, he was brought, at the age of fifteen, by his father to Massachusetts. He graduated in Harvard College, acted as teacher for a time in that institution, became a ship's chaplain, and, finding his way back to England, appeared in 1650 as chaplain in Cromwell's army in Scotland, and subsequently as a member of Parliament under the Lord Protector. Cromwell appointed him resident, or ambassador, at the Hague in 1657, and he was in occupation of this post at the restoration of Charles II. in 1660. He made his peace with the King, according to Carte's "Original Letters and Papers," by attributing his backslidings with the Cromwellians to the fact that in New England, where he had been brought up, "he had sucked in principles that since his reason had made him see were erroneous." Charles confirmed him in his post at the Hague.

By-and-by he returned to England, re-entered Parliament, and played the part of a servile court politician. "The House bell to call the courtiers to vote" is a contemporary description of him. He is said to have received £80,000 by the King's favour. He also induced Charles to make him a grant of a tract of land at Westminster for building purposes, the only condition on which the King insisted being that the houses to be erected so close to the royal palace at Whitehall, should be of handsome and graceful exterior. Downing was looked upon with ill favour by his contemporaries. Pepys in his diary, under date February 27, 1667, records how he met Mr. Hunt, "newly come out of the country," who told him an amusing story of a dinner given by Downing at his country seat. To his guests, according to the indignant Hunt, he gave "nothing but beef, porridge, pudding, and pork." The silence of discontent, therefore, prevailed during the repast. It was broken only by the mother saying to the host, "It's good broth, son;"

and he answering, "Yes, it is good broth." "It is very good pork," said the mother. "Yes, it is very good pork," replied the son. "And so they said of all things," Pepys goes on, "to which nobody made any answer, they going there, not out of love or esteem of them, but to eat his victuals, knowing him to be a niggardly fellow; and with this he is jeered now all over the country." But in America, apparently, it is not niggardliness but infamy that is associated with his memory. "It became a proverbial expression with his countrymen in New England," an American writer states, "to say of a false man who betrayed his trust that he was an arrant George Downing."



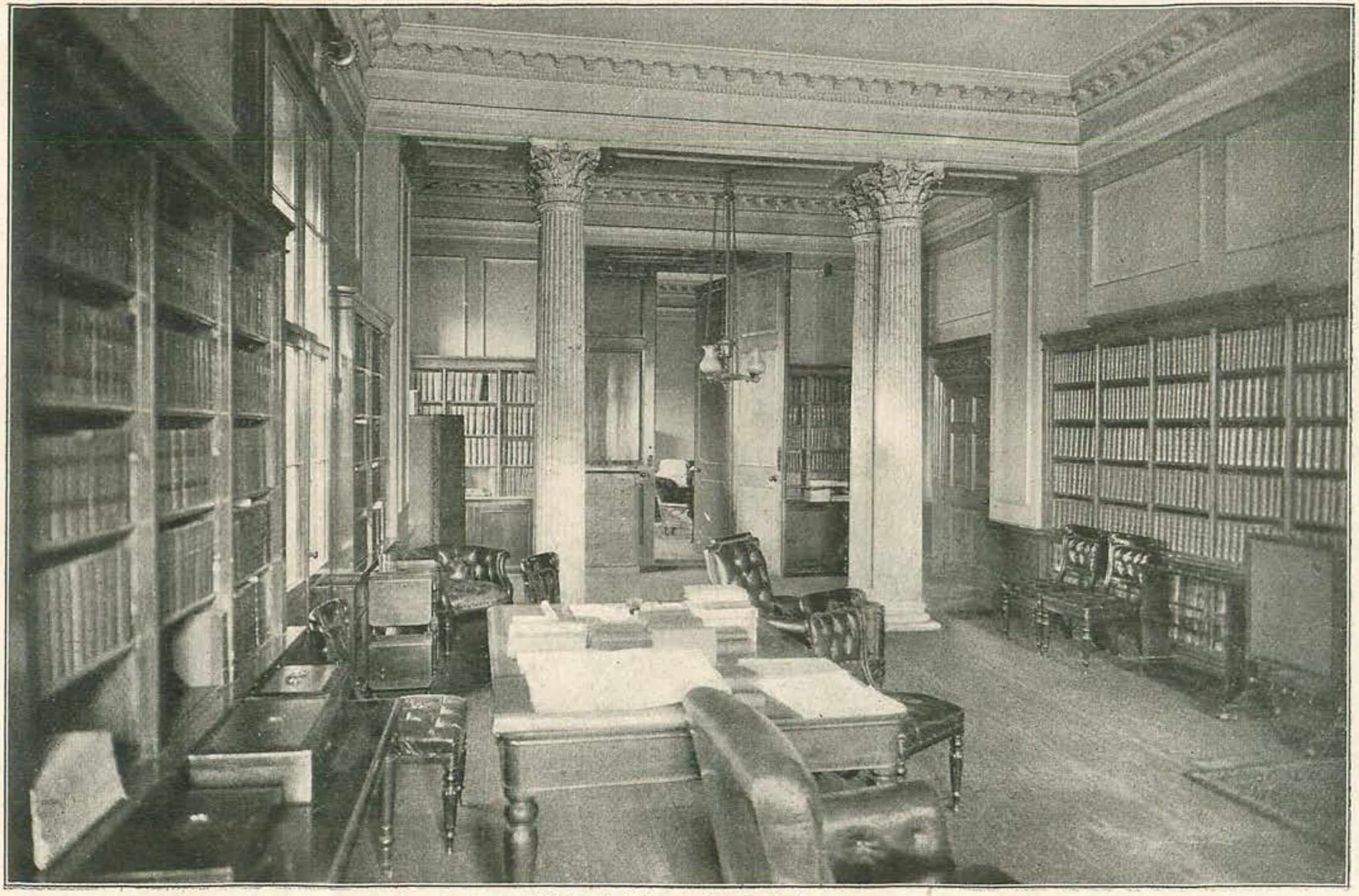
(*H. N. King, photographer, London*)

No. 10 Downing Street

Downing Street becomes a fashionable residential quarter. Lord Lichfield, who was Master of the Horse in the days of James II., had his town mansion here. On the flight of the King, Lichfield elected to follow that unhappy monarch into exile, and his property was forfeited to the Crown. His house in Downing Street was given by George I. for life to Baron Hothmar, the Hanoverian Minister. On the baron's death George I. offered it to Sir Robert Walpole, his Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury. Walpole refused the house as a personal gift, but accepted it as the official residence in perpetuity of the First Lord of the Treasury, the office with which the Premiership is generally associated. He moved into it on September 22, 1735, and since then No. 10 Downing Street has been occupied by several Prime Ministers, who were also First Lords of the Treasury. Other houses in the street were gradually obtained by the State during the nineteenth century as residences for Ministers—No. 12, for instance, is still the official abode of the Chancellor of the Exchequer—and as offices for the various Departments. "No. 10" is to-day a plain, unassuming brick building—if, indeed, not dingy and ugly—three storeys high, with flat windows, and the hall door flanked on each side with the railings of a sunken area. But there is no house in London more idealised by the glamour of history than this unpretentious residence in which the First Lord of the Treasury is entitled to live "rent free, with coal and candles," at the nation's expense. Many historic scenes have been enacted within those walls. Many momentous questions affecting the destiny of the Empire have there been settled at Cabinet Councils. At its hall door has stood many a mean office-seeker, trembling with obsequiousness, as he begged for an interview with the Prime Minister.

After Walpole came the much maligned but genial Lord North, whose most abiding feat as Prime Minister was the loss of the American Colonies. He was followed by Pitt, who lived his careless bachelor life there while Prime Minister, and became so attached to the place that he was never happy away from it. The waste and extravagance carried on at No. 10 Downing Street, was one of the causes of Pitt's chronic condition of impecuniosity. His friend, Robert Smith, whom he asked in 1786 to investigate his affairs, described to William Wilberforce the ruinous profusion of the dinner table. "The butcher's bill only is £96. Can it be possible that 3800 lbs. of meat could be dressed in twenty-eight days? The poulterer's, fishmonger's, and, indeed, all the bills, exceed anything I could have imagined. The meat is sent in in great quantities. On a Saturday there is generally three or four hundredweight." The windows of the house were broken by rioters in July 1795. Stories had been circulated that hundreds of boys had been made drunk by recruiting sergeants, and while in that condition forced to sign papers as recruits for service abroad against France. Several taverns, or "crimping houses" as they were called, were wrecked; and then proceeding to Downing Street the virtuous mob battered in the windows about Pitt's ears. His mother, Lady Chatham, sent him from the country, some days subsequently, an anxious letter inquiring after his safety. "I take shame to myself," he replied, "for not reflecting how much a mob is magnified by report; but that which visited my window with a single pebble was really so young and so little versed in its business that it hardly merited the notice of a newspaper." The letter is characteristic of Pitt's calm—his "majestic self-possession" as Macaulay styles it. During the Mutiny of the Nore, Lord Spencer, the First Lord of the Admiralty, went to No. 10 Downing Street, late one night, with urgent and serious news for the Prime Minister. Pitt, aroused from sleep, received the report, and gave directions as to what was to be done. Spencer withdrew, but had scarcely reached the end of the street when he remembered that there was one point which he had omitted to communicate. He returned, was ushered again into the Prime Minister's bedroom, and found him—even in the brief interval that had elapsed since he had heard news of the most disquieting character—wrapped again in profound slumber.

Spencer Perceval, that industrious and successful, if not brilliant, statesman, was the next Prime Minister, after Pitt, who resided at No. 10 Downing Street. He left its portals for ever on May 11, 1812, when, after walking from Downing Street to the Houses of Parliament, he was shot by the lunatic Bellingham in the lobby of the House of Commons. Lord Liverpool and George Canning also made "No. 10" their homes in the years they were Prime Ministers. So, too, did Earl Grey; and he was painted there, sitting by the fireside brooding over the fate and fortunes of the Reform Bill, by Haydon in 1831. The Duke of Wellington, Lord Melbourne, Sir Robert Peel, Lord John Russell, Lord Aberdeen, the Earl of Derby, and Lord Palmerston did not reside there while Prime Ministers, some not being First Lords of the Treasury, and others, especially Melbourne, Peel, and Palmerston, preferring their own private houses in London. In these years the place was used for the transaction of the official business of the



(H. N. King, photographer, London)

The Council Chamber, No. 10 Downing Street

First Lords of the Treasury. Palmerston writing from there to his brother on February 15, 1855, exultingly announcing his success in forming an Administration on the fall of the Aberdeen Coalition Ministry, because of their mismanagement of the Crimean War, after Lord Derby the Tory and Lord John Russell the Whig had, respectively, tried and failed, said: "A month ago if any man asked me to say what was one of the most improbable events, I should say my being Prime Minister. Aberdeen was there; Derby was head of one great Party; John Russell of the other; and yet in about ten days time they all gave way, like straws before the wind, and so here am I, writing to you from Downing Street, as First Lord of the Treasury."

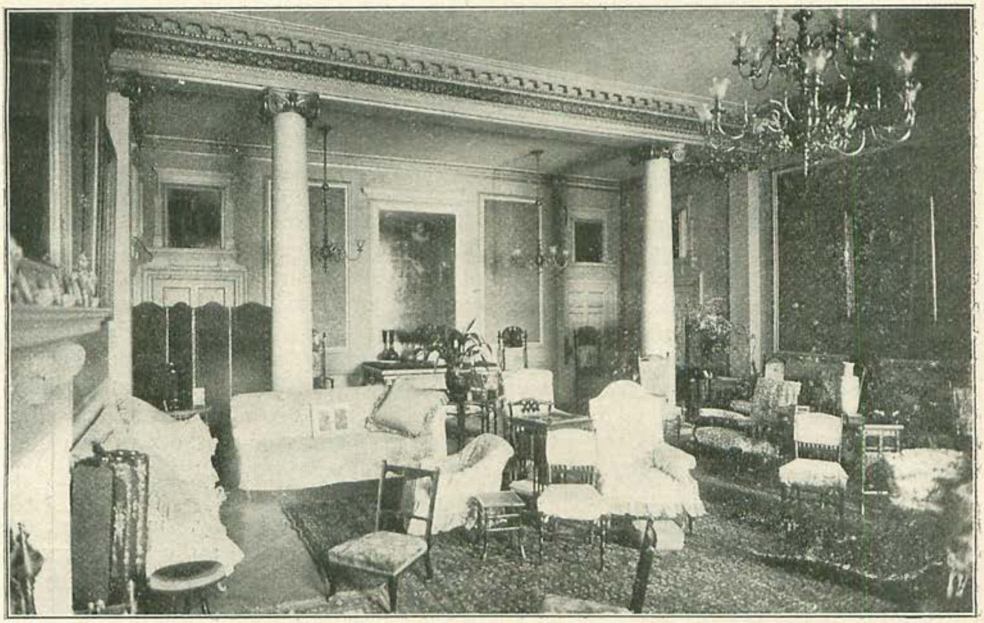
Disraeli, and his great rival Gladstone—both of whom made "No. 10" their official residence—did much to resuscitate in later days the olden glories of the place. Both followed the example of their predecessors in office, as Prime Minister, to hold the meetings of their Cabinets in the old Council Chamber of the house. This room, in which the most momentous public questions of a century and a half have been settled, is on the ground floor, connected by a short passage with the spacious hall, and is furnished as a library. It is lighted by windows overlooking the garden at the back of the house, two of which open upon a stone terrace with plain iron railings, where Ministers were wont to air themselves after their deliberations.

The Foreign Office, the Home Office, and the War and Colonial Offices were also in old Downing Street. The Colonial Office in its present form was not constituted until 1854. The business of the Colonies was transacted at the Home Office until 1801, in which year it was transferred to the War Office. This state of things continued until 1854, when a separate Colonial Office was instituted, and Sir George Grey became the first Secretary of State for the Colonies. It was in the waiting-room of No. 14 Downing Street, the old War and Colonial Office (long since demolished), not at No. 10, as is generally stated, that Nelson and Wellington met for the only time in their lives. This must have been in August 1805, shortly after the return of Sir Arthur Wellesley from India, and just before Nelson rejoined the Mediterranean Squadron to smash a few months later the united fleets of France and Spain off Cape Trafalgar. Wellington in 1834 gave John Wilson Croker an interesting account of the famous interview. "I only saw Nelson once in my life, and perhaps for an hour," said Wellington. "It was soon after I returned from India. I went to the Colonial Office in Downing Street, and there I was shown into a little waiting-room on the right hand, where I found, also waiting to see the Secretary, a gentleman who, from his likeness to his picture and the loss of an arm, I recognised as Lord Nelson. He could not know who I was, but he entered at once into conversation with me, if I can call it conversation, for it was almost all on his side, and all about himself, and in really a style so vain and so silly as to surprise and almost disgust me." Nelson left the room for a few minutes, and probably learned from the hall porter who his companion was. "When he came back," said Wellington, "he was altogether a different man, both in manner and matter. All that I had thought a charlatan style had vanished, and he talked of the state of this country and of the aspect and probabilities of affairs on the Continent with a good sense and a knowledge of subjects both at home and abroad that surprised me equally and more agreeably than the first part of our interview had done; in fact, he talked like an officer and a statesman."

Wellington added—

> The Secretary of State kept us long waiting, and certainly for the first half or three-quarters of an hour I don't know that I ever had a conversation that interested me more. Now, if the Secretary of State had been punctual, and admitted Lord Nelson in the first quarter of an hour, I should have had the same impression of a light and trivial character that other people have had, but luckily I saw enough to be satisfied that he was really a very superior man. But certainly a more sudden and complete metamorphosis I never saw.

The street has other memories. Boswell frequently lodged there during his visits to London. On the night of July 6, 1763, Dr. Johnson, Goldsmith, and other celebrities were to have supped with him in Downing Street; but on the preceding night the landlord behaved so rudely to him and some friends who were with him that he resolved not to remain another night in the house. "I was exceedingly uneasy at the awkward appearance I supposed I should make to Johnson and the other gentlemen whom I had invited, not being able to receive them at home, and being obliged to order supper at the Mitre," Boswell writes. "I went to Johnson in the morning and talked of it as of a serious distress. He laughed and said: Consider, sir, how insignificant this will appear a twelvemonth hence.' Were this consideration to be applied to most of the little vexatious incidents of life, by which our quiet is too often disturbed, it would prevent many painful sensations. I have tried it frequently with good effect. 'There is nothing,' he continued, 'in this mighty misfortune; nay, we shall be better at the Mitre.'" Boswell also told Johnson that on inquiry at Bow Street police office he had been informed that though he had taken the lodgings for a year he might quit them at once without any legal obligation on proof of the landlord's bad behaviour. "The fertility of Johnson's mind," writes the admiring Boswell, "could show itself even upon so small a matter as this. 'But, sir,' said he, 'if your landlord could hold you to your bargain, and the lodgings should be yours for a year, you may certainly use them as you think fit. So, sir, you may quarter two lifeguardsmen upon him; or you may send the greatest scoundrel you can find into your apartments; or you may say that you want to make some experiments in natural philosophy, and may burn a large quantity of assafetida in his house."



(H. N. King, photographer, London)

The Drawing-room, No. 10, Downing Street

Houses in Downing Street continued to be let in lodgings as late as the middle of the nineteenth century. At the Parliament Street corner of the street there was a public-house, called the "Cat and Bagpipes," which was much frequented by people with grievances lying in wait for Ministers with humble petitions, followed up, very often, in the event of their prayer being denied, with foul language. Then there was a row of eight lodging-houses. For many years from the opening of the nineteenth century Irish and Scotch representatives in London for the Parliamentary Session used to stay in these houses, but in more recent times they were let in tenements and inhabited by the poorest artisans. Almost directly opposite the official residence of the Prime Minister was this row of dingy and dilapidated houses, clothes hanging out to dry from its windows, and the broken panes stuffed with bundles of paper. Palmerston had often to pick his way to "No. 10" or to the Foreign Office through groups of dirty children making mud pies in the street. Downing Street at this time was only ten or twelve feet wide. The windows of the Foreign Office overlooked a room at the other side of the street, in which a number of young dressmakers worked. The young clerks of the Foreign Office were given to practical joking. One device of theirs on summer days was by means of looking-glasses to reflect the blinding rays of the sun on the faces of the dressmakers. So annoying did the antics of the clerks become that a complaint was addressed to Palmerston, who was Foreign Secretary, on the subject. The letter is still preserved in the Foreign Office, with Palmerston's comment written on the margin—"Who are the unmannerly youths who have been casting reflections on young ladies opposite?" The "Cat and Bagpipes" and the wretched tenements on the south side of Downing Street were pulled down in the sixties, to make way for the magnificent pile of buildings fronting Parliament Street, and extending the entire length of Downing Street—including the Foreign Office, the Home Office, the Colonial Office, and the India Office—erected between 1868 and 1873 from designs by Sir Gilbert Scott.

"Downing Street" is now frequently used as a synonym for the British Government. The Colonies, we are sometimes told, object to government by "Downing Street." During the unpleasant incident with France on the subject of Fashoda, the newspapers frequently referred to "the negotiations between Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay." "An hour's inhalation of its atmosphere," writes Theodore Hook, sarcastically, "affects some men with giddiness, others with blindness, and very frequently with the most oblivious boastfulness." "Happy spot," says Disraeli, cynically, in "Tancred," "where they draw up constitutions for Syria, and treaties for China, with the same self-complacency, and the same success."