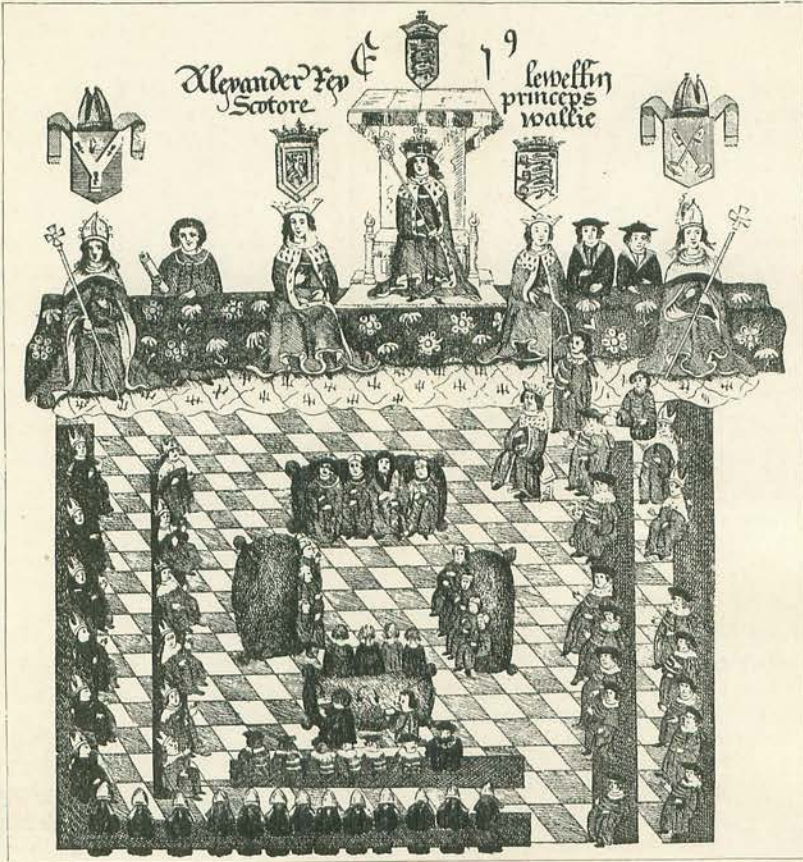


The Evolution of Parliament.

By S. J. HOUSLEY.



HOUSE OF PEERS, ABOUT 1274.



On the 27th of November, 1895, our Parliament completed its six hundredth year. It has at any rate escaped the doom pronounced upon all those of whom the world in general speaks smooth things. Mr. Froude himself has not hesitated to pour sarcasm on the poor Englishman's adoration of the British Constitution, and to compare it to the Spanish peasant's infatuation for his *bambino*. With due respect to the great historian, our veneration for the principles of our government is too sanely deep-seated to be dislodged by ridicule. And, in spite of all blemishes in practice, we may subscribe to the words of another great writer, who places the tendency of our form of government among the highest influences of civilization, when he says: "It is the predominant yet wisely tempered influence of public opinion in England that gives an intellectual and a moral value to English liberty, which, though we may

mention it last, we assuredly rank not as least among the blessings of our Constitution. Our country is the peculiar domicile of mental authority."

Edward I.'s finances were at low-water mark. Now, like other generous folk, the English nation has always resisted encroachments upon its liberty—"I don't mind giving a shilling, but I refuse to be swindled out of a halfpenny." Wise rulers have been far-sighted enough to take advantage of this characteristic; they have asked nicely for their shilling, and prudently refrained from the forcible exaction of the humbler coin.

Sir Edward Creasy has maintained that the English Constitution is as old as the English people. There is, however, a point at which we can say that our present form of government was almost exactly anticipated. The Parliament which assembled on Nov. 27th, 1295, to consider the King's requirements, was as representative of the various

classes of the kingdom, practically speaking, as the present Houses of Lords and Commons. Industry and commerce had attained a position of such importance that the King thought it advisable to ask the consent of their representatives to the imposition of taxes. Hence the appearance of the "two knights from each shire, two citizens from each city, and two burgesses from each borough" in this Parliament. The arrangement was not without precedent. Edward had the wit to appropriate the political as well as the military schemes of Earl Simon de Montfort. It would be a mistake to suppose that the representatives of the constituencies of those early days looked upon their political duties in the light in which historians and moralists of this century regard them. The M.P. of the Middle Ages knew little of civic enthusiasm; he expected wages; he shirked attendance when possible; his constituency, too, not infrequently petitioned to be allowed to remain unrepresented, and keep its representative's wages secure in its own pocket. Truly, the mighty plant of the Constitution grew out of an earthy soil.

One result of this callousness was that the more important events of history—as we regard them—did not receive their due share of contemporary attention; and consequently no representation of the complete and model Parliament of 1295 is forthcoming. The drawing reproduced at the head of this article shows a "Parliament," as almost any assembly at Royal command was then called; it was made in the fifteenth century, and represents the House of Peers, with Edward on the throne, supported by Alexander of Scotland and Llewellyn of Wales, as it was supposed to have sat on some comparatively obscure occasion in the year 1274.

The first Speaker whose name

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SIR THOMAS HUNGERFORD, THE EARLIEST SPEAKER KNOWN (1376).

appears in the Rolls of Parliament was Sir Thomas Hungerford. It is said that Peter de la Mare had filled the office previously. De la Mare is recorded as filling the post in 1377, while Sir Thomas as certainly was elected to the office in the preceding year.

The English seems to have been the most precocious of all growing peoples. We early developed a strong capacity for regulating our rulers. One of those momentous passages in the life of Parliament, though by no means a solitary instance, the deposition of one King and the popular election of another, is recorded in the accompanying illustration. Of the full

significance of their act the people were probably ignorant. No historical explanation, such as we are accustomed to, was forthcoming. On the contrary, the high Tories of the day, supporters of Richard II., did not scruple to write down the assembly at "Westmonstre" as "evil-minded," while his opponents confused the issue with recollections of ancient prophecies and saws of the most absurd nature, the greater number being, of course, ascribed to Merlin. Among the regalia, for instance, were the golden eagle and the cup said to have been dis-



THE PARLIAMENT WHICH DETHRONED RICHARD II. (1394-5).

covered during the last reign. According to the current fable, these treasures had been presented by the Virgin Mary to that worldly saint, Thomas of Canterbury, during his exile from England. A scrip found with them affirmed that "with the oil of this vessel good Kings of the English will be anointed, and one of them will recover without violence the lands lost by his parents, and he will be great among Kings, and will build many churches in the Holy Land, and will drive all Pagans out of Babylon, where he will build more churches," and so on. The ecclesiastical imagination of that day revelled in flights of fancy, unrestricted by geography, international diplomacy, and Board schools. And the chronicler asserts that Henry wore the golden eagle tied round his neck, to insure victory.

Some of the costumes in the original picture are truly gorgeous. Henry of Lancaster stands at the back, in that wondrous, tall, black hat. The Earl of Northumberland, the figure standing on the right, is in blue and gold, lined with white, and red sleeves. Immediately to his left is a truculent-looking nobleman, in purple and gold, with a green cap and red hose. Others are arrayed in similar taste, even the Church permitting her servants the vanity of a crimson cowl.

It appears from several entries in the Rolls of Parliament during the early part of the reign of Edward III., that after the open-

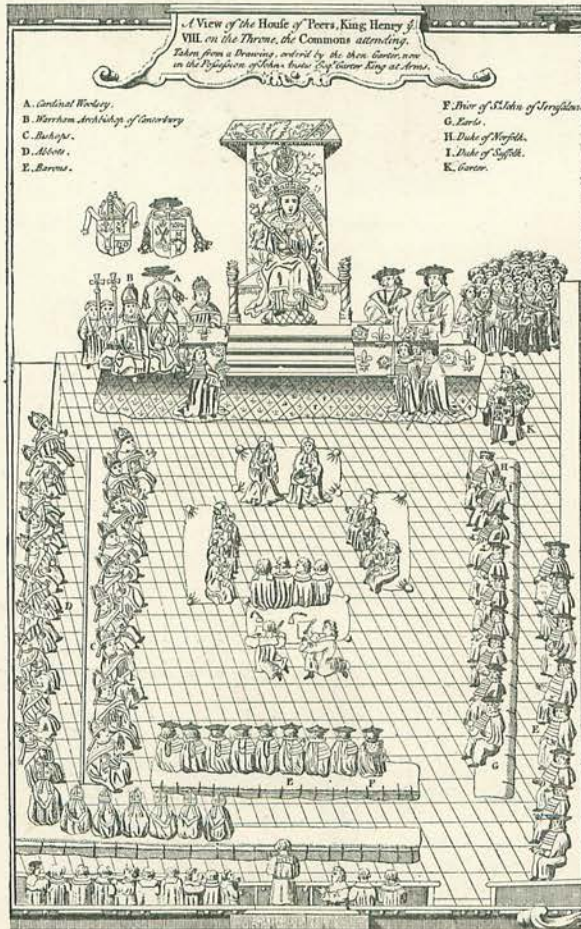
ing of Parliament in the presence of Barons, clergy, and Commons collectively, these three estates frequently sate each separately, and afterwards delivered a joint answer to the King. The eventual separation of Parliament into the two Houses, with which we are familiar, was the result of a gradual process, the stages of which we are unable satisfactorily to trace. It seems that the instances referred to above were the lingering remnants of an older custom which had disappeared before the end of the reign.

Parliament is assembled on a day fixed by Royal Proclamation. The Commons are

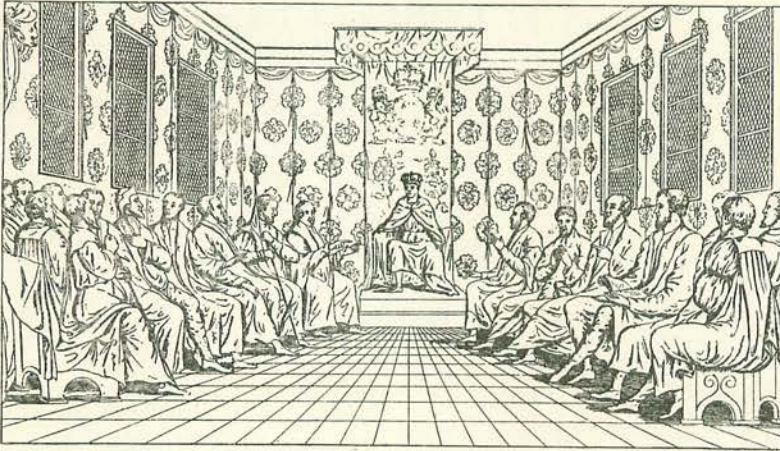
then called to the House of Lords to hear the cause of summons, and are directed to proceed to the election of their Speaker; a time is also appointed when they will be required to attend and present their Speaker for the Royal approval. This drawing represents the first Parliament of Henry VIII. upon that occasion. The Speaker presented was Sir Robert Sheffield. Money was wanted to conduct the war with France; Parliament assembled on the 4th of February, 1512, and eagerly granted the desired supplies. A sermon formed part of the opening ceremony, and was delivered by

Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Curiously enough, he chose as his text, "Justitia et pax osculatae sunt," "Righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

From the reign of Edward IV., through this period, down to the time of the Restora-



PARLIAMENT OF HENRY VIII. (1509-1546).



PARLIAMENT OF EDWARD VI. (1549).

the right sit the peers, in robes not much different to those of earlier or later years; opposite to them sit the representatives of the Church; the mitre of Rome has been exchanged for the severer head-gear of the New Religion.

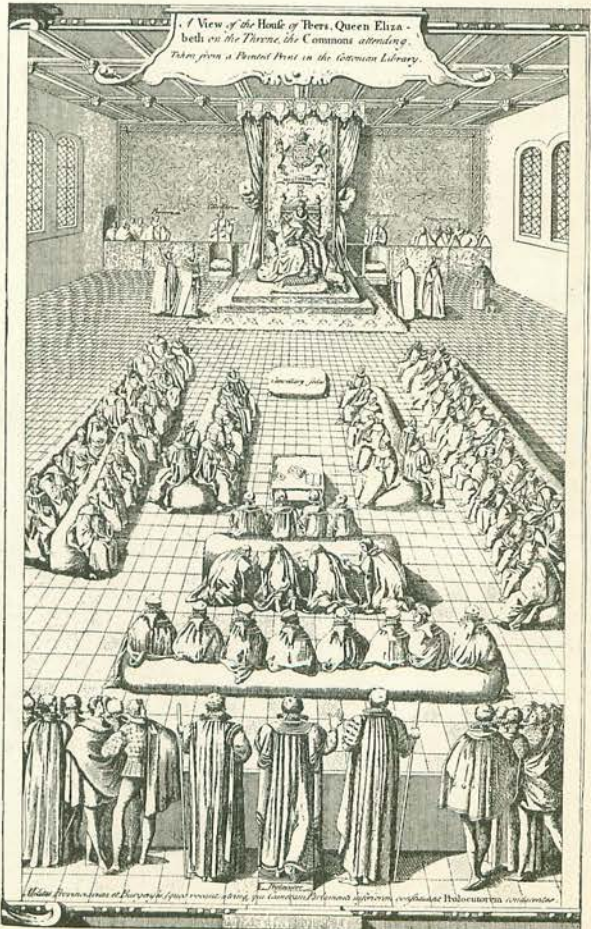
The modern procedure of the presentation of the Speaker is

tion, our Constitutional Parliament was somewhat under a cloud. Much of the work of government was carried on by the King in Council. And one of the greatest struggles of the people with the Crown was directed to the attainment of power to regulate the constitution of this Council. Its lineal descendant, the Privy Council, "has ceased to exist as a constitutional factor in the government." Its living and active offshoot is the Cabinet Ministry of to-day, which the people has succeeded in making completely responsible to the country for its acts. This sketch was affixed to the title of the "Book of Common Prayer," published in 1549, the precursor of that at present in use. It gives the young King a prominence which is, perhaps, more than his due, for, at this time, he was still linked to the apron-strings of the sixteen executors appointed by his father. Indeed, he was not yet twelve years of age. The accounts of the debates in Parliament on the institution of this prayer-book are interesting, as being the earliest reported speeches extant of those delivered in that assembly.

Here is yet another representation of the Commons presenting their Speaker-elect for the approval of the Crown. One very noticeable difference between this picture and that of the Parliament of 1512 is in the costume of the clergy. On

of almost immemorial tradition, and is as follows:—

At the hour appointed the Houses as-



PARLIAMENT OF ELIZABETH (1558-1603).

semble in their respective chambers, and the Speaker-elect takes the chair in the Commons. Presently appears the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, who conducts the Speaker-elect to the House of Lords. The Speaker then informs the Crown—usually represented by the Lords Commissioners—that, “in obedience to Her Majesty’s commands”—in Elizabeth’s time it was “your Highness’s commands”—“Her Majesty’s faithful Commons, in the exercise of their undoubted right and privilege, have proceeded to the election of a Speaker, and as the object of their choice he now presents himself at your bar, and submits himself with all humility to Her Majesty’s gracious approbation.” On two occasions only has the “gracious approbation” been withheld. Usually the Lord Chancellor assures him that “Her Majesty most fully approves and confirms him as the Speaker.” Having received the Royal assent, the Speaker proceeds to lay claim to all the “ancient and undoubted rights and privileges” of the Commons, which it is part of his duty to maintain. The claim having been granted, the Speaker retires from the House of Lords, and holds the post throughout the Parliament for which he was chosen.

One almost needs to be reminded that newspapers are not one of the breakfastable blessings conferred upon us by the science of the nineteenth century, nor even of the eighteenth. Papers containing accounts of the deeds of Parliament sprang into being in considerable numbers during the stirring times of our Civil War. In November, 1641, for instance, the month of the Grand Remonstrance, there appeared a weekly paper styling itself “Diurnal Occurrences; or, the Heads of Several Proceedings in Both Houses of Parliament.” The period was exceedingly fertile, and produced many “Diurnals,” possibly also ornamented with headings as quaint



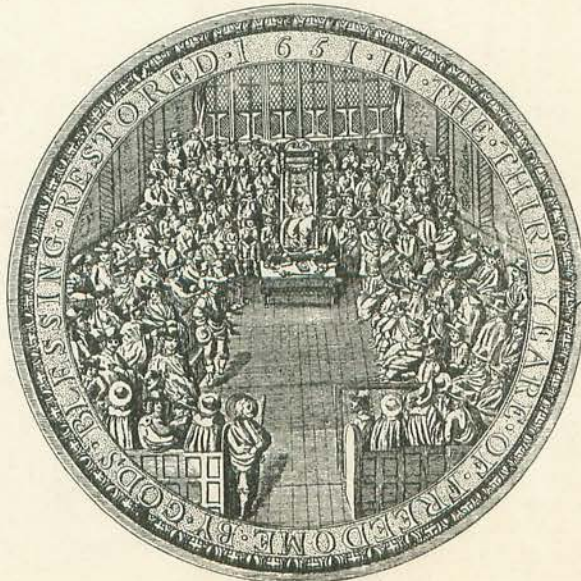
HEAD OF A NEWSPAPER, TIME OF CHARLES I.

as this. These “rags” hardly deserve the title of newspapers; their news was very meagre, and their paucity of comment was hardly compensated by the virulence of its scurrility.

When Charles I. had exhausted the pockets and the patience of England, the Commons resolved, on December 6th, 1648, that whatever was enacted by them had the force of law, without the consent of the King or the House of Lords. On February 6th, 1649—not a month after the King’s execution—they declared that the House of Lords was “useless, dangerous, and ought to be abolished.” The next day a similar fate befell the system of monarchy. Finally, on May 19th, the Commons, by a solemn Act, declared and constituted the people of England a Commonwealth and free State. A great seal, the reverse of which

is here reproduced, was struck by order of the Commons alone. Act and seal are equally significant of the temper of the Commons. The obverse was a map of England and Ireland, with the legend, “The Great Scale of England.” The reverse tells its own tale here; it has no place for a King or a House of Lords.

Our next illustration brings us to an era of Ministers. The people has gained two



THE GREAT SEAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH (1652-57).

great points. James II.'s folly afforded Parliament an opportunity to reassert and act upon its ancient right to choose its King, while the inability of George I. to speak the language of the country he came to rule gave birth to the office—or call it what you will—of Prime Minister. In fact, during the reign of the two first Georges, the Crown ceased absolutely to be an active factor in the government. Not only did the Kings do no wrong, but they did nothing at all. "Both were honest and straightforward men, who frankly accepted the irksome position of constitutional Kings. As political figures, the two Georges are almost absent from our history." The year 1755 was that in which the Duke of Newcastle came into controversy with the genius of William Pitt, afterwards Earl of Chatham. Pitt was then Paymaster of the Forces; and, having refused on technical grounds to pay certain subsidies, he was dismissed. The next year the Seven Years' War broke out,



THE HOUSE OF COMMONS (1755).

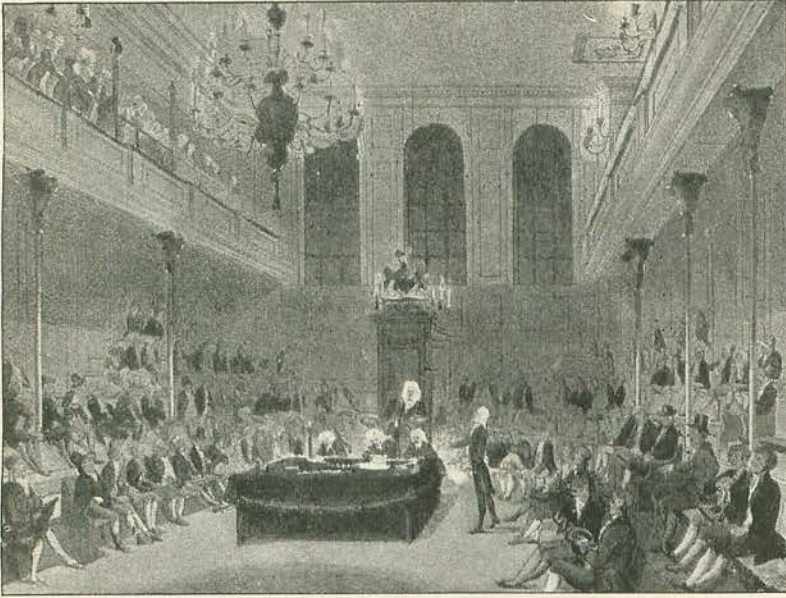


THE HOUSE OF PEERS—GEORGE II. ON THE THRONE (1755).

and Pitt became Secretary of State nominally, though actually the first Minister in the kingdom.

At the prorogation of Parliament, the Commons are called to the bar of the Upper House, just as at its opening. The Speaker addresses the Crown, presents the Bills of Supply, and adverts to the most important measures that have been passed in the Session. After giving the necessary sanction to such Bills as still await it, the King reads his speech to the Houses, either personally or through the Lord Chancellor. Finally, the Lord Chancellor, instructed by His Majesty, declares Parliament prorogued.

From the days of the Earl of Chatham we pass to the year in which his second son, the younger William Pitt, undertook the task of government, which proved the last of his brief but glorious life. Trouble was brewing across the Channel, and England, resolved to strike the first blow, had declared war against Napoleon in May,



HOUSE OF COMMONS (1804)—REIGN OF GEORGE III.

1803. Those were anxious times. In the following year 100,000 men were gathered at Boulogne, within sight of England's white cliffs; a fleet of boats was in readiness to convey them across the water. "Let us be masters of the Channel for six hours," said the great Napoleon, "and we are masters of the world." Englishmen hastened to join the new force of volunteers, and prepared to defend their country. Pitt literally wore himself to death in the execution of the military duties he undertook. All danger, however, of an invasion disappeared when it was known that the French and Spanish fleets had been defeated at Trafalgar. The orator speaking in the House of Commons may well be intended for William Pitt. The long, angular figure, the curious gesticulation, are characteristic of the great states-

man. "His action as a speaker was vehement and ungraceful, sawing the air with windmill arms, sometimes almost touching the ground."

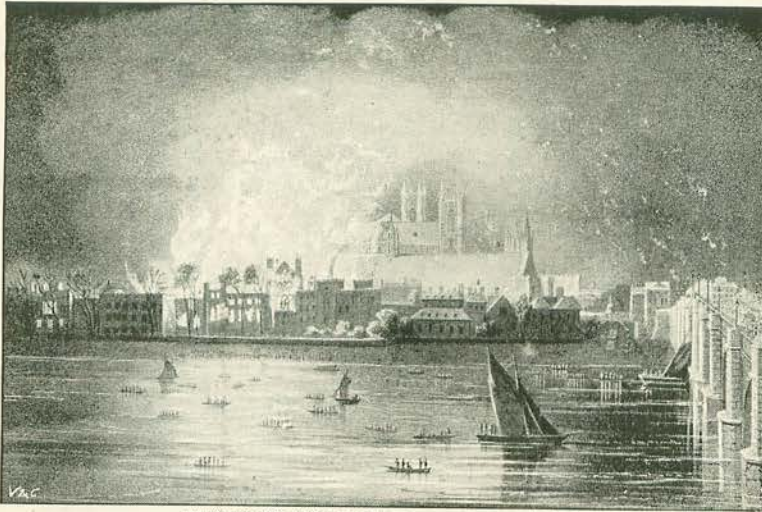
For many years, until that scourge of Europe, "the Little Corporal," was safely lodged in St. Helena, England had a thorny path to tread. But the work which Pitt died in doing was brought to a worthy issue. "When the last shot had been

fired at Waterloo, Great Britain was indisputably the first Power in the world." Pitt's beloved country had entered upon an era of unprecedented power and prosperity; which permits us to return to the story of the Houses of Parliament.

The old Houses, says the *Courier*, were not "valuable in an architectural sense, for a less sightly and more inconvenient place for



HOUSE OF PEERS (1804).

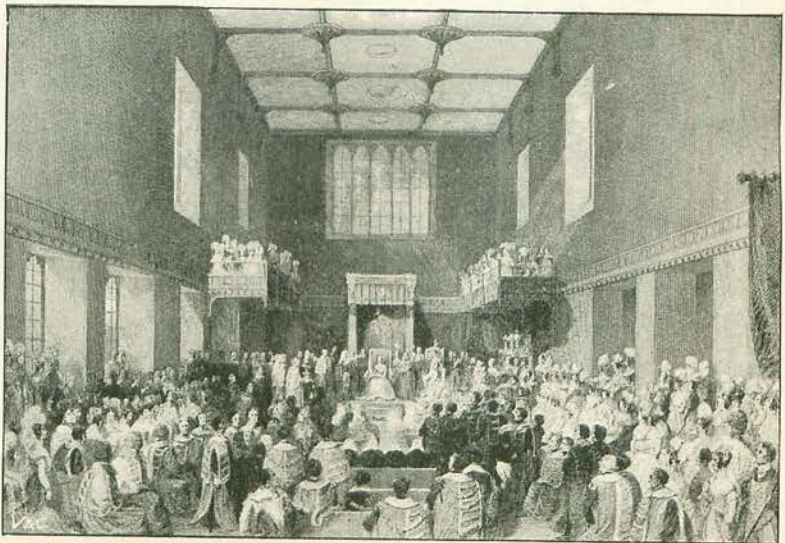


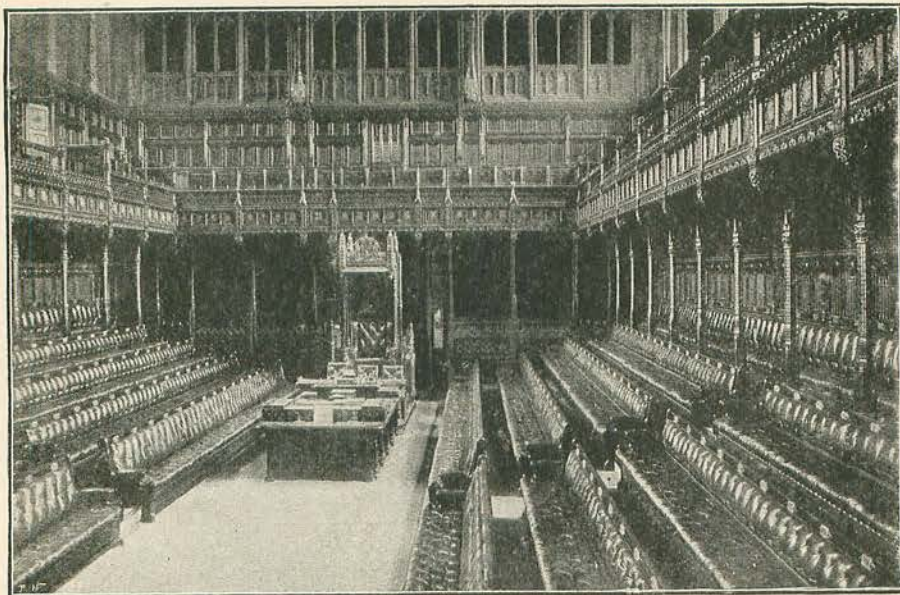
BURNING OF THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT (1834).

business could scarcely be conceived." Consequently it received with qualified grief the news that both Houses were almost entirely destroyed by fire on October 16th, 1834. How the fire really originated remains doubtful. It is said that the heating apparatus became red-hot through the quick burning of the old wooden "tallies," on which accounts were formerly kept in the Exchequer. If that were so, the "tallies" exacted a sufficient revenge for the indignity heaped upon their ancient heads. The fire broke out at twenty minutes to six in the evening and was not totally extinguished until two or three in the morning. There was the usual crowd, whose levity seems to have shocked the reporters of that day. "There goes a bit of the Poor Law Act," they cried; "there is the Reform Bill," and so forth. They were wrong; the Acts of Parliament were not kept in the Parliament office; they enjoyed an *alibi*. That the contents of the library had escaped was made known in the fol-

lowing poster: "St. Margaret's, Westminster. Notice is hereby given, that in consequence of the dreadful calamity which has befallen the Houses of Lords and Commons, a great portion of the books, records, etc., having been placed in this church for safety, Divine service cannot be performed in this church on Sunday next (tomorrow)."

The Library of the House of Peers, which had the fortune to escape, was fitted up as a temporary House; and here the Lords and Commons attended for the prorogation of Parliament—the Lords seated on one side, the Commons on the other; an unusual arrangement. Temporary accommodation was soon provided, and in March, 1835, a Select Committee was appointed to take the necessary steps for the rebuilding of the Houses. In 1840, out of many competitive drawings, the design of Mr. Charles Barry was adopted. The new Houses, complete, excepting the Victoria Tower—which a sarcastic journalist

QUEEN VICTORIA OPENING PARLIAMENT.
TEMPORARY APARTMENT OF HOUSE OF LORDS (1845).



From a Photo. by]

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—PRESENT DAY.

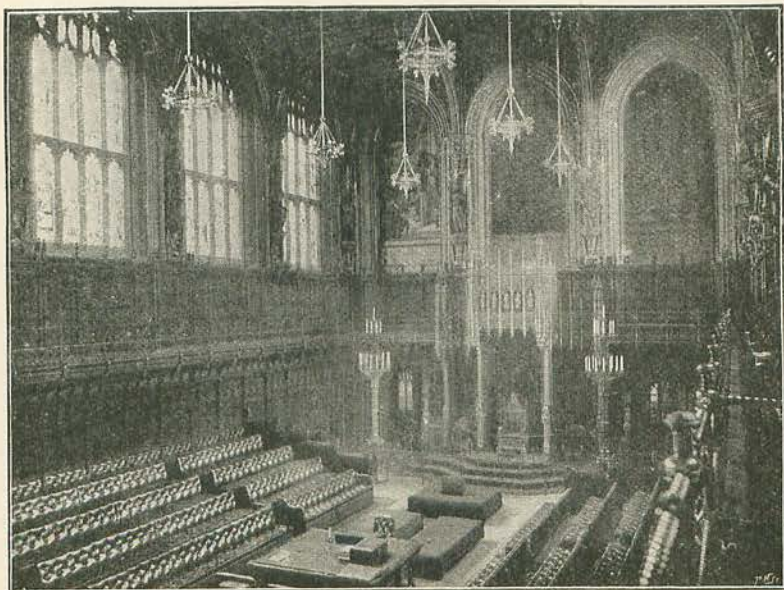
[Prith & Co.

of the day hoped to see at its full height “in some dozen years or so”—were opened by Her Majesty the Queen on February 3rd, 1852, on which occasion also the architect received the honour of knighthood.

Since that date the House of Commons has met with a serious mishap. A more successful attempt than that of the notorious Guy Fawkes was made to blow it up. This

time dynamite was used, and damage to the extent of £10,000 was effected. The outrage was perpetrated in January, 1885, so that the annual investigation of the offices, which occupy the place of the old cellar, on the eve of the Fifth of November proved a fruitless precaution.

The present appearance of the two Houses is shown in the accompanying illustrations.



From a Photo. by]

THE HOUSE OF LORDS—PRESENT DAY.

[Geo. Newnes, Ltd.