

Sir Kingsley Wood

A talk to The Eltham Society by John Kennett
Thursday 6th December 2007

John Kennett's traditional December talk was on 'Sir Kingsley Wood'. A politician (with strong Eltham associations) who held several vital government posts at crucial times in the 1930s and 1940s but whose accomplishments and service to his country are now largely forgotten.

Howard Kingsley Wood was born in Hull in 1881, son of the Reverend Arthur Wood, a Methodist minister, and Sarah Wood. By the age of 22 Kingsley had qualified as a solicitor in London, specialising in industrial insurance law, and three years later was married to Agnes Fawcett. Politics soon became a major interest and from 1911 to 1919 he was elected to the London County Council as a Municipal Reform member. There he proposed important changes to bread pricing policy (a vital issue in those days) and later recommended to Prime Minister Lloyd George that a Ministry of Health be formed. In 1918 he was rewarded with a knighthood.

After the Great War the 'khaki' election of 1919 saw him elected as MP for the newly created constituency of West Woolwich (since 1983 renamed as Eltham); soon he was appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary to Dr Christopher Addison, the first Minister of Health, who incidentally turned the first sod on Eltham's Page Estate. KW's career prospered; in 1924 he introduced to the Commons the Summertime & Allotments Bill and in 1928 was created a Privy Councillor, an occasion marked by a portrait presentation to him.

Kingsley held his West Woolwich seat for the Conservatives in the General Elections of 1922, 1923, 1924, and again in 1929, when he bucked the big national swing to Labour with a majority of 332 votes over William Barefoot (another politician familiar to Eltham). He continued to flourish; pausing only to open the Eltham Conservative Club in the High Street, he was appointed Postmaster General in 1931 (the fourth to hold the post that year) and introduced the first airmail services to Australia and New Zealand; he became a Cabinet Minister in 1933 and Minister of Health in 1935.

With World War II looming he was given the crucial post of Air Minister in May 1938 and in that capacity opened Guernsey and Manchester airports. As Air Minister he visited Kidbrooke RAF depot to inspect the new Balloon Barrage Centre and actually crawled inside a partially inflated balloon; then in July 1939 on a flight from Biggin Hill he survived a forced landing in Lancashire.

His most important appointment followed in May 1940 when he took on the role of Chancellor of the Exchequer, in which capacity he presented four budgets, fathered the PAYE system by deducting income tax at source and also introduced the system of Post War Credits.

It was a shock to the nation when he died in September 1943 aged 63; his funeral took place at Wesley's Chapel, the cremation followed at Golders Green (no ladies attending). He was only the second Chancellor to have died in office.

Kingsley Wood was described as 'spruce, plump, below medium height, genial, bespectacled and popular, eliciting loyalty and good work from his staff'. Winston Churchill told the House of Commons 'the House and the Cabinet were very fond of KW, an amiable, experienced, competent, efficient and accessible man. We shall not easily fill the gap A new burden is thrown on me that I feel very much'.

He had served under Lloyd George, Bonar Law, Baldwin, Ramsay Macdonald, Chamberlain and Churchill and had won seven General Elections. In Roy Jenkins' book on Chancellors it is said 'KW deserved a larger niche in history than that left by one (now disappeared) oil portrait'.

He performed many services for Eltham and it is to be hoped that John Kennett's meticulous presentation of his life and achievements will awaken due appreciation at least among current Eltham constituents.

Les Murrell