

## 'The Last of the Cobdenites'

Helena Mary Carroll Cobden Hirst  
1880 – 1965

### Saved by her godfather



'An American Merchant and His Daughter Strolling in Yokohama' 19th century woodblock print by Sadahide Gountei. Source: Brooklyn Museum.

On February 16<sup>th</sup> 1880 Helena Mary Carroll Cobden, was born in Yokohama, Japan to Charles Henry Cobden (grandson of **William Cobden** and **Millicent Amber**) and Helena Frances Peers Green. Charles was born in Australia and Helena Green in Lancashire. Helena died one month after giving birth, so the grandmother, 43-year-old Mary Ellen Green (a hotelier) looked after the young infant. However, the following year Mary Ellen also died. Around this time Charles, a commercial clerk working for Jardine, Matheson and Co., trade and insurance agents of Yokohama, decided to leave Japan for a new job in Australia, and left his young daughter Helena in the care of her godfather, James Dennis Carroll. Whether or not this was meant to be a temporary or permanent arrangement, I don't know. James Carroll, a bachelor, was an Irish/American businessman and ex-sea captain, living in Kobe, and had been a very close friend of young Helena's mother and grandmother.



Yokohama 1880s. Photograph by Granger. Source: [fineartamerica.com](http://fineartamerica.com)  
The style of architecture and English signage on the right-hand building, suggests this is taken in the foreign settlement.

It would have been difficult for the widower Charles to bring his very young daughter to Australia as, having been sent to England at the age of 9 when his parents died, he had few family supports. His only relatives in Australia were his two brothers, one was unmarried leading a precarious life in the bush, the other was raising 11 children of his own. The godfather James Carroll, unmarried and running a busy ship chandler business, would have also found it difficult to bring up a young child. Wisely, it was arranged for Helena to go to England to live with relatives there.

As far as I know, Helena never saw her father again. In 1891 she would have received news of his death in Australia, but also of the death of her godfather James Carroll, who had made Helena his main heir. When Charles died, *The Hay Standard and Advertiser* (NSW) of June 3<sup>rd</sup> 1891 reported:

'by his first wife leaves a daughter about 9 years of age, living at Bombay, heiress to a large fortune.'<sup>1</sup>

I have not found evidence of Helena in Bombay (Mumbai) as yet.

### Good role models

Thanks to the inheritance from her godfather James Carroll, Helena was well provided for. In 1901 according to the census, she was 21 years old and described as a 'visitor' at 10 Hereford Square Kensington, the home of Jane Cobden-Unwin, one of the daughters of Helena's famous great-uncle, Richard Cobden. These family connections introduced her to the progressive intellectual circles in which Jane and her sisters were heavily involved. Jane was an active suffragist, who had worked hard to become an early female member of the London County Council and a fighter for the rights of minority groups. Her husband was the progressive book publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin.



10 Hereford Square, Kensington, residence of Jane Cobden in the 1890s and where Helena was a visitor in 1901. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

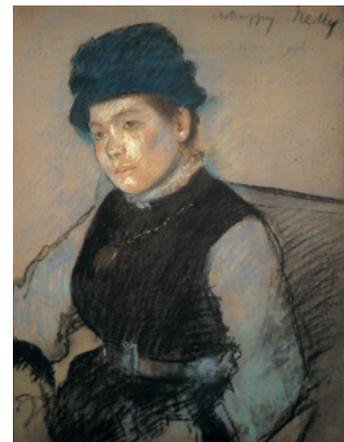
### 'Real relations' and the Cobden fold

At the age of 12 years, Helena's cousins (actually first cousins once removed) Jane and her sisters Anne Cobden-Sanderson and Ellen (Nelly) Cobden Sickert, took her under their collective wing and kept her in the Cobden fold. In 1893, when only 13 years of age, Helena with Jane and Nelly, attended the revived annual Cobden Club dinner held at the *Ship Hotel* in Greenwich. This club had been set up to continue Richard Cobden's philosophies of free trade, and promoting world peace. The last

Cobden Club dinner had been in 1887 so this had been a particularly celebratory event and the Cobden women, Helena included, were seated in pride of place on either side of the chairman, Lord Playfair. Members and guests had travelled by steamer from the House of Commons to Greenwich, and guests included many international representatives as well as many Members of Parliament. This event must have made a huge impression on the young Helena. When Nelly Cobden died in 1914, Helena wrote a letter of condolence to Jane, and in it she recalled:

'.....I remember so well that wonderful day for me, when I was just 12½ years old, when you and she (Nelly) came to see me! You and she - It began such a new life for me - At the time I was too young to realise how much it meant to me - I was only just so glad & excited & so proud to have "real relations" - But now I realise how much it has & does mean to me, to have such dear, dear cousins - so much more than cousins - And I am so grateful.....'<sup>2</sup>

The letter is extremely affectionate and loving, sending Jane kisses and sympathy for Nelly's funeral.



Helena's cousins: Left - Anne Cobden-Sanderson 1907 (Source: Library of Congress Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks); Centre - Jane Cobden-Unwin 1890s (photo by Cyril Flower, National Portrait Gallery London); Right - Nelly Cobden 1885 (pastel by Degas. Source: Museum of Montserrat, Spain).

Helena's emphasis on 'real relations' is interesting - revealing her lost family connections from an early age. Her relationship with Jane, Anne and Nelly also says a lot about the warmth and kinship the sisters felt towards Helena.

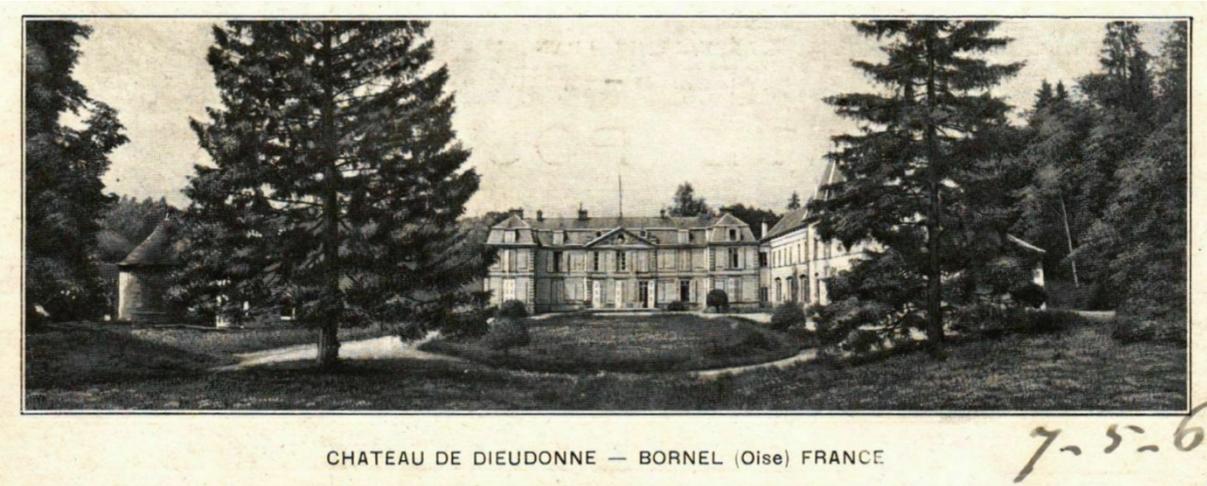
### **Somerville College**

But until she turned 21, Helena was more than a 'visitor' - Jane was her guardian. In 1900, Helena was enrolled at Somerville College<sup>3</sup>, at Oxford, and Jane was listed as her guardian in place of a parent's name. The records state Helena passed the college entrance examination and was enrolled at Somerville from October 1900, the commencement of the academic year, until the end of Trinity term (final term of the academic year) 1901. She did not take any further examinations and left Oxford after that<sup>4</sup>.



Left: Somerville College 1903 where Helena lived and studied from 1900 to 1901. Source: victorianweb.org

Below: Chateau de Dieudonné in Bornel, Oise from a post card of 1906, where Helena lived and studied in the 1890s. Source: picclick.fr



## Chateau de Dieudonné

The records also note she had previously been a student in France at the school of Mme la Marquise de San Carlos, Chateau de Dieudonné in Bornel, Oise. This madame was an American who had married a Spanish Marquis and lived most of her life in France. Her school catered for daughters of the wealthy including many upper-class Americans and English. The *New York Daily Tribune* of January 20<sup>th</sup> 1900 describes the school in an article about a 'matinee musicale' held there:

'There is more or less American interest in Dieudonné, the chateau of the Marquise de San Carlos di Pedrosi, near Paris. It has been an educational establishment for some years where a number of the daughters of well known Americans ..... have spent longer or shorter periods..... Of special interest was the matinée musicale given on Tuesday chez the Marquise de San Carlos di Pedrosi, whose delightful Louis XV chateau situated in Bornel (Oise) within a short distance of Paris is now probably one of the unique educational establishments in France .... In this charming home the Marquise surrounded by five talented daughters, assisted by leading

Parisian professors and surveillants, receives young ladies to complete a high class artistic education, together with a refined training, fitting girls to enter society with a grace which could only be learned in the salons of a truly grande dame. From the spacious ballroom and salle-a-manger the vista of woodland and foliage is refreshingly characteristic of the poppy painted tapestried walls, whilst adjoining is the little chapelle where a Church of England clergyman comes every Sunday to celebrate divine service for the students.'

Well, I wonder if Helena was able to 'enter society with a grace'.

### Political awakening begins

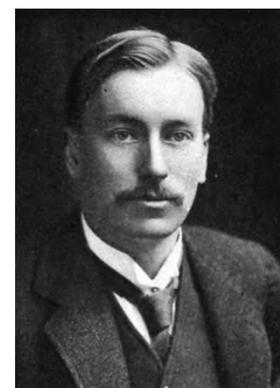
Somerville College, like many of the women's colleges at Oxford, encouraged progressive ideas and attitudes in their students. After all, they were set up to promote women's rights to education and challenge the male academic establishment. At age 20, probably whilst a student at Somerville, Helena became a member of a new organisation that protested against the British aggression in South Africa, the Second Boer War. She became a member of the South Africa Conciliation Committee (SACC) with Jane (a founding member), Anne and Nelly, as well as her future husband, Francis Wrigley Hirst (1873–1953) who was also heavily involved in the League Against Armaments and Militarism that campaigned against the Boer War. The women of the SACC were also closely associated with the women's suffrage movement. The list of members' addresses of SACC in 1900 gives 10 Hereford Square Kensington as the address of Jane, her husband Thomas Fisher Unwin, Nelly (who was now divorced) as well as Francis and Helena (not yet married).



10 Hereford Square, Kensington. Home of Jane and her husband, and address for Nelly, Helena and Francis Hirst in 1900. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

### A grand Heyshott wedding

Francis was from a wealthy Yorkshire family and trained as a barrister. However, he found greater success as a journalist (editor of *The Economist* 1907-1916) and writer on economic affairs promoting the policies of Richard Cobden. As well as his involvement in anti-war activities, he had also been a student of classics and political economy at Oxford (1892-1896). In 1899 he was a recipient of the Cobden essay prize for political economy.



Francis Wrigley Hirst  
Source: Wikipedia

In 1903 Helena and Francis married at Heyshott, Midhurst, West Sussex, the birthplace of many of Helena's ancestors including her grandfather Henry Andrews Cobden, and her great uncle Richard Cobden. The ceremony was held at St. James Parish Church where her cousin Jane had married eleven years earlier.

*The Sussex Agricultural Express* of August 1<sup>st</sup> reported:

**MIDHURST.**

**WEDDING.**—At the Parish Church of St. James, Heyshott, on Saturday, the marriage took place of Mr. F. W. Hirst, barrister-at-law, with Miss Helena Mary Carroll Cobden, daughter of the late Mr. Charles H. Cobden, of Yokohama and Kobe, Japan, and the son of a younger brother of Richard Cobden. The bride was given away by Mr. Fisher Unwin. The ceremony was performed by Canon Bigg, cousin of the bride, assisted by the Rev. G. Harding, uncle of the bride, and the Rev. E. L. Garvock Houndie, rector of Heyshott. A reception was held later at Oatscroft, the house of Mr. and Mrs. Fisher Unwin. Mr. and Mrs. John Morley and Lord Farrer were among the guests.

And a very detailed report from the *Whitby Gazette* was published on July 31<sup>st</sup>:

'...The bride wore a beautiful dress of white crepe-de-chine over silk, both bodice and skirt being trimmed with sprays of chiffon flowers with velvet edges. She had a veil of tulle, a wreath of orange blossom in her hair, and also wore a string of pearls, and carried a bouquet of white roses and carnations, gifts of the bridegroom. Given away by her cousin Mr. T Fisher Unwin, she was attended by eight bridesmaids..... All the bridesmaids wore gold and enamel 'Liberty' brooches, the gift of the bridegroom. .... when the happy couple were leaving the church, ten little girls from Heyshott, dressed in pink, scattered flowers in front of the bride..... the churchyard and village green being crowded with well-wishers whose presence testified to the esteem in which Miss Cobden and her family are held in the neighbourhood.'

Three of the bridesmaids were described as Helena's cousins: Anne's daughter Stella; Miss Bigg (probably Dorothy Mary Bigg, same age as Helena and the granddaughter of her father's aunt Priscilla); and Miss Williams. One of the three ministers performing the ceremony, Rev. Charles Bigg, Canon of Christ Church Oxford, father of Miss Bigg mentioned above, was also described as Helena's cousin (he was husband to Priscilla Cobden's daughter Millicent Mary Sale). Jane's husband Thomas 'gave away' the bride.

After the reception at the Unwin's, Helena and Francis left for their honeymoon, as described in the *Whitby Gazette* on July 31<sup>st</sup>:

'...the first part of which is being spent in the neighbourhood of Malvern. The bride's going-away dress was of pale green viola, the bolero having a wide collar of real lace and a vest of cream silk. Her hat was a black picture one, with ostrich feathers. Later

in the afternoon, Mrs. Fisher-Unwin (Jane), entertained the Heyshott school children at tea in honour of the event.'

A huge list of wedding presents was listed. Among them were a piano from Jane and her husband, and a *Dove's Press* edition of Tennyson's poems from Anne's husband who was one of the owners of the famed printing press.



St James, Heyshott Parish Church where Helena and Francis married in 1903. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2016

## Suffragette movement

Around this time, Helena was becoming very involved in the movement to gain women the right to vote. No doubt, from her early teens she would have been exposed to all the discussions, literature and demonstrations surrounding the suffragist cause in which her cousins Jane, Anne, and Nelly were heavily involved. At Somerville College feminist issues were at the forefront - it was regarded as 'a college of devoted suffragists'<sup>5</sup>. Through Jane, Helena was also introduced to important women such as the American Susan Brownell Anthony, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, who wrote in 1904 from New York to Jane<sup>6</sup>:

'I was very much pleased with your niece, Mrs Hurst [sic]. She came in to see us at the Hotel, and we were all more than charmed with her.'

And later:

'My niece was so disappointed when she saw Mrs. Hurst [sic] that she had missed the good times we had with her at your house. She was charming....'



Susan B Anthony (1820-1906) in 1905. Source: *Rebel, Crusader, Humanitarian* - by Alma Lutz (2007) gutenber ebook

## **Sexism at home**

But Francis, although liberal thinking in most other respects, was not at all charmed with his wife's suffragist opinions or activities. According to author George Martin in his book on the law reformer Charles Culp Burlingham<sup>7</sup> he says:

'Despite having two intelligent sisters and an intelligent wife, Francis Hirst believed that women were fundamentally irrational and therefore should be denied the vote. His wife disagreed, but they had a pact that neither would take a public stand on the issue. But in private the disagreement sometimes boiled to the surface.'

The Hirsts' friend Abbott Lawrence Lowell, President of Harvard University, wrote<sup>8</sup>:

'I first knew then at the time she was a suffragette; far from being suppressed by him, he seemed to be a little afraid of her breaking loose on the subject, and asked us not to refer to it at a dinner he was giving – which did not prevent somebody else doing it and getting some lively expressions of opinion from her. And I remember the amazement, to say the least, when she admitted that she should prefer to avoid burning the house of an anti-suffragette friend, but would do so if necessary.'

This echoed the sentiments of the suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst who had stated that suffragettes held human life sacred, but if it was the only way to win the vote they wouldn't hesitate to damage as much property as they could.

## **Window smashing**

After nearly 70 years of peaceful protesting, the UK women's suffrage movement had not achieved its goal by the close of the nineteenth century. Due to frustration with the broken promises of parliamentarians to introduce a women's suffrage bill, the early 20th century saw the ramping up of suffragette protests and increasingly militant action. In 1906 Helena would have seen her cousin Anne arrested for suffragette activities, and gaoled in Holloway Prison. At this time Jane was also proactive in the Votes for Women campaigns, so Helena would have been well supported by her cousins when she chose to protest. But not so by her husband. Helena's close friend Mary Agnes (Molly) Hamilton, writer and later Yorkshire Labour MP, wrote in her book *Remembering My Good Friends*:

'The one division between husband and wife arose on this issue: in 1913, Helena, deeply stirred by the Pankhurst campaign, took part in a Militant demonstration: threw a stone at a Minister's window; and was arrested.'

*The Yorkshire Post*, January 29th 1913 reported:

The attentions of some of the women were directed to the Government Offices in Whitehall and Parliament Street, four buildings being attacked, although the offices were closely guarded by police. The suddenness of attack took the officers by surprise. At the Home Office four small windows on the ground floor were smashed, and three women were arrested. The Local Government Board Offices, Treasury, and Admiralty windows also suffered, but the damage was not very serious.

At the end of the report Helena's name was in a list of the 21 women arrested including the high-profile suffragettes Sylvia Pankhurst and Flora Drummond. Helena's name was misspelled as 'Elena Hurst'<sup>9</sup>. She had become a true suffragette and had participated in what was known as the most violent year of the women's suffrage campaign.



Above: Flora Drummond and others being arrested in 1914. Source: LSE Library. Right: Sylvia Pankhurst being arrested in 1913. Source: [hackneyhistory.wordpress.com](http://hackneyhistory.wordpress.com)



At her trial in the Bow Street court, Helena said:

'Till recently I have always belonged to the Liberal Party - a Party which professes to believe as one of its first principles in "No taxation without representation." I once thought they believed what they said. Now, under this Liberal Government, there has been a Bill passed to give all members of Parliament £400 a year salary. Women are called upon as well as men to pay those salaries, yet women are not allowed to choose the representatives who go to the House of Commons to govern them. I did what I did as a protest against this shameful political injustice to women. And I chose to smash the Home Office windows especially as a further protest against the disgraceful way in which women political prisoners have been treated under a Liberal Government.'<sup>10</sup>



Five WSPU suffragettes, including Emmeline Pankhurst at centre, campaigning during a by-election, c1910. Photo: Heritage Image Partnership/Alamy. Source: *The Guardian* Feb 2 2018

Helena was sentenced to one month in gaol or a 40-shilling fine. However, I think she must have paid the fine rather than go to prison (which would have been January 28<sup>th</sup> to March 1<sup>st</sup>). Instead, there are reports of her WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) activities during February 1913, including: donating money; 'working up the pitch outside Arthur's Stores'<sup>11</sup> and musical performances 'We are going to have a barrel-organ in Kensington and Mrs Cobden Hirst is going to play it.'<sup>12</sup>

In June that year, the suffragette Emily Wilding Davison died, after throwing herself in protest, under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby. In Harrogate, Yorkshire, whilst Emily's funeral procession and service was underway in London, a memorial service was being held by the local branch of the WSPU. *The Suffragette* reported that 'beautiful addresses were given by the Rev. John Smith and Mrs Cobden Hirst'



Funeral procession in London of Emily Wilding Davison 1913. Source: [katewilloughby.co.uk](http://katewilloughby.co.uk)

## Marriage tension

Helena's stone throwing and consequent arrest caused much tension in her marriage, and possibly embarrassment for Francis as he was a distant relative of

Prime Minister Asquith, but also it was at a time when he was building a strong public profile as a writer on economics and a member of the Liberal Party. By the 1910s Francis 'was one of the most powerful Liberal voices of Edwardian Britain' (A. Howe<sup>13</sup>).

Apparently, Francis and Helena separated briefly over her radical actions. To heal the rift, Francis had to enlist the help of their close friend Sir John Simon, to mediate between them. 'Poignant at the time, this rift in the end deepened their unity.' according to Molly Hamilton<sup>14</sup>.

### Voluntary work in wartime

One very strong area of agreement between Helena and Francis was the issue of world peace. They were both opposed to the Boer Wars in South Africa and the war in the Balkans. Just as strongly, they were against Britain joining in the war against Germany. In 1914, Helena and Anne signed the *Open Christmas Letter* from the Manchester Suffragettes to the women of Germany and Austria, expressing sorrow at the war between their two countries and acknowledging the tragic price paid by non-combatants in wartime.

As a woman of privilege, Helena used her advantages to help wounded soldiers during the war. In 1915, the Endell Street Military Hospital in Covent Garden, a renovated workhouse, was set up and led by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) members, Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson (daughter of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson) and Dr Flora Murray. Women occupied all positions in the hospital from surgeons to orderlies, and here Helena found a role for herself - 'entertainment organiser'<sup>15</sup>.



Staff of the Endell Street Military Hospital 1916. Helena is somewhere in this photograph. Source: greatwarforum.org

Wendy Moore, in her book *Endell Street - The Women Who Ran Britain's Trailblazing Military Hospital*, writes:

'the men were taken to theatre shows, on boating excursions along the Thames and to watch the cricket at Lord's. .... One volunteer, Helena Cobden Hirst, a suffragette friend who had inherited a fortune when she was eleven, organised hundreds of outings. Society hostesses like Hirst also invited the patients to their grand London townhouses for afternoon tea or "at home" events.'<sup>16</sup>

## United Suffragists

When WW1 broke out the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) and the WSPU decided to suspend activities for its duration. But Helena's anti-war convictions did not allow her to cease her suffrage work. In February 1914 a new suffrage group was formed to fill the vacuum, United Suffragists. It was open to the militant and non-militant, women and men (I wonder if Francis joined). It was reported in *Votes For Women* of March 6<sup>th</sup> 1914 that Helena was in charge of organising canvassing for new members, and in the November 13<sup>th</sup> issue, she is listed amongst the many Vice Presidents of the organisation.

But in August 1914, in exchange for a cessation of protesting, the government decided to grant an amnesty to all suffragists who had been arrested. Helena and Anne were on this list and so they would now, not have a criminal record.

## An international woman

Because she was born in Japan into an international community of ex-patriots, had lived in France (and possibly India), Helena was no stranger to foreign countries or travel. In 1923 with her friend Molly Hamilton, she took a holiday to Vienna, Budapest and Prague. There are several shipping records of her travelling to South Africa and many times to New York, usually with her husband, but also after he died in 1953.

Helena and Francis had made many friends and acquaintances with socially progressive Americans: the suffragist Susan B. Anthony; A. Lawrence Howell (President of Harvard University who promoted integrating social classes at Harvard); and the law reformer Charles Culp Burlingham. Others included James Grover McDonald (who encouraged programs to resettle Jews after the end of WW2); and Felix Frankfurter (a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union). In 1934 James Grover McDonald wrote in his diary:

'At the Frankfurters' met Mrs Francis Hirst to whom Frankfurter was very anxious that I should talk frankly about the German situation. This I did. She is said to be an intimate of Sir John Simon.'<sup>17</sup>

## Friends in high places

Another friend was Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and known for her outspoken opinions to promote civil rights for African and Asian Americans, as well as women's workplace rights.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962) speaking at the United Nations in 1947. Source: Wikimedia Commons



An article in *The Citizen* newspaper on February 4<sup>th</sup> 1946 written by Eleanor Roosevelt whilst on a trip to London, includes this reference to Helena and Francis:

I was a little late for Thursday morning's appointments which followed our delegation meeting, but got off in time to lunch with some old friends of ours, Mr. and Mrs. Francis Hirst, at the National Liberal Club. Like so many other London buildings this one shows evidence of bomb damage. The bomb must have dropped right down through the well of the staircase and a good part of the old staircase is gone. Real repairs cannot be made as yet.

In this old club there are some very beautiful portraits. The ones of John Bright and Cobden, names well-known in our history, impressed me as particularly interesting. Then in order to see

the portrait of Mr. Winston Churchill as a young man we went into the gentlemen's lounge. I was a little horrified because, being gentlemen, they all insisted on standing up, and I could imagine their annoyance. My host, Mr. Hirst, however, insisted I come back after my first hasty retreat and walk half way through the room to see a very beautiful portrait of John Bright. Then someone suggested that "I say a few words," and there I was with an exclusive audience of gentlemen except for Mrs. Hirst and Lady Simon. They were very kind, however, but I am sure they were also glad when I finally left them to their coffee and cigars.

Perhaps it was due to her international experiences, possibly an ability to speak Japanese, or her politics, that led Helena to be invited to a luncheon given by Ethel Snowden, feminist, socialist and activist (also the wife of the Chancellor of the Exchequer) at 11 Downing Street. *The Dundee Courier* February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1930 reports:

**Mrs Snowden Entertains.**

Flowers, in tall vases and wide bowls, against the background of the white-painted hall of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's home, offer a cheerful welcome to the visitor. Last week, when Mrs Philip Snowden gave a small luncheon party to meet Madame Matsudaira, wife of the Japanese Ambassador, and Madame Takarabe, wife of one of the Japanese naval delegates to the Naval Conference, No. 11 Downing Street was a bower of flowers. Among the guests were Lady Cynthia Colville, Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen; the Hon. Mrs Graham Murray, the Hon. Mrs Charles Rothschild, Mrs F. W. Hirst, Lady Parmoor, Miss Susan Lawrence, M.P., and Miss Sankey.



Ethel Snowden (1881-1951) c 1931. Photo: Fox Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

### Helena supports her husband

From about 1908, the Hirsts lived at 27 Campden Hill Square, Kensington. Here, in January 1913, a week or so prior to Helena's arrest on the 29<sup>th</sup>, they hosted the wedding of Francis's sister, Helen Garnett Hirst to John Ernest Allen at their home. Gifts from several Women's Liberal Associations were received showing that family and politics were not far apart.



Two residences of the Hirsts: Left: 27 Campden Hill Square, Kensington, home from 1908. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014. Right: 36 Ladbrooke Grove, Kensington, home in the 1920s. Source: Google Maps

During the 1920s, the Hirsts lived at 36 Ladbrooke Grove, Kensington. Later that decade Francis, with his long family history in Yorkshire, decided to run as the Member for Shipley in the 1929 General Election and they temporarily moved to that area. He was unsuccessful at the election, but Helena had worked hard to support his campaign, doing such things as fundraising and public speaking on his behalf - such a contrast to his lack of support for her women's suffrage work. In September of 1929 the Shipley division of the Women's Liberal Council presented Helena with antique jewellery in appreciation of her services at the General Election.

It seems Helena returned to her Liberal Party allegiances, becoming involved in the Women's National Liberal Federation. In 1928 she attended an 'At Home' fundraiser given by past president, and now Member of Parliament, Mrs Hilda Runciman. The Hirsts were among the 500 guests at Hilda's daughter's 'coming out' ball at the *Mayfair Hotel* in London that year. In 1932, at a Liberal County Conference at Glastonbury, Francis was the opening speaker and Helena participated in the discussions. Helena was acknowledged as a descendant of Richard Cobden, a fact which Francis probably found politically useful on this and other Liberal party occasions.



Hilda Runciman (1869-1956) MP 1920s.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

### **Stubborn husband**

Apparently around 1939 the Hirsts were having some financial troubles. The war had contributed to his lack of journalistic work and the government had needed to increase taxes. To add to these troubles, Francis was suffering from appendicitis. He had been reluctant to admit how ill he was and would not let Helena call a doctor. But against his wishes, she called an ambulance and he was taken to hospital just in time for an appendectomy. A group of their American friends found out about the

Hirsts' situation and sent them a Christmas gift of \$4,000 to cover the cost of the operation. Helena and Francis were amazed and extremely grateful. Francis said:

'I suppose you must have guessed our plight - war taxes, loss of work, and then this stroke of bad luck. Helena was very brave about it....'<sup>18</sup>

### ***Dunford House* - a family project**

Jane Cobden Unwin gave her father Richard Cobden's old home, *Dunford House* near Midhurst, West Sussex, to the London School of Economics in 1920 and then in 1928 donated it to the Cobden Memorial Association in which Helena and Francis, (Francis who continued to be a devotee of the Cobdenite principles of free trade and peace) were trustees. Over the 1930s, the Hirsts lived at 13 Kensington Park Gardens in London but *Dunford House* soon became their home away from home, especially as Jane and her husband, although living nearby, were ageing and needed support to look after the property.



*Dunford House*, Midhurst, Sussex. Source: gravelroots.net

With the Cobden-Unwins, Francis and Helena helped continue the Association's work, by turning *Dunford House* into a conference and education centre for furthering the Cobdenite values. Many conferences and events were held there, including efforts to raise money to maintain the house and property, which was said to be struggling despite the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace making a large contribution towards its upkeep. Some of the events reported in the newspapers included a summer fete in 1930 to raise funds, and excursions and tours of the house and property. For example, in 1933, The Northern Division of the Women's Liberal Association of Portsmouth, toured *Dunford* for their annual outing:

'Mr T Fisher Unwin (Jane's husband), who is now 87, gave the party a cordial welcome, and a talk on the many things of history in the house where many rooms are furnished as in Cobden's time. It is now a well-furnished and equipped place of residence with modern comforts and ready for holding conferences and the reception of visitors. Tea was served to the Portsmouth party on the lawn in front of the house by the housekeeper and the visitors were afterwards shown over the house and grounds.'<sup>19</sup>

When Jane's husband died in 1935, Francis and Helena took over the responsibility of the *Dunford House* conferences. The gatherings were continued on world peace, local and international economic issues and included speakers such as the radical Labour politician Philip Snowden (husband of Ethel Snowden), economist Sir George Paish, Professor A. S. Turberville and radical French politician M. Joseph Caillaux among many others.

Drawing Room at *Dunford House* - note the portrait of Richard Cobden above the fireplace. Source: gravelroots.net



### **YMCA takes over *Dunford***

Little is known about Helena's life during the Second World War. After the war, in 1947, her last remaining Cobden cousin and one-time guardian Jane, died at the age of 97 (Anne died in 1926, Nelly in 1914, and their elder sister Kate, in 1916). Only Helena and Francis were left to carry on the Cobden cause and run *Dunford House*. This of course was going to become too much for them as they also aged and Francis increasingly experienced poor health. In 1951, it was decided to transfer *Dunford House* and property to the National Council of the YMCA, for its continued use as an educational venue. Today its future is less certain as the YMCA is selling the property.<sup>20</sup>

## **European Students at Heyshott**

### **TO HOLD DISCUSSIONS ON WORLD PROBLEMS**

**F**OR the next month, Dunford House, the stately Heyshott home of the great statesman, Richard Cobden, will be full of University students from Britain, Germany, Holland, France, and Switzerland, who are camping there to work and to hold discussions on international problems with the help of expert speakers.

Yesterday morning the last of the 34 students had arrived and they were divided into groups to work on the estate.



*Evening News* August 7<sup>th</sup> 1952.



International students working at *Dunford House* in 1952. Source: [dunfordhouse.org.uk](http://dunfordhouse.org.uk)

### **Francis's death**

In the winter of 1952-3, Francis was suffering from influenza, and on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1953 at the age of 79, he died at the *Drove Hotel* in Sussex. On March 5<sup>th</sup> a memorial service was held for him at the chapel of his old university college Wadham in Oxford. In her will, Helena made a bequest to Wadham College in his name.

Helena was now 'the last of the Cobdenites'. Author and journalist Arthur Ransome and his wife Evgenia, were very close friends of the Hirsts. Arthur consoled Helena after the death of Francis, reminding her of what a great support she had been for her husband:

'Everybody who knew him knew how enormously valuable to him was the support from you on which he could always count.....He had a happy life and you gave it him.'

### **No ordinary 'housewife'**

After Francis's death, Helena now into her 70s, moved to 44 Downhills Way Great Cambridge Rd London and continued to travel to New York, keeping in touch with her many old friends there. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her diary on October 21<sup>st</sup> 1953 (8 months after Francis's death):

'Last Saturday I went to Newburgh in the evening, taking an English friend, Mrs Francis Hirst, with me to attend the 71<sup>st</sup> annual chamber of commerce dinner. It was a very successful celebration and apparently the whole atmosphere interested her very much and she enjoyed talking to the gentlemen, who seemed also to enjoy talking to her.'

On the shipping passenger lists Helena's occupation was variously given as 'home duties', 'housewife' or less often, 'retired'. But her overseas connections weren't purely social. In 1961, at the age of 81, she was invited to speak in New York at the banquet of the Henry George<sup>21</sup> School of Social Science. Alexandra Tolstoy, daughter of the famous author, was one of several other speakers. Unfortunately, Helena had to decline the invitation but sent a message to the gathering which was read out.

Helena died at the age of 85, on December 27<sup>th</sup> 1965 at *Aldingbourne House*, Aldingbourne near Chichester, West Sussex. This was probably a nursing home. Helena and Francis did not have children of their own, but in Helena's will, she remembered her many godchildren. She and Francis are buried at the Saffron Walden Cemetery in Essex.



*Aldingbourne House* Sussex, where Helena died in 1965. Source: TuckDB postcards

### **Distant brother**

I wonder if Helena knew she had a brother. When her father Charles left Japan in the 1880s, he married Jane Oborn at Millthorpe in New South Wales in 1890. They had a son Henry Andrews Cobden (named after Charles' father). Then in 1891 Charles died and Jane remarried. Henry knew he had a sister because on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1912, notice appeared in the Missing Friends column of the *Sunday Times* of Perth, Western Australia:

**COBDEN (Henry Andrew), son of the late Charles Henry Cobden, of Millthorpe, formerly of London and Japan, seeks news of his sister or other relatives.**

The newspaper states that the names in their Missing Friends column are 'compiled from the latest English, Irish and Scottish journals.' It also states information

concerning any of the people listed will be 'forwarded to the paper in which the inquiry first appeared.' So, Henry had placed an advertisement in a British paper, hoping to connect with Helena or their relatives in England.

It is not known how much, if any, communication Helena had with her father after he left Japan. When he died in 1891, I imagine she would have been contacted and learned she had a little brother. If so, they may have corresponded with each other when Henry was old enough to do so. At least Henry would have been aware, as he grew up, of the suffragette activities in London frequently reported in the Australian papers including reports of Anne's arrest and imprisonment, as well as her trips to the USA to speak on female suffrage there. 1912 when the above advertisement was published, was around the time of Helena's heavy involvement in the suffrage movement and her temporary separation from Francis. She perhaps had other things on her mind other than to get in touch with a brother she never knew, on the other side of the world.

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2020

[hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au](http://hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au)

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I can't verify the accuracy of the report that Helena was in Bombay in 1891 but I can't find her in the 1891 England Census either.

<sup>2</sup> Letter in the West Sussex Record Office dated Sept. 6 1914

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting she studied at Somerville as it was set up by social liberals and was non-denominational.

<sup>4</sup> However, if she had completed a course, she would not have been awarded a degree from Oxford University until 1920 when the university finally agreed to grant full membership to female students!

<sup>5</sup> Somerville College website - <https://www.some.ox.ac.uk/about-somerville/history/somerville-and-suffrage>

<sup>6</sup> *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: An Awful Hush, 1895 to 1906* - Ann D. Gordon Ed. (2013)

<sup>7</sup> Martin, George - *CCB: The Life and Century of Charles C. Burlingham, New York's First Citizen 1858-1959* (2005)

<sup>8</sup> A Lawrence Lowell to Charles C Burlingham Dec 6 1939 - from Martin, George - *CCB: The Life and Century of Charles C. Burlingham, New York's First Citizen 1858-1959* - (2005)

<sup>9</sup> In *The Suffragette* January 31st 1913 her name is Lena Cobden Hirst

<sup>10</sup> 'A Liberal Woman's Speech from the Dock' - *Votes For Women* February 7th 1913

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<sup>11</sup> *The Suffragette* February 21st 1913

<sup>12</sup> *The Suffragette* February 28th 1913

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Howe, Professor of Modern History at the University of East Anglia.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, Mary Agnes - *Remembering My Good Friends* (1944)

<sup>15</sup> Great War Forum - <https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/282606-endell-street-hospital-staff-photograph-1916/>

<sup>16</sup> Moore, Wendy - *Endell Street - The Women Who Ran Britain's Trailblazing Military Hospital* (2020)  
The military hospital closed in December 1919.

<sup>17</sup> McDonald, James Grover - *Advocate for the Doomed: The diaries and papers of James G. McDonald, 1932-1935*. Entry on May 5th 1934. (2007)  
Sir John Simon, a politician, held three senior cabinet posts from WW1 to WW2 and Lord Chancellor, created the Liberal National Party.

<sup>18</sup> Martin, George - *CCB: The Life and Century of Charles C. Burlingham, New York's First Citizen 1858-1959* (2005)

<sup>19</sup> *Portsmouth Evening News* July 29th 1933

<sup>20</sup> As of 2019/20 the YMCA have put Dunford House up for sale and potential buyers may look at turning the property into a wedding venue, hotel, apartments or private dwelling. This is contrary to the wishes and terms of the endowment from the Cobden family. See the Cobden Foundation Appeal <https://www.cobdenfoundation.org/>

<sup>21</sup> Henry George (1839-87) a philosopher and political economist

Other resources:

*1939 England and Wales Register* (Ancestry.com)

Birth Death and Marriage certificates - General Register Office England

*British Newspaper Archive* (British Library)

*Eleanor Roosevelt Diaries* - <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/my-day>

*England & Wales National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations) 1858-1995* (Ancestry.com)

*England and Wales Census Records* (Ancestry.com)

*England and Wales Civil Registrations Death Index* (Ancestry.com)

*England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975* (Ancestry.com)

*England, Suffragettes Arrested, 1906-1914* (Ancestry.com)

findagrave.com

Grady, Eileen Doyle - correspondence 2015

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Lepach, B. - Meiji-Portraits <http://www.meiji-portraits.de/> (2016)

*London, England, Electoral Registers 1832-1965* (Ancestry.com)

O'Donnell, Kate - archivist Somerville College, Oxford

*Passenger Lists - Incoming and Outward, UK and New York* (Ancestry.com)

*The Cobden Papers* - West Sussex Record Office, Chichester UK

*The Recorders of Uttlesford History* - Saffron Walden Cemetery records

Trove (National Library of Australia)

*UK and Ireland, Find A Grave Index, 1300s-Current* (Ancestry.com)

*UK City and County Directories 1766-1946* (Ancestry.com)