

Suffragist and Tireless Campaigner

Emma Jane Catherine Cobden-Unwin
1851-1947



Jane Cobden-Unwin, photograph by Cyril Flower, 1890s. Source: National Portrait Gallery London

Charity begins at home

Jane was a suffragist and radical. She was born on 28th April 1851 at Westbourne Terrace, London, the sixth child of Richard and Catherine Cobden (and granddaughter of **William Cobden** and **Millicent Amber**). Jane was educated by governesses and at small private schools in London, Southport, and Paris. From early on the Cobden children were encouraged to have a sense of duty towards their community and to show tolerance of others. As young teenagers Jane and her sisters developed first-hand awareness of the issues affecting those less fortunate than themselves. In the 1860s the girls were living at *Dunford House*, Heyshott in rural Sussex where their father had grown up in much poorer circumstances, well before the present *Dunford* was built. Here the girls were encouraged to assist the rural poor and visit local workhouses and schools. Later on, in 1879, Jane and her sisters Anne and Ellen founded the Working Men's Cobden Club at Heyshott.

Jane actively promoted her father's free trade principles particularly when the preWW1 government of Joseph Chamberlain sought to bring back protectionism. In 1904 she and her husband, the radical publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin, published and wrote the introduction to *The Hungry Forties*, then in 1913 *The Land Hunger*. These are collections of letters and testimonies from local people about the poverty and hunger caused by the Corn Laws that Richard Cobden had been successful in having repealed.

Support for Ireland

Throughout her life Jane travelled internationally and became aware of the condition of disenfranchised people in other countries. This led to her involvement in issues



Poster illustrating support for Home Rule from English women for Irish women,
Source: Queen's University of Belfast

such as supporting Irish Independence, reform in the Congo, joining the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom (1907), opposing the South African segregationist Native Land Act (1913), opposing the Boer War and supporting indigenous minorities under colonial rule through the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society.

On a trip to Ireland in 1887 with the Women's Mission to Ireland, she witnessed the mistreatment of evicted Irish tenants that she then exposed in the English newspapers. With members of the National Reform Union, Jane presented to the Lady Mayoress of Dublin, a 'message of sympathy' containing over 37,000 signatures stating support for the women of Ireland from the women of England in the face of harsh English rule. She lectured throughout England on the need for Irish Home Rule and gave her support to the families of many Irish prisoners and evicted tenants in Ireland. In 1889 she and her sister Ellen were signatories to the proposal to form a Committee of National Protest against the

treatment of Irish prisoners. During the labour unrest of 1913–14, Jane acted on behalf of East London and Dublin wives and children of strikers, and appealed on behalf of starving Arab women and children in Tripoli. During the Irish War of Independence (1919-21), Jane offered to help victims of the ruthless Black and Tans.

Women's rights

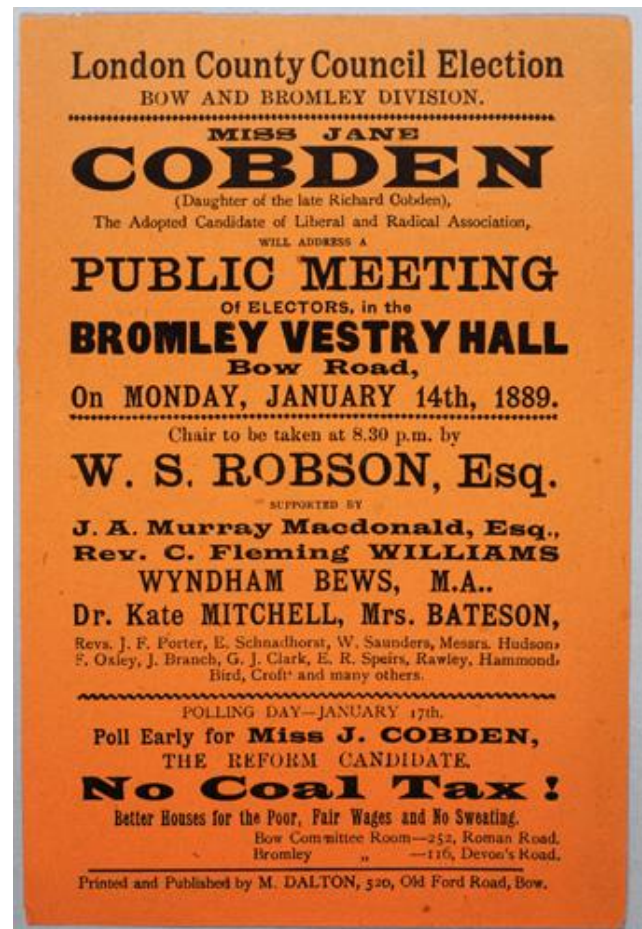
This was also a time when most women had little independence and very few rights. However, some things were beginning to change. In 1867 the *London Society for Women's Suffrage* was formed and 1868 the first public meeting on women's suffrage was held in Manchester. In 1870 the Married Women's Property Act was passed which allowed married women to own their own property and to keep it, whether married, divorced, single or widowed. And in 1871 women gained the right to participate on school boards. Jane's mother Catherine clearly supported women's rights. She had signed the 1866 women's suffrage petition to the House of Commons, and so it is of no surprise that her daughters also took up the cause.

During the 1870s, now living with her sisters in London, Jane decided to become involved in the Women's Suffrage Campaign, so with her sister Anne, she attended the Women's Suffrage Conference in London in 1871. By 1880 she was a speaker at the suffragists' Grand Demonstration at St. James Hall London and in 1881 at Bradford. She was also the treasurer of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage and in 1883 was one of the women delegates at the

Liberal Party's Reform Conference held at Leeds where a resolution for women's suffrage was passed (but not acted upon at the time). In 1889 Jane became a member of the council of the Women's Franchise League.



Jane Cobden-Unwin by Emily Osborn c1889. Stolen in 1989 but part of the collection of the City of London Guildhall Art Gallery formerly in the GLC Heritage Collection. Source: holdaway-family.website



A Jane Cobden campaign poster, January 1889. Source: Wikipedia

What sex is a 'person'?

Pursuing her goal of the franchise for women, Jane stood for the seat of Tower Hamlets (Bow and Bromley) for the London County Council in January 1889. In these elections, some women of property were permitted to vote and the Local Government Act 1888, allowed anyone to serve on a council who was 'a fit person of full age'¹. The electoral officers accepted that the word 'person' included women as well as men. Jane and fellow suffragist Lady Sandhurst won their Council seats, and a third woman, Emma Cons was chosen as an alderman. But Sandhurst's defeated Conservative opponent successfully challenged in court, her right to stand for election, because she was a woman (the judge determining that 'person' meant men only). However, Jane's defeated opponent supported female suffrage and so he did not challenge her. Legal advice was given to Jane to not attend council meetings until the next February, because the election law stated that anyone elected could not be challenged after a period of twelve months. So one year later, in February 1890, Jane took up her seat, and exercised her voting power to advance the interests of children in reformatories.

Immediately, the Conservative MP Sir Walter De Souza took Jane to court, arguing that since she had been elected unlawfully, her votes at council meetings were also unlawful. The court found in favour of De Souza and imposed penalties of £250 plus costs. Jane appealed the decision and the final result was that women's election to council was judged to be legal but illegal for them to vote on council, proving the stupidity of the law. However at least Jane had her penalties reduced to £5. Friends urged her to forgo paying the penalties and go to prison, but she decided against this. She continued to attend the council meetings but did not speak, vote or seek re-election. It would be 16 years before women could fully participate in local government.

A Heyshott wedding

In 1892, at the age of 41, Jane married the publisher Thomas James Fisher Unwin in her family's village church St. James, at Heyshott. She changed her surname to Cobden-Unwin, and they settled at her home 10 Hereford Square South Kensington. The marriage was widely celebrated, including a dinner for '150 old and poor people'² in the Working Girls' Club in Bow and Bromley, whom she had represented on the London County Council.

10 Hereford Square, Kensington,
residence of Jane in the 1890s
Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014



A detailed report in the *North Eastern Daily Gazette* of February 3rd described the wedding scene:

'.....Heyshott is the home of the Cobdens, and Miss Jane Cobden has notably taken a prominent part in the affairs of the village. The fact that the bride of yesterday is beloved by all the residents of Heyshott was attested by the presence of several triumphal arches on the road to the church and by the presentation to Miss Cobden of a handsome piece of plate.....Bunting was displayed in profusion and the church had been prettily decorated.....Miss Cobden attired in a grey satin gown with black broche flowers and true lovers' knots, over which she wore a grey cloak, carried a magnificent bouquet. Her bonnet was of grey velvet Directoire, with ostrich feathers of like colour.....As there is neither organ nor harmonium in the church, the service was necessarily plain and simple, but a merry peal on the bells was rung after the ceremony, and a plentiful shower of rice greeted Mr and Mrs Fisher Unwin as they emerged from the church. They left for Italy early in the evening.'



St. James Church, Heyshott, Sussex where Jane and Thomas married in 1892.
Photo: Euan McGillivray 2014

International focus

The couple shared progressive views on international politics. Both were founding members of the pro-Boer South African Conciliation Committee, and Jane was the committee's secretary. In 1900 she wrote *The Recent Development of Violence in our Midst*, published by the Stop-the-War Committee which opposed the second Boer War. The causes of African freedom and Irish independence stayed close to her heart all her life. But gaining votes for women was still high on Jane's agenda. In 1893 she went to Chicago to represent the Women's Franchise League at the World Congress of Representative Women. Back home, she supported women seeking to be candidates in the 1894 Kensington council elections. In 1898 Jane joined the Union of Practical Suffragists, and in 1900 she became president of the Brighton chapter of the Women's Liberal Association, (she later resigned her honorary presidency of the Rochdale chapter in protest at the Liberal Government's abandonment of women's suffrage and its harsh treatment of militant suffragists). In 1911 Jane was responsible for the Indian women's delegation in the Women's Coronation Procession, a demonstration organised by suffrage associations from Britain and the Empire to coincide with King George V's coronation.



Indian suffragists on the Women's Coronation Procession 17th June 1911, Jane helped organise.
Source:

Art and culture

Jane and Thomas socialised with avant-garde artists of the time. William Morris (textile designer of the Arts and Crafts Movement) and his wife Jane Morris (nee Burden, Pre-Raphaelite artists' model) were friends of Jane and her sister Anne. In 1881 the Cobden sisters visited Tuscany, joining their friend Jane Morris and Thomas James Sanderson (the bookbinder who became Anne's husband). In Siena they posed for two photographs entitled *The Pilgrims of Siena* by Paolo Lombardi, one in front of a painted backdrop of the city. These are now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London. Jane was a close friend of the artist Emily Osborn who lived with her for a while in 1889 and painted her portrait (see above). It was exhibited at the Society of Lady Artists in 1891, and until the 1980s when it was stolen, was hung in the London County Council rooms.



The Pilgrims of Siena albumen cabinet card by Paolo Lombardi, 1881 from left: Jane Cobden, Thomas Sanderson (later husband of Anne Cobden), Jane Morris (wife of William Morris), Anne Cobden (Jane's sister). Source: National Portrait Gallery London

The artist James McNeill Whistler was also a good friend who spent Christmas in 1896 with the Cobden-Unwins, and the painter Walter Sickert was Jane's brother-in-law. In 1893, an article in the *Western Daily Press*, *Bristol 'Dress at the Grosvenor Gallery'*, described the fashions at a private art viewing. Among many notables attending were Jane Cobden and James Whistler whose outfits were described as:

'Miss Jane Cobden wore a deep red satin costume, made with a cape and hat to match, that had a quaint old-fashioned picturesqueness', and 'Mr Whistler in an overcoat closely buttoned over, pilgrim's cape, a touch of his favourite yellow in the silk handkerchief showing from his breast pocket'³.

Emma Cons (with Jane on the LCC mentioned above), was a painter, then became a theatrical producer by reinvigorating the *Old Vic* in Lambeth to provide quality café music hall entertainment, and later Shakespeare, for the working classes. After Emma's death in 1912, Jane became the secretary of the Emma Cons Memorial Committee, set up to provide funds to keep the *Old Vic* theatre running.

Jane also took a very keen interest in her husband's work, the publishing firm T. Fisher Unwin. Unwin published progressive and avant-garde literature such as the work of the suffragist and socialist Olive Schreiner, works by Ibsen, Somerset Maugham and Nietzsche, free trade books and pamphlets, novels by H. G. Wells, Baedeker travel books, poetry by Yeats, as well as many new unknown writers.

Back to Dunford

The 1911 census shows that Jane and Thomas had moved to *Oatscroft* in her ancestral village of Heyshott, and where her mother died in 1877. Since their marriage, Jane and Thomas lived in London but had been using *Oatscroft* as a weekender. Now they moved there permanently. This brought Jane close to her father's home, *Dunford House*, where she had spent much of her childhood.



Oatscroft, Heyshott, Sussex in 1906, home of Jane and Thomas in 1911. Source: gravelroots.com

The London School of Economics

In 1904, to celebrate the centenary of her father's birth, Jane organised an international delegation to visit *Dunford* and her father's grave at West Lavington, as well as other events around the country. In 1919 Jane presented *Dunford House*, to the London School of Economics of which she was a governor. One of the founders of the LSE, Beatrice Webb, wrote in her diary:

'The poor lady ... makes fretful complaints if a single bush is cut down or a stone shifted, whilst she vehemently resents the high spirits of the students ... not to mention the opinions of some of the lecturers'⁴.



Dunford House, near Midhurst, Sussex. Source: dunfordhouse.org.uk

**Dunford
House**

conference centre

In 1923 the LSE returned the house to Jane and it continued to be used for meetings, conferences and lectures devoted to the ideals of Richard Cobden. In 1928 she donated the house to the Cobden Memorial Association. Later her cousin Helena Mary Carroll Cobden Hirst and Helena's husband Francis Wrigley Hirst, took over the running of *Dunford House*. 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 intending to sell the property⁵.

After 1935 the year her husband Thomas died, Jane, now in her eighties, and having outlived all her sisters, led a much less public life. She spent a lot of her time organising her father's papers and donated them to public organisations such as the British Museum and the West Sussex County Council (the latter also holds her own papers).

On 7th July 1947, at *Whitehanger Nursing Home* in Fernhurst, Surrey, Jane Cobden died, aged 96.

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2020

hurleyskidmorehistory.com

Notes:

¹ Sedley, Stephen - *Persons Aggrieved* (Stephen Sedley on law and public life) Vol. 19 No. 10 · 22 May 1997 *London Review of Books*

² *Pall Mall Gazette* February 1 1892

³ *The Western Daily Press Bristol* May 7 1883 p3

⁴ Richman, Sheldon - *Jane Cobden: Carrying on Her Father's Work* - Centre for a Stateless Society (2014) and The Future of Freedom Foundation (2014)

⁵ 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/> for updates.

Other resources:

British Newspaper Archive (British Library)

Cherry, Deborah - *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900* (2000)

Crawford, Elizabeth - *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (1998)

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, Select Marriages, 1538–1973 (Ancestry.com)

Grosvenor Gallery Bond St. London. <http://www.victorianweb.org/decadence/grosvenor.html>

Howe, Anthony - *Unwin, (Emma) Jane Catherine Cobden (1851–1947), suffragist and radical*

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004)

Richardson, Sarah - 'Know Your Father's Heart' *The Cobden Sisterhood and the Legacy of Richard Cobden* Ch 13 from *Rethinking Nineteenth-century Liberalism: Richard Cobden Bicentenary Essays* (Howe, Anthony and Morgan, Simon Eds.) (2006)

Sherwood, Marika - *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (2011)

The Cobden Papers - West Sussex Record Office, Chichester UK

The Grosvenor Gallery A Palace of Art in Victorian England (Casteras, Susan P. and Denney, Colleen Eds.) (1996)