

Sir Joseph Lyons: A Double Anniversary



Sir Joseph Lyons, with members of the Salmon & Gluckstein families, co-founded the catering giant J. Lyons & Co, which was subsequently to become the parent of LEO. This year marks the 170th anniversary of Sir Joseph's birth (1847) and the 100th anniversary of his death (1917). So it seems appropriate to place on record some facts about the life and personality of this remarkable man, known affectionately to everyone as Joe.

Joe was born of quite humble origin on 29th December 1847 in Southwark. He started his working life as an optician's apprentice. He was highly inventive and made a device that he called a chromatic stereoscope, consisting of a telescope, binoculars, microscope and magnifying glass all in one, which he hawked around exhibitions and fairgrounds, with some success, selling for just 1s 6d.

Joe also had a natural talent for painting and he preferred to direct his efforts to painting watercolours and exhibiting them. His pictures achieved some considerable distinction in later life, when he exhibited them at the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours (the RI); and he sold some of his work to the great and the good, including an Admiral in the Royal Navy and the Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

As a young man, Joe wrote music-hall sketches, melodramas and songs. He sold them to theatregoers in the vestibule of his local theatre. There he met his future wife, whose father was a comedian and later became the theatre manager and her mother was an actress.

Joe also co-wrote and published two detective stories, *The Master Crime* (1907) and *The Treasure of the Temple* (1910). Copies of both are in the British Library.

Joe was indeed multi-talented, highly intelligent, generous and a good mixer. These qualities together with the contacts that he had established with the national exhibition authorities were well-known to the Salmon and Glucksteins, to whom he was related by marriage. The latter families had built up a highly successful tobacco company, but disappointment with catering arrangements at the national exhibitions where they exhibited their products led to their idea of diversifying into exhibition catering. There was, however, some family reluctance at having their good business name associated with the catering scene, which was regarded as very down-market. Hence, they approached Joe to seek his willingness to lend his name to the proposed catering business, with the reward of Chairmanship for life.

Joe enthusiastically accepted this challenge, but he was to be far more than a mere front man. The year was 1887, Joe was 40 years old and he lived for another 30 years, so he remained Chairman for an unusually long time. These were to be the formative and highly progressive years in which Joe was to play a very active part. He was to preside over the acquisition of Cadby Hall as Company headquarters and main factory, the opening of the first 200 teashops between 1894 and 1916, the Trocadero Restaurant, the first two of the four Corner Houses and the first two of the 40 hotels that came under the J Lyons banner!

Also, during that period, the company started food production with tea and coffee. They extended their activities to outside catering, such as a Garden Party at Windsor Castle (Buckingham Palace Garden Parties came later) and many events at the Crystal Palace including the FA Cup Final in 1901, where they employed 11,000 staff! The Company's first four Royal Warrants were awarded between 1899 and 1904. King Edward VII was quoted as saying: "I like Mr Lyons. He feeds my people well."!

It was, however, 'Service to the Community' that led to the knighthood, bestowed in 1911 in the first of King George V's New Years Honours. Catering contracts for the army had led to Joe's interest in military matters and in particular the new Territorial Force formed in 1908, forerunner of the Territorial Army. Joe became a member of the Territorial Force Association and, probably encouraged by the London Olympics that same year, he urged for athletics to be included in the training of the Territorials. He organised the athletics events for the London Territorials at Shepherds Bush in 1909 and the National Territorials at Crystal Palace the following year. It was for this Service to the Community that Joe received his knighthood. He was also appointed Deputy Lieutenant of the County of London.

After Sir Joseph died without issue on 22nd June 1917, the Company continued to run under his name for another 60 years, until the merger with Allied Breweries in 1978.

In October 2016, the recognition of Sir Joseph's qualities as "Pioneer of Mass Catering" was displayed by English Heritage, with a blue plaque on the wall of his former residence at Palace Mansions, Hammersmith Road, just opposite Olympia.