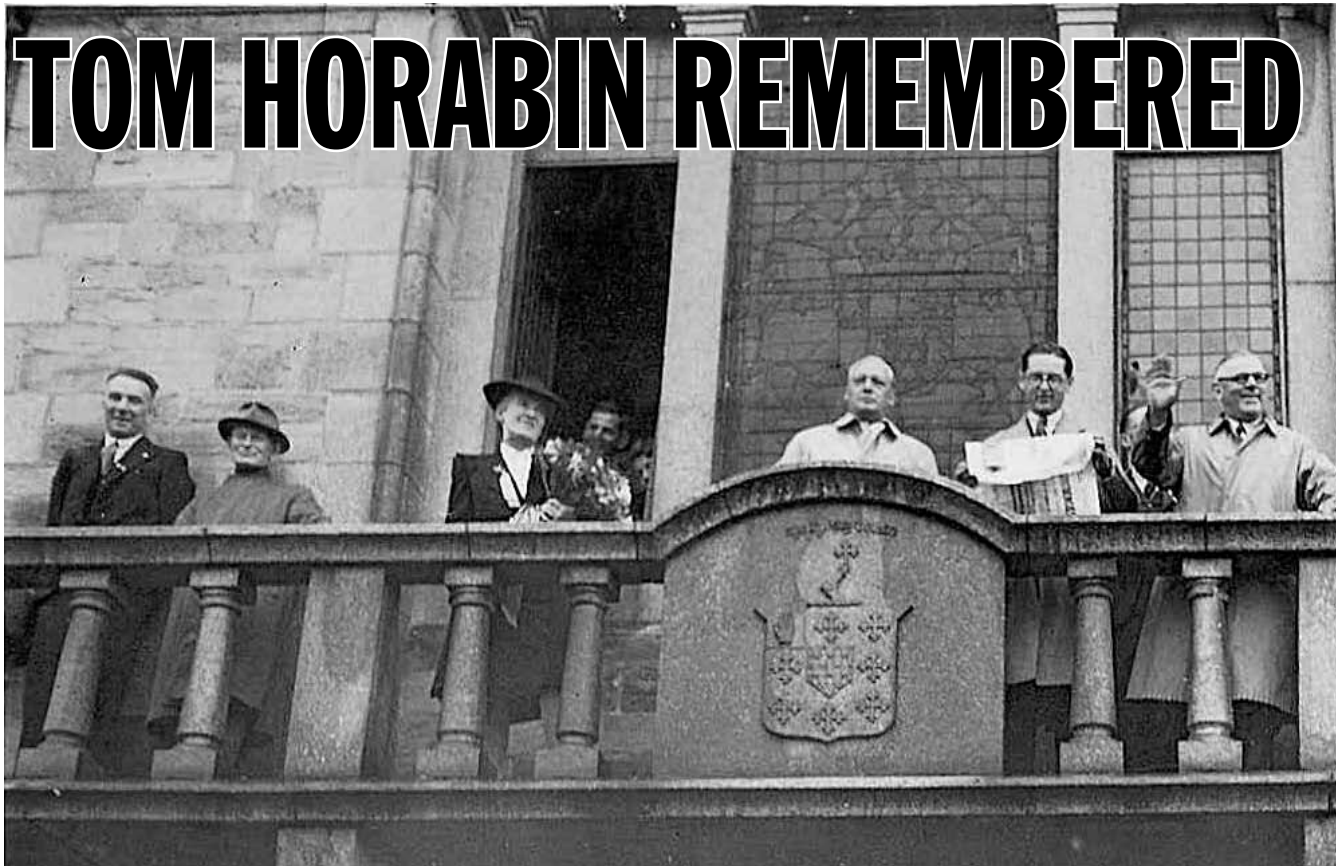


# TOM HORABIN REMEMBERED



Tom Horabin (centre, above crest) at election declaration

IN ISSUE 28 of the *Journal*, Jaime Reynolds and Ian Hunter assessed the career of Tom Horabin, MP for North Cornwall from 1939 to 1950 and Liberal Chief Whip from 1945 to 1946, who later defected to the Labour Party. In December 2004, **Robert Ingham** interviewed Tom's daughter, **Mary Wright**, about her memories of her father.

'My father was a very personable, charismatic, big-hearted man. He had a varied career in business and was very generous. He lived life to the full although he made sure my mother was well provided for after his death. His business interests brought him into contact with a number of Liberal and Conservative politicians in the 1930s, including Churchill. He was always quite left wing, a champion of the underdog.

'My father's main business venture was the establishment with Harry, later Lord, Kissin of

GH Kay Ltd, a general import and export merchants, in 1947. The name was derived from the initials of Grinstin, Kissin's brother-in-law, Horabin and Kissin himself. Kissin was the managing director and Clement Davies also sat on the board. In the 1950s, GH Kay acquired the majority shareholding in the commodity brokers Lewis and Peat, which Kissin later transformed into a vibrant concern. My father and Kissin were close friends and Kissin was extraordinarily upset by his death. My father was also chairman of Lachrinoid Products Ltd, a plastics firm, from 1943 until his death.

'His interest in pursuing a political career was sparked by the Chamberlain government's appeasement policy. He went on holiday to Germany in 1938. Through first-hand experience of what was happening there, and contact with the ordinary population, my father became more convinced that we should

stand up to Hitler. His friendship with Dick Acland secured his selection as Liberal candidate for North Cornwall. I can remember us staying in the Acland family home before Francis Acland died. We retained the use of the chauffeur who had taken the family round Germany during the campaign.

'The by-election was very exciting. Feelings were running high, meetings were packed night after night, and even Lloyd George came to speak for the Liberals. Churchill helped devise the line my father repeated every night about Chamberlain: "the man who lets the bull out of the field is as responsible as the bull for the damage done". One night, a member of the audience challenged the imputation of any responsibility on Chamberlain's part for the international situation. My father, never one to duck a challenge, replied that, in his view, Chamberlain was as guilty as Hitler. The meeting erupted in uproar and the

platform party, including me, was forced to flee and our car was stoned as we left.

‘My father combined his parliamentary duties with his business interests, as was common in those days, but was also a conscientious constituency MP. I worked in his office for a time and remember him dealing with casework and holding surgeries in Cornwall. His nickname in the House was “Honest Tom”. I can remember seeing the fireworks to celebrate the end of the War in Europe from the House of Commons Terrace. My father was delighted with Labour’s victory in 1945. Bumping into Churchill in the House shortly afterwards, the deposed Prime Minister said “you’re not such a fan of me now, Horabin!”

‘My father was always a radical, and I think he joined the Liberals because they were the people he tended to mix with before the War. He was close to Clement Davies, but in Parliament he also became friendly with Labour MPs such as Nye Bevan, Jennie Lee and Harold Wilson. W. J. Brown, who became the Independent MP for Rubgy, was another friend who helped in the by-election. My father was never ambitious to achieve high office in any party. He was more interested in achieving results than in gaining position for himself. I think he left the Liberals because he thought Labour were more likely to implement the radical policies in which he believed, given that they were in power. He was offered a peerage in 1947 or 1948 but refused. In those days there were no life peerages and my father didn’t want to pass a title on to his eldest son without the backup of financial independence.

‘He was part of the “Keep Left” group, which included Bevan. They used to meet in our London home. When he left the Liberals, my father decided not to contest North Cornwall again as he didn’t wish to oppose old friends. He stood in Exeter in 1950 for Labour, but his

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political career had effectively been ended by the plane crash in Romney Marsh in which he broke a leg and was badly burned. He was wheelchair-bound for a year and never physically robust thereafter.

‘The crash was not due to engine failure, as stated in your article, but to negligence on the part of BOAC. The flight crew lacked experience of the route being taken, from London to Bordeaux. They had not been supplied with the relevant maps and made a series of bad decisions when poor weather conditions forced them to seek an alternative place to land. They nearly got all the way back to Manston but the pilot did not appreciate how little fuel was left. Four of the five members of the

flight crew as well as four of the eleven passengers were killed.

‘My father sued BOAC for £11,000 loss of earnings and the case came to court in 1952. The company claimed that, under the Carriage by Air Act 1932, their liability was limited to £3,000 unless “wilful negligence” could be proved. The jury failed to reach a verdict and my father was forced to accept the lower level of compensation. He would have preferred to fight on, but couldn’t afford to do so. His death, in 1956, was directly attributable to the nature of the burns he suffered.’

*Mary Wright is the daughter of Tom Horabin. Robert Ingham is a historical writer, and Biographies Editor of the Journal.*

## BEVERIDGE IN PERSON

**I**N ISSUE 34/35 of the *Journal* (spring/summer 2002), a biography of Ivor Davies was published, written by his son, John Davies. The following was found amongst Ivor Davies’ papers.

### **A note on Lord Beveridge**

I first met William Beveridge when I was but four years old. Immediately after the Second World War, my father, an avid Liberal, was released from the Royal Air Force to fight the Parliamentary constituency of Central Aberdeenshire. We were travelling north on the ‘Flying Scotsman’ when we were told that Beveridge was also on the train and would like to meet us. We were ushered along from the third-class

carriages to the first-class section. In the corner of his more opulent apartment sat a bespectacled, white-haired man with a pile of papers on his knee. My father introduced me: ‘John, this is Sir William Beveridge’. My subsequent conversation with him was inevitably limited, but I left with the impression that I had been in the presence of a very important old man.

Beveridge was himself a high-flying Scotsman. Born not in the country of his ancestors but in Rangpur, India, he was a child of empire, from a family sufficiently well off financially to send him to Charterhouse School and to Balliol College, Oxford, where he proved to be a brilliant scholar. A spell at Toynbee Hall in London awakened his social conscience. He