

Reflections on compiling 'John Ellerman Foundation: A Historical Overview'

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This article is about 'John Ellerman Foundation: A Historical Review', which can be read in full [here](#).

We have recently completed *John Ellerman Foundation: A Historical Overview*. The work was commissioned by the Trustees of John Ellerman Foundation in 2021. The purpose of the commission was to provide a historical overview of the history of the Foundation, its antecedent charitable Trusts, and the lives of John Reeves Ellerman, 1st Bt., C. H. (1862–1933), his daughter Annie Winifred (Bryher) Ellerman (1894–1983), and his son John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. (1909–1973).

The absence of a substantive history of the Ellerman family or a substantive study of their business interests motivated the Trustees to commission our work. In addition to our focus on the conduct of the Ellerman family businesses, we focused on the moral and political views of the Ellerman family, in response to the Trustees' objective to familiarise themselves with the attitudes and conduct of the individuals and the businesses which generated the Foundation's initial endowment.

The research embraced a wide range of subjects: the shipping, brewing, and newspaper industries of the first half of the twentieth century; the literary *beau monde* of 1920s Paris; and the formal study and classification of rodents. The diversity of these subjects reflected the extraordinary assortment of activities pursued by John Reeves Ellerman, 1st Bt., Bryher, and John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt.

A particular focus of the research was the foundation of the Moorgate Trust and New Moorgate Trust in 1971. These Trusts were the antecedents of John Ellerman Foundation; they were established by John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. shortly before his death in 1973. Our work studied the impetus for the establishment of the Trusts, in a manner which could inform the Foundation's present and future Trustees about their founder's rationale.

It is surprising that a long-running Foundation would not have a clear sense of its founder's activities in life, his inclinations or his beliefs. However, John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. was an intensely private person, who avoided virtually any public association with philanthropy and shunned publicity generally. His unexpected death in 1973 left the 'Moorgate Trusts' to operate independently of their founder, although Ellerman's wife, Lady (Esther) Ellerman, was a Trustee of both Trusts and worked closely with the other Trustees to administer the Trusts' endowment prior to her death in 1985.

The research presented several challenges: John Reeves Ellerman, 1st Bt. was also a private individual, although not to the same degree as his son. He was Britain's wealthiest man for a considerable proportion of his lifetime and presided over an extraordinary range of financial interests, including what would become Ellerman Lines Ltd., a major shipping firm. However, Ellerman's private papers – his private correspondence and other financial documentation – is not extant and contemporary reportage about his conduct is limited.

Reconstructing Ellerman's biography was complicated by these archival absences, which were mirrored by the gaps affecting his son's private papers – very few such items belonging to John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. are extant, with the major exception of letters which he exchanged in Afrikaans with his friend, the South African journalist Piet Beukes.

Bryher is the exception; her papers are preserved at Yale University and include thousands of letters, manuscripts, typescripts, and artefacts of the Ellerman family, which proved invaluable for the reconstruction of the family's life prior to Bryher's remarkable break with her brother in 1933.

This break is one of a handful of unusual episodes which we encountered in our research. One particularly unusual example was the discovery that John Reeves Ellerman, 1st Bt.'s mother, Anne Elizabeth Reeves, had authored an anti-semitic novel in 1897, *The Prime Minister of Württemberg*. Her family's otherwise genial association with Jews and Judaism – Lady (Esther) Ellerman was Jewish and her husband was demonstrably close with members of her family – give a bizarre quality to Reeves's publication, which is one of two extant novels that she published in her lifetime, both under the pseudonym 'Eller'.

There were other limitations to our research: the commission was wide-ranging, but we could not reasonably complete a systematic study of each subject without exceeding the limits of time imposed by the Foundation and the limits of scope required by a public-facing history. Nonetheless, we hope that our work will form the basis for additional research into the Ellerman family, who merit further historical study.

Readers interested in a summary of the work's findings will find such an overview in the Conclusion. Four core findings deserve emphasis:

1. **The Practice of Philanthropy:** John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. was obsessively private, but there is significant evidence of his philanthropy prior to the creation of the Moorgate Trust and the New Moorgate Trust in 1971.
2. **The Origins of John Ellerman Foundation:** The origination of the Moorgate Trust and the New Moorgate Trust lay with an acknowledgement by John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt.'s advisers that the trust structures would permit him to continue his philanthropic activities without jeopardising the financial standing of his prospective widow, Lady (Esther) Ellerman or the viability of Ellerman Lines Ltd. The avoidance of estate tax motivated John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. to transfer his shares in Ellerman Lines Ltd. to the two trusts; a transfer would insulate the shares from the tax and ensure that the firm would not need to be sold to satisfy the tax.
3. **The Rationale of Philanthropy:** John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. evidently believed that one's positive activities in this life would redound to their benefit in their other lives, and their negative activities would have the opposite effect. The extreme implications of this view — blaming an individual's present suffering, including their physical disabilities, on misconduct in a prior life — were expressly endorsed by him. For example, he reportedly informed a disabled person that her suffering was caused by karmic retribution.
4. **The Conduct of the Ellerman Businesses:** John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. was evidently indifferent to the apartheid system in South Africa and Namibia, and he did not intervene to effect an anti-apartheid policy of desegregation on Ellerman Lines Ltd. businesses or vessels in apartheid jurisdictions. Ellerman Lines Ltd. itself did not boycott the apartheid regime and there is no indication that JEI was sympathetic to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, even after the signal injustices which motivated it — the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, for example.

Furthermore, there is a disturbing intimation that he supported the imposition of apartheid in Namibia. Although no evidence survives of his personal antipathy to particular black individuals, and unambiguous evidence survives of his acquaintance and generosity to particular black individuals, it is clear that John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. held attitudes towards black individuals which were dismissive and condescending.