

Reflections on the findings from ‘John Ellerman Foundation: A Historical Overview’

(5 minute read)

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

In 2021, as part of our 50th anniversary celebrations, we commissioned Drs Michael Taylor, Timothy Twining and Felix Waldmann to conduct research in to the history of the Foundation, its antecedent charitable Trusts, and the philanthropic, business and personal inclinations of John Reeves Ellerman, 1st Baronet (Bt.), Order of the Companion of Honour (C. H.) (1862–1933), his daughter Annie Winifred (Bryher) Ellerman (1894–1983), and his son John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. (1909–1973). This has resulted in *John Ellerman Foundation: A Historical Overview*.

In 2021, whilst considering how to mark our 50th anniversary, we once again felt all too keenly the paucity of information we possessed about the origins of our endowment, and were keen to rectify this. In 2021, we issued an open call for proposals, resulting in 14 written submissions and three in-depth interviews that highlighted the sheer potential of the work we were trying to discover in relation to our history.

In the last 18 months, this research has provided the Foundation with the opportunity to reflect on the legacy of our organisation and consider the ways in which our past and present can be used to inform our future. It provides a robust historical overview of our history, including our founder John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt. This felt significant given that there have been no direct connections to our founder represented within our organisation for some years now. We were heartened to see that there is demonstrable evidence that aspects of our different funding categories, especially under the arts and environment, would have resonated with him personally.

In reviewing the findings, multiple considerations have been made, of which we think it is important to highlight two. The first is that our founder, John Reeves Ellerman, 2nd Bt., was intensely private and probably would have disliked this publication. We have chosen to make this a public-facing historical account because of our belief that there is legitimate interest from those working in and with John Ellerman Foundation to understand where our wealth comes from, and we are keen to model transparency and accountability on this front.

The second consideration has been that applying present day ethical standards to practices and individuals from the past is not straightforward. The research has provided us with the fullest written account the Foundation has ever possessed of the character, acumen and ambitions of our founder, his father and his sister. On their philanthropic endeavours, there is much to commend, even if it is caveated by the motivations and methodologies they adopted. Our founder’s rationale for setting up the antecedents to what is now John Ellerman Foundation was complex. A primary concern was to guard against the effects of estate duty for his heir and widow Lady Esther Ellerman (1910–1985) and to ensure Ellerman Lines Ltd. (from which a considerable proportion of his wealth was derived) could continue as a going concern, without estate duty risking the company being broken up. The Trusts that were originally set up, the Moorgate Trust and New Moorgate Trust, were under no obligation from our founder to prioritise grantmaking over ensuring

the continued existence of Ellerman Lines Ltd., to the extent that the latter over some years reportedly did not generate a dividend for charitable disbursement.

The research also evidences that the businesses from which our wealth derived, which in brief comprised shipping, breweries, coal and oil, property and newspaper and publication interests ‘...were undoubtedly involved in activities which their modern equivalents would reject’, be that a clear indifference to the apartheid system in South Africa and Namibia, or the environmental harms caused by the family’s investments, or that the source of the family’s wealth was linked to the British Empire in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that Sir John Reeves Ellerman, 1st Bt., C. H. ‘presented himself as a modern Francis Drake: a cynosure for the extension of British rule across the globe’. The research also uncovered a clear example of antisemitism committed by John Reeves Ellerman’s, 1st Bt., C. H. mother, Anne Elizabeth, with the publication in 1897 of a book she wrote titled *The Prime Minister of Württemberg*. This fact was particularly surprising in light of the considerable evidence of her grandchildren’s support for and respect for Jewish people and Judaism.

We fully acknowledge that the origins of our endowment have links to such practices that resulted in harms and struggles both then and now. It is our intent and belief that our present-day practices help to redress these wrongs. Our grantmaking activities are designed to support work that challenges the symptoms and root causes of systemic and structural issues, and improves politics, society, the economy and the environment in ways that enhance the wellbeing of individuals and communities across the UK and beyond. The endowment, from which our wealth continues to be derived, is invested in ways that take full account of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues, but we are fully aware that this practice may be rejected by future generations, and we are proactively looking for new and better ways to invest in ESG funds and beyond. We are committed to delivering our work in ways that are transparent, accountable and effective, with environmental sustainability and diversity, equity and inclusion applied across everything that we do. We know that there is more for us to do in redressing past and present harms.

In their concluding remarks, Drs Michael Taylor, Timothy Twining and Felix Waldmann state that ‘*John Ellerman Foundation is a charity which has had to discover its own history*’. Through their work we now have a thorough and thoughtful account of our Foundation’s history, and we cannot overstate our gratitude to them for this. We are also enormously grateful to Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Allegra Fryxell for their expertise and advice on this research. Further thanks go to Dr Katharine Haydon for completing our Oral History Project, which is referenced in this publication, Rosa Deen, Chandra Finnaughty, Beth Astridge, Inez Gretton, Michael Jacobs, Timothy Martin-Jenkins, Gillian Mosley, as well as former and present staff and Trustees for all their support in making this publication possible.

Whilst this is an impressive and comprehensive publication, our intention is to build upon it further as we consider its findings.