

**JB**  
**Papers of John Bright**  
**1679, 1749-1925**

**ADMINISTRATIVE AND BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY**

John Bright (1811-1889), Liberal politician, was born in Rochdale as the second son of Jacob Bright (1775-1851) and Martha Bright nee Wood (1788/9-1830). Jacob settled in Rochdale from Wiltshire in 1802 in a position of book keeper to the cotton spinners, John and William Holme. His first wife was Sophia Holme, sister to his employers John and William, and he married Martha Wood in 1809 following the death of Sophia in 1806. They had a large family of eleven, including Priscilla Bright [later McLaren] and Jacob Bright. John Bright (1811-1889) became the eldest son when the first child died in 1814.

Bright was educated mainly at the Quaker schools in Ackworth and York, leaving school as an apprentice to his father's business, established in 1823. Bright took over the business with his brothers on their father's retirement. Bright travelled abroad as a young man to Europe and the Middle East, before starting to make a name for himself in local politics in the 1830s as a social reformer, founding with his father the Rochdale Reform Association in 1834 and becoming a leader of the Religious Freedom Society which campaigned against the establishment of the setting of church rates. He then became involved with the Anti-Corn Law Association, but had difficulty reconciling his political passions with his Quaker principles and background, which came to a head when he met Elizabeth Priestman (d 1841), whose family objected to his political notoriety. They eventually married in 1839, with a daughter, Helen Priestman Bright born the following year. Elizabeth died from TB shortly after the birth, leaving Bright's sister Priscilla and his sisters-in-law to bring up their daughter. In 1847, Bright married Margaret 'Elizabeth' or 'Zib' Leatham (d 1878), resulting in seven more children.

During the 1840s, Bright quickly established a national reputation as a result of his growing influence within the Anti-Corn Law League, working closely with Richard Cobden. He became MP for Durham in 1843 and helped to direct the League's attentions towards rural poverty as well as establishing his reputation for radical public speaking, before being elected as MP for Manchester, representing the Manchester Reform Association in 1847. He went on to identify himself with Irish reform and parliamentary reform. In 1856, Bright suffered a nervous breakdown which removed him from public life for a number of years, partly as a result of the stress endured as the leading opponent of the Government during the Crimean War. He was defeated on standing as MP for Manchester in 1856, but returned as MP for Birmingham in 1858, vocalising on the American Civil War, and being re-elected in 1865, once again passed over for Gladstone's Cabinet, although he finally entered the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade (having turned down Secretary of State for India). However, illness returned and he resigned in 1870, reappearing in parliament in 1872, and rejoining the cabinet as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1873. A further depression followed in 1878 on the death of his second wife and he retired from the Cabinet in 1882, returning as the MP for the new constituency of Birmingham Central in 1885, although he was by this point taking a very minor role in politics. He died at home in Rochdale in 1889 and was buried in the Friends' Meeting House.

The Clarks family of Street became closely connected with Quaker families of the Newcastle and Rochdale areas as a result of the marriage of William Stephens Clark (1839-1925) to Helen Priestman Bright (1840-1927). As well as HPBC, also of note as campaigners for women's rights amongst HPBC's maternal relations are Priscilla Bright McLaren (1815-1906), Anna Maria Priestman (1828-1914) and Margaret Priestman (later Wheeler, later Tanner) (1817-1905), who all had a direct input into the raising of Helen from a young age. Helen's grandmother Rachel Priestman (1791-1854) was a Quaker minister. John Bright's aunt Elizabeth Bancroft (nee Wood) emigrated to the USA with her husband John in 1822 – links were maintained between the communities over time, and were strengthened further by the marriage of their great-granddaughter Sarah Bancroft and Roger Clark.

**EXTENT** 2 boxes

### **ARCHIVAL HISTORY**

Deposited in 24 parcels by Dr Stephen Darbishire snr on permanent loan in 1975, listed by James Boswell and Judith Dempster in Feb 1980. The loan was renewed by Dr Stephen Darbishire jnr in Mar 1995, on behalf of himself and his three siblings.

### **DESCRIPTION**

Letters from Richard Cobden to Bright, 1861; John Bright to C P Villiers, 1832-1872; letters mostly to John Bright from J Chamberlain, J Stansfold et al, 1843-1912; letters to and from John Bright - Jacob and Martha Bright, Jonathan Priestman, Rachel Priestman, Priscilla Bright et al, 1807-1899; notes by Bright concerning poor rates, trades, working conditions, wages etc, 1842-1884; letters to Bright from Gladstone, McCarthy et al, 1844-1909; letters from John Bright to Lord Russell, P McLaren etc, and also the Duke of Argyll, Joseph Sturge et al, 1852-1889; letters from John Bright to C P Villiers, Richard Cobden, W J Parry, Lord Kinnaird et al, 1861-1885; letters from John Bright to 'Elizabeth' Bright [second wife Margaret Elizabeth Leatham Bright], Lord Coleridge, Benjamin Disraeli etc and between John Bright and Lord Brougham et al, 1822-1888; Duke of Argyll to John Bright, and between Bright and John Caird et al, 1872-1903; typed copy extract letters from Bright to Richard Cobden, W E Gladstone, C P Villiers, 1841-1865; John Bright to his son John Albert Bright, 1860-1880; handwritten speech notes and newscuttings regarding cotton and the East India Co, 1849-1876; handwritten notes regarding Landlord and Tenant Bill, poem and other papers, 1840-1850; 'Trevelyan's letters' ie letters to J A Bright from G M Trevelyan regarding *The life of John Bright (1913)*, 1902-1913; letters to J A Bright in answer to his request for John Bright correspondence, 1896-1911; copy 1702 letters to George Fox and copy 1689 marriage certificate to Margaret Fell; Lord Ripon (Indian Viceroy) and Grant-Duff to John Bright; also booklet regarding speech by Lord Ripon, 1884; copy letters from John Bright to Charles Sumner [later published by the Massachusetts Historical Society], 1861-1872; John Bright to father Jacob and sisters, 1825-1880; letters from Margaret 'Elizabeth' Leatham, second wife of Bright] to Mary Barclay, and some from John Bright to Mary Barclay, 1847; typescript letters Richard Cobden to John Bright and some others, also copy letters between John Bright and Gladstone, 1861-1885 [transcribed by Prof Keith Robbins, University College of North Wales, Bangor]; transcribed copy of manuscript catalogue 'John Bright Library', including original manuscript inventory, undated; letters to John Bright from MEB [second wife Margaret Elizabeth Bright], S H

Charlotte Berry  
6 Aug 2010

Revised 28 Nov 2011, 26 Jul 2012, 8 Aug 2012, 30 Oct 2014

Walpole, E L Pierce, C Brown et al, with other papers regarding estate and marriage settlement funds of Bright, also newscuttings, pamphlets etc, 1749-1925; copy letters Richard Cobden to John Bright [originals in British Library], 1841-1865; diaries and notebooks, 1835-1884; pamphlet 'True Christianity vindicated, both in preceding, present and succeeding ages...', Ambros Rigge, 1679

### **ACCESS CONDITIONS**

Access to the collection is arranged via advance appointment only. Access to some collections may be restricted due to Data Protection or other restrictions. Please check with the Archivist.

### **REPRODUCTION CONDITIONS**

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### **LANGUAGE**

English

### **FINDING AIDS**

A list is available on the Access database, dated 1999-2000. See also the more detailed typescript list by James Boswell, Feb 1980.

### **RELATED UNITS OF DESCRIPTION**

Other papers relating to John Bright and his immediate family are held in the Millfield papers. A small group of letters from Bright and Richard Cobden to William Evans, 1859-1889, were purchased in 2012 (ACC2012/A/56).

Correspondence of John Bright's sister Priscilla Bright McLaren ('Aunt Tilla' (1815-1906)) with Sir Henry Norman (1858-1939) is held at the University of Nottingham Library (ref 0159 N Mc). Other papers relating to the McLaren family are held at the National Library of Scotland (including some of John Bright's correspondence) and also privately at Bodnant, North Wales. For Bright papers held in other repositories, see the National Register of Archives.

### **PUBLICATION NOTE**

It is not known to what extent this collection has been used in published research.