

Balsall Common u3a Social and Political History Group

Meeting on 24th May- Stanley Baldwin

A. Introduction

1. In the period between the First and Second World Wars, Stanley Baldwin was leader of the Conservative Party for 15 years and Prime Minister three times. Without doubt he qualifies as one of the major political figures of the first part of the 20th century and yet he is mentioned little and remembered less, except, perhaps, in Bewdley, his home town. Unlike his predecessor, Lloyd George (apart from a few months of Bonar Law who retired with ill health) and his successors, Ramsay MacDonald and Neville Chamberlain who are all much better remembered, if not necessarily kindly. Baldwin retired in 1937, basking in the praise for his successful handling of the abdication crisis; however, after Chamberlain's death in 1940, he became the subject of much criticism, including by Churchill, by those who blamed him for failing to rearm soon enough and causing 'this unnecessary war'.

2. What reputation he has is generally for indolence and persuasability, yet it is difficult to see how he could have been so dominant for so long if this was all there was to him. He was involved in the General Strike, the establishment of the National Government, the rise to power of the organised working class, the decline of the UK as an industrial power, the abdication and the rise of Hitler and Mussolini.

3. Baldwin was born in 1867 in Bewdley; his father was a successful ironmaster, running the family business (merged with Richard Thomas Ltd- RTB- in 1948, became part of British Steel in 1967 and is now part of Corus, itself part of Tata Steel). He went to Harrow, but after being flogged for reading and sending pornography to friends, became more withdrawn and less interested in school work. He made few friends, was asked to resign from the debating society because he never spoke and largely wasted his time when he went on to Trinity College, Cambridge- a first at the end of year one, a second at end of year two and a third at end of year three. Amazingly, though, he became Chancellor of the University in 1930 and kept the title until his death in 1947.

4. He went into the family business without too much enthusiasm (he was never interested in making money); he married and moved to Astley House, near Bewdley, quite a grand establishment, but also maintained a residence in London. There were six children, two sons and four daughters. He always loved his home area and played the country gentleman, although he was not one. Partially because of this self-image, like MacDonald, he loved Chequers and also loved his annual summer holiday in Aix-les-Bains for at least a month in August and he rarely let anything get in the way of the trip. It was said that the only time he ever spoke to foreigners was to the waiters in the hotel dining room. Typically, he was a JP, chairman of school governors and a member of Worcester County Council.

B. Parliament and the End of the Coalition

5. Baldwin fell into his father's seat at Bewdley, after he died suddenly in 1908, being returned unopposed (he had contested Kidderminster in 1906 but lost in the Liberal landslide). He remained the MP until his retirement in 1937. He was seen as a quiet and agreeable member who spoke little and he seemed content with his lot; he was vice-chairman of Baldwins, a member of the Board of the GWR, entertained modestly and had a growing circle of friends in Worcestershire and London. The war seemed to make him more restless; at 47, he was too old for service and he began to give away quite a lot of money to Worcestershire charities. He became more interested in the detail of politics and, under the coalition, became Bonar Law's PPS at the Treasury; he took on a junior minister role when Sir Hardman Lever, a businessman, without a parliamentary seat, became Financial Secretary and then left for an extended visit to the United States. Baldwin became Joint Financial Secretary and at 50 a slightly old junior minister, holding the post for four years. He was regarded as a loyal and good minister who deserved some recognition, but was not thought of as a candidate for high office. He turned down a peerage and the offers of Governor-Generalships in Australia and Canada.

6. Baldwin became increasingly jaundiced about Lloyd George and this antipathy was to be the making of his career. In March 1921, he was promoted to the coalition cabinet as President of the Board of Trade; this followed Bonar Law's retirement from ill-health. Austen Chamberlain became leader of the Conservative Party; much more aloof than Law and less adept at party management, this was a start of the process whereby he and the main Conservative members of the cabinet lost touch with the majority of their MPs. Baldwin developed a strong dislike for Lloyd George, considering him to be corrupt and to be infecting the whole of the political system. He had the advantage of being underestimated and, for him, showed extraordinary resolve in deciding that he had had enough of the coalition.

7. When in October 1922, the cabinet agreed to call a General Election and to fight it as a coalition, Baldwin strongly dissented and resigned. He believed that he was consigning himself to the wilderness, but, in reality, his stance was widely supported among Conservative junior ministers and the rank and file and he had, in practice, put himself at their head. Chamberlain called a Party meeting on 19th October at the Carlton Club, to confirm the election decision; he spoke for half an hour, lecturing the party on loyalty. Baldwin replied in an effective eight minute speech, respectful of Chamberlain, but highly critical of Lloyd George, that gained great applause. With Bonar Law present and also opposed to the election plan, the meeting voted by 185 to 88 to withdraw from the coalition. Lloyd George resigned the same day, Bonar Law became leader of the Conservatives and Prime Minister. Baldwin was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer.

8. Although, on paper, the Government looked weak, shorn of most of its significant cabinet members, the Conservatives won a comfortable majority in the

General Election; the Labour Party became the second largest, with the Liberals split.

9. Baldwin's main achievement as Chancellor was the American war debt settlement. This was an extremely difficult issue, given the UK's weakness and American intransigence. He spent a month in the US, from December to January and, possibly because he saw Bonar Law as a temporary leader, reached what he regarded as an acceptable agreement outside of the limits imposed by the Prime Minister. Again he showed resolve in winning the cabinet round to acceptance, except for Law, who, eventually, gave in with bad grace when faced with a unanimous cabinet. Their relationship never recovered and, some say, nor did Law's health. Baldwin's performances became more confident thereafter and his speeches with their trademark homely and high-spun oratory, became more effective. In May 1923, Law's throat cancer became too severe and he resigned on 19th May. Although Curzon was seen as a possible successor, it was never likely and the King sent for Baldwin. He was Prime Minister after just three years' cabinet experience.

First Premiership 1923/24 and Defeat

10. Baldwin's relaxed persona hid the fact that he was highly strung, with a number of nervous habits; this did enable him to respond well to crises, although he was usually left exhausted and in need of a holiday at the end. This meant that it was best that they did not occur often. He did not look for political excitement nor seek work out. He was not afraid of responsibility and was not lazy in the accepted meaning of the word; he worked with the minimum of paperwork and allowed his ministers to work with little interference- a practice which had its downsides as well as benefits. He concentrated on personal relationships and spent a great deal more time than most Prime Ministers or party leaders in the House of Commons; in fact, much of his leisure time was semi-political. He did spend a lot of time on his speeches, mainly to get the mood and tone right ; his homespun talks from the heart took a deal of time to get right.

11. Baldwin was faced with growing unemployment and felt that protection was the best policy to adopt to deal with it and to reunite the Conservative Party. However, Bonar Law had given an undertaking that there would be no change in fiscal arrangements without an appeal to the country. Whilst at Aix that autumn he resolved to call an election and drove the cabinet to agree against their better judgement; it was a bold decision and a wrong one. Baldwin, of course, expected to win the election held in December 1923, but, in the event, lost over 90 seats, 50 of which went to Labour and 40 to the now reunited Liberals. The latter two had 349 seats between them against the Conservative's 258.

12. Almost any permutation was possible to form a new administration, but it was clear that, as his policy had been firmly rejected, he could not continue in office. At that point he could have sunk without trace, but Balfour persuaded him to stay in

office until Parliament met, which, because of Christmas meant a six week period. It meant that, with no alternative candidate in sight, Baldwin's position as leader of the Conservative Party became secure. Baldwin also came to the view that a minority Labour Government would be the best option; he saw their entry into Government at some stage as inevitable and wanted to bolster the moderate elements by allowing them to enter Government in a controlled way. On 21st January 1924, he was defeated, happily, in the Commons and MacDonald took office the following day.

13. In opposition, Baldwin did what was necessary – he dropped tariff reform as a policy and, Neville Chamberlain claims with his help, brought Austen Chamberlain into the shadow cabinet. This also meant taking Birkenhead, which Baldwin had to swallow. He did not enjoy opposition; as someone who liked to defuse arguments, the role was not suited to him. He was happier making speeches in the country and outlined the Party's social reform programme.

14. At this time, Baldwin was in financial difficulty, associated with problems with his eldest son and with the poor performance of Baldwin's Ltd. This did not stop his annual trip to Aix where he relaxed in the knowledge that the Government was likely to lose office and the Conservatives to regain it before long, a position which kept his critics at bay. The time came in October 1924 over the prosecution and then non-prosecution of J R Campbell, WW1 veteran and left wing newspaper editor who was accused of encouraging sedition. The Liberals and Conservatives combined to defeat the Government and MacDonald called an election. The campaign was influenced by the forged Zinoviev letter and a general anti- Bolshevik tone.

15. In the campaign, MacDonald made use of the new radio invention to broadcast his speeches to audiences, but came over as ranting, whilst Baldwin appeared calm and measured. The result was a landslide 419 seats for the Conservatives, with 141 for Labour and 40 for the Liberals. Baldwin had just about reached his aim of replacing the Liberals with Labour. He then wanted Labour to destroy the communists.

Prime Minister Again

16. Baldwin's position was secure and his confidence increased. Curzon was deprived of his role as Foreign Secretary, which went to Austen Chamberlain (Curzon took the India office), whilst his brother Neville surprisingly turned down Chancellor of the Exchequer, to become Minister of Health, which then included responsibility for local government, housing and all social welfare schemes. That led to a surprise decision to make Churchill Chancellor (Churchill thought he was being offered Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, which he would have happily accepted). He had only recently rejoined the party; eight months earlier he had stood as an independent against the Conservatives in a byelection. He had no financial experience and no call on the job; it is difficult to explain the decision. Baldwin continued with errors, appointing Joynson-Hicks to the Home office, from which it

took many years to recover and Steel-Maitland to the sensitive role of Minister of Labour, to which he was totally unsuited. He also left out Balfour, although he was brought in six months later, on Curzon's death.

17. The second premiership lasted four and a half years, with a stable cabinet- no reshuffling; he treated ministers as colleagues and, once appointed, you were there for the duration and left to get on with the job. He probably regarded Neville Chamberlain as his most efficient minister, although the respect was not returned. Chamberlain was a detail man and Baldwin's laissez-faire approach an anathema to him.

18. The main events of this period were: The Treaty of Locarno, the return to the gold standard, the General Strike, the Imperial Conference of 1926 and the Ministry of Health measures for the reform of local government and the extension of social security. The first and last of these items were very much Austen's and Neville's work. Balfour was behind the work on the Imperial Conference (the Balfour Declaration of 1926) which led to the Statute of Westminster, 1931 which recognised the legislative independence of the Dominions and was a major step to their establishment as sovereign states.

19. Not surprisingly, it was the General Strike that occupied Baldwin most. We have, of course, discussed that subject in the group. Baldwin generally felt comfortable dealing with industrial relations; his belief in personal relationships and his patience, as well as business experience were certainly helpful. However, the problems with the coal industry were substantial; it was huge, employing over a million men and was vital to the economy, both domestically and for export. Despite large profits before and during the war, the owners had invested little and the industry was becoming uncompetitive; the only response that the owners could envisage was to cut wages. They were faced with a well-organised union representing tight-knit communities; the union was powerful in the TUC and had an emotional position in the Labour movement.

20. The Government recognised the importance of the coal industry, but pursued an economic policy that made exports more expensive and Baldwin himself, apart from wanting peace, does not appear to have had a clear goal, which probably prevented him from reaching a settlement. In practice, with a temporary subsidy and an inquiry (the Samuel Commission), he bought off the strike in 1925 and made preparations to deal with a future one. One of the clear failings of his government was that they began to recognise the need to move from the old, struggling heavy export industries of coal, steel, shipbuilding and cotton towards the newer light industries, but did little to effect the transition. Making exports more expensive in fact made any transition more difficult.

21. The Government reluctantly accepted the Samuel Commission's recommendations and negotiated half-heartedly. The TUC were persuadable, the

miners' leaders were not. Baldwin was too attracted to postponing difficult decisions and too unwilling to coerce the owners, who approached a strike with equanimity. As it was, an early hours settlement was agreed with TUC representatives, based on the continuation of the subsidy for two weeks and a settlement on the lines of the Samuel Report to be agreed in this period. However, the cabinet revolted and the Chief Whip told him that the party would not support it. Baldwin was then forced to create new hurdles that enabled him to back out of the agreement and at another early hours meeting ended the discussions.

22. The General Strike lasted eight days and Baldwin's main role was to keep the country calm. And to differentiate between the coal strike, an industrial dispute and the General Strike, which was an attack on democracy. He decided to let the strike wear itself out, which it did quite quickly. He then attempted to mediate in the coal dispute, but the recalcitrance of both sides ended his enthusiasm. He did, however, legislate to suspend the Seven Hours Act, which restricted hours in the industry. It did nothing to end the dispute, but gave the owners a concession for the future. Baldwin was worn out and near nervous collapse and frantic efforts had to be made to find a doctor to certify him as being in medical need of his annual trip to Aix to persuade the King to relent in his instruction for him to remain in the country. He was away from 22nd August to 15th September.

23. Churchill, more sympathetic to the miners, took over the negotiations with vigour, but the owners saw victory as too close to require any concessions. Already 100,000 were back at work, mainly in the Midlands where solidarity was weaker. The cabinet decided to do nothing. In October, the Nottingham miners formed a breakaway union and went back to work and in November the strike collapsed. Lower wages, an eight hour day and a large number of unemployed miners being the result, alongside the bitterness. The financial loss to the country had been immense and whole communities alienated and impoverished. Baldwin had dealt with the General Strike reasonably well, but showed little energy for the coal dispute or any desire to make effective and impartial use of the authority of the state. It was, though, a major victory for conservative forces and strike action was considerably reduced in the following years. Left wing members of the TUC lost the debates and the evolution of a TUC involved in the process of government had begun.

Election Defeat and Second Labour Government

24. Baldwin fought the May 1929 General Election on the slogan of 'safety first', perhaps not the best one when things were going badly (10% unemployment); he thought that he would win by dint of his reputation as a moderate statesman, calmly steering the country in the right direction. The Conservatives ended up with 261 seats to Labour's 287 and the Liberals 59. The Liberals increased their share of the vote most, gaining 19 seats, but often helped the Labour candidate to win on a minority vote- Labour had a slightly smaller percentage of the poll than the Conservatives. His loss of office, at a time when Baldwin's share price was doing

badly was a major financial blow and he had to take a shorter lease on a smaller house than previously.

25. Baldwin still managed his six weeks in France, followed by stays in the North of England and Scotland. His time over the following eighteen months from October 1929 was, probably his most difficult as leader. He had little enthusiasm for opposition and gave the Government an easy time; all his energies were taken up on issues with his own party. The two main newspaper proprietors, Beaverbrook and Rothermere, took up the issue of tariff reform and Empire preference, principally to attack Baldwin. Beaverbrook adopted the Empire Crusade, which is when the crusader emblem first appeared on the front of the paper. That no leader of a Dominion was seriously interested in it, was not an issue of concern and one Empire Preference candidate won a by-election in a Tory seat and others took enough votes away for the Conservative to lose in others.

26. India was his other problem, as he came to support Dominion status, seeing no other option apart from continued and expensive repression. This created opposition from Austen Chamberlain, Birkenhead and, of course, Churchill- and the Daily Mail. He took the press barons on and won enough support in his own party to survive, despite local rumblings and constituency resignations. It was, however, a very awkward time for him. Neville Chamberlain, the obvious alternative, remained generally loyal, but got himself installed as Party Chairman, in place of a Baldwin supporter. By-election results continued to go badly and in February 1930 Baldwin was put under severe pressure to resign and nearly did. However, fortified by his supporters, he decided to fight back, winning the majority of the Parliamentary party round. In his attack on the press barons in one speech used the now well-quoted phrase 'What the proprietorship of these papers is aiming at is power and power without responsibility- the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages'. With Neville Chamberlain baulking at striking the first blow, Baldwin survived.

The National Government

27. Baldwin's survival was helped by the problems of the Labour Government and its likely demise. The economic situation was deteriorating and the Government appeared barren of ideas to deal with it. In desperation, they agreed to hand over to an independent committee (chaired by the chairman of the Pru, Sir George May) the task of making recommendations about the handling of the economy i.e. on the main political issue of the day. At this stage, Baldwin did not favour a coalition; unfortunately, his determination to go on his annual trip to Aix-les-Bains left Chamberlain in charge and he was more open to the idea, as Baldwin knew. This cost him the premiership, a significant salary and Chequers.

28. In July 1931, a major deterioration in the economy coincided with the production of the May report that called for major spending cuts. The reaction of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the party generally and the trade unions set the

Government on its death throws and by the time Baldwin was summoned back, the deal on a national government had effectively been done, leaving his colleagues to convince him of the rectitude of the course. In practice, the opposition, including the King, was too strong for him to resist and led him to spend the next four years in charge of by far the largest party, but without the power of the Prime Minister. The proposal caused the final split in the Labour Party and, after dithering, MacDonald accepted the King's remit to form a national government.

29. Baldwin became Lord President of the Council, third in rank behind the PM and the Lord Chancellor. He did, though, get 11 Downing Street, some compensation for the lower salary. Chamberlain insisted on going back to the Ministry of Health, but became Chancellor after the autumn election; Austen reluctantly accepted the Admiralty. Having been formed to protect the Gold Standard, the new Government left it and called an election for 27th October. The coalition were unable to agree on a programme but, nonetheless, agreed to stand together; the Labour Party, solid but leaderless was in no position to threaten them. The result was an overwhelming victory, in effect for the Conservatives. The election was fought on fear and resulted in 470 Conservatives, with 35 Liberal Nationals and 13 Labour Nationals (518). The Labour Party won 46 seats, a loss of 243, the Liberals, 32. MacDonald became Prime Minister of a Conservative dominated Government (12 out of 18 Cabinet members).

30. MacDonald soon became a pathetic figure; Baldwin was 65 in 1932 and going deaf. He found his six weeks in Ottawa at the Imperial Preference Conference that summer a great trial and was pleased to escape to Aix. Baldwin sustained MacDonald in office because he felt that he had to; a very influential leader of the Commons, but not a great deal more. Fortunately those Tories who really disliked MacDonald tended not to support Baldwin, so there was little demand for change from the party as a whole. In addition, from 1933 onwards, the Government performed dreadfully in by-elections, with huge swings to Labour; Baldwin put this down in part to the pacifist tendencies of the time. He delegated much to Chamberlain and concentrated on India, erratically on defence and on the day to day issues which always arise in government. So the Prime Minister depended on the second man in the government and he depended on the second man in his party.

31. In 1934, MacDonald began to deteriorate physically and mentally and became an embarrassment. Eventually, after some months of persuasion, MacDonald reluctantly agreed to go and Baldwin became Prime Minister in June 1935, almost by accident, as most people, including Chamberlain himself, thought that he would succeed. The King proceeded without consulting anyone and the opposition was not sufficiently organised or determined to achieve a different outcome. Baldwin was aware of the strength of the peace lobby (the peace ballot was held that year) and saw its supporters as a large part of his constituency; he aimed, therefore, to play the peace card and, with Italy having invaded Abyssinia, rely on the country being unwilling to trust an unknown opposition.

32. He addressed the Conservative Party conference that year for the first time in seven years (Chamberlain was deputed in 1936), making an obvious pre-election speech and the election was called for November. It was in this campaign that he made his pledge of 'no great armaments' to a meeting of the Peace Society. The Conservatives won a big majority, with 387 seats (plus 42 other National party wins); the Labour Party recovered to 154 seats.

33. Baldwin's reputation suffered almost immediately because of his disastrous appointment of Hoare as Foreign Secretary and his hands-off approach. The result was the Hoare-Laval pact with France, which provided for the dismemberment of Abyssinia and gave Mussolini about half of what he had set out to conquer. With Hoare ill and on holiday, Baldwin tried to defend the pact with a dreadful Commons performance and the Cabinet would not have it. Halifax told Baldwin that Hoare had to go or the PM would suffer personally. Never wanting his public reputation sullied, Baldwin gave in and delegated Chamberlain to tell Hoare. Baldwin then saw Austen Chamberlain who was heading a Commons revolt and said that he would be offered the job when Hoare left. The revolt subsided and Baldwin did not keep his promise, giving the job to Eden- yet again, Austen had played the game and lost. He never forgave Baldwin. This did not stop Baldwin, when Chamberlain died 15 months later, from eulogising that he never had an unkind word to say about anyone.

34. After the fiasco, Baldwin was exhausted and short of prestige; he was depressed and became more deaf; his most popular decision was to fix his retirement for May 1937. In June 1936, he had a week off on doctor's orders and, at the beginning of August left for over two months' holidays at Welsh and English houses- he was too exhausted to go to Aix. Lethargy can have some advantages, as his state led him to decline meetings with Hitler. There was, however, a surprising upturn.

The Abdication Crisis

35. King George V died suddenly on 20th January 1936, aged 70; that has some significance in that no real thought had been to the succession and that the King had had serious doubts about his elder son's fitness for the role. His thoughts were matched by Baldwin and his senior ministers; apart from the issue with Mrs Simpson, he was seen as irresponsible and selfish, preferring privilege and popularity to the demands of kingship. Baldwin anticipated trouble, but, as usual, preferred not to do anything before he had to. Although the British press continued to show discretion about the affair, the gossip appearing abroad, especially in US newspapers and magazines, was making itself known here; Downing Street was flooded with letters of complaint and by the time of Baldwin's return from holiday in October, there was no avoiding the issue.

36. Matters took on an urgency when it was learnt that Mrs Simpson's divorce hearing was scheduled for 27th October. Baldwin, revitalised after his holiday and

able to get away from the drudge of the political issues that surrounded him (not that he was much immersed at the time), reacted with surprising energy. At the end of his first week back, Baldwin stayed in Cumberland Lodge, on the Windsor estate, just a few miles from the King's home in Fort Belvedere. He appears to have decided that Edward could not marry Mrs Simpson and remain King; he was also clear that the King had to reach that decision himself. Baldwin had assembled for the weekend a group of influential peers and leading lights, including Lords Salisbury and Kemsley and the Duke of Norfolk; they braced Baldwin for his first confrontation with the King on 20th October where he told him that he could not carry on as he was and 'get away with it'. He urged him to put the divorce off and go away for six months, but neither happened.

37. His tendency to let matters drift overtook him until Chamberlain produced some draft paperwork to be sent to Edward which amounted to a discourteous ultimatum; Baldwin realised that he had to act and a second meeting took place on 16th November. It is not clear what was said at the meeting but it appears that Baldwin said that the country (not the government) would not stand for him marrying a divorcee and when Edward threatened to abdicate to do so, suggested that there could be some legal doubt about the divorce, which could be exploited if he did so. The following day, the King proposed a morganatic marriage (i.e. the children of the marriage would not succeed); Baldwin opposed it, although he agreed to consider it. The Cabinet, told formally of the whole issue for the first time on 27th November were against, as were the Dominion Prime Ministers (De Valera was one of those consulted!).

38. Baldwin decided that the matter had to be resolved speedily and saw Edward on 2nd and 4th December. It was at these meetings that Baldwin made clear, as deferentially as he could, that, unless he was prepared to give up Mrs Simpson, the King had to go and that he should go as quietly as possible, for the sake of his successor. Baldwin was under much pressure, especially as the press had begun to undam the flow of information. Typically, Chamberlain was most worried about the possible effect on Christmas trade, whilst Churchill was becoming the leader of the King's party. In the meantime, Conservative MPs were coming under great pressure from their constituents for the King to give up Mrs Simpson or the throne. This led to Churchill being given little shrift in the House.

39. Baldwin made his one mistake, agreeing with Edward, in return for the abdication, to put forward a bill in Parliament, to make Mrs Simpson's divorce immediately absolute, to avoid any legal challenge to it. However, the following day, in Downing Street, his senior colleagues would not accept such a blatant twisting of the law and Baldwin's position was temporarily weakened. The pressure also led him feel that he should stay the night at the King's home to help him reason through this difficult time (to what end?). Fortunately, a horrified Edward let him know discreetly that he was welcome to stay for dinner, but no more. There was an addition to the element of farce when the following day the Cabinet wrote asking the King to

reconsider his decision, when they would have been horrified if he had. Edward replied that it was all too late, which, presumably, Baldwin was confident would be the answer.

40. On 10th December, Baldwin presented the King's abdication to the Commons. He spoke without any notes and hit just the right tone and phraseology. It was a great triumph and that House adjourned for ninety minutes to recover. It was a triumph that neither MacDonald nor Chamberlain could have achieved. Attlee at the time would have been less experienced and Churchill would have been wrong. The last named had reason to be grateful to Baldwin for saving him the embarrassment of Edward on the throne in 1940, not that he showed any. Baldwin left office and the Commons on 28th May 1937; he became an Earl and a Knight of the Garter and left public life on a cloud of goodwill (although the Duke of Windsor did not reply to his letter of good wishes). The acclaim did not last.

The Final Act

41. Things went wrong almost from the time he retired. Physically, he was deteriorating; his nervous trouble returned and he had to leave the Commons before the end of the session and, ironically, when he could have stayed in Aix for as long as he wanted, his arthritis got worse and he had to return home. He did little politically except that after Eden's resignation in 1938, he saw him several times to offer advice, not always beneficially. He had avoided confrontation himself and was, thus, not well placed to advise him how to attack Chamberlain- this was not helped by his views, if not his personal sympathies being more with Chamberlain than Eden. Added to which, he had little political influence.

42. Baldwin was in demand for lectures and addresses and went both to Canada and the United States. His dislike of Chamberlain grew, although he praised his courage in going to Munich and considered that the possibility of peace should be clung to; it was a trip he would never have made and did not approve of the phrase 'peace with honour', which he considered to be playing to the gallery. He did argue that the time gained must be used to prepare and supported Churchill over Halifax for Prime Minister when Chamberlain resigned.

43. Chamberlain's death in 1940 left Baldwin then exposed as the man responsible for the country's lack of preparedness for what Churchill termed 'this unnecessary war'. Although he featured little in the public domain, when he did, the press became hostile and his mail was generally uncomplimentary. There was an unseemly row about the acquisition of his wrought-iron gates for scrap. He was also short of money and Astley became run-down. He seemed like a tired old man, living out his sad days in near anonymity; he did not write and thus made no money from memoirs. When his wife died in 1945, between VE day and the General Election he became bereft. He did arrange for G E Young, who he thought was a friend, to write his autobiography; he did not live to see it and would not have liked it if he had.

Conclusion

44. It is surprising that Baldwin features so little in our political consciousness, despite being the most powerful political figure in the inter-war years. He certainly enjoyed his long holidays and was not driven by ideology or partisan conviction and gave his ministers much latitude. All likely to diminish his personal impact on history. He had to contend with Britain's industrial decline, the rise of the organised political working class and the disruption of the world order caused by the emergence of Hitler and Mussolini. On the microscale, he also had to contend with the General Strike and the Abdication Crisis and made the National Government possible.

45. Not surprisingly, he did best at those issues where his lack of partisanship and inherent desire to settle disputes amicably were important. He achieved his aims of aiding the emergence of a moderate, constitutional Labour Party and its supplanting of the Liberal Party, leaving the Conservatives as the unchallenged party of the right. He also, from the Government's point of view, handled the General Strike well, but not the associated miners' strike, as he was not prepared to face down the mine owners. Agreeing to the National Government against his better judgement, however, resulted in an unhealthy misbalance in the politics of the 1930s as well as a period when he was sort of in power, but not quite. He emerged from the abdication crisis with his reputation enhanced.

46. However, on the two defining issues of the time, the rise of the dictators and Britain's industrial decline, his lack of leadership was crucial. In particular, on the issue of rearmament where our relative position with Germany deteriorated; Hitler could not have fought against Britain and France in 1936, but Britain and France could not have fought against Hitler in 1938. His reputation ultimately crumbled because of it. On industrial decline and unemployment, he sensed the need for Britain to move away from such reliance on heavy industries, but did not pursue an economic strategy to ease the transition.

47. So where does that leave us? I think with an almost accidental party leader and PM, who survive because he was under-rated, but who did not have the attributes necessary to be one of those seen as in the first rank (Asquith, Lloyd George, Churchill, Attlee). However, he was very successful in his political career and came out on top against contemporaries usually seen as his superiors. In the end, though, his diffidence and lack of drive, together with the outbreak of World war Two, leave him destined to be one of the also-rans.