

Lazarus Simon Magnus (1824-1865)

Speech given during the Civic Service, commemorating 150 anniversary of his election as the Mayor of Queenborough

Lazarus Simon was born in Chatham, in 1826 to the family of Simon Magnus, a coal merchant. His family had settled in the town for quite some time – Lazarus's grandfather, also Lazarus, having moved to Chatham from Portsmouth.

The only son and the firstborn child of a successful merchant, Lazarus was educated in the well established Leopold Neumegen Academy in Highgate, London. Here the teaching of traditional Jewish education was combined with the more down-to-earth and useful subjects of that time aiming to help young Jews to earn a living and also integrate into English society. It was the time of Jewish Emancipation in England. With the abolition of discriminatory laws and the recognition of Jews as equals, they were no longer oppressed, or overtly excluded from public service. This led to active participation of Jews in civil society. They identified themselves with the national spirit, and while preserving their Jewishness, considered themselves English.

Lazarus Simon Magnus was an outstanding representative of that sector. He was a forceful example of how to combine and harmonise Judaism with Englishness. His major strength was his talent for public work. He was a successful businessman, whose main aim in every project he took part in was the promotion of the public interest. During his short, but intense life – he died when only 39 years old; he managed to achieve so much, that it's rare to find someone of the same age repeating his success today.

Magnus was esteemed as a conscientious and enlightened magistrate; he was also a promoter and Director of the Lodging House for Poor Jews, and generally known to be a very generous, hospitable and charitable man.

He was involved in the North Atlantic Telegraph project, and was lobbying for a new telegraph route to connect Britain with America via the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland (the previous route was a failure and the confidence of public and scientists at the time had been shaken in the practicality of a long direct line between England and America).

Magnus was a personal friend of Brunel – one of the most versatile and audacious engineers of the 19th century, responsible for the design of tunnels, bridges, railway lines and ships. In 1858, picking up a Brunel project, which was on the point of collapse due to a financial crisis approaching bankruptcy, it was Lazarus Magnus, who was instrumental in re-organizing the Great Eastern Ship Company and in bringing the project to completion. The Great Eastern – a giant steam ship was not to be equaled in size for another 50 years.

You may be interested to know, a couple of years earlier, in connection with an important project much nearer to home, it was Lazarus Magnus, who became involved.

When the Sittingbourne and Sheerness Railway Company became incorporated by an Act of Parliament in June 1856, he became the Vice-Chairman of the Company. In spite of the world-

wide financial crisis that hit England among other countries in summer 1857, it was his drive and energy that pushed the project ahead. His belief in the usefulness and enormous benefits that the railway line could bring to the people of Queenborough, connecting Sheerness with Woolwich, Deptford, Portsmouth, and the whole of the south coast from Margate to Weymouth, inspired him in his struggle against robust opposition – there were doubts whether there was enough money to finish the line, whether the line was ever going to make any profit...But as he said at the opening ceremony on the 18th July 1860 with terrific optimism: “Whether we do or we don’t have money, we definitely have the line!”

Lazarus Magnus remained the Vice-Chairman of the Sittingbourne and Sheerness Railway Company until his death. And one of the first steam engines used on that line bore his name “Magnus”.

Yet another important project found him as the Chairman of the Buenos Ayres and San Francisco Railway Company.

In spite of what some cynics may say today, Magnus was one of those, who fervently believed in the advantages that spring from the English municipal system, which he considered to be the foundation of English liberties. His involvement in public welfare was rewarded in 1858, when he was unanimously elected to the Office of Mayor of Queenborough. His success in office was such, that he was re-elected a year later, and for the third time in 1862.

Going back a little bit, on the 12 of May 1859 due to nationwide scare over the possibility of war with France, the War Office gave sanction for the formatting of volunteer corps out of concern for home defence. Lazarus Simon took up this call – an early version of Dad’s Army, perhaps! Hopefully minus the laughs - and on the 29 November 1859 the 4th Corps of the 1st Brigade of the Kent Voluntary Artillery was formed. The target was 30 names: in fact 64 got to sign up. The same day he was proposed for and accepted the office of the Captain. Lazarus Magnus proved to be a caring and generous leader, much respected by the volunteers. And just the opposite to Captain Manwaring, Captain Magnus played the major part in bringing the Corps to efficiency, which was commended on various occasions. He was the leading force behind this Corps, and his tragic death in 1865 fatally affected the Corps – in January 1867 it was merged with the 13th Corps as their 3rd battalion.

In 1860 he became a member of the committee of the so named New Gas Company at Chatham.

As we can see then his commercial main interests were threefold: communication, transport and energy.

On Friday 7 January 1865, Magnus developed a toothache. Despite an invitation from his brother-in-law to stay with him and his family Lazarus went back to his offices in London Bridge. He exchanged greetings with the housekeeper and asked her about the best remedy to the problem. The housekeeper suggested some laudanum on a piece of lint, but Magnus replied: “That is no use. I will try chloroform.” Unfortunately, this was a fatal mistake, that cost him his life - he died from inhaling too much of it.

The local newspapers record that during the funeral many shops closed their shutters for the day out of respect to Lazarus Magnus. A year later during the stone-setting ceremony Rev. Prof. Marks, the minister of the West London Synagogue, in his speech suggested that Lazarus Simon Magnus should be commemorated by building a synagogue, which would serve 2 purposes – it would be a permanent place of worship for the Jews in the area – a symbol of stability and settlement in this country, and secondly – it would improve and enhance the facade of this part of the High Street.

Throughout his life Magnus acted according to his name – grand and noble, great in reputation and authority, distinguished and skilled, of bold and generous spirit.

In his will Lazarus Simon Magnus left legacies to 10 different charities. But I believe, and I think you will agree with me, his greatest, permanent, eternal legacy is the railway which many thousands of people use today, and which connects the Isle of Sheppey with the whole of the south coast. And the Sheppey Crossing, the high-speed carriageway which opened in July 2006, is only a continuation of his pioneering achievement.

by Irina Shub
March 2008