

The Northampton SDF Banner

The story of a stunning discovery in the attic at 97 Charles Street

By John Buckell



The discovery and the campaign

In 1986 the Chronicle and Echo reported the discovery, two years earlier, of a one hundred year old banner measuring 3.4 metres high by 2.5 metres wide in the attic of the Northampton Labour Party, 97 Charles Street. It was said to be worth more than £5 000 when, later, it was donated to the National Museum of Labour History, at the time situated in London and under threat of eviction by Tower Hamlets Council.

A pamphlet, featuring a photograph of the banner on the front, was published as part of the campaign to save the museum..

A new home

The campaign wasn't successful but, fortunately, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities stepped in and provided a new home, renamed it the Peoples' History Museum (PHM) and allocated it a yearly grant of £350,000. The SDF banner was restored between 1992 and 1993 in a process that took the PHM conservator 520 hours at a cost of over £5,000. It is now stored in the museum's controlled temperature banner room.

The Chronicle and Echo described it as "a unique silk banner made in the 1880s for the Northampton branch of the Social Democratic Federation, the first socialist group founded in Britain."

The banner's history

The banner is at least 126 years old; we know this because it was carried in procession in the May Day celebration of 1898. These annual processions always began and ended on Northampton's Market Square, after parading around the town. They attracted thousands of people. In May, 1898, the 'Northampton Socialist' reported "the beautiful socialist banner being carried in front." Similarly, in May 1904, the paper recorded "in front was borne the beautiful banner of the branch." Northampton SDF were proud of their banner.

The SDF & The Labour Party

The SDF had several names during its existence, and in 1914 became part of the newly formed Northampton Labour Party. Several former members were still active in 1931 when the Labour Party acquired 97 Charles Street. At some point, perhaps when these members had died, or ceased to be involved, the banner was stored away in 97 Charles Street's attic, waiting to be discovered in 1984.

Who made the banner?

George Tutill (1817-1887). Tutill started his firm in 1837 and it manufactured a substantial proportion of Trade Union and other banners. He worked on fairgrounds before going into banner manufacturing. The company also created a banner for NUBSO's (Northampton Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives) Northampton No.1 and No.2 Branches. This banner is now kept in the Northampton Museum

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