

Famous Names

# William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme

## Soap and Sociology



### William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme Freemason and philanthropist

**BEST REMEMBERED FOR BRINGING SOAP TO THE MASSES, WILLIAM LEVER WAS DRIVEN BY FREEMASONRY'S STRONG PHILANTHROPIC VALUES, AS PHILIPPA FAULKS EXPLAINS (FREEMASONRY TODAY WINTER 2015)**

On 19 September 1867, 16-year-old William Lever received a birthday present that was to not only influence his future profession but also his entry into masonic life. Later labelled 'the bible of mid-Victorian liberalism', *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles (published in 1859) was a moral treatise on the promotion of self-improvement and the denouncement of materialism.

Known throughout the world for his industrialism and philanthropy, William Lever had humble origins that were to provide a springboard for his success. Born in Bolton in 1851, Lever was the seventh child of grocer James Lever and Eliza Hesketh.

His education at Bolton Church Institute and membership of the Congregationalist Church was later reflected in his work and politics. Although an academic non-achiever at school, Lever threw himself into extracurricular activities and aspired to be an architect – but his father had other plans. In 1867, Lever was recruited into the family grocery business, where one of his chores was to cut the large blocks of soap into slices and wrap them for sale.

Even though he soon progressed through the ranks of the business, Lever was frustrated by his lack of responsibility and channelled much of his energy into his leisure time. He immersed himself in the application of the wisdom of Smiles' *Self-Help*, which placed enormous emphasis on the husbanding of time in pursuit of daily self-improvement. When Lever was aged 21, his father made him a junior partner in the business. With this, his salary rose to £800 a year and his dream of marrying his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth Hulme, became a reality.

Looking at his father's humble empire, Lever's gaze fell upon one thing – soap. In 1885, along with his brother James, he established Lever Brothers and brought soap to the masses. After much market research and international travel, they began to corner the market: Sunlight Soap, the world's first packaged and branded laundry detergent, was born.

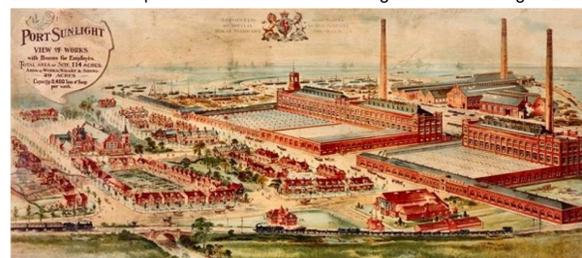
Lever wanted to create something that would be of benefit not only to his closest relations but also to his fellow man. When demand for soap began to outstrip production at the original factory in Warrington, Lancashire, it was time to expand. Thorough searching of land registry maps offered a solution in the Wirral, not far from Liverpool.

Lever designed and oversaw (along with more than 30 architects) the building of what was in effect a large-scale social experiment. Between 1899 and 1914, 800 houses were built for a permanent population of 3,500-4,000 workers, managers and administrators. Once completed, Port Sunlight housed not only the vast new factory and offices, but also a hospital, church, technical institute, museum and library, auditorium, gymnasium, heated outdoor pool and refectories for workers.

One of the most imposing buildings in Port Sunlight today is the Lady Lever Art Gallery, dedicated to his beloved wife Elizabeth. The gallery also houses his extensive collection of masonic regalia and memorabilia, including fine masonic chairs now exhibited in what was once a lodge room. It was in Port Sunlight that Lever's masonic career began when a group of local masons, many of whom were employees of Lever Brothers, decided to open a lodge in the village. To honour their chairman, they named it William Hesketh Lever Lodge, No. 2916. Lever was duly initiated at the first meeting of the lodge in 1902 and went on to become Master in 1907. He later formed Leverhulme Lodge, No. 4438; was a co-founder of no fewer than 17 lodges; became Senior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England; and was appointed Provincial Senior Grand Warden of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Cheshire.

Lever was also a prominent Liberal MP and instigator of the Old Age Pension Bill. He was made a baronet in 1911 and a peer in 1917, taking on the title Lord Leverhulme (the 'hulme' in honour of his wife), and in 1922 was elevated to a viscountcy. His philanthropic reach was large, endowing a school of Tropical Medicine at Liverpool University, while the Leverhulme Trust today provides funding for education and research publications. Lever also made much provision for his hometown of Bolton, responsible for the formation of Bolton School and donating large areas of land to the locals, most notably Lever Park in Rivington.

Lever died at his London residence in Hampstead on 7 May 1925.



Port Sunlight village and the works c.1900



The Sunlight Soap Works in Port Sunlight, Wirral, owned by William Hesketh Lever, was producing 14,000 tons of soap by 1890. The workers pictured in 1897 are packing the best-selling Sunlight Soap ready for despatch.

