Josiah Clement Wedgwood (1872-1943) was a member of the notable Staffordshire Wedgwood family famous for their pottery. Trained as a naval engineer, he worked in South Africa and fought in the Boer War, before breaking with the recent family tradition of Conservatism to be elected as Liberal MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1906. He held his seat until Churchill appointed him to the Lords in 1942.

Wedgwood served at Gallipoli with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve during the First World War and visited revolutionary Russia as an emissary for the Foreign Office in 1917.

In his day Wedgwood was one of the best-known voices in the House of Commons and featured frequently in the press. He was a true radical: outspoken, and although not politically successful in the traditional sense, he heavily influenced wide ranging campaigns and debates in the Commons.

Wedgwood was a keen amateur historian. His Staffordshire Parliamentary History from the Earliest Time to the Present Day, published in 1917, took 20 years to research, and was the inspiration behind his History of Parliament project.

Churchill: “Were I asked for the best evidence of the virtues of our democracy I would cite the whole political life of my old and gallant friend, Jos. Wedgwood.”

‘Foreword’ to Josiah C. Wedgwood, Memoirs of a Fighting Life, 1940.
By the end of the First World War Wedgwood was established—following his campaign to reform land tax—as a radical Liberal, but the 1916 split between David Lloyd George and Herbert Asquith left him disillusioned with the party. In 1918 he stood as an independent. In 1919 Wedgwood joined the Independent Labour Party, but soon discovered that his radical views did not quite fit there either.

He was accepted into the Parliamentary Labour Party and was given a position in the first Labour government in 1924. Wedgwood felt he would be best suited to a role in the Colonial Office, the India Office (Indian self-government was one of his many campaigns), or the Admiralty, but he was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

The Labour leader, Ramsay MacDonald, thought Wedgwood was unpredictable; he was wary of his outspokenness in the press and his radical ideas. Wedgwood regretted supporting MacDonald for the leadership.

After the short-lived Labour government fell Wedgwood returned to the backbenches. Pursuing a series of causes which reflected an unfashionable conviction that it was the purpose of government to enable people so far as possible to govern themselves, Wedgwood was often at odds with the Labour Party.
Inspired by his previous work on Staffordshire, Wedgwood began his campaign to enlist the support of fellow parliamentarians and secure funding for his History of Parliament project in the late 1920s. This was an ambitious plan to identify and write a biography of everyone who had ever served as a Member of Parliament. He saw The History of Parliament project as a call to arms against the worldwide threats to parliamentary democracy in the 1930s.

Wedgwood won over key allies such as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, who nominated him as chairman of a select committee to begin research to determine the project’s scope and cost. By 1934 the History of Parliament committee had raised £30,000 to start work.

As part of the project, in the mid-1930s Wedgwood sent out questionnaires to his fellow MPs, in an effort to capture and memorialise the experiences and opinions of MPs active during the First World War. Wedgwood’s approach, however, did not chime with historians of the day. Seeing it as simplistic and romantic, many initial supporters, such as A. F. Pollard and Lewis Namier, left the project. He published the first volumes with the help of Anne Holt. His niece, historian Dame Veronica Wedgwood gave him a favourable review but several professional historians criticised the volumes as inaccurate and romantic. Wedgwood believed this criticism was political, and with his health failing he was forced to retire.

David Lloyd George’s answers to Wedgwood’s questionnaire, 1936
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"Now two printed volumes stand as a monument for all time; and if they stand alone, I have shown what can be done and I have other things to do!" Foreword to Josiah C. Wedgwood, Memoirs of a Fighting Life, 1940

Lord Snowden’s letter of response to Wedgwood’s questionnaire, 5 August 1936
© History of Parliament Trust

"A good, strong, battle hammer."
—David Lloyd George
When Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, Wedgwood immediately felt that the British government should do more to oppose the regime. At first there were few other MPs who believed the regime was a direct threat to the British way of life, though they included Winston Churchill. But as the 1930s progressed, others began to oppose British policy.

Wedgwood’s opposition to fascism developed from his liberal politics and historical worldview: he believed that the hard-fought-for British parliamentary system faced a dire threat. This was partly due to his romantic ‘Whiggish’ view of British history, but also led him to virulently anti-Catholic ideas. He would come to view the struggle against fascism as a repeat of the battle between the Protestants and the Papacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Throughout the 1930s he was particularly concerned for the plight of Jewish refugees. A lifelong supporter of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he continued to campaign on this issue, although his plans did not receive the backing of the international Zionist movement. He was an active supporter of the Committee for Refugees, which was co-founded by MP Eleanor Rathbone, and in 1938 introduced an unsuccessful bill to allow Austrian and German MPs to come to the UK. A more successful scheme was the ‘Kindertransport’ initiative, which celebrates its 80th anniversary this year. Following the violence of Kristallnacht in November 1938, the British government allowed nearly 10,000 unaccompanied children to settle in Britain.

Wedgwood personally supported the applications of over 500 refugees—eventually the Home Office refused to accept his applications, so he badgered friends to apply for him.

Campaign against fascism

Churchill: “The distressed of the whole world have learnt to look to him, and through him to Parliament, for a patient hearing and the redress of wrongs.”
In 1938 Adolf Hitler threatened to invade Czechoslovakia. After several tense weeks of negotiations in September, Hitler agreed to British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain’s plan—to hand the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis—and war was averted. Chamberlain was welcomed home from Munich as a hero—infamously proclaiming ‘Peace for our time’.

Wedgwood and a growing list of other politicians spoke out against the Munich agreement including Labour leader Clement Attlee.

When war broke out in September 1939, Wedgwood was relieved that Britain was finally prepared to fight for its democracy. He was not done campaigning: he outspokenly opposed the internment of German nationals in Great Britain, and wrote in his memoirs that ‘his chief political aim’ at this time “was to get Churchill for Prime Minister”. He got his wish in 1940, following the fallout from the disastrous naval campaign in Norway.

Churchill became Prime Minister just as the Nazis swept across Western Europe, leaving Britain to fight alone. Wedgwood joined the Home Guard and did his share of fire duty in Parliament during the Blitz. In 1940 he published his most successful book, Forever Freedom, an anthology of poetry on liberty. He toured America in 1941 hoping to encourage support for the war. On his return he became Baron Wedgwood, resigning his Newcastle seat after 36 years. He died in 1943.

“...we are getting to a time now when we have got to make up our minds whether or not there is something worth fighting for, and to my mind the freedom of this country, the democracy of the world, is something that is worth fighting for.”

Josiah C. Wedgwood, House of Commons, 4 Oct 1938

‘Guilty Men’
Wedgwood’s most lasting legacy is the work of the History of Parliament Trust, which still continues to research Parliament through the lives of its members. The Trust was set up in 1940 to ensure the continuation of Wedgwood’s project. However, in reality very little was done until the project was revived, with support from the Treasury, from 1951, now associated with Britain’s most eminent historians. Among them was Sir Lewis Namier, who had been one of the critics of the original project, but whose name became closely associated with Wedgwood’s original concept.

The new project, overseen by a Trust largely made up of parliamentarians, concentrated on producing biographies, but now included work on constituency politics and the development of Parliament as an institution. Gone, though, was Wedgwood’s crusading belief in liberal progress.

Namier died before the Trust published its first set of volumes, which he edited, The House of Commons, 1754-90. Since then, ten further projects have been published: nine on the Commons, ranging from 1386 to 1832, and one on the Lords (1660–1715). Most of this work is now available, for free, on the historyofparliamentonline.

The Trust’s academics continue to research Parliament throughout the ages. Three long-running projects are due to publish in the next few years, and a further two are underway. The Trust also organises events and exhibitions to discuss and celebrate parliamentary history and provide resources for schools.