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The London School of Economics

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Introduction

The London School of Economics and Political Science, known universally as LSE, is more than just a university—it is a celebrated global institution synonymous with ambition, social change, and intellectual rigor. From its beginnings in the late nineteenth century as a modest night school for the working class, LSE has grown into a world-leading center for research, teaching, and policy innovation in the social sciences. Its story is one of bold vision, persistence in the face of challenges, and a steadfast commitment to the betterment of society.

This book traces the remarkable history of LSE, beginning with its founding by the Fabian Society's leading lights—Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Graham Wallas, and George Bernard Shaw—whose shared ideals shaped the school's mission to address the pressing social and economic issues of their time. We follow the institution's evolution through two world wars, economic crises, periods of social unrest, and rapid intellectual innovation, all the while expanding its academic scope and international reach.

At every stage, LSE has stood at the crossroads of knowledge and action. Its willingness to wrestle with the most difficult and consequential questions in economics, politics, law, and society has attracted generations of pioneering thinkers, influential public figures, and students determined to leave their mark on the world. The institution's unwavering focus on "knowing the causes of things"—its Latin motto, *rerum cognoscere causas*—has cemented its reputation for critical inquiry and robust debate.

Yet the story of LSE is not merely one of triumph. The university's long history is also punctuated by controversy, internal strife, and the often tumultuous intersections between academia and the real world. Recurrent challenges—ranging from student activism and crises of governance to ethical dilemmas and public scrutiny—reflect the university's central place in the discourse on society's most urgent issues.

What sets LSE apart is its extraordinary global outlook. Today, its students and faculty represent over 160 countries, creating a vibrant, cosmopolitan community that fosters new ideas and cross-cultural understanding. Its alumni have gone on to influence the highest levels of government, business, international organizations, and civil society—living testament to LSE's unparalleled role as a crucible for talent and leadership.

In this history, we seek to understand how the London School of Economics became what it is today: a beacon for the social sciences, a powerhouse for research and

innovation, and a home for those who wish not merely to study the world, but to change it. Through the chapters that follow, we'll examine the institution's milestones, its enduring values, and the people—both celebrated and unsung—who have shaped its remarkable legacy.

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CHAPTER ONE: Founders and Foundations: The Birth of LSE

Every great institution has a creation story, and the London School of Economics and Political Science is no exception. Its genesis wasn't born in the hallowed halls of an ancient university, but rather over a casual breakfast on a summer morning in 1894. Imagine the scene: August 4th, a time when most of London might be thinking of holidays, not intellectual revolution. Yet, gathered around a breakfast table were four individuals whose collective intellect and progressive ideals would forever alter the landscape of higher education and public policy.

These were the intellectual titans of the Fabian Society: Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Graham Wallas, and the inimitable George Bernard Shaw. The Fabian Society itself, founded a decade earlier, was a socialist organization committed to gradual, rather than revolutionary, social reform. Their method was permeation – influencing thought and policy through research, argument, and education. It was this commitment to evidence-based reform that provided the fertile ground from which LSE would spring. They believed passionately that societal problems could be solved through rigorous, scientific study, and that such knowledge should be accessible to all, particularly the working classes who often lacked formal educational opportunities.

The immediate catalyst for this breakfast brainstorm was a rather fortunate bequest. Henry Hunt Hutchinson, a lawyer and fellow Fabian, had passed away, leaving a sum of £20,000 to the Fabian Society. This was a considerable sum in 1894, equivalent to several million pounds today, and it was earmarked, quite broadly, for the "advancement of the Fabian Society's objectives." While some Fabians might have dreamt of direct political action or grand propaganda campaigns, the Webbs and their cohort had a different, perhaps more enduring, vision. They saw the money not as a war chest for immediate political battles, but as seed money for an institution that would generate the very ideas needed to reshape society.

This vision was remarkably prescient. Instead of spending the inheritance on fleeting campaigns, they decided to invest in something permanent: a school. But not just any school. They envisioned a unique institution dedicated to the study of society, a place where the emerging disciplines of economics, politics, and sociology could be rigorously examined and taught, free from the traditional confines of existing universities, which they felt were too steeped in classical studies and often resistant to new ways of thinking about social issues. The existing universities, in their view, simply weren't equipped to tackle the complexities of an industrializing, urbanizing society.

Their inspiration, in part, came from across the Channel. The *Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris*, more commonly known as Sciences Po, had already demonstrated the value of an institution dedicated to a comprehensive range of social sciences. It provided a model for a curriculum that spanned more than just economics, incorporating the broader political and social contexts that the Fabians believed were essential for truly understanding and addressing societal challenges. LSE, they decided, would follow a similar, expansive intellectual path.

So, with the funding secured and a clear intellectual blueprint in mind, the practicalities of establishing such an institution began to take shape. The search for a suitable location led them to 9 John Street, Adelphi, a modest address that would serve as the school's inaugural home. It was here, in October 1895, that the London School of Economics and Political Science officially opened its doors. It began not as a grand university with sprawling campuses, but as a night school, a reflection of its foundational commitment to accessibility and to providing higher education opportunities for those who worked during the day – particularly the working classes who were at the heart of the Fabians' social reform agenda.

To lead this nascent institution, a young, promising economic historian named William Hewins was appointed as its first Director. At just 29 years old, Hewins brought both scholarly rigor and administrative zeal to the role. He embraced the school's innovative spirit and its ambitious goal of offering a new kind of education. Under his early leadership, LSE immediately distinguished itself by being open to both women and men, a progressive stance for the era, and by welcoming international students from its very inception. This inclusivity was a testament to the founders' belief in universal access to knowledge and their global vision for the study of social sciences.

The early curriculum was ambitious, covering a range of subjects that would soon become the core disciplines of modern social science. While "economics" was in its name, the founders understood that a true understanding of society required a broader lens. Thus, the curriculum extended into areas that would later become distinct departments, laying the groundwork for LSE's interdisciplinary approach. The initial offerings reflected the urgent need to analyze and address the social and economic conditions of late Victorian Britain, but with an eye towards broader theoretical understandings.

The school's immediate success and growing student body quickly necessitated a move to larger premises. By 1896, just a year after its opening, LSE relocated to 10 Adelphi Terrace, signaling its rapid expansion and increasing prominence. This early growth underscored the significant demand for the unique brand of social science education that LSE was offering, proving that the Webbs' gamble on intellectual investment was paying off. The stage was set for LSE to take its place as a significant force in British higher education, and eventually, on the global stage. Its origins,

modest yet driven by a powerful social mission, laid the bedrock for the influential institution it would become.

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