

Appendix 9: Alfred Beit, Otto Beit and Julius Wernher

The 3 Mining Related Benefactors, Alfred Beit, Sir Otto Beit FRS, Sir Julius Wernher

Background notes by Anne Barrett College Archivist & Corporate Records Manager

The German brothers Alfred Beit (1853-1906), Otto Beit (1865-1930) FRS 1924; British Citizenship 1896, and German born Julius Wernher (1850-1912) who all became part of the British Establishment, living in London and the home counties, made their fortunes through diamond and gold mining in South Africa. They were financiers and philanthropists, and had many other educational, scientific, social and cultural interests.

All funded Imperial College, directly or indirectly, and Julius Wernher and Otto Beit were particularly close to College, Julius being on the founding Haldane Committee, and subsequently donating and bequeathing funds. He and Otto were Governing Body members. Otto took a particular interest in the students welfare, and funded the student hostel and the Student Union Quad in Prince Consort Road and scholarships.

‘...practically the whole of the endowment of the College since its incorporation [in 1907] has been provided by Sir Julius Wernher, Mr Alfred Beit and Sir Otto Beit.’

(*Nature* No. 3194, Vol. 127 January 17th 1931)

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v127/n3194/pdf/127097a0.pdf>

In creating their wealth, they were also partners with Cecil Rhodes in their diamond and gold mining business, De Beers Company. Alfred was acknowledged to have unusual financial mastery. Their lives and motives in South Africa were complex; they were business men and philanthropists, but Rhodes in particular had the idea of expanding the British Empire to the areas they worked the mines in, and named this Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

Business relationships in the mining industry formed a web of interconnecting often competing, companies and individuals. However the main concerns of the Beits and Wernher were the business, the diamond trade, the well-being of the mining strategy and workforce, although working with Rhodes they were involved in his schemes for extending the British influence in South Africa. Alfred particularly was involved with Rhodes in the British South Africa Company.

This included some nefarious dealings with others in Britain, and in South Africa, such as in the Jameson Raid :

Leander Starr Jameson who was an Edinburgh born physician who settled and set up a practice in Kimberley for personal health reasons, and became a favourite of the Matabele King, Logenbula. Jameson used his influence with Logenbula to assist Rhodes ambitions to seize land for the British South Africa Company.

Jameson was involved in the First Matebele War in 1893.

He led the infamous attack on the Boers called the Jameson Raid in 1895, an action that Churchill said led to the Boer Wars of 1899 to 1902. Jameson also had a persuasive and engaging personality, the ‘Jameson charm’ and was the inspiration for Ruydard Kipling’s poem *If*.

Despite his ill thought out raid, Jameson became Mayor of the Cape Colonies in 1902.

Alfred Beit’s financial involvement in the Jameson Raid was an error of judgement, for which, at the time, he paid reputationally and financially, with a censuring by the British South African Committee of the House of Commons and a fine of £200,000.

The committee did state that Alfred did not support the action for any financial gain, but he resigned his directorship of the British Company in 1897.

However, Alfred did support of the 1899-1902 South African War, providing funds for the Imperial Light Horse and the Imperial Yeomanry.

He then continued post war, what he had done pre-war, to put money into developing South Africa through philanthropic schemes for land settlement and immigration.

In 1934, the then Rector of Imperial College, Sir Henry Tizard wrote in the journal *Nature*:

‘ practically the whole of the endowment of the College since its incorporation [in 1907] has been provided by Sir Julius Wernher, Mr Alfred Beit and Sir Otto Beit.’
(*Nature* No. 3194, Vol. 127 January 17th 1931)

Alfred Beit was one of the two founders of the diamond industry in Kimberley, the leading founder of the gold mining industry in Johannesburg and one of the 3 founders of Rhodesia. He and Cecil Rhodes set up the De Beers Mining Company.

Julius Wernher was the second of our benefactors to go out to South Africa working for the diamond company J.Porgès, by 1873 Julius became a partner in Porgès and their sole representative there.

As a result Julius met Alfred and Rhodes in 1882. Wernher joined De Beers and he, Alfred and Rhodes set about refining the South African Mining industry.

Julius had persuaded Porgés to buy into the mines, not just deal in diamonds. The mining board of which Julius was a member did not have enough control over the bad practices in use; owners overworked the seams and did not take care in organisation of the systems nor the workers. He looked forward to a time when the mines would be worked in common and educated the board in discipline to this end.

Well respected by the board because of his intellect and integrity, he was in a position to bring about the consolidation he saw necessary to secure the business for all concerned.

As mentioned, business relationships in the mining industry evolved with many interconnecting companies and individuals, but also some competing companies.

So it was that when Porgès began to concentrate on gold mining and acquired claims in and around Johannesburg and developed the financial structures that enabled their exploitation, Alfred and his relation Eduard Lippert, with Julius and Herman Eckstein joined him, in what was the mining and financial group known as the ‘Corner House’. Joining together made them stronger in terms of regulating the mining industry and in negotiating the finance for operations.

The greatest barrier to good order in the mining industry and to their trade, that Wernher, Alfred Beit and Cecil Rhodes came up against, was another mining company owner, Barney Barnato.

In order to mount a challenge on his own terms to Barnato and his Central Company, Julius persuaded Rhodes to buy Porgès the ‘French Company’ in 1887. In a two pronged attack, Julius and Alfred had been buying shares in other mining companies, which resulted in the main diamond mines joining up as one company, De Beers Consolidated Mines. A third attack was mounted by Julius in that he set up the London Diamond Syndicate in 1886, thus stabilising prices.

Julius was created a baronet in 1905, and was also the order of the Crown of Prussia. Although generally perspicacious in business, in 1906, he succumbed to a fraudster, Henri Lemoine, and his calams of making synthetic diamonds, and lost £64,000.

Julius had an interest in art and was an established collector of note. Many prestigious art works were placed in his country house Luton Hoo, Bedfordshire, which he bought in 1903.

Julius was a member of the Haldane Committee considering the setting up a new technological institution in 1904, which was to become, Imperial College.

He was a member of the first Governing Body of Imperial College

Benefactions:

Wernher funded an extension to the national Physical Laboratory, endowed £250,000 to establishing a university in Cape Town.

To Imperial College he donated £25,000 and left a bequest of £150,000.

Alfred Beit and Rhodes Social Legacy

Alfred had decided to base himself in London from 1888, although he continued his South African business interests with Wernher and he became a partner in the company known as Werhner, Beit & Co in 1890.

When Rhodes died in 1902, Alfred succeeded him as leader in his businesses, he was already a key figure in the De Beers Company and again joined the British South Africa Company, in order to push on Rhodes vision. For example, both he and Rhodes saw the necessity for good communications and transport systems and Rhodes had started a scheme which Alfred continued by setting up his Railway Trust Fund to complete the Cape To Cairo Railway and Cape to Cairo Telegraph, putting in £1,200,000 of his own money.

In poor health himself, Alfred returned to Johannesburg on Rhodes death in 1902, where he suffered a stroke, but due to the ministrations of Jameson, survived but was never fully fit again. In 1906 he died at home in Tewin Water, on 16th July, and he was buried in the local churchyard.

Alfred Beit Academic and Scientific Endowments

In 1905 he founded a chair of colonial history at the University of Oxford now the Beit Professorship of History of the British Commonwealth.

<https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/part-4-beit-professor-of-the-history-of-the-british-commonwealth>

In 1907 he made a donation of two million mark to the stock capital of the *Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung*, (Hamburg Scientific Foundation) a charity dedicated to spend its interest for the benefit of scientific projects in Hamburg.

<https://h-w-s.org/> <https://h-w-s.org/metamenu/english-summary/>

In his will he set up the Beit Trust <https://beittrust.org.uk/> through which he bequeathed £1,200,000 for infrastructure development in the former Northern and Southern Rhodesia, later modified to university education and research in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi

Otto Beit (1865-1930) FRS 1924 was the younger brother of Alfred and joined Alfred and Julius in their business ventures and continued their, and his own, philanthropy after their deaths.

In 1888 Otto came to London, at the same time as his brother Alfred. But Otto went out to South Africa in 1890 to learn more about the diamond business and also became involved in the gold business in Witwatersrand.

Otto became a naturalised British citizen in 1896 and immersed himself in philanthropic and cultural works for Britain, particularly after the death of Alfred in 1906, from whom he inherited so much wealth and also his country estate, Tewin. Otto continued the work of the Beit trust.

Between 1903 and 1912, Otto worked as a stockbroker for L.Hirsch and Co. which had South African connections.

Otto married an American, Lilian Carter (b 1874 d 1946) in 1897 Lillian's father was a New Orleans businessman connected with railways and telegraph.

Julius and Lilian and they had 2 daughters and 2 sons, the eldest, Theodore Hamilton (b April 29, 1898), died 27th January 1917.

The second son, Alfred Lane Beit b. 19th January 1903 inherited the title. (He died May 12 1994)

Imperial College

Otto took an increasing role in governance and benefaction of Imperial. He succeeded Julius on the governing body in 1912, as the representative of the Crown,

'...thus preserving unbroken the close connexion of the College with the famous firm of Wernher, Beit and Co.' as Sir Henry Tizard the then Rector between 1929-1942 wrote. (Obituary Notice Otto Beit by Sir Henry Tizard *Nature* No. 3194, Vol. 127 January 17th 1931) <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v127/n3194/pdf/127097a0.pdf>

Otto had a concern that College did not promote itself enough, and so a publicity sub-committee was set up, consisting of, from the Governing Body: Otto, Sir Francis Mowatt and from College Administration: The Rector and the College Secretary, at that time, Alexander Gow. They were to consider and report upon the institution of a publicity department for Imperial College . It was decided that as an experiment £1,000 for a one year experimental propaganda drive in this country and the colonies dealing generally with College, a) PG and research work facilities, b)the excellence of the courses of the specialised training in Pure and Applied Science which the College gives – if successful the experiment may be repeated for a second year

Returning to Tizard's obituary notice, he says:

'..Sir Otto was an active and inspiring member of the Governing Body. A firm believer in intellectual and practical value of the highest scientific education, he did everything in his power to promote it...'

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v127/n3194/pdf/127097a0.pdf>

In 1913 he created a Trust Fund of £26,500 to provide Research Fellowships tenable at the College and open to men and women of European descent by both parents, otherwise of any nationality.

In his Obituary Notice of Otto Beit Sir Henry Tizard wrote:

'...From time to time **he gave sums of money amounting to £32,000 in all to the costs of the Imperial college Students Hostel and of the extension to the Hostel and to the Students Union.** His other gifts, included a sum of £10,000 towards the general development of the College in a time of financial stringency...'

These benefactions are illustrative not only of Sir Otto Beit's generosity, but of his good judgement. He never gave money away indiscriminately; he had a clear insight as to the right thing to do at the right moment. He was always ready to be guided, but never allowed himself to be swamped by the enthusiasm of others. It was this quality which brought him the full confidence of his colleagues and when in 1919, Sir Francis Mowatt resigned the Chairmanship he was invited and agreed to take on the role...'

'...He interested himself not only in the government of the College, but also in the life of the students, many of whom are indebted to him for unobtrusive acts of kindness. We have lost a great friend and a great benefactor.'

(Obituary Notice Otto Beit by Sir Henry Tizard *Nature* No. 3194, Vol. 127 January 17th 1931)

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Which was followed by an additional note to the Editor of The Times from the Chairman of the Governing Body: 'His advice and encouragement throughout have been invaluable. His personal qualities endeared him to all of us and we shall sadly feel the loss of our greatest benefactor.'

College asked his son, Alfred Lane Beit to take Otto's place as Trustee of the Beit Scientific Research Fellowships Imperial writing that your father took an 'intimate, informed and valuable part ' in the administration of the Fellowships'.

Otto had carried on Alfred's intention of endowing scientific research.

Alfred's £25,000 scheme for the support of medical research had lapsed and reverted to Otto, the residual legatee of Alfred's will.

So it was in 1909, that Otto endowed the Beit Memorial Trust for Medical Research, a memorial to his brother Alfred to promote:

'the advancement by research of medicine and the allied sciences in their relation to medicine.'

Otto not only put in Alfred's original 25K, but increased it to 250,000. For this rendering of conspicuous service to the cause of science, Otto was elected FRS in 1924.

One of his obituarists, John Rose Bradford, writing in *Nature*, says it was unusual to find in the layman 'an intelligent appreciation of the problems of medical research and the need for much patient work before the realisation of success. He was not one who was expecting immediate and striking results to follow on a programme of work.'

(*Nature* No. 3194, Vol. 127 January 17th 1931)

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v127/n3194/pdf/127097a0.pdf>

The new [Wellcome-Beit Prize Fellowships](#) awards replaced the Beit Memorial Fellowships for Medical Research in 2009

<https://wellcome.org/what-we-do/directories/wellcome-beit-prize>

Other medical endowments Otto made were :

the total of £58K for the purchase of radium to King Edwards Hospital Fund, here again the remit was wider than just using it for treatment, he encouraged research into the furtherance of knowledge ' for the relief of man's estate'.

£13,000 to the Red Cross appeal for funds for developing a clinic for the treatment of rheumatic diseases

And donations to the London Homeopathic Hospital

To the University of Cambridge Otto gave a donation for the creation of the Beit Library in 1913, specializing in German language of the early 20th century and books on the history of the German language and literature of the classical period eg Goethe.

<https://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/library/beit-library>

Otto was a founder member of the the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House.) His benefaction enables its development.

<https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/10/1/03/2711807?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Otto established the Beit Fellowship at Imperial College in memory of his brother Alfred in 1913; and founded the Beit Fellowships for Scientific Research at Imperial College. He was also a member of the Governing Body from 1912 and in 1919 became Chairman of the Finance Committee.

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He donated funds for the purchase of works of art and donated works of art themselves, (he was a connoisseur of fine art) to, amongst other galleries, the V&A , The Tate and the British Museum

He endowed the Otto Beit Medal of Sculpture of Outstanding Merit of the Royal Society of British Sculptors.

Otto was appointed Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG) in the 1920 New Year Honours for his work in connection with South African troops and hospitals in England and was created a baronet in 1924 for his numerous donations to children's sanatoria, libraries and a homoeopathic research institute

Otto's Royal Society Obituary Notice included this tribute:

'...a man with remarkably wide and generous views as to the paramount importance of furthering, in the interests of humanity, our knowledge of the phenomena of nature. It may truly be said that his aims were singularly akin to those of the founders of the Royal Society, who laid down the precept that the purpose of the Society should be the advancement or furtherance of natural knowledge...'

'...Otto Beit realised to the full that progress in medicine and indeed in all sciences was dependent on research pursued for its own sake quite apart from any possible immediate practical application. The work of some of the Beit Research Fellows has, however, already yielded fruitful results in practical clinical medicine...'

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsbm.1932.0012>

In South Africa, he endowed bridges and education:

Otto Beit Bridge, the Chirundu Bridge spans 382 metres across the Zambezi River between the town of Chirundu in Zambia and the village of Chirundu in Zimbabwe and was the first modern suspension bridge with parallel cables built outside America. It was opened in 1939 by Otto's widow.

The steel corroded considerably making it unsuitable for heavy loads as time went on, and so a 2nd bridge was built 90 metres upstream in 2002.

He was a generous benefactor of the **Johannesburg Art Gallery**, and more so with his gifts to the **University of Cape Town** he was invited to make the first cut in the turf for this.

The Beit Trust continues from the benefactions of these men to this day.

Sir Richard Sykes, the then Rector, gave this message on the centenary of Imperial college in 2007:

Philanthropists of the early twentieth century, such as Alfred and Sir Otto Beit and Sir Julius Wernher, have played a vital role in helping us to get to where we are today, as well as subsequent generations of alumni and supporters. We have invested their gifts wisely and the returns our contributions have made to healthcare, industry and society around the world are there for everyone to see.

http://www.imperial.ac.uk/centenary/message_from_the_rector.shtml

All three benefactors Alfred Beit, Otto Beit and Julius Wernher, were men of great integrity and proud that they had made their money through legitimate business, that they had organised the diamond and gold fields on proper business lines and set up an industry structure that was revered. They had spent their lives working hard, developing industry and good working practices, being self effacing and philanthropic. They were loyal and down to earth, devoted to the cause of education and the teaching of practical science to assist industry – in short they were in tune with the values and intentions of Imperial, begining with the Royal School of Mines.