

Through the Keyhole

LAURA-JANE FOLEY ENTERS NUMBER 10

I stood in front of the big, black, shiny door and reached for the lion's head knocker. The letterbox read: "First Lord of the Treasury". After three loud knocks that resonated embarrassingly loudly around Downing Street, the door opened and I was allowed into Number 10.

Immediate disappointment. The famous black and white chequered floor was covered by a very tatty washed-out rug and it seemed very much like walking into an office with phones, faxes and official notices scattered around. I wonder what foreign dignitaries think when they too walk through that famous black door. A sound emanates from down the hallway. A rickety old lift bumbles up and down with no-one in it. One fears for the safety of our Prime Minister in a lift that looks like it hasn't been serviced since the days of Macmillan. The police men are suitably burly: "If you take any photographs I'll have to destroy your camera. Now you don't want that do you?"

There is always someone on duty at No. 10 to let people in. A debutante of the 1920s recalled that one night after a party forgetting her house keys she and her sister decided to go to Downing Street- the only place they knew with a night porter. She recalls "The porter woke the Baldwins who fixed us up in spare rooms. In the morning Mr Baldwin rang father to ask if he would send a maid round with day clothes". Security today is somewhat more strict. To the extent that even the Prime Minister doesn't have keys to Number 10!

The civil servant, Linda, who showed me around Number 10 was a very pro-Tony, New Labour type who couldn't have been more obvious about her allegiance. Her endless jibes about the Tories even annoyed me and I vote Labour! Before we got further than the hallway came disappointment number two. Tony and Cherie were at Chequers. No hope of a quick meeting then but my guide gossiped perhaps more freely about Euan's unfortunate night in

Leicester Square and Tony's habits around No. 10. She told story after story. Apparently, when John Major left No.10 many of his staff were in tears. Hours later however they had to cheer in a new boss but according to Linda the staff were not as ebullient as the crowds cheering outside and many were still teary from having bid farewell to Norma and John. Linda was the lone Labour party figure in No. 10 and was emblazoned with stickers, badges and posters at the end of the hallway. I don't doubt it of this one woman appreciation society.

The first important room we went into was the Cabinet Room. It was surprisingly stark and the table itself was distinctly shabby. The long boat shaped table (which enables everyone to see everyone else clearly) was covered in brown felt and each place was set with a writing pad and one of those 32p purple drawing pencils from WHSmith. It was a Friday morning so exactly 24 hours previously Tony and his gang had been sitting in those very chairs talking shop. The 23 chairs are the same ones used by Gladstone and Disraeli in the reign of Queen Victoria. Of the set, only the Prime Minister's chair has arms. It is also the only one to be always left at an angle, away from the table. He's too busy to pull the chair out, according to Linda!

My fanatical pro-Blair guide was also anti-Brown. The ceremonial solid gold sword presented by the Emir of Kuwait and on display in the cabinet room was "worryingly close to Brown who might one day take a swipe". Very droll, I'm sure. I asked whether Downing Street had closed circuit television or whether it was bugged. I was eyed suspiciously not just by Linda but by everyone within earshot. I found myself protesting "no, no I was just interested in the terrorist risk and the errr Prime Minister's need for umm privacy" I quickly recovered with a wide and innocent smile. There were no cameras or recording equipment she informed me in the inner sanctums of No. 10. With so much security outside there was little need for



it inside. Whilst many PM's in history preferred to work in the Cabinet Room daily, like Churchill, Wilson and Major, Blair works in an office adjacent to the room which was out of bounds for me. The guide explained: "I used to let people in but people kept leaving rude notes for the Prime Minister."

The ever-talkative Linda told of an incident when Bill Clinton came to visit Blair around the time of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. All of the staff line up in order to greet foreign dignitaries and Clinton was known for taking a long time over greeting everybody personally. One of the workers at No. 10 was in the unfortunate position of being called Monica and decided that if she was asked she would say her name was "Shirley" to avoid any embarrassment. Next to her in the line-up was another woman who looked strikingly like Ms Lewinsky. Clinton apparently did a double take of the Monica look-a-like and, unnerved, moved quickly to finish his meet and greet sadly meaning the real Monica never got to meet Bill.

The White Drawing Room was perhaps the most stunning of the rooms in No.10. It had a distinct homely air to it and was very much like a country house. Dominating the room was a beautiful Bohemian glass chandelier. Today the room is regularly seen on TV interviews. It is where Blair and Bush gave their TV interview to the world's media and, even more recently, it is where Tony welcomed Nelson Mandela to No.10. It was Lady Walpole's boudoir and Lady Churchill's favourite room, it is the room in which Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman



“ IN THE GARDEN
TONY'S BEEN SEEN ON
LEO'S TRAMPOLINE”

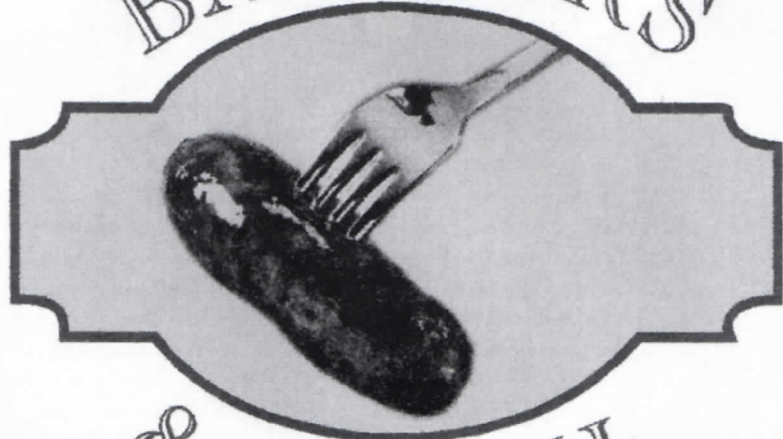
died in 1908 and it is the room where Edward Heath kept his grand piano. He would play while looking out over the garden which now is home to Leo's climbing frame, wendy house and huge trampoline. Linda says she's seen Tony on it... I wonder how much a National would pay for that photograph?!

We walked through the kitchens to get to the State Dining Room. We were sent through the servants' quarters as there was a luncheon taking place in the smaller dining room through

which we should have come. I strained at the door to try and distinguish any recognisable voice but as with most of the rooms in No.10 they're double doored - to keep out prying ears no doubt. Our trip through the kitchens of No. 10 could have been a trip through the kitchens of any third rate seaside hotel kitchen. Melamine cupboards, scuffed floors and stained surfaces - what a disappointment. I turned a gaudy plate over as we passed "presented to No 10" by some vaguely recognisable manufacturer. Mmm... offloading their junk to the PM. On one of the surfaces were two saucers (not even small plates) with a selection of Bendicks chocolates on them. I had to resist every urge in my body not to steal one as a souvenir - but they were probably out of date anyway.

My tour came to an end in the Pillared room where Tony played host to Noel Gallagher and co. in the summer of 1997. I ran my fingers along the objects and window frames- they were covered in inches of dust. My scout would have had a fit if she'd seen it! "God you're like a Northern washer woman" the Blair-ophile lambasted me - clearly forgetting the grass roots of the Labour party. In all the rooms we entered I was allowed to sit on the chairs and sofas. In order to eek out more time inside No.10 I made sure I sat down in every room. In the Pillared room my guide asked me to guess how much it would cost to replace the dust-ridden chair against which I was leaning: a staggering £250,000 and in that room alone there were about 12 such chairs. Maybe No.10's not so much shabby as it is shabby chic!

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