

As you walk through the streets of London you can hardly miss seeing the "blue plaques" or discs on the walls of some of the houses. Here lived a poet; here was born a scientist; here died a Prime Minister. The social history of Britain is enshrined in these plaques, and when a house is pulled down, the wording reads "In a house on this site ..."

One of the most recent of these plaques was unveiled in January 1962. It is at Number 2 Connaught Place, near Marble Arch, and it commemorates the residence there of Lord Randolph Churchill, the eminent politician of the late Victorian era. He was the father of Sir Winston, who spent much of his boyhood in the house. The plaque was unveiled by Sir Winston's son, Mr. Randolph Churchill.

It is now more than 80 years since the Royal Society of Arts began to mark with tablets the former houses of illustrious London residents. Twenty years later the London County Council took

over the task, and there are now about 260 of these commemorative tablets.

Many Prime Ministers

Among those honoured in this way were many eminent statesmen, and the roll-call of their names reads like a political history of the last 200 years. Number 5 Arlington Street was the home of Sir Robert Walpole, the first British Prime Minister. He led the Government for 21 years. At Number 10 St. James's Square, Chatham House, the home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the "blue plaque" is especially large, for it records the names of no less than three Prime Ministers who lived there: William Pitt, the "elder Pitt", pre-eminently the most striking figure on the British political stage during the 18th century; Lord Derby, who held office three times but only briefly; and William Gladstone, whose home it was for a short spell in 1890.

Lord Russell, a Prime Minister from 1846 to 1852 and

briefly in 1865-66. spent many years at 37 Chesham Place. There, according to his wife, "he never but once worked after dinner", a statement which Prime Ministers nowadays are likely to read with incredulity and envy. Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, novelist and statesman, three times Chancellor of the Exchequer and twice Prime Minister in Queen Victoria's reign, after a triumphant career lived at 19 Curzon Street until his death. Asquith, who was Prime Minister at the outbreak of war in 1914 lived for 13 years in Cavendish Square.

Lord Palmerston, most famous of Britain's 19th-century Foreign Secretaries and twice Prime Minister, was born at 20 Queen Anne's Gate. In 1846, the year he became Foreign Secretary for the second time, he took the tenancy of 4 Carlton Gardens. John Burns, popularly known as "Burns of Battersea", the first artisan in Britain's history to become a Cabinet Minister (in 1905) is commemorated by a "blue pla-

BLUE PLAQUES SHOW WHERE THE FAMOUS LIVED

David Stephens

que" at 110 Clapham Common, North Side, south of the river Thames, where he lived from 1914 until his death. He was the pioneer of the modern trade union movement.

Political Refugees

But it is not only British statemen whose life in London is commemorated by the "blue plaques". When Benjamin Franklin went to London in 1757 as Agent to the General Assembly of Pennsylvania in America, he lived at what is now 36 Craven Street, off The Strand. It must be admitted that he did not think much of London. "The whole town is one great smoky house, and every street a chimney," he complained.

The "blue plaques" also remind us that through the ages London has been a haven for political refugees from all corners of the globe. Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian patriot, lived at 183 Gower Street. In 1840 he returned to Italy to help Garibaldi establish the independent Roman Republic. After its failure he returned to England and continued to work and write for the free and united Italy he did not live to visit.

Sharing a similar fate was Louis Kossuth, the 19th-century Hungarian leader, who went into exile when freedom

for his country failed. In 1852 he settled in London and during the next eight years lived at a number of addresses. A plaque at a house in Kensington (39 Chepstow Villas) commemorates his residence at one of them.

While Simon Bolivar freed the northern half of the South American continent, it was General San Martin who helped the Peruvians to gain independence, and his exciting campaign from Argentina across the Andes into Chile led to Chilean independence. He lived at 23 Park Road, St. Marylebone.

Finally a reminder of an Indian whom Mahatma Gandhi (himself honoured by a plaque in London's East End) has described as the "Maker of Modern India", Bal Gangadhar Tilak, known in India as "Lokamanya" (beloved leader of the people). He went to London in 1918 to plead the case of Indian Home Rule. For part of this stay he lived at a house in Paddington (60 Talbot Road) now owned by the Lokamanya Tilak Memorial Trust. Last year a "blue plaque" was unveiled at the house by the Prime Minister of Ghana, Dr. Nkrumah, and the Hon. Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Prime Minister of Ceylon.