



Wilton Park

History of Wilton Park

Introduction

Since the first discussions on German post-war democracy took place in 1946, Wilton Park has pursued its objective to address and resolve global challenges to security, prosperity and justice. Our principal aim is to maintain, develop and engage with the world's most influential experts, policy makers and opinion formers by providing the highest calibre of events with vital, topical discussions.

We became an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 1991. Since then, our business strategy has reflected FCO values and Wilton Park's role is to support the British government, by analysing and shaping international opinion on foreign policy challenges.

Wilton Park's origins



Wilton Park takes its name from the Wilton Park Estate in Buckinghamshire, which was used as a Prisoner of War camp and re-education centre during World War II. The house, an eighteenth century house called Wilton Park, also known as the White House, no longer exists.

Between January 1946 and June 1948 more than 4,000 Germans attended re-education classes at Wilton Park, where they discussed democratic processes with visiting political figures and intellectuals, including philosopher Bertrand Russell, social reformer Lord William Beveridge, and the first female Member of Parliament, Lady Astor.

The first participants at Wilton Park included some of the most senior German PoWs in Britain and many became leading figures in the rebuilding of post-war Germany. Helmut Schmidt, for example, the former German Chancellor, hailed Wilton Park's role for post-war Germany, stating that "many ideas became a political reality." The success of these classes is epitomised in one German participant's statement of his time at Wilton Park: "I was a Nazi; I came to Wilton Park and it changed my life."

Our first visiting speaker on 2 February 1946, was Richard Crossman, later a Labour Minister, who spoke on the theme of 'The Labour Government's task in Europe'.

Wilton Park's founder



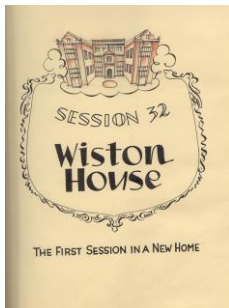
Initially Wilton Park was overseen by a warden, Heinz Koeppler, a German Jewish émigré, who spent his life promoting open and frank discussion. He wanted the atmosphere at the Wilton Park Estate to resemble a residential university college, rather than a prison. One of the first PoW participants, Willi Brundert, felt Heinz Koeppler was key in creating such an environment. "He gave us Germans the possibility to become partners. He did not 're-educate' us..., he did not tell us how things ought to be handled in Germany, but he made us think for ourselves; he believed it to be 'vital' in the real sense of the word, that Britons and Germans should get to know and to understand the other fellow's point of view". He continued: "I cannot describe the encouragement and confidence Heinz Koeppler and his colleagues gave to us, German prisoners of war, by having ministers of the British Crown, leading Opposition speakers, economic leaders... come and talk to us."



Encouraged by the spirit of free expression, Mr Brundert, who went on to become the Mayor of Frankfurt, ran a satirical puppet show gently mocking Heinz Koeppler and his staff; cartoons in the Wilton Park newspaper used pointed humour.

These successful courses evolved as part of an initiative inspired by Sir Winston Churchill, the wartime Prime Minister, who called for Britain to help establish a successful democracy in Germany after the Second World War. From early 1947, civilians from other European countries – including Switzerland, Finland and France, began to participate in Wilton Park's courses, where they were educated on the British way of life and democracy. Such courses eventually became open to the public after the last PoW course took place in June 1948.

Wiston House



In 1950, Wilton Park moved from the estate in Buckinghamshire to Wiston House in West Sussex. In January 1951, Wilton Park reopened with its first session at its new home.



Heinz Koeppler redefined Wilton Park with its arrival at Wiston House, stating its purpose was to give “a course in citizenship, in politics, and in common European problems with the emphasis on realism and impartiality. The purpose of these courses is, in brief, to make a positive contribution to the development of a European public opinion. People talk too much about Europe today without really being conscious of the practical problems.”



Conferences lasted two weeks, with a week devoted to study trips in London and other parts of Britain. Participants were encouraged to “concentrate on the awkward and vital issues,” and to be “brief, trenchant, and if possible, witty.”

Global participation

In the mid 1950s, the Government decided that Wilton Park should continue to be largely Government funded, but that it should develop and accrue a much wider remit.

From 1957, participation grew to include all the member countries of what is now the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Additionally, our agenda began to cover not just Europe, but also Asia and Africa.

A grant from the Ford Foundation enabled Wilton Park to broaden its range further in 1961, when North American participants began coming in increasing and enthusiastic numbers.



Following Britain's entry into what is now the European Union in 1973, Prime Minister Edward Heath, a strong supporter of Wilton Park, agreed with French President Georges Pompidou that issues on European enlargement should be addressed at a European Discussion Centre (EDC) based at Wilton Park.

In the 1980s our horizons widened further with the first Soviet participation. At the first conference, an interpreter from the Soviet Embassy in London burst out of the interpreting booth to join in the debate. At another conference, legend has it that a leading Russian economist challenged all the other participants to chess and beat all comers. Participants were now coming from many countries of what was still the Soviet bloc. In one conference in October 1988, former Director Geoffrey Denton recalled a distinguished Romanian speaker dramatically announcing the imminent collapse of the Communist system. When asked if he meant in Romania he replied, "No, everywhere." His prediction came true one year later. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, Central and South East Europeans have played a growing role in the conferences held here and in the region.

During the transition to black majority rule in South Africa in the 1980s, Wilton Park became a venue for representatives of the black community and the ruling National Party to meet behind closed doors.

We have been hosting events on the Western Balkans since the late 1990s. Our conference in September 1999 on the Western Balkans after Milosevic, held less than three months after the end of NATO's air campaign, was attended by many of those then in opposition, now elected to power in Belgrade and elsewhere in South East Europe.

While strengthening the European programme, Wilton Park also moved into new global arenas with issues relating to Japan, China, North East Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, Latin America all becoming integral parts of the annual programme of conference.

Funding

Becoming an FCO Executive Agency in 1991 gave Wilton Park more autonomy and a more secure financial footing with the opportunity to raise more of its own funding. Wilton Park now raises funds to cover all of its running costs with the FCO providing capital funding, along with financial and intellectual support for specific conferences, in order to support its public diplomacy objectives. Remaining funding is met by participants' contributions, sponsorship and the hire of Wiston House for other events. Our financial performance as an Executive Agency is overseen by a [Departmental Board chaired by the FCO](#).

Our independence is overseen by a well established [Advisory Council](#) who advise on conference themes and monitor their quality. An [International Council](#) of London based Ambassadors from the OECD states also advises on the annual calendar of events from a global perspective.

Participation

We welcome leading representatives from the worlds of politics, diplomacy, academia, business, civil society and the media to our meetings every year. The seniority of those who join our discussions is a powerful indicator of our success.



In 1968, for example, Sir Heinz Koepller welcomed HRH The Duke of Edinburgh to Wilton Park to celebrate our one hundredth conference.



Nearly thirty years later, HRH The Prince of Wales also visited Wilton Park, opening our conference on the theme of building bridges between Islam and the West to celebrate our 50th anniversary.



Attendance in 2012 included sixty nine ministerial level visitors from thirty four countries and all of our conferences had senior attendance from UK government departments. This included the Foreign Secretary William Hague MP, who opened our conference on [Preventing sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations](#) accompanied by Angelina Jolie, Special Envoy to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Wilton Park today



Our work has evolved greatly over the last 70 years and has developed into a range of formats to balance constraints of busy schedules with the necessity for debate. These include regular two to three day conferences; [90 Minute Dialogues](#) where senior participants in London are invited to a single session discussion; [Jubilee Dialogues](#) which are policy conversations hosted and led by an FCO Minister; and a [Wilton Park Address](#) delivered by a visiting Head of State, including the President of Indonesia and the President of the Republic of Turkey.

Today Wilton Park is one of the world's leading centres for discussion of key international policy challenges. There have been more than a thousand events since Wilton Park began and in 2016, Wilton Park celebrated its 70th anniversary, its 65th year at Wiston House and 25 years as an executive agency of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Wilton Park respectfully retains the values of its founder by promoting honest and open debate on the most vital issues.

Wilton Park's role in history has been summarised by historian Richard Mayne:

"Wilton Park was a house and is an institution; but its essence was always more. Its aim was and is to unite people: to bring together those who disagree, often violently, and by patient, outspoken discussion of their conflicting views and assumptions, to reconcile rivals and enemies in recognition of their common humanity, their shared problems and their joint hopes of peace. In today's strife torn world, no task could be more urgent. For more than fifty years, Wilton Park has shown what can be done with care, tact, frankness and delicate hard work."