

HE was the man behind the 20th century's most recognisable gossip column – and his private life and public beliefs made him the sort of person who would make ample copy for any scribbler today.

The life of Labour MP Tom Driberg – who was the Daily Express's original William Hickey, a column still running – was celebrated on Thursday in one of his many haunts.

The location was the Wheatsheaf pub, in Rathbone Place, Fitzrovia, where journalist Francis Wheen uncovered his biography Tom Driberg: The Soul of Indiscretion.

And Mr Wheen told the Sohemian Society, a group dedicated to reviving and celebrating the colourful characters of the area, that because of his flamboyant image – he took it on himself to support unpopular causes – he never made it to high office, despite being one of the most able politicians of his generation.

Mr Wheen said: "He was never going to be



Michael Foot

Soho, sleaze and the gossip column

Despite loitering in the Soho underworld, Tom Driberg's biographer reveals the brilliance of one of Parliament's more colourful members, writes Andy McCorkell

allowed to be a minister – but it is these kinds of misfits and trouble makers that make the very best MPs.

"It would be unbearable if there was no dissent."

His kaleidoscopic account in front of an audience that included former Labour leader and Driberg contemporary and friend Michael Foot, described the MP's encounters with the criminal elements of the Soho underworld and the shabby bohemes of the area.

"He used to like raffish surroundings and what could be more raffish than Soho?" asked Mr Wheen.

Driberg frequented the area's nightclubs in the 1930s after he found work, board and lodgings above an all-night café in

Frith Street. But by the end of the 1930s he turned his pen to covering the Spanish Civil War, warning his readers of the dangers of fascism.

Mr Wheen said that Tom's election to parliament in 1942 – he won the Maldon by-election as an independent – meant he had to curtail his visits to the seedier haunts he'd known before the war.

But his love for the area never diminished, and in the 1960s and 1970s he would be drawn back to Soho.

"He would return as if to remind himself that he was himself bohemian," said Mr Wheen.

Rumours abound of Driberg's allegiances with the Krays and there were rumours that he unwittingly provided an alibi for a man who

ordered a gangland murder.

Other stories that surround the mischievous and disreputable MP tell of his attempts to seduce Mick Jagger.

Driberg, despite once being married, was homosexual.

The incident apparently happened in Greek Street's Gay Hussar when Driberg hoped the Rolling Stone might become the front man of a new left-wing party drawing in the support of the nation's youngsters.

"Stories about him remain shrouded in mystery and I had problems with a lot of them," said Mr Wheen.

"It seems to be a question of whether you take his words for it or not."

During the lecture, Michael Foot heckled Mr Wheen with an occasion-



Francis Wheen

al anecdote.

Mr Foot said he used to receive postcards from Driberg when he was travelling abroad.

He said: "We used to be on a programme on the BBC and we would arrange to meet beforehand. When he was working far away he would send messages to us all the time.

"He sent us cards from all these places in Africa and told us of the women who were giving him garlands.

"He was a great MP. He would do anything in the world if he thought someone needed help and he knew all the ropes to make sure things would happen."

Mr Wheen, who contributes to Private Eye, told how Driberg was used by the magazine for inside gossip on Westminster – an arrangement that was not as fruitful as the magazine hoped.

Mr Wheen said: "He didn't provide anything we could use – so in 1969 he began devising obscene crosswords for us. He would use words such as erection, prostitution and smoking dope."

Mr Wheen also ridiculed claims that Driberg was a spy. He was accused of working



Tom Driberg, with his r'bab, a Russian instrument brought back as a souvenir after visiting Guy Burgess in Moscow, in 1956.

for the KGB and was a close friend of the Cambridge Five's Guy Burgess and visited Moscow with him.

But his biographer said Driberg's track record would have made him completely unsuitable for such a job.

Mr Wheen said: "This couldn't be true. He wasn't someone who was discreet and it's not as if he knew anything about

nuclear secrets.

"He was so indiscreet you would only have had to have bought him a drink to get what ever you wanted from him."

■ The Sohemian Society's next event is An Audience with George Melly at Hampstead's Everyman Theatre at 7.30pm on May 13.

Call 0870 0664 777 for more information.