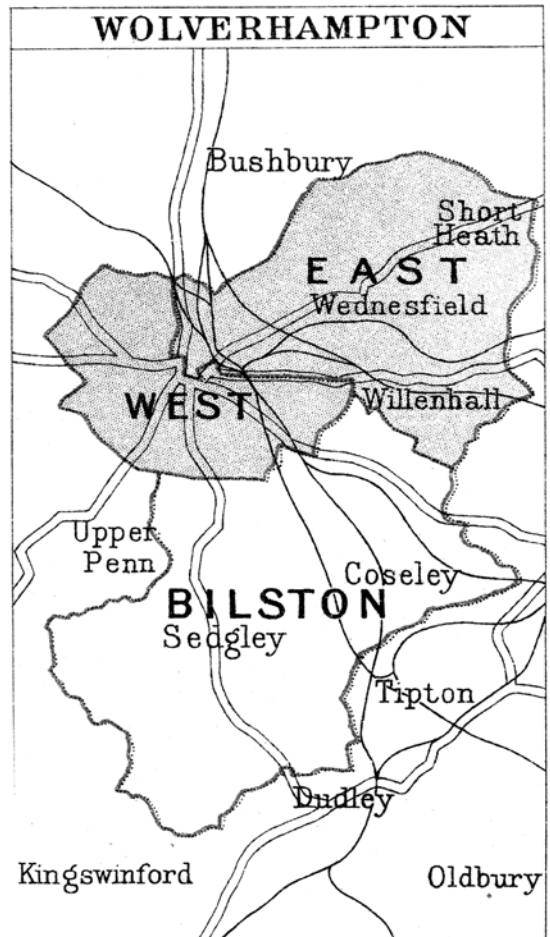


LAST OUTPOST OF URBAN RADICALISM: WOLVERHAMPTON EAST, LIBERAL SEAT 1832–1945

Jaime Reynolds examines the last redoubt of traditional Midland Radicalism



GEOFFREY MANDER was elected as Liberal MP for Wolverhampton East in 1929 and held the seat until his defeat by Labour in 45. It was one of the last remnants of urban Liberalism in the 1930s. By 1935 there were only three other urban seats where Liberals were able to withstand the combined challenge of the Labour and Conservative Parties: Birkenhead East, Middlesbrough West, and Bethnal Green South-West. Wolverhampton East was the last of the party's radical nonconformist Midland strongholds to fall.¹

The constituency name was somewhat misleading, as only half of it lay within Wolverhampton proper, with the other

half comprising a cluster of independent surrounding villages and towns. This explains the relative weakness of Liberalism in Wolverhampton, where between the wars the party was in fourth place on the borough council, with about five or six seats in the 1920s and three or four in the 1930s. By 1945, when Labour finally wrenched control of the borough from the anti-socialist majority, the Liberal councillors had been eliminated entirely.

Liberals held the old two-member borough of Wolverhampton continuously from 1832 to 1885, and also monopolised the East division from its establishment in 1885 until 1918, although George Thorne, in his first contest, held on by only

eight votes at a by-election in 1908. Thorne, who was MP until 1929, was a Wolverhampton man, qualified as a solicitor, an 'Inland Revenue collector' and Alderman and Mayor. He was a Baptist and served as president of the West Midlands Federation of Evangelical Free Church Councils. He was the Asquithian Liberals' Chief Whip from 1919 to 1923.

Inter-war Wolverhampton East comprised the St James', St Peter's and St Mary's wards of Wolverhampton borough, plus Heath Town ward which was incorporated into the borough in 1927, and several smaller towns and villages on the periphery of Wolverhampton: the Urban District Councils of Willenhall (population in 1931: 21,000),

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Wednesfield (9,300), and Short Heath (5,000). This was the cradle of the Industrial Revolution in the Black Country. The area was criss-crossed by canals and railways, and many large and small older businesses remained there, including iron works and metal-trade factories, the chemical industry and small engineering, and the Mander factories in Heath Town and Wednesfield. Willenhall was the capital of the lock-making industry in Britain, and Wednesfield was also a centre of lock and trap-making. It was a predominantly working-class district with extensive slum areas of shabby terraced housing.

Liberalism was sustained by the strength of nonconformity across most of the constituency, and the personal appeal of Thorne and Mander. It was also helped by the relatively slow advance of Labour among the poorer unskilled working-class voters, who were less organised into trade unions than in the more modern lighter industries of Wolverhampton. One Labour candidate in the 1920s remembered that 'the slums of the town were the worst I had seen anywhere in my life. The slum vote was unreliable. It was among the better-paid artisan type that I [had to] look for solid support'. Some of the working class continued to look to the Radical Liberals for their defenders against the local industrialists, many of whom were Conservatives on account of their support for protective tariffs against foreign competition in the iron and steel trades. Mander cultivated the working-class vote; for example, he was one of the few Liberals to oppose the unemployment benefit cuts in 1931 when desertions from Labour to the Liberals seem to have saved his seat – a rare and remarkable achievement in that general election. Very unusually he managed to squeeze the Labour vote further in 1935 to increase his majority.

St Peter's ward was the commercial and professional centre

Election results 1918–45 (% of poll)								
	1918	1922	1923	1924	1929	1931	1935	1945
Lib	51.8	45.9	unop	42.1	44.8	44.1	48.5	30.1
Lab		12.2		19.8	25.7	18.7	15.2	47.7
Con		37.3		38.1	29.5	37.2	36.3	22.2

Note: 1918: Coalition National Democratic Party 48.2%; 1922: National Liberal 4.6%

Wolverhampton borough council – party representation 1919–46								
	1919	1922	1925	1928	1931	1934	1937	1946
Lib	6	6	5	6	5	3	4	0
Lab	6	9	12	11	9	13	14	26
Con	18	17	17	17	17	16	17	11
Ind	6	4	2	5	8	13	10	8

of Wolverhampton, with a working-class area in the north. It was a Conservative stronghold, which Labour began to break down only after 1945. St Mary's ward was an industrial and working-class area of large and small factories and terraced houses. In the 1920s it contained some of the worst slums in the town. Labour first won the ward in 1920 and it remained a safe Labour area into the 1950s. The Catholic Church (St Patrick's) was influential and there was a significant Irish vote. Many elected councillors were Catholics.

St James' ward was also industrial and working-class. From 1896 to 1945, however, the ward was a Liberal stronghold. The Conservatives rarely stood in the inter-war period and Labour never gained over 38 per cent of the poll. The pre-1945 Liberal councillors were mainly local traders and shopkeepers and very largely nonconformist. Many of them worshipped in the Mount Zion Primitive Methodist Chapel.

Heath Town was an independent Urban District until 1927, and retained its own community feeling until the 1950s. It was largely working class with extensive terraced housing, but also some large privately owned houses. It was industrial with large and small engineering, vehicle and electrical manufacturing and a Mander factory. Until 1945 in both St James' and

Heath Town, the councillors were Independents with Liberal or Conservative support.

There was considerable cooperation between the Tories and Liberals in Wolverhampton. They both stood as Independents in local elections (although their national party allegiances were well known). From 1927 there was a formal anti-socialist electoral pact under which the Liberals concentrated their efforts in the east of the town. The Tories were strong in the West division, where the Bird family (of Bird's custard powder) provided the MPs from 1918 to 1945, except for a short break in 1929–31 when W. J. Brown won the seat for Labour. Brown carried

Key statistics

Wolverhampton boundaries in 1922:

- Nonconformist 1922: 6.1%

The following refer to the present-day boundaries of Wolverhampton:

- Working in manufacturing 1931: 46% (national: 29%)
- Unemployed 1931: 18% (national 12.5%)
- Middle-class (professional, managerial) 1931: 11% (national 15%)
- Clerical/skilled manual 1931: 53% (national 49%)
- Working-class 1931: 36% (national 36%)
- Households with one or more persons per room 1931: 23% (national 20%)

Modern constituency counterpart:

Wolverhampton North-east includes parts of Wolverhampton, Heath Town and Wednesfield. Willenhall is in Walsall North.

much of the Labour vote with him when he stood as an Independent in 1931 and 1935 (he sat as Independent MP for Rugby from 1942–50). Wolverhampton Bilston was a Tory/Labour marginal that swapped hands during the inter-war period. The Liberals generally kept out of both seats and in 1924 a number of prominent local Liberals openly supported the Conservative in the West division. In 1929, under pressure from younger members, Liberal candidates were nominated, polling 10.7 per cent in West Wolverhampton, and 12.2 per cent in Bilston.

The Conservatives continued to put up candidates in Wolverhampton East but their organisation was very weak, with only a couple of dozen members. In 1929 it was even proposed to close down the association there. A less radical and left-leaning MP than Geoffrey Mander would have probably been given a free run.

Mander still held on to 30 per cent of the poll at the 1945 general election, but Labour won by over 6,000 votes. The nonconformist and old working-class roots of Liberal support in the area were fast withering away. The Liberals had lost all their councillors in Wolverhampton borough by 1945–46 and although a few ex-Liberals survived as Independent councillors for a time, by 1952 both St James' and Heath Town wards were safely Labour. The Liberals gave up fighting municipal elections in a systematic way; they had no candidates between 1950 and 1956. They resumed contests on a sporadic basis from 1962. There was an active Liberal association in Wolverhampton South-West (Enoch Powell's seat) in the early 1960s, concentrated in the middle-class wards, but with strong residual links to nonconformity.

The constituency was dispersed in the 1949 redistribution. The four Wolverhampton wards were allocated to the new North-East division. Willenhall became part of Wednesbury

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constituency (1950–70), as did Wednesfield until 1955 when it was transferred to Cannock. These were comfortably Labour seats with little sign of any residual Liberal tradition.

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¹ Nearby Walsall, held by the Lib-

erals until 1924 and by the Liberal Nationals from 1931–45 was another example.

Sources

- G. W. Jones, *Borough Politics: A Study of the Wolverhampton Borough Council, 1888–1964* (Macmillan, 1969).
- W. J. Brown, *So Far...* (London, 1943).

LETTERS

Electoral support

In his review of four academic studies of the 2005 general election (*Journal of Liberal History* 52, autumn 2006), Tom Kiehl writes that the Lib Dems received the backing of 'a quarter, or thereabouts, of the electorate' in 2005. In fact, the party received the votes of only 13 per cent of the electorate (although 22 per cent of those who actually voted). This figure casts further light on Kiehl's comparison between the 1983 and 2005 election results, as in 1983 the Alliance won the support of 18 per cent of the electorate (25 per cent of those who voted). Hence, in terms of support throughout the country – not just among those who actually voted – the 2005 result is some way short of 1983.

John Meadowcroft

Herbert Gladstone and South Africa

Re-reading Lawrence Iles' article on Herbert Gladstone (*Journal of Liberal History* 51, summer 2006) I found myself wondering about his treatment of Gladstone's time as Governor-General of South Africa.

The reader might suppose that Lord Gladstone (as he had

by then become) was an absolute 'prancing proconsul' like Lord Lugard in Nigeria. But under the Government of South Africa Act 1909 South Africa became a fully self-governing Dominion, and to blame Gladstone for its actions is like holding George V responsible for the actions of Asquith's government.

Gladstone's extensive correspondence with the Colonial Secretary, Lewis Harcourt, is in the Harcourt papers in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Theses sons of famous fathers (Lewis was the son of the Sir William who unsuccessfully contested the succession to W. E. Gladstone), Gladstone and Harcourt, feared that their total lack of influence over Botha's government would be used as an argument against Irish home rule.

In my youth I raged at how the 1909 Act laid the foundations for apartheid and asked how our great government of 1906–14 could have passed it. My mature conclusion is that they expected public opinion always to be progressive, and to improve the weaknesses of the 1909 Act; unfortunately with minority settler public opinion that is not the dynamic.

Peter Hatton