

THE GLYNDŴR DENBIGHSHIRE RECORD

The survival of local party records, as serious students of Liberal history will be well aware, is largely a matter of chance. In general, the Conservative and Labour parties are better resourced in this respect than are the Liberals. While the formal constituency papers of the East Denbighshire (Wrexham) constituency for the first half of the twentieth century seem to have disappeared, the Glyndwr collection at the Denbighshire Record Office contains a fascinating archive which offers an invaluable insight into the fortunes of the local Liberal Party at a critical stage in its history. **David Dutton** examines its contents.



THE COLLECTION is essentially the private archive of Alderman Edward Hughes (1862–1938), maintained into a second generation by his youngest daughter, Edna (1894–1982). The name Glyndwr derives from the large redbrick

dwelling in Bersham Road, Wrexham, into which Hughes and his family moved in 1895 and which housed the archive until its transfer to the Record Office in Ruthin. Hughes claimed that his family was descended from a daughter of Owain Glyndwr, the legendary Welsh patriot of

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the early fifteenth century, who led a major rebellion against English rule in Wales.

Born in Oswestry, the second child in a family of four sons and a daughter, Hughes moved to Wrexham in 1884 to work as a bookkeeper for a local firm of leather manufacturers. In 1902 he became Company Secretary to the Cambrian Leather Works and in 1910 he was appointed Joint Managing Director. Ousted from this position in 1922 following a coup led by his fellow Managing Director Charles Prescott, Hughes resigned from the company's board two years later. While his business career progressed, Hughes had also become prominent in local politics. Elected to the Wrexham Borough Council in 1898, he was Mayor for two successive terms, 1906–07 and 1907–08. He served as Chairman of the Borough Finance Committee from 1908 to 1919 and of the Electricity Committee from 1919 until his death nearly twenty years later. In the meantime, he became the essential power-broker of the local Liberal Party.

Hughes's training as an accountant no doubt contributed to the meticulous development of his private archive. But he was, in any case, by instinct a compulsive hoarder, and the collection houses some bizarre items. One neatly typed note pasted on a lightbulb sleeve reads, 'this lamp was fixed over my desk this date at 12 o'clock noon, 17 September 1936'.¹ Overall, the archive reflects Hughes's business and local government activity together with his passion for local history, topography and genealogy. But it also enables the researcher to follow the fortunes of the Wrexham Liberal Party over a period of more than three decades.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, coal mining was already the largest employer apart from agriculture in North Wales. The North Wales coalfield extended from Oswestry on the English border to the Point of Ayr on the coast. And, with coal miners forming a significant proportion of the electorate, East Denbighshire was one of many constituencies in which the traditional values and

allegiances of the local Liberal Party were increasingly challenged by Labour's growing appeal to a working-class electorate. Before 1914, however, the local Liberal Party maintained strong links with the miners and it was normal for consultation to take place with the leaders of the North Wales Miners' Federation before the name of the Liberal parliamentary candidate was announced. In the period after the First World War, the Labour Party in the constituency made rapid gains while the social deprivations of the following decade enabled it to demonstrate the attractions of a socialist agenda. In the course of 1925 alone the area suffered three major industrial setbacks with the closure of the Llay Main and Vauxhall collieries and the disappearance of the Cambrian Ironworks. In total more than 3,000 workers lost their jobs. By the end of the 1920s Labour was setting up relief funds to raise money for the families of mine-workers living in abject poverty as a result of prolonged strikes and subsequent redundancies. These developments quickly impacted

Left: courtyard of Ruthin Gaol museum, Ruthin (photo: Arwel Parry). The Gaol now houses the Denbighshire Record Office.



upon the local political scene and the electoral history of the constituency in the 1920s suggested that Labour could not easily be beaten in a three-cornered contest.

Hughes's involvement in Liberal politics went back to an earlier period, when the Labour challenge was less potent. He formed a close association with Edward Hemmerde who was first elected as the constituency's MP in a by-election in August 1906, following the elevation of the sitting MP to the position of County Court Judge on the Chester and North Wales circuit. Hughes recognised the talents of the new member, an articulate and ambitious barrister, whose nomination had been strongly resisted by many other local Liberals, because he was English

Alderman Edward Hughes (1862–1938). (Photos reproduced by kind permission of the Denbighshire Record Office.)

and did not speak the Welsh language. It was Hughes who masterminded the party's victory in East Denbighshire in the general election of January 1910 despite Hemmerde's absence until the last days of the campaign. But there was an erratic and unpredictable side to the MP's character. In 1909 he had been saved from financial ruin and political disaster only when the celebrated charlatan, Horatio Bottomley, organised a round-robin collection of £10,000 among his fellow MPs.² Now, when the country again went to the polls in December 1910, Hemmerde decided to contest Portsmouth rather than East Denbighshire. It was Hughes who seized the initiative and, after considering standing himself, secured the adoption and election of E.T.

John as the constituency's MP. Strikingly, both Hemmerde and John would end up inside the Labour Party, the former as MP for Crewe in the 1920s. This, however, was not a course which Hughes himself was ever likely to follow.

By the time of the next general election in December 1918, the First World War had helped to transform the political landscape and, nationally, it was a much weakened Liberal Party, divided between the followers of Herbert Asquith and David Lloyd George, which faced the electorate. Hughes was a friend of Lloyd George and the latter stayed on more than one occasion at Glyndwr. But the form of Lloyd Georgeite Liberalism of which Hughes approved was that manifested in the era of the

post-war coalition. Hughes's basic instincts were anti-socialist and they led him to view the Conservatives as potential allies in the quest to keep East Denbighshire out of Labour's hands. 'A strong Anti-Socialist policy is our best plan', he wrote in 1929. 'We lost 115 seats at the last [1924] election because the Liberals, under Asquith, put the Labour Party in office.'³

Formally re-titled Wrexham in time for the general election of 1918, the East Denbighshire electorate was considerably enlarged as a result of a rapidly-growing population and the government's extension of the right to vote. The pre-war electorate of under 12,000 now stood at around 39,000. Whether the extension of the franchise worked, of itself, to the advantage of the Labour Party remains a matter for historical debate.⁴ At all events, in Wrexham the general election of 1922 was clearly the turning point, with Labour, in the person of Robert Richards, a lecturer at the University College of North Wales, capturing the seat for the first time. Thereafter, as the archive reveals, it was Hughes's primary goal to prevent the anti-Labour vote being split. In the general election of 1924, as Chairman of the local Liberal Party, he helped to secure the withdrawal of the Conservative candidate, E.F. Bushby, a move which enabled the Liberal Christmas Williams to recapture the seat. But as the general election of 1929 approached, and notwithstanding optimism about the Liberal Party's prospects nationally, Hughes doubted whether Wrexham could be held. With no help on offer from party headquarters, Hughes determined to pursue his preferred strategy. 'We should go on our own and try to get a Secret Agreement with the Conservatives.' Secrecy was central to Hughes's purpose. 'If [Bushby] does withdraw there must be nothing in writing. We may have notes in writing at first

but these must all be destroyed and your [Williams's] word must be accepted. Prominent Conservative workers say that Richards will win on a three-cornered fight.'⁵ Though logic might have suggested that, in the event of a candidate standing down, it was now the turn of the Tory candidate to have a free run against Labour, Hughes almost succeeded in once again persuading the Conservatives to give way. The argument he used – that Wrexham was the sort of constituency whose radical traditions meant that Conservatives would probably vote Liberal but that Liberals could not be relied upon to vote Conservative – would become the common currency of the Conservative–Liberal National dialogue of the next decade. In the event, however, an ill-judged article in the local press, which Hughes attributed to the malice of an 'Asquithian gang', left Bushby with little alternative but to insist that his candidature should go forward.⁶ With the anti-socialist vote split, the result of the general election of 1929 in Wrexham was entirely predictable. Robert Richards recaptured the seat for Labour with a majority of more than 6,500 over Williams, the Liberal candidate.

But not all in the Wrexham Liberal Party approved of what Hughes had tried to do. As the local Treasurer explained:

With regard to your Chairmanship of the party, I may be quite frank and say that there was considerable doubt as to where you stood. Many hold the view that you were a good old Tory, and that you had become a real Protectionist, and with these doubts, whether based on fact or not, it was felt that the Liberal Party could not exist with you as its Leader.⁷

By the end of 1929, Hughes had been eased out of his offices in the local party. 'Being thus freed from office', recalled Hughes, 'I

felt that I could slide out of the party (locally) and thereby you would not have to use the "Bell, Book and Candle" and pronounce excommunication. I said nothing about it to anyone, but I considered that ... I had ceased to be associated with the Wrexham Liberal Association.'⁸

This, however, was far from being the end of Hughes's influence over the local political scene. The Glyndwr papers allow the student to trace the way in which the mainstream Liberal Party, still a significant force in the constituency at the beginning of the 1930s, was comprehensively outmanoeuvred and relegated to the political sidelines over the course of the decade. The documents make it possible to see the Liberal National schism less as the self-serving action of a group of beleaguered MPs desperate to cling on to their parliamentary seats and more as the expression of a reasoned and long-term strategy of a particular strand of Liberalism which believed that it was the Labour Party which posed the ultimate threat to Liberal values and ideals.

The general election of 1931 saw the return of the Liberal Aled Roberts in a straight fight against the sitting Labour MP, Robert Richards. On this occasion the Conservative candidate withdrew, not as part of a local bargain but as a result of nationally led negotiations between those parties which were participating in the newly formed National Government. It was, however, striking that, in the most unfavourable climate for Labour and in the context of its first national electoral setback since the party's formation, Roberts's margin of victory was a mere 1,800 votes. Hughes fully understood that this majority 'came from Tories' and was under no illusion about the difficulties that would have to be overcome if the Liberal victory were to be repeated at any future elections.⁹ Possible success would depend not only

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on maintaining the alliance with the Conservatives but on doing so without losing any Liberal votes in the process. Such thinking ruled out any possibility of an immediate transfer of allegiance to the newly formed Liberal National group, even though that body, headed by Sir John Simon, espoused precisely the same strategy of full electoral co-operation with the Conservatives as Hughes did. The problem was that any such step would almost certainly involve a serious breach in the ranks of Wrexham Liberalism. Hughes therefore moved cautiously and hoped that Roberts could be persuaded to take up a half-way position, supporting the National Government while still maintaining his ties with the local Liberal Party.

Hughes was not helped when Roberts joined the Liberal Leader, Herbert Samuel, in crossing the floor of the House of Commons and rejoining the ranks of opposition in 1933, estranged by the National Government's commitment to tariffs and the Ottawa agreements on Imperial Preference. Nonetheless, Hughes was again successful in persuading the Conservatives to give Roberts a free run against Labour at the general election of 1935. But the Chairman of the Wrexham Conservative Association registered his misgivings about the Liberal candidate by advising Tory voters to abstain. Denied full Conservative backing, Roberts faced almost inevitable defeat and Labour's Robert Richards regained the seat with a comfortable 5,000 majority. It was in this situation and in the knowledge that the mainstream Liberal Party had now been reduced to just twenty-one seats in the House of Commons that Hughes began to consider the Liberal National option more seriously. 'The old Liberal Party is dead', he declared, 'dead as Queen Anne, so what is the use of holding a wake over it?'¹⁰ A Wrexham Liberal National

Association was duly set up on 14 October 1936 with Hughes as Chairman.

Hughes knew, however, that he would have to take as much of the local Liberal Party as possible with him if his goal of recapturing the seat from Labour were to be fulfilled. His hopes continued to rest on Aled Roberts:

If we could only prevail upon Mr Aled Roberts to become a member of the Liberal National Party it will secure the seat coming back from the Labour Party because in that case the Conservative vote will go in his support. Without that we have no chance of regaining the seat.¹¹

Over the following months, as the Glyndwr archive reveals, Hughes displayed his skills as a

consummate political operator. First, Roberts was persuaded to enter negotiations with the Liberal National Organisation in London. A joint consultative committee was set up with the Wrexham Conservatives at which the latter were once again induced to play second fiddle to a Liberal (or now, a Liberal National) candidate. As Hughes recorded, the Conservative Chairman 'stated quite clearly that there was a feeling in his party that the candidate should be a Conservative but upon the figures that had been produced [by Hughes] he could see that the prospect of a Conservative was not so good as a National Liberal'.¹² Before long, Hughes had persuaded the Conservatives that Roberts should be their man. 'Satisfactory to the Conservative

Edna Hughes (1894–1982) in 1916. (Photo reproduced by kind permission of the Denbighshire Record Office.)



Party and the Liberal Nationals, he will pull over a large body of the Liberals – he may drop a few of the old fashioned Liberal die-hards, but with the united support of both parties I think we can win.¹³ Finally, and perhaps most remarkably, the local Liberal Association also threw its weight behind Roberts as a ‘Liberal candidate supporting the National Government’.

Though he felt a little ‘uneasy about the “trimming” of the Liberal Association’,¹⁴ there was no doubt about what Hughes had achieved. In due course Roberts would

... write to Lord Hutchison [Chairman of the Liberal National Organisation] requesting that on election he should receive the Liberal National whip. The designation of Liberal National Candidate will come in time and I am of [the] opinion that the suggestion will come from the Liberal Association. There will [be] three Associations. The Liberal Association, independent and not affiliated to either Liberal Party. The Liberal National Association affiliated to us and the Conservative Association. From these three Associations a small working committee will be formed to conduct the work of organising the constituency and [this] will become the election committee.¹⁵

Because of the outbreak of European war in September 1939, the general election which would have put Hughes’s strategy to the test never took place. In any case, Hughes himself had succumbed to cancer, aged 76, on Christmas Eve, 1938. But it is hard to resist the conclusion that Liberalism as an independent political force in Wrexham had been the victim of his manoeuvres. While the majority of the Wrexham and East Denbighshire Liberal Association had declared its readiness to follow Roberts into what was, in all but name, a Liberal

National stance, a minority of local Liberals soon reacted and formed a rival ‘Radical Association’. With the newly-formed Liberal National Association backing Roberts, the former Liberal MP; the long-standing Liberal Association, which ‘agreed to support Mr Aled Roberts and to co-operate with the Liberal National Association but could not see their way to join the Liberal National Movement’;¹⁶ and now a ‘Radical Association’ trying to revive the cause of independent Liberalism, potential Liberal voters in Wrexham could have been forgiven if they were confused. At all events, when the war was over, Liberalism failed to recover anything like its pre-war strength in Wrexham. It was in fact finished as a significant political force. Liberal candidates came a distant third in the general elections of 1945 and 1950 and the party then failed even to contest the constituency again until 1966.

The travails of the post-war Liberal Party do not feature prominently in the Glyndwr archive, maintained now by Hughes’s daughter, Edna. But there is much material relating to the Liberal Nationals, which is of particular value given the absence of any central archive relating to this party. The presence in the Glyndwr archive of an almost complete run of the party’s pre-war house journal, the *Liberal National Magazine*, which is to be found in few other locations, should also be noted. What is described is the process by which the Liberal National party in Wrexham was swallowed up by the Conservatives. After 1945, the Liberal Nationals no longer had the institutional strength to maintain a partnership on equal terms with the Tories of the sort that Edward Hughes had envisaged. Despite an initial success in persuading the Conservatives to give their support to a Liberal National candidate in the general election of 1945, institutional union

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between the two associations was secured in 1949 very much on Conservative terms, with Conservatives dominating all aspects of the resulting joint association. Most National Liberals (the name was reversed in 1948) accepted *force majeure* and readily acquiesced in this situation, but a small group, including Edna Hughes, refused to be reconciled. The archive reveals a brave but ultimately futile attempt by surviving National Liberals in 1953–54 to reassert a degree of independence from their over-bearing Conservative partners. But, deprived of any backing from National Liberal headquarters in London – ‘what an appalling exhibition of weakness!!’ protested Edna Hughes, ‘I am sorry that I have wasted twenty years in the support of such a party’¹⁷ – the Wrexham rebellion was doomed to failure. In what had now become a safe Labour seat, the local Conservative Party maintained a joint ‘Conservative and National Liberal’ label in its constituency activities and parliamentary candidatures until after the Liberal National Organisation in London was itself wound up in 1968, but the designation increasingly lacked meaning. Symbolically, in what was now only a passing gesture to an all-but-defunct political tradition, Edna Hughes was persuaded to sign the nomination papers of the Conservative and National Liberal candidate for the general election of 1966, the last at which the joint label was used.

By the time Edna Hughes died, aged 88, in 1982, the family archive filled most of Glyndwr apart from the restricted living area which she still occupied. The preservation of the archive had become the abiding concern of her final years. From the point of view of the political historian, the Glyndwr archive stands as a remarkable monument to a right-leaning strand in British Liberalism which has as yet received insufficient scholarly attention.

The Denbighshire Record Office is housed in the Old Gaol, 46 Clwyd Street, Ruthin and is open for research from 10 a.m. to 4.45 p.m., Mondays to Thursdays and 10 a.m. to 4.15 p.m. on Fridays. Users will need to be in possession of a County Archive Research Network (CARN) ticket.

David Dutton is Professor of Modern History at the University of Liverpool. His latest book is Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party (I. B. Tauris, 2008).

- 1 A. K. Matthias and W.A. Williams, *A Wrexham Collection* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1998), p. 4.
- 2 R.S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, (London: Heinemann, 1969), vol. 2, companion, part 2, p. 917.
- 3 Denbighshire Record Office, Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/2511, Hughes to C.P. Williams, 27 April 1929.
- 4 See the discussion in D. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 76–78.
- 5 Denbighshire Record Office, Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/2511, Hughes to Williams, 26 April 1929.
- 6 Ibid., Hughes to D.T. Salathiel, 4 June 1929.
- 7 Ibid., R. Thomas to Hughes, 2 Nov. 1931.
- 8 Ibid., Hughes to R. Thomas, 29 Oct. 1931.
- 9 Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/188, Hughes to A. Roberts, 20 Nov. 1933.
- 10 Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/2544, Hughes to Ffoulkes Roberts, 31 March 1937.
- 11 Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/184ii, Hughes to Henry Morris-Jones, 12 June 1936.
- 12 Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/2544, Hughes to Major Broadhurst, 28 Oct. 1936.
- 13 Ibid., Hughes to G. Fitzhugh, 3 April 1937.
- 14 Ibid., Lewis Edwards to Hughes, 4 Oct. 1937.
- 15 Ibid., report of meeting of the Executive Committee of the Wrexham Liberal Association, 24 Sept. 1937.
- 16 Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/2547, minutes of meeting of the Wrexham Liberal National Association, 4 May 1939.
- 17 Glyndwr MSS, DD/G/2564, Edna Hughes to Ensor Walters, 26 Nov. 1953.

LETTERS

Ireland's Liberal MPs

I welcome Dr Waugh's letter (*Journal of Liberal History* 59, summer 2008) and interest in Irish Liberal MPs. James Wood fought the 1902 East Down by-election on the single issue of T. W. Russell's campaign for land reform. However, the illuminated address presented to Wood by his supporters in 1906 begins: 'After your contest at the late General Election to remain Liberal Representative of East Down in the Imperial Parliament ...'

I suspect party labels, particularly in Ireland, were not as precise a century ago as they are now. I am content to leave the description to his East Down supporters, who seemed in little doubt that he was their Liberal MP.

Berkley Farr

News Chronicle

I am trying to get hold of some copies of the *News Chronicle*, which, alas, ceased

publication before I was born. I wondered whether any readers might have a spare copy or two, or be able to put me in touch with someone who might be able to help.

Contact details: 16 Heatham Park, Twickenham, TW2 7SF; tel. 07946 421771; email york.membership@btopenworld.com

York Membership

Campbell as leader

I was moved by much of Ming Campbell's autobiography, and felt that your interview with him (both in *Journal of Liberal History* 60, autumn 2008) answered some of the questions the book prompted. However, there are two errors therein that have got themselves into the cuttings files and which, for the historical record, should be corrected.

First, the vote at the Llandudno Liberal Party Assembly in September

1981 was not 1,600 to 112. Gruff Evans, chairing the debate, counted the votes against the Alliance and then deducted that figure – 112 – from the total number of delegates! There were many abstentions, myself included, whose presence would have reduced the quoted vote in favour significantly.

Second, I left the negotiations on merger primarily over the nonsense of the proposed party name, and the diminution of the 'Liberal' presence, rather than on the inclusion of NATO in the new party's preamble.

Michael Meadowcroft

Liberal Foots

As a footnote to Professor Morgan's article on the dynastic Liberalism of the Foot family (*Journal of Liberal History* 60, autumn 2008), it is of interest that Paul Foot, too, had a brief Liberal phase when he was at university.

He was an active member of the Oxford University Liberal Club and became its President in the Hilary term of 1960. He remained on the Club committee for a year. At the same time he was pursuing a political career in the Oxford Union, of which he was President in Hilary term, 1961. My papers do not reveal when he left the Liberal Party, but my recollection is that it was in that summer. Some of us put it down to the influence of his uncle Michael, who he much admired at the time, while the more cynical said it was because he wanted a seat in Parliament, and thought that this would be harder to achieve as a Liberal!

In view of his subsequent membership of the Socialist Workers' Party, it seems that the cynics were wrong.

John R. Howe (President, Oxford University Liberal Club, Trinity term 1961).