

'A VERY ENGLISH THE HONOURABLE THOMAS CHARLES REG

The death of Captain the Honourable Thomas Charles Reginald Agar-Robartes MP, at Loos during the First World War, robbed Great Britain of a talented, charismatic and hard-working politician. **Paul Holden**, House and Collections Manager at Lanhydrock House in Cornwall (the Agar-Robartes family estate), assesses the life and career of this backbench Liberal MP who served in the great reforming Liberal governments between 1906 and 1915 – ‘a very English gentleman’.¹



H GENTLEMAN'

GINALD AGAR-ROBARTES MP (1880–1915)

TO HIS Cornish constituents Agar-Robartes' popularity was based as much on his colourful character as on his impartial mind and independent stance. Amongst his peers he was a much admired and gregarious talent whose seriousness and moderation sometimes gave way before an erratic – and often misplaced – wit that drew attention to his youth.²

Nine generations prior to Tommy's birth, Richard Robartes (c.1580–1634), regarded as the 'wealthiest in the west', purchased the Cornish estate of Lanhydrock near Bodmin and, controversially, paid £10,000 to the Duke of Buckingham for a peerage (Fig.2).³ His eldest son, the staunch Parliamentarian John (1606–85), was created 1st Earl Radnor in 1679 after a successful career in the Restoration parliaments of Charles II. By 1757 the Radnor title had become extinct and the Cornish estates passed, first, to George Hunt (1720–98), long-standing MP for Bodmin, and second, to his niece Anna Maria Hunt (1771–1861), Tommy's great-grandmother. Her marriage to Charles Agar (1769–1811), youngest son of the Viscount Clifden, produced one surviving son, Thomas James Agar-Robartes (1808–82) who served as a Liberal MP from 1847 until 1869 when his tireless organisation

of the evolving Liberal Party in Cornwall brought him a peerage. His only son Thomas Charles (1844–1930) took the Liberal seat of East Cornwall in 1880, a seat he held for two years before succeeding his father as Baron Robartes in 1882.

Tommy was one of ten children born into the high-Anglican family of Thomas Charles Agar-Robartes (later 6th Viscount Clifden), and Mary Dickinson (1853–1921) of Kingweston in Somerset (Fig.3). He was educated at Mortimer Vicarage School in Berkshire, Eton College and Christ Church, Oxford. As a young man he developed an ardour for equestrian sports, becoming Master of the Drag Hunt and earning a dubious reputation as 'the most reckless horseman in Cornwall'.⁴ University brought out his outgoing and flamboyant personality. Like his father he became an active member of the prestigious dining club, the Bullingdon Society, and in 1901 alone his personal bills for wines/spirits and cigarettes /cigars totalled £91 5s 8d (£5,200 in 2010 prices) and £44 12s 6d respectively (£2,500). With close friends like James de Rothschild and Neil Primrose, second son of Lord Rosebery, Tommy was a regular at country house parties, and with his passion for the turf his academic studies

understandably suffered, his exasperated tutor writing to Viscount Clifden in 1902, saying: 'I have done my utmost for him'.⁵

After an unsuccessful attempt to join the army Tommy ventured into politics. In 1903 the *Western Daily Mercury* enthusiastically reported on his speech for the Liberal Executive at Liskeard: 'He spoke with ease and confidence and his remarks were salted with wit ... he gives promise of achieving real distinction as a speaker.'⁶ Highlighting the Unionist government's failures, as published in the *Boer War Commission Report*, Tommy declared:

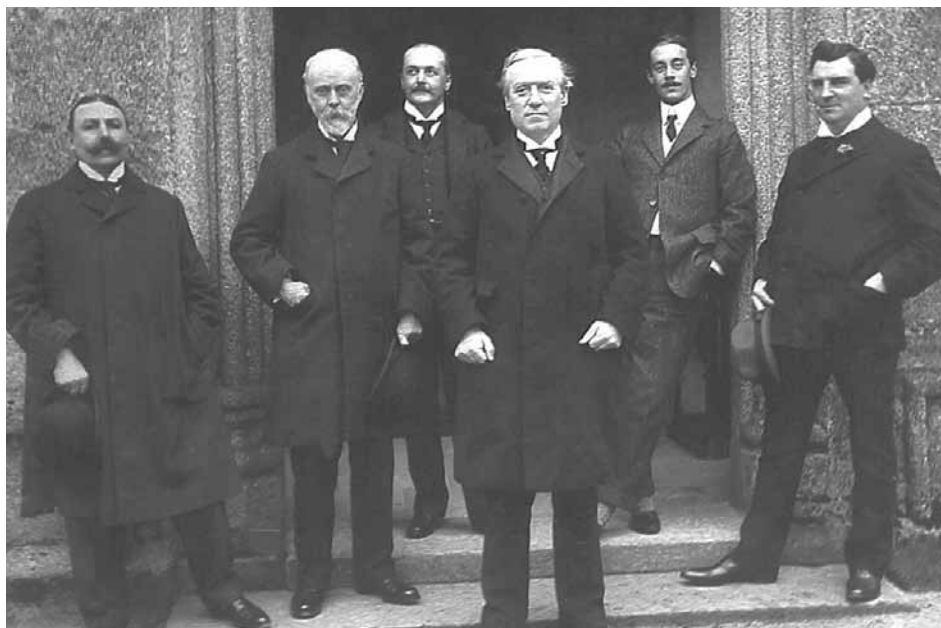
It was the most disgraceful thing he had ever read ... a more disgraceful piece of criminal carelessness and neglect it would be impossible to find. Might it sink into their minds as hot iron into wax, and might it ever remain there like a brand on a Dartmoor pony?⁷

Perhaps mindful of his political inexperience, he wisely avoided speaking on the principles of the war, preferring instead to vent his disapproval at the pitiful organisation and inadequate armaments of the troops. He continued:

It was something akin to murder to send out men to fight our battles on horses unfit to ride

Fig. 1: The Hon T.C.R. Agar-Robartes. Oil on canvas by Richard Jack, 1906/7. Lanhydrock collections.

'A VERY ENGLISH GENTLEMAN'



... As to the reserve of 200,000 rifles, it was discovered that the sighting was incorrect and that the rifle shot eight inches to the right at a distance of 500 yards.

Like his political mentor Lord Rosebery, Tommy's passion and belief in empire was enduring. At Liskeard he said that he did not wish to see the British Empire lose 'one grain of its greatness'; in his 1906 election pledges he wrote that: 'the present condition of affairs in South Africa [is] deplorable to the last degree'; and in 1910 he applauded self-government in South Africa, which he considered had 'brought a valiant people within the circle of the British Empire'.⁸

In 1905, as President of the Wimpole Liberal Association in Cambridgeshire (the local organisation to the family's Wimpole Hall home), Tommy attacked the Tory government's stance on tariff reform. He concluded his speech with the cry:

Out with the present Government ... Mr Balfour ... has clung to office like a drowning man clutching a straw ... they have broken ... the eleventh commandment, 'Be thou not found out'.⁹

Tommy's political future, however, was to be rooted nearer his Cornish home. Edwardian Cornwall had suffered severe social and economic instability as a consequence of continued agricultural and industrial decline. Consequently Nonconformist religion and Liberalism both grew between 1885 and 1910. With his good looks, sharp mind and fervent personality, Tommy was 'enthusiastically adopted' as Liberal candidate for South-East Cornwall, a seat that had been held by the Liberal Unionists at the two previous elections with majorities of 543 (1895) and 1,302 (1900).

Lanhydrock immediately became the centre of industrious political activity, with the guest book recording the names of, amongst others, Herbert Asquith and Winston Churchill (Fig. 4). On Saturday 25 November 1905 Tommy's mentor and family friend Lord Rosebery visited Bodmin as part of his speaking

tour of the south-west. His visit coincided with a period of Liberal division over Home Rule policy and internal scheming over party leadership. Two days prior to the Bodmin rally the Liberal leader Henry Campbell-Bannerman had given a speech in Stirling in which he had outlined his step-by-step approach towards Irish Home Rule. Rosebery's reaction to the press reports was one of anger.

Preceding Rosebery on the platform, Tommy set the evening's controversial mood. His speech has not survived, although a draft letter dated 28 November to the Fowey-based author, Cambridge professor and local Liberal President Arthur Quiller-Couch remains in the collection. Tommy wrote:

I am sorry that you should feel aggrieved at the position and attitude I took in Bodmin this week. I think perhaps that I was wrong in using an expression of Sir H C B's in the way I did, but I thought at the time that it was most appropriate to Chinese labour ... Lord R after the meeting said to me 'a sort of cold shudder beat through the meeting after you [Agar-Robartes] said that the campaign was a game against C.B his name was never mentioned until his words were read on Friday morning, then I admit there was much bitterness, for owing I hope to his words having been misinterpreted, I felt that those words had ruined the prospects of the Liberal Party'¹⁰

Worse followed when Lord Rosebery rose to address the crowd. Denouncing Campbell-Bannerman's position on Home Rule, Rosebery said: 'I, then, will add no more on the subject, except to say emphatically and explicitly and once and for all that I cannot serve under that banner'. Many took this to indicate that he would never serve in a government pledged to Home Rule; certainly the public rift both with his party leader and with his fellow Liberal Imperialists Asquith, Edward Grey and Richard Haldane, irreversibly widened. So serious were his comments that

Campbell-Bannerman thought him 'off his head'. Tommy too realised the seriousness of the situation, writing:

I repudiate any suggestion ~~that it was my desire to oust C.B. & to obtain~~ suggestion that the business was a 'put up job' as I have heard it described. Lord R as he got into the motor with me after Bodmin said 'I think that is probably the last speech I shall make on a public platform'. He said to me on Monday - 'I should be absolutely miserable if C B retires (what I meant by 'I cannot serve under that banner' was that I could take no further part in his campaign)'.¹¹

Tommy apologised for his misjudged comments and vowed in future to adhere to his usual well-prepared notes. It was later remarked that 'Mr Robartes was only voicing, like a parrot, the views of his political mentor'.¹¹ Rosebery, true to form, refused to express any regret later, saying: 'to very word, to every syllable of the Bodmin speech I absolutely adhere'.¹² Even though he consistently rejected any ideas of reclaiming party leadership many, Tommy included, hoped that he would assume the mantle once Balfour was defeated. Tommy concluded his letter

... much as I personally should like to see Lord R in the position of Leader of the Liberal party, I do not believe that he would accept the position ~~Great as~~ Great as is my affection for him, I put ~~personal~~ friendship the Liberal party before my personal friendship.

The controversy came during a period of tentative Liberal division. In the hope of precipitating a lasting Liberal split, Balfour's government resigned within days of the Bodmin speech. For the impending January 1906 election, Tommy - 'the Farmers and Miners Friend' - published his election pledges (Fig. 5), appealing to:

... the Electors of S.E. Cornwall ... 1st. To repair as far as possible the mischief accomplished by the late Government; and,

2nd, to help forward those great social reforms which are urgent and necessary.¹³

His wide-ranging pledges were aimed at the popular Cornish vote. Free trade he considered 'essential to the welfare of the Empire ... and the happiness of the people'. Opposing the 1902 Education Act, he supported an amendment to take all schools into public control and to abolish religious testing for teachers. He viewed the situation in South Africa as lamentable and, in view of the Cornish mining interests in the Transvaal gold mines, was opposed to the impending humanitarian disaster of the Chinese 'slaves'. Moreover, he championed land reform (particularly in amending the Agricultural Holdings Act), better working-class housing, protection of trade unions and fairer local taxation. He was staunchly opposed to an independent parliament for Ireland - a position based largely on Cornwall's Nonconformist sympathies, its geographical proximity to Ireland and the more practical concern of fishing in Irish waters. On the issue of the 1904 Licensing Act Tommy saw it as detrimental to temperance reform, asking: 'Why should the drink traffic be the only trade allowed to carry on business on the Sabbath?'¹⁴ Some years later he was quoted as saying:

I like my beaker of ale in the morning as much as any man - judging from the lively manifestations of joy from the gentlemen opposite, a considerable number of them must be financially dependant on the hop trade.¹⁵

Under the free trade and cheap food slogan, 'Vote for the Big Loaf - Vote for Robartes', eighty campaign meetings were held across his prospective rural constituency. For the first time in many of these scattered areas the motor car was in evidence; indeed three of the Agar-Robartes' private motor-cars were requisitioned in addition to over a dozen others. The enterprising Liberal agents also organised: 'a cyclist corps who darted hither and thither bearing electioneering literature, the handle bars of their machines

Fig. 2: Lanhydrock House, Bodmin, Cornwall. Completed in 1644, Lanhydrock was fully refurbished after a fire in 1881. The property was bequeathed to the National Trust in 1953.

Fig. 3: The Agar-Robartes children, 1896. (L-R) Gerald (later 7th Viscount Clifden), Mary Vere, Cecil, Everilda (Tommy's twin) with Alexander, Tommy, Constance, Victor (later 8th Viscount Clifden) and Violet.

Fig. 4: L-R Sir Clifford J. Cory (Cornwall West, St Ives), the Hon T.C. Agar-Robartes (Viscount Clifden), Rt. Hon. H.H. Asquith, the Hon. T.C.R. Agar-Robartes (Mid-Cornwall, St Austell), George Hay Morgan (Cornwall, Truro). Lanhydrock, 1906.

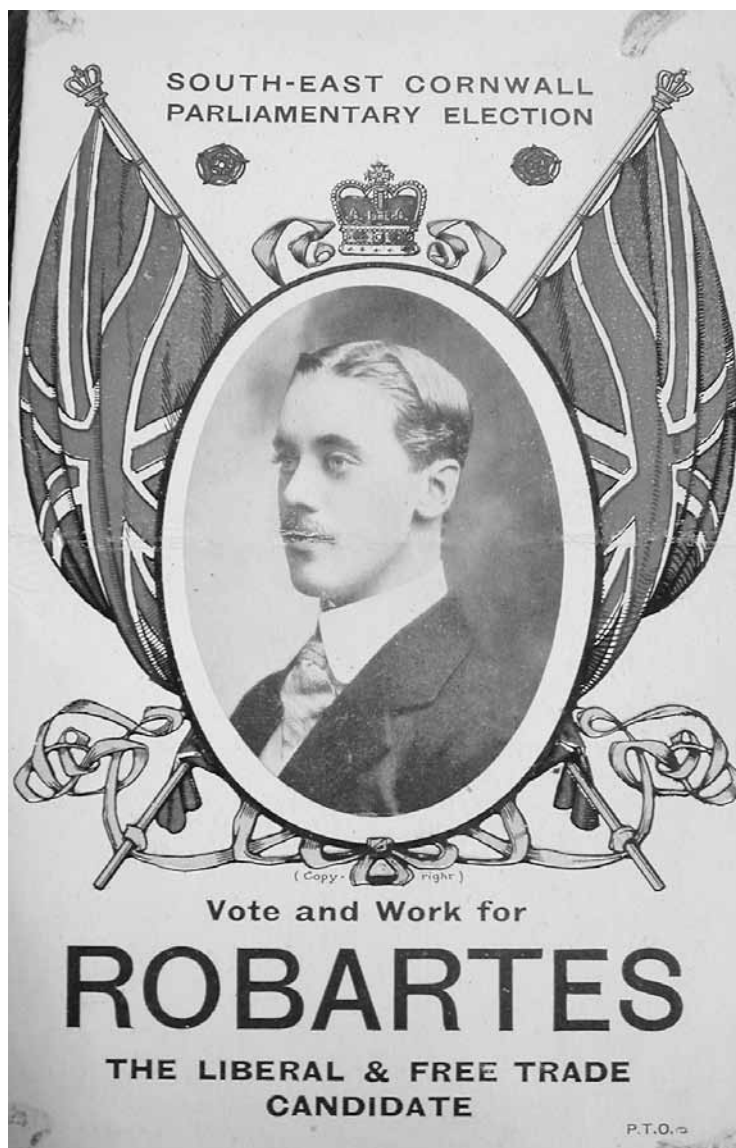


Fig. 5: *Vote and Work for Robartes: The Liberal and Free Trade Candidate*, election leaflet 1906.

Glory, however, soon turned to despair. In May 1906 the *Lostwithiel Guardian* reported 'a sudden bolt from the blue' – Tommy had been accused of 108 counts of bribery and illegal treating.¹⁸ The election petition for his unseating included such further indignities as excessive expenses, illegal payments and a 'meat tea' for the estate workers that was considered 'a very extraordinary proceeding' by the presiding judge. Although political inducements at this time were relatively common, the family strenuously denied any wrongdoing. The *Cornish Guardian* immediately launched and published its own investigation which was later considered as having a potential influence on the trial and thereby implicated in contempt of court.¹⁹ The public trial, held at Bodmin Assizes Court, ended with Tommy being found guilty and disqualified from his seat. In the process his mother and father were humiliated in the witness box by Judge Lawrence. Tommy later vented his anger:

When I saw my mother standing as a butt to the cheap jibes of a judge (shame) I thought to myself Bodmin will never forgive this (loud and continued cheering), and if it does then it is not the Bodmin that I used to know ... You have seen the [Robartes] name besmeared, a name, which I am proud to say, has always stood for freedom under three generations and has thrice fought the battles of the people (tremendous cheering).²⁰

Such emotional oratory was typical of Tommy's style. Needless to say, the press enjoyed the scandal; the *Daily Mail* mischievously reported 'wry smiles from the Liberals' and claimed 'the whole Division is laughing today ... The appeal to feudalism is regarded as quaint coming from a once Liberal member.'²¹ Effectively considered as bribery, aspects of Tommy's case were later used as a case study in Schofield's *Election Agent's Guide to Electoral Law*.

As one of 220 new Liberal MPs elected to the House of Commons during the 1906 election his disqualification meant that he had

supporting placards announcing their latest triumphs'.¹⁶

Alfred Browning-Lyne, the founder of the *Cornish Guardian*, proved a loyal supporter, describing Tommy's 'truly democratic' outlook as having a 'genuine sympathy for the masses of the people ... He was that seeming paradox, a democratic aristocrat.' On his opponent's side, a critical press campaign was initiated by the *Cornish Times* who blamed 'again and again the manner in which the mine-owners of the Division, through the Shylock qualities of their agents, have squeezed the life out of the mining industry'. Although this was in part a justified attack on the landed Cornish elite the *Cornish Guardian* leapt to Tommy's defence: 'The remarks set forth are made solely with the intention of injuring the candidature of the Hon. Agar-Robartes and are wholly unfounded'.

Tory trickery was rife. One campaign worker claimed that Viscount Clifden's tenants were forced to vote for his son. Another, on polling day itself, saw 'a Tory Sandwich man carrying posters made up of Liberal colours (blue and gold), but asking the electors to vote Tory'. The impromptu aphorism 'Vote for Robartes and Resent Trickery' was adopted and Tommy Agar-Robartes, aged 26, was elected as the Liberal MP for south-east Cornwall with a 1,172 majority over his Liberal Unionist opponent Horace Grylls. The *Cornish Guardian* reported 'A Triumphant Victory: South-East Cornwall Returns to Liberalism, Toryism Vanquished'.¹⁷ At the dissolution of the 1905 Parliament, of the seven Cornish seats, four were Liberal and three were Unionist; after the 1906 election all seven were Liberal.

all too briefly experienced the character of the new British parliament. He did however make a significant contribution when, on 9 March 1906, he introduced the Land Tenure Bill to the Commons. The bill entitled farmers to full profits from their capital input and payments for any improvements they made to the soil; had it passed in its original form the bill would have benefited many Cornish tenant farmers. The *Daily News* reported 'young Mr Agar-Robartes, sat on the steps of the throne, with the inevitable bunch of violets in his coat and watched the proceedings ... [His] agreeably youthful and slightly dandified appearance, demure emphasis and boyish wit secured him a very friendly, even a charmed audience.'²² As it was, his disqualification deprived the Cornishman of guiding it through its later stages. In recognition of his short period in office, 15,000 Cornish Liberals subscribed to a portrait of Tommy delivering the second reading of the bill (Fig. 1); a commemorative book records the presentation 'in affectionate recognition of a contest gallantly won for the Cause of the People'.

Tommy's Liberal colleague, and the joint secretary of the imperialist Liberal League, Freeman Freeman-Thomas, took victory at the by-election on 24 July, with a majority similar in size to Tommy's. Welcoming the result, Tommy reminded his constituents that he would return to say to Mr Freeman-Thomas: 'Give me back my constituency!'²³

His absence from politics was indeed short. In 1907 William McArthur resigned the safe Liberal seat of Mid-Cornwall (St. Austell) and on 5 February 1908 Tommy was elected unopposed.

As part of Asquith's first Liberal administration Tommy supported the government's initiatives on free trade and temperance reform. As his confidence grew, however, shortfalls in his character became more apparent. One was impetuosity – a throwback to his Oxford days, when his lecturer regarded him: 'very careless – [he] rushes wildly at a paper without thinking of what he is putting down'. During a debate on the Finance Bill in October 1909 Lloyd George highlighted Tommy's lack

of organisational skills, remarking 'Before he makes another speech ... give a little more time to the study of the bill.'²⁴ Furthermore, a hasty temper was often in evidence. After the Lords' rejection of temperance legislation, he dashed off a speech which, hopefully, remained in draft:

What happened then? A large number of Tory peers, the owners of brewery shares, Little Englanders, pro-brewers, the friends of every country but their own, narrow minded bigots—~~assembled~~ assembled together in a compound mansion in Berkeley Square, decided to throw out this Bill after an hour's discussion, dashed off in their motors and bought more brewery shares ... from that moment this Bill, was supported by all the forces of Christianity, was dead'.²⁵

Such impulsive qualities, coupled with his youthful naivety,

isolated him within his own party and shaped his independent and often controversial character. His criticisms of the 1909 'People's Budget' (which led him eventually to vote against it) led his constituents to question his suitability as their representative. As the *Cornish Guardian* reported:

With all the good feeling possible personally towards Mr. Robartes, I fear his action has been such that will justify many of us asking, 'Is he a suitable representative for us?' ... Many a member of the Government would be glad of being the Liberal candidate for the St. Austell division at the next election ...²⁶

Some weeks later at a public meeting Tommy turned the accusations around and made his audience feel that *they* were being questioned about their attitude towards *him*:

Fig. 6: *To the Electors of the Mid or St Austell Division of the County of Cornwall, election leaflet 1910.*



I ask those who call themselves Liberals in this constituency, to extend to me the courtesy, which I would certainly extend to them, to write to me first, personally, to ask if I have any explanation to give as regarding my vote – before they indulge in a tirade against me in the public press, which, after all, can only have one effect, to sow the seed for any political opponent to reap. (Hear, Hear!) ... If I had any of my own fish to fry, if I had any personal motive in this question, I should have opposed not only the undeveloped land tax ... but the whole of the land clauses ... super taxes ... death duties (Hear, hear). I should have joined and ranged myself from the first with the Tory party if I had any special interest to serve. (Hear, hear). I should have sought by means of Tariff Reform to have thrown the burden of taxation on to the shoulders of the poor. (Hear, hear). I resent those attacks and I think that I am justified in doing so. (Applause).²⁷

He rejected the offer of a government whip's position in 1909, for the reasons, as his party agent C.A. Millman later explained, that he wanted to retain his 'manly independence as well as his position near the exit if escape was needed from some of the dreary proceedings'.²⁸ Millman continued:

This was an opportunity not to be despised or lightly treated. Mr. Robartes was good enough to consult me on the matter and while I advised him to please himself I expressed the hope that he would see his way to accept the offer and thus commence an official career which I felt would sooner or later command distinction and influence. To my surprise and chagrin he declined the offer made by the Prime Minister on the grounds that if he became a member of the Government he would no longer be able to oppose the Undeveloped Land Tax!

Tommy's staunch objection to the introduction of undeveloped land

taxes was based on his passion to defend agriculture, in particular Cornish farmers, who worked in what he called 'the greatest industry in this country'.

In December 1909 Parliament was dissolved. On 8 January 1910 Tommy published his election pledges (Fig.6):

I appeal to you for your support to retain the victories of 1906 and 1908, in order that Free Trade may be secure, and that the House of Commons, elected by your votes, shall predominate for ever over the unrepresentative House of Lords.²⁹

Despite the inevitability of his own peerage he regarded 'the principle of Hereditary Legislation as indefensible and injurious to the best interests of a democratic community'. On the crisis of the People's Budget of 1909 he wrote: 'Who are the rulers, the People or the Peers?' Of the Lords themselves he questioned:

Why then were they there? They were not there by choice or approval of their fellow countrymen; they were not there from any personal merit, but were there simply by an accident of birth ... They had no political death; they had merely political immortality ... How could they give consent to put an end to their own existence? It would be like asking a fellow whom one did not care about to hang a stone around his neck and chuck himself into Dozmary pool.³⁰

To his constituents he wrote:

It is, therefore, with confidence that I appeal to the Electors of this Constituency to maintain the unbroken privileges of the House of Commons. Although I desire to see a Second Chamber performing its proper functions of revising and checking Legislation, I am unalterably opposed to an inheritable right of rejection that only asserts itself when a Liberal Government is in office. I am prepared to support the abolition of the Veto of the House of Lords, and am also in favour of the

establishment of a New and Impartial Second Chamber, constituted in the future by Order of Merit instead of by Accident of Birth.³¹

The Hon. Gerald Agar-Robartes, later 7th Viscount Clifden and a Liberal minister in the Lords, said in support of his brother: 'The hereditary principle was absolutely indefensible ... the will of the people should prevail over the privileges of the Peers'.³²

During the campaign Winston Churchill supported Tommy at a rally in St Austell. Rather overstating Tommy's political successes he said:

Our chairman is himself largely, if not mainly, responsible for the great deal of legislation that passed through Parliament ... I predict for him – if you will return him to the House of Commons, as I am confident you will – a successful political career which will do honour to this constituency before all the country and will strengthen the great hold which the cause of Free Trade and liberalism and national freedom has made upon the hearts of Cornishmen.³³

Tommy rallied – 'This day I am occupying the Chair; on Tuesday I shall occupy the seat'. He was returned as MP for mid-Cornwall with a 3,087 majority, and in the second election of 1910 was elected unopposed. His popularity was expressed in a letter published in the *St Austell Star*:

To our Tommy. I sincerely wish you a Merry Christmas Mr Robartes. All through the year you have stuck to your post and to your duties in the House of Commons splendidly. It has been hard, grinding work too, and most exacting, with a tremendous amount of overtime thrown in. And worse luck, and worse still, so much of the work accomplished by the People's House has been mutilated, murdered, done to death by the Peers' House.³⁴

As an industrious independent backbencher Tommy travelled to the United States of America in

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1910 and Canada in 1912, taking pains to attend important presidential meetings.³⁵ The *Somerset Gazette* described Tommy as 'The best dressed man in Parliament but so exquisite was his taste, that he never displayed ostentatious luxury'.³⁶ His colourful appearance was matched by his sharp humour; George Croyden Marks (MP for North-East Cornwall) noted that his speeches were 'extremely well researched ... interesting and witty'.³⁷ When he criticised his party's Irish policy he was scolded, being 'looked upon as a knave by some, as a fool by others and as both by the rest'.³⁸ He replied:

I well remember that my hon. Friend, if I may call him so, the member for West Belfast (Mr Devlin) was so determined in his opposition to my amendment excluding the four counties, that he threatened to sever his head from his body if the amendment was carried, and to sit opposite a truncated corpse, Mr Deputy-Speaker, at that time I considered that as the only solution to the Irish problem.

During the 1910 campaign Tommy had remained committed, as had the by now diminished figure of Lord Rosebery, to opposing an independent parliament for Ireland. He worked long and hard researching the important issues, amassing a cache of Liberal pamphlets, political books, brochures and leaflets on the subject – many of which are still held at Lanhydrock. Articulately stating the cultural and statistical case he moved an amendment to the Government of Ireland Bill in 1912 to exclude 'the counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down and Londonderry'. The amendment split opinion and sparked fierce cross-party debate. Some saw it as a declaration of war against Ulster; others considered the potential Unionist division as wholly unacceptable. The government staunchly opposed the amendment, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Mr. Birrell, commenting that:

I have no hesitation whatever in saying that it is not the



Fig. 7: 'The Knights of the New Becket', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 April 1911.

Sir Agar: 'Our Asquith shows no fury. We must goad him!'
 Sir Wedgwood: 'Aye, for this haughty Chancellor must die!'
 Sir Primrose: 'He must! He shall! Myself will do the deed!'
 (With apologies to the Muse of History.)

intention of the Government to accept this Amendment which has just been moved by my hon. Friend. Indeed, it would require a very great deal of evidence from Ulster itself to lead to the belief that she desires to cut herself off from the rest of Ireland.

Tommy replied:

This Bill makes the mistake of treating Ireland not as two nations, but as one nation different in sentiment, character, history and religion. I maintain it is absolutely impossible to fuse these two incongruous elements together. It is impossible to reconcile the irreconcilable.

In the hope that the Liberals would become divided, Tommy's great friend, the Tory James de Rothschild, moved an amendment to exclude Ulster from the bill but then withdrew it in favour of Tommy's four counties proposal.³⁹ With their lack of a majority the government needed the Irish vote, and the amendment was defeated by 320 votes to 251 with Tommy a teller for the 'Ayes'. In light of Asquith's later Irish policy Tommy claimed at least

some consistency in his views when strongly questioned in his constituency.

Publicly Tommy held firm to his personal belief that the Liberal Party:

... is to me a vast number of men and women all marching forward – not agreed to how fast or how far they may go; but all inspired and driven by the same motive power, the desire to march forward with a fixed determination.⁴⁰

Yet privately his independence saw him drifting further from the Liberal mainstream.⁴¹ He was already out of line with Lloyd George's land tax proposals contained in the 1909 budget, and the Liberal approach to Home Rule, when, in April 1911, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published a cartoon portraying Tommy, Neil Primrose and Josiah Clement Wedgewood as plotters against the Liberal Lord Chancellor, Lord Loreburn (Fig.7). It was these 'knights' who drew attention to the widespread discontent at the undemocratic methods of appointing magistrates to the county Benches thereby contributing to his resignation the following year.



Fig. 8: Tommy at his happiest – with his political mentor, Lord Rosebery, at the races. Cover from *The Tatler*, 3 June 1914.

Tommy also voted against the government on Edward Carson's Ulster exclusion amendment of January 1913 and abstained on the guillotine motion on Lloyd George's Finance Bill in July 1914.⁴² However, his rebellious nature was soon tempered when events in Europe shifted the patriotic young Cornishman's focus from confrontational frontline politics to out-and-out war.

In the lead-up to war in Europe, Tommy had passionately supported the growth of the Territorial Army; he was himself an officer in the 1st Royal Devon Yeomanry (Territorial Force) between 1902 and 1911.⁴³ The enforcement of the military deterrent was in his opinion 'a guarantee for the maintenance of Peace'. Consequently, in February 1914, he drew up his will and in August took up an appointment

as 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Bucks Hussars.⁴⁴ Being stationed in England, he 'could not bear the thought that others were taking risks which he did not share', so in February 1915, after returning to England to perform best man duties at Neil Primrose's wedding, he left for France as an officer in the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards. Three months later he wrote to the St. Austell Liberal Association a 'Letter from the Trenches':

1st Coldstream Guards
In a dirty ditch somewhere in
France
May 17, 1915

Dear Mr Hancock – I am sending you this short note to ask you to give my kindest regards to the Liberal delegates of Mid-Cornwall, who, I understand, will be meeting together as usual on Whit

Monday. I hope that every one of them is assisting by every possible means in the great struggle that lies before us. I have noticed with satisfaction that Liberals and Unionists in my constituency have worked together on the same platform with the same object in view, the final triumph of Great Britain and her Allies over the fiendish atrocities of our enemies, whose hideous massacres of women and children have left them to claim no right to an inch of the sun.

We cannot utter the word peace until they have been repaid the uttermost farthing. The more complete our victory the more assured is peace and prosperity of the civilised world in days to come.

Every man can help! Every effort is required, for, although our ultimate victory is certain, I would venture to remind the delegates that it is a long, long way to Berlin. So one and all must help.

With kindest regards to yourself and to my many friends in all political parties in mid-Cornwall, believe me, yours sincerely,

Thomas Agar-Robartes

By September his battalion had advanced on Loos. The regimental war diary records:

At about 6am on September the 26th 1915 two Sgt's, Hopkins and Printer, who were in this officers company, went out in front of our trenches at the chalk-pit almost up to the Bois Hugo to bring in a wounded man. When they were about to return Sgt Hopkins was shot down by a German sniper. Sgt Printer continued on with the wounded man and brought him into the lines. Captain Robertes [sic] who had been watching this whole episode, at once went out with Sgt Printer and brought back Sgt Hopkins who was severely wounded. The whole ground in front of the chalk pit was covered in the Enemy's machine Guns, Captain Robertes was himself severely wounded shortly afterwards.⁴⁵

On 28 September Tommy was unsuccessfully recommended for a Victoria Cross for conspicuous gallantry in the field. He was, however, to be put forward for a high military decoration if he were to survive his injuries. Two days later, Tommy, aged 35, died in the 18th Casualty Clearing Station (Fig.9); he was mentioned in despatches on 30 November.⁴⁶

On his death the *Cornish Guardian* reported: 'His Death was Grand, The Cause was Just'; his mother simply wrote 'we do not know how to bear our grief'.⁴⁷ At the St Austell Liberal Club meeting on 8 October 1915 a great gratitude was tendered from the constituency members. The club had:

... watched his Parliamentary career with great admiration, and felt confident that his straightforward and firm adherence to his convictions, as well as his statesmanlike abilities, would secure for him in the future a high place in the administration of national affairs, and it unfeignedly regrets that those hopes have been so soon cut off.⁴⁸

Fig. 9: Grave of Captain The Hon T.C.R. Agar-Robartes at Lapugnoy Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France (picture by Mr A Smith).



Mr H.S. Hancock added that 'on the last occasion that he had met Captain Robartes at Lanhydrock before he went to the front, he conveyed the impression that he never expected to see England again'.

Politically the loss was tragic enough but for the family it proved to be immeasurable. Being heir to the peerage and 120,000 acres of estate Tommy was set to lead the family forward. He died unmarried despite being 'known in Paris and Monte Carlo as in London, and being a most eligible *parti* was greatly but unsuccessfully courted by matchmaking *mammas*'.⁴⁹ After the war the spirit of the family faded and although nine of the Viscount's ten children survived infancy only one produced a child of their own.

After the Second World War it was apparent that the heir was not committed to the estate so in 1953 it was bequeathed to the National Trust. Tommy's brothers, Gerald (1883–1966) and Victor (1887–1974) became successive Viscount Clifdens, while two of his sisters, his twin Everilda (1880–1969) and Violet (1888–1965) lived at Lanhydrock until their deaths. Today the Lanhydrock estate attracts in excess of 200,000 visitors a year. Personal artefacts of Tommy's are on display in the house, his grave markers are in the churchyard and a memorial window is in the adjoining church. He also had stained glass windows installed to his memory in Wimpole Parish Church and St Wilfred's Chapel at Church Norton in Sussex.

Politically Tommy showed great potential yet quite how his allegiances would have developed in a changing political climate we can only speculate. Political epitaphs flowed thick and fast. The *Manchester Guardian* wrote: 'He revealed an unexpected talent for getting all parties by the ears and yet arousing and holding the by no means unfriendly attention of the general public'.⁵⁰ The *London Opinion* believed that 'he showed little respect for [House of Commons] conventions, and declined to treat the assembly as seriously as it treated itself'.⁵¹ His flippancy prompted the Irish MP John Redmond to ungraciously

describe him as 'one of the most whimsically incongruous figures in the Government ranks ... no one took him very seriously'.⁵²

A memorial service was held at St Margaret's, Westminster on 13 October 1915, where Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch said of Tommy:

He had in him and he carried it eminently, that which I think, if men could be judged like thorough-breds in a show, would make a man an English gentleman, recognisable from every gentleman in the world. And the mark of it is that he, the English gentleman, treats life, under God, as the finest, the gallantest, and the most glorious of all sports ... That was Mr. Robartes. No man in this adventure of life, at any moment, weighed danger more cheaply against what I may call the 'fun of it' ... He went out in just that way – gallantly out to France to the trenches just as if he were taking a fence or a hedge ... His fiery spirit like a star went out into the night and leapt the threshold of another world.⁵³

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Acknowledgements.

I am much indebted to Mike England for additions, comments and corrections. His book *A Victorian Family at Lanhydrock: Gone the Happy Dream* (Bodmin, 2000) puts into more context Tommy's life and times. The National Liberal Club, London, set this work in motion through commissioning an exhibition on Tommy's political life in 2005. Duncan Brack and Chris Collins have been helpful with their comments as have the anonymous reviewers. As always Kathryn and Eleanor have been a pillar of strength. All pictures by kind permission of the National Trust.

1 This article draws on some uncatalogued resources held at Lanhydrock House (hereafter LHA).

- References will include a brief description rather than any catalogue number.
- 2 *Western Morning News*, 4 October 1915.
 - 3 For a more detailed history of the house and family see Paul Holden, *Lanhydrock House-Book of the House* (National Trust, 2007).
 - 4 'Memorial to Captain the Hon. T.C.R. Agar-Robartes', Liskeard Liberal Club, 30 September 1916 – speech made by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.
 - 5 *The Sketch*, 'The Primrose Path to Matrimony', 14 April 1915. Primrose died in 1917 during the campaign in Palestine. Both men's heraldic crests were originally mounted in the old Commons Chamber and were reinstalled below the new South Gallery after enemy bombing in 1941.
 - 6 *Western Daily Mercury*, 16 March 1903.
 - 7 *Ibid.*
 - 8 Election leaflet: 'Vote and Work for Robartes: The Liberal and Free Trade Candidate', 1906. Election leaflet, 'To the Electors of the Mid or St Austell Division of the County of Cornwall', 8 January 1910.
 - 9 *Cambridge Independent Press*, 11 August 1905.
 - 10 LHA. Rosebery's actions have been discussed further in David W. Gutzke, 'Rosebery and Campbell-Bannerman: the Conflict over Leadership Reconsidered', *Historical Research* 54, 1981, pp. 241–50 and Leo McKinstry, *Rosebery*, London, 2005, pp. 469–75.
 - 11 *Cornish Guardian*, 8 October 1915.
 - 12 'Lord Rosebery and the Liberal League: Justification of the Bodmin Speech', *The Times*, 12 December 1905.
 - 13 'Vote and Work for Robartes: The Liberal and Free Trade Candidate', election leaflet 1906.
 - 14 LHA undated draft speech. See also *Cornish Guardian*, 26 January 1906 and *Cornish Times*, 26 January 1906.
 - 15 LHA undated newspaper clipping.
 - 16 *Cornish Guardian*, 26 January 1906.
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 *Lostwithiel Guardian*, 24 May 1906.
 - 19 Peter Stephens, 'Alfred Browning Lyne, a Man of Conviction!', *Cornish Guardian*, 11 August 2005.
 - 20 *Daily Chronicle*, 21 July 1906.
 - 21 *Daily Mail*, 21 July 1906.
 - 22 *The Daily News*, February Editions 1906.
 - 23 *Cornish Guardian*, 21 July 1906.

'No man in this adventure of life, at any moment, weighed danger more cheaply against what I may call the "fun of it" ... He went out in just that way – gallantly out to France to the trenches just as if he were taking a fence or a hedge ...'

- 24 *Hansard*, 20 October 1909, p. 419.
- 25 LHA undated draft speech.
- 26 *Cornish Guardian*, 13 August 1909.
- 27 *Cornish Guardian*, 12 November 1909.
- 28 *Cornish Guardian*, 8 October 1909.
- 29 'To the Electors of the Mid or St Austell Division of the County of Cornwall', election leaflet, 1910.
- 30 LHA undated draft speech. In Arthurian legend Dozmary Pool on Bodmin Moor was where King Arthur requested Sir Bedivere to return Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake.
- 31 'To the Electors of the Mid or St Austell Division of the County of Cornwall', election leaflet, 1910.
- 32 LHA.
- 33 *Cornish Guardian*, 28 January 1910.
- 34 *St Austell Star*, 17 December 1910.
- 35 *New York Times*, 7 November 1910. Tommy was reported as a guest at Tammany Hall with Neil Primrose, Murray Graham, James de Rothschild and Cecil Grenfell.
- 36 *Somerset Gazette*, undated cutting in Lanhydrock collection.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Hansard*, 2 April 1914, p. 1467.
- 39 Thanks to Chris Collins for drawing my attention to this.
- 40 LHA undated draft speech.
- 41 'The Liberal cave and the 1914 Budget', *English Historical Review*, June, 1996, p. 632.
- 42 *The Liberal Magazine*, February 1913, p.49. *Manchester Guardian*, 8 July 1914. *British Weekly*, 7 October 1915.
- 43 National Archives, WO 337/42464.
- 44 Whilst in London he resided at 1 Great Stanhope Street, Mayfair, Middlesex. He left £3,688 6s 6d. (£158,820 equivalent in 2010) at the time of his death.
- 45 Thanks to the Regimental Headquarters Coldstream Guards for this information. The 'Intelligence Summary' (National Archives, WO95/1219) recorded on 28 September 1915 also lists 'Cpt Hon T. C. Agar-Robartes MP (wounded)' amongst 229 casualties.
- 46 National Archives WO 337/42464. *London Gazette*, 1 January 1916. He was posthumously awarded the 1914–15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal in 1922.
- 47 *Cornish Guardian*, 8 October 1915.
- 48 *Western Morning News*, 11 October 1915.
- 49 *London Opinion*, 10 October 1915.
- 50 *Manchester Guardian*, 18 January 1915.
- 51 *London Opinion*, 10 October 1915.
- 52 *Manchester Guardian*, 18 January 1915.
- 53 'Memorial to Captain the Hon. T.C.R. Agar-Robartes', Liskeard Liberal Club, 30 September 1916.

REPORT

What's left of Gladstonian Liberalism in the Liberal Democrats?

Evening meeting, 25 January 2010, with Dr Eugenio Biagini and Chris Huhne MP. Chair: William Wallace (Hon. President, Liberal Democrat History Group)

Report by Mark Pack

WILLIAM GLADSTONE'S legacy for modern political parties was the subject for discussion at the January meeting of the Liberal Democrat History Group. The

meeting was addressed by both Eugenio Biagini, of Cambridge University, and Chris Huhne MP, the Liberal Democrat Shadow Home Secretary and keen collector of Gladstone memorabilia.