

CHEL TENHAM'S L

Cheltenham's elegant spa reputation and Cotswold hinterland means that it is often assumed to be a natural Tory seat, the current run of five Liberal Democrat victories presumably something of an aberration. From a historical perspective, this is quite wrong. Always an essentially urban constituency, Cheltenham has rarely been a safe Tory seat, and the tally of MPs since 1832 is now nine Tories to nine in the Liberal tradition with one fascinating independent. And many of the Tories were distinctly urban in flavour with new money and social reform cropping up as recurring themes.

Martin Horwood MP examines Cheltenham's Liberal history.



Cheltenham Promenade showing the Boer War Memorial.

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THE INDIVIDUALS who sat on the green benches for the town have been an extraordinary cast of characters, only occasionally involved in great affairs of state but reflecting the changing nature of politics and parliamentary representation over the last two centuries. For the *Journal*, I have inevitably concentrated on the Liberal MPs but a full profile of each member is available on my website at www.martinhorwood.net/past_MPs.html.

Berkeleys and Beauports

Before 1832, Cheltenham had no MP of its own but was represented by two county members for Gloucestershire. Polls and party allegiances are first mentioned in the seventeenth century and the first recorded votes were in the 1776 by-election held in the turbulent reign of George III after the Tory incumbent entered the House of Lords. A furious

by-election contest ensued between the 'gallant sailor' George Cranfield Berkeley for the Whigs and the Duke of Beaufort's Tory candidate William Bromley Chester. £100,000 is said to have been spent on sweetening the few thousand electors – a staggering sum for the time. Chester won 2,919 votes, narrowly beating Berkeley who polled 2,873. But Berkeley succeeded before long. He was elected in 1783 and on a further seven occasions, one of the thirty members of the family to represent Gloucestershire in parliament over the centuries.

The Berkeley family's presence in Gloucestershire dates back to Norman times with the original charter for Berkeley Castle and the title of baron granted by Henry II in 1117 to the merchant Robert FitzHarding, probably in return for generous loans to the king. Robert's son Maurice married Alice de Berkeley and their descendants still live in the castle today. The family's gift for politics helped them navigate

LIBERAL HISTORY

rebellions, civil wars and dynastic changes. The ninth Lord Berkeley was given an earldom by Charles II and raised to the Privy Council by James II but nevertheless emerged on the winning side in the Glorious Revolution. By the early nineteenth century, more than twenty Berkeleys had already been Gloucestershire MPs, including William 'Fitz' Berkeley who was elected in 1810 but narrowly escaped being unseated on the grounds that he was actually the high-living fifth Earl's illegitimate son, his glamorous wife Mary having been an unmarried maidservant at the time of his birth.

Cheltenham's reputation as a fashionable spa resort was by this time well established, and the town finally gained its own parliamentary representation in the Great Reform Act of 1832. The very first election was unopposed, the seat going to yet another member of the ubiquitous Whig family: Fitz's younger (and unquestionably legitimate) brother.

An atheist, an infidel and a scoffer at religion

Craven Berkeley, Cheltenham's first MP, could politely be called a bit of a character. The twelfth child of the fifth Earl of Berkeley and his former maidservant Mary Cole, Craven reached the rank of captain in the Life Guards and was brother to four previous Gloucestershire MPs. He was also accused of guarding the door of a London bookshop while his brother horsewhipped the Tory proprietor for publishing a bad review of his book. He fought a duel against the Tory MP for Chippenham but both missed twice. Before he was even elected, Craven had also crossed swords (metaphorically) with 'the Pope of Cheltenham', the formidable evangelical Anglican and arch-Tory Dean Francis Close.

He certainly didn't share Close's disapproval of racing, theatre and drink and when Close called him 'an atheist, an infidel and a scoffer at religion',¹ Craven threatened to sue him for slander. Close probably felt vindicated after Craven's election when he proposed an amendment to Sunday pub opening hours which would have removed closing time. A passionate liberal, Craven couched even his argument for more drinking time in terms of solidarity with working people and consistently supported extending the franchise. Perhaps he always had his own mother's modest origins in the back of his mind.

Craven was re-elected in 1835 against token opposition from a Radical candidate. His election campaigns were boisterous affairs involving entertainment, marching bands decked out in his orange and green colours, and several small riots. He defeated serious Tory opponents in 1837 and 1841, but was defeated in 1847 by Sir Willoughby Jones – the only Tory ever to beat him at the polls – after tactlessly drawing attention to the mortality rate in Cheltenham during a parliamentary debate on public health. It was an important issue to raise but potentially devastating for the spa town's tourist trade.

Passing rich and gloriously drunk

Jones interrupted an otherwise continuous thirty-year run of Berkeley domination following an election 'in which money was spent like no other' and 'every man who had a vote and was willing to sell it was passing rich for many days after, not to say gloriously drunk also.'² Perhaps the Berkeleys were sore losers, but no sooner had the Norfolk baronet been elected than he found himself fighting off a petition to

unseat him on grounds of 'bribing and treating'. The evidence was not difficult to gather and parliament's liberal majority voted to unseat him. The subsequent by-election was won by Craven, but he was promptly unseated on petition for exactly the same reason as Jones. The two fought each other again in 1852 in what must have been a particularly bitter campaign. Craven won, but this was to be his last election. He died in Carlsbad in Germany in 1855, still an MP but aged just fifty.

When Craven was unseated on petition in 1848, Berkeley Castle suddenly needed a new candidate to keep the seat warm. Step forward cousin Grenville, who narrowly won the by-election and then graciously stood aside for the returning Craven at the following general election in 1852, despite having been appointed a whip in the meantime. He then secured his own election as MP for Evesham but, when Craven died, Grenville yet again responded to the family's call and resigned his Evesham seat to stand in Cheltenham. Whether in sympathy for the family, through his own talents or simply by outspending his bank manager opponent, he secured a whopping 81 per cent of the vote at this second by-election. Having caused a third by-election, in Evesham, by resigning there, he sat for Cheltenham for less than a year before forcing yet another by-election by accepting the crown office of Commissioner of Customs.

Grenville was succeeded by his cousin Francis, a captain in the Royal Horse Guards and nicknamed 'the Giant'. Cheltenham's third Berkeley MP was the son of one of Craven's older but illegitimate brothers, Admiral Sir Maurice Berkeley, who was already MP for nearby Gloucester. Francis, by now Colonel Berkeley, faced no Tory opposition in the subsequent

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CHELTENHAM'S LIBERAL HISTORY

1857 general election since they, like him, supported Palmerston's aggressive China policy.

The fall of the house of Berkeley

The Berkeleys got a shock in 1859 when another general election saw a vigorous new Tory candidate called Charles Schreiber come within twelve votes of defeating the colonel. A good organiser and 'a forcible speaker', Schreiber stood again in 1865 and pitched his arguments well to his still-small, urban, property-owning electorate, railing against both the aristocratic fox-hunting activities of the Berkeleys and the threat of concessions to workers, Catholics and Nonconformists. 'Of all the existing forms of government, democracy is the lowest and worst,' he declared. 'Shall England abandon her Protestant Faith, her Established Church, the blessing she enjoys, for the evils offered to her clothed in the specious garb of Progressive Reform and Civil and Religious Liberty?' Religious opinion in the town swung strongly behind him.

Nationally the new 'Liberal Party' had united Whigs and Radicals, but in Cheltenham the colonel obviously failed to rally the troops. Berkeley Castle's influence was waning and, with religion such an electoral issue, even Berkeley's attendance at the Grand Prix in Paris on a Sunday was used against him.

Tensions ran high at the 1865 poll. Schreiber had to dodge rotten eggs and dead cats at the hustings, but the violence got worse and a Liberal runner was shot dead by one of Schreiber's supporters. Amidst riotous scenes, the Tories squeaked victory by twenty-eight votes and promptly had their windows broken by a radical mob. Schreiber astutely left the windows unrepaired for many weeks. He then successfully fought off accusations of bribery in the now customary election petition to take his seat in the Commons.

The defeated colonel bitterly complained that Cheltenham was 'very dear and more money is spent on political matters than it is worth. I wish I had never seen the town of Cheltenham.' Cheltenham returned the compliment. No Berkeley ever stood for parliament here again. Francis inherited his father's title and seat in the House of Lords

in 1867. In 1886, he completed the break with the political past by accepting the presidency of Tewkesbury Conservative Association.

Battle of the undergraduates

It must have been a real blow to the local Conservatives that a man of Schreiber's political talents stood down at the next election. He said it was to 'abandon the quest of politics for that of porcelain'.³ That he and his wife eventually amassed one of the finest collections of fine china in Europe must have been little consolation to the Tories.

A new generation contested the 1868 general election. The Tories selected a twenty-two-year-old Cambridge undergraduate called James Agg-Gardner, who launched his campaign with a rejection of the 'hide-bound Toryism' that opposed all social reform. The Liberals chose a twenty-three-year-old Oxford undergraduate, Henry Samuelson, the son of wealthy Banbury Liberal MP Sir Bernhard Samuelson. It was a good time to be the Liberal candidate, as Gladstone swept to a landslide national victory on a platform of reform. Samuelson campaigned in particular for universal education and turned the Tories' narrow majority into a Liberal one of 188.

Even the kindest friend would have to admit that his maiden speech was hopeless. He chose a debate on the odd subject of the House of Commons Ladies Gallery screen. According to the official record, he dismissed the suggestion that removing the screen would force ladies to wear evening dress because 'it was the custom in society for both sexes to appear in full dress or neither'. Gales of laughter ensued but Henry missed the joke. Within a couple of years, he was putting in a much more assured performance in favour of the revolutionary 1870 Education Act for which he had campaigned and which paved the way for universal primary education for all.

But the mood of the country – and the state of the economy – was changing. Disraeli's Tories had picked up the baton of social reform and, when the 1874 election offered Agg-Gardner and Samuelson a rematch, it was the Conservative who won. Agg-Gardner was to be Cheltenham's longest-serving MP by some distance, representing the town over a staggering timespan of

fifty-four years, but his tenure was to be far from uninterrupted.

The loving cups wink right joyously

As Gladstone stormed back into office in 1880, Agg-Gardner lost Cheltenham to the flamboyant Liberal candidate Charles Conrad Adolphus, Baron du Bois de Ferrières. De Ferrières was the grandson of a Napoleonic general whose family had settled in the Netherlands, where he was born in 1823. The family moved to England when Charles was very young and settled in Cheltenham so, despite his exotic roots, he was actually the Liberals' most local candidate yet. In 1867 he was granted 'letters of naturalisation' without which he couldn't have stood for parliament.

Although he had opposed the establishment of Cheltenham's mayor and corporation in 1876, the handsome baron had joined the triumphant Liberal majority in the first municipal elections that year and succeeded fellow Liberal William Nash Skillicorne as mayor in 1877. 'His mayoralty' commented his rival Agg-Gardner 'was marked by generous hospitality. In the presence of the Baron, maces and loving cups winked right joyously as knowing who was their friend'. A great collector of Dutch masters (which he eventually donated to the town), he was 'a picturesque citizen and a sincere lover of Cheltenham' and the obvious choice for the Liberal parliamentary candidacy in 1880. But the baron only squeaked home in Cheltenham by twenty-one votes. He was an active MP, but it must have dismayed the local party that he declined to defend his tiny majority five years later. Agg-Gardner suggests he had 'had enough of St. Stephen's and of the rather insistent demands made upon him'. With Gladstone's popularity waning, the return of the parliamentary seat to the Tories was pretty inevitable.

Agg-Gardner's majority of 804 over radical *Punch* journalist Rudolph Lehmann in the election of 1885 was a Cheltenham record. The Tories had obviously adapted successfully to the now much-increased electorate with improved organisation, including the foundation of a Conservative Club.

Another election soon followed, in 1886, over the critical issue of

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Irish home rule. Although they initially failed to get back into government, the Conservatives won many seats – and Agg-Gardner held Cheltenham with a majority that now topped 1,000. In 1892 the pendulum swung back to Gladstone's Liberals yet again. Agg-Gardner's majority was reduced, but this time he held on. At last his persistence had begun to make Cheltenham a safer seat for the Tories.

Implacable warfare

Agg-Gardner chose the 1895 contest to stand down 'for reasons unconnected to politics' but not explained in his memoirs. Colonel Francis Shirley Russell, an Aberdeenshire landowner and soldier, was safely elected for the Conservatives in Cheltenham, albeit with a reduced majority, seeing off both his official Liberal opponent and the first independent labour candidate, Mr Hillen, who polled just twenty-three votes.

The colonel was an active and eloquent MP but already in his late fifties, and when he announced his retirement the local association lost no time in bringing Agg-Gardner back for the 1900 election. As it turned out, the Liberals were now deeply split over the Boer War and failed to find a candidate in Cheltenham, handing Agg-Gardner the first unopposed victory since Craven Berkeley's original win in 1832.

1906 was another matter. The Unionist coalition, now under Arthur Balfour, split itself over free trade, while Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman now led a radical, reforming and reunited Liberal Party. The Cheltenham Liberals selected John Sears, a London architect and son of a Baptist minister, as their candidate. Sears was still a senior London county councillor but promised to be a zealous radical opponent for the old stager Agg-Gardner, who hadn't actually won a contested election for fourteen years. Sears' lack of a local connection was overlooked as Campbell-Bannerman's party swept to a historic landslide victory at national level and the Liberals regained Cheltenham for the first time in twenty years.

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pensions, punishment for child neglect and banning many forms of child labour. Amongst these huge issues, Sears chose the spectacularly boring subject of Inland Revenue organisational reform for his maiden speech. He stood down from the London County Council in 1907 but never seems to have really established himself in Cheltenham and stood down from the parliamentary seat 'for family and personal reasons' at the next general election. He later made an unsuccessful bid to return to parliament, contesting St Pancras in London for Labour in 1935.

Expenses scandal

In the January 1910 election, dominated by the blocking of Lloyd-George's radical People's Budget by the House of Lords, Cheltenham Tories could hardly have chosen a more aristocratic candidate. Vere Brabazon Ponsonby was the son of an Irish earl, Lord Bessborough, and so himself Viscount Duncannon. The new Liberal candidate, Richard Mathias, was the son of an Aberystwyth steamship owner and pursued careers as a barrister and banker in London before returning to the family shipowning firm. He was a political radical, supporting votes for all women and men and a national minimum wage – just right for the now firmly radical Cheltenham Liberals. But the national swing was against Mathias and, despite winning the largest Liberal vote ever of 3,850, he lost to Duncannon by 138 votes.

The chance of a rematch came in December 1910 when new Liberal Prime Minister Asquith went to the country again to win clearer public support for his attack on entrenched aristocratic privilege in the House of Lords. But in their desperation to unseat Duncannon, Mathias's campaign team overstepped some important marks. No sooner had they snatched victory by just ninety-three votes, than his election expenses were challenged. He took the oath of allegiance on 1 February, but by the end of March his agent, Mr Kessel, had already admitted that he had overspent, illegally paid for lifts to the polls and generally made a mess of the official election return. In court, Mathias's lawyers made some effort to clear his name, but he never made

a maiden speech and goes down in history as Cheltenham's shortest-serving MP.

Four votes, eighty years, three parties

Richard's brother, Major L. J. Mathias, contested the by-election caused by the expenses scandal in September 1911. The nervous local Tories had brought back the popular old warhorse Agg-Gardner yet again, and the Liberals lost after six recounts by just four votes. It was surely the most extraordinary comeback of Cheltenham political history. And it was a fateful moment for the Liberals. The party would be bitterly divided by the coming war, Agg-Gardner wouldn't now relinquish the seat until his death in 1928, and the Liberals would not regain it for more than eighty years. But it would not all be plain sailing for the Conservatives.

In 1918 Agg-Gardner comfortably held the seat as the wartime coalition candidate with a majority of 3,285 over an Independent Liberal. He went on to win the following elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924, although the Liberals shaved his majority back to 1,344 in the middle election. Made a privy counsellor for sheer longevity and affectionately nicknamed 'Minister for the Interior' for his services to Commons catering, the Right Honourable Sir James Tynte Agg-Gardner died in office in 1928.

Gardner's successor, the Conservative Sir Walter Preston, resigned his Commons seat in 1937, leaving Cheltenham an apparently safe Tory seat for the first time in its history. Preston had soundly defeated the Liberals in 1928 and 1929 and when division had left them with no candidate in Cheltenham and only Labour contesting the seat in 1931 and 1935, Preston trounced them too. The Tories had now won nine successive victories. Surely it was inconceivable that the Conservative Party would lose the subsequent by-election ...

The Jew has not so many friends ...

In 1922, the sporting and military private school Cheltenham College decided that the time for their separate Jewish boarding house was past. The incumbent housemaster Daniel

CHELTHENHAM'S LIBERAL HISTORY

Lipson was also president, secretary and treasurer of the Cheltenham Synagogue and in 1923 he set up an independent Jewish school. It didn't work out and closed in 1935. But the charismatic Lipson had already been elected as a county councillor in 1925 and a borough councillor in 1929 and in 1935 he became mayor of Cheltenham. When Preston retired, Lipson's name was discussed as an obvious successor. Whether because he wasn't a kosher Conservative or

simply because he was Jewish, the Tories picked Lieutenant-Colonel R. Tristram Harper instead. Showing his independent streak again, Lipson stood anyway, and an association was formed to support him as the 'Independent Conservative' candidate. Lipson polled 10,533 votes, beating the official Conservative by 339 votes.

In parliament, Lipson proved a gifted and frequent orator. He was at his most passionate in condemning

Nazism and, despite his support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, was prepared to support pro-Arab land regulations on the basis that 'at this time, Great Britain's interests are the interests of the Jew and the Jew has not so many friends in the world today that he can afford to quarrel with his best friend'.

1945 brought the defeat of Churchill by Attlee's Labour Party. Labour's vote in Cheltenham surged, too, but Lipson's surged more. Standing as a National Independent, he romped home with a majority of nearly 5,000 votes and knocked the official Conservative candidate, Major Hicks Beach, into a humiliating third place.

War, peace and Zion

By 1950, it had all changed, and in that year's election, the positions were almost perfectly reversed. Hicks Beach took the seat with a majority of nearly 5,000, while Lipson came third with just 25 per cent of the vote. Although there was a national swing to the Tories and every other independent MP lost their seat as well, it seems likely that other factors helped to end Lipson's career. Britain's role as mandated colonial administrator of Palestine had brought it into increasing conflict with the swelling Jewish population. In 1946, Zionist terrorists blew up the King David Hotel, killing 100 people in the British army's local headquarters. In 1947 there were reciprocal executions of Zionist terrorists and British military hostages. Anti-semitism in Britain increased, and anti-Jewish riots broke out in six British cities as the situation in Palestine deteriorated. The next year, Israel was born straight into a war with its Arab neighbours which Britain nearly entered on the Arab side after Israel shot down three British Spitfires over the Egyptian border.

Even the gifted, peace-loving Lipson, who treasured the Jewish relationship with Britain, was going to struggle for re-election as a pro-Zionist MP after all this. He continued to play an active role in Cheltenham local politics after his defeat and was awarded the freedom of the borough in 1953, an honour given to only Agg-Gardner and Baron de Ferrières amongst his predecessors.

Lipson's victorious successor in 1950, Major Bill Hicks Beach, was in

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many ways the archetypal Tory MP: an Eton and Cambridge-educated, Gloucestershire landowner. His successor, Douglas Dodds-Parker, was more famous for his earlier exploits in the Special Operations Executive's daring wartime intelligence and sabotage operations and for his disastrous spell as a minister defending Eden's doomed Suez policy, than for any subsequent achievement as MP for Cheltenham.

The strange rebirth of Liberal Cheltenham

Lipson's defeat ushered in forty years of consecutive Conservative victories, but the same era saw rapid growth in light industry and, from the 1950s, of GCHQ's highly qualified intelligence community, making it a less and less typical Tory county seat.

Labour nearly won the seat in 1966 but, when Harold Wilson called an election in October 1974, it was the reviving Liberals who posed a fresh threat to whoever took up the Tory baton. Freddie Rodger was standing again with the chance to squeeze Labour votes and close the gap on the Tories. The latter played safe, and chose a veteran county and borough councillor and former mayor, Charles Irving, as their candidate. He was also, usefully, a millionaire hotelier. In the event, votes nationally and locally swung back towards Labour and drifted away from Thorpe's Liberals again. Harold Wilson was back in Number Ten, and Irving was safely elected with a majority of 8,454 over an almost equally divided opposition.

As the Labour government descended into chaos, the 1979 election looked like a foregone conclusion, and Charles duly romped home in Cheltenham with the biggest Tory majority since 1935, beating Liberal Nigel Jones by 10,538. But Jones' determined community politics campaign did resolve the issue of who the challenger would be in future. He beat the Labour candidate by nearly 6,000 votes.

The political geography was changing dramatically. While Mrs Thatcher plumbed depths of unpopularity, Labour lurched further to the left, with right-wing defectors forming the new SDP and immediately allying with the Liberals. The new Alliance briefly commanded

the opinion polls, but the Falklands war transformed Mrs Thatcher's image and paved the way for a landslide victory in 1983.

With Jones abroad, the Cheltenham Liberals invited national party president Richard Holme to become probably the party's most heavyweight candidate since the Cheltenham seat's creation. With the added credibility of the new Alliance, their vote surged to more than 20,000, Labour's nearly halved and so did Charles' majority.

Victory, controversy and tragedy

By the next election, in 1987, Mrs Thatcher's popularity was waning again and Labour was reviving, but in Cheltenham the borough council had already fallen to the Alliance and the anti-Tory vote united behind Holme. Irving's majority fell below 5,000. That the parliamentary seat was still even relatively safe was testament to his huge personal popularity, but his health was failing and he stood down at the 1992 election. At national level, Mrs Thatcher had by then been ousted, and her replacement John Major was struggling to hold the government's different factions in check. The Liberals and now Liberal Democrats had been edging closer and closer to victory in Cheltenham for twenty years and were now the dominant party in local council elections. Richard Holme had taken a shortcut to parliament as Lord Holme of Cheltenham, so both parties were looking for new candidates.

After a close-fought selection contest, the Lib Dems chose the returning candidate from 1987, Nigel Jones, now a councillor and proven local campaigner. Despite the obvious vulnerability of the seat, the Tories bravely picked John Taylor, a Birmingham lawyer with no campaigning experience. In one TV interview he tactlessly described his choice of Cheltenham as 'just a box I ticked on a list'. More controversially, Taylor was also the party's first black candidate for a winnable seat and racist remarks were attributed to members of his own party during the campaign, a doubtless unconscious echo of the prejudice against Lipson that may have doomed their 1937 campaign.

The result that had looked increasingly inevitable following

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years of campaigning by Jones and his predecessors finally came about. Nigel snatched the seat with a narrow majority of 1,668, the first Liberal to represent Cheltenham for more than eighty years. Taylor later followed Richard Holme into the Lords as the Tories' first black peer but chose Warwick not Cheltenham as his territorial designation. His political career ended in disgrace in the aftermath of the expenses scandal earlier this year. Media comment that Nigel had won the seat because of Taylor's colour did a particular injustice both to years of Liberal campaigning and to Nigel's profoundly anti-racist politics. He went on to win two further victories with comfortable majorities in 1997 and 2001 and took on a bewildering variety of spokespersonships for the party in parliament. His second term was overshadowed by a sword attack by a mentally ill constituent who hospitalised Nigel and killed his friend and assistant Andy Pennington.

Postscript

Late in 2004, after repeated heart scares, Nigel accepted the inevitable advice of family and doctors to stand down as an MP. He became a working Liberal Democrat peer after the 2005 general election, the first former Cheltenham MP to enter the House of Lords since Lord Duncannon in 1937. The general election wins that year and again this year mark the longest run of Liberal victories since the days of the Berkeleys in the 1840s.

Cheltenham was indeed a safe-looking seat for the Tories in the early 1930s and again in the 1950s and 1970s, generally thanks to divided opposition. But for much of its history, it was the setting for furious contests between the Liberal and Conservative traditions, with historic upsets a-plenty.

Martin Horwood MP was elected to represent Cheltenham in 2005 and re-elected in 2010. He is currently co-chair of the party's parliamentary committee on international affairs.

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