

Liberal Heritage

Sir Alan Beith MP continues the *Journal's* series in which well-known Liberal Democrats take a look at the Liberal heritage of their own locality.



DISCOVERING BERWICK'S LIBERAL HISTORY

LIBERAL HISTORY IS WRIT large on the landscape of Northumberland. Not that Liberals have had it all their own way. Historically, and even today, the Percy family, who were traditionally Tory, wield considerable influence in what is still a very feudal county. In Alnwick, both the Liberal Democrats and the Tories have their offices in premises owned by the duke's estate. And in the south-east of the county, a strong Liberal tradition in the mining communities of Ashington and Blyth later gave way to two Labour parliamentary seats. Liberal fortunes revived in local elections there, which has helped to secure a Liberal Democrat minority administration on Northumberland County Council since 2008. The modern Berwick constituency is made up of the pre-1888 Berwick Borough constituency and a large part of the old Northumberland County constituency. In 1826 W. E. Gladstone's father, John Gladstone,

was elected as a Conservative for one of the two seats in the Berwick Borough constituency. The contest was marked by so much corruption that he was unseated the following year. In the Northumberland County constituency in 1826, an ancestor of Tim Beaumont fought a duel on Bamburgh's magnificent beach with an ancestor of Lord Lambton (of whom more later). Beaumont was standing against Lord Howick, whose brother-in-law, 'Radical Jack' Lambton, challenged Beaumont on his behalf. Shots were exchanged, but Lambton declared that honour was satisfied before anyone got hurt.

Howick was the son of the great Northumbrian Earl Grey, now more regularly famous for the tea specially blended for him than for the 1832 Reform Act, or for his notable efforts against slavery, or even for his long-lasting affair with the Duchess of Devonshire, by whom he had a child. He is magnificently commemorated in

Berwick-upon-Tweed: the Town Hall across the Old Bridge across the Tweed

the city of Newcastle, not only by his monument, but by the attachment of his name to perhaps the most elegant street to be found in any major city in England. Grey's family home was in the heart of what is now the Berwick constituency at Howick Hall, a few miles from Alnwick. Despite a fire in the 1920s, Howick is still recognisably the hall which Grey knew, and although it is not normally open to the public, the magnificent gardens are. Appropriately, there is a superb tearoom housed not in stables or outbuildings but in a grand part of the Hall. There you can sip your Earl Grey tea and reflect on the immense political battle its original recipient fought to achieve the first modest widening of the franchise and the abolition of at least some of the more grotesquely unequal constituencies. In the grounds there is a small church, with the Grey family memorials.

A few miles away at Falloden is the house of the other famous



Grey, Sir Edward, who was Liberal MP for the Berwick division from 1885 to 1916. He was a distant relation of Earl Grey and was Foreign Secretary at the outbreak of the First World War. His former home is not open to the public and it, too, suffered a serious fire in the 1920s. Sir Edward Grey had a lifelong enthusiasm for nature and for birds. Local people, by whom he was much respected, speak of him sitting by the pond at Falloden, surrounded by birds, teaching local children about the various species. He had his own railway station on the estate, which enabled him to commute to London much as I do today, although it took twice as long. He is commemorated in Embleton church.

While in Embleton, it is worth noting the former Presbyterian manse, just across the road from the parish church. Here was born the radical Liberal journalist W. T. Stead. During his editorship of the *Northern Echo* and later the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he used every kind of sensationalism as a means of progressing radical causes. He went to prison for a dramatic stunt in which he 'bought' a young girl and sent her to safe keeping in order to demonstrate the reality of child

Cartoon commemorating the duel between Beaumont and Lambton in 1826

prostitution and trafficking in nineteenth-century London. He was backed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and General Booth of the Salvation Army: the introduction of the age of consent into law was the outcome of his fight. He met his end on the Titanic, on his way to speak at a peace conference in New York. Until a few years ago the strains of 'Nearer my God to Thee' could be heard at a biennial memorial service for him in the former Presbyterian Church.

Just a few miles away we encounter another great Liberal name. Tughall Hall, near Beadnell, was the home of Sir William Beveridge, who was Liberal MP for Berwick from 1944 to 1945. He won the seat in a by-election following the death of another Grey. George Grey, a young man with great leadership potential, had been elected in 1941 but he was killed in action in France in 1944. Beveridge lost the seat in 1945 in an election in which his own report on the future of the welfare system was the main talking point. The reason is obvious from the figures – his campaign failed to stop a rise in the third-place Labour vote. A squeeze leaflet might have made the difference. His grave lies in a quiet hilltop

churchyard at Thockrington, on the way to Hexham.

A few more miles of travelling will take you to the country house hotel at Doxford Hall, which incorporates the former home of the first Viscount Runciman. Runciman worked closely with Grey, and was in the 1908 Cabinet as President of the Board of Education, although Campbell-Bannerman said he was 'a mutineer whenever mutiny was possible'. He was a vigorous opponent of Lloyd George, and was the messenger of Halifax's doomed attempt to mediate between the Czechs and the Sudetenland Germans in 1938. His contribution to the building of the 1930s Methodist chapel at Seahouses is commemorated by a plaque in the entrance porch.

Another country hotel, at Tillmouth Park, near Cornhill was the home of Sir Francis Blake, Liberal MP for Berwick from 1820 to 1835 despite two attempts to unseat him in Berwick's perennial arguments about electoral corruption. Blake, who had eight illegitimate children by two mothers, was a radical ahead of his time, publishing a pamphlet in favour of an elected House of Lords in 1838.

Closer to Berwick along the Tweed Valley, what is now

Longridge Towers School was the home of the last MP for the separate Berwick borough constituency prior to the 1888 redistribution, Sir Hubert Jerningham. He was unusual among Berwick MPs for being an ex-diplomat, a Catholic, and an author of books in both English and French. After his parliamentary retirement he became Governor of Mauritius and then of Trinidad and Tobago. He presented a statue of his late wife to the town, and it can be found in Bank Hill, overlooking the River Tweed.

The constituency has plenty of later radical Liberal connections. The village of Longhorsley was the maternal home of Emily Wilding Davidson, the suffragette who threw herself under the king's horse at the Derby in 1911, and who had previously hidden in a broom cupboard in the House of Commons during the census. Her recently restored grave can be found in St Mary's churchyard in Morpeth, where she was laid to rest after hugely attended funeral processions in both London and Morpeth.

Well worth a visit is Wallington Hall, a National Trust property given to the nation by Sir Charles Trevelyan. As a Liberal he held junior office at the Board of Education under Runciman in 1908, but he joined Labour in 1918 and served as Education Minister in the two brief

inter-war Labour governments, but became increasingly frustrated with political life. Some of his descendants are, happily, back in the Liberal fold.

Berwick's political history was turbulent. The old Borough constituency, with an electorate of less than a thousand even after the 1832 Act, was rarely free of corruption and bribery allegations, and the Commons called for a Royal Commission to examine the 'corrupt practices at Berwick upon Tweed'. The Northumberland county constituency, and the Berwick county division created in 1888, was and remains a battleground between Liberals and Tories. To the south of the constituency, the mining area returned the first miner MPs, Thomas Burt and Charles Fenwick, both of whom remained active in Liberal politics throughout their parliamentary careers and refused to join the Labour Party. Fenwick represented Wansbeck from 1884 to 1918, and Burt represented Morpeth for forty-four years. Parts of their constituencies are in the modern Berwick constituency, and more will be in the new Berwick and Morpeth constituency under the Boundary Commission proposals.

If you take the road from Wooler to Berwick you will catch a glimpse of the white-spired

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shooting lodge which was Lord Lambton's constituency residence when he was MP for Berwick, although his main homes were in County Durham and London. He was something of a maverick, a right-wing Tory, despite being the descendant of 'Radical Jack.' He was a nineteenth century Earl of Durham who backed parliamentary reform, married Earl Grey's daughter, tried to set up an accepted system of government for Canada, and was described by Thomas Liddell as 'a danger to the established order'. His twentieth-century descendant, the late Lord Lambton, proved a threat to the established order in a different manner. It was his resignation after what was known, in the terminology of the time, as a 'call-girl scandal' which gave rise to the fiercely contested 1973 Berwick by-election: a fifty-seven-vote Liberal victory. Liberalism was back on the Berwick constituency landscape, and was back to stay.

Sir Alan Beith has been MP for Berwick since the by-election in 1973. He was Chief Whip of the Liberal Party, and has served as Deputy Leader of both Liberal and Liberal Democrat parties. He now chairs the Justice Committee and the Liaison Committee of the House of Commons. Before his election he was a lecturer in politics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Orpington by-election research appeal

I'm a long-standing member of the Liberal Democrat History Group, a contributing editor to the *Journal of Liberal History*, and the inspiration for the campaign to find the Greatest Liberal a few years ago.

After working as a journalist for twenty-odd years, albeit writing about history whenever I could, I'm hoping to embark on a PhD on the Orpington by-election. I plan to do it full-time over three years, doing the odd story here and there to supplement my income. However, the fees at King's College, London, are £3,900 a year, and I haven't been able to secure any funding.

Knowing this might be a subject of interest to some *Journal* readers, I wondered whether anyone might be willing to help fund my academic research. In return, I will of course make the fruits of my research available to the *Journal*, keep any funding 'angels' fully informed as to my progress and provide them with a bound copy of my thesis when completed.

I would be very grateful to any readers who could give the matter due consideration. Thank you.

York Membership

16 Heatham Park, Twickenham, TW2 7SF
07946 421 771; york.membership@btopenworld.com

