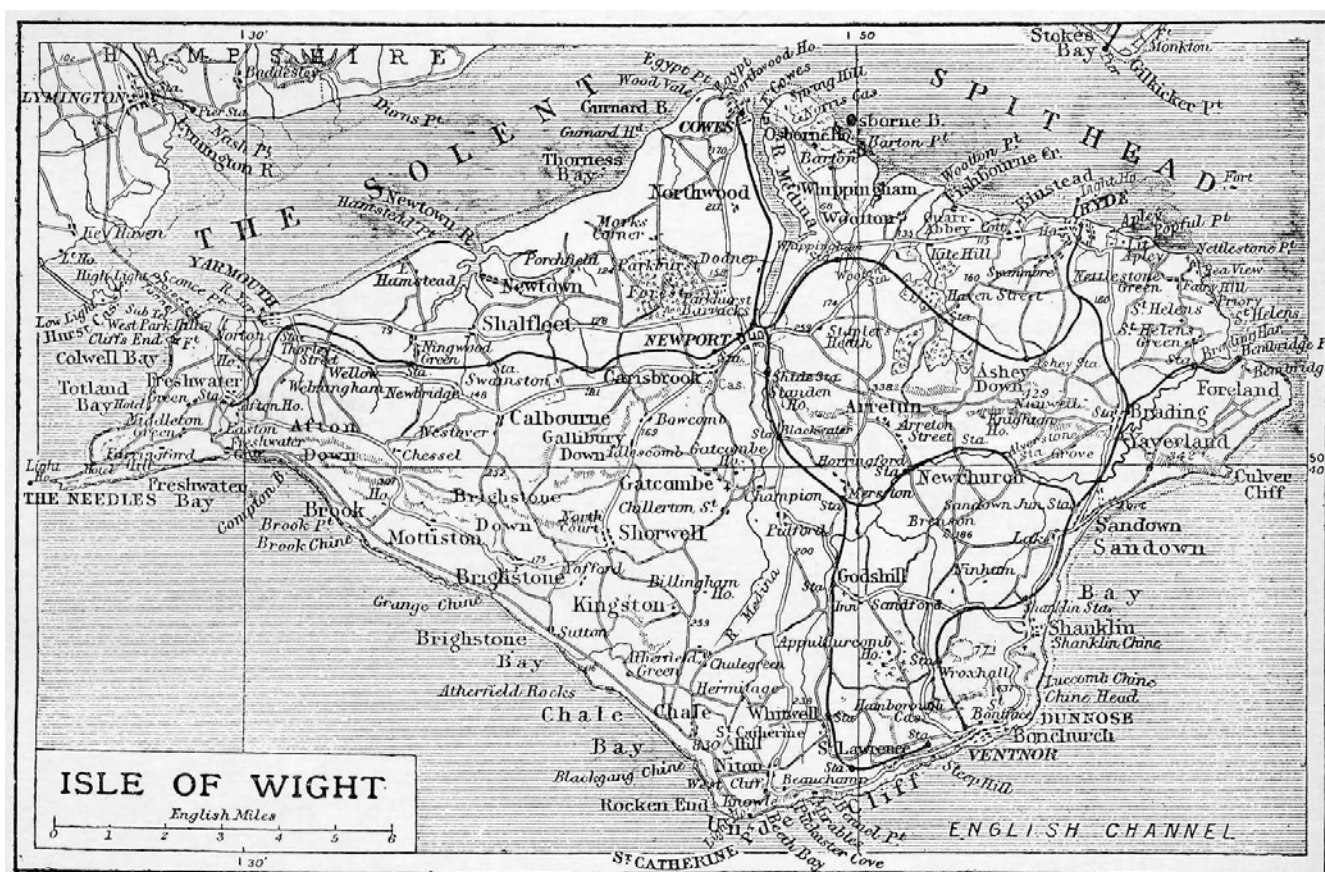


# LIBERAL PARTY IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT A STUDY OF A LIBERAL-CON



It is difficult today to appreciate the passionate interest in politics displayed by the Edwardians. The great political issues of the time were often debated against a background of social and industrial unrest and penetrated to the semi-rural and offshore division

of the Isle of Wight. The island had had a chequered political history since 1832, with the Conservatives and Liberals sharing the parliamentary victories. **Ian Ivatt** looks at the Island's political and electoral history between 1900 and 1910.

# TY FORTUNES IGHT 1900 – 1910 SERVATIVE MARGINAL SEAT

**T**HE ISLE OF Wight was something of an electoral enigma: in some ways it resembled Unionist territory, but the island mentality had isolationist and individualistic traits which favoured Liberalism, while Non-conformity was well entrenched, particularly in the villages.<sup>1</sup>

Both the Conservative and Liberal parties had traditionally polled quite highly in this seat. Indeed, since the great Reform Act, Conservatives had been elected no fewer than twelve times, two of which were unopposed. The Liberals were victorious on ten occasions and would gain their largest majority in 1906 when Sir Godfrey Baring was elected with a 1,561-vote majority. Yet, in the January 1910 general election, this majority completely melted away to let in the Conservative (now called Unionist) candidate, Douglas Hall, from the mainland, by a relatively modest 291 votes. By this time, the registered electorate had increased by about 5 per cent as compared to the 1906 level; whilst the Liberal vote share had decreased from 55.8 per cent to 49 per cent. Did this merely reflect the general lessening of Liberal support in southern England plus the nationwide upsurge in Unionist fortunes? Or was the loss of the island Liberal seat in 1910 due, at least to some extent, to local factors? A case will now be made to establish this theory, or something close to it. The certainty is that

there were no Labour candidates to influence the results.

In his social and parliamentary studies (for 1900), Henry Pelling reported that nearly 17 per cent of the island electorate were home ownership voters.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, the island's economic mainstays were tourism and leisure events, especially Cowes yachting regatta week each August with its increasing royal and international patronage. Important as it was, agriculture played a minor economic role, essentially confined to the inner part of the island. One pointer to the social structure of the island in the Edwardian age is that, in 1901, 8,163 people on the island were involved in one area or another of domestic service. This equates to 10 per cent of the working population, the national average being 6 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

Most especially, the 'Wight' in 1900 was home to the rich and famous. In addition to Queen Victoria and her daughter, Princess Beatrice, other island residents, at least in Victorian times, included Alfred Lord Tennyson, Algernon Swinburne, and the scientists John Milne and Guglielmo Marconi, the latter of whom undertook his early radio experiments from Niton in the south of the island. Dickens and Macaulay were regular visitors as, later on, was Winston Churchill. In addition, distinguished statesmen and a good number of Members of Parliament had second homes

there. Domestic work, already referred to, was plentiful, particularly in hotels and guesthouses. The broader employment situation tended to reflect that in Portsmouth just across the water – such as the dockyard work that was experiencing some redundancies by early 1906. Nevertheless, work was to be found in White's Shipyard (established in Cowes in the early nineteenth century and eventually closed in 1981), which specialised in destroyer construction.<sup>4</sup> Across the Solent, in Portsmouth was the main 'Dreadnought' battleship yard.

The patronage (and presence) of Queen Victoria at Osborne, Barton, and Cowes, up to her death in early 1901, made the island, as evidenced by the above, a fashionable place to live. Edward VII, whilst ignoring Osborne, continued the trend by his personal interest in and membership of the Royal Yacht Squadron, based at Cowes. This royal interest might suggest some consolidation of Conservative support, yet voters in the smaller island towns and villages seem to have been largely Liberal. Pelling's assessment of the island's electoral demography confirms this by pointing out that although the major towns on the island were Conservative, 'in the villages, which were predominantly agricultural, non-conformity was very strong, and here the strength of Liberalism was also to be found'.<sup>5</sup>

The Isle of Wight  
in 1906

## LIBERAL PARTY FORTUNES IN THE ISLE OF WIGHT 1900 – 1910

Historically, the seat was 'marginal'. There was, much to Liberal chagrin, a sizeable proportion of outvoters (i.e. those who lived outside the island but owned a property there) – a point that would be much debated and theorised upon in 1910. Otherwise, a total registered electorate of 14,494 in 1900, as compared to a total island population that year of 83,434,<sup>6</sup> was not especially unusual (at 17.4 per cent). By comparison, according to the 1901 census, Brighton, admittedly a 'Borough' seat, had a total population of 153,386, of which only 12.2 per cent were registered voters.<sup>7</sup> Despite the restricted number of voters, political meetings in the Edwardian era were generally very lively affairs, and no less so on the island, with catcalling and heckling very evident. Newspapers too could play a part, and the island's main Saturday publication, the *Isle of Wight County Press*, tended to be pro-Unionist, whilst also covering selected Liberal stories that it judged to be newsworthy. As 1906 approached, the Liberals had their own newspaper, the *Isle of Wight Leader*, which somewhat redressed the political imbalance.

Fortunately, the island's Liberal endeavours (essentially the call for peace, retrenchment and reform, following national thinking) have been well documented in Walter Roberts' private publication, *A Centenary worthy of Celebration – The Fortunes of the Liberal Party in the [Isle of] Wight since 1877*.<sup>8</sup> In these papers Roberts clearly pinpoints those mainstream Liberal issues that were equally of vital local interest both by 1900 and beyond. These included the free trade argument, the emerging case for old age pensions, and contesting the inbuilt Anglican bias later maintained in the 1902 Education Act. The proposed licensing bills and the 1909 budget, particularly the taxation of land values, also merited serious discussion and had appeal as debating material for the island's electorate. Liberals and radicals, furthermore, already had concerns over the Boer War, the question of Chinese indentured labour, economic failures, and government mismanagement. These early years of the twentieth century sharpened the focus for change.

The Liberal Union and Liberal Clubs on the island held

enthusiastic meetings, and emphasised the need for an efficient party structure to combat the better-organised Tories with their eleven Tory Primrose League Habitations that emerged between 1883 and 1914 (most especially in 1888). Membership numbers vary, but according to Martin Pugh's analysis, Sandown had as few as 100 or so names listed, rising to 1002 in the north of the island at West Cowes.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, between 1888 and 1905, Liberal Club numbers were around 120 at Ventnor (where the Secretary was a Mr H. G. Tory!), 180 at Sandown, and 600 at Newport, with Cowes and Ryde equally attaining several hundred members.<sup>10</sup> It should be remembered when simply comparing membership list numbers that Liberal Clubs tended to be at a disadvantage due to the 'temperance' policy on club premises and at club activities. Nevertheless, 'social' events on the island, such as Liberal garden fetes, recitations and cycling, which would attract female support, began to become increasingly popular. Wight Liberals realised, albeit slowly, that influence was a valuable political asset. Baring, the island's Liberal MP from 1906 to January 1919, was frequently a guest speaker at local functions such as the Carisbrooke Bowling Club AGM Dinner in 1907.<sup>11</sup>

Island Liberal opinion had strong views on the plural voting system. After 1900, Isle of Wight Liberals claimed there were as many as 600 plural (outvoter/second home) electors, some coming to the island to vote from as far away as Leeds, Barrow, and Birmingham.<sup>12</sup> The new age of early motorcars and even steamboats, with the staggered election days, made this duplicate voting process possible. Despite the 1906 victory, Liberals on the island (and nationwide) wanted more than ever to end the plural voting anomaly. It was widely believed that these multiple votes had a crucial impact, particularly after the 1910 general election results were known.

During the Edwardian period, island parliamentary politics were dominated by two men: Sir Godfrey Baring (1871–1957) and John (Jack) Seely (1868–1947). Baring, who lived at Cowes in Nubia House, a substantial ivy-covered, three-storied mansion, was an old

Etonian and a member of the eponymous banking dynasty.<sup>13</sup> Seely was the third son of Sir Charles Seely of Brook, Isle of Wight, and was educated at Harrow. Up to 1904, they were divided politically, yet they were to continue a lifelong friendship both on the island and on the mainland. Seely's political and private life has been thoroughly documented by his grandson, Brough Scott, in Seely's modern biography entitled *Galloper Jack* (2003), and earlier by Cath Cooper's 2001 thesis *The Political and Military Career of Major General J. E. B. Seely*. Moreover, the present Lord Mottistone's (Seely's sole surviving child) encyclopaedic knowledge of his family history has provided additional information. However, Baring's role in politics has received less attention – a matter hopefully to be rectified within this article.

Baring, already High Sheriff of Hampshire (1897) and Chairman of the Isle of Wight Council, was affectionately dubbed the 'Prime Minister of the Island' by friend and foe alike. He endeared himself to many by being a keen yachtsman, local Magistrate, National Chairman of the Lifeboat Institution, Chairman of Cowes Urban District Council and Deputy Lieutenant of the island, amongst his numerous and varied occupations and offices. He was punctilious by nature although on one occasion in the 1890s, Baring had kept Queen Victoria waiting, when she was about to cross from Cowes to East Cowes by ferry. He was summoned to Osborne the next day, when he received a reprimand for keeping Her Majesty held back for ten minutes!<sup>14</sup>

Godfrey Baring's parliamentary electoral baptism was to contest the May 1900 by-election, under Liberal colours, caused by the elevation of the sitting Unionist, Sir Richard Webster, lately appointed to the position of Master of the Rolls. His Unionist opponent was Jack Seely (his coalmine-owning family had been Liberals until the home rule split of 1886 and several had been MPs) who won the seat, achieving 54.5 per cent of the vote in a result that was the worst for Liberals since 1885, save for 1886.<sup>15</sup> Oddly enough, this was despite Liberal claims that the party organisation on the island was 'in perfect condition'.<sup>16</sup> Local Liberal activists

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Sir Godfrey  
Baring  
(1871–1957)

decided not to contest the 'khaki' general election later that year – an opportunity lost, as the Unionist opponent, Seely, remained in South Africa, embroiled in the Boer War, and his wife, Emily 'Nim' Crichton held the fort. Seely's biographer Brough Scott concludes that 'back home there was an angel working in his absence; she was called Mrs Seely'.<sup>17</sup> Seely, a prominent Unionist free trader, later crossed the floor with Winston Churchill and fifteen other Unionist free traders in protest at Chamberlain's tariff reform proposals. He claimed that his conversion to Liberalism dated from 1903 and was inspired by the controversy over the importation of Chinese labour into South Africa as well as free trade.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Seely, after resigning his seat as a Unionist, achieved re-election unopposed, as a free trader in April 1904. Baring agreed not to stand in his way, although significantly retained the Liberal candidacy in the next general election occurring in 1906.

Nationally, Unionist popularity began to decline in the aftermath of the Boer War, when the 'Chinese Coolie' scandal emerged and educational (and hence religious) sensibilities became sorely tested. Conversely, helping employment, the island's warship yards also began building in earnest. Nevertheless, after Joseph Chamberlain's challenge to free trade was put on the table, the tide began to turn and favour the Liberals. Balfour's December 1905 resignation and the January 1906 general election created an opportunity for the Liberals on the Isle of Wight as elsewhere. Colonel A. H. Morgan was adopted to fight the Unionist corner in place of the now departed Jack Seely who had decided to contest Liverpool Abercrombie – being closer to his family economic interests of iron smelting and coal mines.

The Liberals on the island were cock-a-hoop over Seely's defection and moved swiftly to confirm Baring as their 'big name' candidate for the next election. As has been seen, Baring's pedigree was first class.<sup>19</sup> At local political and county administration level, he had an enviable record of service, and he had a reputation for fighting for all islanders' interests and identity. Liberal hopes were very much pinned on him to achieve parliamentary success once more. With the maintenance of tourism high on the island's list of concerns, and an undercurrent of pro-free-trade feeling plus ongoing Non-conformist unrest after the 1902 Education Act, it looked to be a very possible seat once more for the Liberals. Baring set about his task in earnest. He fully supported free trade, positively detested Chamberlain's ideas, and considered that the educational system should be free from denominational privileges. He was in favour of the taxing of land values, housing reform and supported the call for old age pensions.<sup>20</sup> The claims in the Unionist press that Baring had fallen under the spell of their hate figure, Lloyd George, looked more than a possibility, or so thought the *Ryde Observer*. With Parkhurst, a major national prison, on the island, Baring followed mainstream Liberal policy in expressing an interest in the rehabilitation of prisoners and the welfare of prison staff. Also, he favoured a system of smallholdings

and allotments in order to encourage men to go back to the land.<sup>21</sup> Most importantly, he believed that every adult man and woman should be eligible for participation in the government of the country [this was not quite the same as equal votes for men and women]. Evidently, Lady Baring was keen to promote the passive cause for the female franchise.<sup>22</sup>

As events transpired, the Isle of Wight provided a significant victory for the Liberal Party when the seat was captured by a 10.3 per cent swing from the Unionists in the general election of 1906. This was in line with Michael Kinnear's assertion, in his 1981 study of voting patterns, that the overall national Unionist percentage loss in that contest could be as high as 10–15 per cent.<sup>23</sup> Just over the Solent, by contrast, Portsmouth with two seats provided even greater mathematical permutations. In 1906, Labour fielded a candidate, with two Liberals, two Unionists and an Independent: six in all. Between 1900 and 1906, the number of eligible Portsmouth electors increased by 28 per cent, however the Unionist share of the vote decreased from 51.2 per cent in 1900 to 33.8 per cent in 1906. The Labour man took 17.6 per cent of the poll, resulting in victory for the two Liberals, with a 2.5 per cent increased share. Looked at in the wider regional context of south-east England, Michael Kinnear's 'straightforward comparison method' gives an average swing away from the Unionists of 7 per cent. A. K. Russell calculates a Unionist poll share of 68.2 per cent for the south-east in 1900, reducing to 48.4 per cent in 1906.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the mathematics, Baring, no doubt aided by his own personal charisma and prestige on the island, landed a very creditable electoral success for the Liberal Party.

Godfrey Baring thus proceeded to the House of Commons. As an individual, he was renowned as a 'natty dresser', although reportedly never happier than when wearing his nautical attire – a blue reefer coat and yachting cap. For his eleven o'clock matins at the Cowes Holy Trinity Church, ensconced in the family pew, he dressed considerably more smartly. He possessed a great sense of humour, and could invariably talk his way out of most



difficult situations. Most particularly, he was a master of procedures and the rules of debate and protocol, something which would clearly now be demonstrated to his parliamentary colleagues and opponents alike, in the House of Commons.<sup>25</sup> Upon his victory, Baring declared, 'After twenty years of Toryism, the Isle of Wight has returned to its old love. It was a victory for the workers, who are at last realising the power which the ballot confers upon them.'<sup>26</sup>

Baring was tireless in his devotion to the Liberal cause and voted in every division in the House of Commons in the year 1906 – 636 in all – often arriving back at his London home at 195 Queens Gate by cab in the early morning, utterly exhausted. Sir Charles Baring Bt. his son, believed his passage through the House was 'unexceptional for his public statements', perhaps somewhat harsh, as his Commons speeches and questions as recorded in *Hansard* ranged between his support for social and humane issues, to a whole plethora of naval matters and concerns.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, Baring was a good 'constituency man': he was well aware of the cottage-dweller's and working man's lot, and also regularly attended seasonal island dinners, to which local professionals such as doctors, headmasters, and solicitors were invited. Traditionally both of these working and professional 'classes' were the foundations of Liberal support. This was, effectively, Baring's version

Election poster for Jack Seely for the 1900 by-election

of Herbert Samuel's point: 'raising the enthusiasm of the working class without frightening the middle classes'.<sup>28</sup> It was in this context that Baring claimed, during the 1906 election campaign, that the working man 'never got a crumb from the Tory Government table'.<sup>29</sup> The press, moreover, reported that Baring suggested that the Conservatives only looked after their own – 'capitalists, landowners, Jewish mine owners (in South Africa), and brewers'.<sup>30</sup> One disgruntled Ryde resident, clearly of Unionist persuasion wrote to the island's *County Press* in July 1906 suggesting that the 'Radical government was placed in power by the unpatriotic and the ignorant'.<sup>31</sup>

As one could expect, the island's press provided local insight into Baring's 1906–9 progress. During 1907, for example, Baring was much in demand throughout the island for his stance on changes to the 1902 Unionist Education Act; his Nonconformist listeners were delighted. Subsequently, in 1908, Baring's support for the Liberal government's Licensing Bill was substantial (he described it as a just, honest and fearless measure of temperance reform), his convictions so much so that he was quite prepared to 'lose votes by it, or indeed his seat'; there would be no compromise and no surrender.<sup>32</sup> In that same year (1908), Baring's fervent enthusiasm for the Smallholding and Allotment Act was rewarded by the island's County Council receiving applications for

more than 1,000 acres of allotment land.<sup>33</sup>

In late 1908, whilst remarking that his Unionist opponents were ever active, Baring nevertheless claimed that the 'Liberal Party in the island was never in better heart or courage than at the present time'.<sup>34</sup> Debatably so, but the Unionists were not as this might suggest, merely idly standing by. Walter Roberts, in his centenary private publication asserts that the island's Liberal Union in their well supported gatherings 'were well aware of the need for efficient [local] administration, in readiness for strong Tory counter-attacks', which certainly did come in 1910.<sup>35</sup> These counterattacks included, from early 1908, tariff reform meetings that were held throughout the island, by courtesy of Unionist van tours.<sup>36</sup> Although initially it was claimed as a non-political movement, once price increase examples were brought into play with their attendant work-related aspects, and illustrative lantern slides shown, little evidence of political neutrality remained. Indeed the resultant Unionist electoral tactic was to place foodstuff costings above all other factors at the next general election.

Nevertheless, Baring was undismayed – no doubt because his political career had been enhanced by his appointment (1908–10) as unpaid Parliamentary Private Secretary to his fellow island resident, Jack Seely, now at the Colonial Office. The two Isle of Wight men were working together now! Oddly enough, Sir Charles Baring once remarked, 'as he [Godfrey Baring] never went into the Smoking Room [of the House of Commons] the Speaker seldom called him and when Prime Minister's appointments came up, Asquith overlooked him'.<sup>37</sup> Godfrey Baring later (1911–15) went on to be the Parliamentary Private Secretary for J. A. Pease, when Pease was President of the Board of Education. All this looked good for Baring – but what of local matters?

In 1906, the previously overlooked influence of the local Party Agent came to the fore, which might have raised some doubt as regards Baring's 1908 claim about the island's Liberal Party being in good shape. At the close of 1906, the local Liberal Executive Committee

decided to dispense with the services of their vastly experienced agent, E. W. Vincent, by a 5–4 vote. Vincent did not go quietly and consequently vowed (incorrectly, as he briefly returned to help in 1908) that he would have no further dealings with the Liberal Party.<sup>38</sup> Reading between the lines of the Isle of Wight newspaper, there might well be a connection with Vincent's departure and the fact that, during 1906, Vincent lost most of the appeals heard on the island by the visiting electoral Revising Barrister.<sup>39</sup> Not that his replacement, T. V. Pretty, who came from Hastings (another marginal seat), did much better between 1907 and 1909. Additionally, a further but equally devastating blow befell the island's Liberal organisation, namely the death, reported on 1 December 1906, of Miss Martin, keen activist, and lady Treasurer of Newport's Women's Liberals.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst there is clear evidence of Baring's Liberal credentials over the 1906–09 parliament, a drawback was, as Sir Charles Baring explains, that Sir Godfrey (his Baronetcy was granted in 1911, in recognition of his service to Liberalism with a separate non-political KBE in 1952) 'was [regrettably] not really interested in administration, which he

tended to take for granted. His great strength lay in dealing with his fellow colleagues and councillors'. Sir Charles adds, 'He was blessed with an infallible memory and with being a great judge of men'.<sup>41</sup> Contrastingly, Seely has been described as 'an issue and not a party man ... a man of wide and cross-party fellowships'.<sup>42</sup> Arguably Baring's good qualities, in the final analysis, could override all else. One might even speculate that his absolute faith in his local party members and administration was flawed simply because the consequences of the dismissal of the experienced party agent, E. W. Vincent were not viewed as seriously as this situation might have suggested.

Baring attempted to retain his seat in the January 1910 general election, only to be defeated, by 291 votes, by the new Unionist candidate, Douglas Hall, an Oxford graduate and landowner hailing from Petworth, West Sussex. Hall undoubtedly secured more votes not just on the back of generally increased unionist patriotic appeal, but by focusing on food costs, local unemployment concerns, home rule and the 'dangers of Socialism – as embodied in the 1909 Budget'. Hall's emotive campaigning themes

were to support a strong naval presence, sovereignty of the seas and to bind the Empire together.<sup>43</sup> To emphasise the point, Hall's electoral vehicle was decked out as a Dreadnought battle ship.

Baring may well have made the mistake of glossing over the islanders' German invasion fears. Such fears were particularly strong along the south coast and were inspired both by Britain's deteriorating relations with Germany (and its considerable military and naval strength), and by the novels of Erskine Childers and William Le Queux. These novels were hugely popular at the time and were woven around mass German spy operations and hidden arms caches. Island Liberals could have tried to calm these worries by more open and specific support for the Territorial Army, created by the Liberal government in 1907. However, the Unionists effectively took the lead here and played on voters' invasion fears, emphasising the difficulties in organising sufficient regular Army coast-watching as there were 'many places at which it would pay an enemy to land'.<sup>44</sup> Local press reports take up this theme, especially in the columns devoted to 'letters to the editor'. Indeed, that eminent Unionist, Admiral Charles

### Isle of Wight elections 1895–1910

Election	Electors	Turnout (%)	Candidate	Party	Votes	%
1895 GE	13,816	80.9	Sir R. E. Webster	C	5,809	52.0
			Hon. A. Wodehouse	L	5,363	48.0
			<i>Majority</i>		446	4.0
<i>Resignation on appointment as Master of the Rolls and elevation to the peerage as Lord Alverstone causes by-election –</i>						
1900 by-election	14,494	81.4	J. E. B. Seely	C	6,432	54.5
			G. Baring	L	5,370	45.5
			<i>Majority</i>		1,062	9.0
1900 GE			J. E. B. Seely	C	Unopp.	
<i>Seeks re-election on leaving the Conservative Party and causes by-election –</i>						
1904 by-election			J. E. B. Seely	Ind. C (L)	Unopp.	
1906 GE	15,193	87.8	G. Baring	L	7,453	55.8
			A. H. Morgan	C	5,892	44.2
			<i>Majority</i>		1,561	11.6
1910 (Jan) GE	15,969	91.0	D. B. Hall	C	7,414	51.0
			G. Baring	L	7,123	49.0
			<i>Majority</i>		291	2.0
1910 (D) GE	15,969	88.7	D. B. Hall	C	7,192	50.8
			C. Scaramanga-Ralli	L	6,969	49.2
			<i>Majority</i>		223	1.6



Beresford, had set on record his belief that a foreign army could arrive in England 'like a bolt from the blue'. Interestingly enough in the publication *The Isle of Wight at War* (a private collection of papers), there is a photograph of infantrymen defending, presumably in the way of practice, Sandown seafront on the east of the island, against a possible seaborne attack.

Baring, like other Liberals attacked the House of Lords for the loss of Liberal legislation, particularly the Education and Licensing Bills, and, locally, promised support for even more work in the dockyards, to counter some earlier lay-offs. However his campaign was somewhat lacklustre and his usual reasoned electoral analysis and inbuilt charm were found to be wanting. Furthermore, with a larger registered electoral base in 1910, the Liberals had a new set of problems in Wight, such as ongoing employment worries and the effects and counter-effects of the free trade issue. In addition, the Unionist party agent's work in 'elector seeking' tended to be superior, and with increased ownership and usage of motor vehicles to transport voters to the polls, the Unionists enjoyed a clear advantage. The plural voting issue also received a good airing, a point that Liberals, often justifiably, firmly believed gave the Unionists a clear net advantage.<sup>45</sup>

In Sussex, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, no Liberal seats remained at all after the January 1910 contests, with a much-reduced share of poll figures for all Liberal candidates. Nevertheless, the Isle of Wight Liberal vote share came down from the 1906 level by only 6.8 per cent, whereas the average Liberal vote elsewhere in this particular area of Britain dropped by more than 10 percentage points.<sup>46</sup>

Baring was not the Liberal candidate in December 1910 election. Local press reports give an indication why Baring did not go on to contest the Isle of Wight seat that December. Although he was still on the island in June 1910, newspaper articles reveal that he subsequently left for America and the search began for a replacement.<sup>47</sup> The Liberals vigorously contested the Isle of Wight again but with a new candidate, Constantine Scaramanga Ralli, an author and banker of Greek origin, who lived both on

the island at Shanklin and on the mainland in London. The island Liberals narrowly lost again by 223 votes (in a slightly increased 49.2 per cent share of the poll – possibly assisted by Winston Churchill's visit and support). The old arguments about plural voting resurfaced amidst a number of conflicting claims and counter-claims as to what might have been. Ralli's comment on defeat was confined to his assertion that '600 plural votes [realistically two-thirds of this figure is more likely] came over to the island to vote against me'. Not all of these would have added to the Unionist total, but theoretically most would. Letters from readers on this subject were published in the following week's island newspapers, with one correspondent actually calculating the 'plural' vote figure at 293, after deducting deceased out-voters from the total. Whichever is correct, or nearest to the truth, the situation does underline the marginal status of the seat.<sup>48</sup>

Surprisingly, in the December 1910 contest, Baring suddenly reappeared and stood for (two-seat) Devonport, for the Liberals, to finish with 24 per cent of votes cast, whilst the two Unionist victors achieved winning totals of 26 per cent and 25.7 per cent respectively. Undeterred, Baring went on to successfully retain the prestigious Barnstaple Liberal seat in Devon, from 1911 to 1918. He left the House for good after unsuccessful attempts at the Isle of Wight (1918) and Islington East (1922).<sup>49</sup>

Subsequently, the Conservatives attained virtual mastery on the island. The Unionists, whilst revelling in their win, acknowledged that their vote would have been greater but for Baring's reputation and personal popularity. A local Ryde-based newspaper editorial read, 'There is not a person in the Isle of Wight who does not respect and esteem him and would be content to see him MP for the rest of his days, but popularity is one thing principles another – Mr. Baring has chosen to enlist under the banner of Mr. Lloyd George'. The 1909 'Budget Protest League' attracted some support and island Liberals' private hopes for some partial easing of the land tax proposals were apparent, which potentially undermined Baring and linked him to the Chancellor's views.<sup>50</sup> Liberals

remained convinced that the much hated plural vote system was the prime reason for the island seat loss in 1910. This is most likely, but weight should also be given to Baring's marginally weak endeavours (as distinct from his past enthusiasms) in the first 1910 election. This was despite a reputation that was envied by all shades of political opinion, together with the longer-term effects of less effective local support as a result of the local party agent fiasco.

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- 16 Roberts, *A Centenary Worthy of Celebration*, p. 5.
- 17 Brough Scott, *Galloper Jack*, (Macmillan, 2003), p. 70.
- 18 Ibid., p. 107.
- 19 Ivatt, 'Liberal Party Fortunes', p. 93.
- 20 Roberts, *A Centenary Worthy of Celebration*, pp. 6–7.
- 21 IWCP, 3 October 1908 and Ivatt, 'Liberal Party Fortunes', p. 102.
- 22 IWCP, 9 November 1907 – Lady Baring was, additionally, very active in promoting Women's Liberal Associations throughout the island.
- 23 Michael Kinnear, *The British Voter*, Batsford Academic, 1981, p. 28.
- 24 All electoral figures from Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results*, pp. 171, 301 and Ivatt, 'Liberal Party Fortunes', p. 114.
- 25 Baring, *A Baronet's Tale*, pp. 5, 6 and 7.
- 26 Roberts, *A Centenary Worthy of Celebration*, p. 7.
- 27 Baring, *A Baronet's Tale*, pp. 8, 9.
- 28 Ibid. pp. 4, 5, and cited in David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 9.
- 29 Roberts, *A Centenary Worthy of Celebration*, p. 7.
- 30 IWCP, 13 January 1906.
- 31 Ibid. 28 July 1906.
- 32 Ibid. 11 April 1908.
- 33 See IWCP editions 26 January 1907, 21 March 1908, 11 April 1908, 30 May 1908, 27 June 1908, and 3 October 1908.
- 34 IWCP, 3 October 1908.
- 35 Roberts, *A Centenary Worthy of Celebration*, p. 7.
- 36 IWCP, 4 January 1908
- 37 Baring, *A Baronet's Tale*, p. 9.
- 38 IWCP, 15 December 1906.
- 39 Ibid. 15 September 1906.
- 40 Ibid. 1 December 1906.
- 41 Baring, *A Baronet's Tale*, p. 7.
- 42 Scott, *Galloper Jack*, p. 102.
- 43 IWCP, 15 January 1910.
- 44 The guest speaker at the Unionist Celebratory dinner at Freshwater Isle of Wight makes this very point. IWCP, 5 February 1910.
- 45 Ivatt, 'Liberal Party Fortunes', pp. 223, 224, 246.
- 46 Ibid. p. 246 and Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results*, p. 301.
- 47 IWCP, 12 November 1910.
- 48 Ivatt, 'Liberal Party Fortunes', p. 292–3.
- 49 Electoral figures from Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results*, pp. 104, 256.
- 50 Roberts, *A Centenary Worthy of Celebration*, p. 8 and Ivatt, 'Liberal Party Fortunes', p. 223.

# REPORT

## Winston Churchill: Liberal or Tory?

Conference fringe meeting, 9 March 2012, with Professor Martin Pugh and Sir Alan Beith MP; chair: Baroness Maddock

Report by **Mark Pack**

ONE OF my history teachers at school used to joke that the secret to someone's reputation amongst historians is to die at the right point. He was thinking in particular of the comparison between Cavour and Bismarck, one dying triumphant and the other living on to an old age that soured their reputation.

Certainly Winston Churchill's reputation would have been very different had he died at a younger age. If he had died young, he would have been a Horatio Bottomley character – a talented, maverick figure of curiosity in the margins of history and only occasionally remembered. Died a bit later, and he would have been one of the great 'if only' people of Liberal Party history, up there with Charles Dilke as

someone who could have become party leader and led it to glory, a favourite subject of alternative histories.

Had Churchill died shortly after reintroducing the gold standard policy, he would have been remembered on a sour note as someone whose last and greatest contribution to the country was also the worst; an unconventional politician undone at the end by following the conventional wisdom. A few more years on and his death would have been that of the tragic prophet, warning against the rise of Nazism but dying before he was proved right.

As it turned out, he not only lived on for his time as a Conservative prime minister to thoroughly overshadow his years as a successful Liberal politician, but he was also

so triumphant in that role during the Second World War that his reputation survived him hanging on in active politics for too long afterwards. His unsuccessful final years in 10 Downing Street would have wrecked the memories of a lesser man; for Churchill however they are but a small epilogue to his years of greatness.

All this illustrates how any attempt to classify Winston Churchill is prone to problems, given his varied career and wide range of views, many of which still resonate today. Great nationalist friend of Euro-sceptics or pro-European Union man? Supporter of electoral reform or defender of first past the post? Many mantles are claimed for him, which is what made the choice of subject for the latest Liberal Democrat History Group meeting all the more intriguing: Winston Churchill – Liberal or Tory?

Churchill himself once said, 'I am an English Liberal. I hate the Tory Party, their men, their words and their methods.' Strong words, but rather undermined by his two periods of political service in the