

LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

WINTER 2014–15

Huddersfield West 1964: A review note for the *Journal of Liberal History*

Fifty years ago last October, Donald Wade, deputy leader of the Liberal Party, lost his Huddersfield West seat at the October 1964 general election. A fascinating account of that event has just been published in a magazine not obviously high on a list of sources for political history, *Third Age Matters*.¹

TAM circulates to just over two hundred thousand members of the University of the Third Age; its pages reflect activities and interests of older people committed to keeping their minds active. That includes reminiscing, and under the editorship of the politically attuned Francis Beckett, that has included some interesting political memories. Beckett himself has written of his own key role as a Labour official in the Darlington by-election² – the by-election which set the Social Democratic Party (and so the Alliance) back so badly in the run-up to the 1983 general election.

In 2010, it published a chatty reminiscence from Beth Butler, then vice-chairman of the U3A nationally, who had been a full-time Liberal agent in the early 1960s. She was employed from April 1962 by Aubrey Herbert, the former Chief Agent who was

Donald Wade
(1904–88), MP
for Huddersfield
West 1950–64



by then an active Liberal in Suffolk,³ and was involved in the Central Norfolk by-election later that year. This article gave some background and colour to how someone became and functioned as a professional Liberal constituency agent at the time. She included a telling snapshot of tension between Jeremy Thorpe and Pratap Chitnis over Thorpe's behaviour as a visiting MP, a foretaste of their relationship, in due course, as leader and head of the party organisation respectively.⁴

In April 1964, Beth Butler was sent to Huddersfield to save one of the party's most vulnerable seats, threatened by the end of the local Con-Lib Pact.⁵ Her 1,500-word account of that experience paints a compelling picture of the male-dominated, social-club based world of Huddersfield Liberalism that she, a young, smoking, woman encountered.⁶ This alone is valuable source material for any historian interested in the role of Liberal Clubs or in the particular character of mid-twentieth century Liberal strength in a significantly Nonconformist Pennine textile town.

It is also a tale of how the local, very traditional, form of political organisation (which had kept Huddersfield County Borough in Liberal hands for years, as well as sending Wade to Westminster) was at odds with what had been modern electioneering techniques elsewhere for many years. And again, Jeremy Thorpe's role and style played a part. It was more than a clash of styles (though that clash was to bedevil Thorpe's 1967–76 leadership of the party); Wade and Thorpe were a clash of values.

As someone myself who was in his final postgraduate year in Oxford in 1964 and was to move north in 1965, ultimately to live for two decades in the Pennine textile belt, I can vouch for Butler's picture of local Liberal politics at that period. The vividness of her portraiture (such as the loveable Wade)

more than makes up for a few minor unreliabilities, e.g. the date of the March 1966 election.

Donald Wade nearly held Huddersfield West with 32.7 per cent in his first three-cornered fight, an impressive result in the light of what had already happened to the once so strong municipal Liberal vote. This had started to crumble before Beth Butler arrived, with only 11 Liberals (out of 60) after May 1964. By the last Huddersfield County Borough election of 1972, only six Liberal seats were left, and significantly more National Front candidates (nine) than Liberal ones (four, two in three-party fights and two facing Labour) stood.⁷ The Liberal traditional vote totally failed to carry through in 1973 when the town was submerged into the new Kirklees metropolitan borough, though a fresh generation of activists was later to recover some of it.

After Wade, the Westminster Liberal vote fell away as the 1970–83 Huddersfield West became a Labour–Tory marginal. The Liberal candidate in 1970 recalls that 'Huddersfield Liberals in the late 1960s were an elderly group of "respectable" Nonconformists, who had very little idea of political campaigning post-1950s. The ladies made good teas in the committee rooms, but didn't think they needed to chase up voters very actively.'⁸ The constituency disappeared in 1983, the larger part going into a simple Huddersfield. But a significant part of Wade's old seat transferred into neighbouring Colne Valley, where it once again acquired a Liberal MP in Richard Wainwright.

Wainwright had first fought Colne Valley in 1959, reinvigorating a similar traditional social-club based, largely Nonconformist, form of Liberal support, and gone on to win that seat eighteen months after Wade lost his. Richard Wainwright shared Donald Wade's values, but also shared Pratap Chitnis's and Beth Butler's commitment to proper,

effective organisation. It was that synthesis which gave Pennine Liberalism another lease of life, its local strength continuing to produce Liberal representation at Westminster into the twenty-first century.

Butler's personal experience throws sharp light on why the Wainwright synthesis was so necessary.

In 1964 Michael Steed was a psephologist at Oxford University; he moved to Manchester in 1965 and a Pennine textile town (Todmorden) in 1970, becoming active in Liberal politics in the region. He was President of the Liberal Party in 1978–79 and is now honorary lecturer in politics at the University of Kent.

- 1 *Third Age Matters* (formerly *U3A News*), published by the Third Age Trust, The Old Municipal Buildings, 19 East St, Bromley, BR1 1QE, from which back issues may be obtained.
- 2 *TAM* June 2013. Francis Beckett has published other recollections about the key Darlington by-election – see *New Statesman* 13 June 2013; *Total Politics* April 2010.
- 3 See letter re Aubrey Herbert, *Journal of Liberal History* 79, summer 2013, p. 15.
- 4 *U3A News*, autumn 2010, p. 39.
- 5 Except for a brief period following a by-election in February 1893 (won by the Conservatives by just 35 votes), the

single-member borough constituency of Huddersfield was Liberal-held from its formation in 1832 until Labour unseated the sitting Liberal MP in a three-cornered fight, by just 26 votes, in 1923. Its distinctive local Liberal strength and character had been emphasised in 1906, when the national Lib-Lab pact did not include the seat. In four three-cornered contests before 1914, the Liberals won each with an average of 37.9 per cent (Labour 32.4 per cent; Conservative 29.7 per cent). Apart from the 1893 by-election, no straight Conservative had ever won the seat, though right-wing Liberals won in 1918, 1931 and 1935 with Conservative support. That, along with a long-standing partial Con-Lib municipal pact, was the background to a local decision in Huddersfield in 1950, when the borough was divided into an East and a West division, that these two seats should be fought respectively by a Conservative and a Liberal.

- 6 'Of mice and mills', *TAM*, summer 2014, pp. 46–48.
- 7 I am indebted to John Smithson for these figures.
- 8 Communication (August 2014) from Lord Wallace of Saltaire.

2015 Orpington Dinner

On 24 March 2015 it will be fifty years since the young David Steel

was elected in a by-election for Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, with a majority of over 4,500 votes. This was the beginning of fifty years of service as a distinguished parliamentarian and one of the most popular politicians in the United Kingdom.

This Golden Jubilee will be the focus of the 2015 Orpington Dinner at the National Liberal Club on Tuesday, 10 March (6.45 p.m. for 7.30 p.m.). Speakers will include Lord Steel, Baroness Williams, Lord Wallace of Tankerness, Lord Avebury and Peter Soal, former MP for Johannesburg North. Places are £60 each and this covers pre-dinner drinks and a three course meal with wine and a donation to the Orpington Fund.

The Orpington Circle was founded in 2008 with the purpose of raising money to support Liberal Democrat candidates at Westminster by-elections. Over £30,000 has been raised, which has covered the deposit at every by-election since then and additional financial support has been given in selected seats.

Non-NLC members will be made very welcome but early booking is advised. Please contact Louisa Pooley at the Club (tel. 020 7930 9871 or louisa@nlc.org.uk).

Paul Hunt

On This Day ...

Every day the Liberal Democrat History Group's website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three of them. To see them regularly, look at www.liberalhistory.org.uk or www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup or follow us at: [LibHistoryToday](https://twitter.com/LibHistoryToday).

December

5 December 1916: H. H. Asquith resigns as Prime Minister. The crisis that led to the Prime Minister's resignation had been building for over a month. Concern at the military weakness in the British army at the Battle of the Somme had led Lloyd George to call for a restructuring of the War Council with himself as chairman. Although not completely opposed to Lloyd George's proposals, Asquith could not accept that the Prime Minister would not chair the Council nor continue to be a member of it. Protracted negotiations ensued until Lloyd George forced the issue by tendering his resignation. The Unionist ministers sided with Lloyd George and indicated their preparedness to serve in a government headed by him. This was the last straw for Asquith and at 7pm he saw the King to offer his resignation.

January

3 January 1802: Birth of Charles Pelham Villiers, Whig/Liberal/Liberal Unionist MP for Wolverhampton 1835–85 and Wolverhampton South 1885–98. A strong and early advocate of free trade, Villiers initiated debates on the abolition of the Corn Laws before Richard Cobden and John Bright were elected to parliament. *The Times* observed in 1853 that 'it was Mr Charles Villiers who practically originated the Free Trade Movement'. Villiers achieved ministerial office under Lord Aberdeen and served in the cabinets of Palmerston and Russell as President of the Poor Law Board. He left the Liberal Party over Irish Home Rule and joined the Liberal Unionists. He was Father of the House from 1890 and when he died, aged 96, in 1898 he was still an MP and the last MP to have served during the reign of King William IV.

February

9 February 2006: Liberal Democrat candidate Willie Rennie wins the Dunfermline & West Fife by-election, turning a Labour majority of over 11,000 into a Lib Dem majority of 1,800. The by-election was caused by the death of the sitting Labour MP, Rachel Squire, after a long illness. Despite poor opinion poll ratings at the start of the campaign, and reports that Liberal Democrat ambitions were confined to holding off the SNP to retain second place, Rennie and his team pulled off the first by-election defeat for Labour in Scotland since they lost the Govan seat to the SNP in 1988. Dunfermline & West Fife is the last gain recorded by the Liberal Democrats at a by-election to date.