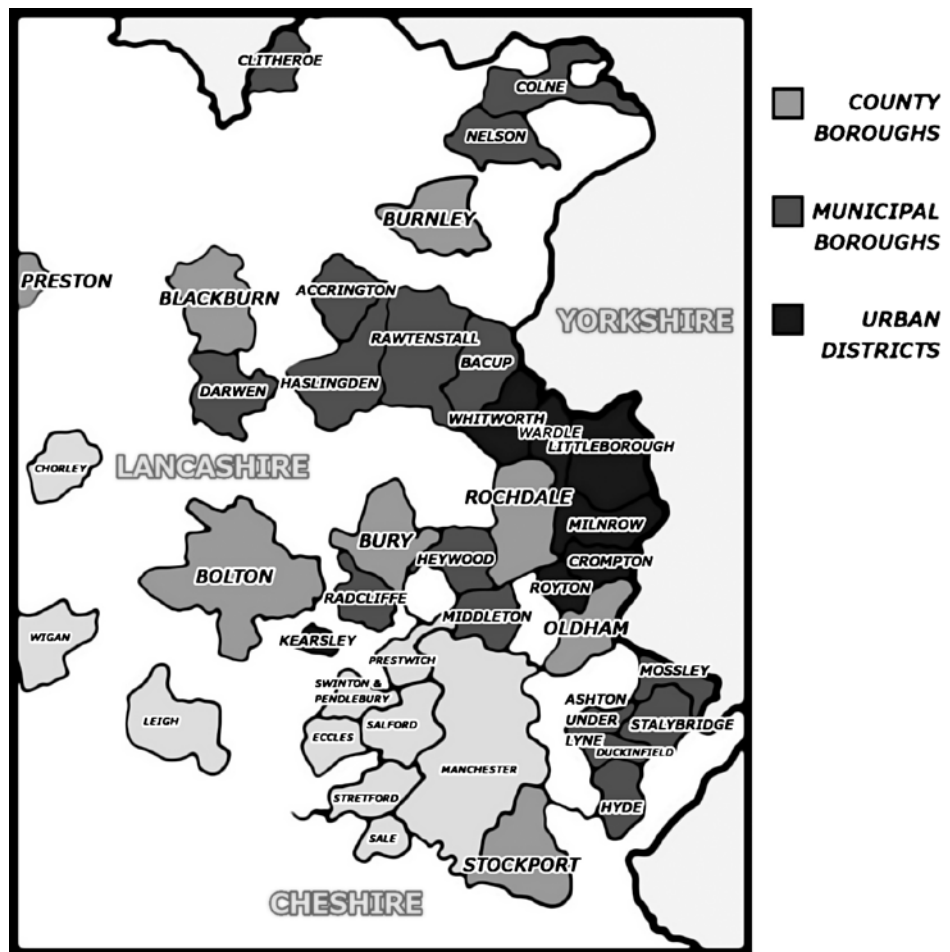


THE STRANGING OF LIBERALISM

The story of the decline of the Liberal Party after 1918 is well known. With the rise of class politics the Liberals were squeezed between the advance of Labour and the exodus of the middle classes to the Tories. Liberalism disintegrated in industrial and urban Britain and was pushed back to rural enclaves in the 'Celtic fringe', where it held on precariously until the 1960s when, reinvented by Jo Grimond as a radical alternative to Labour, the party spread back into the suburbs.

Jaime Reynolds examines one exception to this story: the resilience of the Liberal Party in the Lancashire cotton districts between the 1920s and the 1970s.



THE SURVIVAL of the Liberals as a significant local force in the Lancashire and Yorkshire textile districts throughout this period is a striking exception to this general picture. The party's decline here was slower than in other parts of urban Britain with the result that by the mid-1950s over two-thirds of the Liberals' remaining local government representation came from the region.¹

The persistence of this Pennine outpost of Liberalism is conventionally attributed to the strength of Nonconformity and the Liberals' collusion with the Conservatives in anti-Labour pacts. Thus Peter Clarke has lamented that after 1914 the Liberals could win elections there only on the basis of 'a sort of Nonconformist bastard Toryism'.² This does not do justice to the continuing vigour of

THE SURVIVAL OF LIBERALISM IN LANCASHIRE

Pennine Radicalism which, at least until 1945 and in some places later, amounted to a third force in the politics of the northern industrial heartland. It continued to play a prominent part in the political leadership of the region and remained deeply embedded in the local social and economic structure. It articulated a distinctive political outlook that influenced the development of all three major parties.

The academic literature on Lancashire Liberalism that is so rich for the period before 1914 – notably Clarke's seminal *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*³ – is almost totally lacking for the period after the First World War. In the dominant class-based left–right interpretation, the Liberals are dismissed as an irrelevant and outmoded relic of the past. Far more has been written about tiny and electorally insignificant groups on the political extremes. Even Liberal historians have generally confined their interest to the intellectual influence on the national party of a few prominent northern intellectuals such as Ernest Simon, Ramsay Muir and Elliot Dodds, ignoring the significance of the resilient Liberal grassroots in the mill towns. But in order to understand properly the nature of the party in the years of decline it is essential to understand more about its social and economic underpinning and the story of the many hundreds of local activists who sustained it in its northern redoubt.

This article is intended as a corrective to this neglect. It makes use particularly of the increasing

availability of digital sources⁴ on local history to map the main contours and character of the Liberal stronghold in the Lancashire cotton districts. For reasons of space, other parts of Lancashire including most of the Manchester conurbation as well as the West Riding of Yorkshire are not covered in detail. Future articles will look at these areas in depth. The time span examined is from the end of the First World War until the reorganisation of local government in 1974.

Electoral trends in Lancashire

In parliamentary general elections – apart from a couple of blips in the 1920s – at national level the Liberals declined steadily from their landslide victory in 1906, through a series of crashes at the general elections of 1918, 1924, 1931, 1935 and 1950, down to a low point in 1957 when they held just five seats at Westminster.

The parliamentary election figures for Lancashire paint the same picture. In 1906 the Liberals and their allies won fifty-four seats in the region to the Conservatives' sixteen. By December 1910 they had thirty-nine seats to the Tories' thirty-two.⁵ At the 1918 general election only nine Coalition and one Asquithian Liberal were returned. The Liberals' high-point after the First World War was 1923 when they won twenty-six seats in the region, but by 1929 they were down to six, and in 1931 only Herbert Samuel in Darwen and Graham White in Birkenhead East remained. Darwen was lost in 1935

and thereafter the Liberals secured only isolated victories. White held his seat until 1945; Arthur Holt sat for Bolton West from 1951 to 1964 thanks to a pact with the Tories; Michael Winstanley represented Cheadle from 1966 to 1970; and Cyril Smith gained Rochdale at a by-election in 1972. The steady national decline to the 1950s was mirrored in the pattern of Liberal candidatures in the region and the falling average of votes they received.

Labour advanced in Lancashire in the same period. In 1906 it held a dozen seats, all of them in alliance with the Liberals. In 1918 Labour won fourteen seats, but only one of these was in new territory; it had held all the others at some time before 1918. By 1923 – the year of the first minority Labour government – Labour reached twenty-three seats, still behind the Liberals. Their gains were concentrated in unionised working-class constituencies in Manchester, Salford and the South Lancashire heavy industrial belt. In 1929 they broke into previously Liberal textile areas such as Accrington, Mossley, Rochdale, Rossendale and Stalybridge & Hyde winning forty seats. However in the 1931 crisis election Labour collapsed to just five seats and recovered only to fifteen in 1935. These were essentially the core seats they had won in 1918 and before. Labour had to wait until the 1945 landslide to repeat and go beyond the point they had achieved in 1929, winning fifty-two seats, including a number in middle-class suburbs where the Liberals had

The persistence of this Pennine outpost of Liberalism is conventionally attributed to the strength of Nonconformity and the Liberals' collusion with the Conservatives in anti-Labour pacts.

THE STRANGE SURVIVAL OF LIBERAL LANCASHIRE

previously been strong.⁶ Thus, far from being a relentless advance, Labour expansion was largely confined to its working-class unionised strongholds apart from the leap forward of 1929 which was soon reversed, and that of 1945 which marked a more permanent shift.

The Conservatives were by far the dominant party in Lancashire parliamentary elections, apart from 1906–10 and 1945. Even in bad years such as 1923 or 1929 they won more seats than either the Liberals or Labour.⁷ In their good years, such as 1924 or 1935, their lead was overwhelming.⁸ It was only in the early 1950s that Labour replaced them as the leading party in Lancashire.

At local government level, the trends were broadly similar. In Lancashire, as nationally, Labour's progress fluctuated. Its advances were in 1919, in the second half of the 1920s, the mid-1930s, and especially in 1945–6 and 1952–4 when Labour established majorities in many boroughs, which it maintained through to the later 1960s. In the intervening years it lost ground. The Conservatives made sweeping gains in 1967–9 followed by almost as sharp a swing back to Labour in 1970–2 when the last elections were held before local government reorganisation in 1974. (See Table 1.)

The Liberals – ignoring those who stood as Independents – held more than 20 per cent of seats through the 1920s and still held a seventh of the total at the end of the 1930s. Their decline accelerated after 1945 and into the early 1950s. There were some signs of revival even before Jo Grimond became leader in 1956, followed by more wins in 1957–8 and a surge in 1962–3 when sweeping gains were made at the expense of the Conservatives. These successes were reversed almost everywhere in Lancashire in the mid-1960s. In a few boroughs the Liberals benefited from the swing against Labour in the late 1960s, but in most places the party was heading in reverse at the beginning of the 1970s. By 1972 it was in a weaker overall position than fifteen years before.

Electoral patterns in the cotton districts

The data above cover the whole of Lancashire and hide the extent to which – apart from pockets of

Table 1: Percentage of Lancashire county borough and municipal borough seats held by party⁹

	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Other</i>
1921	28.2	48.4	16.0	7.3
1929	21.0	40.6	29.0	9.4
1938	14.1	41.0	27.7	17.2
1947	9.0	44.2	37.7	9.1
1957	6.1	39.5	50.6	3.8
1963	11.9	31.7	52.2	4.3
1972	5.7	38.0	54.0	2.3

Table 2: Percentage of county borough and municipal borough seats held by party in cotton districts

	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Other</i>
1921	39.3	46.5	11.3	2.8
1929	32.4	41.8	21.8	4.1
1938	27.2	45.7	23.7	3.4
1947	17.2	42.6	37.3	2.9
1957	9.4	37.5	52.6	0.5
1963	16.2	27.2	54.7	1.9
1972	6.5	35.5	56.6	1.4

support in the seaside resorts of Southport and Blackpool – Liberal strength was concentrated in the cotton-manufacturing boroughs in the east and south of the county. If we home in on the traditional weaving towns of Burnley, Darwen, Accrington, Haslingden, Rawtenstall and Bacup, together with the traditional spinning towns of Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Oldham, Stockport, Heywood, Middleton, Ashton under Lyne, Dukinfield, Hyde, Stalybridge and Mossley, this pattern is clear. (See Table 2.)

In this area the Liberals held more seats than Labour during the interwar period and as late as 1947 they still held more than a sixth of the total, slightly more than they managed at the height of the 1960s Liberal revival. Until the early 1950s Labour was considerably weaker here than in Lancashire as a whole, but thereafter somewhat stronger than in the wider region. Conversely the Tories were somewhat stronger here than in wider Lancashire before the Second World War but weaker afterwards. There were many fewer Independents here than in other districts.

Before 1945 Labour seems to have had greater difficulty making headway against an entrenched Liberal Party with a strong sense of identity or at the very least a reluctance to stand under other labels

or to fuse into electoral coalitions with the Tories. The Conservatives were also relatively strong in this industrial area. The pattern shifted after 1945, with the Liberal relative strength becoming less marked and indeed negligible by the end of the period, the Conservatives losing their local advantage and Labour performing better than elsewhere in Lancashire to become the clear majority party in these districts from the 1950s.¹⁰

An electoral tour of the East Lancashire textile belt

(The figures in brackets after the towns give the population in 1931.)

In the north there were the cotton weaving towns of Preston, Blackburn and Burnley surrounded by a number of smaller centres: Darwen, Accrington and the towns in Rossendale and the Clitheroe–Pendle Hills area. Preston (119,000)¹¹ and Blackburn (123,000)¹² were both fortresses of working-class Toryism where the Liberals were traditionally weak and the Labour Party secured an early foothold. Clitheroe (12,000) leaned towards the Conservatives but until 1918 it formed a single large constituency with the Radical towns of Nelson (38,000) and Colne (24,000). This was one of the first Labour seats, taken in 1902. The constituency was split in 1918: Clitheroe soon

returned to the Tories, and Nelson & Colne was solidly Labour.¹³ As in some Yorkshire Pennine towns, Nelson's Radicalism evolved into ethical socialism. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was particularly strong there and from the late 1920s the town was dubbed a 'little Moscow' due to the large and militant Labour majority on the council right up to 1974.¹⁴ Colne was more evenly balanced between Labour and the Conservatives. As the Liberals were weak or absent in these towns throughout the period,¹⁵ they have been excluded from the analysis in Table 2.

The other towns in the cotton-weaving district were Liberal strongholds. Davies and Morley conclude that there was no 'strange death' of Liberalism in inter-war Burnley (98,000). The Liberals were the first or second party on Burnley council throughout the inter-war period with between 25 and 45 per cent of the seats. 'Liberalism ... enjoyed a recrudescence and consolidation of its position after 1918. It had a continuing local vibrancy down to 1934, Labour's year of triumph.' Even in 1938 the Liberals had twelve councillors to Labour's fourteen.¹⁶

In the neighbouring cotton towns the Liberals were a major force until the Second World War. In Accrington (43,000) they were the controlling party until 1929 and the largest party until 1945. In Darwen (36,000) they had an overall majority on the council until 1945. In the three boroughs of Rossendale the Liberals were the largest party: in Bacup (21,000) they had periods of overall control; they were nearly always the largest party in Rawtenstall (29,000); and in Haslingden (17,000) they vied for control with the Tories, holding the advantage in the 1920s, while the Tories had the edge in the 1930s.

In parliamentary elections the Liberals were most successful in Darwen, the seat of Herbert Samuel – the Liberal leader from 1931 until his defeat in 1935. Accrington also elected a Liberal/Constitutionalist in the 1920s. In Rossendale they ran the Conservatives close. Burnley was held by Labour from 1918 to 1931 but was represented by a Liberal National from 1931 to 1935.

After 1945, Bacup and Darwen were the main Liberal strongholds in the district. In Bacup they were

the largest party until 1951 and sporadically up to 1962, with an overall majority in 1960–2. Thereafter their representation dwindled and the Conservatives supplanted them as the dominant party in the town in the later '60s and early '70s. In Darwen the pattern was the reverse: between 1945 and 1955 the Liberals lost all their seats on the council as the Conservatives secured a controlling majority, however from 1956 the Liberals recovered at Tory expense and they were often the largest party from 1965. The trend in Haslingden was similar to Bacup. The Liberals were the largest party at times in the 1950s, but they were displaced by the Conservatives after 1964. In Rawtenstall, a three-party balance survived until 1949 but the Liberals were for a time eliminated from the council by 1953 and Labour became the usual majority party. Accrington was also Labour dominated for most of the 1950s and '60s with only a small Liberal group surviving on the council. That leaves Burnley, also dominated by Labour from 1945 to 1967, where the Liberals remained the second largest party until 1949 but then collapsed to just two seats in 1956–7. They recovered a little ground in the following years before a stronger revival in 1967–70 when they shared with the Tories the spoils of Labour's decline. In 1969 they briefly equalled Labour's total of twelve seats, but by 1972 had slumped to three.

Moving further south we come to the Oldham-Rochdale-Bury cotton-spinning district, which also included the municipal boroughs of Radcliffe, Heywood and Middleton. Rochdale, Heywood, Middleton and Radcliffe followed a pattern of long-term, stable collaboration between Liberals and Conservatives. In Rochdale (91,000) from 1924 onwards the Liberals were the leading party on the council including periods when they held an overall majority (1925–33, 1936–7, 1947–50). The two parties were fiercely competitive in parliamentary elections.¹⁷ In Heywood (26,000) and Middleton (29,000) party politics were muted with Liberal–Conservative oligarchies in control for decades. However the parties merged only in Radcliffe where a 'Municipal Party' was formed in 1935 and

continued to dominate the scene until the 1960s.¹⁸ There was also a history of Liberal–Conservative cooperation in parliamentary elections in the Heywood & Radcliffe constituency. From 1922 to 1931 the MP was Colonel Abraham England, a right-wing Liberal who joined the Liberal Nationals in 1931. In Middleton some of the local Liberal establishment were also aligned with the Liberal Nationals.¹⁹

Bury (56,000) was a Tory bastion both before and after 1945. Nevertheless the Liberals equalled the Conservatives as the largest party on the council during the 1920s and again in 1933. They only fell decisively behind in 1937–8. Labour was weak and at the end of the 1930s still had only four seats (of forty-four) on the council. After 1920, Lib–Con electoral collaboration was the norm, with a candidate of each party standing in the two-member wards. However there were occasional clashes between the two parties including a spate of contests in 1938 and after the war when the Liberal representation on the council was rapidly reduced from thirteen in 1938 to three by 1950.

In Oldham (140,000) the Liberals fought elections and formed a council majority in alliance with the Conservatives and until 1928 were the largest party. However this pact broke down in the late 1920s enabling Labour to take control briefly in 1934 by when the Liberals had been reduced to six seats (of 48) on the council. Oldham Liberals were split between Liberal Nationals such as Lady Emmott²⁰ and J. S. Dodd²¹ and independent Liberal stalwarts such as James T. Middleton.²² In 1935 Dodd was elected for the two-member borough as a Liberal National MP in harness with a Conservative, opposed by a Samuelite Liberal.²³ At local level it was denied that there was a Lib–Con pact²⁴ and indeed three-way contests were fairly common, but there were also clear cases in the later 1930s of mutual support allowing straight fights against Labour.²⁵

By the 1950s the Liberals had been eliminated from Oldham council with their last seats surrendered undefended in 1950 and 1951. The party, led by James Middleton, continued to function but it did not fight local elections for

Davies and Morley conclude that there was no 'strange death' of Liberalism in inter-war Burnley. The Liberals were the first or second party on Burnley council throughout the interwar period with between 25 and 45 per cent of the seats.

a time. In Bury the Liberals maintained a residual presence on the council thanks to their strength in Elton ward. In Radcliffe the Liberals vanished into the Municipal Party – there was no trace of them left when it broke up in 1962–3 and was replaced by the Conservatives. Middleton politics were transformed in the mid-1950s by the building of a large Manchester overspill estate in the town and the emergence of a disciplined and assertive Labour Party which pushed aside the Con–Lib elite whose pact continued for a few more years.²⁶

In Rochdale the Liberals did not collapse after Labour's breakthrough in the early 1950s. They remained the second party on the council until 1970. The electoral agreement with the Conservatives continued, but was strained when Ludovic Kennedy came close to winning the 1958 by-election and 1959 general election just behind Labour in what had previously been a Conservative-held seat. In the 1960s, Liberal-versus-Conservative contests became increasingly common. At the end of the decade the Tories were the major beneficiary of the swing against Labour, and in the last years of the county borough's existence, as Labour recovered, the Liberals lost more than half of their council seats. At parliamentary level, however, Cyril Smith²⁷ recruited from Labour and gained the seat for the Liberals at a by-election in 1972. In Heywood the Liberal presence on the council was static in the late 1950s and early '60s and there was no weakening of the Lib–Con electoral understanding. The Liberals shared the benefit of the anti-Labour swing in the later 1960s, increasing from seven to twelve seats (of thirty-six), but falling back again as the pendulum swung to Labour at the beginning of the 1970s.

It is worth flagging that the Liberals also did well in some of the Urban Districts around Rochdale and Oldham, notably Royton (17,000) where they held control several times between 1946 and 1965, Saddleworth (13,000)²⁸ which they controlled in the early 1960s, and Crompton (15,000), Milnrow (9,000), Littleborough (12,000), Wardle (5,000) and Whitworth (8,000) where they frequently held a sizeable minority of the seats.

Lib–Con competition was often keen in these districts.

Throughout the interwar period the Conservatives were the leading party in Bolton (177,000)²⁹ and had an overall majority except in the years 1933–6. The Liberals generally had between 15 and 20 per cent of council members. Labour overtook the Liberals in 1925 and peaked in 1929. However it failed to get much beyond this point and indeed at the end of the 1930s fell back sharply with both the Tories and the Liberals gaining. Elections were frequently competitive but there was also cooperation between the Liberals and both the other parties. The Liberals were assertive in defending their position in their stronger wards and in the second half of the 1930s captured several Tory seats. The Labour breakthrough came in 1946 when they won control of the council for the first time. Many of the early post-war contests were three-way fights in which the Liberals were squeezed from nineteen seats down to six (of ninety-two) by 1947. Their only wins were in harness with Tories or by Thomas Connor,³⁰ a former Labour councillor who defected to the Liberals in 1938 and was to remain on the council until 1967. He managed to defend his Smithills seat against all comers. By the early 1950s the Liberals were down to two seats and local elections had become an almost exclusively Tory–Labour contest with control of the council changing hands frequently. This was in stark contrast with the parliamentary situation in Bolton where from 1951 the Conservatives entered a pact with the Liberals to share representation at Westminster. As a result Arthur Holt, a Liberal, was returned as MP for Bolton West from 1951 to 1964.³¹ The Liberals began to make gains from both other parties from 1956 and by 1963 had eighteen council members. However the Liberal vote collapsed in the mid-1960s and by the end of the decade they had been eliminated from the council.

Moving further south to the Lancashire–Cheshire border east of Manchester we come to the county borough of Stockport, and the municipal boroughs of Ashton-under-Lyne, Dukinfield, Stalybridge, Hyde and Mossley. Until 1945 the Conservatives were strong in these boroughs with the

Liberals in second place and Labour mostly a weak third. In Stockport (126,000)³² the Liberals held about a quarter of the seats until 1929 and still held eleven (of seventy-two) in 1938 – one more than Labour. In the 1920s the Liberals were split between factions led by Henry Fildes (MP 1920–3), who inclined to cooperation with the Tories, and Charles Royle (MP 1923–4), closer to Labour. Royle joined the Labour Party in 1929 but the complex pattern of Con–Lib collaboration in some years and in some wards and competition in others, continued. From 1945 the Liberals were squeezed as elections became very polarised between Labour and Conservative. They surrendered their last seat in 1954 and ceased to fight local elections for a time. Labour dominated the borough for most of the 1950s and '60s. Ashton-under-Lyne (52,000) was also strongly Conservative until 1945. Lib–Con collaboration broke down in the late 1920s and the Liberals were crushed in the ensuing hostilities. However the Liberals revived somewhat in the late 1930s in tacit alliance with Labour. This collaboration seems to have continued into the 1950s as Labour established control, enabling the Liberals to retain a foothold on the council.

In Dukinfield (46,000) the Liberals were the largest party as late as 1949, controlling the council in alliance with the Conservatives. After the Second World War, Labour gradually displaced the Liberals as the leading party and had a comfortable majority on the council from 1952 to 1966 during which time the Tories were almost always in third place. The Liberals dwindled from eight to ten seats (of twenty-four) in the 1940s down to four or five by the mid-1950s. Politics in Hyde (32,000) were more competitive. The Liberals and Conservatives continued to vie for control of the council until the mid-1930s with Labour as a very weak third party. The Liberals held an overall majority as late as 1928. In the second half of the 1930s the Conservatives established a firm grip and Labour gained ground at the expense of the Liberals, but there was little evidence of Liberal collaboration with the Tories. The Liberals lost their last council member in 1953. The last Liberals were opposed by both other parties.

In Rochdale the Liberals did not collapse after Labour's breakthrough in the early 1950s. They remained the second party on the council until 1970.

From 1949 to 1957 the Liberals ceased contesting local elections in Hyde, which swung over to Labour control as Conservative support steadily collapsed. Neighbouring Stalybridge (35,000) also leaned to the Conservatives, with the Liberals as the second party comfortably ahead of Labour. A Lib-Con deal was abandoned in 1928 though sporadic cooperation continued. The Liberals lost some ground but nevertheless on the eve of the Second World War still held ten (of thirty-two) seats on the council. Post-1945 Stalybridge became a tight Con-Lab battleground and the Liberals were eradicated from the council by 1947.

The small borough of Mossley (12,000), tucked in the upper Tame valley in the foothills of the Pennines where Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire met, survived as a unique Liberal enclave as if untouched by modern two-party politics right up to the 1970s. There was fierce and evenly balanced rivalry between the Liberals and Conservatives with control of the council swinging between the two. Mossley remained more faithful to Liberalism than anywhere else in the UK with periods of Liberal control for most of the interwar years and in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, in some years as the only Liberal-controlled authority in the country. In 1953 the *Manchester Guardian* described the town 'the last stronghold of municipal Liberalism ... this uniquely wayward place – an industrial area with no Labour councillors where local elections are fought in terms of sewage works and secondary schools ...'.³³ Mossley's eccentricity extended to parliamentary politics too. The Mossley division (which extended well beyond the borough) was represented in the Commons for most of the interwar period by an Independent MP, Austin Hopkinson.

Within the boroughs there were some areas of extraordinary Liberal resilience and other districts where the party was eradicated for long periods. In Rochdale Spotland ward returned Liberals consistently at every election from the 1930s to the 1970s, while Central ward was very rarely contested during the same period and won only once in 1969. Future research – beyond the scope of this article – to analyse

the socio-economic and other factors present in localities of Liberal strength – would be of great interest.

Why did Lancashire Liberalism persist?

The common reasons given for the survival of Pennine Radicalism – electoral pacts and religion – provide at most a partial explanation. They must be seen in the broader context of the political culture and community ties of the cotton towns as well as the ideological outlook of northern Liberalism which facilitated alliances with the Conservatives while remaining fiercely independent.

Pacts

Cooperation between the Liberals and Conservatives against Labour was widespread in the region and in some boroughs was clearly an important factor keeping Labour at bay and sustaining the Liberal presence on local councils.

Such pacts were common throughout Britain from the 1920s until the late 1950s when the national leadership of the party for the first time took decisive – though not totally successful – steps to stamp them out.³⁴ In many areas they seem to have had the effect of hastening the disappearance of the Liberals rather than preserving them. In Merseyside, the South Lancashire industrial district and Manchester/Salford pacts did not prevent the near-complete elimination of Liberal councillors by 1945 if not earlier.

However in East Lancashire pacts seem to have reflected continuing Liberal strength rather than being the cause of it. In Burnley when pacts broke down it was the Tories who came off worse than the Liberals.³⁵ Some of the pacts were very advantageous to the Liberals – in Rochdale for decades the Tories accepted third-party status on the council and in Bolton the Tories conceded one of the parliamentary seats to the Liberals. This apparent generosity reflected the widespread perception that Liberalism remained a potent if subdued force that the Conservatives needed to enlist in order to meet the Labour challenge. At election time commentators habitually noted the 'strong Liberal tradition' in such

Cooperation between the Liberals and Conservatives against Labour was widespread in the region and in some boroughs was clearly an important factor keeping Labour at bay and sustaining the Liberal presence on local councils.

areas.³⁶ This may have involved bluffing or wishful thinking but no doubt it also indicated that in many communities what might be called the 'Liberal infrastructure' – including Liberal public figures, employers and opinion-leaders, clubs, friendly societies, Sunday schools, chapels and newspapers – remained intact. Pacts tended to collapse where Liberalism was broken and was ceasing to count. In much of East Lancashire this happened late or not at all.

Many of the pacts had the flavour of an armed truce between combatants with episodes of tension when one or other party tested the boundaries of the deal.³⁷ Deeper Lib-Con convergence was uncommon. Only in Radcliffe was a fused coalition, the Municipal Party, formed. The Liberal Nationals were not strong in the region and they took over the local party only in Burnley.³⁸ In Oldham, Bolton and Stockport, however, some prominent Liberals backed the Simonites, but they were in a minority. More often until the mid-1940s the situation was unclear: local associations seem to have remained affiliated to the Samuelite party while working closely with the Conservatives. Lib-Con competition occurred in many boroughs and in some, such as Ashton-under-Lyne, the Liberals even cooperated with Labour against the Tories. There are few examples of the Liberals being reduced to captives allowed to retain their seats only by 'grace and favour' of the Tories.³⁹

It should be recalled that neither Liberals nor Conservatives could guarantee to deliver their vote to their partner in a pact. Evidence from the 1951 general election suggests that where a Liberal withdrew in the Lancashire textile constituencies the Liberal vote split about 60:40 in favour of the Conservatives, but in Rossendale, one of the most traditional Radical seats, the split was 50:50.⁴⁰

Religion

The 'Radical belt' of East Lancashire and the area where Nonconformity was strongest in the region coincided and Nonconformity has long been regarded as a factor in the persistence of Liberalism in these districts. The powerful nineteenth-century association of Liberalism and Dissent lived on here to some



extent in the first half of the twentieth century. Many of the Liberal elite were also active Nonconformists, whilst active Anglicans, Catholics, Jews and non-believers were less common. For example Arthur Worsley, who maintained an active regional Liberal organisation in the north-west for many years, was a Methodist lay preacher.⁴¹ Nonconformity was clearly an important marker of Liberal support, but it was not the determinant of Liberal survival in the area.

The chapel was declining both as a religious force and Liberal prop in the interwar years. The decline was apparent well before 1914. Peter Clarke considers that by 1914 'Nonconformity ... was clearly no longer the dominant element in the [Liberal] party'.⁴² Although it occasionally surfaced in political controversy in the 1920s – over such issues as Sunday opening of cinemas for example – religion fell into the background as a party issue except in some parts of Liverpool, Bootle and Preston where sectarian (Catholic–Protestant) divisions still counted.

Nonconformists were a relatively small minority even in the hotspots of Liberalism in East Lancashire. In 1922 they accounted for

less than 5 per cent in Stalybridge & Hyde and Mossley, less than 10 per cent in Rochdale and Heywood & Radcliffe and only just over 10 per cent in strongholds such as Darwen and Burnley. By far the highest proportion was in Rossendale, but even there it was less than 20 per cent.⁴³

The Liberals no longer monopolised the Nonconformist vote. Many amongst the largest group, the Wesleyan Methodists, were inclining towards the Conservatives, while Labour was making inroads into the Baptists.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Liberals were losing the support of Congregationalists both to the Tories and Labour. The limited evidence on voting behaviour indicates that only about one-third of Nonconformists who could vote in 1918 were Liberals and of those coming of age in 1918–35, not much more than a quarter were Liberals. This contrasted with 50–60 per cent allegiance to the Liberals among their fathers. Amongst Nonconformists coming of age in 1935–50, only 16 per cent were Liberals.⁴⁵

These data may of course understate the wider social influence of the chapels and their role in mobilising the Liberal vote, but they show that Nonconformity lacked

Left: Dame Sarah Lees (1842–1935): mill-owner, philanthropist, suffragist, Congregationalist, Liberal Mayor of Oldham 1910–11.

Right: John Percy Taylor (1868–1945): mill-owner, Liberal leader in Bolton between the wars, Mayor 1934–35, Unitarian.

the numbers to account for continuing mass support for the Liberals.

Rather Nonconformity should be viewed as an important reinforcing element in the local community culture and the broader ideological outlook that sustained Liberalism in many districts. This may well have been true in the nineteenth century too. Peter Joyce has argued that 'religion was part of a ritualised politics that had little to do with either politics or religion', stressing that it was essentially a badge representing allegiances to communities closely connected with places of work. In his view 'the conflict of church and chapel was itself an expression of allegiances formed at the level of the factory and its environment'. According to Joyce this 'culture of the factory' was the underlying determinant of party support and religious sectarianism (bearing in mind the low levels of working-class attendance at church and chapel) was more a matter of display.⁴⁶

In towns such as Nelson where other community factors supporting Liberalism were relatively weak, the presence of strong local Nonconformist roots was insufficient to compensate.⁴⁷



Community

Long before the 1970s' Young Liberals invented community politics, the Liberal Party in places like East Lancashire was sustained by extensive and deeply embedded roots in the local community. Alongside the chapel and the Sunday School, a range of structures tied voters of all classes to the party and its view of the world. Foremost amongst these was the place of work. In the cotton industry most firms were small with close contact between workers and management. In 1959 after many mergers and rationalisations the average size of firm was still only 244 employees.⁴⁸ Mills were commonly surrounded by housing provided by the employers for the skilled and unskilled operatives, the overlookers, clerks and managers. Even as the industry declined, the influence of paternalistic owners diminished (a process visible from the late nineteenth century), and some of the workforce moved to the suburbs, the role of the cotton industry in people's lives remained central. It also played a major role in the life of many boroughs. As late as 1955, in Bolton 29,000 people were employed in textiles – 35 per cent of the labour force.⁴⁹ Other local industries such as engineering

Left: James Alfred Bottomley (1874–1957): mill-owner and seven times Liberal mayor of Mossley.

Right: Jeremiah Lord (1877–1947): weaver, Baptist, Liberal mayor of Haslingden 1926–27.

were often linked with the textile industry. A large class of white-collar workers was employed in the commercial and mercantile businesses that grew up and depended on textiles. Manchester was still the largest commodities market in the world in 1929. Locally, small businesses, shopkeepers and professionals of all kinds were dependent on the fortunes of the cotton trade.

Not all mill owners were Liberals of course. Many were Tories or unaligned politically. There was even the occasional Labour mill owner. Nevertheless there were extremely strong ties between cotton and the Liberal Party. In virtually all the towns examined in this article, mill-owning families provided the party's elite. A good example is J. P. Taylor, owner of a family cotton mill in Bolton and a leading figure in the Liberal Party and local government until his death in 1945.⁵⁰ The workforces in the mills also provided a large proportion of the activists including many councillors. When a youthful Cyril Smith lost his civil service job in 1945 because of his campaigning for the Liberal candidate for Rochdale, he was re-employed by a local textile mill where the Liberal candidate was a director. Although

Smith claimed in his memoirs that there was 'no Old Boys influence', this seems like an example of the interweaving of politics and employment.⁵¹ Many other activists were drawn from the small business and professional classes that relied on the industry for their prosperity.

The prominence of Liberals in civic leadership in the North, seen for example in the high proportion of council committee chairmanships held by Liberals in some boroughs, was, according to at least one study, attributable to the party's close links with local business and the professions and its reputation for civic activism and good administration.⁵²

The Liberal electoral coalition included many working-class voters. Davies and Morley writing of Burnley note that the firm ties before 1914 between local Liberalism and 'the respectable and politically and socially aware groups within the working class survived to some degree in inter-war local politics.' Working-class Liberalism, alongside the still powerful tradition of working-class Toryism, remained important in many parts of the region, aided by the moderate, verging on apolitical, character of much of the Lancashire textile

trades union movement. In some instances such loyalty was sustained by paternalistic and philanthropic owners, who had by no means entirely died out, such as Oscar Hall in Bury,⁵³ James Bottomley in Mossley,⁵⁴ the Holts in Bolton,⁵⁵ or Dame Sarah Lees in Oldham.⁵⁶

It was also reinforced by a range of institutions in which Liberals often played a prominent part. Notable were the Friendly Societies,⁵⁷ several of the most important of which had originated in the region, including the Oddfellows and Rechabites (Manchester) and the Foresters (Rochdale). During the nineteenth century the Friendly Society movement had mostly aligned with the Liberals and some were identified closely with Liberal causes – for instance the Rechabites with the Temperance movement. The Societies had some eight million members at the end of the 1930s.⁵⁸ They were part of a vast popular movement of mutualist institutions that included building societies, cooperatives and mutual improvement societies dedicated to education. Some writers identify such self-help ventures with the Labour Party and the left,⁵⁹ but they were at least equally associated with Liberalism. A typical Liberal activist of the interwar period was a person of modest, often working-class origins, who through education in the Mechanics Institute or other ‘self-help’ means had risen to occupy a supervisory or managerial role in a mill or had started a small business or shop. Frequently he (sometimes she) was an ‘active citizen’ involved in local social, religious, masonic, sporting and educational causes alongside political activity.⁶⁰

Liberal working-men’s clubs provided another prop of this infrastructure. Davies and Morley note the importance of the clubs to both the Conservative and Liberal parties in Bury: ‘These clubs served as a focal point of politics, entertainment and sometimes, moral instruction ... The Liberals, if anything, had a more vibrant club organisation [than the Tories]. Some of their clubs carried the great names of nineteenth century Liberalism: the Gladstone (East ward), the Cobden and the Trevelyan (Church ward). Also active were the Blackford Bridge, Philip’s and the Fishpool Liberal Club.

These firmly entrenched organisations aided the strong performance of the Conservative and Liberal parties throughout the twenty years of elections. The Labour Party realised the advantage the other two parties had with their clubs and bemoaned their own lack of them.⁶¹ Such social networking extended beyond the political clubs: in interwar Nelson, Labour complained about Liberal influence in the town’s cricket club.⁶²

Finally, the importance of the local Liberal press should be mentioned. Many towns had their own local newspapers, owned by Liberal families, which were supportive of the Liberal Party. As well as the *Manchester Guardian*, whose influence was felt throughout Lancashire and beyond, these included the *Bolton Evening News* (Tillotsons), the *Oldham Evening Chronicle* (Hirsts) and the *Rochdale Observer*. The party’s leaders and activities were given detailed and sympathetic coverage in such papers.

This web of communal supports for Liberalism was gradually eroding as the cotton industry declined and urban areas changed, but it remained important throughout the interwar period and in some places was still significant after 1945. It constituted a powerful defence against the advances of the Labour Party, which despite its very moderate character in Lancashire, remained extremely weak in some boroughs and everywhere had difficulty breaking out of its unionised strongholds. Similarly the far left was strikingly feeble in Lancashire even at the height of the slump. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Communist Party and its fronts such as the Unemployed Workers Movement fought local elections regularly but with conspicuous lack of success. As one Labour historian writing of Lancashire rather archly puts it ‘the surviving peculiarities in the community forms of social relations worked against effective coordination of working-class unrest’.⁶³

Radical ideology

Pennine Radicalism is routinely viewed as individualistic, economically liberal (indeed laissez-faire), anti-socialist and fixated with free trade and reducing public expenditure. In other words it is seen as an

essentially passé Gladstonian creed which found increasing points of agreement with the Conservatives and many points of disagreement with the Labour Party. Some historians starting from a left–right class-based template deny that there was any significant ideological difference between the Liberals and Conservatives in this period. Describing Bury, Davies and Morley see:

... a minimum of ideological and political differences existing between the two parties. Both stood for the free market and private property. This was translated into a defence of the ratepayers ‘true’ interests by the advocating of ‘small government’. Minimum government, ostensibly in the interest of the freedom of the individual, involved a resistance to any perceived unnecessary expenditure of ratepayers’ money. The defence of public order in the face of another perceived threat: that of the unemployed was another area of mutual agreement.⁶⁴

This leaves unanswered the question why so many so-called ‘right-wing’ Liberals declined to throw in their lot with the Tories, or why some progressives for so long refused to abandon the Liberal Party. In fact, the Liberals maintained a distinctive ideology which shared some common ground with each of the other parties but also major points of difference which could not easily be blurred.

Their starting point was to reject class politics and to stress the importance of efficient and non-partisan management of local government. As Davies and Morley note, this time writing about Burnley, an important source of their strength was that ‘the Liberals played down, and even attacked, the notion of class-based politics. Liberals emphasised the differences between Liberalism and Labour as well as stressing the far greater business and administrative experience of Liberal candidates’.⁶⁵ This not only reflected the party’s moderation, but also its view that both Labour and the Conservatives represented sectional interests to the cost of the general public. Labour projected itself as the party

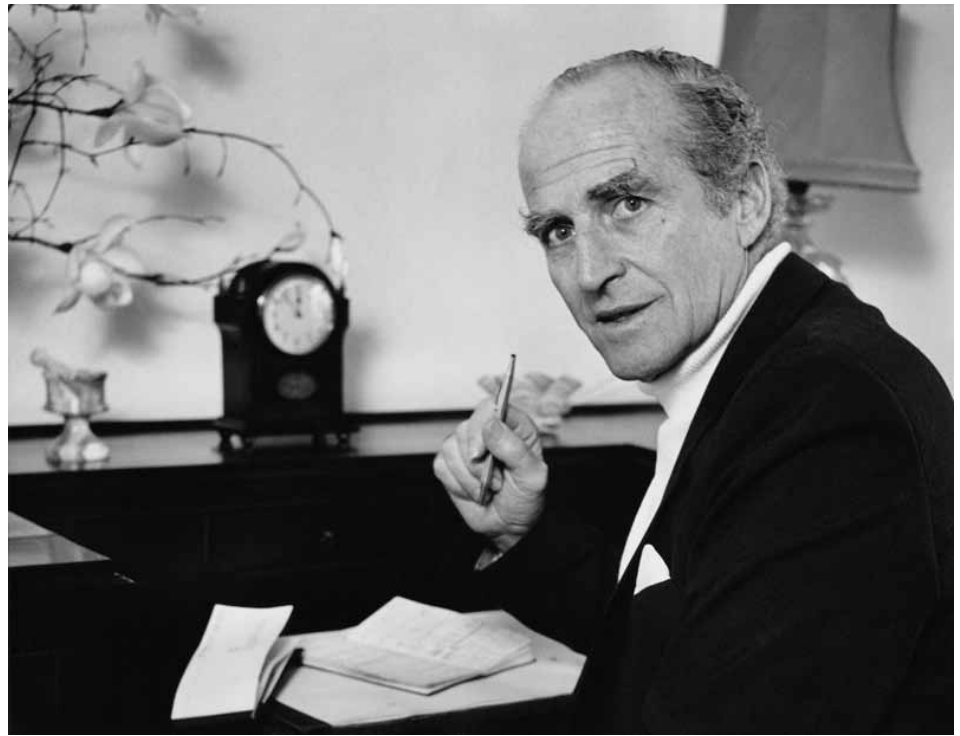
The Liberals maintained a distinctive ideology which shared some common ground with each of the other parties but also major points of difference which could not easily be blurred.

of the working class and the Conservatives were seen as the party of privileged 'rent-seeking' economic groups.⁶⁶ Othello Whitehead,⁶⁷ a prominent Bury Liberal in the 1920s saw the fundamental 'difference between Conservatives and Liberals was that the former represented the dividend seekers'.⁶⁸ This outlook was rooted in the ideological heritage of the 'Peers versus the People' battles before 1914, the influence of George-ist ideas on land taxation, but above all free trade doctrine which regarded protectionism as a Tory conspiracy against the public good.

There is some debate about the continued potency of the free trade issue. Peter Clarke plays it down claiming that it had been neutralised as a decisive partisan issue because many Lancashire Conservatives favoured free trade.⁶⁹ Frank Trentmann, on the other hand, insists that it still retained enormous power as a great popular cause coming 'close to a national ideology' right up to the First World War. He describes a more gradual disintegration of the intellectual, popular and business foundations of free trade which continued until Britain abandoned the policy in 1931–32.⁷⁰

The mass popularity of free trade lasted longer in Lancashire – dependant on cotton exports, commerce and shipping – than elsewhere. As we have seen as late as the 1923 general election the Liberals were able to secure twenty-six Lancashire seats on an anti-protectionist platform. This scale of success was not repeated: almost everywhere free trade was ceasing to be a winning cause on its own, but it continued to be a badge of identity differentiating Liberals from Conservatives and enabled them to tap into a powerful current of Lancashire opinion. Liberals from the region were in the forefront as champions of free trade in the party right into the 1950s.⁷¹

It is important to remember that free trade was not just about tariff policy but focused a whole philosophy, as the sub-title of Trentmann's book suggests, of 'commerce, consumption and civil society'. It was associated with socially responsible trade and consumerism, equity, and social solidarity. It provided the Liberals with their own political mythology in which free trade had



expanded civil freedom, freed the state from group interests, and promoted peace amongst nations.

If free trade was for many Liberals an insurmountable barrier in the way of them joining the Tories, it was viewed as a national issue that had little relevance for local government. This contrasted with 'sound finance' which offered fertile ground for cooperation with the Conservatives at local level in order to keep the rates down and to ensure tight control over expenditure. This was a favourite theme of Liberal campaigns throughout the period. In Bury in the 1920s and 1930s the Liberals' parsimony sometimes exceeded even that of the Conservatives and they argued that the most effective way for the council to ease unemployment was by keeping the rates low.⁷² In Rochdale two decades later 'the most economy-minded members of the Council appeared to be the Liberals, not the Conservatives'.⁷³

Those Liberals who stuck with the party were almost by definition 'anti-socialist'. This was true for those on the 'left' of the party as for those on the 'right'.⁷⁴ A Progressive like Ernest Simon, a leading Manchester Liberal and driving force of advanced interventionist policies to clear the slums and regenerate housing in the city, took years to overcome his aversion to joining the Labour Party.⁷⁵ Winifred Kirkham, an Oldham councillor

Michael Winstanley (1918–93), Liberal MP for Cheadle 1966–70, for Hazel Grove February – October 1974.

and Liberal parliamentary candidate in 1950 told the Manchester Guardian that 'she used to describe herself as "a Liberal with Labour leanings"'. She still calls herself a working woman and a democrat, but towards the Labour Party she has reservations. In her view the Labour creed implies excessive regimentation.⁷⁶ It is often suggested that this shared anti-socialism and economic and social connections made Liberals and Conservatives virtually indistinguishable politically. However this is to underestimate the differences in outlook and background that made many Liberals feel uncomfortable with the Tory Party. An example of this is Vera Bruce Chambers, a Stockport Liberal councillor who joined the Conservative Party in December 1947. Within less than a year she had defected back to the Liberals complaining that she was 'wrong in hoping to work with the Conservatives and is sure the Tory Party is no place for the Liberal-minded'.⁷⁷

Progressive ideas remained important in the Liberal Party especially in Manchester which had a considerable influence on the surrounding boroughs. As late as 1930 the Liberal candidates there were described as 'nearly always of deepening shades of pink'.⁷⁸ The zeal for improvement in social conditions was evident amongst many other Liberals. Often this took the form of philanthropic

activity in support of educational and health causes. Wealthy women such as Dame Sarah Lees and her daughter Marjory in Oldham,⁷⁹ Amy Jones in Rochdale⁸⁰ and Ada Summers in Stalybridge⁸¹ were prominent in this field, but there were also others from more modest backgrounds such as Mary Ellen Wild in Ashton-under-Lyne who was a pawnbroker.⁸² Doctors such as Richard Mothersole⁸³ and Jean Marshall,⁸⁴ both councillors in Bolton in the interwar years were drawn into Liberal politics through medical practice in the mills and deprived areas. Where Liberals had power they pursued positive social reforms. In 1934 the Manchester Guardian reported that Liberal-controlled Rochdale was 'very enterprising', promoting several local public works projects that provided employment – a reservoir, a secondary school for girls, a maternity hospital and a sanatorium.⁸⁵

The Liberals' enthusiasm for such progressive measures was part and parcel of their broader ideological commitment to mutualism, active citizenship and equality of opportunity (seen in Bury for example in a tendency to argue for greater expenditure on education than the Tories⁸⁶). The enthusiasm of Lancashire Liberals for the Beveridge national insurance plan in the mid-1940s was dimmed by the shift away from mutualism and voluntarism that its implementation brought about, as well as the cost implications.

The Radical ideology allowed and indeed encouraged cooperation with both the other parties: with the Conservatives in the cause of efficient and economical local administration and with Labour on progressive issues such as education, slum clearance and municipal enterprise. At the same time it was a barrier in the way of full amalgamation with those parties. The differences with Labour were pertinent at local as well as national level because Labour consciously sought to spread its class-based, collectivist and redistributive policies into local government. With the Conservatives the Liberals' differences related more to national, or as it was described at the time, imperial policy – in other words, free trade and international affairs. Thus in local elections Liberal

candidates habitually insisted that 'politics' – meaning national politics – should be kept out of local government. This is an important reason why Liberals in a number of boroughs were prone to cooperate with Tories in local government while continuing to compete vigorously with them in parliamentary elections.⁸⁷

The retreat of Lancashire Radicalism

In 1938 the Liberals controlled Darwen and were the largest party on Rochdale, Accrington, Bacup, and Heywood councils and in second place in Bury, Stockport, Dukinfield, Haslingden, Hyde, Middleton, Mossley, Rawtenstall, and Stalybridge. In Burnley and Bolton they were in a strong third place just behind Labour. Even in their weakest boroughs, Oldham and Ashton-under-Lyne they retained a strong foothold on the councils. Overall they held some 27 per cent of council seats: more than Labour.

By 1957 their representation had been seriously depleted. They had been eliminated from Oldham, Hyde, Rawtenstall and Stalybridge, and councils. In most other boroughs they held on tenuously with a councillor or two. In Darwen, Dukinfield, Haslingden, Heywood they could still claim a more sizeable representation but only in Rochdale, Bacup and Mossley did they remain a major force. Overall their strength had fallen to 9 per cent of council seats in the East Lancashire area. This was a big decline, but nevertheless the Liberal presence in local government remained significantly greater here than in any other part of the country except the West Riding.⁸⁸

In part the Liberal decline was due to the stronger and more aggressive electoral challenge of the Labour and Conservative parties, which was a national phenomenon. As we have seen, Labour made a breakthrough in some areas in 1945–46 and there was a further shift in its favour in the early 1950s. Compared with before the war, Labour had everywhere broadened its appeal and improved its organisation so that there were no longer boroughs where it was a negligible factor. The Conservatives too improved their organisation, recruited a mass membership

The Radical ideology allowed and indeed encouraged cooperation with both the other parties: with the Conservatives in the cause of efficient and economical local administration and with Labour on progressive issues such as education, slum clearance and municipal enterprise. At the same time it was a barrier in the way of full amalgamation with those parties.

and were increasingly assertive in electoral contests. They were less willing to stand aside for Liberals or Independents. Especially in some of the larger boroughs, such as Burnley, Oldham and Stockport, the Liberals were squeezed out. Where this happened, typically the Liberals put up a fight in the late 1940s but then largely ceased activity for a time from 1950. This also reflected the wider demoralisation and penilessness of the party after the collapse of its attempted revival at the 1950 general election.

In East Lancashire there were also important local factors at work, above all the economic and social changes that were taking place as the cotton industry declined. Cotton had been in retreat since the 1920s, with some 800 mills closing and 345,000 people leaving the industry between 1918 and 1939. Nevertheless the region still accounted for 28 per cent of world cotton trade at the end of the 1930s. There was a further 50 per cent decline in workforce and production during the Second World War, but this fall was largely reversed as the industry boomed after the war, and by 1951 production for the home market exceeded that of the mid-1930s. The 'Cotton Crisis' hit in 1951–2 due to inflation of textile prices and a shift in spending towards consumer durables. By 1958 production for the home market was down by 24 per cent and for export by 57 per cent compared with 1951. The government's efforts to rationalise and modernise the industry were unsuccessful and in the late 1960s and early 1970s cotton entered its final agony with mills closing at a rate of almost one a week across Lancashire.⁸⁹

At the same time the community structure that had helped sustain Liberalism was dissolving. In part this was due to independent factors such as the continuing decline of Nonconformity, the provincial press and the mutual sector. The Friendly Societies lost their central role in the national insurance system in the 1948 National Assistance Act. The communal 'self-help' educational sector was also sagging after the war and by the late 1960s the tradition had collapsed in many mill districts to be replaced by new national initiatives such as the Open University.⁹⁰

Population movements and urban regeneration unhinged established political patterns in many areas. In Middleton, for example, the building of a large Manchester overspill estate in the 1950s transformed local politics and propelled the previously docile local Labour Party into power.⁹¹

Other changes were more directly linked to the disintegration of the cotton industry. Much of the old Liberal elite drawn from the industry and its commercial and small business offshoots disappeared. Deference and the influence in tightly knit communities of employers, philanthropists and local notables faded away. The supply of active citizens in traditional fields – the foot soldiers of the party – dried up. Many Liberal clubs closed or lost their active connection with the party in the 1950s and early 1960s. The salience of free trade as rallying cry finally ceased as foreign competition in the domestic textile market became an increasing problem.

Where these processes developed more slowly, the Liberal political culture persisted longer. In Rochdale the Liberals held their position on the council up to the end of the 1960s, although they did not hold a majority after 1950. The town's official handbook of 1952, packed with adverts for local textile firms, gives special prominence to Rochdale's Liberal tradition and pictures of Cobden and Bright.⁹² In Mossley, traditional deference seems to have continued after the war. When the mill owner and former Liberal 'boss' of the town, James Bottomley, died in 1957 an obituary claimed that he 'was known affectionately throughout the town, particularly by the many cotton workers who had been employed at his mills, as "James Alfred" ... At his mills and at clubs and business premises all over the town flags were lowered to half-mast on Tuesday as news of his death spread'. Nevertheless, a few individuals, such as Alderman Jesse Crabtree (and his son John) in Bacup,⁹³ Alderman Roberts in Mossley,⁹⁴ Alderman Davidson in Darwen⁹⁵ and Alderman Fearn in Rochdale,⁹⁶ kept the flag of a dogged and robust Liberalism flying.

Generally though, the Liberal decline was more marked as cotton

Table 3: Liberal council members in eighteen East Lancashire boroughs 1956–72

	1956	1959	1961	1963	1966	1969	1972
Bolton, Bury, Stockport	7	8	18	39	12	3	1
Other boroughs	66	77	84	81	75	88	47
Total	73	85	102	120	87	91	48

retreated, and this was mirrored by a weakening of support for the Conservatives in the region, no doubt reflecting the same social changes. Labour gained ground as the balance of the economy shifted away from cotton.

These trends were not much affected by the Liberal revival under Jo Grimond. As Table 3 shows, only Bolton, Bury and Stockport followed the national pattern of a surge in the early 1960s followed by a rapid retreat and indeed collapse in the later 1960s. But even here the gains were on a more modest scale than in the newer suburbs of south-east England and the commuter fringe of Manchester around Cheadle and Sale. Elsewhere in the region the advance came early and then stalled with the Liberals actually suffering a slight loss of seats in the early 1960s. Here however the party held its position more firmly in the later 1960s and indeed made some gains at the end of the decade when to a limited extent it shared with the Tories the spoils of the big swing against the Wilson Labour government, which was particularly sharp in the textile area.⁹⁷ (See Table 3.)

However, as the figures for 1972 show, this only concealed temporarily the collapse of Liberal strength in the region. The Liberals had by this stage been eliminated from six councils (Oldham, Bolton, Bury, Ashton-under-Lyne, Stalybridge and Middleton) and had only a handful of representatives (at most three) in eight others (Stockport, Burnley, Accrington, Dukinfield, Hyde, Haslingden, Bacup, Rawtenstall). In Rochdale and Heywood they had lost heavily and only in Mossley and Darwen was the party's position still relatively strong and stable. The Conservatives had supplanted the Liberals in several of their traditional strongholds. Bacup, a council which the Liberals had controlled in the early 1960s, had become solidly Conservative by the end of the decade. The Tories had also overtaken the Liberals in Rochdale and Heywood.

In the elections to the new county authorities in 1973 the best Liberal performances in the north-west were outside the region covered in this article, in the newer Manchester suburbs of Cheadle, Hazel Grove, Prestwich and Altrincham & Sale and in areas where they had previously been weak such as Liverpool and Colne, Pendle and Preston.⁹⁸ In their old heartlands they did well in Darwen and picked up seats in Royton, Saddleworth and Rochdale, but made little impact elsewhere.

The economic, social and community factors that had sustained a distinctive northern Liberalism in the textile towns of East Lancashire were severely weakened by the 1960s – a pattern also evident in Halifax, Huddersfield and other Liberal strongholds in the West Riding of Yorkshire.⁹⁹ The modernised Liberal Party of that period was also becoming less congenial to traditional economic liberals who increasingly found a home in the Conservative Party of Heath and Thatcher.

Traces of the region's old Liberal allegiance have survived and resurfaced especially where assisted by local factors and charismatic candidates. But the former textile districts have not been in the forefront of the expansion of the Liberal/Liberal Democrat electoral base in recent decades. The strange survival of Liberal Lancashire in the first half of the twentieth century was followed by the curious collapse of its heartlands the 1960s and '70s. Future articles will examine this story in the Manchester area and the West Riding of Yorkshire as well as the contrasting developments on Merseyside and the West Lancashire coast.¹⁰⁰

Jaime Reynolds has written numerous contributions for the Journal of Liberal History and other History Group publications. He was awarded a PhD following studies at LSE and the University of Warsaw, Poland. He worked in the UK civil service and since 2000 has been an official of the European

THE STRANGE SURVIVAL OF LIBERAL LANCASHIRE

Commission working on international environmental issues. His current research interests are the political parties and the expanding role of women in local government politics in the 1920s and 1930s.

- 1 M. Egan, *Coming Into Focus – The Transformation of the Liberal Party 1945–64* (Saarbrücken, 2009), p. 168.
- 2 P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 397.
- 3 Clarke, as above.
- 4 Especially the digital archives of *The (Manchester) Guardian* and *The Times*, UK Data Service, the British Newspaper Archive. The family history site Ancestry UK is also useful for biographical material.
- 5 Clarke, *Lancashire*, p. 10.
- 6 Such as Birkenhead East (from the Liberals) and Manchester Blackley, Rusholme and Moss Side.
- 7 Twenty-nine in 1923 and thirty-one in 1929.
- 8 Fifty-six in 1924 and fifty-nine in 1935.
- 9 Calculated by the author. The data covers the total of councillors and aldermen sitting on the councils in the years specified. For a small number of councils, mostly in 1921, estimates have been used because of lack of data. The total of seats in 1921 was some 1,650 and in 1972 some 2,140. The region covered is modern Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside, thus including some parts of pre-1974 Cheshire.
- 10 South-east Lancashire was one of only two regions in the country that swung to the Labour Party at the 1959 general election: D. E. Butler and R. Rose, *The British General Election of 1959* (London, 1960), p. 236.
- 11 M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: the Labour Movement in Preston 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987) is useful.
- 12 S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Elections in England and Wales 1919–38: A Comparative Analysis*, vol. 1 (Ashgate, 1999).
- 13 Clitheroe elected a Labour MP in 1918 and 1945 but otherwise has always been Tory. Nelson and Colne was always Labour from 1918 to 1970, except in 1931.
- 14 J. Hill, *Nelson: Politics, Economy, Community* (Keele, 1997) is an excellent analysis of Nelson's economic and political culture. 'Little Moscow' was a misnomer as communist influence was limited and the local Labour tradition owed more to Radical and ILP influences. Hill suggests that 'Red Nelson' would be more apt. The large proportion of immigrants especially from nearby Pennine weaving districts, the absence of big employers to form a patriarchal political class, and the early development, large size and effective organisation of the Nelson Weavers' Association were key factors in the exceptional strength of Labour in Nelson.
- 15 The Liberals began to gain seats in Colne in the early 1970s and became the largest party in the new Pendle District in 1973.
- 16 S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Elections in England and Wales 1919–38: A Comparative Analysis*, vol. 2 (Aldershot, 2000) pp. 316, 333. The Tories had ten. Labour had nine aldermen, the Liberals two and the Conservatives one.
- 17 The Liberals only stood aside at the 1951 and 1955 elections when the Conservatives gained Rochdale.
- 18 It was formed in August 1935 on the initiative of the local Rector in order 'to eliminate political passions from local government'. See *Manchester Guardian*, 22 Aug. 1935.
- 19 William Herbert Booth, a prominent councillor and mayor in 1938, was described in the press as a Liberal National. It was reported in 1937 that Middleton & Prestwich Liberal Association had recently been re-formed: *Manchester Guardian* 2 Sept. 1937.
- 20 Mary Gertrude Emmott (née Lees) (1866–1954), daughter of cotton spinner, 1887 married Alfred Emmott (1858–1926), cotton manufacturer, Liberal MP for Oldham 1899–1911, 1st Baron Emmott 1911. They were mayor and mayoress of Oldham 1891. She was Liberal candidate for Oldham 1922. Vice-president of the Liberal Council 1929–31. Prominent Liberal National in late 1930s.
- 21 John Samuel Dodd (1904–73), engineer, director of family-owned Sun Cotton Mill, one of largest in Oldham. Liberal councillor and parliamentary candidate for Oldham 1929. Liberal National MP for Oldham 1935–45.
- 22 James Taylor Middleton (1887–1957), solicitor, son of a Liberal mayor of Oldham. Councillor for Hollinwood ward 1936–48 and numerous times Liberal candidate. Three times parliamentary candidate. President Oldham Liberal Association. President of NW Liberal Federation in 1950s. On executive of Liberal Party Organisation.
- 23 See D. Dutton, *Liberals in Schism – A History of the National Liberal Party* (London, 2008), pp. 91, 99.
- 24 *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Oct. 1936.
- 25 Enabling J. T. Middleton to gain Hollinwood ward in 1936 for example.
- 26 J. G. Bulpitt, *Party Politics in English Local Government* (London, 1967), pp. 22–39.
- 27 Cyril Smith (1928–2010), active Liberal Rochdale, Stockport 1945–50, on executive NLYL. Councillor Rochdale Labour 1952–66, Independent 1966–70. Mayor. Rejoined Liberals 1970. MP for Rochdale 1972–92. Unitarian.
- 28 In West Riding of Yorkshire.
- 29 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 1, pp. 463–542.
- 30 Thomas Connor (1896–1988), commercial traveller. Labour councillor Bolton 1929–38. Liberal councillor 1938–61. Alderman 1961–67. Mayor 1963–64. Leader Liberal group in 1960s. Secretary Bolton Liberal Association and chairman from 1944. Failed to regain Smithills 1967. Rejoined Labour Party 1967.
- 31 B. J. Evans and A. J. Taylor, 'Rise and Fall of Two-party Electoral Cooperation (Huddersfield and Bolton)', *Political Studies*, xxxii (1984), pp. 257–272.
- 32 In Cheshire, as were Dukinfield, Hyde and Stalybridge.
- 33 *Manchester Guardian*, 6 May 1953.
- 34 A resolution adopted at the 1958 Liberal Assembly declared that the party 'can, in no foreseeable circumstances, enter into pacts, with either the Conservative Party or the Labour Party on the national or local level; whilst in view of the undemocratic nature of the present electoral system, welcoming the opportunity of presenting the Liberal case in a straight fight against either Conservatives or Socialists, should such opportunities afford themselves'.
- 35 E. D. Smithies, 'The Contrast Between North and South in England 1918–39: A Study of Economic, Social and Political Problems with particular reference to the Experience of Burnley, Halifax, Ipswich and Luton' (DPhil thesis, University of Leeds, 1974), p. 287.
- 36 For example in 1955 H. J. Hallam wrote of the very strong Liberal traditions in Radcliffe preserved by the Municipal Party, long after Liberals had ceased to contest local elections independently, see H. J. Hallam in D. Butler, *The British General Election of 1955* (London, 1956), p. 145.
- 37 Even in a town like Middleton where Lib-Con collaboration was close, the Liberals fiercely defended their independence. In 1951 a Liberal councillor publicly denounced what he claimed were Conservative attempts to force him to stand as a Tory and turn the council into a 'closed shop': *Manchester Guardian*, 2 Nov. 1951. For more on Middleton and on Rochdale, see Bulpitt, *Party Politics*, ch. 1 and 4.
- 38 Burnley Liberal Association affiliated to the Liberal Party Organisation in June 1946. It had previously aligned with the Liberal Nationals without formally affiliating to the Liberal National organisation. See *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jun. 1946.
- 39 Unlike in Liverpool and Manchester for instance where a Liberal alderman survived in the 1950s only due to Conservative support.
- 40 E. J. Cleary and H. Pollins, 'Liberal Voting in the General Election of 1951', *The Sociological Review*, vol. 1, issue 2, Dec 1953, p. 39.
- 41 Arthur Douglas Worsley (1891–1965), born Pendleton. Father was mayor of Salford. Organiser for NW Liberal Federation from 1927, secretary 1932–58.
- 42 Clarke, *Lancashire*, pp. 272–3.
- 43 M. Kinnear, *The British Voter – An Atlas and Survey since 1885* (London, 1968), pp. 125–6. The detailed figures are: Rochdale 6.4 per cent; Heywood & Radcliffe 6.2 per cent; Stalybridge & Hyde 4.4 per cent; Mossley 4.6 per cent; Darwen 10.0 per cent;

- Burnley 10.1 per cent; Rossendale 18.7 per cent.
- 44 Prominent Labour Baptists included the Rev. Gordon Lang, Labour MP for Oldham 1929–31 and Stalybridge & Hyde 1945–51, and Clifford Kenyon, Labour MP for Chorley 1945–70, a lay preacher and former mayor of Rawtenstall.
- 45 D. Butler and D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain – Forces Shaping Electoral Change* (Penguin, 1971), p. 170.
- 46 P. Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics – the Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton, 1980), pp. 170, 241. Joyce also suggests that racism (i.e. anti-Irish feeling) was a secondary factor behind sectarian behaviour.
- 47 See further: Hill, *Nelson*.
- 48 C. Miles, *Lancashire Textiles – a Case Study of Industrial Change* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 42.
- 49 Miles, *Lancashire Textiles*, pp. 114, 121. Overall 241,000 people were still employed in the industry in 1959 and 164,000 in 1964.
- 50 John Percy Taylor (1868–1945), cotton spinning mill owner. A leading figure in Bolton Liberalism for over forty years, President of Liberal Association for fifteen years, vice-chair North-western Liberal Federation. Parliamentary candidate 1924. Bolton council 1900–3, 1914–42. Mayor 1934. Freeman of Bolton 1938. Unitarian.
- 51 C. Smith, *Big Cyril* (London, 1977), pp. 48–9.
- 52 Smithies, ‘Contrast Between North and South’, p. 295.
- 53 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 2, p. 429. Oscar Stranding Hall (1862–1932). Power loom manufacturer. Bury Councillor to 1926.
- 54 James Alfred Bottomley (1874–1957), mill owner Mossley. Mossley council 1909–30s. Seven times mayor of Mossley.
- 55 Holt family: prominent Liberal Congregationalist mill-owning (Holt Hosiery) family in Bolton. A. E. Holt (1872–?) was a councillor from 1911, President of Bolton Liberal Association and parliamentary candidate for Bolton in 1924. Arthur Frederick Holt (1914–95) was Liberal MP for Bolton West from 1951–64. Chief Whip 1963–64. President of the Liberal Party 1974–75.
- 56 Sarah Lees (née Buckley) (1842–1935), born Mossley. Widow of wealthy Oldham cotton spinner. Co-opted to Oldham Education Committee 1902. Member of Oldham council 1907–19. Mayor 1910 (second female mayor in UK) and Freeman of Oldham. DBE 1917. Congregationalist.
- 57 Friendly societies clubbed together workers to offer basic health and unemployment benefits, savings banks, job referral services, and burial plans.
- 58 S. Cordery, *British Friendly Societies, 1750–1914* (Houndmills and New York, 2003); T. Cutler, K. Williams and J. Williams, *Keynes, Beveridge and Beyond* (London, 1986), pp. 42–4; J. McNicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain, 1878–1948* (Cambridge, 1998); D. Gladstone (ed.), *Before Beveridge – Welfare before the Welfare State* (Civitas, 1999), <http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/cw47.pdf>
- 59 J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2nd edn, Yale, 2010), ch. 2.
- 60 See the biographies on the excellent Links in the Chain (Bolton) site for numerous examples: <http://www.boltonsmayors.org.uk/>
- 61 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 2, p. 425.
- 62 Hill, *Nelson*, pp. 123–4.
- 63 K. Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour – Reshaping British Society 1850–1930* (London, 1980), p. 208.
- 64 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 2, pp. 426–47.
- 65 *Ibid.*, pp. 216–7, quoting G. Trodd, ‘Political Change and the Working Class in Blackburn and Burnley, 1880–1914’ (PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1978).
- 66 The Conservatives were described as ‘the party of vested interests’ in *The Liberal Way* (National Liberal Federation, 1934), p. 114.
- 67 Othello Lord William Whitehead (1866–1953), headmaster. Liberal councillor Bury 1926–1940s. Mayor 1937–38.
- 68 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 2, p. 427.
- 69 Clarke, *Lancashire*, p. 398.
- 70 F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation – Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 5, 32.
- 71 James T. Middleton, president of the North-west Liberal Federation, proposed the famous ‘trumpet call for Free Trade’ adopted at the 1953 Liberal Assembly in Ilfracombe.
- 72 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 2, pp. 434, 437–9.
- 73 Bulpitt, *Party Politics*, p. 91.
- 74 The terms left and right are used here for convenience only. Old radical Liberal thinking commonly dubbed ‘right-wing’ shares much in common with what today would be labelled as ‘left libertarianism’.
- 75 E. D. Simon bowed out of Liberal politics in the 1930s. He stood as an Independent at the 1945 general election and shortly after joined the Labour Party. His wife Shena, also a leading Manchester housing reformer had joined the Labour Party in 1935.
- 76 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Jan. 1950.
- 77 *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Dec. 1947, 29 Oct. 1948.
- 78 *The Times*, 28 Oct. 1930.
- 79 Marjory Lees (1878–1970), daughter of Sarah Lees. Liberal councillor Oldham. Continued her mother’s philanthropic work. Freedom of Oldham 1934.
- 80 Amy Jones (1883–?), daughter of Sir James E Jones, wealthy cotton merchant, philanthropist, leading Rochdale Liberal, mayor 1905–7 and pillar of the United Methodist Church. Amy was a Rochdale councillor for a short time.
- 81 Ada Jane Summers (née Broome) (1861–1944), daughter of Oldham textile mill owner, wealthy widow of John Summers of family firm of ironmasters in Stalybridge which became one of largest steel producers in the UK. Active Liberal and suffragist. Stalybridge councillor from 1912. First woman mayor of Stalybridge 1919. Alderman. Freedom of Stalybridge 1939. Known as ‘Lady Bountiful’ for philanthropic work. Her brother-in-law J. W. Summers was Liberal MP for Flint 1910–13.
- 82 Mary Ellen Wild (1866–1945), born Rochdale, shop-assistant, later pawnbroker. Moved to Ashton under Lyne in 1898. Liberal councillor 1919–28 and subsequently several times candidate. Her husband James Albert was also an active Liberal and councillor in Ashton.
- 83 Robert Deveraux Mothersole (1865–1950), born Colchester, mill doctor. Liberal councillor Bolton 1925–40s.
- 84 Jean Marion Farie Marshall (1876–1965), born Greenock, general practitioner working in Bolton from before 1914. Liberal councillor Bolton 1935–40s.
- 85 *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Oct. 1934.
- 86 Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, vol. 2, p. 427.
- 87 For example in Rochdale, Oldham, Bury and Rossendale Liberals opposed Conservatives in almost every parliamentary election from 1918–50.
- 88 The Liberals were also strong in Blackpool, and Southport.
- 89 Miles, *Lancashire Textiles*, pp. 25–6, 38–41.
- 90 See J. Rose, *Intellectual Life*, pp. 296–7, 463.
- 91 See Bulpitt, *Party Politics*, pp. 22–39.
- 92 *The County Borough of Rochdale – the Official Handbook* (3rd edn, 1952). It records that 26,000 people were employed in the textile industry, 46 per cent of the total workforce.
- 93 Successively councillors for Broadclough ward, Bacup in late 1950s and early ’60s.
- 94 Nelson Roberts, Liberal councillor Mossley Cheshire ward during 1950s and early 1960s.
- 95 David Davidson, Liberal councillor Darwen South-west in early 1960s. Mayor of Darwen 1961–62.
- 96 Charles H. Fearn, Liberal councillor and alderman, Rochdale, 1945 to 1960s. Chair of Housing Committee.
- 97 The textile towns of Lancashire saw a swing of 7.4 per cent to the Conservatives at the 1970 general election, compared with the national average of 4.7 per cent: D. Butler and M. Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* (London, 1971), p. 394–5.
- 98 The Liberals also captured control of Kearsley Urban District near Bolton in the late 1960s, a mining town with little Liberal tradition.
- 99 See J. Reynolds and P. Wrigley, ‘Liberal Roots – The Liberal Party in a West Yorkshire constituency 1920s–1970s’, *Journal of Liberal History* 80 (Autumn 2013).
- 100 Researchers interested in collaborating in further research on this topic are welcome to contact the author jjcyejnolds@gmail.com