

1900 election

The 'khaki election' of 1900 saw the Liberals performing poorly. **Graem Peters** examines one seat they gained from the Conservatives.

Hastings in 1900

In the general election of 1900, the Liberals made a few gains across the country, recovering slightly from the debacle of 1895 – but the recovery was limited as the Unionist government appealed for support during the South African war. The fact that the constituency of Hastings was one of the gains was something of a surprise.

The sitting Unionist MP in 1900 was William Lucas-Shadwell. He was a local man who had been born and raised in Fairlight, just outside the town. He was known locally for taking a stand on social issues, which endeared him to the working classes. However, at the last minute he chose to stand down, following concerns expressed by the local Conservatives about his voting record (he had frequently voted with the opposition), and the Unionists had to find a new candidate. The man they chose was barrister and architect Edward Boyle KC, selected just eleven days before polling took place. He lived in the neighbouring constituency at Hurst Green, and this was his first contest.

(Boyle was to stand again in the neighbouring seat of Rye three years later, where he was also defeated. His losses were the only two occasions in the twentieth century before 1997 when either Rye or Hastings was lost by the Conservatives. This was not just a case of bad luck for Boyle. He was reputedly not the best of platform speakers, and during an age when public meetings were a major part of an election campaign, how good an orator a candidate was was more important than what he was saying.)

Boyle fared particularly badly in 1900 when compared with the Liberal candidate. In 1900 the Liberals put forward thirty-four year-old Freeman-Thomas. He had played cricket for Sussex and Cambridge University and was a local JP. He was imposing in an aristocratic way and came across well at his meetings. He was the son-in-law of Lord Brassey, who had himself been Liberal MP for Hastings.

In 1900, the main issue of the campaign was, of course, the Boer War. The Liberal Party was known to be split on the issue. Henry Campbell-Bannerman

and his supporters opposed the war, while Lord Rosebery and his Liberal Imperialist followers supported the Unionists in their war efforts. Freeman-Thomas was an Imperialist and a follower of Rosebery, and was therefore well placed to appeal to the views of wavering Unionist voters in Hastings.

Mrs Lucas-Shadwell, wife of the retiring MP, came out openly in opposition to the Conservatives and their candidate and urged voters to support Freeman-Thomas. He could also call upon influential support in the Liberal Party to help with his campaign in Hastings. As well as being a follower of Rosebery, he was also a personal friend. Rosebery was keen that such a friend and supporter should be returned to the House of Commons, which would make his position in the Liberal Party and the cause of Liberal Imperialism that much stronger. Thus Freeman-Thomas' campaign was well supported by the Roseberyites, and in due course helped him win the seat.

Post-election excuses were made by the Tories; they claimed that the Liberals had intimated that if their man won, Lord Brassey would fund the completion of Hastings harbour. The harbour was never completed, and to this day the local fisherman have to drag their flat-bottomed boats up the beach inland. Freeman-Thomas sat in the Commons until his defeat in 1906, one of only a handful of losses suffered by the Liberals in their greatest election landslide.

Graem Peters is the Liberal Democrat prospective parliamentary candidate for Hastings & Rye.

Election results, Hastings:

1900

Freeman-Thomas (Lib)	3,399	51.6%
Boyle (Con)	3,191	48.4%

1906

Du Cros (Con)	4,348	52.5%
Freeman-Thomas (Lib)	3,935	47.5%