

BATTLING BATH LIBERAL

The story of a Liberal activist in Bath in the late nineteenth century, in his own words. **Stephen Tollyfield** introduces the reminiscences of his great-grandfather, Alf Wills, as part of his ongoing efforts to restore Wills' position as a formidable figure in Bath's political history.



As an old man, living on Bathwick Hill, Bath, my great-grandfather A. W. Wills (1872–1949) started writing an account of his life. He never finished it and it remains in my mother's possession. However, it contains his account of his early political experiences in a knockabout way that, quite literally, pulls no punches.

Alfred started life as a plumber and builder, working for his father, also Alfred Wills. His father, who was with good reason concerned for his business, advised his son against displaying his politics too openly. Young Alfred, however, could not be restrained for long. His stories paint an enjoyable picture of early Liberal politics in Bath –

My father was an advanced Radical with a definite leaning to Republicanism. It is astonishing to look back and remember how many were only waiting for the opportunity to declare a Republic. Many people think

**Alfred Wills
(1872–1949)**

of 'Victoria the Good'. All I can say is the memories of my early youth leave the impression that the democracy thought of her in other terms. Probably Gladstone's extension of the Franchise, which was bitterly opposed in the early 1880s, had a good deal of effect and the fact that Edward, Prince of Wales, was declared to be a friend of Gladstone and a Liberal helped to keep the Peace.

Election times were times of turbulence. My earliest memory is my father going to Bristol on business, during an election, taking a blue and a red scarf with him so as to display either, in case he met a procession. At election meetings it was not uncommon to have free fights and all the chairs, or nearly all, smashed. Gangs were organised to disturb opponents and parade the streets, seeking for a fight. A torchlight parade with hundreds taking part, carrying lighted torches, was always organised by the Liberals at least. But we dared not openly display our politics. If

we did, we lost jobs, patronage, everything and incurred bitter hatred. Right up till the time of the Great War, I was persecuted for my Politics and my Religion.

The Reform Acts of 1832, 1867 and 1884 increased the total electorate to over five million. The introduction of secret ballots in 1872 freed working men from voting deferentially. At the time of the Great Reform Act of 1832 and of municipal reform in 1835, Bath increased its constituency from 30 to over 3,000 voters with a quarter drawn from the working class.¹ By October 1900 there were 7,346 voters on the register. Alfred writes of how he acquired his first vote:

When I was 18 (I looked years older) I thought I ought to have the vote, though the law said I must not. Votes were obtained by making claims through Party Agents and the Revising Barrister; who held an annual enquiry to decide between claims and objections. One Party made a

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claim; the other side made all possible investigations to raise an objection. If there were no objection it was agreed that the claim was good and was allowed. To prevent frivolous objections the Barrister could allow 'time and expenses'. This tended to keep things in proper proportion.

I went to see Sam Hayward the Conservative Agent and laid my claim. He was delighted to see me and asked no questions. All he said was, 'But your father was always a Liberal.'

I countered with, 'But it doesn't follow that a son shares his father's political views does it? He does not know of my visit here and I want you to keep it quiet.'

This was sufficient. Father did not know, but the Liberal Agent did. My father had proudly commenced to trade as 'A Wills & Son'. I took advantage of this; it being presumed that I was a partner, of age, and therefore a joint tenant of the business premises. I got my vote and used it two or three times before I was legally qualified to do so.

Bath had seven wards, which included Bathwick and Walcot. Each ward elected six councillors to Bath City Council.

A year or two after I was 21 I came out into the open and was made Chairman of the Liberal Ward Committee for Bathwick. Though we had not the slightest chance in the Ward I was able sufficiently to impress the other side that they would consult me as to a Candidate for the City Council, to avoid a contest. More than once I found an alternative Conservative candidate to the proposed official one.

I can find only one instance of my great-grandfather nominating anyone in Bathwick. This was William Adams, the proprietor of the Fernley Hotel, in the Municipal Elections of 2 November 1903.

What fun we used to have! Every year there was a Ward Meeting at which members rendered account to their constituents. We attended to ask questions. We always found the disgruntled members and asked their questions for them – if they would not do it. It was better than pantomime!

I remember one incident in a Municipal election at Walcot. Oliver (Conservative) was fighting our man Baggs. We knew that it was going to be the closest possible contest and every vote of special value. In the middle of the afternoon, three of us, Trude Young and myself were standing in the street, near the polling station. A lady came along in a pony wheelchair – openly carrying Oliver's polling card – and asked us where she had to vote for Oliver.

Trude steps forward, raises his hat and says, 'Beg pardon lady, but are you over 70?'

'What has that to do with the question?' she asks.

'Don't you know lady, that ladies over 70 can't vote now?' says Trude.

'Oh dear dear. I didn't want to come and they've been worrying me all day. Take me home Mr —.'

Mr —, one of our ardent supporters, was happy to do so. We won by only 3 votes!

Alfred's recollection in this respect was defective. The result as recorded by the *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette* of 26 April 1893 was as follows:

M Baggs	677
C B Oliver	665
Majority	12

The paper goes on to record that Oliver gave a speech from the steps of the Guildhall saying how amicable the fight had been. They had nothing to reproach themselves for and neither had the other side!

Alfred clearly felt that the additional resources of the Tories justified a little skulduggery –

The Tories always had a multiplicity of conveyances, carriages and pairs galore, but the poor radicals could hardly ever get half enough ponies and traps. So in every ward where there were invalidated stalwarts, they were instructed to suggest that they were going to vote Tory 'this time'. They were polled in carriages and pairs, but we knew how they really voted.

Alfred had an enemy in the Rector of Bathwick, George Tugwell. Rev. Tugwell had been Rector whilst Alfred had been at the Parish Church School and there was evidently no love lost

The following PERSONS have been duly NOMINATED
as Candidates for the office of Councillor for Walcot Ward in
the CITY OF BATH.

The ELECTION to be held on the 20th day of April, 1893.

Person Nominated.				Persons subscribing the respective Nomination Papers.	
Surname.	Other Names.	Abode.	Description.	Proposer.	Seconder.
Baggs	Mark	York Villa Stendington Bath	Gentleman	Edw. H. Hunt Thomas Head Belville P. Penley Caroline Usher	William H. Mortimer Aaron Moor Francis Miles Hannah Challenor
Oliver	Charles Bryan	Assembly Rooms Bath.	Architect	Richard Harbord Charles David Ingham R. V. Fowler James William Britten	Charles Clement D. M. Walters Richard J. St. Scott James P. Osborne

Dated the 13th day of April, 1893.

[Signature]
Town Clerk.

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between them. The Rector had refused to allow Alfred to tender for the work of building a wall at the cemetery, on the grounds of his Nonconformist religion and Radical politics. This was despite the fact that the architect – also a Tory and Anglican – wanted A. Wills & Son included in the firms invited for tender. Alfred was, however, to have his revenge, as he relates in the next election story:

During a General Election at which Home Rule was the issue and feelings were running high, I was Party Agent inside the Polling Booth. Each side had an Agent to ensure fair play. In the middle of the afternoon the

General election results in Bath, 1880–1900

1880 April		
Hayter	Lib	2712
Wodehouse	Lib	2700
Hardy	Con	2359
Smyth	Con	2241
1885 November		
Blaine	Con	3208
Wodehouse	Lib	2990
Laurie	Con	2971
Hayter	Lib	2953
1886 July		
Wodehouse	Lib Unionist	3309
Laurie	Con	3244
Hayter	Gladstonite	2588
Verney	Gladstonite	2529
1892 July		
Murray	Con	3198
Wodehouse	Lib Unionist	3177
Baptie	Gladstonite	2981
Adye	Gladstonite	2941
1895 July		
Murray	Con	3445
Wodehouse	Lib Unionist	3358
Conway	Lib	2917
Fuller	Lib	2865
1900 October		
Murray	Con	3486
Wodehouse	Lib Unionist	3439
Maclean	Lib	2605
Fuller	Lib	2549

Liberals wheeled in a poor man who could not write or speak properly following a stroke. It was therefore necessary for the Booth to be cleared of all but sworn men whilst the Presiding Officer got from the voter his directions as to his vote. The Bathwick School was being used, as always.

As I was closing the door at the direction of the Presiding Officer I saw Rev. Tugwell pompously walking along the long path towards the school. In a minute or two the Rector was knocking on the door. Getting no answer he increased his knocking, shook the door and then kicked it violently.

The Presiding Officer asked me to see who it was, but on no account to let anyone in. Pulling the bolt back gently but keeping my foot against the door I opened it slightly. I was met with a tornado of words from a man who was almost in an apoplectic state. 'How dare you keep me out of my school!' he said, trying to push in.

Using my flat hand I pushed him so hard that he staggered back four yards and fell backwards over the step. Fortunately another gentleman had just arrived and rushed to brake his fall. I at once rebolted the door and informed the P.O. that it was the Rector. In a minute the kicking and rattling resumed, but shortly ceased.

The Sworn Room lasted 20 minutes, because of the condition of the voter, who died 2 days later. When the door was opened and the voter wheeled out, a Policeman who had now arrived held the Rector back. 2 or 3 other voters had also arrived in the interim. The Rector stamped into the Polling Booth calling upon the Policeman to follow and take me in charge for assault.

The Polling Officer did not know what to do. I stood laughing while he tried to calm the Rector. Suddenly I turned to

the P.O. and said quietly, but as clearly as possible, 'Mr Presiding Officer I call upon you in the Queen's Name to do your duty and have this person removed or prosecuted for brawling in a Polling Booth. I call upon you to so instruct the Police Officer.'

The complete collapse of the Rector was the best reward I could ever have.

Alfred was sanguine at the bribery and corruption that occurred during elections. He accepted it as inevitable. The problem for the Liberals was that they simply could not afford it. They were not averse to paying for votes, but needed to be sure they were getting value for money:

The Tories paid over their half sovereigns on the promise to vote – probably two or three days before the election. Our men only ever paid after the man had polled as an illiterate. This meant that an agent took the man right into the Polling Booth. The man would declare that he could not read or write and so in a Sworn Room the voter would openly declare for whom he voted. No half crowns for nothing was our slogan.

Bath at the time elected two MPs to parliament. Voters could vote for up to two candidates. The table shows the spread of voting from 1880 with the top two being elected.

I got a fair intuition into political methods. The year Donald Maclean lost I told him at 11 a.m. on Polling Day, 'You are going to lose.'

He asked me how I could be such a pessimist – the only one in Bath. I replied, 'The Publicans are quiet ... and confident.'

Years later, when I saw Maclean in the House of Commons, he reminded me of the incident.

Sir Donald Maclean KBE (1864–1932) became the Liberal MP

for Bath in the Liberal landslide of 1906. Maclean's total vote was 4,102 and his fellow Liberal Gooch received 4,069. The two Tories mustered 3,123 and 3,088 respectively. The last time Bath had elected two Liberals was in 1880 (see chart). In 1910 he left Bath and became MP for Peebles and Selkirk. He was chairman of the Liberal Party from 1919 to 1922. He was also the father of the other Donald Maclean, the infamous spy.

My great-grandfather records an incident in that election of 1906:

I was outside the Old Herald Office watching the results of the polling come in. There was an immense crowd reaching from St Michael's, Bridge Street, to the top of New Bond Street; excited, pushing and swaying. Of course it was mostly a Liberal crowd. Standing by my side was a little man, named Barnes, a photographer. He was absolutely dumb with astonishment as the Balfour figures were put out.

Arthur James Balfour, the Tory Prime Minister from 1902 to 1905, lost his seat for the constituency of East Manchester in the 1906 general election. The memoirs continue:

I did not know him well enough to carry out any sort of conversation. But there he stood with a blue Conservative handkerchief tucked well down inside his breast pocket. But as he was so small even I could see it by looking down into his pocket, which slightly gaped open.

Suddenly a gang of Avon Street hooligans forced themselves through the crowd, pushing and shoving by way of diversion. As they passed Barnes, one of them saw his handkerchief and without hesitation bashed Barnes' hat over the eyes.

In a moment my fist had contacted with the hooligan's jaw and he went sprawling. His pals were at me like panthers.

Suddenly I heard a voice, far away at first and then, 'That's Alf's voice! Hold on Alf I'm coming!'

In a moment I was fighting side by side with my old colleague O'Leary. The best of which was O'Leary had left A Wills & Son and set himself up in competition to us. I had not seen him for three or four years. It was a famous victory.

One last vignette perhaps conveys the rather more colourful character of politics at the time:

There were two brothers who both owned home brew public houses. Enoch Tutton in Bathwick Street was a Radical. Robert Tutton in Walcot was a Tory. They were both successful men but absolutely divided on their politics. Both owned high stepping horses and dogcarts.

At election times one of the sights was to see these brothers driving round Bath with harness, whip, horses, dogcarts and themselves decorated with their party colours. It looked like a competition for the best-dressed dogcart.

How they glowered at each other as they passed, but never spoke!

Alfred was persuaded to stand in the Bath City Council elections of 1908 as a Liberal candidate in Walcot. This was in place of Mr W. Tonkin who retired from the Council through ill health. Despite being an employer himself, his Radical credentials nevertheless made him acceptable to the working man. If he were not an employer himself, he announced, he would be a trade unionist. He went on to become Mayor of Bath in 1918. He was also food controller for Bath during the Great War. He suffered a nervous breakdown in 1919 following the national rail strike, which greatly disrupted food distribution. His conflicts had moved beyond the robust physical confrontations of

his early politics, for which he clearly felt a singular degree of nostalgia.

Stephen Tollyfield is a Principal Legal Adviser for the South Derbyshire Magistrates' Court. He is married with two children and now lives in Swanwick, Derbyshire.

1 Graham Davis, 'Sir Jerome Murch and the 'civic gospel' in Victorian Bath', *Journal of Liberal History* 37, p. 14

Form 6.

DECLARATION TO THE RETURNING OFFICER OF NAME AND ADDRESS OF ELECTION AGENT.

1890

Parliamentary Election for the _____ Division of the _____
City of Bath

I, *Donald Maclean* of
14 The Parade Cardiff a Candidate at
the above-named Election, do hereby give you notice that
pursuant to the provisions of the 46th and 47th Victoria, Cap.
51, Sec. 24, I have appointed *Seymour Williams* of
Northgate Chambers Bath to be my Election Agent for the said
Election; and that the address of his office or place to which
all claims, writs, summons, and documents with regard to the
said Election, addressed to the said *Seymour Williams*
may be sent is *Northgate Chambers Bath*

Dated this *25th* day of *September* 189*0*

(Signed) *Donald Maclean*

To the Returning Officer.

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**Special Instructions to Presiding Officers
POLLING AGENTS**

NOT MORE THAN 4 POLLING AGENTS (WHOSE NAMES ARE ON THE ACCOMPANYING LIST) ARE ENTITLED TO ATTEND IN THE STATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF DETECTING PERSONATION.

IT HAS ALSO BEEN ARRANGED WITH THE CANDIDATES AND THEIR AGENTS THAT NOT MORE THAN 2 OF SUCH POLLING AGENTS FOR EACH SIDE SHALL REMAIN IN THE STATION AT THE SAME TIME AND THAT THE AGENT WHO TAKES THE REGISTER WILL NOT BE CHANGED.

SPECIAL ADMISSION TICKETS HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO THE POLLING AGENTS AND OTHERS ENTITLED TO ATTEND.

Note: Undated instruction document from Bath City Archives.