

A LANCASHIRE MINER SAM WOODS AND THE

The Walthamstow by-election of 3 February 1897 was the most remarkable result of over seventy parliamentary contests during the 1895–1900 parliament. Sam Woods, a white-haired miner in his early fifties, unexpectedly became the first Liberal-Labour Member for Walthamstow. The Liberal press hailed the result as ‘the most astonishing political transformation of recent times’.¹ However, *The Times* declared: ‘We had no notion that the crude, violent and subversive Radicalism of Mr Woods would find acceptance even in a working-class constituency’.² **John Shepherd** tells the story.



AROUND MIDNIGHT ON 3 February 1897 the result of the parliamentary election for the Walthamstow (South Western Division of Essex) constituency was announced at the old town hall in Orford Road. The dramatic election result was:

Sam Woods (Liberal-Labour)	6,518
Thomas Dewar (Cons.)	6,239
Lib-Lab majority	279

Previous general election results:
1892

E. W. Byrne (Con)	6,115
W. B. Whittingham (Lib)	4,965
Con majority	1,150
1895	
E. W. Byrne (Con)	6,876
A. H. Pollen (Lib)	4,523
Con majority	2,353

From 1886 to 1895 Walthamstow returned Tory MPs, and the

R IN WALTHAMSTOW BY-ELECTION OF 1897

Liberal Party saw the constituency as a hopeless cause. The first workman to contest Walthamstow, Sam Woods, was a former hewer from Wigan and a complete stranger who had been adopted shortly before polling day. In the late nineteenth century miners' unions were the pioneers of labour representation, but their candidates stood only in mining constituencies.

In 1897 Sam Woods' campaign manager, Herbert Samuel, wrote to the former Prime Minister and Liberal leader William Gladstone for support. Samuel stressed 'the great importance at the present moment of a hearty alliance between the party and the more sober section of Labour politicians',³ a well-directed reference to the long-established links in Victorian politics between the Gladstonian Liberal Party and prominent trade union and labour leaders. In this way, before the advent of the modern Labour Party, Sam Woods joined the small group of working-class MPs known as 'Lib-Labs' who represented labour interests but were Liberals in politics.

Nearly fifty years later, Herbert (then Viscount) Samuel recalled that 'Woods knew as little of Walthamstow as Walthamstow knew of coalmines'.⁴ How Sam Woods became the Member for Walthamstow provides a fascinating insight into the politics and society of the town during its important period of urban development in the late nineteenth century.

The Walthamstow constituency

In 1897 the Essex county constituencies of Romford and

Walthamstow contained the two largest electorates in the country. The South-Western Division with 19,846 adult male voters out of a total population of around 150,000 was a vast constituency which comprised Walthamstow, Leyton, Leytonstone, Harrow Green and Woodford and stretched from Tottenham in the west to Wanstead in the east, and Chingford in the north to Clapton in the south. Before 1850 there were fewer than 5,000 inhabitants in the rural parish of Walthamstow, but by 1883 the socialist writer, designer and craftsman William Morris described Walthamstow, his birthplace, as 'a suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest and once a pleasant place enough, but now terribly cocknified and choked up by the jerrybuilder'.⁵

In Walthamstow during 1871–1891 the population expanded dramatically from 11,092 to 95,131. The estate developers and the Great Eastern Railway Company created the new, predominantly working-class, suburb. The extension of the railway to Walthamstow in 1870 and the G.E.R. Company's promotion of workmen's tickets and half fares in 1872 and 1885 attracted the skilled artisans and clerks who settled in the town with their families, but commuted to London. Many worked in the City, the financial centre of the world at this time.⁶ The major estate developer in Walthamstow was Thomas Courtenay Theydon Warner, one of the largest landowners in the locality, whose Warner Estate Company built large parts of the town, starting in the 1880s in the St James Street district. The most important industry was the building

trade, with many skilled workers, engaged mainly in house construction. Of the individual occupations represented in the local community, the most numerous were carpenters and joiners, printers, clerks and domestic servants. Outside their homes, women worked mainly in domestic service, dress-making and the manufacture of books, paper and stationery. There were over 350 women schoolteachers and more than 250 female commercial clerks in the town. By the turn of the century, at least seventeen trade unions had been established in the district. While similar urban development took place in nearby Leyton, the villadom of Woodford, with four times as many domestic servants per head of population as Walthamstow, retained its middle-class character.⁷ From 1886 to 1895 the Walthamstow Liberal Party found great difficulties in persuading wealthy Liberals to contest the constituency. To obtain help, Walthamstow Liberals approached party headquarters in London, but with little success. Pressed by his local party, Courtenay Warner told Herbert Gladstone: 'I am afraid this division is a forlorn hope. I shall do what I can for the candidate they choose though I should not like to stand myself'.⁸

Prospective Liberal candidates were not encouraged by the bitter internal party feuding surrounding the political activities of J. J. McSheedy, an Irish Radical and schoolmaster, who had first earned his reputation as the stormy petrel of Walthamstow in his campaign to reform the Walthamstow Parochial Charities.⁹ McSheedy became the leader of the local Radical and

Left: Sam Woods (10 May 1846 – 23 November 1915)

A LANCASHIRE MINER IN WALTHAMSTOW: SAM WOODS AND THE BY-ELECTION OF 1897

Progressive Association, an alliance of working men and small-scale businessmen, which gained increasing influence within the local Liberal Party. Elected to the new urban district council with five other Radicals in 1894, McSheedy's activities were publicised in his own newspaper, the *Walthamstow Reporter*. McSheedyism aroused demonstrations of great passion and hostility. But the Progressives enjoyed strong support in the new working-class areas, such as St James Street and High Street wards; and the changing social composition of the constituency was an important factor in the by-election of 1897.

The by-election of 1897

The vacancy at Walthamstow was caused by the appointment of the Tory MP, E. W. Byrne, QC, to the Bench of the Chancery Division of the High Court of Justice. The local Conservative Association soon chose Thomas Dewar, a wealthy director of Dewar's Whisky, as their candidate; whereas the Liberal Party in Walthamstow received the demoralising reply from London that the party managers had committed their resources instead to another by-election in neighbouring Romford.¹⁰ There the Conservatives had held the seat for eleven years. In Walthamstow, Arnold Hills, the millionaire owner of the Thames Iron Works and Shipbuilding Company, came forward briefly as an independent opponent in the Temperance cause.¹¹ The situation altered unexpectedly when, at the City Liberal Club on 23 January, Sam Woods, Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, was finally persuaded to accept the Liberal nomination. However, Woods did not owe his last-minute selection to the Liberal Whips in London, nor to his Lancashire miners. A twenty-six-year-old party worker, Herbert (later Viscount) Samuel, after visiting the constituency, took a different view from his Liberal chiefs and decided to fight the by-election. He secured Woods as the candidate and arranged the finance and election workers.¹²

The Liberals in Walthamstow had always sought rich, middle-class local men as their candidates, whereas Sam Woods had made his reputation as a pioneer in trade

union and labour politics in Lancashire, becoming the respected local miners' agent at Ashton-in-Makerfield, and then the first president of the Lancashire Miners Federation and vice-president of the Miners Federation of Great Britain. From 1892 to 1895 Woods was the MP for the Ince Division of Lancashire and had held his part-time TUC post since 1894. In politics, he was a loyal Gladstonian Liberal, as the Liberal Chief Whip had informed Gladstone:

Mr Woods is the agent for the Lancashire Miners Association and has the support of the Liberal Party in the division. He has found it necessary to declare on Home Rule and I have a written assurance that on all questions other than those specifically affecting labour he will support the Liberal Party.¹³

At this time many local Liberal associations, dominated by middle-class elites, were hostile to working-class candidates. The Walthamstow Liberal Party included amongst its leadership two local magnates, Edward North Buxton, who had been the local MP briefly in 1885 and was a director of the East London brewers, Truman Hanbury and Buxton, and Thomas Courtenay Theydon Warner MP. Both men lived in the constituency, were active in Victorian politics and took a progressive line on labour matters. In these circumstances, with an increased working-class electorate, the local political climate was favourable for a labour candidate in Walthamstow.¹⁴

Woods's election costs (nearly £1,400) had to be met entirely from Liberal sources including help from a local businessman, John (later Sir John) Roberts of Salway House, the benefactor of the Jubilee Hospital in Woodford and a stalwart of the local Liberal Party.¹⁵ Once the Liberal Chief Whip's office in London endorsed Woods's candidature, Herbert Samuel remained in the constituency to manage the campaign.

The candidates and the election campaign

Samuel found that the Walthamstow Liberals lacked an effective

electoral organisation. He quickly prepared a short biography of Sam Woods for distribution in the constituency.¹⁶ Woods had entered the mine at the age of seven and had worked at every mining occupation for twenty years. Largely self-educated, he had gained a first-class certificate in mining management. A Baptist convert, he had been a student for the ministry, but was unable to take up his place. Instead, Woods' direct experience of the hazardous conditions of mining life formed the basis of his long trade union and political career. In terms of background, social position and political views, the two candidates made a striking contrast. Woods was a labour leader of humble origins, deep religious convictions and strong temperance beliefs. The wealthy Thomas (later Baron) Dewar was twenty years younger, owned a string of thoroughbred racehorses (including the Derby favourite) and his own Rocket coach. On the 'Drink v Temperance' issue, the Director of Dewar's Whisky had publicly denounced prohibition systems and in the election enjoyed the support of his business rivals.

During his campaign, Woods advocated a broad Lib-Lab programme. He told the electors:

I strongly favour such democratic proposals as the abolition of the power of the House of Lords to veto legislation, the Payment of Members, One Man One Vote, a thorough Registration reform, and the control by the Irish people of their own domestic affairs. I also heartily support the taxation of Ground values, a radical reform of the Land Laws as affecting both urban and rural land, the establishment of a complete system of Secondary Education open to all classes, and any measures which would improve the housing of the people.¹⁷

In particular, Woods attacked the Tory government's controversial grant proposals of 1897 to assist the Church schools rather than the Board schools since, in Walthamstow, nearly twenty thousand children attended twenty-six local Board schools compared to fewer than two thousand pupils in the four denominational schools. He

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was well known as an advocate of the legal eight-hour day and had campaigned steadily in parliament for the miners on this issue, as well as the nationalisation of mining royalties, land and railways. These were radical proposals, rather than socialist measures, which would have then won sympathy with some advanced Liberals. However, Samuel completely suppressed these references to nationalisation in Woods' manifesto to assuage any fears which middle-class voters in the constituency might possess about a workman candidate.¹⁸

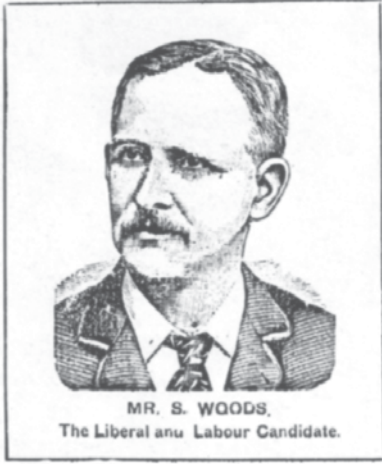
Thomas Dewar appealed to the electorate on the Tory government's policies, especially in imperial and foreign affairs, advocating increases in military expenditure to protect British colonies and shipping. In domestic politics, he was in favour of conciliation courts in industrial relations, opposed alien immigration and cautiously defended the Tory education proposals.

Though the Walthamstow by-election took place in mid-winter, with a similar Conservative versus Liberal contest in neighbouring Romford, the two largest constituencies in the country attracted a great deal of attention in the national and local press. The London Radical newspaper, *The Star*, vigorously championed the Liberal cause with waspish attacks on the Tory candidates in Romford and Walthamstow. In Walthamstow the Liberal Party hurriedly organised a vigorous campaign lasting just over a week during which Sam Woods addressed over forty meetings.

On Tuesday 25 January, he officially opened his campaign with meetings in Leyton and at the Workmen's Hall in the High Street, Walthamstow. There, in a forthright speech, the Liberal candidate announced his programme of trade union and labour reforms. Besides attacking the government's Education Bill, Woods declared in favour of votes for women, the nationalisation of railways and the municipalisation of water supplies, though he opposed compulsory vaccination. Three days before, Dewar commenced campaigning with a splendid drive through the constituency in a four-in-hand. At his first meeting at Leyton Town Hall he presented himself as a commercial man and patriot who approved of

Sam Woods' election address for the by-election

Mr. S. Woods's Election Address.



MR. S. WOODS,
The Liberal and Labour Candidate.

To the Parliamentary Electors of the Walthamstow Division.

GENTLEMEN,

A vacancy having occurred in the representation of the Division, I have accepted the invitation of the Liberal Association, and present myself as a Labour and Liberal Candidate.

I am an opponent of the general policy of the present Government, and I am convinced that the constituency will gladly avail themselves of this opportunity of protesting against their reactionary legislation.

By the Agricultural Rating Act they have voted £2,000,000 a year of the ratepayers' money to the agricultural landlords, a class which does nothing to increase the nation's wealth and whose incomes have no claim to be swollen at the expense of the people.

By their Education Proposals, attempts have been made to cripple the Board Schools, to diminish in other ways the efficiency of the national

the government's foreign policy in Egypt. He concluded: 'I am going very much for the Government, because although in power only a short time, they have brought back the prestige of the empire, a prestige it enjoys only when a Conservative government is in power.'

Electioneering started each morning with the distribution of literature outside the railway stations as early as five o'clock. The wintry weather, sometimes including blizzards, did not deter large crowds at the outdoor gatherings and packed audiences at the indoor evening meetings. The Walthamstow Liberal Party received help from organisations such as the Essex United Temperance Council, the Poplar Labour League and local women's groups. The very few references in the local press do not give a full and accurate picture of the part women played in local politics. A bevy of Labour MPs and prominent trade union leaders joined local Liberal politicians to speak in support of Sam Woods. Most active was the Battersea MP,

John Burns, popularly known as the 'Battersea Bruiser', owing to his rumbustious political style, and as the most famous working-class leader in London in the late Victorian period.¹⁹

On the Saturday, three days before polling, Burns who had 'lungs of leather and throat of brass' addressed an immense crowd on Markhouse Common, a traditional gathering-place for election hustings and open-air meetings in Walthamstow. In all, Sam Woods spoke at thirteen meetings that day, including a visit to the Great Eastern Railway Company's works at Stratford. In the evening, the former miner ventured into upper-class, Tory Woodford to address a meeting at the Wilfred Lawson Temperance Hotel.

On Monday 1 February polling took place in Romford, which was regarded as a safe Tory seat, though *The Star* had revealed that the Conservative candidate, Louis Sinclair, had only recently become a naturalised British citizen. In Walthamstow, despite awful weather, a

large Liberal meeting at the Victoria Hall in Hoe Street heard John Burns challenge Dewar's support for home industries by demonstrating, to the amusement of the audience, that ashtrays advertising Dewar's whisky were 'made in Japan'. The next day in the Victoria Hall Dewar responded to Burns's taunts by stating that he had placed far more contracts for ashtrays and similar goods with British firms than with those abroad. In ending his campaign, the Tory candidate revealed that he was against the payment of MPs, a popular demand in working-class politics. In what was regarded as a strong Tory seat, the Conservatives had undertaken little canvassing and organised fewer meetings. Dewar was not considered a good public speaker and was on weak ground in defending unpopular Tory measures.

Polling day

Polling in Walthamstow took place on Wednesday 3 February. Heavy snowfall the previous evening turned every street into a quagmire and most workers left the town before the polling booths opened at 8 a.m. Consequently polling was slow until the early evening, though in the afternoon the Romford result, where the Conservative majority was reduced to only 125, became known in the town. In the evening the Great Eastern Railway Company brought the voters home to Walthamstow, in some cases very near to the close of polling at 8 p.m. The correspondent of the Manchester Guardian described what happened:

The scene at St. James Street station as eight o'clock drew near beggars description. Here the arrivals were principally working men and this ward and adjoining High Street were great strongholds of Mr Woods. Wagonette, cart, pony carriage, vans; everything that could run on wheels was there to await the supporters of Mr Woods and a willing crowd of helpers – all shouting at the top of their voices – directed the voters as they came out to the vehicles for the different polling stations ...²⁰

John Burns had noted in his diary 'victory doubtful', a view shared

by the Liberal camp in general.²¹ Instead Sam Woods' resounding win, achieved with a 64 per cent turnout of the electorate, was attributed in part to the weakness of Dewar's campaign, which alienated the temperance vote, and the voters' dislike of the Tory education proposals. Herbert Samuel believed that the popular enthusiasm for the workman candidate was a decisive factor. As a labour leader of notable religious and temperance beliefs, Sam Woods was able to unite the Liberal and Labour vote in Walthamstow at the time of general hostility to the Conservative government. While the Liberal Party in the country was in turmoil in the 1890s, the new MP's unexpected victory owed much to the success of the local Progressive alliance in the constituency. A few weeks later in the local elections, the Progressives, led by the firebrand McSheedy, gained control of the district council.

In 1897 Sam Woods' impressive triumph represented a swing of over 11 per cent, but he was defeated in the 'khaki' election of 1900 and retired a few years later. The Labour Party did not contest a parliamentary election in Walthamstow until after the First World War. From 1897 to 1900 Sam Woods had the unusual distinction of being the town's first Labour MP, many years before the celebrated figures of Valentine (later Baron) McEntee and Clement (later Earl) Attlee.

Professor John Shepherd is now Visiting Professor of Modern British History at the University of Huddersfield. Sam Woods is also mentioned in his article 'Labour and parliament: the Lib-Labs as the first working-class MPs, 1885–1906', in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds) Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain, 1850–1914 (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

The author would like to thank Mr Reg Jones (Sam Woods' great-nephew) and his family in Wigan, and the staff of the Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow Public Library, British Library and House of Lords Record Office for their assistance during the research.

This article originally appeared in the Essex Journal (Spring 1987 Vol. 22 No

1) and is reprinted with the kind permission of the editor and the author.

- 1 *The Speaker*, 6 Feb. 1897.
- 2 *The Times*, 4 Feb. 1897.
- 3 Samuel to Gladstone, 23 Jan. 1897. Gladstone Papers B.L. Add Mss, 44,525, f. 64.
- 4 Viscount Samuel, *Memoirs* (1945), p. 27.
- 5 E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Revolutionary to Romantic* (1955), p. 16.
- 6 R. Wall, *The History of the Development of Walthamstow*, unpublished M.Phil. thesis (University of London, 1968).
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- 8 Warner to Gladstone (n.d. 1887?). Viscount Gladstone Papers B.L. Add Mss 46,044, f. 77.
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- 10 Walthamstow Central Liberal and Radical Association, *Minutes*, 15 Jan. 1897, Vestry House Museum.
- 11 *Walthamstow and Leyton and Chingford Guardian*, 22 Jan. 1897.
- 12 Samuel to Clara Samuel, 31 Jan. 1897, Samuel Papers. A/156.
- 13 Morley to Gladstone, 1 Nov. 1890, Gladstone Papers, B.L. Add Mss 44,254. ff. 124–138.
- 14 John Shepherd, *The Lib-Labs and English Working-Class Politics, 1874–1906*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 1980), chapter vi.
- 15 Diary, 2 July 1900, Viscount Gladstone Papers, B.L. Add Mss 46,483 ff. 138–139; *The Essex Review*, XXVII (Jan. 1918), pp. 44–45.
- 16 *Mr Sam Woods the Liberal and Labour Candidate ...*, Samuel Papers A/155 (II).
- 17 For the election campaign, see *The Star*, 30 Jan. 1897; *Daily News*, 29 Jan. 1897; *Walthamstow Whip*, 30 Jan. and 6 Feb. 1897; *Leyton Express and Independent*, 20 Jan. 1897; *The Times*, 4 Feb. 1897.
- 18 Samuel to Gladstone, 23 Jan. 1897, Gladstone Papers B.L. Add Mss 44,252, ff. 63–70.
- 19 K. D. Brown, *John Burns* (1977).
- 20 *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Feb. 1897.
- 21 Diary, 3 Feb. 1897, John Burns papers, B.L. Add Mss 46,315.

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