

Gladstone's books are collector's items now, I came across a 1534 religious text lying casually on a window ledge in the study; my sense is that he valued books primarily for the contents rather than their appearance.

If you will excuse my saying so, and judging solely from the appearance in the pictures, the engraving has a 'rural' character rather than the professional appearance one would expect from something professionally commissioned by someone of Gladstone's wealth. None of this detracts of course from the historic character of the artefact.

Tony Little (Chair, Liberal Democrat History Group)

Thanks to Patrick Mitchell

Patrick Mitchell has decided to stand down from the management committee of the Liberal Democrat History Group at the 2021 Annual General Meeting.

Patrick has been with the History Group from its beginning when it started to publish the *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter* (now the *Journal of Liberal History*), and has served on the committee in a multitude of roles.

Patrick drafted the constitution of the Group, which has been sufficiently brief and clear that it has served efficiently, and virtually unchanged, for the thirty-plus years of the Group's

existence. He was the Group's treasurer for some years and was the membership secretary for an even longer period.

Chair of the Group, Tony Little, said: 'Patrick brought a quiet efficiency to his roles on the committee, particularly as our membership secretary. We have been very fortunate to have had his diligent services over such a long period.'

'I would like to express the gratitude of his fellow committee members for his help and advice and wish him well for the future.'

Letters to the Editor

Lady Howard of Llanelli

I was interested in the article on Lady Howard of Llanelli in the last issue (Jaime Reynolds, 'Another Madam Mayor: Lady Howard of Llanelli and the strange case of the Cowell-Stepneys', *Journal of Liberal History* 108 (autumn 2020)). Although the authors writes that it became an absolutely safe Labour seat after 1922, citing as evidence the 1931 majority of 16,033, this was simply because no Liberal stood in 1931. In the four elections between 1922 and 1929, the Labour majority over Liberal never reached 10,000 and was only 2,259 in 1924. Thereafter the constituency did become very strongly Labour indeed, but its Liberal vote resisted the rapid erosion which occurred in most of industrial south Wales.

There are only rare three-cornered fights, in 1929 and 1950, to show this. Most seats had these in 1929: in Llanelli, the Liberal vote (37 per cent) was higher than in any of the industrial South Wales valley seats and much higher than the average Liberal vote in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire (27 per cent). By 1950, the average Liberal

vote in industrial South Wales had dropped to 11.8 per cent (based mostly on coastal towns, as the party was too weak to fight most mining seats), but Lanelli still pulled in 14 per cent, the only industrial Welsh seat in which the Liberal vote was ahead of the Conservatives (by 7,700 to 6,362) and one of only a handful across Britain.

Then, despite this second place, Liberals dropped out in Llanelli until 1964. Nationally, in seats fought in both 1950 and 1964, the party's percentage share rose by 5.4; in Llanelli, the vote dropped to 12.2 per cent. Its locally higher parliamentary support had by then evaporated. Maybe that vote had simply reflected its more Welsh linguistic character, or maybe the influence of Meriel Howard-Stepney can be discerned.

Michael Steed

Lady Howard of Llanelli: response

Michael, many thanks for your comments on the article.

I am sure you are correct about the enduring Liberal strength in Llanelli

into the 1950s, which is not surprising given the Liberal hold on the surrounding Carmarthenshire seat and the presence of a sizable Welsh-speaking and Nonconformist population in the constituency. There may also have been some residual Howard influence, though I suspect that this was on the wane after the 1920s. Interestingly, Stafford Vaughan-Howard, Meriel's son, was mentioned as a possible Liberal candidate for Llanelli in 1948 but he chose instead to stand for South Gloucestershire in 1950 and Penrith & the Border in 1951. Instead, the candidate for Llanelli was Hywel Gruffydd Thomas.

The fact remains that Labour polled over 50 per cent of the votes in every election from 1922, and even where there was a single Liberal or Tory candidate, as in 1924 and 1931, this was insufficient to overturn the Labour lead (perhaps, as you suggest, because a significant number of Liberal voters preferred Labour).

Jaime Reynolds