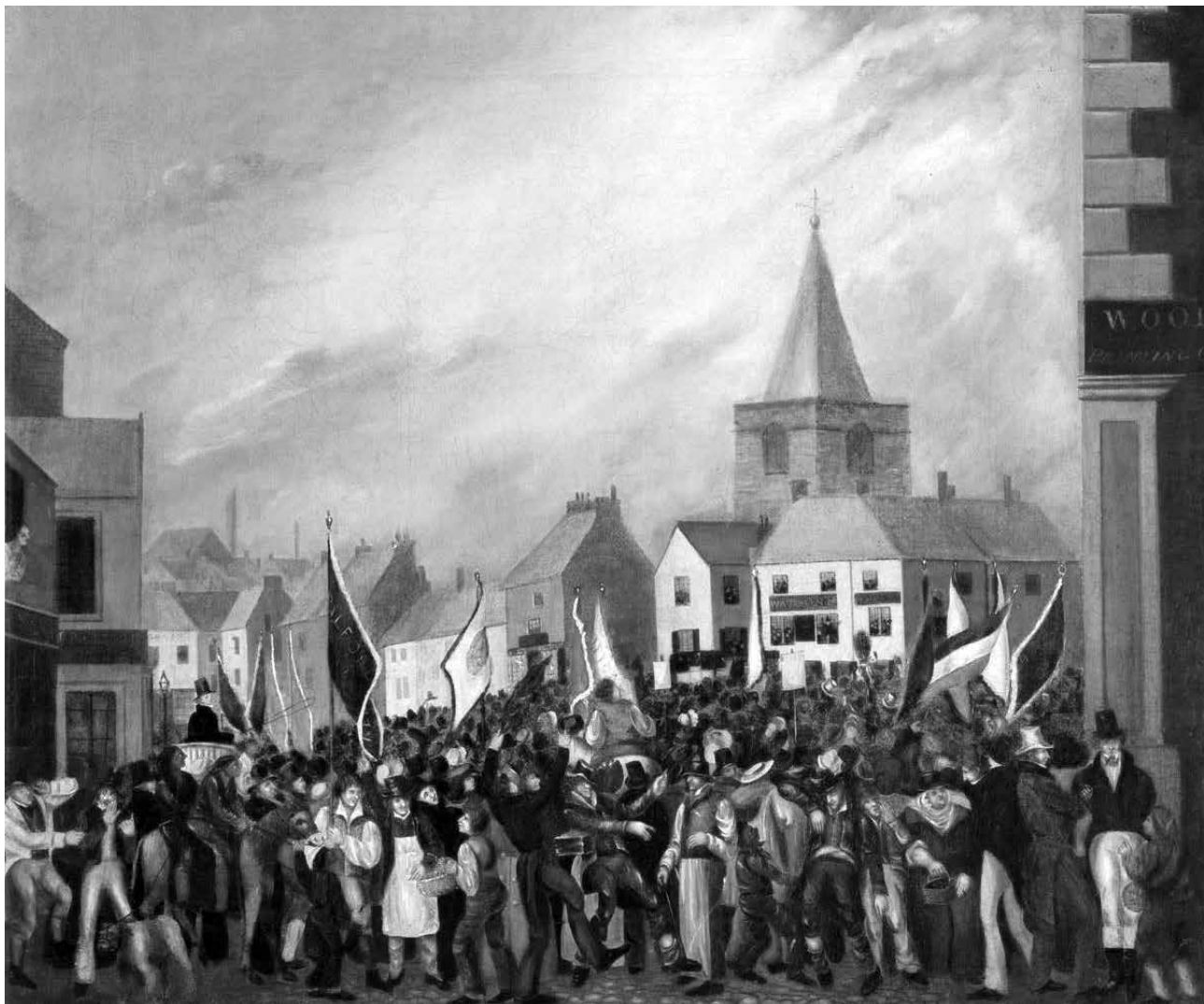


Great Reform Act

The impact of the Reform Act of 1832 on politics in Lancashire; by Michael Winstanley.

Liberalism and the L in the aftermath of t



THE CONSEQUENCES OF the Reform Act of 1832 (Representation of the People Act) have generated considerable academic debate over the decades. Perhaps surprisingly, with a few notable exceptions they have not been represented much in this journal.¹ This overview of Lancashire, the county which experienced the most rapid industrial,

commercial and demographic growth and a major centre of earlier Radical agitation for parliamentary reform, is necessarily broad in approach and some of its generalisations more tentative than others, but it hopefully provides some indication of the factors which may have influenced the political landscape of the county in the immediate post-Reform Act decades.

Lancashire electorate the 1832 Reform Act

The reformed electoral system

It is worthwhile at the outset reviewing essential components of the 1832 Act and how they affected Lancashire.

Nationally there was a redistribution of seats. So-called 'rotten boroughs' with handfuls of electors were disenfranchised, but in Lancashire only Newton-Le-Willows, with an estimated fifty electors and two MPs and where there had been no contest since 1797, lost its seat. Clitheroe, a small market town, lost one of its two seats but other older corporate towns of Lancaster, Liverpool, Wigan and Preston retained both theirs. County representation – covering all the areas outside the urban parliamentary boundaries – was doubled from two to four, with the division of the county into two, two-member constituencies: North and South. Manchester, Oldham, Bolton and Blackburn received two members and Salford, Rochdale, Bury and Ashton-under-Lyne were granted one. Away from the textile districts, however, Warrington, with one member, was the only new borough. Representation within Lancashire was therefore not so much redistributed from old boroughs to new but supplemented by the creation of new seats in the south-east of the county. Cumulatively this amounted to a near doubling of seats from fourteen to twenty-six, but it still fell far short of reflecting the population or economic significance of the county nationally.

There was no uniform franchise. In the county seats, forty-shilling freeholders retained their rights to vote but they were supplemented by tenants who paid £50 per annum rent. These included not just rural voters but men who owned or rented property of that value in the boroughs. Over two-thirds of electors in the South Lancashire constituency lived in industrial areas. In the borough seats, old and new, '£10 householders' were enfranchised; that is,

any man who owned or tenanted any 'house, warehouse, counting-house, shop, or other building' in the parliamentary borough district with a rateable value (estimated net annual rental after deduction of expenses) of £10 or more. Electors had also to have been occupiers of the property for twelve months prior to the last day of July each year and have paid all the taxes due and to have resided in the borough or within seven miles of it for six months. In a two-seat constituency, electors had two votes. Since the majority of properties in towns were valued below £10, the electorate cannot be considered working class or representative of a town's social make-up. Indeed, it has been estimated that the proportion of houses rated at £10 or more in borough constituencies in the North West were among the lowest in the country.² The electorate in the new manufacturing boroughs, therefore, did not reflect the local occupational structure of the towns. Most of the industrial working class remained excluded, their potential influence restricted to extra-parliamentary campaigning or tactics such as exclusive dealing. Consequently, the electorate was comparatively small. Among one-member constituencies, only Salford exceeded 700 voters. With nearly 7,000 voters there were more electors in the commercial hub that was Manchester than all the other new borough constituencies combined.

In the old corporate towns with ancient charters granting certain rights and privileges to freemen, however, resident freemen retained their rights to vote if they had qualified before 1 March 1831, whether or not they were occupiers of £10 properties. The effect of this varied depending on the constituency. In Wigan and Clitheroe there were few resident freemen and the new £10 householders dominated. Elsewhere freemen were an important component of the electorate, particularly in the 1830s. For

The 1832 Blackburn Election, unknown artist, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery (Creative Commons, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Liberalism and the Lancashire electorate in the aftermath of the 1832 Reform Act

example, whereas Liverpool and Manchester had broadly similar populations in 1832, Liverpool's freemen boosted the potential electorate to 11,283 while Manchester's was just 6,726. Preston, with about a fifth of the population, had an electorate only marginally smaller than Manchester in 1832. In Lancaster, of the 1,110 electors eligible to vote in 1832, 848 were freemen and only 262 were £10 householders.³ In the Lancaster election of 1837, 780 of the voters qualified as freemen, but only 208 were new £10 householders.⁴ Freemen's right to vote was extended to subsequent generations, but only if they qualified by birth or 'servitude' (apprenticeship) rather than by ownership of certain burgage plots or honorary appointment. Numbers in Preston therefore shrank rapidly as those who had qualified under the pre-1832 male inhabitant franchise died or moved away in the following decades. Urban expansion in Liverpool had eroded the potential influence of freemen by the 1850s, but in Lancaster, which experienced little population growth during the period, they remained an important component of the electorate until the enfranchisement of all adult male, resident householders under the Reform Act of 1867. Every election year through to the 1860s witnessed a sharp rise in the number of admissions to the rolls.⁵

An often overlooked yet important element of the act was registration: the compilation of annual lists of potential voters. Overseers responsible for collecting local property rates from householders submitted lists of qualified electors to the annual registration courts, which were presided over by revising barristers who adjudicated on any contested claims. To remain on the register then required an annual payment of one shilling. This all meant that there was ample scope for disputes about who should be on the lists and created an opportunity for local party activists to ensure that potential supporters were registered and opponents removed.

Liberal fortunes and the new electorate

How well did 'Liberals', or 'Reformers' as they were commonly referred to, fare under this new, diverse system? We need to bear in mind at the outset that there was no agreed definition of the term, and no national party structure or policy manifesto. Candidates stood on platforms which encompassed a wide spectrum of views on a diverse range of issues. Margins of victory could also be very narrow. There was nearly always a significant Conservative vote even in superficially staunch Liberal towns. In the Manchester by-election of 1839,

for example, at the height of the Anti-Corn Law League's campaign, Sir George Murray, secretary of state for war under Wellington and who had denounced reform in 1831 and repeatedly refused on the hustings to commit himself to support repeal of the Corn Laws, came within a few hundred votes of defeating the local Liberal manufacturer Robert Hyde Greg.⁶ Two years later, he polled 3,115 votes, just 460 behind Thomas Milner Gibson. An individual candidate's vote could also vary significantly between elections. In two-member constituencies where voters could cast two votes, a significant minority split between parties, suggesting either that they did not have strong party loyalty, or that they cast their votes tactically to keep out their least preferred candidate.

Historians have adopted a variety of approaches when analysing election outcomes in the county: single-member as opposed to two-member constituencies; cities, town and county seats; new boroughs as opposed to pre-1832 survivors. The approach adopted here reflects that of contemporaries who identified the textile manufacturing district as distinctive. All but one of the new constituencies in the county were located here.

Manchester and the single-member constituencies of Salford, Ashton-under-Lyne and Bury consistently returned reformers from 1832 to 1867, many of them major local textile employers.⁷ Conservatives briefly triumphed in Rochdale in 1835 and again in 1857, but the borough was otherwise solidly Liberal. Two-member boroughs were more mixed. Oldham briefly returned the local employer John F. Lees as a Conservative in the by-election of 1835 and also returned a free-trade Conservative employer, John Duncuft, as one of its representatives between 1847 and his death in 1852. John Morgan Cobbett, son of William Cobbett who had represented the borough between 1832 and 1835, sat between 1852 and 1865 but, despite claiming Radical credentials and his general support for the Palmerston ministry in the 1850s, local campaigning and voting patterns during that period clearly suggest that he was not viewed locally as a Liberal candidate.⁸ In 1868, he stood as a Conservative. In Bolton, Liberal success was also qualified. William Bolling, the Conservative employer and newspaper proprietor, claimed one of the two seats in every election except 1841 until his death in 1848. Stephen Blair replaced Bolling until 1852 and William Gray, another Conservative mill owner, was returned for one of the seats from 1857.

Yet further afield success was also more muted. In Blackburn, members of the Feilden

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The reputation or local connections of a candidate may well have been sufficient to sway electors who did not have strong political views. William Ewart's earlier support for William Huskisson in Liverpool when he was MP helped secure his electoral victory in 1832. Successful candidates elsewhere were also often local men, whatever their party.

and Hornby families, both large employers in the town, claimed one of the seats every year except 1852.⁹ Feilden held liberal views on trade and had welcomed the 1832 measure which enfranchised the town, but he predominantly voted with the Conservatives in parliament. Hornby was uncomplicatedly Tory. In Preston, a textile town but also a longstanding administrative, legal and social centre, the Earls of Derby (the Stanleys) had exercised considerable influence under the pre-1832 system and continued to do so initially into the 1830s, but it swung between Liberal and Conservative, reflecting the vacillations of the local landowner, Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood; elected as a Conservative in 1832 he was voting with the Liberals by the 1830s and stood as a reformer in 1841. Henry Hunt was decisively defeated in 1832. Conservatives held at least one seat in every election from 1852. Clitheroe elected a reformer until 1841 when Matthew Wilson was unseated and replaced by the Conservative Edward Cardwell, later a prominent Peelite. Thereafter Conservatives were returned until 1865 apart from Le Gendre Starkie MP, 1853–57. Wigan returned two reform MPs till 1841, with exception of 1835 when the local textile employer John Hodson Kearsley took a seat. Two Conservatives were returned in 1841 and thereafter representation was shared with locally born Conservatives with landed connections. Yet further north, Lancaster returned its pre-1832 MPs unopposed, one Whig, one Conservative. William Rathbone Greg, whose brother John had mills in the area, stood unsuccessfully on a reform platform in 1837. After 1847, the Liberals Samuel Gregson and Robert Baynes Armstrong claimed one of the seats, but local landed connections remained strong.

The Liberal cause was weakest in south-west Lancashire. In Liverpool the Radical William Ewart had been returned as one of the two MPs in 1832 and 1835 but he had been joined by Dudley Ryder, Lord Sandon, a Conservative with strong Anglican views and inclined at that time at least towards protectionism in terms of corn, although in favour of moderate electoral concessions. After 1835 the town largely returned Conservatives although Sir Thomas Birch and the Peelite and later Liberal minister Edward Cardwell triumphed in 1847 and Joseph Ewart, William's brother, sat for ten years after 1855. Edmund George Hornby won a narrow victory in Warrington in 1832 but the constituency returned a Conservative every election thereafter and, apart from 1847, he was unopposed from 1841 to 1868.¹⁰ Reformers were

returned for the county seat of South Lancashire in 1832 and were unopposed from 1846 to 1859, but Conservatives reasserted their presence in the intervening periods and won both seats in 1859 and all three in 1861 after a third was added to the constituency. William Ewart Gladstone narrowly secured the third of these in 1865. There were no contests in the North Lancashire seats before 1868; the parties shared the spoils.¹¹ Essentially, therefore, Liberal Lancashire's heartland throughout this period was centred on Manchester and its immediate satellite towns. Elsewhere success was less secure. Is it possible to explain this?

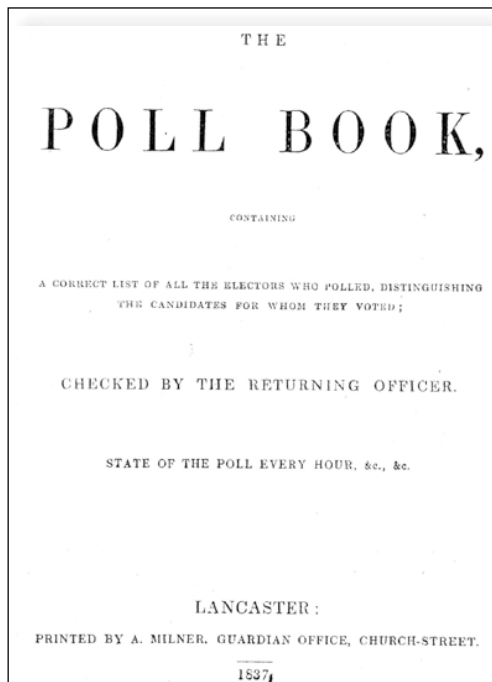
Local connections and national reputations

The reputation or local connections of a candidate may well have been sufficient to sway electors who did not have strong political views. William Ewart's earlier support for William Huskisson in Liverpool when he was MP helped secure his electoral victory in 1832. Successful candidates elsewhere were also often local men, whatever their party. Away from the textile towns, Conservatives were often from local landed families. The Conservatives who outpolled Liberal outsiders in Blackburn, Bolton and Oldham were all prominent local employers. In Ashton-under-Lyne, the reformers were united from 1835 behind Charles Hindley, a local employer who sat until 1857; in several years, no one felt confident enough to challenge him. In Bury, local Liberal employer Richard Walker sat until he retired in 1852. He was succeeded by Robert Peel's son, Frederick, who in turn was succeeded by Robert Needham Philips, brother of Mark, MP for Manchester from 1832. John Fenton and John Entwistle in Rochdale were both local employers as was the Radical Joseph Brotherton who sat for Salford from 1832 until his death in 1857.

Personal connections were particularly evident in smaller constituencies. In Lancaster, local landowner Thomas Greene sat as a Conservative and, latterly Peelite from 1824 to 1857 with only a short interlude in 1852–53. He was joined by another local landowner, George Marton (1837–47), and succeeded after 1857 by another landowner, William Garnett. The Liberals who represented the town after 1847 were born into prominent local business families although they lived and worked elsewhere. Candidates with local connections dominated in Clitheroe, Wigan, where two generations of the Thicknesse family were returned, and Warrington, where first the local landowner John

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Title page and part of an inside page from the Lancaster poll book, 1837 election



	G.	S.	M.	GR
Ball, William, Heaton-with-Oxcliffe, farmer	1	1	1	1
Ball, Mark, Halton, cotton-spinner	1	1	1	1
Ball, George, Halton, labourer	1	1	1	1
Barber, James, Church-street, tailor	1	1	1	1
Barber, John, Skerton, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Barrow, George, Bowerham, gentleman	1	1	1	1
Barrow, Corbyn, Bowerham, woollen-draper	1	1	1	1
Barrow, William, Bath House, gentleman	1	1	1	1
Barrow, John, King-street, woollen-draper	1	1	1	1
Barrow, William, Damside-street, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Barrow, Nicholas, Damside-street, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Barrow, John, Damside-street, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Barrow, Thomas, St. Leonard-gate, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Barrow, Edward, Little John-street, painter	1	1	1	1
Barwick, William, Market-street, printer and stationer	1	1	1	1
Bateman, Matthew, St. Nicholas-street, turner	1	1	1	1
Bateson, John Thomas, Church-street, surgeon	1	1	1	1
Bateson, Rowland, Bridget-street, saddler	1	1	1	1
Battersby, John, Moor-lane, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Batty, Jonathan, Chapel-street, joiner	1	1	1	1
Batty, Richard, Saint Leonard-gate, painter	1	1	1	1
Batty, William, Cable-street, joiner	1	1	1	1
Baxter, Robert, Winter Ends, Heysham, farmer	1	1	1	1
Bayles, Thomas, Church-street, hair-dresser	1	1	1	1
Baynes, William, St. George's Quay, warehouseman	1	1	1	1
Baynes, Philip, Market-street, shoe-maker	1	1	1	1
Beckett, John, Cable-street, cabinet-maker	1	1	1	1
Beckett, John, Penny-street, tailor	1	1	1	1
Beesley, Thomas, Spring-court, tailor	1	1	1	1
Bell, William, Poulton, fisherman	1	1	1	1
Bell, James, Poulton, fisherman	1	1	1	1
Bell, Daniel, Poulton, fisherman	1	1	1	1
Bell, Thomas, Bridge-lane, whitesmith	1	1	1	1
Bennison, Thomas, Bolton, weaver	1	1	1	1
Berry, Richard Sparling, Bolton, gentleman	1	1	1	1
Bibby, Thomas, Castle-hill, cooper	1	1	1	1

Blackburne and then the brewer Gilbert Greenall were returned until 1868.

Outsiders tended to succeed only if they had national reputations like Philips's running partner in Manchester until 1839, Charles Poullet Thomson. Thomas Milner Gibson from 1841 to 1857, and William Sharman Crawford in Rochdale in the 1840s. William Cobbett's high national profile was not sufficient to secure his return for Manchester in 1832 but he romped home in Oldham, albeit against ineffectual opposition and in a constituency which, because of its extensive nature, contained a significant body of rural voters: farmers were the largest occupational grouping.¹² Conversely, conflicts within local ranks over who should stand for the reform cause, or the unwanted appearance of an outsider who nominated himself to stand, could split the reform vote in two member constituencies. In Oldham, in 1835, Nonconformist Radicals were unhappy about John Morgan Cobbett's stand on church disestablishment. His campaign was undermined by the intervention of Feargus O'Connor, later the prominent Chartist leader. Although O'Connor withdrew early in the contest, he had already obtained more votes than the eventual winning margin of local Conservative coal proprietor and mill owner John F. Lees.¹³ The split in Conservative ranks enabled Liverpool to return Edward Cardwell in 1847 alongside the local merchant and landowner Sir Thomas Birch, a man whose nomination was seen 'as acceptable as that of any Liberal can be to the Tory portion of the constituency'.¹⁴

Personal connections and reputations, therefore, were clearly important, but since successful candidates everywhere could often boast some local affiliation, they cannot really account for the consistent political differences in voting patterns across the county and between different types of constituencies. Local connections were also not always sufficient to secure victory.

Party organisation and influence

Philip Salmon and Nancy LoPatin-Lummis have documented the ways in which the registration process gave an impetus to party organisation.¹⁵ From the early 1830s, lawyers acting for local activists regularly challenged the inclusion of individuals not favourable to their causes, defended those who were, and promoted the claims of those omitted from the lists. In some cases, they were reported to have paid the annual registration fee of cash-strapped potential electors. The local press carried detailed reports of contentious cases and their outcomes in the 1830s. Conservatives appear to have been initially more successful in their actions. In Lancaster in 1835, for example, they removed seventy names from the register as opposed to just twelve successfully challenged by the reformers.¹⁶ The revising court for South Lancashire constituency held in Liverpool the same year saw 140 Conservatives struck off, but as many as 271 reformers.¹⁷ Similar successes followed in succeeding years in many of the boroughs. Confidence in Birch's success in 1847, however, was boosted by the fact that as many

as 1,600 Tory voters had been removed from the lists in recent years.¹⁸ Barristers financed by the Anti-Corn Law League were particularly active in the Manchester region in the 1840s and beyond. When, as was the case, the margins of victory could be very small, actions in these courts could well have helped determine the outcomes of elections. But press reports of the courts' deliberations became less detailed in time; and, when both parties contested claims, they sometimes seem to have come close to cancelling each other out; so it is difficult to evaluate how influential these actions were without more detailed local research where that is possible.

Registration was only one element of local party activism, however. In Manchester, a 'small but determined band' campaigned tirelessly for reform in the aftermath of Peterloo, mobilising ratepayer support to challenge the Tory-controlled Improvement Commission in the 1820s, albeit with mixed success. In the following decade, they were active in the selection and promotion of parliamentary candidates, the fight to incorporate the borough, and the formation of the Anti-Corn Law League.¹⁹ We know a lot about them, because their activities were widely reported through the *Manchester Times*, owned by their chief propagandist Archibald Prentice, and in John Edward Taylor's *Manchester Guardian*. Whether their achievements were replicated to the same extent elsewhere is less clear, since towns like Rochdale, Ashton and Bury lacked their own newspapers until the 1850s. The manuscript notebooks of Edwin Butterworth, Oldham correspondent for the Manchester papers, however, certainly suggest that reformers there were active in campaigns; but it is also clear that their priorities differed, as was evident in the split in 1835 over J. M. Cobbett's candidature.²⁰ Some studies of Liverpool have sought to emphasise the significance of reform activities there, but the overall impression is that, in Philip Waller's words, 'Liberalism was a creature of stunted growth in Liverpool'.²¹ The Conservatives were also not idle in seeking to mobilise popular support. A Liverpool Conservative Association was in existence as early as 1832. By the mid-1830s, Operative Conservative Associations with low subscription rates, regular lectures and convivial social events were active in all the Lancashire boroughs. Membership could run into the hundreds.²² Clearly such local efforts could have an effect on both turnout and results, but judging their overall contribution is, again, problematic. Did effective

local organisation influence public opinion or reflect it?

Unsuccessful candidates frequently claimed, with varying degrees of conviction, that their opponents owed their success to bribery, intimidation or influence. It was clearly more feasible in boroughs with small electorates, such as Clitheroe where results were overturned in 1841, 1852 and 1853. Freemen voters in the older corporate boroughs like Lancaster were also viewed as more corruptible than the new householders, and the town acquired an unenviable reputation for bribery which eventually resulted in the borough's disenfranchisement after 1865.²³ Adel Manai's study of voting behaviour in mid-century Lancaster elections, however, concluded that such practices were more likely to confirm rather than change voters' preferences which, as elsewhere, were closely correlated to occupation. Freemen also contained a much higher proportion of farmers, husbandmen and labourers, who were more likely to support the Conservatives everywhere.²⁴ Vincent and Foster in particular have suggested working-class boycotts of shops – exclusive dealing – could have been influential in Rochdale and Oldham.²⁵ Exclusive dealing could be championed by either side, however, while in practice it was difficult to sustain, requiring effective organisation and a degree of commitment on the part of sufficient non-electors with purchasing power who shared the same political convictions. Such claims were also not unique to Lancashire and cannot explain the distinct variations across the region.

The social composition of the electorate

While we usually know quite a lot about some of the candidates and activists, we know less about the backgrounds, views and commitment of the mass of electors. Salmon's extensive survey of electoral lists and Gatrell's more limited analysis of Manchester show that a significant percentage of registered electors did not vote.²⁶ There seem to have been few attempts to analyse this group whose failure to participate may well have determined outcomes. Unless there is a poll book detailing how individual electors cast their votes, we also have no way of knowing who voted for whom. Poll books that are simply of lists of names are unhelpful. Those with electors' addresses or occupations enable some spatial and socio-economic analysis, but it is difficult to correlate this information accurately with rate books or other social attributes such as religion, family background, place

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of birth, age, wealth, social status, income or involvement in other public arenas, except for a small minority of individuals, particularly in the larger constituencies. Even then, it is difficult to know how to weigh the relative importance of each. Nevertheless, they provide some useful insights into voting behaviour.

Poll books in Liverpool and Lancaster distinguished the new householder from the old freeman franchise. Collins' analysis of early Liverpool elections reveal that the two groups displayed very different patterns of voting. In 1835, £10 householders accounted for over 80 per cent of the votes cast for William Ewart and his Liberal running partner James Morris but less than 50 per cent of those for their Conservative rivals. Over two-thirds of freemen were Conservative. Two years later, reformers comfortably won the householder vote but lost the election.²⁷ Freemen continued to vote overwhelmingly for Conservatives, but they declined as a proportion of the electorate and ceased to be separately recorded after 1853. The situation was similar in Lancaster in 1837: over 70 per cent of householders voted for both reformers as opposed to less than half of freemen.²⁸ Not surprisingly, the Whig government in the early 1830s made repeated attempts to repeal these clauses of the 1832 Act but all failed.

Although more difficult to document, the freeman/householder distinction in the old corporate towns was reflected elsewhere, including Manchester, in what Derek Fraser described as a conflict between the 'old' and 'new' middle class: the long-established versus the newly founded dynasties, the insiders versus the outsiders.²⁹ Like the corporate boroughs, local administration in the new textile towns had been largely dominated by Anglican Tory cliques before the 1830s. In Manchester the Improvement Commission, court leet and vestry were all effectively controlled by Tories until 1838 when Cobden mounted his campaign to 'Incorporate Your Borough'. Even then, the old guard refused to acknowledge the validity of the new council and continued to function for the next four years. A similarly protracted battle ensued in Bolton at the same time. As Peter Taylor noted, 'The predominant endemic rivalry in the town was that between rival sections of the middle class and not one between the middle class and working class or rich and poor'.³⁰ Whether these divisions between freemen and householders, old and new men, also represented a generational divide is not clear. Nossiter has suggested that it may have done so in the North East, but we lack sufficient

evidence on voters' ages to make a definitive conclusion.³¹ What is clear is that they often mirrored other social and religious distinctions in the electorate.

Studies of the occupational backgrounds of electors suggests that there was, in Nossiter's words, a 'remarkably consistent social basis to voting' after 1832.³² His conclusions are based on a study of the North East but are echoed by Lancashire case studies. Assigning the large number of occupations listed in poll books to meaningful analytical categories is, admittedly, rather subjective, since we rarely have other information on which to build up a rounded picture of most voters' backgrounds. The correlation is also stronger for some groups than others. In the towns examined by Brian Lewis, the more substantial middle class, whom he called 'the middlemost', did not vote consistently for one party.³³ Professionals and [Anglican] clerics were overwhelmingly Conservative, but substantial manufacturers and merchants were divided. Gatrell's analysis of the 1839 Manchester election came to similar conclusions.³⁴ Textile employers who became MPs may have been overwhelmingly Liberal, but this did not reflect the group as a whole.³⁵ Further down the social scale, builders, butchers, jewellers, farmers and the publicans were, not unsurprisingly, also overwhelmingly Conservative. Although many publicans and farmers had voted for the populist radical William Cobbett when he stood in Oldham in 1832 with his emphasis on repealing the malt tax, these groups moved into the Conservative camp in succeeding decades.³⁶

The largest occupational categories in the new boroughs were retailers and what are generally labelled as skilled tradesmen, although it is likely that some of these were in business rather than employees. Some historians have gone so far as to call this electorate 'pre-industrial', but that would be to overlook the fact that most manufacturing businesses well into the nineteenth century (and even beyond) were relatively small-scale enterprises and that the expansion of the retail and service sector was an integral part of the industrial economy. Among these, the most consistent reform categories were grocers, bakers, flour dealers, provision dealers, drapers, tailors, shoemakers, hatters and clothes dealers, and what are loosely called craftsmen, artisans and skilled workers: workshop manufacturers, clockmakers, printers, overlookers, spinners. In the Manchester election of 1832, they voted for Philips and either Thomson or Cobbett, with the latter drawing most support from the lower rated voters. In

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1839 they supported the Liberal manufacturer Robert Hyde Greg.³⁷ In the Rochdale elections of 1841 and 1857 they were the only categories to vote overwhelmingly for the Liberals.³⁸ Even among Lancaster freemen, the small minority of freemen shoemakers, cordwainers, white-smiths, tailors and grocers were consistently more Liberal than other occupational groups.³⁹ Not surprisingly it was the 'shopocracy' to whom Cobden appealed most directly when he campaigned for the municipal incorporation of Manchester in 1838. It was these groups who were the most consistent supporters of reform candidates and these groups which dominated the electorate in the newly enfranchised boroughs.

Religious affiliations

Correlations, however, are one thing. Explanations are another. What determined individuals' preferences? The candidates they voted for publicly proffered their views on a wide variety of issues in public meetings and in the press, but we do not know which, if any, of these concerns carried most weight with voters. John Vincent has simply described their voting as 'the way these people looked at things, their domestic morality writ large', an expression of religious, moral and cultural values and causes.⁴⁰ In the vast majority of cases, however, we do not know the nature or strength of voters' religious and moral convictions. Having said this however, there does appear to be a strong correlation with denomination.

Many of the leading activists were Old Dissenters. 'New Dissenters', particularly mainstream Wesleyan Methodists, were far less prominent. Unitarians dominated the small early band of reformers in Manchester and the leading ranks of the Anti-Corn Law League supported by other, largely older Nonconformist religious sects.⁴¹ The 'Little Circle' or 'small but determined band' included seven Unitarians associated with the Cross Street chapel; Archibald Prentice was a Scottish Presbyterian; there were also two Bible Christians and a member of the Methodist New Connexion. Mark Philips, Manchester's first MP, George Wood, MP for South Lancashire 1832–35, Robert Hyde Greg, Manchester MP 1839–41, John Fielden, MP for Oldham from 1832 to 1847 and Richard Potter, MP for Wigan 1832–39, were all Unitarians, as was Richard's brother Thomas who was first mayor of Manchester in 1838 and John Edward Taylor who founded the *Manchester Guardian*. Joseph Brotherton, MP for

Salford from 1832 to 1857, was a Bible Christian. Charles Hindley, MP for Ashton-under-Lyne from 1835 to 1857 was the first member of the Moravian church to sit in parliament. In contrast to the rest of the county, appointments to the county magisterial bench in Salford Hundred from the late 1830s were also overwhelmingly old Dissenters.⁴²

Occasional surveys published in the local press confirm this strong correlation between Nonconformity and Liberal views among the wider electorate, although they do not tell us how the information was collected. In Blackburn in 1835, over 70 per cent of Anglicans voted for William Feilden, as opposed to none of the Unitarians and Baptists, only 12 per cent of Quakers, 18 per cent of Independents, 20 per cent of Roman Catholics and 26 per cent of Methodists. The Conservative *Blackburn Standard* concluded, 'We hope that the friends of the church will consider these facts, and strengthen the majority of its advocates upon any future struggle for ascendancy'.⁴³ The Liberal *Bolton Free Press* published an analysis of religious affiliation and voting in 1847. Churchmen again were overwhelmingly Conservative, Wesleyans (unclassified) marginally so. All other affiliations were, almost to a man, Liberal.⁴⁴ A survey of dissenting voters in Lancaster, also in 1847, produced comparable results.⁴⁵

Many of the issues which mobilised these groups had a moral and religious basis: the abolition of slavery, the end of 'Old Corruption' and the promotion of public and self moral and intellectual improvement. Others reflected denominational rivalries: the championing of secular rather than religious education; the disestablishment of the Anglican church or at the very least the abolition of church rates; removal of bishops from the Lords; and Dissenters' right of admission to the ancient universities. Conservatives' most common rallying cries were Church and State in danger, the need to preserve church control over education, and, less blatantly, the defence of working-class pleasures such as drink. As Simon Gunn observed, 'Victorian radical Nonconformity saw itself in direct descent from sixteenth-century puritanism'.⁴⁶ It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that the Liberal cause was strongest in south-east Lancashire which boasted a long history of religious and political dissent dating back to that time. In both periods it appealed to the 'middle sort' in the 'clothing towns, market centres and in the industrialising pastoral regions'.⁴⁷

Religious, political and economic individualism particularly appealed to the aspiring

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middling ranks who, although a minority of the population, comprised a significant element of the post-1832 electorate. The Religious Census of 1851 clearly demonstrates that south-east Lancashire was also the area of the county where the established Church experienced the greatest difficulty to adapting to the new industrial society and where its provision was exceeded by the various Nonconformist denominations, particularly in Rochdale.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Mark Smith’s detailed analysis of religious provision in Oldham also suggests that Old Dissenters, like Nonconformist Liberals, were concentrated in the township’s urban centre where they even challenged Anglicans as the major ecclesiastical presence.⁴⁹ Elsewhere in south-west and north Lancashire, the census reveals a significantly lower Nonconformist presence and much higher Catholic representation, residual allegiance to the Old Faith being supplemented by a massive influx of poor Irish in the early nineteenth century in Liverpool. The cry of ‘Church in danger’ had more urgency here, where Liberal support for what were seen as Catholic and Irish causes strengthened Conservative appeal among less committed Protestant voters who might otherwise have voted for reformers, and where passions were inflamed by men like Revd Hugh McNeile with his cry of ‘No Popery’. Sectarianism remained a potent force in Liverpool politics for the rest of the century and beyond.

Looking back

Addressing a crowd in north-east Lancashire in August 1868, Grant Duff, Liberal MP for Elgin, looked back over the previous three and a half decades.

Ever since the Reform Act of 1832 and still more since the Anti-Corn Law League Agitation, Liberals in other parts of the country had looked to the manufacturing districts of Lancashire as to a political Mecca, and they have repeated, not without jealousy, but with warm sympathy and admiration, our proud country saying ‘What Lancashire thinks today, England thinks tomorrow.’⁵⁰

He was essentially correct. In Manchester and the ‘manufacturing districts’ immediately surrounding it, the restricted nature of the new electorate, together with longstanding political and religious dissent and effective local party organisation, helped to give Liberals the edge. Elsewhere in the county, however – particularly in Liverpool and older corporate towns

like Lancaster – reform had shallower roots, and consistent success was far from ensured. As this analysis has sought to demonstrate, what Lancashire as a whole thought was both complicated, as well as regionally and socially differentiated.

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