

Cobden

Simon Morgan analyses Richard Cobden's relationship with the three constituencies he represented during his parliamentary career.

Cobden and his constituencies

THE RECENT PUBLICATION of the 'Letters of Richard Cobden Online', an open access database funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and containing previously unpublished transcripts of over 5,500 of Cobden's letters, presents myriad possibilities for exploring the public and private life of arguably the most influential backbencher of the nineteenth century (see my article in *Journal of Liberal History* 123, summer 2024). One of the many aspects of Cobden's life it enables us to examine in more detail is his relationship with the three constituencies he represented during a parliamentary career of nearly twenty-five years: Stockport; the West Riding of Yorkshire; and Rochdale.

Cobden was elected to parliament for Stockport in 1841, during the early phases of his campaign against the corn laws. He had previously stood unsuccessfully for one of the borough's two seats in 1837 alongside another successful Liberal candidate, Henry Marsland. His election gave him a hugely important platform in parliament to pursue corn law repeal. Once this was achieved in 1846, Cobden was touring the Continent preaching the gospel of free trade to foreign governments when he was returned *in absentia* and unopposed in 1847 for the West Riding of Yorkshire, physically the largest county constituency in the country and second in population only to Middlesex.

Cobden was less than happy at this turn of events, having left instructions that he preferred to remain in the more manageable Stockport seat. Nonetheless, the size and importance of the West Riding meant that he felt duty bound to accept the honour. Ironically, although he declared that he was only a temporary sojourner east of the Pennines,

Richard Cobden (1804–65) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



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Cobden's tenure there was the longest in any of his three seats. In 1852, he reluctantly defended it rather than risk it falling to a protectionist. Having fallen out with the West Riding Liberals, he stood for Huddersfield at the 1857 election, where he was beaten by the former Anti-Corn Law Leaguer Edward Akroyd. Believing his parliamentary career to be over, in 1859 Cobden arrived back in England from a lengthy tour of the United States to be met at Liverpool by cheering crowds and the news that he had been returned for the Lancashire borough of Rochdale, which he represented until his death in April 1865.

Stockport and Rochdale were relatively manageable borough constituencies. In Stockport the town clerk, Henry Coppock, effectively became his constituency manager. Cobden relied on Coppock for information about the economic and social state of the town, which he then used in debate to criticise the government's handling of the economy. One of his requests for information dates from 17 February 1843, written shortly before the infamous row with Sir Robert Peel in the House of Commons in which the prime minister accused Cobden of inciting violence against him by declaring Peel 'personally responsible' for the distress in the manufacturing districts. Eleven days later, Cobden wrote to Coppock about arrangements for publicising his reply to an address of support from his constituents, telling him: 'I am fairly deluged with letters from all parts about this foolish affair of Peels, & can hardly find time to read far less to answer them. For all this Sir Robert is "responsible"'.

In Rochdale, Coppock's role was filled by the Liberal Reform Association, which had sponsored Cobden's election. One of the letters in our 'virtual exhibition', dated 17 July 1862 and housed at the Local Studies Library in Rochdale, is taken from the minute book of that organisation. This too was in response to an address of support following criticism by

the prime minister of the day. In this case it followed Cobden's attack on Lord Palmerston's huge expenditure on coastal fortifications to counter a French invasion threat that Cobden believed was illusory.

However, managing the sprawling West Riding constituency was another matter entirely. Comprising most of modern West and South Yorkshire with a good slice of North Yorkshire thrown in, the Riding was highly urbanised and industrialised in parts, but retained a substantial rural hinterland. To compound the geographical challenges, Cobden inherited a seat where the local party was divided between the aristocratic rural Whigs, led by Earl Fitzwilliam, and the urban Liberals, led by Edward Baines, editor of the *Leeds Mercury*. The latter sponsored Cobden's candidacy in 1847, but found himself increasingly at odds with Cobden over educational reform, with Cobden favouring a national system over voluntary effort, and the Crimean War, which Cobden opposed.

Given the length of his tenure and lack of reliable proxies to manage constituency business, it is probably no coincidence that we have more surviving examples of Cobden's correspondence with ordinary constituents from the West Riding than from anywhere else. These letters give an insight into the everyday activities of constituency MPs in the mid-nineteenth century. They were expected to look out for the interests of their constituents through the promotion or management of local bills, which at this date took up a substantial amount of parliamentary time. On one occasion we find Cobden responding to a local clergyman, the aptly named Reverend Drought, who seems to have objected to the Ilkley Water Bill on the grounds that he would receive no remuneration for the water which fell onto his land only to drain away into the proposed reservoir on the edge of Ilkley Moor.

As Henry Miller has shown in his recent book, another important duty of MPs was to

present petitions submitted by their constituents to the House of Commons. As leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, Cobden had promoted the organisation of large numbers of petitions against the hated 'bread tax' and continued to see them as an important tool of extra-parliamentary pressure. One example is mentioned in his letter to Joseph Firth of Bradford regarding a petition against the paper duties. Another letter, published in the Oxford University Press edition and represented in our virtual exhibition, is to a constituent in the out-township of Burley near Leeds who had sent a petition objecting to government expenditure on armaments.

As well as seeing to local affairs in parliament, MPs were expected to be active, visible and generous in supporting local institutions and causes. It is here perhaps that Cobden found the role of representative most onerous. As early as 1843 he was complaining to Coppock of the expense of supporting Stockport institutions given his existing commitments in Manchester and Chorley. The sheer scale of the West Riding added a further complication. In 1851 he told his friend Charles Lattimore that as 'My constituency ... embraces a large number of towns to which I am constantly receiving pressing invitations, ... if I go to other parts of the kingdom it causes discontent in those quarters where the people think they have the first claim upon me.' His move to West Sussex in the early 1850s, where he repurchased and remodelled his family's ancestral farmhouse of Dunford near Midhurst, added further complications. Soon after his election for Rochdale, the deterioration of his health made him even more reluctant to travel to the damp and smoky north.

It would be unfair, however, to characterise Cobden as an absentee MP or 'carpet bagger'. He made a point of addressing his constituents in person at least once a year, which by contemporary standards made him the model of the assiduous Member. He often

used such constituency visits to make major speeches, such as his address on educational reform at the Barnsley Mechanics' Institute in October 1853. Moreover, during the notorious 'Cotton Famine' of the 1860s, his visits to Rochdale expanded to allow him time to mobilise relief efforts for those left unemployed by the impact of the American Civil War on the cotton supply from the southern United States. Such commitment eventually cost him dear. In the autumn of 1864 Cobden tarried too long in Lancashire, forcing him to spend a miserable winter at Dunford being nursed back to health. In the spring he rallied sufficiently to travel to London for a debate on Canadian defences. By the time he arrived at his lodgings on Suffolk Street, he had suffered a relapse from which he did not recover. He died there on 2 April 1865.

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Further reading

- Anthony Howe and Simon Morgan (eds.), *The Letters of Richard Cobden*, 4 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2006–2015).
- Derek Fraser, 'Voluntaryism and West Riding Politics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Northern History*, 13:1 (1977).
- Henry J. Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).
- F. M. L. Thompson, 'Whigs and Liberals in the West Riding, 1830–1860', *English Historical Review*, lxxiv:291 (1959).