

Edward Donner and the rise of Manchester Liberalism

THE NAME OF Edward Donner is no longer familiar even to historians of the Liberal Party; but it should be, for he was hugely influential in making the great northern city of Manchester a Victorian and Edwardian bastion of Liberalism. Party activist during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, past president of the Manchester Liberal Federation, the South Manchester Liberal Association and Manchester Reform Club, he was a valued friend of both Campbell-Bannerman and Winston Churchill. He was also the chairman of Churchill's election committee in the 1908 by-election. Described in the *Manchester Evening News*, after his death, as 'the leader of liberalism in Manchester',¹ he has somehow been erased from history. Perhaps one reason lies in his own character, for the *Manchester Evening News* also commented that 'To those who know him intimately Mr Donner is a most unassuming gentleman whose force of character is hidden between a veil of modesty'.²

Born in 1840, the son of Scarborough solicitor and entrepreneur Edward Sedgefield Donner,³ he studied at Oxford University where he met and became friendly with James Bryce,⁴ later cabinet member and ambassador to the United States, and also with A. V. Dicey of *The Law of the Constitution* fame. A Classics scholar, with a first in Mods and later coming seventh in the country in the Indian

Civil Service exams, Donner was destined for a lucrative administrative career in India. All of that changed after the death of his father and, instead, he arrived in Manchester to work for the family shipping firm of Chamberlin, Donner & Co. of Aytoun Street⁵ as a cotton merchant. This apparent descent into trade, no doubt partly to maintain his father's widow (Donner's mother had died when he was aged 2) and many younger siblings, was the making of him.

On arrival in Manchester, he not only fell in love and married Anna, the daughter of a local banker, but he quickly found kindred spirits determined to develop the potential of this rapidly growing northern metropolis. His first great project was to be involved in the foundation of Manchester High School for Girls,⁶ for he felt strongly that girls should be educated to the same standards as boys and have equal opportunities to develop their academic talents. His influence in education rapidly extended to Manchester Grammar School,⁷ where he became a governor and vice-chairman, and to the foundation and support of other local schools.⁸ He was also highly influential in the foundation of Manchester University from its origins in Owens College and was a familiar face to many in that developing institution. By the 1860s, Owens College was an exciting ferment of ideas with research a priority, pushing the boundaries of

many subjects in a way in which a provincial university had the freedom to do. In a history of the college published in 1900,⁹ Edward Donner is listed as a life governor and a member of the council. Donner got to know well various visiting and existing professors, teaching staff and students. He was also delighted that his best man, James Bryce, was professor of jurisprudence from 1870 to 1875. It was actually Donner who proposed the formal resolution for an independent foundation of Manchester as a university in 1902.¹⁰ Despite his crucial role, including the donation of sports facilities and his residence in his will,¹¹ you will find it hard to find any acknowledgement of him from the present-day university, which has largely forgotten his contribution. Donner's influence in the university and its forebears should certainly not be underestimated when we assess his contribution to the Liberal Party. Through social interaction and debate, discussion and his own example, he influenced many university contacts in liberal thought and ideas. It is likely that his own perception of liberalism was also honed and refined by others in this exciting academic institution.

Indeed, from the time of his arrival in Manchester, he was soon also surrounded in his development of liberal ideas by the 'great and the good' of the emerging Manchester metropolis: by academics and bankers, by the bishop and the dean, by the archdeacon, who was also the priest of his parish church where he became churchwarden, and particularly by the dynamic wife of the archdeacon who involved him with the High School for Girls project. Of course not all may have shared his politics. But many had an openness to new ideas and direction necessary in a rapidly developing industrial city. It is interesting that, although many Liberal stalwarts were active Nonconformists,¹² Donner was a committed Anglican who also became involved in Manchester diocesan affairs.¹³ Indeed, so deeply did he take his church commitments



Edward Donner (*Manchester Evening News*, 9 November 1907)

that he was prepared to defy the party line and vigorously oppose at meetings the disestablishment of the Church of Wales.¹⁴ He soon became known by and was friendly with the great editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott.

Above all Donner was very happy to work with those of influence in order to further his passionate concern for social justice and the development of community. This including modern and scientific ideas, and this was a spur for him to become involved with a wide variety of organisations, from a hospital for the deaf to industrial schools for offenders and those likely to offend.¹⁵ He observed with horror the drunkenness on Manchester's streets as he walked to and from his office each day – a distance of several miles; this led him to the temperance lobby. His role as a merchant led to involvement with British and foreign sailors' benevolence. He championed children's homes for orphans¹⁶ and nursing help for the poor.¹⁷ He became a trustee of the Manchester Royal Infirmary, was involved in the Manchester Royal Eye Hospital, and in 1894 the Manchester Medical Society appointed him as a vice-president. He had a philanthropic interest

in the then cutting edge of science, especially with regard to cancer treatment and the then revolutionary use of the Rontgen ray apparatus (i.e. X-ray machine). As far back as 1887, he was treasurer of the local fund of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, which visited Manchester in that year.

As well as charitable work and support for those in need, which included much financial generosity, he was also a patron of the Arts. In a desire to see Manchester as a great centre of culture, he worked hard with others, in particular to establish and support the Whitworth Art Gallery. He was one of the original governors¹⁸ and prominent at its opening. He also obtained, in 1898, a first folio of Shakespeare for the Christie Library. Sadly, this was stolen in 1972 and never recovered.¹⁹ He was also a patron of the Halle Orchestra and chairman of Manchester Museum Committee. He was determined to provide open space for the community and the Manchester Guardian commented, 'It was mainly owing to his generosity that the Ashfield estate was acquired for public purposes and added to Platt Fields, the great South Manchester park.'²⁰ The provision of a fine pavilion on the newly opened sports ground for Owens College was largely due to him,²¹ and, in 1922, he gave £500 towards the new sports field for Manchester High School for Girls.

In 1907 he was awarded a baronetcy and the Manchester Evening News waxed eloquent that:

Members of all parties and of all sections of the community will be gratified by the baronetcy conferred on Mr Edward Donner. To the general public he is known as a man whose lead is always in the field of benefaction and always commands a following. Mr Donner also includes in his activities a large share in the management of the Hulme's charity (as Chairman of the Governors) the Manchester Royal Infirmary (as a member of

the Board of Management), the Manchester University (as a representative governor), the Hulme Hall, the Girls' High School, and the Manchester Grammar School. To these and to other local institutions and to local charities generally he has given with a generous hand.²²

His philanthropy earned him the freedom of the City of Manchester in 1916.²³

His liberal politics were intertwined with this philanthropy. The philanthropy was not a means of garnishing votes or favours but arose from deeply held convictions. His liberal politics may well have been a means of expressing and enabling some of this, but the philanthropy endured even when he was no longer politically active. He was certainly not a career politician and, for example, had no desire to stand as a member of parliament. When he was politically active not only was he socially active but he did all of this as well as running a successful business – one can only assume that, with his time spent in so many different areas, he had very competent colleagues and employees. In addition, he became prominent in the banking world including being chairman of the District Bank.²⁴ Again this was intertwined with his liberal economics and his commitment to free trade. The banking sector was vital to Manchester's economic success, and Donner's stable influence in this should not be underestimated. Research has shown that:

Manchester's financial sector underwent a particularly radical transformation. In 1872 the 12 banks making up the new Manchester clearing had a collective turnover of £69 million. By 1896 this figure had nearly trebled to £191 million making Manchester home to the largest provincial clearing house in the country.²⁵

Not only was Donner economically literate and skilled in finance and trade, but he was also

philosophically absolutely committed to the Liberal doctrine of free trade and no import duties – a doctrine which he was convinced was the only true foundation of prosperity. Certainly, as a merchant running a shipping company, free trade was very much in his business interests. He rejected the view proclaimed by tariff reformers that, when there is an import duty, the burden of the duties is borne by the exporter. It was not only his opinion but the collective experience of the great shipping houses of Manchester that duties are paid by the importing people and that it is folly to talk of ‘taxing the foreigner’:

Sir Edward Donner, of the firm of Chamberlin, Donner and Co., merchant manufacturers of velvets, velveteens, &c., was not less emphatic in his statement that it is the consumer who pays. His firm, he said, do a considerable business with American States. In all cases tariffs are met with, and the burden of them is as a matter of course cast on the shoulders of the purchasing firms, who pass it on to their customers, and they, doubtless, to the actual user.²⁶

One reason that Manchester was such a Liberal stronghold was that Donner was but one of many merchants and traders in cotton and other goods seeking a sensible business environment founded on free trade rather than protection. Not only did this result in fewer bureaucratic restrictions but also led to lower costs for businesses and more competitive prices for consumers, as well as increasing imports and exports. But certainly, in Donner’s case, progressive social attitudes and local action were helped by the economic benefits of free trade. His Liberalism did not arise out of privilege but out of a genuine desire to serve this new industrial city. His Liberalism not only encouraged prosperity but also sought public improvements for the benefit of all, as well as trying to avoid evil social consequences. As a wealthy Anglican businessman

and property owner, he sits awkwardly with the conclusion of Moore who, referring to South Manchester in the late nineteenth century, wrote:

Suburban Liberalism was successful, not because it spoke the language of a privileged group, but, somewhat paradoxically, because it attacked a privileged group – the largely Anglican property-owning class who resisted the public improvements prized by many of the lower middle class.²⁷

Of course, many other Liberals both then and since have involved themselves in philanthropy and social action, but it is hard to find any who gave so extensively or unselfconsciously of their time for the relief of others and the wider good of their local community or had such a lifelong commitment to the area.

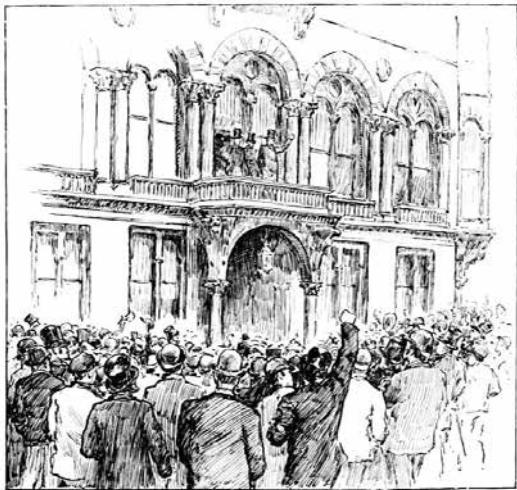
So, from the start of his move to Manchester, Donner rapidly became a stalwart of Liberal institutions and political activism. His modest charm and gentle persuasion and wise counsel counted for much. Unlike more radical local liberals like Sir Henry Roscoe,²⁸ who became for a time MP for South Manchester, his was a less strident voice but nonetheless effective, especially to a wider audience than Liberal stalwarts. His style was well summed up by C. P. Scott when Scott took over from him in 1909 as president of the Liberal Federation. The local press quoted him as saying:

In Sir Edward the Liberal Federation had an ideal president. Liberals were sometimes spoken of as though they were wild men and revolutionaries. They would not describe Sir Edward as a revolutionary (Hear, hear). He was an extremely convinced and convincing Liberal, who combined in a remarkable degree caution with courage and enterprise with foresight. He looked before and after, and they all felt they were pretty safe in following him. Mr Scott did not know whether

Sir Edward Donner had taken out a patent for his particular kind of Liberalism but if he had it was to be hoped he would work it actively in this country and that his country would have the benefit of its product – (Cheers and laughter.)²⁹

Donner was indeed a familiar and influential figure in all local Liberal institutions. He had succeeded Sir Charles Swann (who was MP for North Manchester) as president of the Manchester Liberal Federation in 1907.³⁰ Although, as we see above, he resigned this in favour of his friend C. P. Scott in 1909, he did remain as a vice-president. He was a member of Manchester Reform Club probably from its establishment in 1867. In 1871, it moved into fine new premises on King Street designed by architect Edward Saloman. Here much Liberal business, no doubt both municipal and national, was done in convivial surroundings. In 1899, at the thirty-second annual meeting, chaired by President Mr Edwin Guthrie, he was listed as on the Reform Club political committee.³¹ He later progressed to becoming president. He was generous in funding the Liberal cause, donating £50 to the MLU (Manchester Liberal Union) in the

Manchester Reform Club at election time, c.1890
(*Club-Land*, 85)



1890s and another £50 for the new Liberal Club in 1893.³²

But for sheer length of service, which itself is an indication of the priority Donner placed upon it, his presidency of the South Manchester Liberal Association, from 1905 to 1916, must rank as highly significant. This was the association most concerned with Donner's immediate surroundings and the area and people he knew best. I have found no evidence that Donner represented Liberalism in a formal capacity beyond Manchester, although his contribution within Manchester was outstanding and well known to national leaders.

Perhaps here is a good place to mention the reputation of Edward and his wife, Anna Donner, for hospitality. Able to afford a full household staff, they delighted in entertaining and introducing people from different spheres to one another. Such an exchange of ideas cannot be quantified but was of immense value. In summer, the lovely garden in their house at Oak Mount in Fallowfield was used for garden parties for many different charities and organisations, from the South Manchester Liberal Association itself to a local Catholic Convent School³³ and the British Medical Society's seventieth meeting, in 1902. Each Sunday, they would entertain staff from the university. Both Campbell-Bannerman and Churchill shared his board on their visits to Manchester. He was equally happy with such exalted people as with somewhat random visitors, such as a visit by a delegate, Sadie Harper, from an American university, who wrote, 'I sat on Sir Edward's right, and he was just delightful to talk to. Oh you would have loved both him and Lady Donner, they were such charming people.'³⁴

Unlike many of his contemporaries, including his best man, James Bryce, he did not seek to stand for parliament but rather put all his efforts into the local community, trying, with Anna, to make it a better and a safer place. Nevertheless, he had a real and vital

contact with those who were MPs. In a letter to James Bryce, dated 3 April 1880, he writes:

I couldn't write last night for we were out & only got news of your election in the evening. I have just sent a telegram with our heartiest congratulations – I am awfully glad old fellow. The Liberal victory has surprised everyone here by its substance. Personally I am just as well pleased that things have gone as they have, for I can't stand Dizzy – he would be in any party sooner or later. I hope the Liberals will make a strong government ... no reason why they should not.

Anna sends very kind wishes also to you & your northern sisters, & adds her included warmest congratulations.

Every affection,
Edward Donner³⁵

James Bryce rose quickly in political importance as an MP, and, in a letter to him dated 22 August 1892, Donner writes:

My dear Bryce, We are both delighted that you are in the Cabinet. Accept our best congratulations. I shall hope to see you at Lingslads again as you have a lot of Duchy property there. We came home on Friday evening. Anna is very well, & I am too, but I find this morning I am not much good at writing. We spent our time at Sars & the Eiffel art both very delightful. With kindest remembrances to your wife & yourself, Every affection, Edward Donner.³⁶

That they continued to correspond on substantive matters of politics can be seen in a letter from Donner to Bryce, dated 9 December 1894,³⁷ in which Donner proclaimed:

It is not the ordinary voter, known to political workers, who counts, but the large class of those not known to politicians, but who turn situations. The College³⁸ touches them at busy points, as many hundreds of students pass through it every year or two.

Here we find a conscious recognition, if one were needed, of the importance of his contacts with Owen's College, the forerunner of the university. He was conscious that his Liberalism belonged amongst, and influenced, the free exchange of ideas from those eager for academic knowledge and professional skills.

Donner was recommended to Campbell-Bannerman in preparation for the former's visit to Manchester in 1899, with the assurance 'that Edward Donner is the best man to act as your host. He is an Oxford man & a very nice fellow, also quite one of the leading M'ter Liberals.'³⁹ Clarke, in his chapter on 'Men of light and leading',⁴⁰ sees Donner as typical of highly influential local Liberals – respectable and with a social conscience – without whom MPs lacked solid constituency support. Campbell-Bannerman immediately warmed to Donner and there began a personal friendship between the two of them.

Donner's influence in national politics increased when, in 1907, he became president of the Manchester Liberal Federation. Certainly, all of this fits in with James Moore's thesis, examining South Manchester, that 'popular community-based campaigning that addressed local needs could provide powerful cross-class appeals and help address Liberal decline in urban politics'⁴¹ Donner's genial, thoughtful, philanthropic and unthreatening character was both attractive and effective. However, partly because he was modest and unassuming, his contribution has so often been subsequently ignored or understated.

Personal friendship with Campbell Bannerman led to Donner entertaining him on a prime ministerial visit to Manchester in May 1907. A newspaper account recorded:

A surprisingly large number of people assembled at the Central Station to welcome the Prime Minister. The platform at which the train was to arrive was kept clear,

but outside the barriers, right down the approach to the station and along Mount Street hundreds of people were waiting some time before the train was due. Waiting on the platform were the local leaders of the Liberal Party, including Mr Donner who will occupy the chair at the banquet at the Midland Hotel tonight ... Mr Donner's private carriage was drawn up near the platform. Sir Henry was greeted on alighting from the train by Mr Donner and hearty cheers were raised by the party on the platform ... He entered Mr Donner's carriage at once with Mr Donner and Mr Nash and drove off to Mr Donner's house at Fallowfield. As they left the station the cheering was renewed by the people when they caught sight of Sir Henry through the windows of the closed carriage, a conveyance by the way which caused considerable disappointment to the small army of photographers who were waiting with their cameras to take snapshots of Manchester's distinguished visitor.⁴²

Interestingly, it was in November of the same year that Edward Donner was made Baronet by Sir Henry in the King's Birthday Honours list. The *Manchester Evening News* of 9 November not only listed Donner's philanthropy and citizenship but also elaborated his modest character and the effect of his friendship and influence in Liberalism at the highest level:

Though of liberal views Mr Donner is not in any sense an aggressive politician and the fact that the Premier on his last visit to Manchester, was the guest of Mr Donner at Oak Drive, Fallowfield, had rather a social and personal than political significance. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who on previous visits had been the guest of Mr Donner, spoke highly on that occasion of his host's valuable help 'Not only in the cause of Liberalism but in support of every good work,

educational and philanthropic.' Sir Edward Donner is married and has no family.⁴³

Despite his connections, his industry, his philanthropy and his personality, Donner did not meet with universal success. The biggest failure of his political endeavours was as chairman of Winston Churchill's election committee, when Churchill was defeated in the then Manchester North West by-election on 24 April 1908. It was a three-way contest with a Conservative and a Socialist candidate also standing.⁴⁴ Churchill had been the Liberal MP for the constituency since 1906, but he had to stand again in a by-election because he had been appointed as President of the Board of Trade. At that time, newly appointed cabinet ministers were required to re-contest their seats. Fighting what was traditionally a Conservative seat, Churchill – and Donner who he enthusiastically appointed as his election committee chairman – faced opposition to their stance on the importance of free trade and also from the suffrage movement. This latter was a little surprising, because Churchill was on record as being sympathetic to their cause. However, at this stage, it should be noted, the Liberal government had not committed to women's suffrage. From an account in the *Manchester Guardian*:

At the close of a crowded meeting in the Cathedral Schools yesterday Mr. Winston Churchill was asked what he would do to help women to get the Parliamentary suffrage.

He said: 'I will try my best as and when occasion offers, because I do think sincerely that the women have always had a logical case, and they have now got behind them a great popular demand among women.'

'It is no longer a movement of a few extravagant and excitable people, but a movement which is gradually spreading to all classes of women, and, that being so, it

assumes the same character as franchise movements have previously assumed.

‘I find another argument in favour of the enfranchisement of women in the opposition we are encountering on this temperance question.

‘I believe the influence of women in the temperance question would be highly beneficial. When I see the great forces of prejudice and monopoly with which we are confronted, I am ready to say that the women must come into the fighting line and do their share in fighting for the cause of progress.’ (Cheers.)

Mrs C. H. Pankhurst writes from the office of the National Women’s Social and Political Union:

‘Except that we regard it as a sign that our campaign against the Government is having its effect, we attach no value to Mr. Churchill’s assertion that he will use his influence with the Government in the interests of women’s suffrage.

‘Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman is in favour of ‘votes for women’, yet he, as Prime Minister, could not induce his colleagues to take action, and where his influence failed Mr. Winston Churchill’s is not likely to succeed.

‘We wish to make it clear to Mr. Winston Churchill that we shall not be satisfied by anything less than a definite undertaking from Mr Asquith and the Government as a whole that the Women’s Enfranchisement Bill now before the House of Commons is to be carried into law without delay. Unless this official Government pledge is made to us we shall continue our opposition to the candidature of Mr. Churchill and other Government candidates.⁴⁵

Interestingly, in this regard Sir Edward was himself at this time not convinced by the campaign for women’s suffrage, a fact probably known by the Pankhurst family. A school

history records that, ‘The daughters of Mrs Pankhurst, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, who all at one time or another played a prominent part in the cause of women’s suffrage, were all members of Manchester High School for Girls in the last decade of the nineteenth century and all were prominent in the cause of women’s suffrage.⁴⁶ It seems from the account that Christabel and Adela were happy there but Sylvia hated it. A decade later, Donner found himself at odds over women’s suffrage with the headmistress of the school he had been very influential in founding, but there was no record of them discussing this in public.

The situation was also complicated by the support of both Churchill and Donner for proposed legislation concerning public houses. Edward Donner, in particular, was a staunch opponent of the evils of the liquor trade. This has been described thus:

In response to the numerous proposals presented to the House of Commons, the Liberal government agreed to overhaul the entire licensing arrangements across the United Kingdom. A proposed licensing bill (1908) would control opening hours, restrict the number of licences and contained a section effectively banning the employment of women. The bill, drafted in February 1908, contained 40 pages outlining amendments to the Licensing Acts, 1828 to 1906. The main thrust of the proposed bill was to reduce dramatically the number of public houses and transfer licences from breweries in an attempt to virtually nationalise public houses. Almost hidden in part three of this document, under clause 20 (‘Power to attach conditions to the renewal of a licence’), was a section granting local magistrates the power to attach any condition that they saw fit, including ‘the employment of women or children on the licensed premises’. Under this clause a local magistrate could refuse

to issue or renew a licence unless a publican agreed not to hire women for bar work.⁴⁷

This led to a furious reaction from the Gore-Booth sisters, that is Eva Gore-Booth and her older sister Constance Gore-Booth, later known as the Countess Markievicz. Both were committed Irish suffragists of influence. Constance was later the first woman elected to the parliament of the United Kingdom, from 1918 to 1922. However, as a member of Sinn Fein, she did not take her seat. Eva had renounced her Irish aristocratic background to live with Esther Roper in a terraced house in the heart of working-class Manchester. The story of her life is told in detail by Sonja Tiernan in *Eva Gore-Booth*. An image of such politics.⁴⁸ At the time of the 1908 by-election Eva invited her sister to join her in defending the barmaids, founding the Barmaids Political Defence League. They resented the moral standpoint of churchmen approved of by Donner, like the Bishop of Southwark, who proclaimed that 'the nation ought not to allow the natural attractions of a young girl to be used for trading purposes'.⁴⁹ Sonja Tiernan records:

Gore-Booth organised a rather striking coach, drawn by four white horses, to be driven around Manchester on the day that Churchill held his meeting at the Coal Exchange. Markievicz was at the whip and she drove to Stevenson Square. On their arrival Gore-Booth and Roper took to the roof of the coach and made a rousing address about Clause 20 of the Licensing Bill. The women explained how the clause would restrict, or possibly eradicate, the employment of barmaids. Roper appealed for a vote against Churchill in the by-election on the grounds that the 'Home Secretary had been induced to insert the clause in the bill by a number of rich persons who had attacked the moral characters of barmaids as a class.' Gore-Booth exclaimed that 'it was not a minor matter to take away the livelihood

of 100,000 respectable hard-working women'.⁵⁰

In addition, much of the Catholic vote was lost because of Roman Catholic opposition to the Liberal education policy which they claimed was undermining the autonomy of Roman Catholic schools. Despite all of this, Churchill rode around the constituency in an open top car with his mother and Sir Edward Donner on the day of the election, convinced he would win, yet he lost by 529 votes from a large turnout of 10,681.⁵¹

Following his defeat, in a most gracious letter to Sir Edward Donner, his electoral committee chairman, Churchill wrote giving a valuable insight into his political thinking:

My Dear Sir Edward Donner,
I must ask you to convey my sincere thanks to all those who worked with you to secure the success of the Liberal and Free Trade cause at the late election in North West Manchester. The energy and public spirit they displayed in that hard conflict are beyond all aspersion; and their efforts were supported by a thoroughly efficient organisation. An even more powerful concentration of forces and interests have prevailed and certainly I am not going to underrate the evil consequence of the result. But there is at the heart of every political reverse the dynamic impulse of a future triumph. You must turn the emotions of defeat to the process of recovery, so that the very hour of disaster may become the seed time of victory, and, in my opinion, the figures of the poll ought to carry the highest encouragement to all Free Traders who are in earnest. It is quite clear the political levels and balance in North-West Manchester have been permanently altered during the last four years. Here in a constituency, which since its creation has been regarded as the blue ribbon of Lancashire Toryism at a moment of peculiar

national and still more local difficulty, the utmost exertions of the most powerful vested interests in the country have only succeeded in securing an anti Free Trade majority of 153 upon a poll of unexampled size, and even this exiguous majority was only achieved through the sudden and organised transference of between 400 and 500 Catholic votes, always hitherto an integral part of the Liberal strength in Manchester, to the Protectionist side upon grounds quite unconnected with the main issues. Now, by the general election several important adverse factors may have been removed. The insignificant support secured by the Socialist candidate after so much trouble makes it at least doubtful whether that curious diversion will be repeated. The Licensing Bill will, I trust, have taken its place upon the statute book, and the liquor trade may not be in a position to exercise the undue political power which they at present possess. The Catholic voters now estranged will, there is reason to hope, have been conciliated and their apprehension allayed by some fair and practical concordat in educational matters. Lastly, at the general election the issue will be sharply defined, and a vote for the Protectionist candidate will not only be a moral injury to the cause of Free Trade in the abstract, but a direct mandate for the immediate erection of a discriminatory tariff upon a vast number of commodities. See now what a noble opportunity rises above the horizon. There is no reason, in my opinion, why, with a suitable candidate the seat should not be recovered in such manner and at such time as will more than repair the misfortune that has occurred. In such a work I shall be ready to aid in any way in my power, and, although my Parliamentary connection with the division has now terminated, I shall consider myself under special obligations to help, so far as

my strength permits, to defend Free Trade in the great city to whose prosperity and fame Free Trade is vital.

Yours very sincerely,
Winston S Churchill.⁵²

Churchill's prediction above was proved correct and the Liberals did regain the seat in the January 1910 election.

The friendship between Mr & Mrs Churchill and Sir Edward and Lady Donner continued. A telegram was sent by the Donners on the occasion of Churchill's wedding in September 1908.

The Churchills returned to Manchester to receive a wedding present for Mrs Churchill subscribed by the Liberals of North West Manchester. There was also a gift of a souvenir of Mr Churchill's service to North West Manchester. These are described as:

The gifts were diamond ornaments – a bracelet and a star. The star is intended for the hair, but Mrs Churchill pinned it at once to her dress and she was still wearing it when she took her place on the platform at Belle Vue last night ... At night Mr and Mrs Churchill went to Belle Vue for the presentation of the souvenir of Mr Churchill's political representation of North-west Manchester. The subscribers to this fund numbered many hundreds and, as Sir Edward Donner, in making the presentation very happily

Telegram from Donner to Churchill: 'Sir Edward and Lady Donner offer their congratulations and best wishes'.



phrased it, they included many whose worldly possessions are small but who are nevertheless true judges of character, with warm hearts and generous appreciation ... Sir Edward Donner said 'We delight in your eloquence, in your knowledge, in your wit and humour, we have confidence in you as a statesman and as an able administrator, and we are grateful for your eminent services to Lancashire'. Sir Edward Donner singled out other of Mr Churchill's qualities and was warmly cheered when he assured Mr Churchill that although the direct political tie had been severed Manchester will always claim a large share in him 'as a representative of the British nation.' Sir Edward Donner was again cheered when he uncovered the souvenir, a beautifully designed fruit and flower stand in silver. It bears an inscription memorising the great Liberal victory of 1906 ... Mr Churchill's speech of thanks was listened to with great pleasure ... he spoke with transparent gratitude 'The support of this great city has been the turning point of my political life.' His defeat at the by-election six months ago was 'a bitter sorrow, a cruel, heavy blow'. But Mr Churchill insisted on the broader outlook ... The waves of fortune may ebb and flow, but in the long run the new levels will hold, and therein Manchester Liberals will find abiding satisfaction.⁵³

The Manchester Liberal Federation annual meeting of 1909⁵⁴ was chaired by Sir Edward Donner, who gave a comprehensive speech that included both a lament for the death of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman and the result of the by-election in which Churchill was defeated. On a positive note, he commended the report of the general committee, which enthused about the social reforms, such as the old age pension, that the Liberal government had achieved. It is a moot point whether handing over the presidency to 'one of his oldest personal friends and a pillar

of liberalism in the North of England', C. P. Scott, was influenced by the recent by-election defeat. However, Donner still remained involved and supportive and continued as a vice-president. 1910 was exceptionally busy with two elections, in January and December.

As the January election was drawing to a close he commented that it had been a bitter contest and a large part of a letter to Bryce, dated 28 January 1910, contains some interesting insights. Not only is it clear that political arguments also became religious issues, but the letter also highlights the debate about free trade against tariff reform as well as the role of the House of Lords.⁵⁵

We are nearly through with the elections. The Tories, big landlords and publicans have used every kind of means against me, and spread a belief that the ballot is not secret. Indeed it appears to be pretty lowly conducted in some such districts. Prayer for a Tory candidate in some schools has been found useful. At Fallowfield Church we handed over the matter to the All. King and simply prayed that country might be guided aright. They were.

I hope that Asquith will go first simply for two things. 1 to put the Budget through 2 to establish the sole right of the Commons to touch finance. I should think the Irish would agree. Of course Balfour may offer to put them through the House of Lords in exchange for Tariff Reform, but I doubt if he cares much for Tariff Reform, and the bargain would be risky for both.

The big question of curtailing the powers of the Lords, or reforming them, will be difficult. Asquith has pronounced for the former; others for the latter. It could be tackled after 1 and 2. I try to inform upon everybody that we must be prepared and willing for another fight at any moment.

Bos Smith's life is well done, but the book is rather big.

My wife includes with me in kindest remembrance to Mrs Bryce and yourself, and believe me,

Yrs, every affection
Edward Donner⁵⁶

Clarke records that Donner continued in great demand in the run up to the December election.

The calls on his support were numerous. On one evening in November Donner spoke for Schwann in Manchester North, Haworth in South, and was appointed to Kemp's election committee in North West.⁵⁷

Another interesting political letter to Bryce can be found in the run up to the January 1910 general election.⁵⁸ Donner lambasts the Tory press as the 'idle rich of whom we have far too many in London especially'. He states that 'the next General Election will be interesting. I hope you will be back for it. The Labour Party will trouble us.' He is clearly anxious about a threat from both Tory and Labour. It did indeed result in a hung parliament.

That 'big question', referred to above by Donner in his January letter to Bryce, of curtailing the power of the Lords can be seen in Asquith's action of including him in a list of possible peers.⁵⁹ Whether he was aware of this possibility is unknown but perhaps this is doubtful and would probably not have been welcomed by him, although these peerages were never bestowed. This was a contingency plan in case a mass creation was needed to get the Parliament Act through the Lords in 1911. It does, however, show the regard in which he was held by the Liberal leadership.

Although he and Lady Donner opened their garden for a garden party to support South Manchester Liberal Association in 1911,⁶⁰ perhaps unsurprisingly Donner felt increasingly that the time was right to withdraw from major political activity. He eventually resigned from the chairmanship of the

South Manchester Liberal Association in 1916 on the grounds of advancing years.⁶¹

During the years between 1914 and 1918, both Sir Edward and Lady Donner were doing all they could for the war effort despite their increasing age. Sir Edward was busy with the war work of the Manchester Royal Infirmary.

The war work of the Manchester Royal Infirmary was the subject of comment at the annual meeting of the trustees, held on February 9th. Sir Edward Donner said the past year had made extraordinary demands upon the honorary staff. They had taken over 200 military patients in addition to all their ordinary care of the civil patients. The staff had risen to the occasion.⁶²

Lady Donner was involved in founding the Fairview Auxiliary Hospital in Fallowfield and was a member of the Fallowfield Red Cross. She was made a Dame of the British Empire for her war work.⁶³ In June 1914, Sir Edward and Lady Donner's house and garden were lent for the day to the British Red Cross as a training exercise for a mock hospital and operating theatre.

Politics no longer seemed important at this time of great national peril, although it should be noted that the passage of the war and the role of women within it altered Sir Edward's view on women's suffrage. Despite his earlier lack of enthusiasm for this cause, it was reported in 1916 in the *Christian Science Monitor*:

Of the many interesting changes which have come over public opinion in the United Kingdom, during the last two years, few are more striking than that in regard to woman suffrage. It is not that great numbers of public men and public bodies have formally registered altered views. The change is soon much more in a kind of general admission, met with everywhere, that the whole question is on a different basis; that woman

suffrage is in fact already an admitted necessity, because the view of the nation has really swept far beyond it. The admission of Sir Edward Donner, at Manchester, recently, that he had been converted to woman suffrage, because of what he had seen during the past two years, is only an expression of a feeling that is growing more common every day.⁶⁴

In 1920, Sir Edward was 80. Known now as 'the grand old man of Manchester' – a term of affection his modesty would have shrunk from – perhaps the best tribute came from the magazine of Manchester Grammar School, for it encapsulates his life of trade and social and political action at a time when inevitably his powers were waning:

'My boy is going into business. What in the world is the use, I should like to know, of his learning your Latin and Greek? As for going up to Oxford, it simply means that he won't begin at the Petty Cash until he is 22.'

Of such talk Sir Edward is the standing refutation. He learned Latin and Greek, he took Classical Honours at Oxford, and he stands to-day as one of the leading business men of Manchester and the noblest of her great citizens. The 'chapter of accidents' (though I doubt whether that is the right name for it) brought him to Manchester straight from Corpus, Oxford, and the friendship of such men as Prof. Dicey and Lord Bryce. He set himself to study the cotton trade with the same thoroughness as he had studied the humane letters withal. 'There is no work uninteresting,' he says, 'if you put your back and your mind into it.' The warehouse was a very different proposition from what he had forecast for himself, but he put his back and his mind into it, and before long there was no operation in connection with the warehouse which he did not understand both in theory and practice. So much for his vocation in the narrower

sense of the word; but there is for every businessman a higher vocation – the vocation of citizenship. It is the fulfilment of this vocation that Sir Edward Donner has won the regard and affection of the whole community. In particular he has devoted himself to higher education. The University has had no better friend and supporter. Professors and servants, the Council and the Students' Union, alike look to him for counsel and help. It is always at their service for any good object.

Sir Edward is our Deputy-Chairman; he is Chairman of our sister Institution, the Girls' High School; he is an ex-chairman and still governor of Hulme Grammar School; he is president of the Whitworth Institute, and chairman of Hulme Hall. This represents only a small part of his civic work. Wherever there is a cause which makes for the uplift of the common life, Sir Edward gives it his active support. 'The wisest head in Manchester,' said a friend to me. 'And the biggest heart,' was my answer. The Grammar School joins with all Sir Edward's friends in the tribute which is paid to him on achieving his 80th birthday. 'That man is richest,' says John Ruskin, 'who has by means of his attainments and possessions the widest and most helpful influence over the lives of his fellows.'⁶⁵

Donner died at his home, Oak Mount, Fallowfield on 29 December 1934 after a fall on the evening of Christmas Day. When we assess Donner's contribution to the Liberal cause over many decades, we see not only how much Manchester Liberalism depended on him and his unique style, but also his importance nationally through his friendship with Liberal leaders and influential politicians, like Campbell-Bannerman, Churchill and Bryce, in keeping local issues in the national consciousness. He was not, of course, immune to the ebb and flow of political popularity. Indeed,

Moore could have been describing Donner when he stated, 'Manchester Liberalism had great influence on the national political stage, but never exercised complete dominance over its own city'.⁶⁶ Having said this, Moore also points out that 'Both Manchester and Leicester were something of Liberal islands in otherwise largely Conservative counties'.⁶⁷ Certainly, in Manchester's embrace of Liberalism, Donner's congenial leadership style was successful and not only attracted many but avoided the damaging internal schisms which can be so destructive.

Although this leadership contribution came to be recognised in his own lifetime and he was admired and followed then, this 'grand old man of Manchester' has now been largely forgotten. Tanner, in examining the dynamics of political change which saw the ascendency of the Labour Party, argues:

The evidence presented here suggests that the process of change was more fragmented. The Liberals were not an entirely 'visible' force, but Labour's capacity to replace them was not so evident that major electoral changes were inevitable. There were areas of Labour growth before 1914, and areas of Liberal success. The political system was an elaborate jigsaw.⁶⁸

In this process of national and local fragmentation Donner was, I think, ever patiently trying to assemble the jigsaw and make sense of it in ways which accorded with his Christian, humanitarian and liberal instincts and the needs of the local community. So, not only was Donner a catalyst for the growth of Liberalism in Manchester and the north-west, but he also illustrated quite unconsciously a strategy of sound and honest business and social action with a concern for education for all and a particular concern for the plight of the poor, the disadvantaged, the sick and the unfortunate. It was no exaggeration for the Manchester Evening News to describe him as 'one

of the most genuinely public spirited men in the country'.⁶⁹ Such local examples could be seen as an inspiration for national Liberal policies such as old age pensions and the National Insurance scheme.⁷⁰ In this, while a shrewd observer of national politics, he was rooted in the local and wished the best for the lives of those around him. He would, I think, have agreed with Moore's conclusions:

Despite the growing importance of national political personalities, local issues and local politicians continued to be important, especially in urban politics where personal contact between the elector and candidate was more likely.⁷¹

The vitality and commitment of a generation of Liberals in the constituencies was able to overcome the period of destructive infighting at Westminster. Only a world war, with its accompanying social and political turmoil could destroy that optimism and vitality.⁷²

This model of local presence and action has been successfully adopted by Liberal activists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. Only by being fully part of and committed to the local community and its well-being has the present incarnation of Liberal Democrats had so much influence in local councils and now so much influence with its seventy-two MPs at Westminster following the 2024 general election.

In his own day and circumstances Sir Edward Donner set a fine example. Today we should rediscover his heritage and continue to be grateful, not just for him, but also for those who in our day do so much of the hard graft of caring for communities. ■

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- 1 *Manchester Evening News*, 1 Nov. 1935. This comment appeared as part of the account of the death of his wife Lady Donner, who died eleven months after him. See also the detailed tribute in the *Manchester Guardian* of 31 Dec. 1934 at the time of his death.
- 2 *Manchester Evening News*, 9 Nov. 1907.
- 3 Donner's father's contribution to the lucrative tourist industry in early to mid-19th century Scarborough was considerable. More information can be found in Arthur Rowntree (ed.), *The History of Scarborough* (J. M. Dent, 1931), p. 266; also on the website of the Scarborough Civic Society, see scarboroughcivicsociety.org.uk/Royal-Hotel.php.
- 4 James Bryce was Donner's best man at his wedding to Anna Cunningham on 18 Apr. 1866 at the parish church of St James, Birch. He was appointed trustee of Donner's wife's assets. He became a member of the Liberal cabinet of 1892 and became Ambassador to the United States 1907–13. There is an extensive correspondence between the two preserved in the Bodleian Library.
- 5 *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Dec. 1941, refers to the firm as being founded in 1854.
- 6 His role in this was extensive and time consuming as treasurer of the project and was groundbreaking at the time. See Sara Burstall, *The Story of the Manchester High School for Girls 1871–1911* (Manchester University Press, 1911); also, *100 years of Manchester High School for Girls 1874–1974*, obtainable from the school and printed by A. J. Wright & Sons Ltd., Manchester.
- 7 See footnote 29 for a fulsome tribute.
- 8 This includes the Willian Hulme Grammar School which opened a Donner centre in 2008 in his memory.
- 9 P. J. Hartog (ed.), *The Owens College, Manchester: (Founded 1851) A brief history of the college and description of its various departments* (J. E. Cornish, 1900).
- 10 See *Manchester City News*, Sat. 11 Jan. 1902.
- 11 Donner House, its use and then demolition in 1966 is described in Brian Pullan and Michele Abendstern, *A History of the University of Manchester 1951–73* (Manchester University Press, 2000).
- 12 See, for example, J. R. Moore, *Liberalism and the Politics of Suburbia: Electoral dynamics in late nineteenth-century Manchester* (Urban History, 2003), p. 234.
- 13 See *Manchester Evening News*, 23 Dec. 1905, concerning the sale of three old Manchester churches.
- 14 See for example the *Church Times*, June 1912, p. 823.
- 15 See account of Donner's presence at Barnes' House School, Heaton Mersey to award prizes as recorded in *The Advertiser*, Fri. 25 June 1918. Such schools were later called Approved Schools, then Community Homes with education, and now Secure Schools.
- 16 See account in *Manchester Guardian*, 8 May 1911.
- 17 See *Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1918.
- 18 Charter of incorporation signed by Queen Victoria on 2 Oct. 1889.
- 19 See my letter in *Daily Telegraph*, Fri. 10 Nov. 2023.
- 20 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Dec. 1934.
- 21 An account of the opening ceremony performed by Lady Donner is in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Oct. 1900.
- 22 *Manchester Evening News*, 9 Nov. 1907.
- 23 For the citation see: Sir Edward Donner | GB127.M797/2/1 | Manchester Archives+ | Flickr <https://www.flickr.com/photos/manchesterarchiveplus/7988667850/> album-72157631541553684.
- 24 See Sir Christopher Needham's tribute in *The Observer*, 27 Jan. 1935.
- 25 A. Kidd, *Manchester* (2nd edn., Keele, 1996), p. 107–8, quoted in J. Moore, *The Transformation of Urban Liberalism: Party Politics and Urban Governance in Late Nineteenth-century England* (Routledge, 2017), p. 267.
- 26 *The Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 28 Jan. 1910, quoting from research done by the *Manchester Guardian*.
- 27 See Moore, *Liberalism and the Politics of Suburbia*, p. 248.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- 29 *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Mar. 1909.
- 30 See *Yorkshire Post & Leeds Intelligence*, 1 Jan. 1935.
- 31 See *Manchester Courier*, 1 Mar. 1899.
- 32 P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 213.
- 33 Pat Harris, *Against the Odds: The Story of The Hollies FCJ Convent School, 1852–1985* (Kindle edn.: Pat Harris, 2002), ch. 2.
- 34 Mary Biggar Peck (ed.), *A Full House and Fine Singing: Diaries and Letters of Sadie Harper Allen* (Goose Lane Editions, 1992), p. 237.
- 35 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 3 Apr. 1880, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.
- 36 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 22 Aug. 1892, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.
- 37 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 9 Dec. 1894, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.
- 38 That would be Manchester's Owens College, the forerunner of the University. He comments that the college is, socially and politically, a considerable direct

power in South Manchester.

39 Henry Gladstone to Campbell-Bannerman, 26 Oct. 1899, CBP 41215 f.118, quoted in Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 230.

40 Clarke, *Lancashire and the new liberalism*, p. 230 ff.

41 Moore, *Liberalism and the Politics of Suburbia*, p. 225.

42 *Manchester Evening News*, 9 May 1907.

43 *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1907.

44 The Labour party chose not to contest the election.

45 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Apr. 1908.

46 *100 years of Manchester High School for Girls*.

47 *History Ireland*, 3/20 (May/June 2012), found online at: <https://www.historyireland.com/in-defence-of-barmaidsthe-gore-booth-sisters-take-on-winston-churchill/>

48 Sonja Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth: An image of such politics* (Manchester University Press, 2012).

49 Quoted in *History Ireland*, 3/20 (May/June 2012), as above.

50 Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, pp. 124–5.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

52 Quoted verbatim in Randolph S Churchill *Winston S Churchill Companion Volume II Part 2 1907–1911* (Houghton, Mifflin Company, Boston 1969) and in contemporary newspapers, for example in *The Londonderry Sentinel*, 30 Apr. 1908.

53 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Oct. 1908.

54 An account of this can be found in *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Mar. 1909.

55 For an analysis of the 1910 elections and the changing relationship between Liberals and Labour, see Declan McHugh, *Labour, the Liberals, and the Progressive Alliance in Manchester, 1900–1914* (School of History, University of Leeds, 2002), p. 101 ff.

56 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 28 Jan. 1910, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.

57 Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, p. 231.

58 Edward Donner to James Bryce, 7 June 1909, Bodleian Libraries, MS Bryce 59.

59 Listed in Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (HarperCollins, 1964), p. 535.

60 See the account of 11 July 1911 in Jenkins, *Asquith*.

61 See the account in the *Manchester Evening News*, 17 Mar. 1916.

62 See *Medical Press and Circular*, 1916, p. 177.

63 See the *London Gazette* (3rd supplement), 7 June 1918, p. 6687.

64 *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 1916, p. 22.

65 *ULULA: The Manchester Grammar School Magazine*, vol. ixlviii (Oct. 1920).

66 Moore, *Transformation*, p. 16.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

68 Duncan Tanner, *Political change and the Labour Party 1900–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 419 ff.

69 *Manchester Evening News*, 1 Nov. 1935.

70 See Declan McHugh's analysis of the significance of Liberal social reforms in *Labour, the Liberals, and the Progressive Alliance in Manchester 1900–1914*, p. 93.

71 Moore, *Transformation*, p. 266.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

Report

Liberalism: the ideas that built the Liberal Democrats

Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting, Bournemouth, 20 September 2025, with Professor Jonathan Parry and Professor David Howarth. Chair: Baroness Featherstone
Report by Peter Truesdale

Professor Parry put his cards on the table at the outset. He was (and indeed is) a political historian. Therefore,

his thinking about Liberalism springs not from looking at theory. Rather it comes from examining the political processes and

actions of Liberal leaders over the last two centuries. From these studies he drew out two big Liberal principles. The first