

Liberal MPs

Nigel Lindsay analyses the life and political career of Victorian railway-builder and industrialist Henry Robertson.

Henry Robertson: A Liberal Industrialist

WALKERS ON THE popular Heart of Wales Trail will see a long, tall, curved and gracious railway viaduct before them as they approach Cynghordy in Carmarthenshire. An information board on the lane below ascribes the viaduct to Henry Robertson, the renowned Victorian railway builder and industrialist. As an afterthought, the board mentions that he was ‘a Liberal politician’. In fact, Robertson was a Liberal MP for Shrewsbury between 1862 and 1865, again between 1874 and 1885 and then for Merionethshire from 1885 to 1886. Who was this man? Where did he come from and how did he come to have such a full and varied career?

Henry Robertson was born in the elegant Scottish town of Banff, on the coast of the Moray Firth, in January 1816. He was the youngest child of Duncan Robertson, a supervisor of excise, and his wife Christian Anderson. Educated at local schools in Banff, in his teens he won a scholarship to King’s College, one of the ancient universities of Scotland. King’s was one of two universities that flourished in Aberdeen for over 250 years, until their fusion under the Universities (Scotland) Act of 1858; Aberdonians have been known to boast that for more than two centuries their city had as many universities as the whole of England.

Robertson was a brilliant scholar. He graduated M.A. in March 1834, after a course that included Chemistry, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy [Physics], Latin, Greek, and Moral Philosophy.¹ The aim of most students

at King’s in those days was ministry in the Church of Scotland, but Robertson’s early thoughts of the pulpit were soon abandoned as his interests turned to engineering and law. These subjects represented a mixture of skills that was to stand him in good stead for more than half a century.

The only biography of the man published in book form is *Henry Robertson, Pioneer of Railways into Wales*, published in Oswestry in 1949.² This short but charming book was written by George Geoffrey Lerry, an eminent local journalist and historian of Wrexham. As its title suggests, the book focuses on the subject’s work as a railway-builder rather than as a politician; but it is well-informed, not least because the author was personally acquainted with Robertson’s son and heir. Much valuable information in this article about Henry Robertson’s personal life and early career is drawn from Mr Lerry’s work.

Robertson’s father died at about the time the son graduated, and the family moved to Glasgow. During Robertson’s time in the city, he attended a public meeting at which the Quaker Radical John Bright spoke, an occasion he mentioned more than once in later life as a political inspiration for him. Henry trained as an engineer under an established Glasgow civil engineer and started work as a mining engineer in the West of Scotland. Before long, he became interested in railway engineering, working initially with Robert Stephenson on what is now the West Coast Main Line over Shap Fell.



Henry Robertson in July 1862 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

While still in his early twenties, he won a contract to build overhead bridges on the Glasgow and Greenock Railway, a line which opened to traffic in 1841. The railway's engineer was Joseph Locke and its contractor was Thomas Brassey of Chester. Robertson was fortunate in making the acquaintance of these men, who between them were responsible for the construction of many railways both in Britain and overseas. Locke was a Radical MP,

and Robert Stephenson also sat in the House of Commons. A recurring pattern in his career was that of getting to know influential people who recognised and were happy to make use of his obvious talent.

Such was the impetus for his next move. On the recommendation of a Glasgow contractor, Robertson went to North Wales in 1842 in the interest of a Scottish bank which had been investing in ironworks at Brymbo, near

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Wrexham. Brymbo ironworks had been set up by John Wilkinson some fifty years previously but had been languishing for some time. Robertson saw that the works could be made to flourish if sufficient investment were forthcoming, and if a railway could be constructed to link the ironworks with a port. With the support of the bank and with Robert Roy and Alexander Ross, two colleagues who had accompanied him from Scotland, he duly purchased the ironworks.

While still in his late twenties, he made his first acquaintance with parliament by seeing through the necessary legislation and then building the railway.³ It is interesting to note that his childhood friend Theodore Martin of Fraserburgh, near Banff, (later Sir Theodore Martin, biographer of the Prince Consort) had moved to London and in 1845 become head of the firm of Martin and Leslie, parliamentary agents. The ironworks became successful and the railway remained a constituent of the national rail network until the 1950s.

Soon afterwards, in 1844, with his Scottish colleagues Roy and Ross, Robertson successfully presented to parliament proposals

The Reform Act of 1832 had opened opportunities for men involved in industry and commerce to contemplate careers in parliament, often in opposition to the longer-standing landed interests.

for a railway from Chester to Wrexham. A few weeks later, to the dismay of people in Wrexham who had expected their station to be the terminus of the line, a proposal was made to extend it to Ruabon with its coalfields and terracotta works. Robertson addressed a public meeting in Wrexham and argued persuasively for the extension. After claiming that the extension had not been contemplated when the original proposal was made, and that the shareholders demanded the extension to secure the greatest return on their

capital, he then outlined the material benefits to the district as follows, in what may have combined personal political motivation with self-interest.

We have thousands of men around us with a willing mind and a strong arm, who are scarcely able to obtain the common necessities of life. When I have a piece of work to do I have scores of male labourers asking for a job. Have you no feeling for the destitution of these people? Have they not as good a right to the rewards of their industry as the inhabitants of Wrexham? Would you rather see them sustained by the hand of private charity, or partaking the pittance of the Workhouse, than eating the fruit of their own honest toil?⁴

The line was surveyed, sometimes at night because of the opposition of landowners, and steered through parliament by Robertson. It was eventually built with a further extension to Shrewsbury and is still a busy railway today. It involves two impressive viaducts near Chirk for which Robertson won much praise. By this time, he was living in Chester, then a great centre of railway building. His technical prowess, knowledge of procedure, and powers of persuasion meant that Henry Robertson became a frequent expert witness before parliament, in sup-

port of, and sometimes in opposition to various railway proposals. As an engineer, he was responsible for the main line from Shrewsbury to Hereford and on to Newport, and railways from Shrewsbury to Birmingham, Ruabon to Dolgellau, and many other lines in and near Wales. Such was his professional eminence that in 1848, still only in his early thirties, he became a founding member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers and, a year later, a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers.

At the same time, he was manager of the Brymbo Works, and manager and proprietor of the Broughton Colliery. He had previously been proprietor of the Ruabon Coal Company, and proprietor and manager of the Westminster Colliery near Wrexham. He was respected as a tolerant employer and paid workers in money, abolishing the previous system of payment in kind. In evidence before a parliamentary committee, Robertson said, 'I think we pay double the wages of any person, or company, in the district'.⁵

One of his greatest successes as an industrialist was in rescuing and becoming a partner in the Manchester firm of Beyer, Peacock and Co. in the 1850s. This large company produced machine tools and built railway engines and boilers which were exported all over the world. It remained in production until the mid-1960s.⁶

Henry Robertson's work before parliament necessitated frequent trips to the capital. In 1846, at the age of 30, he married Elizabeth, the daughter of William Dean, a London solicitor. The couple had four children. His son, also Henry, born in 1862, later maintained and developed many of his father's enterprises.

Many of Robertson's railway lines were merged into the Great Western Railway (GWR), which was also a customer of Beyer, Peacock and Co. He was associated with the GWR as a parliamentary witness in favour of some of their proposals and against those of their competitors. It may be that his experience of working in parliament attracted him to the idea of becoming an MP.

The opportunity to realise this idea came in 1862, with the death of Robert Aglionby Slaney, one of the MPs representing the two-member seat of Shrewsbury. Slaney had been an MP intermittently since 1826. He was elected as a Whig in 1857 and was returned unopposed in the general election of 1859. Robertson had moved to Shrewsbury around 1849 and was to make his home there for

some years. He stood as a Liberal in the 1862 by-election, publishing a statement of his platform which committed him to free trade and civil and religious liberty, continuing:

While reserving to myself freedom of action on public questions, I will give general support to the Government of Lord Palmerston.

In our foreign relations, I regard the principle of non-intervention as the basis of the policy to be adopted on all occasions.

In our colonial relations, I hold that the sooner we can place our colonies in a position to manage their own affairs the more advantageous they will be to the mother country, and the more contented and happy in themselves.

He favoured the Reform Bill, and opening up public service to competition, 'so that the highest honours shall be only attained by merit and tried service.'⁷

Robertson won, in the restricted electorate of those days gaining 671 votes against the 361 of his Conservative opponent. He was sworn in on 3 June 1862.

The Reform Act of 1832 had opened opportunities for men involved in industry and commerce to contemplate careers in parliament, often in opposition to the longer-standing landed interests. Robertson was not alone in availing himself of this chance. Many eminent Liberal MPs of the Victorian age, including Richard Cobden, John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain had been industrialists, but came to make their names as radical politicians.

Other Liberal MPs who were prominent industrialists attended the House as time permitted but remained more focused on their businesses. Among these can be counted: Charles Seely, MP for Lincoln with his interests in coal and agricultural machinery; Samuel Whitbread, the brewer, who was MP for Bedford for over forty years; Isaac Holden, MP for various Yorkshire constituencies and a leader

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Henry Robertson in 1865 and in old age

in textile technology; Charles McLaren, chairman of the Metropolitan Railway and MP for Stafford; William Schaw Lindsay, shipowner and MP for Tynemouth and North Shields, later Sunderland; and Francis Crossley, founder of the carpet-making firm that bears his name and MP for Halifax and later the West Riding. In Scotland, the Paisley Liberal MPs William Holms and Stewart Clark were primarily concerned with their textile businesses.

Searle⁸ writes that 'Businessmen who strove to secure a parliamentary seat ... were invariably motivated by an urge to win social recognition, and outside recognition of the worth of the local communities in which they were men of consequence. This sort of touchy "class pride" may, in many cases, have set limits to their ambitions once they actually arrived at Westminster.' Conversely, he adds, 'the fact that few businessmen enjoyed a conventionally successful political career does not preclude the possibility that those who made it to Westminster exercised considerable influence.'

Henry Robertson shared an interest in coal and railways with other Liberal MPs but showed little interest in advancing his Westminster career. His three years in parliament at this time were marked by discretion rather than activism. Hansard records little from him in those years, and such interventions as he made were based on his specialist knowledge of engineering rather than constituency interests.

He spoke on several occasions criticising the Admiralty for its lack of engineering expertise. He asked that the Admiralty employ competent engineers in the design of dockyards, and suggested that for every ship built at Chatham, three should be built at private yards 'to obtain the necessary standard of comparison'. He supported proposals for iron ships rather than wooden ones and criticised the Admiralty for poor design and cost overruns resulting from mid-contract changes of specifications. Towards the end of his first term in parliament, he opposed a proposal to oblige Irish railway companies to run trains on Sundays, not on any grounds of Sabbath

observance, but from the belief that parliament should not become involved in the management of railways.⁹

In May 1864, Robertson published an advertisement in a local newspaper,¹⁰ refuting reports that he did not intend to offer himself as a candidate for Shrewsbury at the next election. However, in 1865 he decided not to stand for re-election. The retiring address he circulated to the electors of Shrewsbury reads:

Gentlemen, I find that the demands of professional and private business prevent me giving that time which is necessary for the discharge of my duties as your Representative in a manner satisfactory to myself, even if I might continue to have your kind indulgence and approbation, and I have therefore decided not to offer myself as a Candidate at the next Election.

Allow me in making this announcement to express my sense of the distinguished honour which was conferred on me by your free choice, and to thank you for the great kindness, and I will add, forbearance, which I have experienced on all hands as one of your Representatives.

In taking leave of Shrewsbury in my public capacity, let me assure my fellow townsmen that I will in no respect cease to take an interest in the prosperity of the Borough, but will gladly co-operate in promoting its social and commercial prosperity.¹¹

The short leaflet, printed in Shrewsbury but giving his address as London, leaves no doubt that his business interests were to take precedence over his work as an MP. At this time, he had a young family, with four children between the ages of 3 and 14, which may also have influenced his decision.

In the 1865 general election that followed, Shrewsbury returned two Liberals to parliament: William James Clement and George Tomline. Henry Robertson returned to the

businesses of coal, iron, railways, and engineering. He had at this time started work on the Central Wales Railway, which forms part of the link between Shrewsbury and Swansea. It is a long line that includes the spectacular viaduct mentioned at the start of this article. He continued also to be much involved with development of the Brymbo ironworks, and associated businesses around Brymbo and Wrexham, which included a water company, coal mines and exploitation of other minerals in the area.

His wide business interests at this time also included: the Llangollen and Corwen Railway (opened 1865, closed 1965, and now re-opened as a heritage railway); the Corwen and Bala Railway (opened 1868); and finally, the Bala and Festiniog Railway (incorporated in 1873 and opened nine years later). The latter was notable for having the highest summit of any railway in England or Wales, at 1,278 feet above sea level.

Henry Robertson's children were older now and the attractions of parliamentary life eventually could not be resisted. In 1873, he published an advertisement in the local press:

Having received a requisition signed by upwards of one thousand of the Liberal electors of Shrewsbury to allow myself to be put in nomination as a Candidate for the representation of the borough, in conjunction with Mr Cotes ... I accede without hesitation.¹²

Robertson was adopted and contested Shrewsbury – still a two-member constituency – in the general election of 1874. His election address recounted his industrial work and how this had raised wages and cut the price of coal. It dwelt on issues of property from a wholly Liberal perspective:

The Liberals are charged with attempting the confiscation of property and the destruction of the Established Church. I am held up

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in Shrewsbury as one of those bugbears to frighten the timid and cautious. Nothing could be more unjust. With regard to property I may be regarded as safe enough. I have had too much trouble to make it not to desire to protect it. I know its power, I know its rights and I trust I know its duties too, and I trust I shall never be found wanting in those duties which accompany its possession.¹³

The franchise had by this time been widened, and the election was more keenly contested. The number of votes given were:

Charles Cotes (L)	1,672
Henry Robertson(L)	1,561
J. Figgins (C)	1,388
D. Straight (C)	1,328

Robertson's parliamentary career was more prolonged this time, lasting until 1886, but without noticeable increase in his activity in the House. A local newspaper reported on the number of Divisions in the House of Commons attended by the town's two MPs in 1874, 1875, and 1876. There were a possible 162, 248, and 242 Divisions. Cotes's attendance was 57, 112, and 150, while Robertson was reported as attending 28, 43, and 44 Divisions.¹⁴

These figures belie his influence. In his study of MPs with railway interests, Alderman¹⁵ groups Robertson, who had only regional directorships, beside MPs who served as directors of major national railway companies such as the GWR, the Midland Railway, and the London and North Western Railway. He writes, 'Robertson ... was a railway constructor who took to defending the railways on a number of occasions in the Commons. It would be wrong to exclude such a person in any estimate of the strength of the railway interest.'¹⁶

Hansard¹⁷ records that his interventions after 1874 were mainly on railway business. He supported controversial plans to build a railway alongside Regent's Canal in London

which, had it been completed, would have allowed the Great Western Railway to transport coal from Wales through Paddington to the London docks. He endorsed the ultimately successful proposal to convert the ancient Swansea and Mumbles tramway into a fully-fledged steam railway.

Likewise, he spoke on unpopular plans to build a railway in Ennerdale in the Lake District, contrasting its opponents' concern to protect scenery with their denial of the public transport necessary for others to see it. On such private bills concerning railways, he argued that decisions made by select committees should be accepted rather than being revisited on the floor of the House, with the important caveat that those committees should report to the House not only their decisions but also the reasons for them. In arguing this case, he harked back to his early work as a railway promoter, mentioning his experience 'in matters affecting the conduct of Private Bills before committees of the House long before he had the honour of being a Member of it.'¹⁸

He continued to oppose state intervention in the management of railways, claiming that the unhampered work of the railway companies had brought many benefits. He argued that the advent of railways had reduced the cost of coal to consumers by almost 50 per cent, and had enabled farmers to endure the agricultural depression with less distress. In 1880, he joined four other Liberal MPs of the railway interest in voting against the Liberal whip on the Employers Liability Bill.¹⁹

On matters other than railways, Robertson joined other MPs in deploring the length of time being taken to complete the Ordnance Survey, which was still unfinished after a couple of decades. He supported the proposal to pay a lump sum for completion within a set period, rather than continuing with endless annual grants.²⁰ Typically conscious of his own interests and those of his

area, he suggested that the scale of the mapping should be adjusted in mining districts of North Wales. His only other significant intervention on the floor of the House during these years was in support of a proposal that the appointment of postmasters should rest solely with the postal authorities, rather than being a matter of parliamentary patronage.

Robertson had meantime maintained his position in Shrewsbury, with his generous charitable donations and support of local organisations being regularly reported in the press. His engineering talents had given impetus to the ambitious proposals for the Kingsland Bridge over the Severn in the town, at the time one of the largest single-span iron bridges in the country.

In the general election of 1880, he was returned as one of Shrewsbury's two members, again gaining fewer votes than the senior Liberal candidate, Charles Cotes, but still significantly more than the Conservatives:

C. Cotes (L)	1,945
Henry Robertson (L)	1,884
A. R. Scoble (C)	1,622
F. C. Needham (C)	1,568

Change was on the horizon, though, as a redistribution of seats meant that Shrewsbury would return only one MP from the next election. In the event, the borough elected a Conservative as its sole MP in 1885. Robertson would have to find another seat if he were to remain in parliament. The offer of a seat came with the decision of Samuel Holland to retire as Liberal MP for Merionethshire, which he had represented since 1870. Like Robertson, Holland was an early railway entrepreneur. In his teens, Samuel Holland had been manager of a slate quarry in Blaenau Ffestiniog and had projected the Festiniog (now Ffestiniog) Railway, built to carry slates to the harbour at Porthmadog.

Henry Robertson had meanwhile bought Palé Hall, a mansion at Llandderfel near Bala in

his beloved Dee Valley in Merionethshire. He had hoped to refurbish the mansion, but that plan proved to be impossible. Instead, he built a wholly new house on the site. This gave him a firm connection with the county. The house is now Palé Hall Hotel, an AA five-red-star luxury country house hotel. It has a Michelin green-star restaurant called, appropriately, the Henry Robertson Dining Room.

In 1882, approaching his eightieth birthday, Samuel Holland invited Robertson to be his successor in the seat and that offer was warmly accepted. There was a serious obstacle, however, in the shape of Morgan Lloyd of Aberdovey (Aberdyfi). Morgan Lloyd, born in Merionethshire in 1822 but educated at the University of Edinburgh, was a lawyer who had contested Anglesey unsuccessfully as a Liberal in 1868. He fought Beaumaris and won in 1874, and had been returned unopposed there in 1880, but the seat was then to disappear with redistribution. Like Robertson, he was searching for a new seat.

Lloyd felt he had a strong claim to Merionethshire and to Samuel Holland's sympathy, living in the constituency and having sought nomination for it in 1870, only to withdraw in favour of Holland. However, his claim was somewhat weakened by the fact that he had not opposed Henry Robertson's adoption for the seat in 1882. His interest in the Merioneth seat had been piqued only when his own seat was to be abolished, and after he had been unsuccessful in seeking adoption as Liberal candidate for South Caernarfonshire instead.

Robertson's adoption had not been uncontroversial. A local newspaper reported late in 1883 that 'A requisition is being signed in Merionethshire, inviting Mr Pughe Jones, barrister on the Chester and North Wales circuit, to contest the county as an independent Liberal. Mr Henry Robertson, MP for Shrewsbury, is the candidate selected by the Liberal Central Committee.'²¹

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The question of how local parties should be managed was controversial at that time. Jon Lawrence describes ‘two contrasting conceptions of democratic representation. One upheld the importance of a direct relationship between politician and constituents, the other, one mediated through party organisations.’²² The caucus system by which Chamberlain had kept a firm grip on Birmingham politics was being replicated by Radicals elsewhere. Morgan Lloyd exploited differences of opinion on this matter as he sought to re-open the question of who should be adopted as the Liberal Party’s candidate.

A Liberal perspective on the 1885 general election in Merionethshire can be read in the extensive collection of Henry Robertson’s papers in the National Library of Wales. Those papers are the source for this account of what became an eventful contest.

In a letter dated 10 August 1885, Morgan Lloyd wrote to Samuel Holland:

I do not think it is in accordance with Liberal principles that a retiring member, however constant may have been his attendance, and however valuable may have been his services, should nominate his successor, as the choice of a candidate belongs to the electors.

I cordially agree with you in wishing that the County shall remain in the hands of the Liberals, and shall do all in my power to secure that object. There is, however, danger lest by grasping the shadow we may let go the substance; and the first object should be to secure the rights of the electors, and carry out the election in accordance with the principles of true Liberalism.

As an elector I shall insist upon the new electors being consulted and having a free choice.²³

Further passive-aggressive correspondence followed and in due course Samuel

A train on Henry Robertson’s viaduct at Cyngordy, mid-Wales (photo reproduced by kind permission of Kittiwake Books, publishers of *The Heart of Wales Line Trail*)



Holland issued an Address to the Electors of Merionethshire:

When, 3 years ago, it appeared desirable to nominate a candidate in consequence of the condition of my health, I, after consulting many friends including the representatives of Welsh constituencies, supported the name of your present Liberal candidate, Mr Henry Robertson.

It has given me surprise and regret to find that one of those I had consulted, and who had approved of my suggested nomination ... seeks to disturb that Liberal unity which is essential to success. The 'call of duty' which is said to have inspired Mr Morgan Lloyd to Merionethshire was not heard until it was ascertained at the 11th hour that no call would be given by South Caernarvon.²⁴

The upshot was that Henry Robertson was confirmed as the official Liberal candidate, whereupon Morgan Lloyd decided to offer himself as an independent Liberal candidate. The third candidate in the election was that generation's representative of a long-standing North Wales Conservative family, William Wynne. The main interest in the election was the contest between the two Liberal candidates, whose campaigning methods were quite dissimilar.

Morgan Lloyd's platform was wide but rested essentially on three foundations: first, that because the franchise had been widened, the choice of candidate should be made by the wider electorate rather than by a party caucus; second, that the Welsh language should be promoted (most of the new working-class voters were Welsh-speaking) – 'The Electors and their Representatives should be in sympathy, which must always remain imperfect so long as the barrier of an unknown tongue prevents free intercommunication between them' (the unknown tongue being English, of course); and third, the need for a 'thorough reform

of land laws' with emphasis on the rights of tenants.

Lloyd's election address contained a few barbs seemingly aimed at the official Liberal candidate. Robertson had made a point of being a Presbyterian, but in his address Lloyd said he would 'be prepared to vote for the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church not only in Wales, but also in England and Scotland'. He 'would compel the wealthy who derive their incomes from the Funds, Railway Shares, and Foreign Investments, to contribute their fair proportion of the poor and other local rates.' (My emphasis in both instances).

By contrast, Henry Robertson's own campaigning was so laid-back as to be almost soporific. His election address started, 'In compliance with the unanimous request of the only representative Liberal organisation in your County, confirmed by the resolutions of public meetings of the whole body of electors in every district of the County during last autumn, I offer myself as a Candidate for the honour of representing you in the next Parliament.' He continued, 'I am a Liberal from long and earnest conviction'. Robertson could not match Lloyd's familiarity with the Welsh language but preserved his position as best he could by writing, 'Born in Scotland, the son of a Highlander, and educated at one of the Scottish Universities I have all my life been familiar with the wants and aspirations of the Celtic Race wherever located or by whatever name they may be called.' Like Morgan Lloyd, Robertson committed himself to 'a thorough reform of our land laws'. He was able to add that for 'upwards of forty years I have been and am one of the largest employers of labour in North Wales, and I claim from professional and personal experience of Welsh workmen a knowledge of their wants and true interests.'

An entertaining spoof of Robertson's election address was circulated anonymously.

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Judging from its critique of free trade, it may have emanated from Conservative offices. Under the sub-heading 'Mr Robertson's amended Address; or what he really meant to say', it lampooned Robertson's address paragraph by paragraph. It started 'In obedience to the Dolgelley caucus and wire-pullers who profess to represent you, the eleven thousand free electors of the County, I now offer myself as their chosen representative.' Getting into its stride, the text says, 'I am a Scotchman and came south as we all do to make money out of the Southron, and have done the best I could for myself – I have made a pile of money through the Great Western Railway &c.' Warming further to its theme, the leaflet adds 'For many years I have had the spending of lots of money upon the railways in Wales in order to bring grist to the Mill for the Great Western Railway, and of course I was well paid for my work and so I believe were the men.'

Robertson's papers show a relaxed approach to the election. They contain an informative selection of letters from Liberal workers.²⁵ Some thank him for 'the present of game', for 'the hare and pheasants', 'the basket of game', and so on. Yet other papers in the same collection suggest that Liberal branches were worried by his apparently complacent approach and were entreating him to do much more to meet those who were newly enfranchised. One letter to him asks, 'Can a simple handbill in Welsh be circulated to the farm servants?' Another asks him 'to attend meetings in all villages, and at times (late evenings and Saturdays) that farmers and quarrymen could manage.' A letter from the settlement of Cynwyd, requesting Robertson's attendance at a meeting there says, 'The Liberal Party to a man almost will vote for you here ... but a meeting should take place for fears some will feel that they are overlooked.' A letter dated 10 November 1885 asks Robertson to write personally to a Welsh-speaking minister from Blaenau urging him to speak at a meeting: 'We

are very short of Welsh speakers and as this is a very Welsh district ... you will at once see a great disadvantage and drawback to the success of the meeting.' Unease about Morgan Lloyd's candidature seems to lie behind these increasingly plangent calls.

Among the papers are the speech notes he used at meetings in Henry Robertson's own hand. Interestingly, in light of later events, his speech opens with uncharacteristic acerbity:

The (last) session (of parliament) was chiefly remarkable for the persistent obstructions of a very small section of the Irish members so as to prevent the general legislation of parliament.²⁶

He goes on to discuss the Eastern Question, which he defined as 'how to govern India well', and remarks on government income and expenditure related to India, before moving on to Crimea and the Dardanelles:

We have had the declaration of Lord Cameron that he believes 'no-one would be insane enough to desire a repetition of the Crimean Wars'. I ask myself why Pitt has been summoned ... I believe it will be for the purpose of asking authority to supply money – and I fear for the purposes of Warlike Expenditure.

Is it because Russia has entered into war with Turkey that we are told to step forward and give the lives of our men and our treasures to support one of the worst governments which has ever ruled over any portion of the human race?

I am not here to apologise for all the acts of Russia in the past, no more than I would for the acts of my own country but we live in better times when the calls of humanity and freedom are not to be cast aside for what might be called selfish British interests.²⁷

The speech also deplores the government's profits from the supply to China of opium and, after deploring the intoxicating nature of the

drug, says that 'the efforts of the Indian and Home Governments should be directed to ... finding some substituted source of income.' It then rounds on the Conservative candidate, Wynne, for supporting the House of Lords in its opposition to 'the Reform Measure':

He supported the existence of the House of Lords, and said that the statements of Mr John Bright were Gross misrepresentations. But we would wish Mr Wynne to explain to the People of Merionethshire the uprightness of the Peers in the majority of whom the Country has not the least confidence as being fit and proper to regulate and order their laws in rejecting the Measure which the representatives of the Country with an immense majority had passed.²⁸

Henry Robertson's papers preserve two letters to the editor of the *Wythnos* (the *Week*), in support of Morgan Lloyd. One draws attention to voting records, claiming Morgan Lloyd voted ninety-two times in the last session of parliament, while Henry Robertson voted only thirty-two times. The other letter is from a lady who urges support for Morgan Lloyd because of his Methodist connections, reproves the tutors at Bala Methodist College for failing to back him and ends tartly, 'I am quite willing for Mr Robertson to have all earthly honour, even to be made a Peer of the Realm.'²⁹

In the other interest, a paper dated 31 October 1885 was circulated, setting out a resolution passed unanimously by 'workmen in Mr Robertson's employ in East Denbighshire'. It praises Henry Robertson's virtues as an employer, a donor to charity, and 'an advanced leader of Liberal opinions', before saying 'we unhesitatingly urge our fellow-workmen in Merionethshire to give him their unanimous support at the forthcoming election'. Evidently aimed at newly enfranchised electors tempted to vote for Lloyd, it describes Robertson as 'a self-made man, who

is an adopted Welshman, and who has lived and worked for Wales'.³⁰

Canvass returns were sent by telegram to Robertson's election HQ. The canvass summary on 6 November found 4,683 men for Robertson, 2,605 for Wynne, and 1,796 for Lloyd. Lloyd's support was said to be greatest in the working-class and Welsh-speaking areas of Ffestiniog, Penrhyndeudraeth, Trawsfynydd, and Blaenau. This canvass may have been influenced by confirmation bias, for the final result three weeks later was:

Henry Robertson (L)	3,784
William Wynne (C)	2,209
Morgan Lloyd (L)	1,907

On 7 December, Robertson drafted a letter to the electors of Merionethshire:

Gentlemen, I beg to thank you very sincerely for the honor (sic) confirmed upon me by my Election as member of Parliament for the County of Merioneth.

I congratulate you on the signal victory obtained for the Liberal cause, and trust that the result will promote and secure the unity of the Liberal party of the County in any future contest.

I have the honor to be, Gentlemen, Your obt. Servant, H.R.³¹

Henry Robertson was thus returned to a parliament in which Gladstone had lost his majority and was dependent on the votes of Irish MPs. It was destined to last for only seven months. Robertson made only two significant interventions in that time. He spoke in March 1886 on a bill to allow the Felixstowe Dock Co. (a proxy for the Great Eastern Railway) to run steamships between Felixstowe and the continent. Two months later, he spoke on a private member's bill to oblige railway companies to do more to prevent accidents.³²

In both cases, he urged that the matters should be debated in select committees rather than on the floor of the House. In the

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Palé Hall, the house Henry Robertson built near Bala in north Wales: in 1889 (top) and today (bottom – photo courtesy of Palé Hall Hotel)

second instance, he opposed taking away from railway companies the responsibility for seeing that they were operated safely. Looking forward, he proposed that the Board of Trade should consider whether there should

be a second class of railway, where the costs of doing all necessary for public safety might not be too great for small companies. (Such a scheme was enacted a decade later as the Light Railways Act of 1896.)

In these years, Robertson's ambitious mind had been looking to the future of Brymbo ironworks. Since 1882, he had been considering converting it to a steel works. He sent one of his partners to find information from other works, and sent another to Russia, where the basic open-hearth process was being developed.³³ The research of these men led Robertson to found the Brymbo Steel Company Ltd, which started work in 1885. This steel works never became as large as some others, but its processes were innovative in British terms. It remained in production until 1990. Brymbo steel works produced fine quality steel for specialised uses such as pistons and tended to consider itself superior to the nearby Shotton steel works as producers of perhaps a higher quality of steel.³⁴

Gladstone's government fell after a few months, amid discord over Irish home rule. In the division, 92 of the 316 Liberal MPs voted against the Home Rule Bill. Robertson was one of this minority and seceded from the Liberal Party over the question. Unlike many of the dissidents, he did not stand for re-election. He 'subsequently rendered service to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, and other Conservative and Liberal Unionist candidates, by his presence at their meetings, as well as by his speeches.'³⁵

Alderman records that while only 29 per cent of the parliamentary Liberal Party voted against Gladstone, eleven of the twenty Liberal MPs with strong railway interests turned against him. He writes that, 'For Liberal directors and managers alike, the events of 1886 did not come as a great traumatic experience; the writing had been on the wall for some time. The Conservatives promised and had proved to be accommodating and sympathetic. As Liberalism moved in a more Radical direction it lost touch with the great industries, like railways, whose interests it no longer served.'³⁶

A local newspaper reported on a meeting he chaired in Shrewsbury in support of the Conservative candidate in the 1886 election there. In a speech as chairman, he denied apostasy and claimed constancy. Saying that it was now fifty years since he went to Glasgow to hear John Bright and Cobden, he cited Bright, a man of constant principle who had also opposed the bill, in support of his position. He said he was proud to look back on the great changes which had been made in Shrewsbury, and that as a Liberal member he had done his share.

But times have changed. It is no longer a question between Liberals and Conservatives. It had become a question of how they were to secure good government to an important part of the United Empire. It had become a question how far they would be parties to any attempt to disunite the government of the country ... how far they would allow one part of a great nation and a great community to control and disturb the whole relations of the rest.

Many a sound and good Liberal were anxious to do what may be done for the benefit of Ireland – justice and equal laws administered without fear or favour – treating all alike but not allowing ... the common law of the country to be over-ridden by the secret law of the National Land League.

It was said that giving the Irish Home Rule was simply giving them power to manage their own affairs. But who are the Irish? There are really two Irelands. There are five millions of people or so in Ireland, and of them three millions perhaps are in favour of the policies of Mr Parnell, and two millions are opposed to it and are determined to remain united to this country. The real question then was – Is this great country of ours, of 35 or 36 millions of people to give way to this majority of one million in Ireland? Is

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that majority in Ireland to control the 35 millions in this country?’ ...

If there were seceders, Mr Gladstone himself was a seceder from the great Liberal Party of which he (Mr Robertson) had been one all his life.³⁷

As so often, Robertson was on the winning side. Shrewsbury stayed Conservative in the 1886 election, and would remain Conservative for over a hundred years, except for a brief period in Joseph Sunlight’s Liberal hands from 1923 to 1924.

Morgan Lloyd became a Liberal Unionist and was subsequently elected as such for the Anglesey constituency. But in the 1886 general election, after Robertson vacated the seat, Merionethshire was won for the Liberals with a handsome majority by Thomas Edward Ellis in a straight fight with the Conservatives. The result was:

Thomas Edward Ellis (L)	4,127
John Vaughan (C)	2,860

Ellis, aged only 27 when he won the seat, increased the Liberal vote by 11.2 per cent, though the Conservative vote rose by a similar amount in the absence of an independent candidate. Merionethshire remained in Liberal hands until 1951.

Henry Robertson was still developing the Brymbo steel works when he died in March 1888, less than two years after the election. Although born and educated in north-east

A placid rather than a fervent Liberal in parliament, Henry Robertson contributed his specialist engineering knowledge to debates that otherwise lacked this perspective.

Scotland, he moved to Cheshire, Shropshire and North Wales while a young man and never looked back. With a scholarship, a fine education, his childhood friendship with Theodore Martin, and the respect he drew from the

great railway builders of the Victorian age, he made his own way in life. He had no inherited wealth and no ‘friends in high places’ but he gained prominence as an engineer and as a member of parliament. After his death, his personal estate was valued at £199,437, equivalent in purchasing power to about £22 million in 2025.³⁸

His success and reputation rested on his own abilities. Clearly a deeply intelligent and very likeable man, he was a brilliant engineer. An astute businessman, he had a remarkable ability to achieve his own objectives whilst keeping good relationships with those who had other plans. He was well read and enjoyed life. It was said he could read Latin almost as fast as English, and that he could recite poems by Burns and Byron by heart. One of his favourite pastimes was fishing in the Dee Valley, a place he had come to love. With his wife, he built a fine home in that valley and brought up four children. His son, Henry, born in 1862, continued and developed his father’s industrial interests and was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1890 after her visit to Palé.³⁹

A placid rather than a fervent Liberal in parliament, Henry Robertson contributed his specialist engineering knowledge to debates that otherwise lacked this perspective. The line between private interest and public duty was drawn in a different place in the late Victorian age from where it stands today. Nowadays he would be seen to have conflicted interests, and there are hints of that in his

opponents’ election literature. Nonetheless, he was accounted a good employer by the standards of his time and his enterprises provided

employment and incomes for people who previously had none. He gave work and prosperity to thousands who worked in his iron and steel enterprises, on his railways, and in his coal, water, and mineral companies.

Henry Robertson opened up North Wales and the Marches with railways, built astonishing bridges, modernised the area's industries, and provided new opportunities to those who lived there. Many of the bridges, viaducts and railways he built in the mid-nineteenth century are still in busy daily use today. It is fitting to remember him now, in the mid-2020s, as we come from celebrating 200 years of public passenger railways in Britain. A self-made man, he was the paradigm of a Victorian Liberal industrialist and the very opposite of a modern asset-stripper. ■

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- 2 There are entries on Robertson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) and *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (DWB). There is also a short article by Valmai Webb in issue 42 of the *Clwyd Historian*, Spring 1999.
- 3 Information on this period of Robertson's life is taken from George Geoffrey Lerry's 1959 article on the subject in DWB.
- 4 Quoted in G. G. Lerry, *Henry Robertson, Pioneer of Railways into Wales* (Oswestry, 1949), pp.23–24.
- 5 Lerry, *Pioneer*, p. 34.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 7 Reported in *Eddowes's Shrewsbury Journal*, 28 May 1862.
- 8 G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in Mid-Victorian*

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- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 NLW, Robertson papers, 1/277.
- 30 NLW, Robertson papers.
- 31 Draft letter in NLW, Robertson collection.
- 32 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 303, col. 432 (11th March 1886); vol. 305, cols. 1455–8 (19th May 1886).
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- 34 Conversation with Lord Thomas of Gresford, 22 Feb. 2025.
- 35 Obituary published by the Institution of Civil Engineers, 1888.
- 36 Alderman, *Railway Interest*, p. 115.
- 37 *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 2 July 1886 (quoted *verbatim*).
- 38 Re-sworn in 1891 at a higher value than the earlier figure reported by ODNB. Estimate of current value drawn from Bank of England inflation calculator.
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