

Election agents

Beth Butler's experiences as a Liberal election agent at elections and by-elections

A Liberal Agent in the 1960s

1962: Travelling hopefully

Enthused by their historic March 1962 Orpington by-election victory, Liberal Party members had hopes for another election in November that year. Party election agent Beth Butler was sent to help.

Office and hills

Someone at Liberal Party HQ thought it would be a good idea for me to help out in the Central Norfolk by-election to be held on 22 November 1962. Our candidate was Maxwell Goode, the sort of farmer you only get in East Anglia (rich). Ian Fowler was theoretically the agent in charge, but Pratap Chitnis, the architect of the legendary Liberal victory in Orpington, would be there to oversee things.

My contribution was my coffee percolator, which turned out to be the most used item in the committee room. Ian and Pratap insisted on livening up the coffee with orange juice. I let them. I enjoyed tea just as much anyway.

Max had organised his own canvassing. We found ourselves supervising the addressing of envelopes, which needed serious inspection when returned. Postcodes were being trialled in Norwich, but the man in the Norfolk street considered them beneath his dignity, despite the Post Office's warning that they must be used. Our other immediate responsibility was to get the nomination papers signed. This could involve complex journeys after dark for me – the only driver in the team.

It was a relief when Juliet Mattinson, the equally 'in training' agent from the next-door

constituency, was sent to help us, complete with her Minivan. This meant I was able to drive to Wymondham for the election addresses. Why me? Having been there a week longer I must know the geography better. On the way there, I overtook a bus when another bus was coming in the other direction. Luckily the Mini had flashing indicators, not semaphores – the vehicle just filled the space between the two buses. And on the way back – an evening in November, there was ice on the road – I went down a hill sideways as a car came round the corner at the bottom. Somehow, we missed each other.

Liberal Party leader Jo Grimond came, and he was greeting senior agents when a journalist unexpectedly kissed me to spoil a rival's photograph.

I was checking lists in the office when Grimond threw Randolph Churchill out of a meeting, but I took him to his press conference, outside which I had to turn the car (one pressman told me, 'All Norwich got involved in your turn'), and he was in the back when I gently – but completely accidentally – brushed Randolph Churchill's coat. Jo thought I did it on purpose, but I was concentrating on not stalling the engine.

Polling day was enlivened by my crashing into a hedge at about 5.30 a.m. and being rescued by a tractor full of workers. I still got to the office first. After a short, sharp row with both Ian and Pratap, we all set out to visit committee rooms and polling stations.

Next day at the count there had to be a recount. Highly illegally, I snuck out and



Eric Lubbock, victor of the Orpington by-election at the announcement of the result, 14 March 1962

informed the national office. We came third, of course, and the Conservatives won. But we alone increased our vote. We were moderately pleased – and exhausted.

On the way home I drove down a street I had been driving down on my way back every night. It tells you a lot about the hours we kept that I hadn't known until that day that it was a one-way street, the other way.

1963: The result? We came third, as usual

In November 1963 Beth Butler found herself in Suffolk, handling the Sudbury & Woodbridge by-election.

Of vice and shills

It had been a year from my first dabbling in by-elections when the backwash from the Profumo affair hit my Suffolk constituency. The sitting Conservative MP, John Hare, was kicked upstairs in the guise of Lord Blakenham. The worst he seemed to have done

was to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time but, in those nervy days, that was enough.

Our candidate, Aubrey Herbert, once a chief agent, asked me if I could manage on my own. With eighteen months' experience and one by-election behind me, I knew enough to know I could not. So, an appeal for aid went to HQ. But I had to start the campaign on my own.

Public meetings in deepest Suffolk were rarely well-attended, but they often had charms not to be found in big cities. There are four that stick in my mind; three of them were ours.

One of them was Labour, in Hadleigh. I wanted to get a look at the candidate because none of us knew anything about him. There was quite a big crowd there for Hadleigh (about one hundred?). The platform party surged in, the candidate among them, clutching a copy of their manifesto. I remember nothing of his speech; afterwards the chairman called for questions from the floor, and this was where it got interesting. The chairman's eye roved over

the room, apparently picking at random. The question came from about the middle. Then we saw the candidate's manifesto had book-marks in it – thus enabling him to look up the answers. There were about ten questions and ten bookmarks. I would have strangled any candidate of mine who did that so blatantly. OK, so I placed questions and warned Aubrey about what might be asked – but bookmarks!

Fortunately, Ted Wheeler, the help supplied by the National Office had not arrived in time for the adoption meeting. He dreaded the prospect of Aubrey reading chunks from the Eatanswill election section of Dickens' comic novel *The Pickwick Papers* (Eatanswill was Dickens' name for Sudbury.) Aubrey did that with great dramatic force. Many of the citizens of Sudbury were totally baffled, but they still voted to adopt Aubrey as their candidate. And then the association's chairman proposed votes of thanks all round, especially to 'our candidate's wife'. Ted had been fearing that, too, as Randolph Churchill, who lived in the constituency, had broadly hinted in *The Observer* that Ruth and Aubrey were not married, at least, not to each other.

The Felixstowe meeting was the big one, with Liberal leader Jo Grimond as the main speaker plus about a dozen Labour regulars who looked as if they had come to heckle. They settled in a block in the middle of the second and third rows. When the platform party arrived, these individuals sat up straight and a couple nudged each other. But nothing happened. The chairman did his bit with admirable brevity; then Aubrey did his bit. Then Jo was introduced – and, as he unwound himself to his full height, the 'troublemakers' sank down into their seats. Whether they had not realised how big he was or had not allowed for his commanding personality, who can tell? But they never said a word and hurried out quietly at the end. Association secretary Mervyn and I had both expected the worst. We looked at each other in bewilderment.

And then there was the East Bergholt meeting which I had arranged for 22 November 1963 and which never happened. I hadn't heard any news – the publican told me about JFK. About eight people arrived all slightly stunned, and Aubrey, who had heard, came at the due time. We sat round a blazing fire and discussed the future of the Western world. I don't think it affected the election result. It certainly didn't affect the Western world.

On polling day, the Tories had a loud-speaker car in the north of the constituency announcing that Aubrey had withdrawn, and the Tory agent asked me if I might like to work for them.

The result? We came third, as usual.

1964: General election

For the 1964 election, the Liberal Party pulled out all the stops. Beth Butler was sent to be the agent in Huddersfield.

Of mice and mills

When I arrived in Huddersfield, there was a mouse in the office. I phoned the appropriate council department and said: 'This is Huddersfield Liberal Association, 24 Westgate. We have a mouse; could you abate it?'

'Yes, madam,' said a male voice. 'What name?'

'We haven't given it a name. We just call it the mouse ...'

They had asked me to go to Huddersfield West in 1964 to prepare for the inevitable general election later that year. But first, I had to be interviewed by Donald Wade, the sitting member, who had held the seat for thirteen years in a pact with the Tories. Now there was a Tory candidate in the field, and it was felt that a professional agent was essential. I met Donald at the House of Commons. Nobody had told me that he shared his office with Eric Lubbock, who had the coldest eyes I had ever seen and who frightened me to ribbons. So, when



Donald Wade, Liberal MP for Huddersfield West 1950–64

Donald said, 'You don't mind if Eric stays?' I lied. 'Of course not.' To ease my nerves, I took out a cigarette, inserted it in my holder, lifted it to my lips and, reclining elegantly, lit it. It fell out of the holder. I suspect that Donald (who didn't drink, smoke or swear) would never have accepted me if Jeremy hadn't told him he must.

Then I travelled north to be interviewed by the Huddersfield Liberal Association. The chairman – Neville Sykes, who became a good friend – asked me if I could type. I got the impression that he wasn't too sure of what an agent was supposed to do. The man who met me at the station had said: 'Neville couldn't come. There's trouble at t'mill.' I laughed merrily at his joke. Pity he wasn't joking.

I would be the agent for two constituencies, West and East. East had been held by Labour since the fifties. I headed for the membership card index to find a team to work with. Immediately I opened it, I knew why Neville didn't know what an agent should do. There were so few cards there and they bore only a name and address (with the exception of those introduced by the magic letters 'Cllr' and in one case 'Ald'.) After thirteen years with an MP in Huddersfield West, I could understand a degree of complacency creeping in; but the

previous election had been in 1959 and now it was April 1964. I had a maximum of seven months to build a machine capable of fighting a three-sided election.

My first job was to meet the members as informally as possible. Technique One was to go to coffee mornings and help with the washing up. Technique Two could be the Liberal clubs. At one time, apparently, there had been a Liberal club in every ward and there were still a good many, though few still had any link with the present Liberal organisation. Longwood ward had burnt its Liberal club down, no doubt in a fit of pique, while it was still Liberal property, and had used the insurance to set up a ward association.

I never got there. I rarely got to any of the extant clubs either, because I had taken what was seen to be a man's job, but I wasn't a man. I would not dare to go into a Liberal club unless escorted by an acceptable male – acceptable to them, not necessarily to me. I was also viewed with suspicion by most of the councillors. It was not just my sex: I was headquarters' choice and might want to impose all sorts of mysterious ideas from above. I got on fine with the rank and file, however, when at last I got to meet them.

I tracked down the register of electors that had been in force for the council elections. They were in the filing cabinet – untouched. Not a mark on them. Which is not quite what you want if you are relying on the marked register to show you where your support is.

It is not easy to persuade people to come out canvassing. The first method involves explaining at a meeting why canvassing is required, how enjoyable it is and how pleased they will be when they have done it. I suggest they each ask three people to come out canvassing with them. They nod and write it down on their bit of paper – 'Ask three people to go out canvassing'. The only successful method is to catch someone firmly by the sleeve and say: 'I'm canvassing two streets

in Marsh tonight. You must come with me!’ I generally managed to catch about four at a time that way. And they did enjoy it (there is no drink as enjoyable as the post-canvassing pint in the nearest pub). And I began to get some marks on the registers.

Donald was good at dropping into coffee mornings and evening meetings. Public meetings were reasonably successful: he was a good speaker and needed no hints on how to answer questions, coping as well with spontaneous ones as well as those I had thoughtfully seeded in the audience. He was liked and respected in the town because he had been a very good constituency member. But he was a terrible candidate. If challenged aggressively, he was apologetic; and his natural shyness was a handicap. I took him once to Paddock Liberal Club, but only once. He looked thoroughly miserable, refused to drink even an orange juice and spoke to nobody.

The adoption meeting was held in the big room of our offices at 24 Westgate. It was notable for the fact that I raised £300 cold for the fighting fund without taking the precaution of salting a few donations amongst the audience first. (At every election, the Huddersfield Examiner printed a photograph of a dear old lady pressing a £5 note into the hand of the Labour agent. It was always the same old lady and the same £5 note.)

I only remember two ‘big names’ turning up during the campaign (in by-elections they are so frequent as to become a nuisance). One was Sir Frank Medlicott, a reformed National Liberal, chosen to appeal to the Tories. I had met him at the Central Norfolk by-election when he went off with my car keys. He redeemed himself in Huddersfield by giving me his coffee when I took him out to dinner. He never touched stimulants. The other was Jeremy Thorpe who flew to Manchester where my brother met him and brought him over the Pennines. They were due at about noon; but they did not appear in my office until about

1.30 p.m. having enjoyed triple martinis at the hotel. My brother was quite surprised how cross I was with Jeremy; I had arranged for him to meet the workers coming out of a local factory at lunchtime. I believe John Major pinched my idea some years later.

The Tories were pushing ‘A Liberal vote is a wasted vote’ nationwide; I was pushing the service Donald had done for the town; Labour was quietly working hard and waiting for us to cancel each other out.

We had plenty of volunteers for drivers on the day; quite a few leafletters; perhaps a few more canvassers. As a paid official, I was not allowed to canvass, so I had to rely on my barely trained team. I was able to deliver leaflets; one night I went up and down a road pulling out Labour leaflets before pushing our own in – right in, as I had instructed the deliverers. I hoped that my team remembered this simple precaution.

By election eve we did not have a complete canvass, but more than I had expected. I worked out my and the candidate’s itineraries for the next day. Donald’s had to be carefully studded with breaks for drinks and meals. You cosset your candidate on polling day – at least, you arrange for half a dozen kindly people to cosset him. You are a bit too busy.

I had a banana – my invariable breakfast on polling days – and set off to visit all the polling stations and all the committee rooms. Some of the polling clerks are delighted to see anyone and recite to you all the daft things odd voters have done. One particularly remote station with not a lot of voters had made a figure of a hanged man which they suspended from the back of the door the voters entered and exited by.

The committee rooms were less inspiring. At one, the dear old soul running it had piled all my lists, registers, pens and pencils on the sideboard and spread the table with cakes, biscuits and other goodies. ‘We always do it,’ she said. ‘It’s for the drivers and anyone else who

drops in.' I explained the illegality of 'treating' and rearranged things. I should have gone back later to check, but I didn't dare. I revisited those that were doing it my way to congratulate them and tell them how well they were doing.

We lost by 1,200 votes. That was amazingly good, considering everything. I don't think it came as a shock to headquarters. I had been sending rather depressed reports to Jeremy. Less than a week after the result, Donald was offered a peerage. I advised him to take it; he was not physically strong enough to fight

another election. Shortly afterwards, I was offered Ross and Cromarty, a winnable seat, but I was too scared of driving on icy roads to take it.

I saw Huddersfield through another election in 1966 with a candidate in whom I had no faith. We came third. I went back to teaching. ■

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The 'last of the Whig statesmen': The Marquess of Crewe

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- 69 *Manchester Guardian*, 5 May 1938, p. 8.
- 70 Marquess of Crewe, *Lord Rosebery*, vols. i–ii (John Murray, 1931); McKinsty, *Rosebery*, p. 5.
- 71 Crewe, *Well I forget the rest*, p. 34; *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Jan. 1936, p. 4.
- 72 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 Mar. 1938, p. 20; Pope-Hennessy, *Lord Crewe*, p. 177.
- 73 *The Times*, 29 Sep. 1932, p. 10.
- 74 *Manchester Guardian*, 2 June 1934, p. 15.
- 75 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 June 1935, p. 14; Salisbury to Chamberlain, 7 Feb. 1936, Austen Chamberlain Collection, AC41/3/11.
- 76 Samuel, *Memoirs*, p. 266; Crewe to Stanley Baldwin, 7 Apr. 1937, Crewe Papers, C/44.
- 77 I. Hunter, 'Sir Archibald Sinclair: Liberal Anti-Appeaser', *Journal of Liberal History*, 42 (Spring 2004), pp. 30–5.
- 78 Crewe to Harcourt Johnstone, 11 July 1939, Crewe Papers, C/28.
- 79 For examples, see Hansard, HL (series 5) vol. 103, cols. 301–4 (19 Nov. 1936); Hansard, HL (series 5) vol. 103, cols. 428–30 (26 Nov. 1936).
- 80 Samuel, *Memoirs*, pp. 266–7.
- 81 *Ibid.*, p. 279; *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Oct. 1938, p. 8.
- 82 Memorandum by A. J. Sylvester for David Lloyd George, n.d., A. J. Sylvester Papers, National Library of Wales, B63; 'Founders of the Air Raid Defence League', Fourth Marquess of Salisbury Papers, Hatfield House, 4M/171/26–28.
- 83 Hansard, HL (series 5) vol. 114, col. 958 (3 Sep. 1939).
- 84 Marquess of Crewe, 'The Eclipse of Liberalism', *The Fortnightly Review* (May 1940), pp. 481–2.
- 85 Bracken to Morris-Jones, 5 Oct. 1948, Sir Henry Morris-Jones Papers, North East Wales Archives, D/MJ/3/1.
- 86 *Sunday Times*, 28 July 1940, p. 6.
- 87 'The French Apostasy', Aug. 1940, and 'France in Fetters', Aug. 1941, *The Contemporary Review*, Crewe Papers, P.2.1.
- 88 Samuel, *Memoirs*, p. 281; S. Heffer (ed.), *Henry 'Chips' Channon: The Diaries 1938–1943* (Hutchinson, 2021), p. 22.
- 89 Crewe, *Well I forget the rest*, p. 39.
- 90 Crewe to Nicholas Murray Butler, 1 May 1942, Crewe Papers, C/4.
- 91 *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Dec. 1944, p. 6.
- 92 Sir George Leveson Gower.
- 93 His snobbery was evidenced, according to Quentin Crewe, in his objection to the second marriage of Quentin's mother, Crewe's eldest daughter Annabel, to his middle-class father, whilst his 'Victorian prudery' showed in his disposal of his father's infamously large pornographic literary collection – much to Quentin's disappointment (Crewe, *Well I forget the rest*, pp. 3 and 40).
- 94 Pope-Hennessy, *Lord Crewe*, pp. ix–x.
- 95 Brock and Brock, *Asquith Letters*, p. 549.
- 96 David, *Inside Asquith's Cabinet*, p. 230.
- 97 McKinsty, *Rosebery*, p. 165.
- 98 *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Dec. 1944, p. 4.