

Liberal Heritage

Michael Meadowcroft continues the *Journal's* series in which well-known Liberal Democrats take a look at the Liberal heritage of their home town.

LEEDS AND THE LIBERAL PANTHEON



MORE THAN with most cities, an overview of Leeds Liberalism is underpinned by significant political events. Perhaps most crucial was the ninth annual meeting of the National Liberal Federation held in Leeds on 3 November 1886. Until that year the dominant centre for Liberal organisation had been Birmingham, home of Joseph Chamberlain, who was in many ways the driving force behind modern party organisation.

Herbert Gladstone addressing an election meeting in 1880 from the steps of Leeds Town Hall.

Chamberlain was fundamentally opposed to Gladstone's Irish home rule policy on which the June 1886 election had been fought. For Chamberlain Ireland was the determining issue and, despite being very much on the radical wing of the Liberal Party, he and his allies aligned themselves with the Conservatives as 'Liberal Unionists' which, as a party, was completely merged with the Tories in 1912.

The happy coincidence for the Liberal Party of the ascendancy of the Leeds Liberals for the first

time, together with the national chairmanship being held by a determined Leeds Liberal, Sir James Kitson, probably saved the party for Gladstone. Other officers, from Birmingham, tried to propose a compromise motion urging Gladstone not to exclude Irish representatives from the Commons, but Kitson simply refused to put the motion forward and declared 'purely and simply, without reservation or exception' for Gladstone's plan. After a heated debate his motion was carried by 'very large majority'

LEEDS AND THE LIBERAL PANTHEON

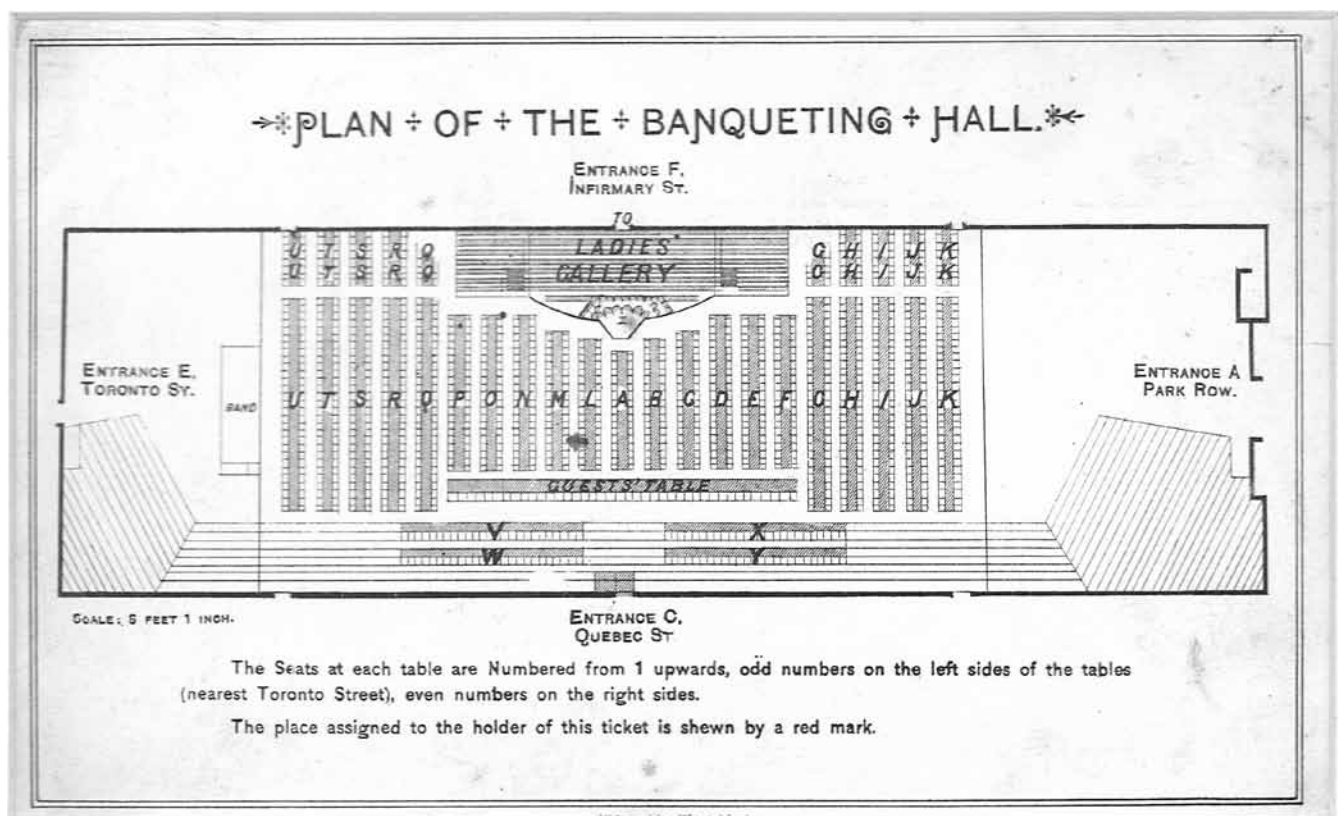
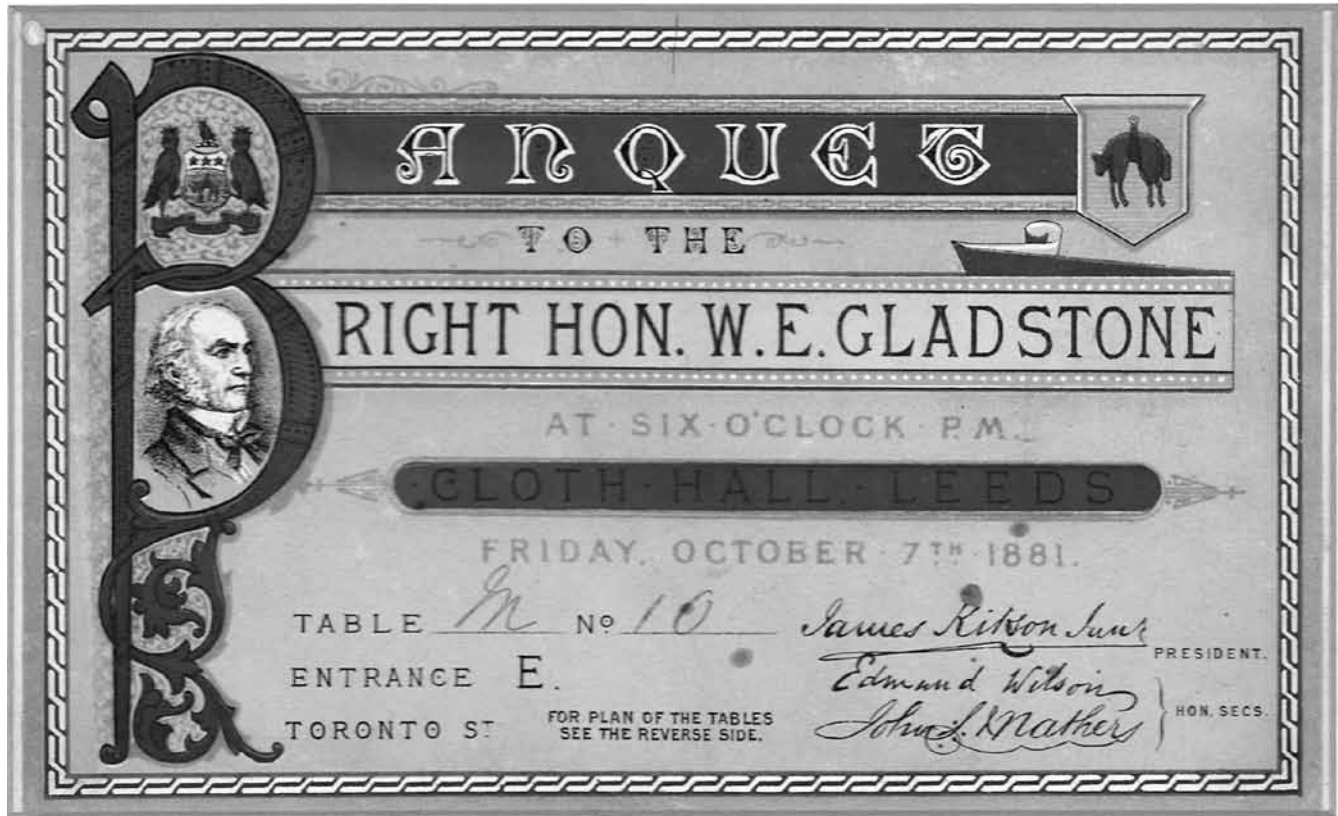
and was endorsed by huge public meetings in Leeds the same evening.

Liberalism was the dominant force in Leeds politics for fifty years before the NLF AGM of 1886. In fact, the Liberals controlled the Leeds Town Council for

fifty-seven years, from its inception in 1835 to 1892, its majority being bolstered from time to time by the cynical manipulation of the aldermanic bench. It had remarkable leaders in that time, not least John Hope Shaw, three times Mayor of Leeds, and

a man with remarkable foresight, not least in getting the council to inaugurate a municipal supply of drinking water to the town from reservoirs to the north of the town as early as 1852.

Despite having a number of civic leaders and MPs of great



stature, and even though they produced buildings and enterprises ahead of their time, the long tenure of office was not in the end beneficial. The party became moribund and failed to perceive the dangers of the rise of Labour as a serious political force.

In June and July 1890 came a victory for organised trade unionism which was to prove significant in the long struggle between Liberal and Labour for working-class support. The Liberal-controlled town council, having during the previous winter been forced to make concessions to the gas workers, including the eight hour day, determined to teach the men a lesson. As the warmer weather reduced the demand for gas, the Liberal leaders sought to enforce the withdrawal of concessions previously made. They alienated a wide range of public opinion so that, when the gasworkers went on strike, they had a great deal of support.

The Council brought in blacklegs from towns outside Leeds and, rather than taking them immediately to the three gas works, the local Liberal leaders took them to the town hall where they were led in patriotic songs! By the time they arrived at the gas works the strikers were ready for them and, in the ensuing confrontation, many of the blacklegs joined the strikers. Eventually the strikers gained just about all their demands and the Liberal Party was discredited as the representative of the working class.

All this was despite the efforts of another remarkable local Liberal. John Shackleton Mathers was a local building society manager and, although he was a member of the town council for seven years, it was as the honorary secretary of the Leeds Liberal Association that his skills were used and his reputation forged. He was described by Herbert Gladstone, MP for Leeds West, as 'a born organiser' and by Sir Wemyss Reid, the editor of the Liberal *Leeds Mercury*, as 'simply the best organiser and wire puller I ever met.'

Mathers was exceptionally shrewd and saw clearly the danger to the Liberal Party of failing to accommodate the legitimate political desires of working-class

Left: Ticket for banquet in Leeds for WE Gladstone, organised by Mathers. A huge marquee was erected on what is now City Square. It housed 2,000 diners and many thousands more who came for Gladstone's speech and to observe the dinner! Mathers charged a differential price – of one guinea to five guineas – depending on how close to Gladstone they were.

men. He worked with Herbert Gladstone to pick off local trade union leaders by getting them adopted as Liberal (or in some cases Lib-Lab) candidates for the town council or as Liberal nominees for the magistrates' bench. Partly through Mathers' efforts the electoral success of the Labour Party in Leeds came years after its comparable victories in Bradford: Fred Jowett was successful in Bradford in 1892, eleven years before the first Labour councillor in Leeds.

In March 1890, three months before the gasworkers' strike, Mathers wrote in prescient terms to Herbert Gladstone, MP for Leeds West and on the way to becoming a key national figure in the party:

There are questions ... coming on in leaps and bounds ... To use the broadest term, I mean Socialism and by that I mean immediately all the questions which concern capital and labour; all that which concerns the very direct interests and comforts of the toilers.

For over five years I have been warning friends that, unless the Liberal Party took up and considered these questions and dealt with them, a great Labour Party would spring up and sweep aside both Tories and Liberals as such and govern for themselves.

You may think this Utopian, it only remains so until the hour, and not a moment beyond, when the masses have accumulated funds to sustain their men for their cause.

Mathers was not heeded. Labour was alienated and increasingly believed that Liberals were incapable of treating them as the equals of the professional and business men that were the public image of the Leeds Liberal Party. Mathers himself died in 1899, at the early age of fifty-five, and no one took up his radical mantle. In 1903, Herbert Gladstone concluded his famous pact with Ramsay Macdonald under which thirty-one Labour candidates were not opposed by Liberals at the 1906 general election in return for an equivalent number of Liberals – including Gladstone himself – being given a free run against the Conservatives.

The pact was mutually beneficial in the short term but it gave Labour its first independent and identifiable group of MPs, the forerunner of Labour's successful drive to replace the Liberals, which, indeed, was Macdonald's aim. In Leeds, as elsewhere, the Liberals increasingly lacked a base and a role. In 1926, the council group split and six Liberals defected to the Conservatives. Labour took control of the City Council in 1928 and all Liberal representation on the council had gone by 1945. It was to be another twenty-three years before they returned. Which is another story.

Michael Meadowcroft was a Leeds City Councillor, 1968–1983, and Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983–87. He has held numerous local and national offices in the Liberal Party and is currently the Chair of the Leeds Liberal Democrats Campaign Development Group.

Liberal Democrat History Group on the web

Email

Join our email mailing list for news of History Group meetings and publications – the fastest and earliest way to find out what we're doing. To join the list, send a blank email to liberalhistory-subscribe@lists.libdems.org.uk.

Website

See www.liberalhistory.org.uk for details of History Group activities, records of all past *Journals* and past meetings, guides to archive sources, research in progress and other research resources, together with a growing number of pages on the history of the party, covering particular issues and periods in more detail, including lists of party leaders, election results and cabinet ministers.

Facebook page

See us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup) for news of the latest meeting, and a discussion forum: www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup