

The Conduct of Parliamentary Elections
in Kidderminster 1832-1880

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CONTENTS

Chapter		Pages
i	Abstract	3 – 4
ii	Dedication	5
iii	Acknowledgements	6
iv	Frontispiece	7
1.	Introduction	8 – 22
2.	Kidderminster – “May the trade of Kidderminster be trodden under foot by all nations.”	23 – 50
3.	Politics and the Electoral Process: A review of historiography	51 – 108
4.	“Godson for Ever” 1832-1850	109 – 166
5.	“Kill the Pink-Eye” 1851-1864	167 – 213
6.	Carpetbagger 1865-1880	214 – 300
7.	Conclusion	301 – 321
Appendices		
1.	Kidderminster – Parliamentary Election Results 1832-1880	322 – 323
2.	Map of Kidderminster Parliamentary Borough	324
3.	Public Splendour	325
4.	Private Squalor	326
	Sources and Bibliography	327 – 344

Abstract

Local studies are a crucial means to understanding the actual working of the political process in the post-Reform Act period. This applies particularly to Kidderminster which was enfranchised in 1832 and where the town and parliamentary constituency covered broadly the same area throughout the period. This correlation enables valid judgements to be made about the key drivers in the twelve general elections held in Kidderminster from 1832 to 1880 and to analyse the elements of continuity and change in both the process and the issues.

This thesis is based on evidence from contemporary local and national newspapers, election petition reports, local archive collections, poll books, directories and official reports. It reviews the relevant historiography and identifies and weighs what actually happened during parliamentary elections, how the parties organised themselves and their supporters, and the impact of industrial relations, the publican lobby and differences in religion. It also compares voting patterns in municipal as well as parliamentary elections.

The thesis concludes that corruption and violence were embedded in the electoral process in Kidderminster. Corruption, whether in the form of outright bribery, treating or the provision of sinecures, began with the first general election in 1832 and reached its height with the campaigns of Albert Grant in 1865 and 1874. Election petitions alleging corruption were prepared after six elections, and prosecutions took place after two. The evidence from these petitions indicates that corruption was

widespread and indiscriminate. In terms of violence, including intimidation by blocking and boycotting, there were riots in 1832 and 1835, with the threat of disturbance present at virtually every election. It was the norm for the army to be stationed in or around the town in the elections of the 1830s and 1840s. This violence reached its peak in 1857 with the attempt to murder the MP Robert Lowe. The propensity for violence and corruption was fuelled both by generally hostile industrial relations where riots and destruction of property in trade disputes spilled over naturally into political divisions and by the existence of 150 public houses.

The thesis also argues that no tenable conclusions can be drawn from a comparison of municipal and parliamentary elections in Kidderminster, because they were for and about entirely different things. Local elections were primarily concerned with keeping council expenditure to a minimum in order to keep rates low. Parliamentary elections, on the other hand, were far more about national issues and the opportunity to be paid for good sport.

The word-count of chapters one to seven of this thesis, excluding footnotes, is 79,788.

To Marjorie, Carole and Helen

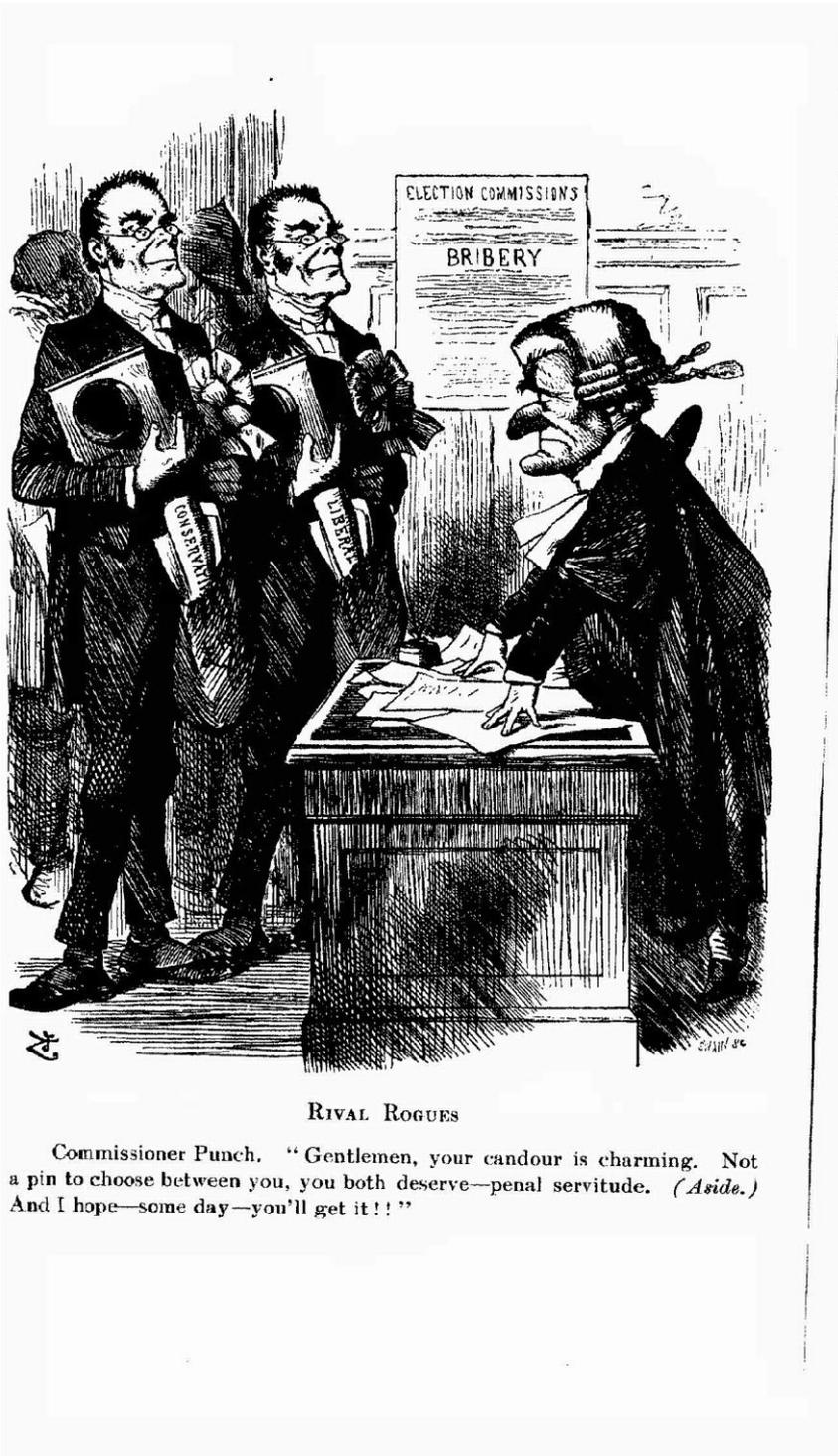
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My thanks are due to my supervisory team, Drs. Paddy McNally and Dil Porter, for their encouragement and constructive criticism; to the staffs of Kidderminster Public Library, particularly Jeremy Hamblett, and the Worcestershire Record Office for their help in locating source documents; to my late mother, wife and daughter for their support; and to Janet Haywood and Terry Jenks for deciphering my hieroglyphics.

The pictures of Richard Godson and Robert Lowe and Old Court No 2, Worcester Street are reproduced by permission of Kidderminster Public Library; the picture of Albert Grant is reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery; the cartoon from Punch, which illustrates contemporary attitudes towards corrupt electioneering, is reproduced from Charles Seymour Electoral Reform in England and Wales.

The cartoon is undated but must refer to a date after 1868 when the Queen's Bench took over responsibility for trying election petitions.

Frontispiece



RIVAL ROGUES

Commissioner Punch. "Gentlemen, your candour is charming. Not a pin to choose between you, you both deserve—penal servitude. (*Aside.*) And I hope—some day—you'll get it!!"

Cartoon from Punch Seymour, p.426-7

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. CONTEXT

The history of parliamentary elections in Kidderminster is a valid contribution to research into Victorian politics. Local studies are an important contribution to an understanding of what actually mattered to a borough elector. An historical approach enables both the change and continuity of social, cultural and economic development to be assessed and evaluated across time. This applies particularly to Kidderminster, which was one of only twenty-one single-seat boroughs enfranchised in 1832, and where eleven of the twelve general elections in the period were contested. This represents 92 per cent, against a national average of 60 per cent.¹ The borough and parliamentary boundaries remained broadly similar throughout so that there is a real sense of continuity and community (see appendix 2).

Kidderminster was an inward-looking single-product town, where there was generally deep distrust between capital and labour. It is impossible to understand Kidderminster without the carpet industry. In the 1830s the twenty-four largest carpet manufacturers employed over 4,000 people or more than 25 per cent of the entire population. If the shopkeepers, suppliers and publicans who were indirectly dependent on the industry are taken into account well over half of the inhabitants relied on the carpet trade, which was a luxury business and therefore volatile. The industry was marked by violence; violent swings in prosperity; violent changes in

¹ Cook, C, Britain in the Nineteenth Century, (Pearson, 1999), p 90.

technology; and violent industrial relations. At best in the 1830s and 1840s there was an armed truce between capital and labour and the Chartist movement attempted, without much success, to make headway .

Religious divisions were also significant. Particularly in the earlier period religious differences between the Anglicans and the Dissenters were exploited for party purposes. The Liberal coalition of carpet manufacturers and non-conformists was opposed by Richard Godson's appeal to the Church of England, shopkeepers and pub landlords. Church rates and exclusion from the Universities were a particular bugbear for the non-conformists while the Anglicans were concerned about disestablishment and the loss of church revenue.

Public order was fragile and riots were common. Kidderminster experienced electoral malpractice both in terms of corruption and violence. Bribery and treating were alleged to have occurred in at least six parliamentary polls. The impact of reforms such as the 1872 Ballot Act and the over eight hundred fold increase in electors in a borough whose population increased by only 39 per cent is particularly striking. As shown in Appendix 1, on five occasions Kidderminster voted against the national result. Until 1868 there was a very low voter-population ratio, with less than three per cent of Kidderminster's inhabitants having the vote. Also up to 1868 the winning margin of the successful candidate was paper-thin. In 1865 Albert Grant won by fifteen votes out of 555 cast. Kidderminster was very much a working-class town and the role of the mob was significant. Godson and Grant were masters at organising carefully orchestrated "spontaneous" crowds of several thousand.

In addition the evidence shows that there were high levels of genuine party activism. The publican lobby was important. It was claimed in 1849 that 24 per cent of all Kidderminster's electors were publicans and that they all voted Conservative.²

During the period there were seventeen parliamentary elections, of which the Conservatives won eight particularly from 1832 to 1849, 1865 and 1874. The Liberal successes are concentrated in the period 1852 to 1880, except for the notorious successes of Albert Grant. Turnout was consistently over 80 per cent and frequently exceeded 90 per cent. There is clear evidence, derived mainly from a partisan local press, of a vigorous political debate. The same sources make it clear that this co-existed with bribery, corruption, violence and public disorder.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHY

The "Whig" interpretation that the 1832 Reform Act represented, with its successors in 1867, 1884 and 1918, a cornerstone of liberal democratic evolution, expounded by Trevelyan in 1920, had already been challenged by Seymour in 1915. Seymour argued that the pace of change was very slow and that the power of the landed and commercial aristocracy remained. Electoral corruption continued to be rife and the sheer cost of elections restricted the candidates to a small coterie of the extremely wealthy. Not until the reforms of 1883 to 1885 was the sway of the aristocracy replaced by something approaching a modern

² Worcestershire Chronicle 24 April 1850.

democracy.³ In the 1950s Gash argued that from 1832 to at least 1850 the Reform Act had changed very little and that the old norms and systems of pocket and proprietary boroughs, corruption and violence continued as much after 1832 as before.⁴

Gash's thesis was attacked by Phillips whose analysis of eight boroughs up to 1841 led him to believe that the Reform Act generated an increased and persistent voter partisanship.⁵ Likewise Salmon has argued that there was a "rapid development of two-party politics" and that the 1832 Act "led to the establishment of permanent party organisations...and to the rise of electoral behaviour which was substantially more partisan." Furthermore there was a development of "party based attachment and more modern and professional forms of political activity" and the Act encouraged "nationally oriented party organisation to become a permanent feature of parochial and municipal life."⁶ Clearly no two boroughs are the same but it is the intention of this thesis to use Kidderminster to test the validity of the arguments advanced by Gash and by Phillips and Salmon for the period 1832-1849.

The Gash thesis was taken forward to the 1860s by Hanham who argued that there was an "essential continuity of political life before and after 1867"⁷ and that "corrupt practices occurred in between one-third and one-half of the English

³ Seymour, C, Electoral Reform in England and Wales. The Development and Operation of the Parliamentary Franchise 1832-1885, (David and Charles, 1970), pp. 519-525.

⁴ Gash, N, Politics in the Age of Peel. A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830-1850, (Longman, 1953), pp. ix-xxi.

⁵ Phillips, J. and Wetherell, C, 'The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the political modernisation of England', American Historical Review. (April 1985), pp. 411-436.

⁶ Salmon, P, Electoral Reform at Work. Local Politics and National Parties 1832-1841, (Boydell and Brewer, 2002), pp. 246-248.

⁷ Hanham, H.J, Elections and Party Management. Politics in the time of Disraeli and Gladstone. (Harvester, 1978), p xxviii.

boroughs on sufficient scale for them to be noticed.”⁸ O’Leary endorses the Gash and Hanham arguments, claiming that bribery and treating may well have increased after 1832 and that initiatives such as the 1854 Act to tackle corrupt practices were ineffective.⁹ Although the Ballot Act of 1872 had a limited impact it was not until the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act that real progress was made towards eradicating the habits that had become ingrained.¹⁰ Pugh also sits firmly in the Gash/Hanham camp describing “influence in the boroughs....[as] more obviously corrupt and coercive.”¹¹ Elections were a staple part of the local economy and the Ballot Act was castigated for enabling voters to take bribes from both parties.

Salmon’s and Phillips’ scholarship is much more recent than Gash et al and their conclusions need to be verified against the experience of specific local communities. A body of such analysis continues to be built up, from the North East and the North West cotton towns to several small towns. This research focuses almost entirely on Kidderminster. Since it was only enfranchised in 1832 its voters could not look back to “the bad old days” before the first Reform Act. To that extent the elections in the borough started on a blank page. Hanham has neatly summed up the issues. Not only were no two boroughs the same, the more one researches them the more difficult it is to understand why they voted as they did. What looks on the surface to be a nomination borough controlled by a big

⁸ Hanham, op.cit., p 263.

⁹ O’Leary, C, The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections 1868-1911, (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ O’Leary, op.cit., pp. 229-233.

¹¹ Pugh, M, The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939, (Blackwell, 1982), p 11.

magnate may seem quite different in the local partisan press.¹² This thesis contends that although for a short period the legally exerted influence of Lord Ward was an important factor in parliamentary elections, both before and after the predominance of that influence, the illegal methods of corruption and violence were far more successful.

Electoral violence from 1857-1880 has been analysed by Wasserman and Jaggard who conclude that it was more widespread and serious than generally believed, that it usually happened in big cities as opposed to small towns and that it was directly in relation to contested constituencies. They also posit that far from over-exuberance or sheer hooliganism driven by boredom, many riots had specific targets and disorder was more politically inspired. Essentially corruption bred violence.¹³ The thesis will test this hypothesis against the evidence of Kidderminster's experience.

This brief review of the relevant historiography has highlighted major differences of opinion among historians on the conduct of borough elections. The review of the historiography in Chapter 3 contains a more detailed analysis of these differences and the research submits them to a review of the evidence so far as it concerns Kidderminster and, where appropriate, the borough's immediate neighbours. Local studies may only be representative of the boroughs studied, but together they build up a body of evidence upon which students of the wider national spectrum can make judgements.

¹² Hanham, H.J., The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain 1832-1914, (Historical Association, 1968), p 31.

¹³ Wasserman, J and Jaggard, E, 'Electoral Violence in Mid-Nineteenth Century England and Wales', Historical Research Vol 80, No. 207 (Feb 2007), pp. 124-158.

3. SOURCES

The prime sources for the research are the local press. Over the period under review eight papers covered Kidderminster either specifically or as part of their readership area. These are:-

		Political Bias
<u>Berrows Worcester Journal</u>	1832-1880	Conservative
<u>Kidderminster Shuttle</u>	1870-1880	Liberal
<u>Kidderminster Times</u>	1867-1880	Liberal
<u>Kidderminster /Ten Towns Messenger</u>	1836-1849	Conservative
<u>Kidderminster Sun</u>	1877-1880	Conservative
<u>Worcestershire Chronicle</u>	1838-1880	Liberal
<u>Worcester Herald</u>	1832-1880	Liberal
<u>Brierley Hill Advertiser</u>	1856-1867	Liberal

The fact that over the period 1832 to 1880 eight local newspapers reported the affairs of Kidderminster in some detail is a positive support to the methodology supporting this thesis.

The great strength of the local press is that it reflects an insatiable popular interest in politics, particularly in parliamentary elections. Speeches by candidates and their main supporters were reported verbatim. The limitation of the local press as a reliable source of evidence is the intense political bias. The Shuttle, for example, owned by a non-conformist minister, was entirely Liberal in its sympathies. The Journal was just as partisan in support of the Conservatives. During the trial of Albert Grant in 1874 the Shuttle devoted almost its entire print

run to Grant's dastardly deeds and supplemented the reports with damning editorials. The Journal on the other hand decided on the whole that this was not news fit to print and largely ignored the whole process. The letters to the editor of the rival organs are a fascinating exercise in special pleading. Overall, however, the richness of the eight sources far outweighs their bias and the local press reports form a bedrock upon which the research is based. The different political bias of the local press enables reasoned judgements to be made – their very imbalance produces balance. For all its foibles the local press provides an essential, if biased, continuity. Of course they reported elections but they also provide an insight of what happened between elections – the attempts by the parties to form a permanent structure which would cement the loyalty of voters. In addition to the local press Kidderminster could also arouse the interest of national papers such as The Times whose leader writer, Robert Lowe, was the victim of the 1857 riot. The tone of its reporting of this event was predictable.

In addition to the press there are a number of important sources to support the research. The Poll Books for the parliamentary elections of 1849, 1859, 1862 and 1865 have survived. Unfortunately the addresses and occupations of voters only exist for 1849. However, comparisons of the names and wards of voters for the three consecutive elections of 1859, 1862 and 1865 do provide pointers of voter consistency, voter “churn” and the efforts of the parties – both legitimate and illegal – in polls where the majorities were nine, ten and fifteen respectively in a restricted electorate.

The research is further buttressed by the existence of the Minute Books of the Power Loom Carpet Weavers and Textile Workers Association and the Kidderminster Corporation. Although these became increasingly stylised and formal they do give an insight into the workings of the political process.

Apart from commercial directories which list businesses in the borough, there are also copies of official reports by the Boundaries Commission, reports of select committees of the House of Commons and in private archives election posters and documents particularly relating to the 1874 election petition. These private archives, particularly the Palfrey, Danks and Kidderminster Public Library collections of contemporary documents, provide a rich source of electioneering techniques.

Overall, therefore, there are excellent primary sources to support the research. Of course these sources may be partial and biased and there are gaps, most particularly the actual records of the local Conservative and Liberal parties – but the sources do provide a solid and reliable framework on which judgements may be validly based and interpretations may be advanced backed by empirical evidence.

4. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The research reviews borough parliamentary politics and the electoral process in Victorian England on a matrix of thematic and process-related bases within a chronological framework. It seeks to explore the strands of continuity and change across time boundaries within the borough of Kidderminster. Local studies are

important in assessing the impact of corrupt electoral practices and factors such as industrial relations and religion. It is also possible to evaluate the extent to which the interplay of national and local issues influenced the conduct and outcome of elections.

Kidderminster politics were described by a contemporary, Canon David Melville, as dominated by the “bribe and the beer-barrel.”¹⁴ Kidderminster’s elections were conspicuous for violence, corruption, treating, blocking, boycotting and personation. The research critically appraises the extent and impact of these corrupt practices, and the depth to which they were embedded in both municipal and parliamentary elections. The correlation, if any, between voting patterns in local and national elections has been reviewed. The role of the residuum (the non-voters) has also been examined.

On a chronological basis the research has been divided into time periods as follows:-

1. 1832-1849 “Godson for Ever”
2. 1850-1864 “Kill the Pink-Eye”
3. 1865-1880 “Carpetbagger”

These time periods reflect significant and discrete strands and developments in the political history of Kidderminster. From 1832 to 1849 parliamentary elections were characterised by the Conservative Richard Godson who won four of the five polls in the period. His techniques and methods characterised the electoral process in Kidderminster and were successfully copied after his death in the 1849

¹⁴ Gilbert, D, Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster ,(David Voice, 2004), p 42.

election by John Best, who managed to fight off an election petition. The Liberals won the five elections between 1852 and 1862 partially because the Conservatives were split over free trade but also because of the legitimate political influence of Lord Ward, who had largely financed the industrialisation of the carpet industry in Kidderminster. The 1857 election witnessed a major backlash of resentment when the mob attempted to murder the Liberal MP Robert Lowe. From 1865 to 1880 Albert Grant stood for the Conservatives in three of the six elections. While certainly the heir to Godson's techniques he also refined those methods after the Ballot Act and the 1867 Reform Act which more than quintupled the electorate.

5. OBJECTIVES

The research seeks to answer the key issues arising from the primary sources:

1. How significant in the political process were difficult industrial relations in Kidderminster?

The research tends to indicate that Godson and Grant owed some of their success to the mob, the underprivileged and the socially marginalised through an appeal to the resentment and frustration of voters and non-voters alike. They cobbled together an alliance of envy against Kidderminster's elite "carpetocracy". The generally confrontational nature of industrial relations in Kidderminster throughout the period, but particularly the aftermath of the 1828 and 1830 strikes, embittered working relationships for a generation. This at least partly explains why elections were so keenly and bitterly fought. Parliamentary elections were not just about appeals to the voters. The disenfranchised were also courted as a

symbol of a candidate's strength. However the Liberal victories of the 1850s and the early 1860s give pointers that industrial power could also deliver political success when the circumstances were favourable.

2. Does the evidence suggest that corruption and violence were endemic and part of the natural order of things?

Kidderminster was a rough borough with a history of violent confrontation in industrial disputes. It would not be unreasonable to expect that predisposition for disorder to spill over into the political arena especially when elections were characterised by vast crowds and fuelled by alcohol. There are indications that this may well have been the case, particularly in the first half of the period under review. The local magistrates may have over-reacted to the situation but in the 1830s and 1840s the army were called out to a number of elections to maintain order. The violence reached its peak in 1857 with the sustained assault by the mob on Robert Lowe, which brought the town to the attention of the national press. Not surprisingly thereafter the authorities took precautions to ensure that there was no recurrence, although sporadic outbreaks of violence continued. Violence did not necessarily have to be overtly physical. It could also take the form of intimidation which encompassed threats of eviction from rented property and the sack if electors did not vote according to their employers' wishes. It was also alleged that blocking, boycotting and exclusive trading took place, although for these methods to be successful the threat of actual violence may well have been close to the surface.

The extent of corruption in the political process became apparent in the 1832 parliamentary election and appears to have continued throughout the period except for the 1852 and 1857 elections won by Robert Lowe, who publicly denounced the practice. It is probably to be expected that in a constituency which until 1868 had fewer than 600 electors and where in six of the ten contested elections up to 1865 the winning majority was less than twenty, the losing party would allege that bribery and corruption had taken place. They did so on six occasions and two were the subject of an election petition. Even allowing for the potential exaggeration, the evidence from the election petitions and contemporary press reporting implies a scale of bribery and corruption which was embedded in the electoral process in Kidderminster. The sheer amounts allegedly involved suggest that this was not just the selective application of cash to a few venal voters but was an essential part of the entire system. The techniques evolved as the electorate rose to over 3,600 in 1880, and Grant's victory in 1874, which was marked by wholesale bribery and treating, shows that the Ballot Act was not an immediate success in curbing corruption, at least in Kidderminster.

3. Was there a systemic difference between municipal and parliamentary elections?

Claims for voter partisanship and the development of party loyalty would be buttressed if voting patterns in Kidderminster in parliamentary and local election showed marked correlation. Overall the evidence does not support this hypothesis. The annual election of one-third of the council does not appear to be a reliable indicator of how the constituency would vote at a parliamentary election.

Parliamentary elections might take place at seven year intervals. If they occurred more frequently it was likely to be because the government thought it could win a snap election or, as in 1837, on the death of the monarch. As a result the timing of a parliamentary election was much more haphazard than the discipline attendant upon annual municipal elections. Even so, the research indicates that in Kidderminster the municipal and parliamentary elections were fought on largely different grounds. In choosing a councillor the electors were far more concerned about local issues, predominantly the burden of rates. However much the two parties might try to differentiate themselves, in reality the manifestos of the candidates are virtually indistinguishable. Both sides promised retrenchment and value for money. This is in contrast to parliamentary elections where the emphasis was very much on national issues. These issues, such as free trade, foreign policy and church rates, might well have been simplified into stereotypes so that they became slogans, but it seems that national elections demanded consideration of national rather than purely local issues. The price of a loaf of bread clearly touched every inhabitant of Kidderminster but the debates in parliamentary elections tended to be at the rhetorical rather than practical level. This dichotomy also continued after the period under review. In the 1890s the burghers of Kidderminster saw no contradiction in voting for Frederick Godson as their MP from 1886 to 1906 while voting for a Liberal controlled council for the same period.

4. What real impact did differences in religion and attitudes to alcohol have on the electoral process in Kidderminster?

Kidderminster may be argued to have been a divided town in Victorian England. It was certainly divided between weaver and master in the carpet industry. The carpet masters tended to be non-conformist in their religious beliefs and Liberal in their political persuasion. This enabled the Conservatives, particularly under Godson, to differentiate themselves from the Liberals by appealing to the Anglicans. It was an appeal to the established order of things, and was rammed home by attacking the non-conformist claim to be excused from paying church rates as back-door disestablishment of the Church of England. From here it was a short step to associate “Church in Danger” with an attempt to subvert the constitution.

After 1850 religious differences played less of a part in electoral proceedings in Kidderminster. The same cannot be said for alcohol and the brewers’ lobby. The impact of drink on the propensity for violence has been noted above. The evidence tends to imply that alcohol was the solace of the poor and that it was the cornerstone of the social life of the weavers. However, the influence of the drink trade is wider than that. Although care had to be taken not to condone drunkenness the Conservatives, knowing that several teetotallers were non-conformists and Liberals, appealed to the sanctity of the working man’s “beer and baccy”. Both Best and Grant held open house at many pubs in the 1849, 1865 and 1874 elections buying free beer and spirits. This source of income might well have been enough to persuade some landlords to the Conservative cause. Their loyalty may well have been cemented by Lowe’s refusal to support longer opening hours and by Grant’s opposition to Gladstone’s proposed legalisation to combat drunkenness.

Chapter 2

Kidderminster – “May the trade of Kidderminster be trodden under foot by all nations.”¹

1. GEOGRAPHY.

In the nineteenth century Kidderminster was an industrial town with virtually no agriculture in the north-west of the predominantly rural county of Worcestershire, sixteen miles north of Worcester and twenty miles west of Birmingham. It lies on the River Stour, a tributary of the River Severn. The town is mentioned in the Domesday Book and was the centre of a cloth manufacturing industry from the thirteenth century. By the 1830s Kidderminster was essentially a one-product town dominated by the manufacture of carpets. In 1838 its trade was characterised by relatively small firms (the average number of employees per firm was 167, of whom seventy- nine were men, fifteen were women and seventy-three were children) and by a predominance of hand looms. The employees of twenty-four largest firms ranged from 360 to forty-four. Overall there were 198 weaving shops housing 1,956 looms. 20 per cent of the shops contained on average less than five looms each, indicating the small- scale units of production.²

¹ Weaver Toast 1886. Cited in Thompson, M, Woven in Kidderminster. (David Voice, 2002), Frontispiece.

² Smith, L.D, Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters. The Hand Loom Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster 1780-1850 , (Tomkinson, 1986), pp 29, 30, 46.

2. CARPETS – TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS, POLITICS AND PROTEST.

The history of industrial relations in Kidderminster's carpet industry pre-dates enfranchisement in 1832 and helped to shape parliamentary politics in the borough for nearly four decades afterwards.

Between 1811 and 1831 the population of Kidderminster grew from 8,038 to 14,981, an increase of 86 per cent.³ In general this period was one of prosperity for the carpet industry, as the Brussels carpet became popular and the Jacquard loom replaced the Mountford. The Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal, built by James Brindley between 1766 and 1772, linked the Trent and Severn and passed through Kidderminster, giving good access for transporting in raw materials and delivering the finished product.⁴

However, labour relations were fragile. Following increases in the price per yard paid to weavers for Brussels carpet to 1s.2d in 1810, a decline in trade set in. Employment halved and parish relief more than tripled. Working families found their weekly income reduced from 30s to 20s or less.⁵ Discontent rumbled on and following the decision by the manufacturers to reduce the Brussels rate from 1s 2d to 1s, there was a strike in 1817. This lasted for some weeks and was accompanied by threats, intimidation and violence, culminating in an arson attack on Pardoe and Hooman's mill, causing £20,000 of damage. The army was called

³ Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), pp. 80, 85.

⁴ Thompson, op.cit., Kidderminster, pp. 11-14.

⁵ British Parliamentary Papers, Minutes of Evidence Before the Committee of the Whole House Relating to the Orders in Council 1812 (210) Session 7 January – 30 July, pp. 118-124.

in to maintain order. The strike failed, but both sides learned lessons. The weavers had become organised and adept at circumventing the Combination Acts. The manufacturers recognised their own strength through solidarity and repression.⁶ From 1817 to 1825 trade improved. Industrial relations did not.

Following the repeal of the Combination Acts, the fledgling Kidderminster trade union (the Friendly Society of Operative Carpet Weavers) financially supported the strike of the Wilton carpet weavers in 1825.⁷ The strike failed, but attitudes hardened, particularly among the manufacturers. In 1828, in response to price competition from Scotland and Yorkshire, they imposed unilaterally and without consultation a reduction to 10d per yard of Brussels, in the comfortable knowledge that stocks were high.⁸

The Weavers' Union Committee called a town meeting and 2,000 people marched through the town centre. The house of a prominent manufacturer was stoned and the High Bailiff wrote to Home Secretary Peel asking guidance on summoning the militia.⁹ Negotiations between the manufacturers and the weavers failed and a strike began, lasting for twenty-one weeks. Early efforts at restraint crumbled. Blackleg workers were imported by barge and were pelted with stones and horse manure. The battle was fought out in the national press between The Times (pro manufacturer) and the Trades Free Press (pro weaver).¹⁰ The magistrates may have used the occasion of the stoning of one striker who wished to return to work to call in the 14th Light Dragoons and the Riot Act was read. As time passed, the

⁶ Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 86-87.

⁷ Smith, *op.cit.*, p 88.

⁸ Smith, *op.cit.*, p 90. Marsh, A. The Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster. (Malthouse, 1995), p 22.

⁹ Home Office 40/22. 18 March 1828, Hallen to Peel.

¹⁰ Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 25-26.

plight of the strikers, who received little outside help, became acute and even The Times noted that starvation was close.¹¹

On 16 August 1828 the strikers accepted an offer of 30s for every married worker and 20s for single weavers to return to work. The strike had failed. Thereafter industrial relations “degenerated into almost continuous acrimony.”¹² The weaver had been downgraded from craftsman to pieceworker. As the strike had become more entrenched violence and intimidation on both sides had increased. Henry Brinton, a leading carpet manufacturer, had received death threats. The magistrates responded by threatening the strikers with withdrawal of parish relief. Triumphalism and bitter resentment were a powder-keg. The spark was provided by another dispute in August 1830 at William Cooper’s factory. Seven to eight hundred weavers attacked first the plant and then Cooper’s home in another dispute about piece rates. They then sacked the houses of the manufacturers most associated with the 1828 strike – Brinton, Lea, Gough and Dobson. The Black Horse Hotel was also attacked, despite the reading of the Riot Act. The army restored order and eleven weavers were arrested. “Feelings between masters and men.....amounted to perfect hatred on both sides.”¹³

The riots had caused damage of up to £3,000.¹⁴ and the weavers had taken their vengeance.¹⁵ The High Bailiff wrote to Peel denouncing a Combination of the Operatives who had planned and directed the riots.¹⁶ As the date of the trials

¹¹ The Times 11 June 1828.

¹² Marsh, *op.cit.*, p 23.

¹³ Marsh, *op.cit.*, p 40.

¹⁴ Smith, *op.cit.*, p 150.

¹⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 2 September 1830.

¹⁶ London Gazette 3 September 1830.

approached tension rose still further. The High Bailiff asked Peel for a permanent military force and barracks to put down a mob of up to 3,000 who could be mobilised rapidly,¹⁷ but Peel refused.

The trial of the eleven weavers arrested in connection with the 1830 strike lasted three days. Their defence barrister Richard Godson, from Tenbury Wells, secured the release of seven of the accused and light sentences – from two to six months – for the other four. Godson’s defence was skilful and conciliatory. He emphasised that the evidence against the individuals charged was not clear but that he did not condone the violence, which would ruin Kidderminster’s trade. He proposed that the weavers’ grievances should be put to the manufacturers and discussed peacefully.¹⁸

The armed truce did not last long. The magistrates continued to press for a permanent military garrison.¹⁹ The Reverend Humphrey Price, born in Kidderminster and the radical vicar of Needlewood, near Lichfield, already imprisoned for his inflammatory support of the weavers in the 1828 strike, continued to attack the manufacturers as oppressors, advocating universal suffrage and a secret ballot.²⁰ The weavers responded by forming a “Political Union” to demand drastic reform.²¹ They also demanded a wage increase, to no avail. The army, in the form of the 14th Light Dragoons, remained in Kidderminster. At a further set of trials relating to the 1830 riots, Godson managed to secure the

¹⁷ Home Office, 52/11, 3 October, Custance to Peel; Home Office 41/8, 5 October 1830, Phillips to Custance.

¹⁸ Worcester Herald 23 October 1830. Berrows Worcester Journal 28 October 1830. Turberville, T.C, Worcestershire In The Nineteenth Century, (Longman, 1852), pp. 129-130.

¹⁹ Home Office, 52/12 3 November 1830.

²⁰ A Circular to Gentlemen In The Vicinity Of the Old Forest Of Neechwood, 1830.

²¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 2 December 1830.

acquittal of three of the five defendants.²² Trade remained bad and industrial relations were worse, exacerbated by the collapse of John Broom's company. Nearly 800 heads of family were on poor relief. Three carpet factories were firebombed and looms were destroyed.²³

At least in the minds of the magistrates, political and industrial unrest were inter-linked. Although the army had been called out the Political Union managed to gain credibility by attracting some respectable support including Henry Brinton and three other carpet manufacturers.²⁴ Significantly the leaders of the Political Union included James Tuck and William Regan who had supported the weavers in 1828.²⁵ The Union asked Godson to represent Kidderminster if it was enfranchised because he had made reformist noises.²⁶ There was a strong movement for parliamentary reform in Birmingham led by Thomas Attwood, and his Political Union, formed in 1829, set the pattern for the development of similar structures in other parts of the country. Kidderminster's proximity to Birmingham and the agitation of the Reverend Price led to the formation of a Kidderminster General Political Union in 1830. This was a new departure for the town where public protest had tended to be industrial or, in the case of the carpet presented to Caroline of Brunswick the estranged wife of George IV in 1821, anti-authoritarian, rather than purely political in nature. The Kidderminster Political Union was supported by the Weavers' Committee which provoked the magistrates to call in the army, fearing riot. Godson might be seen as the natural choice for the Political Union, although it was clear that he was not supported by many of its

²² Smith, *op.cit.*, p 156.

²³ Smith, *op.cit.*, p 157.

²⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 24 February 1831, 3 March 1831.

²⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 3 January 1839.

²⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 10 March 1831.

leading Liberal/Whig members. He was local; he was the darling of the weavers; and he was prepared to support reform as bringing back “long lost rights and ancient privileges”.²⁷

In April 1831 Godson came to Kidderminster, flushed with his success in the riot trial. He was met by a large crowd which cheered him into the town, where he addressed a crowd of 6,000 from the Lion Inn.²⁸ The weavers were dangerous allies. They were excellent foot-soldiers in the skirmishes which typified the 1832 election in Kidderminster. Berrows Worcester Journal reported that “part of the populace which was in the interest of Godson interrupted Philips’ [his Whig opponent] approach and commenced a furious attack” on Philips and his friends, many of whom were pelted with mud and stones.²⁹ A voter was killed by a weaver acting as special constable.³⁰ The research shows that the weavers could also be relied upon to help tradesmen and landlords vote the desired way by intimidation through boycotting and blocking (preventing customers from patronising a shop).

But as potential constituents for Godson they lacked one fundamental asset – the vote. Godson could not afford to be seen to be radical. Given that Philips was supported by “the most reputable dissenters”³¹ and by “an overwhelming majority of the most influential of the Carpet Manufacturers,”³² Godson had to appeal publicly to the rest of the electorate, the respectable middle-class landlords,

²⁷ Briggs, A, The Age of Improvement 1783-1850 , (Longman, 1979), pp. 247-248 Marsh, op.cit., pp. 45-46 Smith, op.cit., pp. 226-227.

²⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 7 April 1831.

²⁹ Palfrey Collection, B.A. 3762 Worcestershire Record Office.

³⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 14 March 1833.

³¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 21 June 1832.

³² Berrows Worcester Journal 18 October 1832.

shopkeepers and lawyers of Kidderminster. Thus he disassociated himself from the attack on Philips, diverting the blame by accusing the night constables of having their hats decked with Philips' colours. For good measure, he denied blocking and exclusive trading and accused Philips of threats of loss of trade, sackings and notices to quit.³³ Indeed at his victory dinner the only reference to Kidderminster's industry was a crimson silk flag inscribed in gold "Success to the town and trade of Kidderminster."³⁴

Godson's victory in the 1832 election by 172 votes to 159 – a two per cent majority of thirteen votes – was probably due to his judicious use of the mob (which he denied)³⁵ and to an alliance of envy against the carpet manufacturers and dissenters (who tended to be one and the same thing) together with, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, a healthy measure of bribery and corruption. Godson's victory was all the more notable because the Conservatives won only eighty-three of the 327 English boroughs.

Although there is no evidence that industrial relations had changed for the better or the worse, they do not seem to have been a major factor in the result of the 1835 election, won by Philips by 197 votes to Godson's 121 – a swing to the Whigs/Liberals of 13.8 per cent and an increase in their vote of 24 per cent. Instead it appears to have been due more to the ability of the Liberals to mobilise their vote, which, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, was due to the efforts of the non-conformist ministers.

³³ Berrows Worcester Journal 13 December 1834.

³⁴ Worcester Herald 12 January 1833.

³⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 13 December 1834.

Trade improved in 1835 to 1836 and the wage aspirations of the weavers grew accordingly. There was a partial strike in 1836 which resulted in slight improvements over the 1828 settlement.³⁶ In the 1837 election, arising on the death of William IV, Godson stood again, this time opposed by Bagshaw. Electioneering followed its now normal course, and Godson won by 198 votes to 157, a majority of forty-one. He remained the hero of the masses. Never an unbiased observer, The Ten Towns Messenger claimed that not less than 15,000 townsfolk attended Godson when he arrived in Kidderminster³⁷ and that 90 per cent of the non-voters of the town supported him.³⁸ The ground had been set in November 1836 when “An Operative” wrote to the Ten Towns Messenger proclaiming loyalty to Crown and Church and proposing the formation of a “Conservative Operatives’ Association.”³⁹ Godson exploited this. At a public dinner for him in January 1837, attended by 206 voters, he proposed a toast to Josiah Allen, a weavers’ leader, and the operatives of Kidderminster. Allen replied by applauding the proposed Reading Room for Operatives and deploring the Poor Law Commissioners.⁴⁰ In his address to the hustings in July 1837 Godson certainly defended himself as a lawyer and not a mill-owner,⁴¹ distinguishing himself from the leading Liberals.

The “Conservative Operatives” and their physical presence were a key factor in the failure of Chartism in Kidderminster. The Chartists, led by local men George Holloway and William Charlton, formed the Kidderminster Working Men’s

³⁶ Marsh, *op.cit.*, p 41.

³⁷ Ten Towns Messenger 7 July 1837.

³⁸ Ten Towns Messenger 21 July 1837.

³⁹ Ten Towns Messenger 4 November 1836.

⁴⁰ Ten Towns Messenger 20 January 1837.

⁴¹ Worcester Herald 29 July 1837.

Association which met weekly for political discussion and to demand universal suffrage through peaceful means.⁴² They invited speakers from the Birmingham Political Union to address a rally on 27 August 1838, following a preliminary meeting at the Plough Inn.⁴³ The rally was a disappointment for the Chartist cause. The Ten Towns Messenger gleefully reported that a Conservative mob under the leadership of Boycott, Brough and Tuck (the latter a leader of the 1828 strike) disrupted the meeting. The Chartists withdrew. Boycott condemned the “rascality” of the Chartists and claimed to represent the views of the working classes. According to the report there were 400 Chartists and 2,000 Conservatives. The Messenger glorified the defeat of the “Great Dragon of Birmingham” by the “Loyal Operatives of Kidderminster.”⁴⁴ By March 1839 the Kidderminster Operative Conservatives, sponsored by the Ten Towns Messenger, claimed 600 members.⁴⁵ Godson sponsored their festival with a gift of £10.

The Chartists persisted, attempting to gain Liberal support through favourable reporting from the Worcestershire Chronicle.⁴⁶ The Liberals formed a Reform Association, supported by Talbot (a director of the Chronicle) and several carpet-manufacturers including Henry Brinton. The alliance was short-lived. The Birmingham riots of July 1839 scared off the Liberals and the Chartists were left friendless.⁴⁷ The movement was divided over universal suffrage and Charlton eventually gave up the struggle to establish Chartism in Kidderminster and emigrated to America in 1845. There would be a last attempt, probably

⁴² Worcestershire Chronicle 15 February 1838.

⁴³ Ten Towns Messenger 24 August 1838.

⁴⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 31 August 1838.

⁴⁵ Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), p 101.

⁴⁶ Smith, op.cit., pp. 234-235.

⁴⁷ Smith, op.cit., pp. 236-237.

orchestrated by the Liberals to create a sympathetic class of voter through the formation of land clubs, but Chartism per se was by now a dead letter in Kidderminster, although its legacy probably helped the Liberals in the 1850s and 1860s. For the moment, the Liberals would disinter the movement in the 1849 election, but the Conservative mob could be relied upon to shout loudest and longest.

In the 1841 general election Godson was once again backed by the Conservative Operatives, 300 of whom met to denounce the Liberal Ricardo's candidature. Weaver support for Godson was not however unanimous. The "Unfranchised Operatives of Kidderminster" denounced protectionism and Godson as deceitful and dishonourable and pledged support for the Liberals.⁴⁸ Godson was victorious by 212 votes to 200.

Godson presented an address from the Operatives Conservative Association to Sir Robert Peel in May 1842, signed by 1,367 inhabitants, praising Peel's measures to reduce the burden of tax on the poor. Peel's response was that his measures would increase the demand for labour by stimulating industry and add to the comfort and enjoyment of the working classes.⁴⁹

Trade in the second half of the 1840s was poor. Ebenezer Guest recorded in his diary that in February 1847 trade was "nearly at a standstill with half the looms idle." Prices for essentials were rising and collections were made for the poor,

⁴⁸ Ten Towns Messenger 2 April 1941.

⁴⁹ The Times 5 May 1842.

who also received cheap soup, rice and coal.⁵⁰ It was estimated that 1,500 families lacked the common necessities of life. At a public meeting at the Guildhall to form a committee to relieve the distress in January 1847, Godson donated £50. Henry Brinton was rather less generous at three guineas.⁵¹ No-one could accuse Godson of not “working” his constituency.

The Chartist/Liberal alliance resurfaced in 1846 and 1847 with the Chartist Land Company, led by Holloway⁵², and designed to create Liberal voters.⁵³ If their aim was to unseat Godson, they failed. The research shows how from 1832 to 1849 Richard Godson cobbled together a loose alliance of those excluded from Kidderminster’s ruling elite – predominantly the carpet manufacturers. The fact that they tended, like Henry Brinton, to be non-conformist in religion and Liberal in politics merely made Godson’s job easier. His success in securing acquittals for those accused in the strike of 1830 had made him the hero of the weavers and cemented, while he lived, their allegiance to his personal brand of Conservatism.

The fate of the hand-loom weavers was effectively sealed in the early 1850s as Thomas and James Pardoe and George Hooman and Brinton began to introduce steam power to tapestry production and Crossley of Halifax did the same for Brussels carpets,⁵⁴ against a backdrop of a prolonged downturn in trade. The weavers began by believing that hand-loom and steam power could co-exist, as it had initially done in the Coventry ribbon industry, but with the ultimate demise of

⁵⁰ Extracts from an Old Diary, Kidderminster Shuttle 2 March 1895.

⁵¹ Worcestershire Chronicle 13 January 1847.

⁵² Holloway (1818-1904) was a “moral force” Chartist. Originally a weaver he became successively a pub landlord, grocer, carpet manufacturer and auctioneer. He was elected to the town council as a Liberal in 1853 and subsequently became an alderman.

⁵³ Smith, op.cit., pp. 240-241.

⁵⁴ Worcester Herald 3 January 1852, 28 February 1852.

the former.⁵⁵ Reality came quickly in March 1852, when Simcox reduced wage rates for his new tapestry product.⁵⁶ 2,000 weavers protested at Sutton Common, but at least the expected riot did not take place. The trouble spread to the factories of John Woodward, Pardoe and Hooman and Brinton, who imported six men from Halifax to break the weavers' refusal to work the looms. The Halifax men were blocked by a large crowd and returned home.⁵⁷ As trade declined, industrial relations worsened and the future of the hand-loom workers was bleak. Emigration increased steadily. In a rare occasion of co-operation a public conference was organised in April 1853. The Liberal MP, Robert Lowe, offered to intercede on behalf of the weavers and Lord Ward (a prominent local landowner and financier who became the Earl of Dudley in 1860 and who was, for a time, the leading Liberal sponsor – see Chapter 5) was also supportive, urging concessions on the manufacturers. Despite some progress, including the provision of education for 600 boys at evening schools, all else failed on the stumbling block of the weavers' claim for an extra 1p per yard. The manufacturers refused to accept this and an all-out strike became inevitable. The mayor called in a troop of the 2nd Dragoons to maintain order. Lord Ward's prophecy of a "new moral phase" had not lasted. The strike started on 27 June 1853, and was countered by a lock-out from 3 August. On 22 August the strike ended in "a disastrous failure" for the weavers. Not only had they not achieved the 1p per yard increase, but the manufacturers began to install power looms.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Beaven, B, 'Custom, Culture and Conflict: A Study of the Coventry Ribbon Trade in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century', *Midland History*, vol 15 (1990), pp. 83-99.

⁵⁶ *Worcestershire Chronicle* 10 March 1852.

⁵⁷ *Worcester Herald* 22 May 1852, 29 May 1852. *Worcestershire Chronicle* 21 April 1852, 28 April; 1852, 19 May 1852.

⁵⁸ Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 261-272. Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-52.

The hand-loom weavers were condemned to oblivion. Simcox ceased trading in 1856 and Pardoe and Hooman went bankrupt in 1858 with a deficit of £20,000. Despite the hardship and recession the splendid Public Rooms, consisting of a corn exchange and music room, were built in 1855 with financial help from Lord Ward. (See Appendix 3) Disputes continued in 1854, when the Yeoman cavalry were called in, 1856 and 1858. By 1859 the hand-loom weavers were virtually at starvation level and many emigrated. Probably over 6,000 left Kidderminster from 1851 to 1861.⁵⁹ The union of hand-loom weavers was finally disbanded. By 1862 the mayor of Kidderminster was appealing for funds to relieve the “distressed condition of the town” and by February the fund totalled £1,120, with weekly payments of £80 for bread and £90 for coal and the supply of blankets. The Earl of Dudley supported regeneration and donated £100.⁶⁰ The weavers won not one of their confrontations with the owners and their only resort was to desperate violence. The organisation of the trade had changed dramatically from a hand-loom cottage industry to a factory environment driven by powered carpet machines in the 1850s which effectively transformed the weavers from skilled craftsmen to machine minders at reduced employment levels. All this should imply that the grass roots support for the Conservatives would be at least as strong as in the heyday of Godson. And yet the Liberals won every general and by-election from 1852 to 1864. The reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 5.

The carpet trade began to enjoy a revival from the early 1860s. Thomas Lea constructed Slingfield Mill in 1864.⁶¹ Built without proper drainage, the soap suds used to wash the wool flooded the surrounding land and caused an

⁵⁹ Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 272-274.

⁶⁰ *Brierley Hill Advertiser* 4 January 1862, 18 January 1862, 22 February 1862.

⁶¹ Thompson, *op.cit.*, pp. 44-49.

unbearable smell. Lea refused to take any action until the council agreed to meet half the cost.⁶² The revival in trade received a fillip with the end of the American Civil War in 1865, which opened up the American markets. Both employers and weavers regarded it as a “golden age” – the masters grew rich on handsome profits and the weavers saw a future of never-ending full employment.⁶³ Both sides began to organise – the Power Loom Brussels Carpet Weavers Association was founded in 1865 in response to the formation of the Power Loom Carpet Manufacturers association in 1864.⁶⁴

Between 1865 and 1868 the carpet industry continued to flourish. There was a flexing of muscles between the employers and the weavers’ union at Harrisons about non-union labour. Once again the union lost.⁶⁵ The amount of sewage in the River Stour was so great that it always threatened to flood and the river became so sluggish that it threatened the carpet industry which depended on its flow. Having finally reconciled themselves to improving the sanitary conditions the council’s plans were scotched by a sweeping victory in the municipal elections of 1867 of independent “anti-drainage” candidates who refused to pay for the sanitary improvements. It was claimed that the death rate in Kidderminster was the highest of any town in the country.⁶⁶

The period from 1868 to 1874 witnessed the continued regeneration of Kidderminster. A new hospital was founded in 1871, funded by public subscription, including donations of £1,000 from Thomas Lea the local MP and

⁶² Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p 112.

⁶³ Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p 113. Marsh, *op.cit.*, p 93.

⁶⁴ Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 67 and 123.

⁶⁵ Marsh, *op.cit.*, p 93.

⁶⁶ Gilbert *op.cit.*, pp. 112-113.

the Earl of Dudley. Since the rich, mainly carpet manufacturers, paid for the facility, they demanded their pound of flesh. The infirmary was not allowed to treat infectious or contagious diseases such as smallpox and cholera. Instead the hospital was intended to keep the employees of the carpet industry as fit as possible.⁶⁷ In addition to Lea's largess towards his employees, in 1870 John Brinton the largest carpet manufacturer in Kidderminster and son of Henry Brinton took sixty of his workers to Witley Court and then to the Hundred House for a lavish dinner.⁶⁸

Industrial relations remained difficult. The employers held the whip hand because of a combination of a sudden recession in the carpet trade in 1872 combined with rapid inflation. The manufacturers reacted by selling stock at, according to Brinton, "famine prices." The weavers were left on short-time and earnings halved from 25s.8d per week to 12s.10d. The union demanded an increase in wages of 3/8 of a penny per yard. The masters made some concessions and bought peace for twelve months.⁶⁹ The manufacturers might have been paternalistic in treating their employees to free drinks, but this came at a price.

That peace was short-lived. There were too many Brussels carpet manufacturers and these were primarily based in Kidderminster. Brussels carpets had been priced out of all but the luxury markets and exports to the USA fell by 46 per cent. Manufacturers resorted to even shorter time and contemplated reducing unit costs by greater mechanisation and use of female labour. 1873 was worse than 1872,

⁶⁷ Gilbert, op.cit., pp. 114-115.

⁶⁸ Gilbert, op.cit., pp. 111-118. Thompson, op.cit., pp. 47-55.

⁶⁹ Kidderminster Times 21 February 1874. Littlebury's Directory, (Littlebury 1873), pp. 359-366. Marsh, op.cit., pp. 83-99.

and 1874 saw an even deeper depression. The masters decided to pay only for carpet actually woven and completed rather than in process. The Manufacturers' Association won an important test case confirming that they were entitled to change terms and conditions of employment to reflect this method of payment.⁷⁰

Relations between master and weaver deteriorated during the two parliamentary elections in 1874. In February 1874 the union put forward pay claims to the Manufacturers' Association, which were rejected out of hand. The union countered that the masters were being "almost despotic" and that the rules were being applied in "an oppressive manner." A local firm Humphries, the second largest employer in the town, reacted by making forty weavers redundant. Trade continued to deteriorate and by September hundreds of weavers were on short time and at least fifty-six were wholly unemployed. As matters continued to get worse, John Brinton, previously regarded as relatively benevolent, used apprentices on Brussels looms and women on his new tapestry looms. Women's rates of pay were 40 per cent below that of men. The union was incensed and, despite efforts at arbitration and conciliation, Brinton, abandoned by many of his fellow-manufacturers, abruptly physically moved his looms to Leeds. The union was divided between the doves and the hawks. It made little difference. Acting in his most autocratic manner, Brinton would take five years to bring the tapestry looms back to Kidderminster.⁷¹

It was against this backdrop of deteriorating trade and worsening industrial relations in Kidderminster that Gladstone called a snap election in late January

⁷⁰ Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 103-106.

⁷¹ Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 86-112. Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p 118.

1874. The election was a massive opportunity for the Conservatives in Kidderminster if they could grasp the chance to exploit the “working man” vote. Following the repealing of the “compounding” (payment of rates as part of the rent on a property) requirements, the electorate in the borough rose by 1,071 from 2,323 in 1868 to 3,394, real evidence of the pervasive nature of rented property in the town. In addition the improvement in trade from 1865 to 1870 had increased the numbers of inhabitants to 20,814, virtually the same as in 1851, and a growth of 35 per cent over the depressed levels of 1861. As a result, the percentage of the population of the town having the vote rose by only 1.2 per cent to 16.3 per cent, albeit in absolute terms, and this is critical, 1,071 new voters were created over the 1868 electorate.

In 1879 Brinton was determined to introduce new loom technology into Kidderminster’s tapestry market and, after arbitration, won his case. The Weavers’ Association capitulated. Trade remained depressed, but the masters avoided confrontation with the weavers by undercutting each other on price rather than reducing wages. The uneasy truce would continue until the massive riots in 1884 over Dixon’s determination to use female labour to work his looms for “medici” velvet. A mob of up to 1,600 weavers was involved in pitched battles with the local police, reinforcements from Birmingham and the army.⁷²

This summary indicates that the carpet industry was characterised by volatile trading conditions, by generally confrontational industrial relations and by rapid and brutal changes in technology. It was inevitably linked to the political process

⁷² Gilbert, *op.cit.*, pp. 114-129. Thompson, *op.cit.*, pp. 55, 60, 63. Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 112-133.

and to parliamentary elections. In the seventeen elections from 1832 to 1880 eleven of the candidates had direct personal links to the carpet trade and at least three unashamedly courted “the working man”.

3. HARD TIMES

As the research shows, public interest in elections was intense and the whole town seems to have played an active part. Until the 1867 Reform Act there were never more than 600 voters but crowds of up to 6,000 frequently attended the speeches of the candidates. The vast majority of those crowds clearly did not have the vote but throughout the period candidates of both parties made strenuous efforts to acquire the support of the “residuum.” The objective was to mobilise a party’s supporters in an attempt to disrupt the opposition’s speeches and by sheer numbers to intimidate unsympathetic electors from actually voting in a marginal constituency.

There is little doubt that social conditions in Kidderminster, particularly for the poor, were rough and precarious. The carpet masters could afford to live outside the boundaries of the borough, to avoid both local taxes and the unhealthy low-lying area of the town itself, where the river, the life-blood of the town’s predominant industry was an open sewer. The carpet weavers did not have this luxury (see Appendix 4). From the age of about eight, girls and boys were employed in the carpet trade in order to enhance the family income.⁷³ This meant almost complete dependence on a volatile industry and an introverted outlook. Trade depression meant poverty and poverty meant hunger. Even when times

⁷³ Smith, op.cit., pp. 182-184.

were good, the working conditions were poor. The manufacturers' responses to the Factory Act of 1833 which limited the hours of work for children in textile factories were complacent and the Act was ineffective. The working week was six days from six in the morning to eight or nine at night – a staggering eighty-four to ninety hours per week. Nothing much had changed by the Children's Employment Commission of 1843, when Mary Ann Cadogan, aged eighteen, said that she had not been to day school since she was seven.⁷⁴ Such unremitting grind might have been expected to lead Kidderminster to be a Chartist stronghold; but after an initial flirtation the inhabitants preferred the more immediate benefits, like Juvenal's citizens of ancient Rome, of bread (poor relief) and circuses (the largess of Richard Godson).

4. FAITH AND FACTION

Political differentiation could also be applied to religious conflict and control, particularly in the earlier periods. In 1851 there were fifteen churches, five Anglican, one Roman Catholic and nine Protestant dissenters. Attendance at church for the three services recorded by the census of that year was forty-seven per cent of the population, with the physically bigger Anglican churches (1,109 average number of seats per church) representing 55 per cent of the aggregate worshippers, while the smaller more fragmented dissenting churches (432 average number of seats per church) accounted for 40 per cent.⁷⁵ The numbers are important because they provide further evidence of the divide in Kidderminster society. As noted, in the 1832 general election the Liberals were supported by “the

⁷⁴ Gilbert, *op.cit.*, pp. 97, 105.

⁷⁵ Gibbons, B, Notes and Suggestions for a History of Kidderminster, (Mark, 1859), p 51.

most respectable dissenters”⁷⁶ and “an overwhelming majority of the carpet manufacturers.”⁷⁷ These were by and large the same people, with Henry Talbot, Joseph Newombe, Henry Brinton and John Gough among the most prominent. The differences were temporal as well as religious and political. The dissenters were aggrieved by the requirement to pay church rates and by their inability to attend Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The Anglicans were concerned to maintain their existing rights of church rate income and worried about the threat of disestablishment both of the Church of England as well as the Church of Ireland. The position in Kidderminster became even more personalised in 1870 when Edward Parry, a non-conformist minister, founded the Kidderminster Shuttle and edited it as a radically Liberal mouthpiece, with his most vitriolic attacks being directed at Albert Grant.

5. THE DEMON DRINK

If differences between employer and employee and between Anglican and Dissenter were not enough to engender political schism, alcohol could be relied upon to fan the flames. Baxter, the seventeenth century puritan minister and author, described the population of Kidderminster as “an ignorant, rude and revelling people”.⁷⁸ Two hundred years on, and the pleasure pursuits had not changed much. Alcohol remained the core of popular recreation. In 1838 there were 132 public houses and beer-shops, and fairs and wakes were a notorious excuse for drunken excess. Kidderminster “enjoyed” the “Lawless Hour” when the inhabitants would pelt each other and the High Bailiff with cabbages and apples. “Bannering” (a procession round the parish followed by fights) and

⁷⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 21 June 1832.

⁷⁷ Worcester Herald 13 October 1832.

⁷⁸ Gilbert, D, Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster, (David Voice, 2004), p 106.

“heaving” (payment for kisses) were popular in the 1840s, always to the accompaniment of alcohol. Kidderminster’s popular culture also celebrated the Battle of the Boyne, and had a fine old time with Brecknell’s Charity for the inhabitants of Church Street, with vast amounts of beer being distributed.⁷⁹ Overall therefore, a clear picture emerges of, at least among the majority of the population, a rough and rowdy town, probably like many others, whose main recreation and solace revolved around alcohol.

Religion may have touched urban Victorian life, but alcoholic drink lubricated it in a far more tangible way. As late as 1906 Stanley Baldwin recalled that the Victorian voters of Kidderminster expected the candidate to instruct them how to vote, on the understanding that they would be rewarded with free drink for their compliance.⁸⁰ Manufacturers could be equally generous. In 1839 Thomas Simcox Lea treated 200 employees to a dinner at the Lion Hotel, where they drank 180 gallons of beer at his expense.⁸¹ No doubt Lea, like a prospective MP, expected a return for his money.

Drink was the core of popular culture in Kidderminster. Some taverns were the headquarters of Friendly Societies and until 1836 Orange Lodges and others provided the services of a newsreader. But alcohol was the prime mover. Some weavers would spend three days drinking after pay day.⁸²

⁷⁹ Tomkinson, K. and Hall, G, Kidderminster Since 1800, (Authors, 1975), p 181.

⁸⁰ Gilbert, D, Town and Borough, p 86.

⁸¹ Thompson, op.cit., p 32.

⁸² Smith, op.cit., pp. 201-204.

During the 1830s the temperance movement became popular, particularly with the middle classes. In Kidderminster a Temperance Society was founded in 1834 with ten to twelve members. Although it did contain earnest and respectable Liberals such as Ebenezer Guest, its leading light seems to have been James Quinn who was not only a prominent Chartist, but who had in 1839 accused the Inspector of Kidderminster Police, William Merrefield, of assault at the Revising Barristers Court, and of acting “very well as a bully for the Tory Party.” Merrefield was found not guilty by the magistrates who included prominent Conservatives William Best and William Boycot.⁸³ Temperance was thus associated in the public mind with radical and dangerous agitation.

The real importance of the drink lobby was seen in the 1849 election. At the election petition hearing, counsel for the petitioners alleged that in a constituency of 494 voters, no less than a quarter were publicans or beerhouse keepers, all of whom voted for Best.⁸⁴ As usual there is some poetic licence here. Analysis of the 1849 Poll book shows that identified publicans were fourteen per cent of the electorate and these voted forty-three to twenty-two in favour of Best. What the evidence does show is that in Kidderminster as elsewhere the Conservatives did seem able to target the potential anti-Liberal vote, and to mobilise it on election day. Of course if a publican thought that the Conservatives would win, he would stand to gain financially from any “treating” which might occur.

“Pub in Danger” was a slogan which would be trotted out in the latter period of the research. Generally it was enough for the Conservative Press to denounce

⁸³ Palfrey Collection, BA3762 Worcestershire Record Office.

⁸⁴ Worcestershire Chronicle 24 April 1850.

Temperance as akin to revolution, and for the Conservatives to target publicans as a group. It was a very different kind of appeal than that to the Anglicans, but appears, in 1849 at least, to have been none the less successful for all that.

By 1857, it was claimed that 109 voters were publicans and the vast majority were implacably opposed to the Liberals in general and to Lowe in particular since he had failed to support their petition to extend Sunday opening hours.⁸⁵ Likewise Albert Grant used the pub network to drum up support and opposed legislation to curb drunkenness. Certainly nearly all public meetings took place in bars. The teetotal movement in the town merely cemented prejudice and party affiliation since the teetotallers tended to be dissenters, who could be portrayed as Liberal fodder. The Conservatives in Kidderminster could and did proclaim the slogan of Crown in danger, Church in danger, pub in danger to an audience only too conditioned to react accordingly.

6. TAXES AND TYPHOID

In terms of their civic responsibilities Kidderminster's worthies were intent on minimising local taxes. Apart from the Paving commissioners, no rates were levied in Kidderminster before the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. The rate payers essentially opposed any expenditure, particularly where this involved sanitation and housing improvements which were designed mainly to improve the lot of the poor (non rate-payers and non-voters).⁸⁶ Out-relief was abolished and replaced in 1834 by the workhouse.

⁸⁵ The Times 15 April 1857.

⁸⁶ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 108.

Kidderminster's approach to public health was backward. The commissioners had some success in providing oil lamps for the town, and were conscientious, but the problem of sanitation was too big for them. Failure was due to medical ignorance, a reluctance to commit resources (a desire to keep the rates low), the lack of real powers, and the lack of co-operation from the inhabitants.⁸⁷ Even in the 1860s the Earl of Dudley complained that Kidderminster "stank from end to end."⁸⁸

Until 1870 Kidderminster had no piped water supply, no water closets and no means of sewage disposal except the river Stour. As the population increased and industry concentrated in the town centre, the position worsened. In 1843 a member of the Health of Towns Commission visited Kidderminster. Despite a damning report, the wealthy ratepayers (whose own streets were open and well drained) resisted taking any action to address the situation, on the grounds of both cost and anti-centralism. Cholera hit Kidderminster in 1832 and again in 1848. The town council did nothing, and failed to implement the 1848 Public Health Act. Kidderminster's ultimate conundrum was that the source of its prosperity – the River Stour – was also the source of its poor public health. The town was prey to an enteric "Kidderminster fever," a disease exacerbated by the determination of the ratepayers and town meetings to avoid increasing rates at almost any cost to public health, unless it affected the prosperity of the carpet industry.⁸⁹ Here is a major instance of municipal politics writ large, particularly in a borough dominated by one industry. In 1835 the town was described as "irregularly built"

⁸⁷ Smith, S.A, The Response of Kidderminster Town council to 19th Century Public Health Legislation, (Unpublished MA thesis, 1992), p 32.

⁸⁸ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 106.

⁸⁹ Tomkinson and Hall, op.cit., p 181.

but, condescendingly, “there are several good streets.”⁹⁰ There were two police constables and a night watch of eleven men in winter and eight in summer – “insufficient for the protection of the Town.”⁹¹

7. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In 1832 the Borough was administered under Charters granted by Charles I and George IV by a High Bailiff, twelve Aldermen and twenty-five largely ceremonial assistants. The Aldermen were chosen by the High Bailiff and the other Aldermen – there were no elections. Although the report noted that the corporation had never “acquired an exclusively political character,”⁹² it was prone to nepotism, religious exclusion and insider dealing. In 1835 a father and two of his sons were among the twelve Aldermen. Although the dissenters “formed a large body and constituted a large proportion of the opulence and respectability” of the town, none had even been a member of the corporation, not even as an assistant.

Liquor licenses had been arbitrarily refused while others had been granted to houses owned or occupied by members of the corporation. Five public houses were owned by Aldermen (three by one individual), three by assistants, two by close relatives of Aldermen, three by the High Steward and four by charities controlled by the corporation.⁹³

⁹⁰ Report of the Proposed Division of the Borough of Kidderminster into Wards, 1835.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Report on the Corporation of Kidderminster by A.E. Cockburn.

⁹³ Ibid.

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 introduced annual voting with six of the eighteen council seats being contested. The implications of this change are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

8. MP AT LAST

The 1832 Reform Act gave Kidderminster its first Member of Parliament for over 500 years.⁹⁴ The Borough was one of twenty-one newly enfranchised single-seat towns in Schedule D of the Act.⁹⁵ The report of the Boundaries Commission noted that the limits of the borough of Kidderminster were much the same as the parliamentary constituency, with 14,981 inhabitants and 16,000 respectively in 1831. The suburbs of Hoo Lane and Blackbrook which accounted for the extra 1000 “appear to have been built beyond the Boundary of the Borough, in order that their inhabitants might escape the burdens, which usually press very heavily within its precincts”.⁹⁶ There were 290 houses assessed to the Inhabited House Duty out of a total of 3,100. The Commissioners expected that there would have been between 400 and 500 properties with an annual value of £10, observing that “the small proportion which the number of £10 houses bears to the population, is remarkable; but may be accounted for by the unusually large proportion which the number of the labouring class bears to that of the other inhabitants”.⁹⁷ In the event, there were 390 electors in the 1832 general election,⁹⁸ representing one house in eight, and 2.4 per cent of the total population. This compares with an

⁹⁴ Kidderminster was represented in the 1295 Model Parliament by Walter de Caldrihan and Walter Lihtfot. Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 41.

⁹⁵ Salmon, P, Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties 1832-1841, (Boydell and Brewer, 2002), p 251.

⁹⁶ Boundary Commission Report on the Borough of Kidderminster, 1832.

⁹⁷ Boundary Commission Report on the Borough of Kidderminster, 1832.

⁹⁸ Extracted from 1849 Poll Book for Kidderminster.

average of around five per cent for England and Wales as a whole.⁹⁹ The 1831 census for Kidderminster shows 7,433 males and 7,548 females. If the enlarged parliamentary borough of 16,000 was in the same proportion, roughly one male in twenty was entitled to vote.¹⁰⁰

9. SUMMARY

This review of Kidderminster's development from 1832 to 1880 indicates that politics was inextricably linked to the social and economic life of the town. The Borough had one dominant trade and rivalries were entrenched early. It is not too fanciful to argue that the "typical" Liberal voter, at least before 1868, was a non-conformist probably teetotal carpet manufacturer. Excluded from this "carpetocracy" the Conservatives concentrated their appeal on those outside the voting elite – the shopkeeper, the lawyer and the pub landlord. After 1868 both parties courted the "working man" assiduously. The Liberals relied more on "loyalty" to the employer, a loyalty reinforced by free drink. The Conservatives, led by Grant, relied on envy and free drink. The population of the town grew from 8,038 in 1811 to 22,299 in 1881. Virtually all this growth occurred in the years to 1851. Kidderminster ended the period in superficially in the same position as it had started. It remained a single product town. However, the continuity masks massive change in that trade from an essentially craftsman cottage industry to one dominated by the industrial artisan, employed by much larger companies.

⁹⁹ Cook, C, Britain in the Nineteenth Century 1815-1914, (Pearson, 1999), p 68. Wood, A, Nineteenth Century Britain 1815-1914, (Longman, 1960), pp. 449 and p 453.

¹⁰⁰ Report on the Corporation of Kidderminster by A. E. Cockburn for the Municipal Corporations Act 1835.

Chapter 3

Politics and the Electoral Process: A Review of Historiography

The historiography of borough politics and the electoral process in Victorian England has been reviewed on a matrix of thematic and process-related bases within a chronological context, which encompasses the 1832 Reform Act, the 1835 Municipal Corporation Act, the 1867 Reform Act and the 1872 Ballot Act, where relevant. On a thematic basis the review focuses on the respective impact of industrial relations issues, religion and alcohol. The assessment of electoral process concentrates on election registration, party organisation and violence and corruption. Relevant secondary source references to Kidderminster are also reviewed.

1. REGISTRATION AND PARTY ORGANISATION

Whether or not “the Act of 1832 was a turning point in modern English history”¹ or “the end of an old civilization overborne by the tumultuous forces of its aggressive and triumphant adversary,”² it was certainly historic for Kidderminster, which gained its first MP since 1295.³

¹ Woodward, L, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870*, (Oxford University Press, 1961), p 87.

² Keir, D. L, *The Constitutional History of Modern Britain 1485-1937*, (Black, 1938), p 403.

³ Gilbert, D, *Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster*, (David Voice, 2004), p 41.

Salmon has pointed out that nearly a third of the clauses of the 1832 Reform Act dealt with voter registration.⁴ This was inevitable since registration was not required before 1832. Perhaps surprisingly, as Seymour points out, the registration system was intended to reduce the cost of elections rather than to prevent personation.⁵ Building on Seymour's work, Hanham has shown how the overseers of the poor were inadequate for their role of compiling the registers, and that only the partisan efforts of the local party agents kept the procedure relatively stable.⁶

Certainly registration was a key element in the electoral process, at both parliamentary and municipal levels. Crucially, the entitlement to the vote (qualification) and the right to exercise that vote (registration) were separate. In the boroughs, including the twenty-one newly enfranchised single-seat towns in schedule D, of which Kidderminster was one, the 1832 Act created two broad categories of qualification. Ancient-right voters, including freemen, were entitled to retain their franchise provided they were resident for six months within seven miles of the borough's main polling place and had not received poor relief during the previous twelve months. The qualification date was 31 July. This franchise qualification, however, did not apply to the newly enfranchised boroughs.⁷

After 1832, the £10 householder borough franchise comprised adult male occupiers, as tenant or owners of any house, warehouse, counting-house, shop or

⁴ Salmon, P, Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832-1841, (Boydell and Brewer, 2002), p 19.

⁵ Seymour, C, Electoral Reform in England and Wales. The Development and Operation of the Parliamentary Franchise 1832-1885, (David and Charles, 1970), p 107.

⁶ Hanham. H. J, The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain, 1832-1914, (Historical Association, 1968), p 17.

⁷ Salmon, op.cit., p 254.

other building, either with or without land, with a clear yearly rental of £10 in the borough, provided that they had been in possession for twelve calendar months prior to 31 July in the year of claim and had paid before 20 July all the poor-rates and taxes assessed and due to April.⁸

This outline fails to highlight the impact of compounding of rates in boroughs such as Kidderminster. As noted, based on 1831 data, out of a constituency population of an estimated 16,000 and 3,100 houses, only 500 were estimated to be worth £10 and upwards.⁹

The Report on the Borough of Kidderminster in 1832 highlights two issues. Firstly, that the more affluent inhabitants could afford to live outside the municipal boundary and thus reduce their liability to the poor rate. As the Report indicates, the boundary changes increased the total population by 6.7 per cent, but the potential electorate by up to 17 per cent. The estimated number of houses taxed at £10 a year and upwards in Kidderminster represents a maximum of 16 per cent of the dwellings in the borough and translates into at most 3 per cent of the total population. This discrepancy may be due to either the relative poverty of the majority of the borough's inhabitants, or the prevalence of compounding of rates (where a tenant paid his rates and rent in a lump sum to the landlord, thus effectively disfranchising himself) in Kidderminster, or a combination of both factors.

⁸ Hanham, The Reformed Electoral System, p 34.

⁹ Boundaries Commission Report on the Borough of Kidderminster (1832), p 142.

The historiography of the registration process itself is relatively uncontroversial, and curiously neglected. Seymour remains the bedrock throughout the period under review, devoting three chapters to the subject.

He points out that the 1832 qualifications “evinced very plainly the fear of radical change.”¹⁰ Indeed, of a total borough electorate of 282,000, only around 62 per cent were £10 householders newly enfranchised.¹¹ Seymour claims that the Liberals gained from the borough franchise both by opening up previously close Tory constituencies but also by creating constituencies which would be markedly Liberal.¹² Indeed, in the new Schedule D single-seat boroughs, from 1832 to 1867, eight returned no Conservative MP at all, and only three (including Kidderminster) gave the advantage to the Conservatives.¹³ As already noted, the registration system was introduced with an aim of shortening the poll, of preventing disorder and of reducing the cost of elections. The research indicates that if Kidderminster is used as a yardstick the system in operation failed to meet these objectives. The registration officers were the overseers of the poor, who, at least in theory had three main advantages for the role. Firstly, it was felt that since the overseers were incumbent parish officers, potential voters would be accustomed to, and comfortable with, the existing local organisation and that the overseers would be less susceptible to political bias than a new body of officials.¹⁴ Secondly, the overseers already had responsibility for compiling the rate books and therefore knew the residents of the parish and the rateable values of all

¹⁰ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 43.

¹¹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 83.

¹² Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-95.

¹³ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 101.

¹⁴ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 108.

houses.¹⁵ Thirdly, they were cheap, since no additional payment was forthcoming.

The reality seems to have been somewhat different. Economy came at a cost in terms of efficiency. Thomas has claimed that overseers tended to be small farmers and small shopkeepers. They were not highly educated (some were illiterate) and “they regarded their offices as an unwelcome and unprofitable distraction from their main business.”¹⁶ Since they had no financial incentive, no permanency of tenure, and not necessarily any local knowledge, indifference and inefficiency were rife.¹⁷

Salmon makes much of voter apathy.¹⁸ This argument may hold water in the counties, where a positive action was required to claim the franchise; in the boroughs, however, the system was intended to be “automatic”, based on the overseer’s compilation of the rates records. Here Salmon’s argument may be rather less persuasive. It may well be true that a process which presumed that objections were valid unless specifically rebutted did deter legitimate voters from substantiating their claim, but this is a factor of the process, rather than a legitimate argument for voter indifference, at least in the boroughs.

It is true, however, as Salmon points out, that “the weight of the law.....clearly lay on the side of caution and restriction, facilitating the objector rather than the

¹⁵ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 109.

¹⁶ Thomas, J. A, ‘Development of Party Organisation 1832-1870’ Vol 35, *History*,(Feb-Jun 1950), p 84.

¹⁷ Thomas, *op.cit.*, p 85.

¹⁸ Salmon. *op.cit.*, pp. 22-27.

claimant.”¹⁹ The shilling payment required for registration may have deterred some less affluent voters, and it was not until 1843 that parliament enacted relaxations to the payment of rates, giving the tax payer three months grace and requiring the overseers to inform ratepayers by 20 June that they must pay their rates if they wished to register.²⁰

But undoubtedly the key feature of the registration system was its core of cleansing through conflict. If the overseers could not be relied on to prepare accurate and timely lists – and Seymour gives copious examples of omissions, duplications, the inclusion of the dead and downright fraud²¹ – then the rival political parties would “purify” the registers.²² The 1832 Act envisaged the need to verify the lists prepared by the overseers by creating a system of revision courts, presided over by a Revising Barrister. Since the procedure in the revision courts was essentially a judicial one, the system was one of claims and objections. Any claimant who had not been registered could claim to be so. Any elector could object to any claimant. The system thus allowed for both the creation and disqualification of voters.

Peel was well aware of the powers of the registration courts. In 1837 his view was that “the battle of the Constitution will be fought in the registration court,”²³ and in 1838 that: “there is a perfectly new element of political power – namely the registration of voters, a more powerful one than either the sovereign or the House

¹⁹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 21.

²⁰ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 119.

²¹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 129-132.

²² Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 125.

²³ Hilton, B, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 516-517.

of Commons”²⁴ Methods to create votes were numerous, particularly in creating 40 shilling freeholds in the counties.

Seymour recounts how the Crosslands sold cottages to thirty-five people on their estate. On the same day, they took back a lease on all the cottages for 40 shillings a year, thus creating thirty-five votes.²⁵ Franchise creation thus took two forms – the encouragement of legitimate claimants and the manipulation of the system to obtain qualifications, in both cases for the benefit of “friends”. It was inevitable that this vote creation system would become the business of the rival parties, initially at a local level, but increasingly, as the electorate (and potential electorate) expanded, particularly following the 1867 Reform Act, on a nationally organised and co-ordinated level. The first such campaign was organised by the Anti-Corn Law League. Starting in 1843, the League concentrated on creating small freehold claims in the counties, and admitted in 1846 that at least two thousand freehold votes had been manufactured in Yorkshire.²⁶ Overall, it was estimated that at least half a million pounds was spent in 1846 to buy property in order to establish voting qualifications.²⁷ Salmon has added the valid point that railway expansion was also critical to the League’s success, since the non-resident urban freeholders could be transported quickly and cheaply to the poll.²⁸ Both Salmon²⁹ and Seymour³⁰ point out how faggot votes – splitting property into small freeholds of a 40 shillings value, along with sale and lease-backs – were manufactured by both parties.

²⁴ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 125.

²⁵ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 124.

²⁶ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 127.

²⁷ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 128.

²⁸ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 114.

²⁹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 178.

³⁰ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 124-125.

Kidderminster provides two examples of how the parties could manipulate the system to create votes. In 1865, on the death of William Butler Best, Baron Albert Grant bought all eleven lots of his estate Broomfield Road.³¹ Although there is no direct evidence that this purchase was to buy up £10 freeholds, given Grant's track record of corruption in the borough, it is probable that this transaction had ulterior motives, particularly since Grant was elected MP for the borough in that year. There can be little doubt that the estates purchased by the Kidderminster Freehold Land Society in 1851 were intended to provide a cadre of loyal Liberal voters in the borough, if only because the local Conservative leadership opposed it so vehemently as "practically the very reverse [of] benefit [to] working men."³² The activities of the Freehold Land Society are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 5.

But if there was electoral mileage in voter creation, and Thomas has shown that duplicate voters arising from change in residence existed in boroughs up to 1878, giving ample opportunity for fraud and personation,³³ then the real and most potent weapon to control the electoral register was the objection process. Blewett has described the registration system even after 1885 as costly, cumbersome, creaking and capricious³⁴ and has estimated that the time period for registration, together with the strict occupation requirements, meant that each year around one million voters were disfranchised.³⁵ Seymour has reasonably claimed that "the system of objections gave the party managers ample opportunity for striking off

³¹ Gilbert, D, *Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster*, (David Voice, 2004), p 46.

³² Townley, C, *Kidderminster Revolutionaries*, (Private, 1999), pp. 17-22.

³³ Thomas, *op.cit.*, p 87.

³⁴ Blewett, N, 'The Franchise in the United Kingdom'. *Past and Present* Vol 32, (Dec.1965) p 38.

³⁵ Blewett, *op.cit.*, p 36.

many hostile voters”³⁶ from the very outset of the registration process in 1832. For every fraudulent and fictitious voter “created” as in St Pancras in 1836,³⁷ probably many more were disfranchised, either through incompetence (such as the overseers of Abingdon who neglected to make out a list of the £10 householders),³⁸ or by manipulation of the process.

Since the 1832 Act failed to provide any meaningful penalty for frivolous objections, it de facto encouraged wholesale retaliation both by the parties and by special-interest groups. In 1834, the Leeds Conservatives successfully struck off 511 Liberal voters, and the Leeds Liberals gained the exclusion of 268 Conservatives by means of objections³⁹ – a total of 779, or 16 per cent of the total electorate of 4,774. The Anti-Corn Law League carried this process forward in the counties by local canvassing and central organisation to the extent that two to three thousand registered electors out of a total of 8,000 in South Cheshire were objected to in 1845.⁴⁰

The system encouraged not merely bona fide objections, but those which were vexatious and frivolous. The procedure required the claimant to appear in person at the revision court; as a result, voters with perfectly valid qualifications might either lose the franchise for non-attendance or, at the very least, were subject to expense and time to defend their claims. Seymour has pointed out how the provision of the 1843 Act which permitted posting of objections actually encouraged vexatious ones, by making the duplicate, signed by the postmaster,

³⁶ Seymour, op.cit., p 134.

³⁷ Salmon, op.cit., p 32.

³⁸ Salmon, op.cit., p 32.

³⁹ Seymour, op.cit., p 135.

⁴⁰ Seymour, op.cit., p 136.

conclusive proof of service.⁴¹ Given the postal delays, and, in particular, shrewd management, thousands of objections were posted in Manchester in 1845 on the last permitted day. As a result, many did not arrive until well after the due date, and some had not even arrived until after the day set for public notification.⁴² Given such late notice, many claimants could not appear to defend their qualification and were struck from the register. Although the 1843 Act allowed the revising barrister to allow costs to the claimant where the objection was unreasonable or vexatious, this was virtually a dead letter, since any ground for objection, however petty or technical, was considered valid enough to avoid costs. Seymour has also noted the use of forgery in Birmingham in 1846, where 400 out of 710 objections were false. Costs were refused by the revising barrister to the successful claimants on the grounds that since the objections were forgeries, they were not legal objections.⁴³ A Bill aimed to remedy some of the worst excesses failed in 1846 and it was not until 1865 that an Act was passed which required that the notices of objection must state the specific grounds of that objection and increased the penalties for frivolous or vexatious objections.⁴⁴ But, as Thomas has pointed out, the position for the lodger enfranchised in 1867 was particularly difficult. Since these claimants did not receive notice of objection (and indeed were unaware of whether they had been included in the register) until the list of objections was publicly displayed, the first time they knew the grounds of the objection was when they reached the court.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 138.

⁴² Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 138.

⁴³ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 141.

⁴⁴ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 160-161.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *op.cit.*, p 83.

There are three further ramifications of the registration system which need to be examined. Firstly, the critical link to the rates – what Salmon has neatly termed “no representation without taxation.”⁴⁶ secondly, the development of party organisation consequent upon both the registration system and the expansion in the number of voters in 1867; and thirdly, the similarities and the differences between the parliamentary franchise outlined above and the municipal franchise following the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835.

Salmon has shown the crucial link between the prompt payment of taxes and voter registration in the boroughs. The requirement that the £10 franchise depended upon prompt payment of all local rates and taxes was seized upon in 1832 by the Tories in Monmouth, buying copies of the poor rate books to object to all Liberal voters who were behind with their payments. This tactic could be, and was, countered by electoral agents paying up the arrears of friendly voters, as at Newark in 1840.⁴⁷ But this practice itself could be challenged since the rates were required to be paid in person. This could be circumvented by a system of loans, such as that employed by the Conservatives at Ipswich in 1835.⁴⁸ Salmon claims that “poor law and parish vestry elections became quickly integrated into broader battles for political control, helping to intensify and stabilise partisan political behaviour at constituency level”.⁴⁹ Not only could the political balance of power be challenged by control of the Poor Law Unions, as at Clitheroe in 1837, but that control could also be (and was) translated into patronage for supporters.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁶ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 185-209.

⁴⁷ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 188-189.

⁴⁸ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 190.

⁴⁹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 193.

⁵⁰ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 193.

patronage was then employed to manipulate the timing and amount and collection of the rate for political advantage.⁵¹

Parish offices became valuable political property and elections were keenly contested by the parties. Indeed Salmon claims that “the nationally – oriented voting behaviour elicited in the election of MPs was quickly reproduced at a local level in the selection of new town councillors. Voters behaved almost identically at both types of election.”⁵² Since Salmon can produce only one example (Lichfield) this is a sweeping claim. It assumes, for example, that the motivation of voters was the same in local and national elections. Moreover it assumes a level of party loyalty which is, at least, open to challenge. At root, the samples are statistically unreliable. Salmon admits that the evidence (Poll Books), particularly for local elections, is sparse.⁵³ Kidderminster may be no more (or no less) typical than Lichfield, but it demonstrates a markedly different pattern. In Kidderminster, the Conservatives won the parliamentary seat in 1832, 1837, 1841 and 1847 – each time with Richard Godson as their candidate; the Liberals were triumphant in 1835. By contrast, Gilbert has noted that in 1835, the first municipal elections in the Borough following the reform of that year, the Conservatives and Liberals initially agreed that there should be no contested elections, but that “the best man should be returned unopposed.”⁵⁴ This idealism did not last and in 1835 the Conservatives won sixteen of the eighteen seats. In 1836 the Liberals campaigned on a slogan of wasted ratepayers’ money (a recurrent theme) and won every seat. The Conservatives were so demoralised that they fielded no candidates in 1837,

⁵¹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 194-195.

⁵² Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 196.

⁵³ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 196.

⁵⁴ Gilbert, *Town and Borough*, p 29.

and did not contest any seats again until 1838, having celebrated Victoria's coronation in sullen isolation.⁵⁵ This hardly fits Salmon's thesis. Likewise, at the end of the century, the Borough happily returned the Conservative Frederick Godson as MP from 1886 to 1904, while equally happily electing Liberal-controlled councils and thus Liberal mayors from 1898 to 1904.⁵⁶ This does not corroborate the consistency of voting patterns which Salmon seeks to claim.

Kidderminster's history may well be colourful, contrary and conflicting or perhaps there may have been a marked dichotomy in behaviour at municipal elections (which mattered, which were dominated by local issues and costs, and which may perhaps have been a fairer reflection of the political mood of the Borough at a point in time despite instances of flagrant corruption) and parliamentary elections (which were a necessary part of the local economy and which were an outlet for revelry, violence and the settling of old scores by voters and the non-voting residuum alike); or, given that the vote, whether parliamentary or municipal, was a financial asset to be brought and sold, there may have been an "auction" at all elections, and the party with the deepest pockets won.

This review of the historiography has, perforce, been diverted from the rates issue, precisely because Salmon himself is diverted. Returning to the theme, he makes valid points about the disfranchisement of those in receipt of poor relief.⁵⁷ But he pays scant attention to a crucial issue in borough franchises – that of the compounding of rates with the landlord. Thomas has pointed out that Clay's Act of 1851, giving the compound householder the right to pay his rates in person and

⁵⁵ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 29.

⁵⁶ Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), pp. 136-137.

⁵⁷ Salmon, op.cit., pp. 200-201.

thus qualify for the franchise, was ineffective. People in general preferred to pay once and would not put themselves out to pay in person, just to obtain the vote, when they had been used to paying the rate as part of their rent.⁵⁸ The system of compounding was even more favourable to the landlord, who could receive a discount of twenty to twenty-five per cent from the borough.⁵⁹ The effect of compounding varied from borough to borough, but in Tower Hamlets it was estimated that 16,000 householders were thereby disfranchised, roughly 50 per cent of the total.⁶⁰ Seymour estimated that of the entire number of £10 householders before 1867, over ten per cent were disfranchised because their landlords paid their rates.⁶¹ In Kidderminster, it was estimated that in 1867, such was the predominance of compounding, the proportion of householders who would be enfranchised under the Bill which allowed “household suffrage” but required personal payment of rates would be less than one in a thousand of the population.⁶² In the event, the 1867 Act cut the Gordian Knot of compounding by abolishing the system altogether and introducing a borough franchise to all householders with a twelve-month residence qualification, together with lodgers who had occupied premises with a value of £10 a year, also for twelve months.

Seymour has claimed that of the 570,000 borough compound householders, 94,000 were at or over the £10 threshold, and 478,000 were under it. As a result the 1867 Act enfranchised nearly half a million new voters.⁶³ In Kidderminster, as a result both of the 1867 Act enfranchisement and the redrawing of the

⁵⁸ Thomas, *op.cit.*, p 85.

⁵⁹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 149.

⁶⁰ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 150.

⁶¹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 155.

⁶² Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 263.

⁶³ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 270.

constituency boundaries to include Comberton and parts of Wolverley (see Appendix 2), the number of voters rose from 588 in 1865 to 2,323 in 1868, an increase of 295 per cent, representing some 16 per cent of the population, compared with 4 per cent, based on the 1861 census. Although compounding was abolished in 1867 it remained popular, with a consequent failure to realise the full franchise envisaged by the 1867 Act. Compounding was not restored until 1869. The Poor-Rate Assessment and Collection Act required borough overseers to enter all rateable premises whether they paid rates or not. As a result Kidderminster's electorate rose to 3,394 by 1874, a further 46 per cent over 1868, and over 470 per cent up on 1865. The 1874 electorate represented 17.4 per cent of Kidderminster's population, or 1 in 5.7.

Salmon has made much of the growth of political parties following the 1832 Reform Act. He is quite right to emphasize the emergence of local party organisations to deal with the registration process.⁶⁴ Overall, borough registrations increased by 10 per cent in 1835,⁶⁵ an impressive result given, as has been noted, that the advantage lay with the objector. In Kidderminster, however, the reduction from 1832 was 1.8 per cent.⁶⁶ It was not until 1837 that the electorate increased, by 14.9 per cent,⁶⁷ when the Conservative Godson's share of the vote rose from 38.6 per cent to 55.8 per cent. This may help to explain the reasons for the substantial swing in Kidderminster's voting patterns in the "Godson years". The results of elections may be shown in the following table:-

⁶⁴ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶⁵ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 29.

⁶⁶ Craig, F.W.S, British Parliamentary Election Results, (MacMillan, 1974), p 165.

⁶⁷ Craig, *op.cit.*, p 165.

Election	Electors	% Change	% Turnout	% Vote Conservatives	% Vote Liberals	Winning Margin - Votes
1832	390	N/A	84.9	52.0	48.0	13
1835	383	(1.8)	83.8	38.6	61.4	73
1837	440	14.9	80.7	55.8	44.2	41
1841	482	9.5	85.5	51.5	48.5	12
1847	548	13.7	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

In 1847 Godson was returned unopposed, the only time between 1832 and 1910 that a general election in Kidderminster was not contested. This is remarkably low compared with national statistics.

The relationship between local party organisation and central electoral management typified by the Carlton and Reform Clubs remains unclear, at least in the decade after 1832. Salmon has shown that there is no real evidence for significant new machinery up to 1835, although party activists such as Bonham for the Conservatives and Parkes for the Liberals (Radicals) were urging co-ordinated action.⁶⁸ Even up to 1841, Salmon argues, interference by the Conservative central organisation in the local constituencies was unusual and unwelcome.⁶⁹ This is in contrast to Gash's claim that Bonham was "the cardinal figure in the extra-parliamentary management of the party."⁷⁰ Likewise Coleman, while admitting the limits of Bonham's role in the counties, stresses his concern with the small boroughs, and emphasises the central encouragement of local supporters, especially in the boroughs, "to keep the registers up to date and to

⁶⁸ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 44-47.

⁶⁹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 47.

⁷⁰ Gash, N, Politics in the Age of Peel: A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830-1850, (Longman, 1953), p 44.

work the revising courts in the party's interests".⁷¹ Gash points out that a Conservative central electioneering fund did exist for the general elections of 1835, 1837, 1841 and 1847, to assist candidates who deserved exceptional support,⁷² but he acknowledges that the main conduct of the electoral process in the provinces was entrusted to local men. There was however, detailed communication back to headquarters.⁷³ Registration was the key activity of local associations, and this was a local process which could only be effectively carried out by local partisans.⁷⁴ Salmon argues that the Conservative Associations, whose manipulation of registration was a key factor in their success in the 1835 elections, owed very little to central election agents,⁷⁵ although the Reform Association for the Liberals was a more co-ordinating body. Ultimately, one suspects that the positions taken by Gash and Salmon are not that far apart.

Of course the central party organisation had a role to play, in encouragement, support and finance, as well as nascent co-ordination; but equally, with a relatively small electorate and the old social and economic forces of control and influence not much weakened, it made sense for the local effort to be conducted locally. As Thomas has commented, the 1832 Act made obvious the need for "organisation", and this organisation took the form of local registration societies and the shadowy registration agent.⁷⁶ This was a combination of local volunteers and paid officials. The former would include, typically, the local landlords and

⁷¹ Coleman, B, Conservatism and the Conservative Party in Nineteenth Century Britain, (Arnold, 1988), pp. 107-108.

⁷² Gash, N, 'The Organisation of the Conservative Party 1832-1846, Part II: The Electoral Organisation'. Parliamentary History, Vol 2, (1983), pp. 138-139.

⁷³ Gash, 'The Organisation of the Conservative Party', p 140.

⁷⁴ Gash, 'The Organisation of the Conservative Party', p 147.

⁷⁵ Salmon, op.cit., p 59.

⁷⁶ Thomas, op.cit., pp. 91-92.

employers, who provided the bulk of the funds, the Anglican or Non-conformist clergy and some operatives. The latter were mainly “friendly” solicitors.

The 1867 Reform Act increased the borough electorate in England and Wales from 514,000 to 1,210,000 – an uplift of 135 per cent. Clearly such an increase demanded changes in party structure and organisation. In addition, from 1867 it would appear that interest and participation in politics grew. This is borne out not only by the general reduction in uncontested seats at general elections (from 383 in 1859 to a low of forty-three in 1885)⁷⁷ but also by what seems to have been high voter turnouts. Certainly this is borne out at Kidderminster where, in the eleven general elections from 1867 to 1910 (and the re-run in 1874 following the election petition), the turnout was over 90 per cent in six, and never fell below 85 per cent.⁷⁸ However, in Kidderminster even before 1867 eight of the nine general elections were contested and only once did the turn-out fall below 80 per cent.

Participation in politics did not need to be arduous – going to meetings, fêtes and jumble sales, cheering for the party at election times, and perhaps a bit of canvassing.⁷⁹ Hanham ascribes this proliferation to three main causes. Firstly, participation in politics was a road to promotion, particularly in the boroughs, where patronage was doled out; secondly, prosperity had increased the numbers of men for whom political participation was a means to a social or economic end;

⁷⁷ Pugh, M, The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939, (Blackwell, 1982), p 14.

⁷⁸ Craig, op.cit., pp. 126, 165.

⁷⁹ Hanham, The Reformed Electoral System, p 23.

and thirdly (through this can hardly have applied to Conservative activists) there was a non-conformist search for civil rights.⁸⁰

Pugh notes three main developments of organised party activity after 1867. Firstly, the professional party agent began to supplant the local solicitor in working the register. Secondly, the local party-sponsored club began to permeate society, with an aim to imbue the virtues of the parliamentary system in the new voters, to educate the activists in the way of politics, and to instil political loyalty by a sort of passive selling technique. The parties took drinking, billiards, football and picnics a stage further by promoting benefit and burial societies. Thirdly, party constituency associations were formed on a ward basis, to co-ordinate the activities of the volunteers in canvassing, transport and propaganda.⁸¹ Garrard's study of Salford confirms that after 1867 the organisation of both parties became more formal and more permanent, albeit still firmly controlled by their wealthy middle-class members.⁸² The activities of the party associations in Salford came to encompass much more than their traditional roles at election time. They became involved in what Garrard terms "social integration", seeking to ensure that new voters were imbued with social, political and economic values which would integrate them into the existing political structure.⁸³

This theme is endorsed by Dunbabin, who contrasts the typical mid-century organisation of an informal committee of the MP/candidate and the big subscribers who hired a friendly solicitor to manipulate the register, an

⁸⁰ Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System*, pp. 22-23.

⁸¹ Pugh, *op.cit.*, p 16.

⁸² Garrard, J, 'Parties, Members and Voters after 1867.' in *Later Victorian Britain 1867-1900*, Gourvish, T. R. and O'Day, A (eds.), (MacMillan, 1988), p 129.

⁸³ Garrard, *op.cit.*, p 149.

organisation ephemeral and candidate – centred, with the development of more permanent and formal structure.⁸⁴ This was heightened further by the formation of the “caucus”, typified by the Birmingham Liberal Association, open to all members, which concentrated not only on detailed campaign management but also on monopolising municipal employment and patronage. By 1877 the Birmingham Association was amalgamated with others to form the National Liberal Association for the same purposes.⁸⁵ Likewise the National Union of Conservative Associations was eventually commandeered by Lord Salisbury and R.W.E. Middleton to create a professional electoral machine supported by the Conservative Working Men’s Clubs and the Primrose League.⁸⁶ The Primrose League, formed to mobilise borough Conservatism, appealed to all classes of society – aristocracy, middle-classes and artisans, who each had their own category of membership. Hanham has rightly commented that the political associations of both parties almost imperceptibly became social organisations as well and that politics came to occupy a central position in community life.⁸⁷ Pugh has pointed out that the Primrose League was a perfect body for the Tory grandees – popular but no threat to the leadership, and operating not just at elections but providing regular social events as well as involving women in their activities.⁸⁸

How much of this development was reflected in Kidderminster? The inhabitants, voters and non-voters alike, had since 1832 regarded nomination and polling days as local festivals to be observed with enthusiasm and celebrated with free beer.

⁸⁴ Dunbabin, J. P. D, ‘Electoral Reforms and their Outcome in the UK’, in Later Victorian Britain 1867-1900, Gourvish, T.R. and O’Day, A (eds.), (MacMillan, 1988), p 115.

⁸⁵ Dunbabin, op.cit., p 116.

⁸⁶ Dunbabin, op.cit., p 117.

⁸⁷ Hanham, H. J, Elections and Party Management, Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone, (Harvester, 1978), p xiv.

⁸⁸ Pugh, op.cit., pp. 49-52.

Carter has pointed out how the Conservatives found willing allies in the carpet weavers who could be persuaded to oppose their Liberal and non-conformist employers.⁸⁹ There is evidence that Conservative organisation was strong in the borough in 1868 (although they lost the seat), achieving eighty-five objections in the Revision Court, against the Liberals' three.⁹⁰ By 1868 a Conservative Association and Conservative Working Men's Association had been formed, but these were controlled locally, and the choice of Albert Grant in 1874 was positively a Kidderminster one, the Carlton Club nominee having been rejected.⁹¹ Deals could also be done. In return for the Conservatives not opposing John Brinton at the 1880 by-election, the Liberals agreed not to contest the seats of three Conservative Councillors in the municipal elections and an increased number of Tory Aldermen on the town council.⁹² The Primrose League was also active. The Liberals formed an association in 1880 based on caucus lines. Prior to that, the Liberals in Kidderminster were controlled absolutely by local employers, who (like the Conservatives) managed in 1868 to ensure that their nominee rather than the preferred choice of the Reform League was selected as candidate. Kidderminster's branch of the League supported Alfred Bristow as Liberal candidate in 1868 and eventually "transferred" his votes to Thomas Lea.⁹³ The activities of the Reform League are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 6.

The previous paragraphs have touched on the relationship between municipal and parliamentary elections. Following the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, borough councils like Kidderminster were subject to elections on an annual basis.

⁸⁹ Carter, S, Carpet Knights and Carpet Baggers, (Private, 1995), p 17.

⁹⁰ Carter, op.cit., p 18.

⁹¹ Carter, op.cit., p 19.

⁹² Carter, op.cit., p 20.

⁹³ Carter, op.cit., pp. 15-23.

Clearly this tended to build party politics into the structure of borough life at both levels.⁹⁴ It was difficult to avoid some sort of political allegiance whether or not a person was a voter. Indeed, Hanham has claimed that municipal and other local elections played a vital part in local politics, as the nursery of political organisation and as a barometer of party strength.⁹⁵ Likewise Finlayson has argued that the 1835 Act had far-reaching political and party implications.⁹⁶

Phillips and Wetherell claim that not only did the 1832 Reform Act transform the nature of elections across England, but that the 1835 Act transformed politics in England's towns.⁹⁷ Based on the single example of Shrewsbury, they claim that the council elections of 1835 "moved England further towards a nationally-oriented, partisan electorate, capable of behaving with remarkable party fervour and loyalty whether asked to do so in the return of MPs or in the election of town councilmen."⁹⁸

They also argue that: "local politics now both mirrored and reinforced the national agenda. Men voted less as members of local communities than as participants in the larger national debate over the nature of English government at large."⁹⁹

Salmon also claims firstly that the type of voting behaviour and response elicited in national elections was clearly reproduced at a local level in the election of town councillors; secondly that registration politics convinced local party organisations to participate in the municipal as well as parliamentary arena; and thirdly,

⁹⁴ Hanham, The Reformed Electoral System, p 14.

⁹⁵ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, p 387.

⁹⁶ Finlayson, G. B. A. M, 'The Politics of Municipal Reform, 1835', English Historical Review, Vol 81 (1966), p 673.

⁹⁷ Phillips, J. A. and Wetherell, C, 'Parliamentary Parties and Municipal Politics: 1835 and the Party System', Parliamentary Review (1994), pp. 48-49.

⁹⁸ Phillips, and Wetherell, op.cit., p 49.

⁹⁹ Phillips and Wetherell, op.cit., p 82.

municipal reform infused local affairs with an increasingly national partisan perspective.¹⁰⁰ These assertions are based on an analysis of voting in one ward out of eight in Norwich (a notoriously corrupt borough) and Canterbury. This is not to decry Salmon's scholarship, merely to observe that the sample is limited and that in Kidderminster it would be difficult to draw the same conclusions. Each borough is clearly different, and Kidderminster may be the sole exception to Salmon's first rule, but arguing from the very limited specific to the general is a dangerous approach.

Salmon has expanded the theme legitimately by pointing out both the differences and similarities between the parliamentary and municipal franchises. The municipal electorate was lower than the parliamentary because the absence of a minimum property qualification was more than outweighed by significant increases in the rate-paying and residency requirements.¹⁰¹ But there was a substantial overlap, and Salmon reasonably claims that municipal elections became an increasingly important annual indicator of partisan support in parliamentary elections.¹⁰² Moreover, he argues that voter partisanship in municipal elections was often extremely high and was continuing and consistent with that in parliamentary elections (again based on Norwich and Canterbury).¹⁰³

Whether or not Salmon's thesis is valid for the decade from the 1832 Act, Hanham doubts whether it is true for the 1860s. "The pettiness of local politics, the parsimoniousness of local councillors, except when they themselves were

¹⁰⁰ Salmon, P, 'Local Politics and Partisanship: The Electoral Impact of Municipal Reform, 1835', *Parliamentary History*, pt.3, Vol 19, (2000), p 375.

¹⁰¹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 219.

¹⁰² Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 223.

¹⁰³ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 225-228.

interested in a contract, and the blatant corruption at so many municipal elections often kept the better class of manufacturers, merchants, and professional men out of the town council.”¹⁰⁴ This somewhat cynical view of municipal politics is tempered by confirmation that the importance of municipal elections was fully recognised by the pioneers of party organisation in the 1870s, Gorst and Chamberlain. Gorst wrote in 1874 to Disraeli that “I was in hopes that the power and patronage which the possession of office has given us might have been.....used to create in the boroughs a permanent Tory faction”.¹⁰⁵ Likewise Joseph Chamberlain and the Birmingham Liberals believed both in fighting local elections on strict party lines and also that the party should control all local institutions by a systematic campaign.¹⁰⁶ The “caucus”, however, did not hold sway everywhere and many towns held “non-political” municipal elections, which were determined just as much by local as national issues. Hanham also claims that although patronage could be applied to appoint aldermen and JPs as a reward for party services, the town clerk (an important borough official) was less likely to be an active politician, albeit he would need to be acceptable to the majority party in a borough.¹⁰⁷

2. CORRUPTION AND VIOLENCE

If the historiography of the election registration process is relatively uncontentious, the same cannot be said for the impact of violence and corruption. The “Whig” theory of history, a gradual but inevitable path to the eventual triumph of a Liberal democracy, that path punctuated by critical milestones such

¹⁰⁴ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, p 387.

¹⁰⁵ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, p 390.

¹⁰⁶ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, p 391.

¹⁰⁷ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, pp. 395-396.

as the 1832 Act, finds little or no modern support. The notion was challenged by Seymour, who argued that although the 1832 Act struck at their power, the sway of the landed and commercial aristocracy remained strong, buttressed by manipulating the registration system and by the application of corrupt influence. Perversely the 1867 Act continued this process since the cost of a parliamentary seat restricted the candidates to plutocrats. Not until the 1883 and 1885 Acts did political education begin to replace political purchase.¹⁰⁸ This argument was taken a step further by Gash who argued cogently that in reality the 1832 Act changed very little – the earlier techniques of venality, corruption, violence and proprietorial influence were just as much in evidence after 1832 as before.¹⁰⁹ Likewise Hanham claimed that between 1865 and 1884 corrupt practices continued in between one-third and one-half of the English boroughs on a scale large enough to be recorded.¹¹⁰ The argument was relentlessly reinforced by O’Leary, who, in pursuit of his argument that the reforms of 1868, 1872 and 1883 were successful, contrasts a golden age which they introduced with a torrent of bribery, boycotting, exclusive dealing, personation, violence and intimidation in the earlier period.¹¹¹

This view remained the new orthodoxy until the 1990s when it was challenged by Phillips and Wetherell who claimed that the 1832 Act was indeed a watershed, because it unleashed a wave of political modernisation and replaced the existing political system with an essentially modern one based on rigid partisanship and

¹⁰⁸ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 519-524.

¹⁰⁹ Gash, N, Politics in the Age of Peel: A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830-1850, (Longman, 1953), p x.

¹¹⁰ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, p 263.

¹¹¹ O’Leary, C, The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections 1868-1911, (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 15-26.

clearly articulated political principle. Voters became consistent partisans.¹¹² Salmon advances the argument that new types of party-based attachments and more permanent forms of party organisation created not only a reformed but also recognisably modern political world after 1832.¹¹³

Both camps unashamedly argue from the specific to the general. To some extent this process is easier for Seymour, Gash and Hanham. The reports of select committees, the election petition judgments, the debates in the House of Commons, and correspondence of both the winners and losers of elections comprise a damning litany of electoral malpractice of every kind. Given this apparent wealth of evidence, it is not difficult to conjure up a vision of all-pervading corruption and violence. But since good news is rarely reported, this argument may tend to imply that all constituencies were corrupt and all electors venal.

Phillips, Wetherell and Salmon have concentrated far more on what electors actually did rather than why and how they said they did it. What source could be more pure than the poll books? Using these sources, they can discern a consistent pattern of party voting in the first decade after the 1832 Act. What is more, they claim that this “modern” approach to elections, party organisation and voter loyalty applied to municipal as well as parliamentary elections. To the very limited extent that Hanham addressed municipal elections, he dismissed them as petty and flagrantly corrupt.¹¹⁴ However, there are two main drawbacks to the

¹¹² Phillips, J. A. and Wetherell, C, ‘The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Political Modernization of England,’ *American Historical Review*, (April, 1995), pp. 411, 412, 435.

¹¹³ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 11.

¹¹⁴ Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, pp. 387-396.

Phillips and Salmon thesis. Firstly, the numbers of poll books which have survived are very few, especially sequentially within a constituency. Secondly, their work stops at around 1840, so that at best it is no more than indicative of succeeding periods.

Ultimately, for Phillips and Salmon to imply that, because most voters in Canterbury between 1819 and 1841 tended overall to support one party, most constituencies were “pure” and that most partisans were not profiteers, is as statistically flawed as for Gash and Hanham to argue that, because Bridgewater was notoriously corrupt (so corrupt that it was disfranchised), most constituencies were corrupt and that most voters were venal. The research into electoral politics in Kidderminster reviews both ends of this spectrum and seeks, in addition, to weigh the respective importance of other factors which could affect voting patterns. For this purpose Kidderminster has a number of significant advantages. It was enfranchised in 1832 and thus had no “baggage”. Eleven of the twelve general elections from 1832 to 1880 were fought there. Throughout the period the boundaries of the borough were broadly the same as the parliamentary constituency. There is, therefore, a continuity not only between municipal and parliamentary elections, but between successive parliamentary elections. Kidderminster was a single-seat borough, and therefore the potentially distorting effects of “plumping”, tactical voting and party “deals” are conspicuously absent. Moreover, poll books for the elections of 1849, 1852, 1859 and 1865 still exist for interpretation and there is detailed testimony of the 1849 and 1874 election petitions.

Before reviewing in detail the relevant historiography, it is necessary to establish the legal definitions of bribery and corruption in elections, and also to explore contemporary attitudes to these offences as they developed over the period.

The Treating Act of 1696 stated that any candidate who gave money, meat, drink or entertainment to an elector in exchange for his vote was to be disqualified and the election declared void.¹¹⁵ The Bribery Act of 1729 required a voter to take an oath at the request of a candidate and levied a fine of £500 and perpetual exclusion from the franchise for any voter guilty of accepting a bribe.¹¹⁶ An Act of 1809 provided that any promise of office or employment would disqualify the candidate and nullify the election.¹¹⁷ In 1829 employees of candidates were disfranchised.¹¹⁸ The Reform Act of 1832 also disfranchised non-residents who had been used to being handsomely paid to travel to vote.¹¹⁹

This legislation was, on the whole, ineffective, due both to the difficulties of proof and the leniency of the penalties.¹²⁰ However, the real issue was public opinion. So long as both candidate and voter regarded bribery, in its widest form, as acceptable and, indeed, as a “right”, legislation was likely to prove ineffective. If candidates, agents and voters sought to cover their tracks, it was merely in order to avoid detection and not out of a sense of having committed any crime.¹²¹ Indeed Seymour argues that the 1832 Act actually increased bribery and corruption by

¹¹⁵ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 168.

¹¹⁶ O’Leary, *op.cit.*, p 11.

¹¹⁷ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 168.

¹¹⁸ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 168.

¹¹⁹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 169.

¹²⁰ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 194.

¹²¹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 195-196.

eliminating the nomination borough and increasing the electorate.¹²² O’Leary echoes the sentiment, by claiming that it was regarded as perfectly normal for a Member of Parliament to show concern for his constituents and to help his friends.¹²³ Indeed, it was (and still is) difficult to determine where hospitality stopped and treating began. Pugh has summed it up succinctly, claiming that elections were naturally expected “to be punctuated by excessive drinking, mob action ranging from exuberance to intimidation, an exchange of cash and a judicious application of the “screw.” However, “influence” covered a multitude of practices and forms, many of which were regarded as perfectly natural and proper.”¹²⁴ This applied particularly, and tangibly, in the counties. Likewise, Hanham argues cogently that each constituency was unique, and that voting patterns are particularly hard to determine. What might appear on the surface to be a corrupt borough, controlled by a patron, could look very different through the eyes of the local partisan press.¹²⁵ All that is certain is that there are no certainties, and that the easy and specious simplicities are in reality infinitely more complicated.

Seymour has bleakly outlined the attack on corruption up to 1854, with a number of failed bills (including proposals for a secret ballot) at last culminating in the 1854 Act.¹²⁶ Previous Acts in 1841, 1842 and 1852 nibbled at the edges of corruption, but the 1854 Act not only defined bribery (as the corrupt inducement to vote or abstain from voting), but also attacked the receiver as well as the giver of bribes and laid down realistic penalties. In addition, a system of election

¹²² Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 196.

¹²³ O’Leary, *op.cit.*, pp. 11-12.

¹²⁴ Pugh, *op.cit.*, p 9.

¹²⁵ Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System*, p 31.

¹²⁶ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 198-233.

accounts and auditors was established. All claims for payment in connection with an election were to be submitted and paid within one month of that election.¹²⁷

Seymour outlines the extent and methods of malpractice in the corrupt boroughs. The evidence is plentiful, taken directly from the election petitions. However, by focusing exclusively on the most venal constituencies, there is a real risk that the reader is misled into believing that all constituencies were corrupt, and that constant repetition of a relatively small number of persistent and flagrant offenders overstates Seymour's case. Having said that, Seymour does make some telling claims, which strike a chord in relation to the conduct of elections in Kidderminster. The choice of a candidate was "almost entirely determined by his willingness and ability to spend money."¹²⁸ In addition it was necessary for a candidate to have an election agent to control those payments and determine their timing. In Norwich (and frequently in Kidderminster) the Conservatives concentrated their efforts on the last few hours of the poll, turning potential defeat into victory. Even though direct bribery may have been restricted, the practice of paying voters handsomely to perform nominal services such as canvassing was more widespread, as was generous reimbursement of travelling expenses. Treating remained a common and successful tactic while, as noted, intimidation in terms of blocking, boycotting, notices to quit and threatened sackings was unaffected by the Act. Ultimately, while electors regarded payment for voting as a right and while candidates recognised that a seat had to be purchased, rampant demand and inexhaustible supply would mean that attempts to purify the electoral system would be frustrated. The failure of the system of election auditors,

¹²⁷ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 229-231.

¹²⁸ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 390.

difficulties over the definition of agency and the partiality of the House of Commons committee system all contributed to the failure of the 1854 Act.¹²⁹

Seymour may have overstated the extent of corruption in the 1850s, but his arguments are lucid and well constructed. The same cannot be said of Moore, whose focus on the counties leads him to argue that England was a deferential society. If anything, he appears to support the Seymour claim that both electors and candidates connived at evading anti-corruption legislation because politics had always involved the exchange of money or favours, either on an individual or group basis.¹³⁰ He also argues that voters were encouraged, often forcibly, to be loyal to their group and were often recompensed for their loyalty.¹³¹ The 1854 Act may not have been robust enough to prevent corruption, particularly after the extended franchise of 1867, but it was an important stepping-stone on the road towards further and future legislation. O'Leary damns the 1854 Act with faint praise, noting that the 1860 Select Committee's report on the 1854 Act could only say that corrupt practices had not increased.¹³² Indeed in 1863 the system of auditors was repealed.

Seymour has commented that in some boroughs the traditions of absolute corruption were so entrenched that the only remedy in 1867 was disfranchisement – and the 1867 Act certainly expunged four of the hard-line recidivists, Lancaster,

¹²⁹ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 390-417.

¹³⁰ Moore, D. C, *The Politics of Deference. A Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century English Political System*, (Harvester, 1976), pp. 416-447.

¹³¹ Moore, D. C, 'Political Morality in Mid-Nineteenth Century England: Concepts, Norms, Violations'. *Victorian Studies*, Vol 13, (1969/70), p 26.

¹³² O'Leary, *op.cit.*, p 24.

Totnes, Yarmouth and Reigate. But “there remained many other incurables.”¹³³ Since the House of Commons committee system had proved at best ambivalent, the jurisdiction of election petitions was transferred in 1868 to the courts of the Queen’s Bench division. In addition, there was an attack on the withdrawal of petitions, corrupt compromises and the stoppage of investigations.¹³⁴ Equally importantly, the trial was to be held in the constituency itself, as it was in Kidderminster in 1874.

Despite numerous attempts, and the agitation of the Chartists and the Ballot Society, the movement for a secret ballot foundered until 1872 not only because it was deemed “un-English” – the vote was a responsibility and a privilege which could only be exercised in public – but also because it was too “democratic.”¹³⁵ In addition, and perversely, it was argued that a secret ballot would actually increase bribery since voters could safely accept money from both sides, safe in the knowledge that their actual voting preference could not be identified. However, following the exposure of widespread corruption during the 1868 election, where there were 51 election petitions (18 per cent or nearly one in five of all contested seats), of which twenty-two were successful, the Liberals began to believe, albeit without great enthusiasm, that in order to reduce intimidation and disorder, and to bring down the cost of elections, the Ballot Act of 1872 needed to be passed. Generally, the Ballot Act succeeded in reducing violence and intimidation, although there was the usual plethora of severe riots at Willenhall, Stourbridge, Wolverhampton and several other constituencies.¹³⁶ The Ballot Act

¹³³ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 418.

¹³⁴ Seymour, *op.cit.*, p 423.

¹³⁵ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 213-215.

¹³⁶ O’Leary, *op.cit.*, pp. 86-89.

was extended to municipal elections and bolstered by the Corrupt Practices (Municipal Elections) Act of 1872. In both cases by striking at the roots of electoral corruption, these measures had an immediate effect.¹³⁷ However, O’Leary, Seymour and Hanham all agree that in many traditionally corrupt boroughs, direct and particularly indirect bribery, and treating of a general nature continued on happily regardless of the Act.¹³⁸ Indeed the Kidderminster election petition of 1874 concentrated on Albert Grant’s wholesale treating. Corruption only declined because it became too expensive in generally enlarged borough constituencies.

A borough electorate, and indeed non-voters, saw it as the MP’s duty to help the borough, particularly as an employer of labour, and to put his hand in his pockets for borough schemes, charities and sporting events. Many MPs were a major source of alms during bad weather or trade downturns and footed the bill for tea parties and fish suppers.¹³⁹ Kidderminster saw both the acceptable and unacceptable face of this phenomenon. Albert Grant, MP for Kidderminster in 1865 and 1874, was unseated at the latter election for treating. It was claimed that Grant’s agents had treated twelve people at The Lion, twelve at The Globe, twelve at The Crown and Anchor and various others at 30 other public houses. In addition, after he had won, he had intended to pay for 5,000 dinners for his supporters and the same number of teas for their ladies.¹⁴⁰ And yet, and this may speak volumes for the politics of Kidderminster, Grant was again selected as the Conservative candidate in the 1880 election, against, ironically, John Brinton.

¹³⁷ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, pp. 274-275.

¹³⁸ Seymour, op.cit., pp. 433-441. Hanham, Elections and Party Management, pp. 266-267. O’Leary, op.cit., p 155.

¹³⁹ Pugh, op.cit., pp. 11-12.

¹⁴⁰ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 45.

These two epitomise the carpet bagger and the carpet baron. By 1877 Brinton was the town's largest employer, with 1,300 people in Kidderminster and Leeds. Typical of his paternalistic type, Brinton was a Liberal and, until later life, a non-conformist. He was an autocratic proprietor who browbeat his family, employees and the Trade Unions in liberal doses. But he was a major benefactor to the town, giving generously towards the School of Art, the Infirmary and the School of Science. In addition, and, significantly after he had ceased to be the MP for the borough, he gave 24 acres of land, laid out with a lake, lawns and paths, to the town. After his conversion to Anglicanism he gave generously to St Mary's church to the tune of some £10,000.¹⁴¹

There is no doubt that Phillips, Wetherell and Salmon have done a service in accessing the poll books and presenting a counter-balance to the orthodoxy of Seymour, Gash, Hanham and O'Leary. But their claims that: "party voting became not just the norm but the nearly unanimous choice after 1832....[and]... once a voter did cast his lot with a party....he remained loyal to that party permanently;"¹⁴² and that: "electoral behaviour....was substantially more partisan and far more likely to be sustained at subsequent polls"¹⁴³ – suffer from three fundamental weaknesses. Firstly, the surviving evidence is limited and sketchy. Secondly, as Gash and Hanham might have argued, consistency of voting patterns may merely indicate the same consistency of at best "influence" and at worst good old-fashioned bribery and corruption at both parliamentary and municipal levels. Thirdly, their analyses cease at around 1840. Conversely, Seymour can devote

¹⁴¹ Gilbert, *Town and Borough*, pp. 45-48.

¹⁴² Phillips, J. A. and Wetherell, C, 'The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Rise of Partisanship', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol 63, (1991), p 646.

¹⁴³ Salmon, *op.cit.*, p 248.

four chapters to corruption with a wealth of examples;¹⁴⁴ Gash occupies nearly one hundred pages on the price of politics, violence, corruption, influence and control, each relentless claim of electoral bribery, corruption and mob violence supported by detailed evidence, such as the Wolverhampton riot of 1835 which had much in common with the orchestrated violence against Robert Lowe in Kidderminster in 1857.¹⁴⁵ Hanham's chapters on corruption post-1867 are damning and a core part of his thesis,¹⁴⁶ and it is O'Leary's basic claim that only the 1883 Act by and large swept away traditions which were centuries old and had been regarded by many as "well nigh ineradicable".¹⁴⁷ It is here that local studies become so important.

Howe has demonstrated clearly that in Cheltenham and Gloucester corrupt and illegal practices continued until at least 1910, treating being a normal feature of both municipal and parliamentary elections. In Gloucester direct bribery flourished, and was not regarded as a "real" offence. Critically Howe points out that a bribed voter might have voted for the briber anyway, and, given a secret ballot, any apostasy was safe from detection. He also suggests that it is hard to differentiate between corruption and legitimate "nursing" of a constituency.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, it is probably legitimate to raise the issue of whether the promise of a penny off income tax is any less treating on a national scale than giving a free pint (or several) of beer was in a local constituency. After all, the intention – to

¹⁴⁴ Seymour, *op.cit.*, pp. 165-197, 198-233, 384-417, 418-455.

¹⁴⁵ Gash, *op.cit.*, pp. 105-202.

¹⁴⁶ Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, pp. 249-283.

¹⁴⁷ O'Leary, *op.cit.*, p 233.

¹⁴⁸ Howe, J. R, 'Corruption in British Elections in the Early Twentieth Century: Some Examples from Gloucestershire', *Midland History*, Vol 5, (1979-1980), pp. 74-75.

buy votes – is identical. The “crime” is the same; the only difference is the scale, and the latter is both personal and tangible.

Jaggard, has, exceptionally, combined the themes of partisanship and corruption in his study of Barnstaple and various other small boroughs. His review is important both because it actually compares and examines the views of Phillips and Gash, and because, as Jaggard points out, small boroughs were responsible for between one-quarter and one-third of the total membership of the House of Commons.¹⁴⁹ Jaggard begins his analysis with Barnstaple, a notoriously corrupt parliamentary borough. However between fifty and sixty per cent of the electorate consistently voted for one party. He complains that both Gash and Hanham dismiss small boroughs as predominantly venal and use the evidence of election petitions to argue that although the 1832 Act may have dealt with the most blatant anomalies of the unreformed system, in reality very little changed and reports of the death of the old system were very much exaggerated.¹⁵⁰

Jaggard admits that Phillips’ conclusions are based on isolated and geographically haphazard data, and (as stated) limited in time and therefore an unreliable basis on which to build a general argument about political behaviour in small towns.¹⁵¹ However, he argues that “unlike the pre-reform era, after 1832 the majority of small towns were “open” and enjoyed a surprisingly vigorous political life,”¹⁵² and seeks to demonstrate this hypothesis by analysing 26 boroughs with an electorate under 1,000 in 1832. While he includes Bewdley (Kidderminster’s

¹⁴⁹ Jaggard, E, ‘Small Town Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *History*, Vol 89, (2004), p 25.

¹⁵⁰ Jaggard, *op.cit.*, pp. 4,5, 9,10.

¹⁵¹ Jaggard, *op.cit.*, p 6.

¹⁵² Jaggard, *op.cit.*, p 11.

neighbour, and damned (quite fairly) by Hanham as hopelessly venal),¹⁵³ he regrettably omits Kidderminster itself, although it would have been a classic example. Jaggard's core thesis is debatable. First, he argues de facto that "open" politics and a "vigorous political life" underpin each other. This is not necessarily the case. It was perfectly possible to have active political debate in a corrupt borough. A voter might have wished to vote Conservative, but if that party's candidate gave him ten shillings to do so, and he accepted it, did that nullify the bribery? If there were 200 votes in a constituency, of whom 160 do not take bribes and vote 80 Conservative and 80 Liberal; and the Conservatives bribe 40 electors, thereby winning the seat, was this somehow not a corrupt borough? Secondly, to argue that sixteen of the 25 boroughs were contested at least once in 1868, 1874 and 1880 (which appears to mean that 9 (or 36 per cent) were not contested at all hardly merits a claim that they "displayed far greater political life than hitherto."¹⁵⁴ If that is the criterion, then Kidderminster, which contested eleven of the twelve general elections between 1832 and 1880 must have been a hotbed of political life and therefore "open". However, six election petitions and habitual corruption and violence do not seem to be the hallmarks of a "pure" electorate. Two contemporary songs serve to illustrate the paradox, both concerning Richard Godson, Conservative MP for Kidderminster from 1832 to 1835, and 1837 to 1849. The extracts relate to the 1841 election:

¹⁵³ Hanham, Elections and Party Management, pp. 66-67.

¹⁵⁴ Jaggard, op.cit., p 15.

“The Tories true turn out the crew
of Whiggish villainy”.

“If you justice wish ’tween poor and rich,
let Godson be your choice”.¹⁵⁵

This appears to be good evidence of a rigorous political debate. It is in stark contrast with somewhat different claims, also from the 1841 election.

“Nix my Tory pals bribe away”
“But I [Godson] on the next election day [1837]
Seven thousand pounds in bribes did pay”.¹⁵⁶

It may be that Kidderminster was one of the four newly enfranchised single-seat boroughs in which Jaggard detects a suggestion of corruption. Of the 26 constituencies in his sample Jaggard claims thirteen almost always elected Liberals and two were staunchly Conservative.¹⁵⁷ From 1832 until 1880 (inclusive) Kidderminster at general elections voted six times for Conservatives, five times Liberal and on one occasion returned a Conservative unopposed. This is hardly compelling evidence for fixed voter partisanship. Nor is Jaggard’s assertion that 50 per cent of voters demonstrated ongoing political loyalty wholly convincing. Presumably 50 per cent did not either because the issues had changed or they were “persuaded” financially to do so. Regarding Barnstaple, Jaggard admits that even as late as the 1850s and 1860s, there were 180 venal freemen (26

¹⁵⁵ Smith, L.D, The Carpet Weaver’s Lament: Songs and Ballads of Kidderminster in the Industrial Revolution, (Tomkinson, 1979), pp. 95-96.

¹⁵⁶ Smith, L.D, op.cit., pp. 99-100.

¹⁵⁷ Jaggard, op.cit., p 28.

per cent of the total electorate), whose activities led to persistent petitions and unseatings.¹⁵⁸

He is correct to say that not all Barnstaple voters were corrupt – but by his own arithmetic well over 50 per cent were corrupt. It may be that Barnstaple like Bewdley, Kidderminster and Worcester and the sixty boroughs (excluding counties) identified by Hanham, as having a noticeable corrupt element¹⁵⁹ were the exception rather than the rule, but Jaggard's argument begins to founder. Nevertheless, he is right to stress the diversity of the small boroughs, the importance of the registration process and their importance to the electoral system.¹⁶⁰

In his study of the North East from 1832 to 1870 Nossiter, who generally supports Gash's thesis, has brought together the various interlocking strands of political behaviour – industrialisation; the collision of Anglicanism and dissent; the economic slavery of the poor; violence; localism in substance and character. As Nossiter points out parliament's time from the 1840s to 1860s was occupied far more with local and private Acts than with high matters of state. Election results depended on local interests, local candidates and local feelings.¹⁶¹

Nossiter identifies three concepts of the voting process: an occasional facet of a wider social life; a financial transaction; and an independent part of the life of an

¹⁵⁸ Jaggard, *op.cit.*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁵⁹ Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, p 263.

¹⁶⁰ Jaggard, *op.cit.*, pp. 25-29.

¹⁶¹ Nossiter, T. J, *Influence, Opinion and Political Ideas in Reformed England. Case Studies from the North-East 1832-1874*, (Harvester, 1975), pp. 1-2.

elector.¹⁶² There may be further sub-divisions but this analysis is a sound starting point for evaluation. He draws (albeit a fine) distinction between bribery and influence, market politics and conscience politics. Neatly he describes the “floating voter” as the “quoting voter.”¹⁶³ Votes were a commodity, to be bought and sold like any other, although equally common were politically motivated employment, custom and services.

The role of violence in parliamentary elections has recently been studied by Wasserman and Jaggard. This is an important and valuable analysis, not least because they attempt to stratify electoral violence into discernible categories. Riot is defined as a serious and sustained outbreak of collective violence which resulted in physical damage to people or property. Riots could well result in the reading of the Riot Act and the forcible restoration of order by the army or police. A “disturbance” is a less serious breach of the peace, involving outbursts of crowd violence rather than the sustained quality of a riot. Although a disturbance could evoke some measure of official response, it was less severe than a riot. Wasserman and Jaggard classify an “incident” as a noisy crowd demonstration which disrupts an election but is short-lived, involved little violence and was met with limited official action.¹⁶⁴

Although clearly there will be some subjectivity around the margins of each classification, the three categories appear to be a reasonable basis for analysis and the methodology. The study of contemporary newspapers (34 provincial and The

¹⁶² Nossiter, *op.cit.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶³ Nossiter, *op.cit.*, p 5.

¹⁶⁴ Wasserman, J. E. and Jaggard, E, ‘Electoral Violence in Mid Nineteenth-Century England and Wales’, Historical Research, Vol 80, (2007), pp. 127-128.

Times), Home Office correspondence and election petitions,¹⁶⁵ is sound in principle.

Wasserman and Jaggard have identified 191 cases of violence in the six general elections from 1857 to 1886, of which 132 took place in boroughs. 53 per cent of all episodes took place on polling day, and there were sixty-three riots, seventy-seven disturbances and fifty-one incidents. The 1850s were a period of low numbers of contested elections (47 per cent in 1857 and 43 per cent in 1859) but even so 8.9 per cent of contested elections experienced violence in 1857 and 8.1 per cent in 1859. In 1868 the incidence rose to 26.4 per cent.¹⁶⁶ Virtually all the disorder occurred in the boroughs and showed an escalating trend as the election progressed, with 64 per cent taking place on polling day or the declaration.

Their analysis leads Wasserman and Jaggard to argue that violence was more likely to occur in larger constituencies; five of the twelve boroughs which experienced violence in 1857 had over 3,000 voters. They also draw the obvious conclusion that violence was more prevalent at contested elections. They reject Richter's argument that election riots were a routine part of small-town mid-Victorian life, and that they were "spontaneous outbreaks of sheer ebullience" unrelated to the campaign and polling and resulting from a simple love of disorder.¹⁶⁷ Hoppen, on the other hand, proposes that disorder in English elections was insignificant and more often merely a general letting off of steam. Crowds only became violent when they were not bribed, or indeed were bribed to

¹⁶⁵ Wasserman and Jaggard, *op.cit.*, p 128.

¹⁶⁶ Wasserman and Jaggard, *op.cit.*, pp. 129-130.

¹⁶⁷ Richter, D. C, 'Public Order and Popular Disturbances in Great Britain, 1865-1914', *Unpublished PhD Thesis*, (1965), pp. 170-72.

be violent.¹⁶⁸ Wasserman and Jaggard claim that this theory of mindless, motiveless violence cannot explain the premeditation and organisation prevalent in many electoral riots. Instead they argue for a combination of political issues dividing communities by race and religion; of contested elections raising the passions of partisans; of poor policing and electoral scrutiny which enabled the rich and unscrupulous to wield influence. Ambition and opportunity bred corruption, and corruption bred violence.¹⁶⁹ This argument appears to be sound in methodology and persuasive in analysis. But is it validated by the experience of Kidderminster? The borough is cited twice as the scene of electoral riot – in 1857 and 1865. As the research will show, the violence in the 1857 elections was extreme. Wasserman and Jaggard claim that the disorder was “less the product of habitual patterns of violence and more the outcome of specific local tensions.”¹⁷⁰ It is axiomatic that the riot was the result of local issues, but the dismissal of a prior record of disturbance is spurious. The army was called in by the Magistrates in Kidderminster to maintain order in the general elections of 1832, 1835 and 1837. There were regular brawls and deaths, quite apart from other electoral malpractice in 1832, 1835, 1841 and 1849. This illustrates the potential pitfall of analysing a particular period of time without regard for the previous history of a constituency.

Although, as the research shows, there is substantive evidence of electoral malpractice on a large scale in the 1865 election, the inclusion of Kidderminster as a major centre of riot in that poll is at best debatable. It is based, presumably, on a

¹⁶⁸ Hoppen, K.T, ‘Grammars of Electoral Violence in 19th Century England and Ireland’, English Historical Review, Vol cix, (1994), pp. 607-610.

¹⁶⁹ Wasserman and Jaggard, op.cit., p 155.

¹⁷⁰ Wasserman and Jaggard, op.cit., p 154.

report in The Times which alleged that “there was the usual great excitement” and that “the mob became boisterous (as usual) and smashed the telegraph wires.”¹⁷¹ This is contradicted both by the report of the Brierley Hill Advertiser, a notable Liberal mouthpiece, which, while admitting that both the borough and county police were present to maintain order, agreed that “though the excitement was great, there was no attempt to disturb the peace”,¹⁷² and by a letter to The Times from H. T. Woodward, albeit a leading supporter of Grant, which claimed that not only was the telegraph system still working but there was no “broken head or damaged nose throughout this borough.”¹⁷³

Wasserman and Jaggard’s claim that electoral violence was more widespread and serious than generally believed does not sit easily with Jaggard’s earlier argument that small towns were more inclined to partisanship than previously thought and that they revealed a surprising degree of political loyalty, with influence less obvious than principle.¹⁷⁴ The validity of this analysis in relation to Kidderminster is discussed as part of this research.

The revisionist assault on the easy certainties of Seymour, Gash and Hanham is a valuable contribution to the historiography of Victorian politics. But, as noted, the research has flaws which weigh against wholehearted acceptance of the new orthodoxy. It is probably true that, faced with an apparently overwhelming mass of evidence to support the continuation of bribery, corruption, intimidation and violence, Gash and Hanham overstated the case and implied, through bleak and

¹⁷¹ The Times 13 June 1865.

¹⁷² Brierley Hill Advertiser 15 July 1865.

¹⁷³ The Times 15 June 1865.

¹⁷⁴ Jaggard, op.cit., pp. 3-29.

constant repetition, that most electors in most boroughs were corrupt. To be fair to Gash, however, he does point out that most boroughs were corrupt in the sense that illegal inducements were habitually offered to voters and accepted by them. But few were corrupt in the sense that the collective decision of the electorate was based on a simple cash transaction. It was unnecessary for all or even the majority of the voters to be venal. It was enough if bribery could tip the balance of the result.¹⁷⁵ This does not seem to be an unreasonable thesis given the evidence.

The revisionists, including Jaggard, have pointed out the consistency of voting patterns and the rise of partisanship after the 1832 Act and this, one suspects is the real basis of their assault on Gash – not bribery per se, but his claim that the 1832 Act changed nothing. The question, as usual, is a matter of degree. Both sides overstate their case in order to make their point. And, critically, the sample size is crucial. Local studies are an important contribution to the debate, but since each community is unique, it is dangerous to draw broad conclusions from specific examples. What does seem apparent, at least in relation to Kidderminster is that a vigorous political divide did not preclude the illegal bribery and violence of the Victorian electoral system. It is not credible that Godson and Grant would have been so liberal with their largess if they did not expect a tangible return on their investment. The size of their target audience may be a matter for debate, but their methods are not, nor their success.

¹⁷⁵ Gash, op.cit., pp. 154-155.

3. INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The relationship between employer and employee in the borough electoral process is clearly of crucial importance. Like Kidderminster the constituency of Merthyr Tydfil was created by the 1832 Act. Merthyr was essentially “Guest-town”, overwhelmed by the totally dominant local employer, Josiah John Guest, owner of the massive iron works, who was returned (rather than elected) as MP for the borough from 1832 to 1852, only once being opposed (1837). Guest faced out industrial unrest, particularly in 1831 when the army brutally restored order, and in 1842 when Guest and the other iron masters bleakly weeded out Chartist employees.¹⁷⁶ In the 1840s Guest employed 7,000 people in Merthyr, with twice that number directly dependent on the ironworks. His power was such that in 1851, when he was in poor health and had moved to Dorset, 700 electors (representing virtually all of those who would have voted) wrote to Guest begging him not to trouble himself with the canvass or even the hustings, and guaranteeing him a safe and untroubled return. As a result, five months before his death, Guest was elected for Merthyr for the sixth time, in absentia and unopposed.

As Gash notes, this is a signal example of industrial feudalism.¹⁷⁷ He argues that where in an economic relationship authority was accompanied by dependence, political influence was always liable to be exercised.¹⁷⁸ Thus manufacturers would influence contractors, employers their employees, customers their shops and breweries their tied-houses. So from 1832 to 1852 Tiverton dutifully returned John Heathcoat, the owner of a large local lace-making factory. At Merthyr after

¹⁷⁶ Jones, E, A History of GKN Volume One: Innovation and Enterprise 1759-1918, (MacMillan, 1987), pp. 87-89.

¹⁷⁷ Gash, op.cit., pp. 199-200.

¹⁷⁸ Gash, op.cit., p 175.

Guest's death, the family's preferred candidate "inherited" the seat, but in 1868 the cosy arrangement was upset by another ironmaster, Richard Fothergill, who employed directly 4,000 people, with another 2,000 dependent on him. His wage bill was £1,200 a week, without which the local economy would collapse, a fact not lost on his supporters and hence the electorate. Political rejection could have meant economic suicide and Fothergill was duly elected as the second member.¹⁷⁹

The political implications of one overwhelming local employer are obvious. The cotton towns of Lancashire offer a different perspective, particularly after Chartism. Here in the 1860s and beyond the cotton trade predominated, but there were a number of rival manufacturers, both Conservative and Liberal. Joyce claims that the real area of political effect was that of the factory neighbourhood. The most pressing and political reality was work and the life that grew up about it. Factory masters were also prominent socially and politically outside work and there was a dependency of the employed to the employer.¹⁸⁰ Joyce argues that the local society was stable and paternalistic, with generally good labour relations.

The skilled workers often had as much in common with their employers as with the unskilled labourers. As a result, it came as little surprise to Joyce that there was a marked correlation between voting patterns in particular wards, especially in Blackburn and Bury. Put simply, the voters who were employees of a particular mill-owner within a particular ward tended to vote according to his political persuasion. The employees would tend to live in the ward where they voted. Joyce also notes that pubs and beerhouses tended to vote Tory, while

¹⁷⁹ Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, pp. 78, 79, 173-175.

¹⁸⁰ Joyce, P, 'The Factory Politics of Lancashire in the Later Nineteenth Century', *Historical Journal* Vol 18, (1975), pp. 526-527.

artisans and shopkeepers were mainly Liberal.¹⁸¹ He accepts that coercion may have taken place, but insists that the real reason for this phenomenon was influence. He does, however, accept that there is a very thin line between legitimate influence and unlawful coercion. In Blackburn's Tory mills, overseers were nominated for reasons of economic subservience or political loyalty. Joyce's defence that sackings for political reasons might well be orchestrated by the employees themselves hardly makes them a less coercive action.¹⁸² On a more positive note, both Joyce and Garrard (for Salford) record the extension of political life, driven by local magnates, into friendly societies, political clubs (complete with a billiard table), concerts, outings, sports, marching bands, burial clubs, Sunday schools, temperance halls (Liberals) and drinking clubs (Conservatives).¹⁸³ Joyce ascribes the continuation of this trend to employers living locally, but admits that the provision of homes by employers was at least as much for intimidation as for reward. In addition, employer influence was supported by patronage in the local town, including churches, chapels and schools. Within the Liberal interest, chapel-going would lead to social advancement and political activism. Likewise Anglicans would not employ non-conformists and Conservatives in Blackburn appealed seductively to the working man's right to "beer, baccy and billiards."¹⁸⁴

Whether Joyce's conclusions on employer paternalism are exportable out of the Lancashire mills towns is debatable. Likewise, Foster's overtly Marxist claim that, at least in Oldham, "the increased electorate and the development of mass

¹⁸¹ Joyce, *op.cit.*, pp. 530-538.

¹⁸² Joyce, *op.cit.*, pp. 541-543.

¹⁸³ Joyce, *op.cit.*, pp. 543-549. Garrard, *op.cit.*, pp. 127-150.

¹⁸⁴ Joyce, *op.cit.*, pp. 545-553.

parties were obviously part of a process whereby capitalist authority was re-imposed and the working class vanguard pushed back into isolation” is not wholly convincing.¹⁸⁵

Beaven’s detailed study of the Coventry ribbon trade shows how corruption eroded the paternalism and protection in the 1830s. This trade resembled the Kidderminster carpet industry in its proliferation of small units of production. Conflict between masters and weavers rose as established customs and practices were broken. Violence ensued and political activity grew.¹⁸⁶

Pugh has commented that the pattern of control in industrial borough constituencies echoed that of the counties. Factory owners would give their men a hearty breakfast and then march them off to vote (for the approved candidate) particularly where, as in the case of Norwich with Colman, there was one predominant local employer. To this extent, factory employees were the equivalent of the squire’s retainers in the shires. But Pugh warns against generalisations. The influence of employers depended upon a limited range of employment, upon owners still living near their workers and upon medium-sized towns. Where these circumstances did not apply, political debate developed particularly as paternalism was eroded by physical distance as employers moved out to more salubrious neighbourhoods. Employers had to recognise loyalties beyond the personal. By the 1880s, when working men, newly enfranchised in 1867, were more conscious of their power, the onus was on the factory owner with

¹⁸⁵ Foster, J, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution, (Methuen, 1974), p 251.

¹⁸⁶ Beaven, B, ‘Custom, Culture and Conflict. A Study of the Coventry Ribbon Trade in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century’, Midland History, Vol 15, (1990), pp. 83-99.

political ambitions both to be seen as a good employer and to find a constituency which was politically sympathetic.¹⁸⁷

Kidderminster was essentially a single-product town. Given this predominance of a single trade, it is not unreasonable to expect that at least half of Kidderminster's inhabitants depended directly or indirectly on the manufacture of carpets. However, carpets were a luxury and cyclical product. As a result, Kidderminster's position as the foremost manufacturer of carpets in Britain left it vulnerable to trade cycles and tariffs. Thus between 1831 and 1861 the population actually fell by 24 per cent, and between 1861 and 1891 increased by 61 per cent, both major fluctuations essentially reflecting the state of the carpet industry and, in the latter case, improvements in public health and thus mortality rates. Furthermore, it is Smith's contention that in many respects the town and its industry was distinctive, with a unique community culture.

Indeed it was a sort of industrial ghetto with not much in common with the immediate locality (which was predominantly agricultural), with other textile workers (who were far away), or with the heavy industry in the Black Country (which seems to have been ignored). The inhabitants regarded themselves as distinct and distinctive, with their own dialect and as skilled craftsmen.¹⁸⁸ The Borough was influenced by Chartism and later the Reform League and by the coming of the railway in 1852, but it remained an introverted community.

¹⁸⁷ Pugh, op.cit., pp. 12-13.

¹⁸⁸ Smith, op.cit., pp. 2-3.

The 1850s saw Kidderminster's industrial revolution from a cottage industry to a power driven factory environment. Kidderminster's carpet manufacturers were too small (and too small-minded) to invest in the steam-driven power looms which had been introduced into Halifax. The result was massive social upheaval and distress. However, when one might expect industrial relations to be at their worst, Gash could describe Kidderminster as a borough controlled by a patron, Lord Ward.¹⁸⁹ Certainly from 1852 to 1865 Kidderminster's MPs were all Liberals. The research seeks to establish the reasons for this change and reviews the Liberal revival in the 1850s and early 1860s against a background of economic distress and the exacerbation of already bad labour relations.

4. RELIGION

The inter-relationship between politics and industrial relations and religion has already been noted. Salmon has claimed that tensions between the Church of England and the Dissenters were easily exacerbated by the registration process after 1832. This was particularly the case where the church and poor rates were combined, which effectively meant that support for the Church of England was a pre-requisite for borough enfranchisement. The same controversy arose over the entitlement to vote of trustees of dissenting chapels.¹⁹⁰ Anglican ministers were active in supporting Conservative societies, and the local Conservative societies tended to be more compliant to local leaders than the Liberal equivalents where the fragmented nature of non-conformism could cause disunity. Salmon also claims that these Conservative associations tended to cultivate sections of the working class which had not previously been politically active.

¹⁸⁹ Gash, op.cit., p 438.

¹⁹⁰ Salmon, op.cit., pp. 32-34.

Anglican clergy also supported the registration process for the Conservatives. Socially respectable and with administrative ability and ideological motivation, these clergy had the time to organise the registration system. They could also count on the help of the parish clerks, whose appointment they controlled. By contrast, the dissenting chapels were probably less well placed to give similar support to the Liberals. The clergy could also canvas votes straight from the pulpit. At Ipswich in 1841, for example, an Anglican priest declared that to vote Liberal was a vote against God.¹⁹¹ Both sides could also rely on the spiritual or moral authority of priests to release a voter from any previous pledge of support.¹⁹² Tension between the faiths was, as already noted, fuelled by church rates which contributed twelve per cent to the Church of England's revenues.¹⁹³ The non-conformists felt a particular grievance, and their militant campaigns intensified Anglican fears that abolition was a step on the road to disestablishment. Tory appeals to the "Church in danger" exacerbated religious divisions in the 1830s. Certainly Richard Godson was a stout supporter of Anglicanism and had hot debates with Henry Brinton, a leading local carpet manufacturer and dissenter.

The link between politics and religion persisted during the second half of the nineteenth century. Non-conformity was a major prop to the Liberals with specific grievances and pressure groups for extension of the franchise, temperance, non-denominational state education, church rates, denial of burial rights in churchyards and exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge universities.

¹⁹¹ Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 68-72.

¹⁹² Salmon, *op.cit.*, pp. 99-101.

¹⁹³ Hilton, *op.cit.*, p 532.

These pressure groups formed the fabric of local Liberalism. Non-conformity turned many Victorians into active politicians.¹⁹⁴

Pugh claims that Forster's Education Act of 1870 probably cemented party and religious loyalties in the long run. For non-conformists religious belief was central to political affiliation and wherever the "free" churches were dominant, Liberalism was strong. Having said that, most Liberal MPs (including Gladstone) were Anglicans. But Gladstone steadily removed non-conformist grievances by eliminating church rates (1868), disestablishing the Church of Ireland (1869) and passing the University Tests Act (1871) and the Church Burials Act (1880). The next logical step was the disestablishment of the Church of England. But for many dissenters this was a step too far. Their most immediate grievances had been resolved, and the most socially advantaged, such as the Wesleyans, could sympathise with the Conservative "Church in Danger" appeal and preferred the status quo.¹⁹⁵

In Kidderminster, Carter argues, perhaps excessively, that religion was a central feature of Victorian life. Church attendance figures do not support this claim, but as noted there was a substantial and long-lived tradition of Protestant dissent, dating back to Richard Baxter's ministry in the town in the seventeenth century.¹⁹⁶

5. ALCOHOL

In 1906, Stanley Baldwin, who stood unsuccessfully for Kidderminster, complained that "the candidate was expected to spend three evenings a week

¹⁹⁴ Pugh, op.cit., pp. 24-26.

¹⁹⁵ Pugh, op.cit., pp. 66-67.

¹⁹⁶ Carter, op.cit., p 5.

during the time of his probation in one or another of the public houses which jostled each other through the constituency”.¹⁹⁷

In the introduction to their study, Harrison and Trinder hail the disappearance of the Victorian drink problem.¹⁹⁸ By 1847, Banbury contained 91 sellers of alcohol, who were active in politics. In 1859 the publicans vote accounted for 19 per cent of the Liberal support at the elections.¹⁹⁹ Public houses were the centre of society for rich and poor alike and entertainments tended to take place there. Violence and drunkenness were widespread. They argue that by 1830s the middle classes were associating in temperance societies, and drink became an issue of class. Temperance became a movement in Banbury in the 1850s, led by non-conformists.²⁰⁰

For Kidderminster Smith echoes that drink was the core of popular culture. Alcohol was central to leisure for the weavers and working classes of the town.²⁰¹ The plethora of public houses can be gauged by the fact that in 1850 there were at least seventeen taverns in Worcester Street, four in Coventry Street and five in the Horsefair.²⁰² Publicans were politically as well as socially important. As noted, in 1857, out of a total electorate of 502 in Kidderminster, it was claimed that at least 109 were beer sellers.²⁰³ These publicans were “natural” Conservatives, since they feared the Liberal government would open up the trade, and because

¹⁹⁷ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 86.

¹⁹⁸ Harrison, B. and Trinder, B, Drink and Sobriety in an Early Victorian Country Town: Banbury 1830-1860, (Longman, 1969), p 1.

¹⁹⁹ Harrison and Trinder, op.cit., pp. 2-4.

²⁰⁰ Harrison and Trinder, op.cit., pp. 5-15.

²⁰¹ Smith, op.cit., pp. 201-204.

²⁰² Tomkinson, K and Hall, G, Kidderminster Since 1800, (Authors, 1975) App H.

²⁰³ The Times 15 April 1857.

Robert Lowe had failed to support their petition to extend Sunday opening hours.²⁰⁴

Read reasonably claims that public houses were the social centres for the poor, an escape from the squalor and overcrowding of life at home. The deeper the poverty, the higher was the proportion of public houses. There was a boom in pub building, and Bass brewed one million barrels a year in 1890 compared with 100,000 in 1850. In 1876 the average per capita consumption of beer was 344 gallons, and up to one-quarter of London working-class earnings were spent on drink. Lowe, safe from Kidderminster in 1872, would describe the drunkard as “the sheet anchor of the British constitution.” During the 1870s temperance societies thrived and their pressure contributed to the 1872 Licensing Act. Gladstone would attribute his defeat in 1874 to the publicans’ hatred of the 1872 Act – “borne down in a torrent of gin and beer.”²⁰⁵

Pugh summarises recent research by claiming that by the 1880s the temperance movement had not suddenly or completely alienated the Conservatives, mainly because Gladstone had fended off its more extreme proposals. Although it was an advantage to the Conservatives in working-class seats (such as Kidderminster) to be able to defend the working man’s right to beer, the party could not associate itself too wholeheartedly with the drink lobby. This was because the ambitious artisan could also be an abstainer and because the Conservatives embraced middle-class anti-drink sentiment. Having said this, Liberal activists were certainly anti-drink and the Conservatives could (and did) benefit by “passive”

²⁰⁴ Winter, J, Robert Lowe, (University of Toronto, 1976), p 142.

²⁰⁵ Read, D, The Age of Urban Democracy, England 1868-1914, (Longman, 1994), pp. 107-111, 152, 180.

support for “the Pub in Danger.”²⁰⁶ Hoppen has noted that public houses were the great social centres of working class life. They gave accommodation to friendly societies, trade unions and craft societies. Election campaigns were planned in pubs and they were naturally the centre of treating. In 1853 it was estimated that 70 per cent of working men in Derby spent the evening in the pubs, and up to one half of family income might be spent on drink. It was little wonder that election riots, bribery and treating were still vigorous.²⁰⁷ Hoppen also claims that the 1872 Licensing Act enabled the Conservatives to pose as the champions of the beer-drinking working man. They delivered when they came back to power in 1874, restoring longer opening hours.²⁰⁸

6. SUMMARY

Overall the review of the historiography has shown that, although relatively neglected by historians, the registration process was crucial – at least as much to prevent “enemies” being included on the register as it was to ensure that “friends” were supported and their names incorporated. Party organisation developed as the century progressed and perforce became more professional as the electorate expanded. Indeed the organisation sought to encompass much more than merely political allegiance at election times by attempting to bind adherents in a system which went far beyond pure politics. The historiography, though limited, is relatively uncontroversial. The crucial link between registration activity and electoral success is firmly established.

²⁰⁶ Pugh, *op.cit.*, pp. 68-69.

²⁰⁷ Hoppen, K. T, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886*, (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 351-356.

²⁰⁸ Hoppen, *op.cit.*, pp. 607-608.

The same cannot be said for electoral violence and corruption, where more recent research has attempted to exonerate the electorate from charges that it was no less venal after 1832 than before. Phillips and Salmon make important points about consistency of voting in a restricted number of constituencies over an equally restricted period, and they highlight the importance of municipal elections as a potential signpost to parliamentary results. In doing so, they may have provided a significant re-reading of half of Gash's and Hanham's thesis that the political system in England and Wales was just as venal, corrupt and violent after 1832 as before. But the other half of the Gash thesis that politics after 1832 were corrupt is less convincingly challenged. Their argument, while a welcome rejoinder to accepted wisdom, is probably "too little, too early". Certainly, Seymour, Gash, Hanham and O'Leary can produce report after report, petition after petition, to convince us that old habits died exceedingly hard, since in market politics there always seemed to be high levels of both supply of and demand for malpractice. As the nineteenth century progressed, more and more stringent efforts were made to combat corruption, but it should be noted that Kidderminster's election petition took place as late as 1874 and Worcester's in 1906. The real issues surrounding corruption, it appears, are how many voters accepted bribes, and did corruption work? One is drawn to a parallel with modern advertising of consumer goods; once started, no-one dares stop, for fear of the consequences. Certainly the review indicates that for much of the century at least indirect bribery was both expected (as a voter's "right") and needed (to boost a borough's economy) and also that there was a very fine line between legitimate influence and corruption.

Industrial relations in an urban borough were complex and inconsistent, both within a town and across towns. What appears to apply to one industry does not necessarily apply to another. The parallels between cotton in Lancashire and carpets in Kidderminster should be illuminating, but more often than not the factory loyalty of the north is matched by sullen resentment in the midlands, especially from 1832 to 1847. In the 1850s and 1880s Kidderminster flirted with Liberalism (particularly ironically in the 1850s when there was mass unemployment and a technological revolution). However, given the chance to have a carpet-bagger like Albert Grant as MP, the electorate jumped at the opportunity. As soon as the Liberals were split in the late 1880s the local Conservative machine ushered in a century of almost uninterrupted dominance at parliamentary elections.

Religion and alcohol also appear to be inter-related strands at least in urban boroughs. This is not to argue that Anglicans favoured drunkenness; but if the Non-Conformists were predominantly Liberal and major campaigners for enforced temperance, it was a cheap appeal to ancient “rights” to combine “Church in danger” with “Pub in danger”. This may be a crude and cynical analysis of genuinely held religious beliefs, especially in a town like Kidderminster with a long tradition of Dissent, but an appeal to the heart, soul and liver of the working man has always been a potent one, especially if, as made by Grant, it was accompanied by an appeal to his pocket and as his champion.

All towns have their own particular characteristics, which is why it is so dangerous to generalise from a statistical sample of one. As noted it may be

argued that, even after the arrival of the railway in 1852, for much of the century, Kidderminster was isolated geographically from other carpet manufacturers in the north; isolated economically from the rest of mainly agricultural Worcestershire; isolated socially by having such a high proportion of working class inhabitants. As a result it was an inward-looking town prone to focus on its own concerns.

The review of the historiography has unearthed a number of key issues which the research addresses. It may be that there could be a valid reason to believe that in Kidderminster the “classic” two-party power base system existed at least for some of the period:- Liberal: carpet manufacturer/dissenter/ex-Chartist/temperance against Conservative: carpet weaver/Anglican/brewer.

Chapter 4

“Godson Forever” 1832-1850

Richard Godson

MP for Kidderminster 1832-1835, 1837-1849



Kidderminster Public Library.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Between 1832 and 1849 there were six parliamentary elections in Kidderminster of which Richard Godson won four for the Conservatives. There were never more than 500 voters in the five contested elections, and the turnout always exceeded 80 per cent. In three of the elections the winning margin was less than twenty votes. The elections during this period were characterised by violence and allegations of bribery and corruption on a substantial scale. An election petition was issued in the 1849 election and, although not successful, it gives clear evidence of the techniques employed to win a seat like Kidderminster. The research also explores the political impact of the strikes of 1828 and 1830 and whether Godson can be regarded as the founder of a working-class Conservative tradition in Kidderminster.

2. REGISTRATION AND PARTY ORGANISATION

In terms of the registration process in 1832, Godson was alert. In his letter to the “Free and independent electors of Kidderminster” he asked his “friends to be vigilant in obtaining more promises [and] in watching the registration of the voters.”¹ Early party organisation was informal, but in 1832 the Liberals had already formed a committee to support Philips. A handbill issued by this committee accusing William Boycot of reneging on a promise to vote for G. R. Philips drew a furious and prolonged denial by Boycot.² At his victory dinner in January 1833, Godson was accompanied by his election committee – Doughty (Chairman), Rev. William Villiers (Curate of St George’s), William Boycot and

¹ Worcester Herald 16 June 1832.

² Worcester Herald 19 January 1833.

Tomkins.³ As already noted, Godson had been sponsored by the “Kidderminster General Political Union,” in an attempt to unite the people of Kidderminster to regain their long lost rights and privileges and to unite the new middle and lower classes peacefully. It was supported by some of the county magistrates and gentlemen and some of the more reasonable carpet manufacturers, including Brinton, Watson, Talbot and Broom. The appearance on the list of Brinton is surprising. since he and most of the carpet manufacturers supported Philips in the 1832 election. The Political Union seems to have faded from view in the 1830s after the initial election in 1832.⁴

The structures had not changed much by 1835. They were locally based and were an informal system based on party activists on both sides. Since both candidates appealed to the independent electors, it could hardly be otherwise. At his victory dinner, Philips was supported by the carpet manufacturers, including Brinton, Gough, Newcombe and Hopkins.⁵

The 1837 election showed further development both in the operation of the registration system and party organisation. At the parliamentary revision court the Conservatives objected to thirty-four voters, of whom seventeen were removed and seventeen retained. The Liberals objected to thirty-three voters claimed by the Conservatives, of whom nine were struck off and twenty-four retained. Hallen and Boycot were employed by the Conservatives and Talbot for the Liberals.⁶ In terms of the parliamentary franchise, the Conservatives had a net gain of eight

³ Berrows Worcester Journal 17 January 1833 Worcester Herald 12 January 1833.

⁴ Marsh, A, The Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster, (Malthouse, 1995), p 22.

⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 19 February 1835.

⁶ Ten Towns Messenger 28 October 1836.

votes in striking off opponents. In a constituency where the 1837 election was won by forty-one votes, every disqualification counted.

In addition to the informal arrangements previously noted, 1837 saw the formation of the Kidderminster Conservative Association, led by James Morton and Thomas Bradley. The inaugural dinner was attended by 110 members. The Association toasted its own success in electing Godson, as well as his supporters the clergy. They had a recruiting sergeant, Burrows, and a treasurer, Harvey.⁷ Morton was also chairman of Godson's election committee.⁸ Godson paid special tribute to the contribution of the Association to his victory. The Association spawned offshoots such as the Operatives' Conservative Society.⁹ An anti-Poor-Law meeting, which damned the Whig government proposals and was addressed only by Conservatives, including Tuck, a leader of the 1828 strike,¹⁰ denounced the proposed abolition of church rates.¹¹ The Operatives were toasted by Godson at a public dinner.¹² Not to be outdone, Philips, before his retirement from the election, proposed the same toast to the Operatives of Kidderminster (or, one assumes, those who voted Liberal). The Messenger gleefully reported that the response was given by an Irishman (O'Leary) who urged the workmen to be deferential and dutiful.¹³

Ahead of the 1841 election the Ten Towns Messenger applauded the Operatives' Conservative Societies formed "amongst the honest and industrial working classes

⁷ Ten Towns Messenger 8 September 1837.

⁸ Ten Towns Messenger 7 July 1837.

⁹ Ten Towns Messenger 4 November 1836.

¹⁰ Ten Towns Messenger 27 January 1837.

¹¹ Ten Towns Messenger 3 April 1837.

¹² Ten Towns Messenger 20 January 1837.

¹³ Ten Towns Messenger 13 January 1837.

and principal tradesmen” to oppose Liberal measures such as the Poor Law.¹⁴ Certainly a Landlords’ Association of Kidderminster denounced the Poor Bill claiming that rents “are lamentably in arrears and a vast number of these houses are constantly vacated.” The Association pressed for exemption from rates for houses under an annual value of £6 or £7.¹⁵

The contrast in reporting the 1847 election is clear. The Messenger described Godson’s entry as “very favourably” received;¹⁶ to the Chronicle it was “poorly attended,”¹⁷ with disgruntled Conservatives trying to find another candidate. At the revision court in October 1847, Tudor appeared for the Conservatives and Talbot for the Whigs. Both were local solicitors and party activists. The Conservatives opposed eight voters, six successfully. They also made three successful claims for voters. The Liberals opposed three but failed on all of them. The net result was a gain to the Conservatives of nine votes. The Messenger tellingly concluded that three cases were hotly contested but “the excitement which in former years prevailed in these courts appears to have subsided.”¹⁸ The low-key reporting of these revision courts seriously underestimates both their importance and the efforts made by both parties not only to oppose people known to be unfavourable to the party but also to include on the voters’ list those likely to support them.

For the first time the 1849 Revision Court proceedings were a little more fully reported. It gives a telling insight into the tactics adopted. The Conservatives

¹⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 1 January 1841.

¹⁵ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁶ Ten Towns Messenger 30 July 1847.

¹⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 28 July 1847.

¹⁸ Ten Towns Messenger 22 October 1847.

(again under Tudor) complained that a John Powell should be disfranchised because he had given his address as “Hall Street” and omitted to state that it was in Kidderminster. The Revising Barrister rejected the objection, together with 13 other similar cases. Tudor appealed. The appeal was upheld since no counsel appeared to support the claims. In other cases at the original court the Conservatives secured thirteen objections (out of twenty) and secured all five claims. The Liberals secured two objections (out of seventeen) and four claims (out of eight). The net result was a gain to the Conservatives of twenty-five.¹⁹ Since Best won by seventeen votes in the 1849 election, the crucial importance of “managing” the registration process cannot be overestimated.

As already noted, the Liberals took a leaf out of the Conservatives’ book in terms of party organisation. As a successor to the Kidderminster Reform Association, a Liberal body which was formed in 1837 and then seems to have sunk without trace, a Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association was formed in September 1849 under the chairmanship of Henry Brinton. They had been in touch with the national Reform Association and extended their aims to the municipal government of Kidderminster which was “bound hand and foot to the triumphal ear of Toryism and bigotry.” It was claimed that “2000 householders in the town had been deprived of their municipal privileges.”²⁰ The committee met again in February 1850 to support parliamentary reform by extending the suffrage to every adult male of good character who had resided for twelve months in the constituency; by equalising the size of the parliamentary constituencies; by introducing triennial parliaments; and by abolishing the property qualification for

¹⁹ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

²⁰ Worcestershire Chronicle 26 September 1849.

voters. In addition they wished to reduce the civil pension list.²¹ A further meeting supported the Kidderminster Freehold Land Society in its efforts to elevate the working classes to obtain for them a (Liberal) vote.²² Not to be outdone, the Conservatives revived their own Association.

The Liberals organised a free trade petition and at the election orchestrated a meeting of the Kidderminster Operatives in favour of Gisborne, attended by allegedly 5,000 people. The meeting demanded free trade, financial reform and a wider suffrage. This meeting was addressed by the former Chartist leader, George Holloway and by Peter Turner, who advocated better relations between masters and men.²³ Holloway was regarded as a trump card and addressed a Gisborne meeting, preaching suffrage reform. The Liberal party organisation was refined by dividing the borough into five wards, each with its own canvassing committee.

24

In the aftermath of their defeat in 1849, the carpet manufacturers continued to woo the weavers by lavish dinners then preaching to them. Thus Worth took 60 men to the Royal George. The operatives drank toast after toast and supported “more votes and less taxes.” Likewise Bough (another Liberal carpet manufacturer) treated his workers amongst general damnation of Protectionism in general and the Conservative MP John Best in particular. The more votes and less taxes cry

²¹ Worcestershire Chronicle 6 February 1850.

²² Worcestershire Chronicle 30 November 1850.

²³ Worcestershire Chronicle 29 August 1849.

²⁴ Worcestershire Chronicle 5 September 1849.

was repeated. Hayes (an operative) hailed the dawning of a new Liberal day. Needless to say the Chronicle was toasted.²⁵

The research clearly shows that both parties recognised very early the critical importance of the registration process. From the reports which survive, it is clear that the Conservatives generally seemed to be more successful; that the prime focus was on eliminating opponents, although claims were also important; and that any detail, no matter how small, could be used as the basis for an objection. In terms of party organisation, the structure became more formal and all-embracing as the period progressed. It may well be that in 1832 Godson was right to talk of his “friends” but the organisation became more formalised, with committees and orchestrated pressure groups, particularly among the weavers, to drum up support. The role of the press here is important. The Messenger supported (and faithfully reported) the meetings of the Conservative Operatives Association, while the Chronicle did the same for the Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association.

One issue remains unresolved. It is known that the Kidderminster Political Union sponsored Godson in 1832, although clearly a number would have preferred Philips. Thereafter, Godson flew the flag for the Conservatives. It would be interesting to know how the selection process for subsequent Liberal candidates worked. They were represented by Bagshaw (a business man and the former MP for Sudbury) in 1837, Ricardo (from Sunning Hill and a relative of economist David Ricardo) in 1841 and Gisborne (from Burton-on-Trent and the former MP

²⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 10 October 1849.

for Nottingham) in 1849. Were these centrally chosen, or did the local intelligence network sound them out? The answer may never be known, but it remains a valid question of whether, by 1849, choice of a candidate remained a strictly local decision or whether nascent national party organisation had a say. Certainly Bagshaw and Ricardo were by no means the first choice of the Liberals to oppose Godson. The requisites were that they must be free-traders, sympathetic to the ambitions of the dissenters and must have money.

3. CORRUPTION AND VIOLENCE

The evidence for electoral malpractice in Kidderminster follows a consistent pattern. Since Kidderminster was enfranchised in 1832, it should have had no “baggage” of dirty tricks. The inhabitants seem to have learned quickly. Ebenezer Guest recalled an incident from the 1832 election when a stationer, Bromley, announced that his political views were “so finely balanced” that it would take £50 to make up his mind for whom to vote. As closing time of the election approached the result appeared to be so close that a Conservative party official offered Bromley the £50 and a cab to go to the poll. As he was counting the money, another Conservative snatched the money with the words “come away, we have got a dozen without the old....”²⁶ Guest was a professed Liberal and would only have been ten at the time, so the tale is probably folklore, but none of Guest’s other reminiscences have been seriously challenged.

Godson’s letter to the electors of Kidderminster hinted at intimidation by entreating that “no man may suffer in his business for his political opinions.”²⁷

²⁶ Ebenezer Guest, Old Kidderminster. Kidderminster Shuttle January 1905.

²⁷ Worcester Herald 16 June 1832.

Troops of the Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry were quartered at Kidderminster to prevent riot.²⁸ As already noted, their presence did not entirely quell the violence. Three special constables were charged with unlawful killing after a man had been bludgeoned to death. A story also emerged later that a voter had died from a drug administered to prevent him from voting.²⁹

If anything, the accusations of foul play in the 1835 election were even more strident than in 1832. Allegations were made of blatant “blocking” (preventing customers using shops). The extension of the franchise was “a curse not a privilege.”³⁰ Philips was pelted with mud on his arrival in the town³¹ and Godson was forced to deny that he encouraged blocking and exclusive dealing and accused Philips’ supporters of threats of loss of trade, discharge from work and notices to quit.³² Once again the Magistrates requisitioned a troop of Lancers from Birmingham to keep the peace.³³ On his victory Philips declined to be “chaired” through the town and gave £50 to the Dispensary, thus hoping to avoid violence and to “work” the constituency. Godson was to claim that the Liberals had imported “bludgeon-men” to break the heads of the weavers,³⁴ and threatened violent retribution if they repeated the tactics in 1837. The Messenger returned to the theme in 1841 election, accusing the Liberals of bringing in a “notorious band of sappers and miners” to attack local worthies.³⁵ The Messenger, with characteristic lack of restraint, accused Philips of spending “upwards of £7,000”

²⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 20 December 1832.

²⁹ Gilbert, D, Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster, (David Voice, 2004), p 42. Berrows Worcester Journal 22 January 1835.

³⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 22 January 1835.

³¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 4 December 1834.

³² Berrows Worcester Journal 18 December 1834.

³³ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 January 1835.

³⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 14 July 1837.

³⁵ Ten Towns Messenger 2 July 1841.

to win the 1835 election,³⁶ and accusing him of “bribery and gross treating.”³⁷ Weavers at Pardoe, Nooman and Pardoe presented a rug to Godson, claiming that his defeat was due to “practices of the most atrocious nature.”³⁸

There was the usual quota of violence. A hairdresser named Edward Foxall was accused of assaulting Merrefield, the police officer, during a riot of 150 men, some armed with pike handles. Godson defended Foxall, who was imprisoned for six months.³⁹ The losers were inclined to fall out. Hunt, the landlord of the Sussex Arms, sued Philpots, the book keeper of the Lion Hotel, Godson’s headquarters and an adherent of Godson, for recovery of food and drink supplied to twenty-five people – tripe and cowheel pie and ale – during the 1835 election and was awarded £10 damages.⁴⁰ The Journal, a Godson supporter, hinted darkly of rumours of an election petition to unseat Philips. “A voter” wrote to the Messenger alleging that the Liberals had spent £306.10s hiring 300 men from the collieries to intimidate voters. The colliers were, the writer claimed, lodged in Liberals’ houses. The army had had to be summoned to “protect the peaceable inhabitants from their savage brutality.”⁴¹ It was alleged that publicans had been paid sums from £63.16s.8d to £313.4s.11d for their votes. The same applied to some butchers who had been bribed to vote. The tradesmen had been told that these fictitious bills for “services” were illegal and would not be paid unless they

³⁶ Ten Towns Messenger 7 July 1837.

³⁷ Ten Towns Messenger 12 August 1836.

³⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 3 March 1835.

³⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 July 1835.

⁴⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 July 1835.

⁴¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 July 1835.

voted for Philips. It was further claimed that a Liberal voter had been given £25 for himself and £167 to distribute at his discretion during the canvass.⁴²

Even Guest was forced to admit that Shemmons, an ironmonger, “a staunch, unwavering Liberal” owned Gorst Hill Farm, which was very convenient at election times to hold party carouses and “bottled voters”⁴³ He also recalled the weavers of Queen Street enjoying being “treated” by publicans in the Liberal interest, who themselves had been paid by Lygon, Foley or Spencer, prominent Liberals. Instead of their modest half-pints, they were given quarts. But it was not all beer and skittles. Liberals were likely to be given “a good shaking” by “hostile Godsoners.”⁴⁴ It was also apparently the custom to brigade small bands of roughs at the ale-houses, where the publican was venal, and who might change his mind on how to vote. The roughs would drink a toast to their favourite’s health, pick a quarrel with the opposing roughs, and then call in the help of “mercenaries.” Large bunches of oak or laurel boughs, decorated with ribbons of red or blue, were guarded by the roughs of the particular party. The opposition would attempt to capture the old “colours” and replace them with its own. If successful, the “enlightened” landlord “saw the question in a different light” and changed his allegiance. Blackwell Street was notorious for this tactic although, because the men knew each other there would be “a great scuffle but no blood shed.”⁴⁵

⁴² Ten Towns Messenger 15 July 1836.

⁴³ Ebenezer Guest, Old Kidderminster, Kidderminster Shuttle January 1905.

⁴⁴ Ebenezer Guest, op.cit., January 1905.

⁴⁵ Ebenezer Guest, op.cit., January 1905.

There is an impression that in 1835 Godson was for once “outgunned” by the Liberals who used outside muscle to counteract the local Kidderminster mob. In the 1837 election, Godson took the moral high ground, thanking his friends for their exertions against “Bribery, Intimidation and Oppression.”⁴⁶ The council was less optimistic. A public notice from Thomas Hallen, the Town Clerk, warned that “all persons who may be seen during the election unlawfully armed with staves or bludgeons will at once be taken into custody, and punished with the utmost severity of the law.” The Notice cited serious breaches of the peace at former elections for the borough.⁴⁷ Even so the magistrates wrote on 21 July to the Home Office requesting that a troop of the 5th Dragoon Guards should be sent to Kidderminster during the election to preserve the peace.⁴⁸ This was followed up by letters confirming that fourteen and a further 102 special constables had been appointed.⁴⁹ Trouble started early. On 20 July 1837 Joseph Boycott was attacked in The Sun public house by Liberal roughs, allegedly at the instigation of Shemmons and Clarke, two Liberals activists.⁵⁰ Ever reasonable and fair minded, the Messenger described the Liberals as “bigoted, designing restless partisans, who consider no act too mean, no artifice too unworthy, no trick too dishonourable or too unethical to freedom of election.” The Liberals stood accused of forcing employees to vote for their employer’s candidate or lose their job and of requiring tradesmen to vote as instructed, or lose their custom. It was alleged that Liberal candidates were chosen for money (or access to money.)⁵¹

⁴⁶ Handbill in Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁴⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 14 July 1837.

⁴⁸ Home Office 52/35/88.

⁴⁹ Home Office 52/35/83 and 52/35/85.

⁵⁰ Ten Towns Messenger 21 July 1837.

⁵¹ Ten Towns Messenger 21 July 1837 11 August 1837.

In 1837 the pettiness of dirty tricks knew no depths. A Conservative booking clerk refused to hand over a parcel addressed to Bagshaw and marked it as not received because he thought it contained election posters.⁵² More legitimate tactics included the Conservative mob drowning out Bagshaw's speeches with groans and boos, while the Liberals retaliated by sending coal carts to drive up and down to disrupt Godson's speeches.⁵³ Talbot claimed to have been an eye-witness to Conservative intimidation and blocking during the election.⁵⁴ At least there was no violence during the polling, helped perhaps by the presence of the Dragoons and special constables.⁵⁵ Godson's hatchet job on Bagshaw ("rejected of Sudbury") whom he later accused of spending £10,000 to "buy" the Sudbury seat, and of supplying £1,000 to his supporter, Peter Turner, was successful.

The 1841 election provides real evidence of the election process in Kidderminster. George Rennie, the original Liberal candidate, withdrew, despite claiming a successful canvass, because "the expenses, which, according to the custom of this Borough, I have found it is usual to incur, by the protracted nature of the contest, exceed the sum which I feel disposed to advance for this object."⁵⁶ This was dynamite. Even if in reality Rennie thought he could not win (and given the rank outsider Ricardo's performance this seems unlikely) it is significant that he should attribute his withdrawal to the need to bribe the electors. There really can be no alternative reading given to the words of the statement. To Godson this was an opportunity too good to miss. As noted, he accused the Liberals of importing

⁵² Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁵³ Ebenezer Guest, op.cit., Kidderminster Shuttle 25 January 1905.

⁵⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 12 August 1838.

⁵⁵ Ten Towns Messenger 28 July 1837.

⁵⁶ Handbill 19 June 1841, Danks Archive BA, 5278, Worcestershire Record Office. Berrows Worcester Journal 19 June 1841.

thugs in previous elections,⁵⁷ and he harked back to 1835, accusing an agent of Philips of settling a bill for £4,283.3s.7d. He drew the not unnatural conclusion that the 1841 election would have cost the Liberals well in excess of this sum. He also accused Rennie of standing for Ipswich as well as Kidderminster. Just in case the message was not strong enough, he denounced the Liberals for exclusive dealing.⁵⁸ He returned to the attack by sneering that Ricardo was a nobody. A man who resembled Ricardo had narrowly escaped a severe beating, and Godson accused Ricardo himself of sending for the Stourbridge brickbat and bludgeon men. In a pitched battle between the mobs, Godson's crew won, shredding the Liberal laurel boughs and tearing off part of the flag. The Conservative mob, 300 strong, happily smashed windows at a Liberal public house. At the nomination one sour note was injected. Morton, Godson's supporter, was forced to deny that he had served a Liberal voter, Quinn, with notice to quit his lodgings because Quinn was Liberal. Godson again used the Rennie announcement to accuse the Liberals of bribery and intimidation. Godson's victory was duly celebrated by an attack on the flags and banners of the Liberals.⁵⁹ Ricardo blamed his defeat on the "unexpected appearance of some voters who had promised neutrality"⁶⁰ which appears to be a coded reference to last minute bribery. The Messenger, which supported the Conservatives, regarded this as good planning.⁶¹

In the 1847 election Godson was unopposed. The Liberals accused him of conducting the 1841 election in such a way as has "rendered Kidderminster a bye-

⁵⁷ Ten Towns Messenger 2 July 1841.

⁵⁸ Ten Towns Messenger 25 June 1841.

⁵⁹ Ten Towns Messenger 2 July 1841.

⁶⁰ Handbill 6 July 1841 Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁶¹ Ten Towns Messenger 2 July 1841.

word in the country.”⁶² Certainly tickets were issued entitling the bearer “to have anything you like to drink at any Public House or Beer Shop in the parish to the amount of three shillings.”⁶³ Publicans were also requested “to let the Wolverley voters have anything to drink to the value of £1.10s.-d.”⁶⁴ The Liberals awaited a more favourable day – “the mob in Kidderminster has always been Tory in its opinion.”⁶⁵

The corrupt practices for which Kidderminster were known were put to the official test in the election of 1849. Prior to this Godson, helped by sympathetic reporting from the Messenger and the Journal had generally been able to claim the local, independent, anti-corruption high ground. It seems unlikely that this was justified. Godson was a shrewd political operator, who generally controlled the mob. There can be little doubt that he indulged in selective bribery and indiscriminate treating, as did his opponents. He learned from his defeat in 1835 to ensure that his machine could out-rough his opponents and pay to out-drink them. For the Liberals, 1849 was the closest to a level playing field which they were likely to achieve. The Conservatives had lost Godson’s control over the weavers, his money and his oratory. Even worse, they were divided among themselves.

The election did not start well for John Best, the Conservative candidate, a local twenty-nine year old lawyer. He was forcibly ejected from the traditional Conservative headquarters at the Lion Hotel by supporters of Bailey, a rival

⁶² Worcestershire Chronicle 4 August 1847.

⁶³ Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁶⁴ Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁶⁵ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

Conservative candidate.⁶⁶ Best's men regained control, and a week later Bailey, reportedly a nominee of Lord Ward and with "no small amount of money [to spend] here," had withdrawn.⁶⁷ Kidderminster was back to the traditional two-horse race. At a public meeting Best's father asked for fair play, and no "roguery, rascality and blocking of shops." These noble sentiments lasted until 7pm the same day, when the Conservatives tried to interrupt the Liberal candidate Gisborne's speech. They were physically repelled and the evening continued with armed camps – the Conservatives in High Street, the Liberals in the Bull Ring and regular skirmishing at the edges.⁶⁸ There were accusations that roughs had been brought in from Kinver, and that the Superintendent of Police, Merrefield, had ordered a further hundred bludgeon-men. When William Boycot, the senior magistrate denied this, he was set upon. The rival gangs roamed the streets looking for trouble and also to disrupt meetings of the other party.⁶⁹

Accusations of corruption began even before the poll. Gisborne alleged that "a learned gentleman ... of Blackbrook House" (easily identified as William Butler Best, the Conservative candidate's father) had entertained a voter first at Blackbrook House, then conveyed him to Wolverley for more drink, and finally back to the Lion Hotel for the same purpose.⁷⁰ Joseph Boycott, the leader of the Bailey supporters, was obliged to publish a hand-bill denying that he had sold the election to Best by persuading the Bailey party to vote for him; that he had kept

⁶⁶ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

⁶⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

⁶⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 29 August 1849.

⁶⁹ Worcestershire Chronicle 22 August 1849.

⁷⁰ Worcestershire Chronicle 5 September 1849.

voters who would have voted for Gisborne locked in his house until the polls had closed; and that he had secret meetings with Best the night before the election.⁷¹

Gisborne also accused Best of mobilising the farmer vote (hardly illegal) and, more seriously, of trying to seduce a publican voter who supported Gisborne with a promise of £50 and payment for a round of beef, two legs of mutton, and plenty of potatoes, and “40 honest fellows to eat them.” Gisborne sarcastically advised “every honest voter” who meant to sell his vote to insist on cash down. One landlord was alleged to be putting laudanum in a Gisborne supporter’s ale to stop him from voting. Gisborne threatened that after the election, when the beer licences came up for renewal, there would be retribution.⁷²

As the poll neared, both parties used larger gangs to patrol the streets. A Tory voter, John Ayres, was seen entering a Liberal public house, the Queens Head, Best’s men smashed the front door down either to rescue him or persuade him back to the path of righteousness. There was also violence at the Boar’s Head and there was a prolonged fight over a bed-ridden voter whom the Conservatives attempted to carry to the poll. The Liberals had removed one Best voter, Mound, to Shrewsbury, but he was rescued and voted just before the close. The final voter was a gardener, Broom, who had been hiding in back-yards, but was “captured” by Best’s men and instructed to vote. The Liberals attributed their loss to “men who had been hiding in cellars and brewhouses to escape [the Conservatives] or

⁷¹ Worcestershire Chronicle 19 September 1849. Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), p 100.

⁷² Worcestershire Chronicle 5 September 1849.

[who had] yielded to the influence of all-powerful gold.⁷³ Certainly the voting figures by time of day are illuminating:-

Time	Majority	
	Conservatives	Liberals
9am		16
10am		36
11am		26
12 noon		28
2pm	7	
4pm	17	

An annotated copy of the Poll Book is equally instructive:-

Ready to poll for Gisborne if required	6
Promised neutrality but voted for Best	7
Promised Gisborne but voted for Best	9
Promised Gisborne but declined to vote	1
Liberals away from home	2
Liberals “neutralised by personal or venal considerations”	9
Liberals voted for Best	14

⁷³ Worcestershire Chronicle 12 September 1849.

This list is clearly produced by an unnamed Liberal, but it patently shows Best won a tight contest by focusing on the nine turncoats. Unusually the Chronicle regarded the 1849 election as “the purest which ever took place in Kidderminster,”⁷⁴ which may be faint praise indeed. Certainly, both sides celebrated in good style with a whole sheep-roast and 120 revellers. In his letter of defeat, Gisborne, while claiming corruption by Best, rejected the opportunity to unseat him on the grounds that the Conservatives would unite and achieve a “fair and legitimate” victory.⁷⁵

Probably as a pre-emptive strike, Best’s supporters charged George Clarke and five others with holding Mound against his will to prevent him from voting. This might have had the effect of persuading the Liberals to drop their election petition.⁷⁶ If so, the Conservatives were to be disappointed. The petition was heard over seven days in April 1850 by a House of Commons Committee with three Liberal and two Conservative members.

Counsel for the petitioners alleged that there were over 150 publicans, of whom 120 had the vote, meaning that one quarter of the voters were publicans, and that all of them had voted for Best. He also claimed that Best had been guilty of treating and corruption. Best had kept open house at those public-houses, and with his father and cousin had treated voters to free drinks. It was alleged that the Best party went from pub to pub buying drinks and food. Counsel accused John Corbett of bribing Robert Watkins, a Gisborne supporter, with £20 - £5 down and the rest after the election. Likewise Perry, a publican, was alleged to have offered

⁷⁴ Worcestershire Chronicle 12 September 1849

⁷⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 12 September 1849.

⁷⁶ Worcestershire Chronicle 13 March 1850.

Jackson £20 to vote for Best while Paget was accused of offering £150 to three voters. It was claimed that Thomas Jones of Martley was treated at the Lion Hotel and offered £10, of which £6.10s had been paid.

At the trial one elector, Harvey admitted he had been “market pert” (drunk) on the election day on at least six quarts of ale, followed by brandy. He was an unreliable and comic witness, as was the landlord of the Lion Hotel, Samuel Brooks, who claimed that this had been a “quiet” election (i.e. less money was spent) and whose memory about who was where and when was selective. It also became clear that many of those present at the drinking sessions were not voters. Thomas Jones admitted that Best’s cousin had solicited his vote and that he had been offered £5. He had voted for Best. but claimed that he paid for his own brandy. Jones admitted that the Bests had paid to take him back to Martley, but that he had not been paid the £5, just £1.15s. In a carefully rehearsed evasion of questions (to which the answer was “I never thought anything about it”), he denied that he had taken the bribery oath. Brooks’ wife was also vague about who had attended the Lion and confirmed that she had not yet sent in an invoice. The barmaid at the Lion Hotel, Jane Dalley, gave evidence worthy of someone dressed in the Conservative colours, a blue bonnet, blue ribbons and blue eye shadow.

Other witnesses made it clear that Tudor, the solicitor who acted for the Conservatives at revision courts, was the paymaster, but the evidence had been burned. Jesse Cooke and his wife were defiant witnesses, who denied all wrongdoing or being offered bribes. The wife claimed she earned money by “going to gentlemen’s houses.” Both claimed to have paid for all accommodation

and drink, as well as the celebrated top hat which was accused of being part of the bribe. Just to turn the knife, Jesse Cooke accused the Liberal Batham (who later admitted his clerks had indeed done so without his knowledge) of getting him drunk and soliciting his vote, and offering him £50. The chief witness in the case of Watkins turned out to be his housekeeper, who had been fined for assault and charged with theft and admitted striking Watkins. Another witness accused Gisborne's supporters of offering him £5 to absent himself in Warwick. He had voted for Best because the Liberal non-voters were violent and had beaten him up.

In summing up it was alleged that "in Mr Godson's time an enormous system of expenditure had gone on in Kidderminster." The Best clan and Tudor were accused of a concentrated and systematic campaign of bribery and treating. Best and his family declined to give evidence and defence counsel muddied the waters by accusing the Liberals of trying to delay the election until they had time to "work" the registration. The whole case was a "fishing expedition." Best was found not guilty and his victory confirmed.⁷⁷ Cooke and his wife were heroes of the Conservative hour. It is reasonable to speculate how much and how many times this one-handed blacksmith and his wife were paid during the whole election and petition process, perhaps by the shadowy "Tricky Edwards." Certainly their performance merited it. Best returned to Kidderminster a vindicated man, promising not to trample on a defeated foe, and then proceeding to do so, lauding the "unsullied purity" of Kidderminster.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ British Parliamentary Papers 1850 volume VIII. Worcestershire Chronicle 24 April 1850 1 May 1850.

⁷⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 1 May 1850.

Thus far, the evidence of violence and corruption in Kidderminster from 1832 to 1850 reads like a litany of confirmation of the conclusions of Seymour and Gash. And this is before the most flagrant acts of violence (in 1857) and corruption (in 1874) which made Kidderminster notorious. However, it is critical not to judge that period by today's standards and not to adopt a high moral tone. Kidderminster was probably little different to many small boroughs with a restricted electorate. Given 400 to 500 voters, of whom 320 to 400 would probably vote, and given what was seen as normal and standard practice at the time, it was inevitable that the rules should be "bent," especially in a relatively poor borough.

Elections in early Victorian England seem to have been like Christmas. Firstly they brought in much needed revenue to the tradesmen, particularly the publicans. Secondly, they seem to have been an occasion for public celebration. The reports reveal a gala spirit. The town was awash with the colours of the rival parties – red and blue – and their symbols – laurel and oak boughs. There were bands, Negroes playing side drums, fife bands, nut-men, banners, flags, ribbons and festoons. If, as in 1849, the poll coincided with market day, the impression is of a mass open-air carnival. It was a time for revelling and free beer and gluttony. The revelry could quickly give way to drunken brawls between the rival gangs of enforcers. It was also a time to be rewarded for having the vote by the receipt of rival bids. The non-voters seem to have participated in the jollification just as much as the voters. They could not be paid for their vote but they could rely on free beer to act as supporters.

The most telling comment on the issue of violence and corruption is a fascinating letter to the Kidderminster Shuttle in February 1881 from “A Rambler” which deserves to be quoted at length.⁷⁹

“I well remember the fearful riots which were associated with the great strike referred to, [1828], when shops were pillaged, thousands of squares of glass broken, and much valuable property destroyed. As a result, many persons were prosecuted and imprisoned and the town was burdened for many years with troops of military. I have a strong notion that the consequences of that strike, from the estrangement of employers and employed, have largely entered into many political contests since it occurred; and I am not sure that its effects have completely discontinued even at this distant date, for party feeling, like disease, gets handed down from father to son. Mr. Godson was the great legal advocate of the men indicted and as a result, became the political champion of the people. Kidderminster, therefore, for many years sent to Parliament a representative that opposed those great measures [the repeal of the Corn Laws], which have since proved great blessings to the country and to Kidderminster, especially. Kidderminster gained, soon after its enfranchisement, a notoriety with regard to its Parliamentary elections, the allusion to which, much as I love the town and feel proud of it, has brought a flush to my cheeks many a time. A state of things used exist at elections that, to use the mildest terms, were not creditable to either party, and for which the working people were not the only responsible agents. Not to

⁷⁹ Kidderminster Shuttle 5 February 1881.

mention the means more privately employed, the proceedings and scenes publicly enacted were not of the most pure nature. Every beer and public-house was open for weeks, where men, enflamed by liquor increased the party zeal, which ended in the most brutal conflicts and the creation of much animosity. Each party with the professed object of keeping the peace, hired large numbers of men of not the most orderly of character to defend their party. Just as in the case of strong nations who keep large standing armies, so it happened in the case of these engaged partisans, they would make a trial of their strength and valour, and as a consequence, as these men were supplied with formidable weapons, many revolting and bloody conflicts took place. For the purpose of keeping these respective partisans in order, hundreds of special constables were sworn in and supplied with staves and these officials often came into conflict with the contending parties, and sometimes rather increased than diminished the disorder. A heavy burden would have to be borne somewhere for the maintenance of all those 'keepers of the peace.' Each party had a large number of banners, comprising hundreds of yards of expensive silk. A custom prevailed of the winning party at the close of the poll claiming the banners of the losing party. If the strength of parties was pretty evenly balanced it often happened that this attempt resulted in the most desperate and determined conflict of the whole campaign. I well remember the last of such engagements that I saw, just before my departure for a residence in the north. The hustings were erected near to where the present works of Messrs. Dixon and Green were situated. The contest had been a hot one and both parties had become worked up to the highest pitch of excitement.

As four o'clock, the final hour of the poll approached, the rich and expensive banners of each party were floating in the breeze at the respective side of the hustings. The order went forth from some of the leaders on the winning side that the banners of the defeated were to be captured. The losing side with equal courage and determination, decided to resist the attempt. The more calm viewed the situation and saw the storm brewing that must soon culminate in destructive violence, and many, among whom was the writer, thinking the cause could not be improved by a conflict, withdrew a space and viewed the vengeful scene. Vengeance and resistance were plainly viable(sic) in the countenances of hundreds of partisans and their eyes, if we may use an old figure of speech, almost flashed fire. At length the command was given, and a rush was made which was as stoutly resisted. The two parties were in mortal conflict, manifesting the greatest hatred and engaged in the most deadly strife. Banners were torn to shreds, the poles were broken to pieces and became weapons freely used to belabour former friends and neighbours, and by which many skulls were broken and other violence penetrated".

From a study of the press reports of the elections in the period, it is likely that this letter probably relates to the 1841 poll, but in truth could apply to any of the 1832, 1835 or 1837 elections.

4. INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The history of industrial relations in Kidderminster's carpet industry pre-dates enfranchisement in 1832 and helped to shape parliamentary politics in the borough for nearly two decades afterwards. Godson's defence of the weavers after the 1830 strike riots has already been noted, as has his status as the darling of the mob, a support which he assiduously cultivated.

Godson's triumph in 1847 was short-lived. He died, aged 52, on 1 August 1849. Godson has been credited with forging a strong working-class Conservative tradition in Kidderminster.⁸⁰ This is a bold claim, and probably one which Godson himself would neither have desired or appreciated. He consistently advocated a restriction of further enfranchisement; at least publicly he always distanced himself from the excesses of his supporters, and was conciliatory in defending the 1828 and 1830 rioters. As already noted, with an electorate of between 400 and 550, he must have recognised that the "residuum," by whom he was largely adored, had no vote. What is more, in order to win elections he had to appeal to the actual voters, whom he frequently described as "respectable." This meant creating an alliance between the Church of England and the non-carpet manufacturers – the lawyers, the landlords and the shopkeepers. This was a loose coalition – an alliance of envy – that could be kept together by an unremitting appeal to Church, Crown and Constitution – Godson's slogans.⁸¹ The fact that Godson was the darling of most of the labouring classes, who could generally be relied on to act as enforcers by helping to "persuade" the enfranchised to vote for

⁸⁰Smith, L.D, Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters: The Hand Loom Carpet Weavers Of Kidderminster, (Tomkinson, 1985), p 228.

⁸¹Ten Towns Messenger 20 January 1837.

him was clearly a massive advantage, as long as it remained unspoken and “spontaneous.” The wheels of such spontaneity could be oiled with free drink and good sport. It could be relied upon to see off the Chartists when the Tory mob successfully disrupted their meeting in 1838, but it must not frighten the horses. Instead, Godson, ever the sharp lawyer, neatly trimmed to the prevailing wind and shifted his ground – for example over the Corn Laws – as circumstances dictated.

Having fought the 1835, 1837 and 1841 elections on a protectionist ticket, in 1847 Godson supported free trade with the “object of.....bettering the condition of the labouring classes.”⁸² The Liberals transiently fielded E.J Sartoris, but, given the impact of the 5,000 who greeted Godson on his arrival, and the fact that Godson’s conversion to free trade had robbed them of a key difference in policy, Sartoris withdrew.⁸³ For the first time Godson was elected unopposed. The inherent bitterness between the have-nots (the weavers) and the haves (the manufacturers) could be, and was exploited, but the mileage was limited, and one suspects that Godson knew this. His appeal to principle, prejudice and pelf was a cogent force, which operated successfully at parliamentary elections (but not necessarily so at municipal ones), but one may argue that it was a very personal legacy. Would it die with him?

As a godsend to the Liberals, Best was an ardent Protectionist. This meant that not only was there clear blue water between the parties, but there was a good prospect that the Conservative vote might be split. As noted a second Conservative Crawshay Bailey, did emerge as a candidate.

⁸² Ten Towns Messenger 30 July 1847.

⁸³ Ten Towns Messenger 30 July 1847.

Industrial relations remained poor. In a period of almost continual trade recession, the weavers reorganised, and were heartened by the victory in 1844 of Henry Martin over his employer George Harris in a case of defining completed work. Patchy strikes continued. Blackleg labour was roughed up and there was some damage to mills. By 1849, with rumours rife that the manufacturers were contemplating swingeing pay cuts, the town was restless. Ultimately, the manufacturers climbed down.⁸⁴ Relationships remained strained with a weaver protesting that the manufacturers' claim that a reduction in wages would bring prosperity to Kidderminster was false and merely a means of increasing the capital of the manufacturers at the expense of the workmen.

In the 1849 election the Liberals saw an opportunity to split the weavers' support for the Conservatives by choosing Thomas Gisborne as their candidate. Gisborne was a radical, who supported an extension of the franchise to every man of good character.⁸⁵ They also courted the Chartists and their local leader, George Holloway, shared the platform with Gisborne, who, however, denounced socialism as a system where the industrious and honest worked and the idle and reprobate shared the profits.⁸⁶ Holloway's induction into the house of respectability was reinforced by a further public appearance with Henry Brinton, George Talbot and W H Worth on 29 August. Holloway was overjoyed to see Henry Brinton apparently espouse the cause of Chartism.⁸⁷ The Liberals and Chartists formed the Kidderminster Parliamentary and Financial Reform

⁸⁴ Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 41-43.

⁸⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

⁸⁶ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

⁸⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 5 September 1849.

Association.⁸⁸ The manufacturer James Bough gave a dinner to his weavers, whose spokesman claimed that the Liberals had got the working men at their back.⁸⁹ The rhetoric may have been persuasive but reality was not since Best, claiming to support Kidderminster's trade and manufactures,⁹⁰ won by seventeen votes. "Church, State and Constitution" had been good enough for Godson, and Best repeated the message.⁹¹

The local boy had beaten the outsider. Perhaps Godson had delivered one last victory from the grave. The Poll Book makes interesting reading.⁹² Best carried the South Ward by 118 votes to ninety-one, considerably more than his winning margin. The occupations of the voters are significant. 108 of Best's votes came from publicans (forty-three), gentlemen (eleven) and shopkeepers (fifty-four) against twenty-two publicans, seven gentlemen and thirty-three shopkeepers for Gisborne - an overall margin of forty-six. Against this, the carpet trade (manufacturers and weavers) voted forty-two to twenty-eight in favour of Gisborne. The voter who described himself as a scavenger voted Tory.

The old alliance of the envious publicans and shopkeepers had just held sway, but clearly the impact of the Chartist/Liberal axis had begun to dent the Conservative vote. Unfortunately this is the first Poll Book to survive, but it indicates clearly the identifiable bases of support for each party, at least in 1849. Turnout was 84.4 per cent.

⁸⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 12 September 1849.

⁸⁹ Worcestershire Chronicle 10 October 1849.

⁹⁰ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

⁹¹ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

⁹² A List of Parties Who Voted for Each Candidate, George Friend, Kidderminster 1849.

The absence of Poll Books before the 1849 election obviously means that objective evidence of voter occupations is lacking. Indeed, even with the evidence of the 1849 Poll Book, it is difficult to draw conclusions, because it represented the first election of the post-Godson era; because Best was a local man – the first candidate of either party to have been born in the borough; because Best was an ardent Protectionist, which may have split the Conservative vote; and because his opponent was more radical than previous Liberal candidates. For the prior period we must rely on the notoriously partisan local press – The Ten Towns Messenger and The Worcestershire Chronicle, both of which reported politics in partisan editorial style.

However, for the period 1832 to 1849, certain preliminary observations may be made about the links between industrial relations and politics. Relations between employer and employed in a largely working class town dangerously dependent on a luxury product were always likely to be volatile. In the age of the hand-loom weaver, the relationship between the weavers and the manufacturers was at best an armed truce and at worst outright conflict. The era was beset by strikes and violence. The most notable industrial disruption was in 1828, followed by 1830. The choice of Richard Godson as the Conservative candidate was to a large extent inspired. He was relatively local (from Tenbury Wells), his watchwords were simple and patriotic and he appealed to an established order of things likely to be attractive to a society facing change and to the hardships of the workers who tended to bear the cost of that change. Crucially, he was the hero of the weavers. Most of them could not vote, but they were loyal, especially if “treated”, and usefully resentful of outsiders and their masters. This, together with his

undoubted other political skills, may explain Godson's successes from 1832 to 1849 but his was probably a personal following, which could not necessarily be exploited by his successors unless they copied his methods. Indeed, it is open to question whether, even if he had lived, he could have continued to be successful in a period which would shortly be transformed by a brutal technological revolution. By 1849 the sun of the hand-loom weaver had almost set. Godson could, and did, capture the spirit of that age, but it essentially passed away with him. In retrospect, he may be seen as the father of working class conservatism in Kidderminster, but this is to apply the "straight line" approach to history. And it is not how he would have seen himself. In all probability he would have been appalled at the title.

5. RELIGION

The research assesses the political importance of the religious divide in Kidderminster. Gilbert has claimed, probably fairly, that although the non-conformists were well-represented in Kidderminster, this does not necessarily mean that the town was progressive.⁹³ Certainly in religion a conservative tradition remained. Loyalty to Protestantism was demonstrated by an Orange Lodge until 1836, when it was compulsorily disbanded. This is perhaps unusual in a town which Catholicism was insignificant – by 1851 Roman Catholics were less than 2 per cent of the population. The Orangemen proclaimed their loyalty to William III and asserted that they wished to preserve the rights of the crown.⁹⁴

⁹³ Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), p 103.

⁹⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 17 January 1833.

The tone of religious division was set in the 1832 election. At his celebratory public dinner Richard Godson ostentatiously proposed a toast to the health of the clergy of Kidderminster and in particular the Vicar, the Reverend William Villers. During the election Godson had quarrelled with a Baptist Minister, Mr Smith, over slavery,⁹⁵ while the battle lines were drawn between Godson, an Anglican, and Philips, who was sponsored by the Unitarians.⁹⁶ The conflict between the alliance of carpet manufacturers and dissenters, the Liberal coalition, and the Anglican shopkeepers and landlords, the Conservative axis, would be intensified over the period. In January 1834 the Dissenters met and petitioned the government for relief from church rates, the power to celebrate marriages and burials, the right to attend the universities, and for a non-partisan registration of births, deaths and marriages. Significantly three of the four lay speakers were carpet manufacturers – William Brinton, Henry Brinton and Thomas Hopkins.⁹⁷ The Anglicans replied in February with a motion expressing unshaken confidence in the established church. This time the lay speakers included the High Bailiff and Godson’s sponsor in the 1835 election, William Boycot Senior.⁹⁸

At the 1835 election G. R. Philips was supported by the Dissenters and Godson by “many of the leading members of the Church.”⁹⁹ During the nomination Philips denied Godson’s claim that he was a Unitarian but did support the entry of Dissenters into the universities. Pressed by Henry Brinton as to his position on church rates, Godson ducked the issue because Peel had already stated that he would abolish them. However, Godson confirmed that he would not allow

⁹⁵ Worcester Herald 1 December 1832.

⁹⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 October 1832.

⁹⁷ Turberville, T.C, Worcestershire in the Nineteenth Century, (Longman, 1852), p 72.

⁹⁸ Turberville, op.cit., p 72.

⁹⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 14 December 1834.

Dissenters into the universities because it would lead to the separation of Church and State,¹⁰⁰ and repeated this sentiment in his letter to the electorate following his defeat.¹⁰¹ Critically, Godson ascribed his defeat to the efforts of the Dissenting ministers not only in mobilising the Liberal vote, but in persuading Anglicans to vote Liberal, accusing them of putting private interest ahead of the church.¹⁰² This might be dismissed as sour grapes had not Phillips, at his victory dinner, emphasised his belief in church reform and proposed a toast to the dissenting ministers. Their representative Dr Ross claimed that “the efforts of the Dissenting bodies in the town had, in a great degree, contributed to” Phillips’ election and that Dissenters had voted overwhelmingly for him.¹⁰³

By 1837 Godson had developed his “Church, King and Constitution” banners. At his candidate’s dinner the first toast was “Church and King – may their union be indissoluble.” He did, however, become somewhat more conciliatory, claiming to have votes of both Dissenters and Anglicans and to be addressing at least six different denominations in his audience. He proclaimed religious toleration but was insistent on church rates, in order, he claimed, to help the poor. He ascribed to the opponents of church rates the “sentiments of politics rather than conscience.”¹⁰⁴ He went on to condemn the government plan to divert the revenue from church lands to build churches as separation of church and state by the back door, which would lead to the payment of tithes to a Dissenting minister rather than the minister of the national and established church. He concluded by

¹⁰⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 8 January 1835.

¹⁰¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 15 January 1835.

¹⁰² Berrows Worcester Journal 15 January 1835.

¹⁰³ Berrows Worcester Journal 19 February 1835.

¹⁰⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 20 January 1837.

accusing Melbourne of adultery and the Whig government of excluding Anglicans from Queen Victoria's inner circle.¹⁰⁵

Clearly Godson was responding to the town meeting held in March 1837 on the subject of church rates, which aroused strong emotions. Woodward and Pardoe (staunch Conservatives and Anglicans) condemned the proposal to abolish church rates. They were inevitably opposed by Henry Brinton, who proclaimed himself a Dissenter, on the grounds that it was unfair on non-conformists to be required to support a church in which they did not believe. Thomas Simcox Lea (another carpet manufacturer) who had become an Anglican, despite a non-conformist background, condemned the Unitarians and Quakers, as well as the Roman Catholics, and implied that it was a sacred duty to pay church rates. William Boycott continued the attack. The result was as might have been expected. All resolutions condemned the proposed abolition, and to add insult to the Dissenters' injury, the meeting closed with toasts to "Church and King," "the Bishops" and Godson.¹⁰⁶ The petition was signed by 2,200 people.

In the 1837 election Godson continued his attack on his Liberal opponent, Bagshaw, by accusing him of voting for the destruction of the church (among other charges), which Bagshaw denied.¹⁰⁷ Feelings ran high. At a public meeting in support of the incumbent MP, Philips (who later withdrew), two Dissenting ministers accused the Ten Towns Messenger of being a "vile press" full of calumnies and vilification against the Dissenters and threatened to get rid of church rates as the Irish had got rid of tithes. From the style of reporting the

¹⁰⁵ Ten Towns Messenger 28 July 1837.

¹⁰⁶ Ten Towns Messenger 24 March 1837.

¹⁰⁷ Ten Towns Messenger 14 July 1837.

Messenger clearly regarded this as a compliment to its Anglican stance.¹⁰⁸ Certainly while he was MP, Philips presented a petition from the Dissenters in Kidderminster proposing the abolition of church rates.¹⁰⁹ A handbill denounced this as separation of church and state.¹¹⁰

Godson's victory in 1837 may have been influenced by Philips' decision not to stand against him, by the fact that Bagshaw was a London banker, but also by Godson's skill in whipping up Anglican fervour. In 1841, having damned Godson's Liberal opponent, Samson Ricardo, for daring to visit the parish church accompanied by a Unitarian, the Ten Towns Messenger lovingly reported Godson's devotion to religious liberty, and his personal abuse of Rennie, the original Liberal candidate, and Ricardo.¹¹¹ Perhaps because Ricardo in his speeches grudgingly reported by the Messenger did not raise the issue of church rates, and because certainly at a national level the Whigs had by now abandoned the issue, religion does not seem to have played a major part in the 1841 election.

However, it was never far from the surface. In 1842 the New Meeting House Minister, Richard Fry died. Previously there had been no problems about burying non-conformists in the parish church, but the curate insisted that burial there would be a tacit acknowledgement that Fry was no longer a Dissenter. After protracted wrangling Fry was eventually buried in front of the New Meeting Chapel.¹¹² Religious division could be internecine as well as inter-denominational. In the 1843 election for churchwarden of Kidderminster, which held valuable

¹⁰⁸ Ten Towns Messenger 13 January 1837.

¹⁰⁹ Ten Towns Messenger 17 March 1837.

¹¹⁰ Handbill in Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹¹¹ Ten Towns Messenger 5 July 1841.

¹¹² Gilbert, op.cit., p 104.

patronage, James Hooman, a carpet manufacturer, defeated Thomas Hair, a lawyer, by 420 votes to 186, prompting Hair to accuse the Ten Towns Messenger of lack of independence and Hooman of exerting undue influence.¹¹³ Further excitement was only dissipated in 1849 when one of the candidates withdrew.

Godson was unopposed in 1847, but this did not prevent him from delivering an impassioned speech defending his support of Anglicanism, despite voting for the Maynooth Grant and the Dissenters' Chapel Bill.¹¹⁴ He also sent five guineas to the Old Meeting House for new schools and two guineas to the New Meeting House for their charity schools, perhaps because his potential Liberal opponent, E. J. Sartoris, had proclaimed absolute religious freedom, particularly in regard to education.¹¹⁵

The 1849 election was fought very much on the issue of Free Trade. Best's handbill proclaimed "Church, State and Constitution,"¹¹⁶ but this may perhaps be seen as Godson's inheritance. Religious divisions did not feature in the nomination speeches,¹¹⁷ but in 1850 the election for Vestry Clerk, won by Saunders against Tudor, was marked by the abstention of the Liberals and hints of corruption.¹¹⁸

There can be little doubt that at least part of Godson's success was his judicious use of the "Church in Danger" card. It was obvious to all that a majority of the

¹¹³ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹¹⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 30 July 1847.

¹¹⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 28 July 1847.

¹¹⁶ Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹¹⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 5 September 1849 and 15 August 1849.

¹¹⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 10 April 1850.

Kidderminster carpet-manufacturer elite were non-conformist. They also tended to vote Liberal. So defence of the Church of England became a pillar of Godson's axis. It may well have been that Godson was a sincere Anglican, but, whether or not, he exploited the latent envy of the disadvantaged against the prosperous. By effectively claiming that his opponents aimed to subvert the constitution, either by excessive reform or by undermining the church, he could deliver electoral success. Perhaps tellingly, the religious card was only played when his opponent could be vilified as a dissenter. Where there was no need to do so, religious division ceased to be an issue. Godson clearly learned from the experience of 1835, when Philips managed to capture some Anglican votes as well as mobilising the non-conformists.

In 1837 and 1841 Bagshaw and Ricardo were not in the same league as Philips and could be defeated by more traditional means. In addition, after 1837 radical church reform had ceased to be official Whig/Liberal policy.¹¹⁹ Godson's skill was to persuade a generally conservative, introverted and backward-looking community that his opponents were aiming to destroy the structure of society, whether they were marginalized from that society or not, and whether they regularly attended church or not. Godson tended to run "negative campaigns," damning his opponents' policies (and personalities) rather than defending his own, perhaps a forerunner of "bogeyman" politics. On the Liberal side, we may never know whether their candidates' support of Dissenting issues, such as relief from church rates and entry into university, was due to genuine belief or a realisation that sponsorship by the carpet manufacturers came at a price.

¹¹⁹ Briggs, A, The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867, (Longman, 1979), p 285.

6. LOCAL AND NATIONAL ISSUES

It might have been expected that the Conservatives, who throughout this period fielded a “local” candidate, would focus on parochial issues in order to consolidate their power base in Kidderminster. This tended not to be borne out in practice. It is clear that town meetings on important national issues were held and petitions made to the Sovereign and to Parliament. Thus sixty-three of the town’s worthies petitioned King William IV in 1832 “to call to your councils such persons only as will carry into effect, unimpaired all the essential provisions of [The Reform Act]”¹²⁰ Even earlier in March 1831 a town meeting denounced “the oligarchy of Borough managers obstinately bent...upon continuing the present corrupt and unconstitutional system of representation” and asking the King to support reform.¹²¹ This followed a similar set of resolutions in February 1831.¹²²

What was important was that Godson was first in the field, his name being put forward in June 1831. Philips was the Whigs’ third choice, after Russell, who resigned in January 1832 to become a judge in India, and Fox, who did not pull out until June 1832, having bequeathed his votes, particularly among the Dissenters, to Philips.¹²³ In a speech to his supporters in April 1831, Godson set out his qualifications – he was local; he was independent (a sly dig at Russell); he supported reform as bringing back the “old constitution”; he supported prudent reform of the church; he supported free trade; he supported emancipation of slaves (although he had West Indian estates worth £50,000). He claimed to be

¹²⁰ Worcester Herald 19 May 1832, Berrows Worcester Journal 15 May 1832.

¹²¹ Worcester Herald 19 March 1831, Berrows Worcester Journal 24 March 1831.

¹²² Berrows Worcester Journal 24 February 1831.

¹²³ Berrows Worcester Journal 21 June 1832.

independent of party. Interestingly he called on his supporters to organise themselves and was grateful for the help of the ladies.¹²⁴ Because he entered the contest late, Philips' policies are not recorded. These became apparent in the 1835 election.

At Godson's victory dinner on 9 January 1833, there was a flag inscribed "Success to the town and trade of Kidderminster." In his speech Godson once again proclaimed his independence, with "Forward" as his motto. He emphasised his local status, attacked his opponents' dirty tricks and proclaimed his principles of "Property, Government and Religion."¹²⁵ What is clear from the evidence is that the 1832 election was fought, at least publicly, entirely on national issues – primarily on the degree of reform.

In 1835 Godson still proclaimed his independence, neither a Whig or a Tory, and stressed his credentials as a reformer.¹²⁶ Philips claimed that he was an Anglican, but did support the entry of Dissenters into the universities. He too was a "real" reformer.¹²⁷ There was no mention by either of any local issues apart from mutual mud-slinging about who had started the mud-slinging. At his victory dinner, Philips regretted that the "irritation of the contest" continued, but repeated his belief in the Church of England. He claimed to be independent of masters and men in trade disputes. The only local mention was the obligatory toast to "the town and trade of Kidderminster."¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 4 April 1831.

¹²⁵ Worcester Herald 12 January 1833, Berrows Worcester Journal 17 January 1833.

¹²⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 8 January 1835 and 11 September 1834.

¹²⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 8 January 1835.

¹²⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 19 February 1835.

In 1837 the nomination process was adversarial. James Morton accused the Whig government of continuing in office against the wishes of William IV, and accused Bagshaw of voting for the abolition of church rates. Godson accused Bagshaw of renegeing on his debts. In a rare descent into local issues, Godson accused Henry Brinton of promising never to oppose him again and then not keeping his word. Godson accused the Whig Government of submitting to the power of Russia and of disastrous foreign policy in Spain, Portugal and France and Ireland. He followed this with an attack on the non-conformists and the proposal to abolish church rates. In summary, he claimed that the government was not fit to govern. “They have sold their country and their religion for the pay of their seats.” They would separate church and state and they would prevent Queen Victoria from choosing her own advisers. With a final aside at the tyranny of Oliver Cromwell, Godson concluded with an appeal to the independence of Kidderminster and the watch-word “Forward.” Bagshaw gently complained that he had listened to a two-hour speech about nothing. He defended the Whig government and his own actions as MP for Sudbury and he gave his watchword as “God defend the Right.”¹²⁹ Clearly God decided that Bagshaw was wrong! He lost by 198 votes to 157.

Godson’s speech was essentially a replay of his address reported on 14 July 1837, but without the references to outside thugs and bribery by Philips at the 1835 election, and to the iniquities of the Poor Law Bill. Once again he accused his opponent of being an outsider who bribed his way to victory at Sudbury. In a moment of honesty (or irony) he advised his audience to “demand good prices for

¹²⁹ Ten Towns Messenger 28 July 1837.

yourselves; if you are to be sold like pigs, at least get the payment of fat pigs.”¹³⁰

At the Kidderminster Conservative dinner after the election victory, the local party elite celebrated their triumph and proclaimed their loyalty to the sovereign, church and state.¹³¹

In the 1841 election, Godson’s supporters praised him for upholding the constitution and voting against the Poor Law Bill. He had also opposed Free Trade. The Liberals were accused of attempting to bribe the electors. As usual the Liberals were on the back foot, denying the charges. However, Ricardo was presented as in favour of both extension of the franchise and also religious liberty. Godson’s riposte was to accuse Rennie (the first choice Liberal candidate) both of bribery and running away. Ricardo was denounced as a nobody. Godson was still a reformer (in his own eyes), an advocate of civil and religious liberty. Free Trade was “mere clap-trap.” To the Messenger’s delight most of Samson Ricardo’s speech was drowned out – certainly the paper declined to print more than a few lines on his devotion to free trade and his disappointment that the contest was not carried on in a more kindly spirit.¹³² Ricardo’s letter of defeat blamed Godson’s victory on “the extraordinary exertions of his [Godson’s] friends, and the unexpected appearance of some voters who had promised neutrality”¹³³ (which is probably a coded reference to bribery). Ricardo deplored the unpleasant spirit in which the contest was fought and the intimidation of voters, but he remained an advocate of Free Trade, which he believed would increase demand for carpets and

¹³⁰ Ten Towns Messenger 14 July 1837.

¹³¹ Ten Towns Messenger 8 September 1837.

¹³² Ten Towns Messenger 2 July 1841.

¹³³ Handbill 6 July 1841 Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

therefore additional labour and higher wages – at last a concrete reference to Kidderminster.

Godson's "conversion" to Free Trade handed him the 1847 election on a plate and he was unopposed. As noted, at his nomination he defended his voting in Parliament for the Maynooth Grant and the Dissenters' Endowment Bill. He had voted against the Poor Law Bill. He supported the Health of Towns Bill but demanded locally appointed officers.¹³⁴

In 1849 the first time the Conservative vote was split. John Best was first to declare, on a Protectionist ticket. He capitalised on his local background: "Born and bred among you and enjoying intimate acquaintance with most of the inhabitants and Knowledge of your Trade and Manufacturers.... Your interests [are] my interests." He pledged to support the prosperity of Kidderminster's town and trade and the welfare of its inhabitants. He also emphasised his support for church, state and constitution¹³⁵ and promised to work for the benefit of all classes in Kidderminster.¹³⁶ His supporters composed a song "I'm for Best, he's our townsman."¹³⁷ As noted, Best was opposed by Thomas Gisborne for the Liberals, and temporarily also by Crawshay Bailey, a slightly less protectionist Conservative from South Wales, who was supported by the Anglican clergy and possibly by Lord Ward, the local financier and industrialist. Bailey withdrew, but failed to give his supporters, led by Joseph Boycot, clear instructions on how to

¹³⁴ Worcestershire Chronicle 4 August 1847, Ten Towns Messenger 30 July 1847.

¹³⁵ Handbill 7 August 1849 Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹³⁶ Handbill 5 September 1849 Danks Archive, BA5278, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹³⁷ Palfrey Collection, Vol 11b BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

vote.¹³⁸ The Chronicle had revelled in the split in the Conservative vote. Now it was a straight fight.

Gisborne proclaimed his desire to extend the suffrage “to every man of good character” but probably missed a trick by refusing to confirm that he would promote a Ten Hour’s bill for the carpet weavers of Kidderminster.¹³⁹ Not to be outdone by Best, Gisborne’s supporters produced their own song: Gisborne and Reform – “Our struggle is for liberty, suffrage and free corn”¹⁴⁰ Gisborne also supported reduction in government expenditure and an end to the bitter strife between classes and between the employers and their workmen. Best took up the cudgels, promising to be a “protector of native industry” and to advocate the Ten Hours’ Bill.¹⁴¹ He claimed that financial reform was emptying other people’s pockets and filling those of the Whigs. He angrily denied that Gisborne was the friend of the working man. But the Kidderminster Operatives met on 21 August 1849 to support Gisborne and to claim the franchise, reduction in public expenditure and free trade.¹⁴²

The evidence up to 1847 appears to confirm that national issues were more important than purely local concerns. It is true that some national debates had a local impact or at least interest. This is more true of Free Trade than of further reform of parliament or church rates or temperance or the politics of Queen Victoria’s advisers. As in many other towns and cities the worthies of Kidderminster were interested in and supported parliamentary reform, since they

¹³⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 22 August 1849.

¹³⁹ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 August 1849.

¹⁴⁰ Palfrey Collection, Vol 11b BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁴¹ Worcestershire Chronicle 29 August 1849.

¹⁴² Worcestershire Chronicle 29 August 1849.

would benefit from the vote. But during the Godson era, there was no overt attempt to spell out the impact of any of these issues on the constituency. One doubts whether the Whig government's foreign policy towards Portugal meant anything at all to most Kidderminster voters, let alone the intricacies of the Maynooth Grant. Instead Godson needed to keep his loose alliance together by denouncing everything that the Liberal government and their local supporters, who tended to be carpet manufacturers and Dissenters, held dear. So he was an ardent supporter of church rates and of no further reform of parliament. As stated, this appeal to "traditional values" was calculated to strike a chord. On Free Trade, Godson trimmed. If his opponent was a free-trader, Godson was protectionist; but in 1847 he changed again to secure an unopposed nomination.

7. MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Following the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, borough councils were subject to elections on an annual basis and it was difficult to avoid some sort of political allegiance whether or not a person was a voter. While the Conservatives dominated parliamentary elections from 1832 to 1849 municipal polls were more closely fought. The parties initially agreed in 1835 that there should be no contested elections,¹⁴³ but the actual outcome was that the Conservatives won sixteen of the eighteen seats.

Flushed with their success in 1835 the Conservative Council submitted a list of six (all Conservatives) as magistrates for the borough.¹⁴⁴ Lord John Russell (the

¹⁴³ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 29.

¹⁴⁴ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 29.

Whig prime minister) refused to accept it, and replaced them with two Whigs.¹⁴⁵ The council regarded this as “not satisfactory,” with commendable restraint.¹⁴⁶ The council also noted that a debt of £1,600 had been incurred by the old council in obtaining a new charter.¹⁴⁷ It became clear that all the corporation’s assets were mortgaged and that expenditure on the interest exceeded rents from the properties.¹⁴⁸ The council owed £850 to a prominent Liberal Dissenter, Joseph Newcombe.¹⁴⁹

By contrast the Liberals had a clean sweep in 1836 and the Conservatives did not contest any seats until 1838.¹⁵⁰ This does not corroborate the consistency of voting patterns which Salmon seeks to claim. There was a real difference between municipal and parliamentary elections. The Messenger naturally blamed the Liberal successes in the 1836 local elections on bribery by drink (“a quart of beer”) and perversely noted the death of a member of the Temperance Society who had ordered a cup of coffee.¹⁵¹ The Conservative Morton claimed that the defeat was due to “artful manoeuvres” by the Liberals who, in order to prejudice the electors, had claimed that the previous council had sanctioned enormous expense of £1,200 on the Guildhall.¹⁵² The parties also squabbled about control of Witnell’s Alms Charities, with Liberal councillors trying to replace the old members of the corporation on the board, a clear case of the importance attributed to the distribution of local patronage. In the 1836 borough revision, the Conservatives managed to strike off nineteen Liberals, against one Conservative.

¹⁴⁵ Turberville, *op.cit.*, p 287.

¹⁴⁶ Minutes of Kidderminster Corporation 1 February 1836.

¹⁴⁷ Minutes of Kidderminster Corporation 30 May 1836.

¹⁴⁸ Minutes of Kidderminster Corporation 20 January 1836.

¹⁴⁹ Minutes of Kidderminster Corporation 20 January 1836.

¹⁵⁰ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 29.

¹⁵¹ Ten Towns Messenger 4 November 1836.

¹⁵² Berrows Worcester Journal 23 December 1836.

The ratepayers, ever concerned about the level of their payments, were up in arms. A letter from “a large ratepayer” complained that poor relief rates were “extremely burdensome” and “infinitely heavier than those of other manufacturing towns,” and were preventing employment of the labouring classes. The writer complained that a very large proportion of the property in the borough escaped the burden of poor rates. For 2,510 houses with an average annual value of around £6, which were occupied by labourers, it had been impossible to collect rates.¹⁵³ The Messenger continued its attack, blaming Liberal success in the 1836 election on an attempt to convert the council into a “mere assembly for political and party purpose” at the cost to the ratepayers.¹⁵⁴ The Tories fought back by denouncing a letter from the Dissenters’ Church Rate Abolition Committee which had not been stamped. As a result the council had to pay 1s.8d in postage.

The ratepayers continued to complain about excessive costs – the responsibility for the police had been transferred from the Paving Commissioners to the Corporation, but there had been no reduction in lighting costs. W.B. Best (the previous Conservative mayor) was forced to deny that he had “laid burdens unnecessarily on the town and that he had lavishly expended public money.”¹⁵⁵ The cells for confinement of prisoners were “not fit for a dog to live in.” Best claimed a conspiracy by “certain individuals;” Brinton (perhaps sensing Best’s line of attack) agreed that the old corporation had been guilty of “many miserable shifts.” The real reason for the Liberal victory in 1836 may probably be ascribed to their election pledge “to maintain the strictest economy in local expenditure”

¹⁵³ Berrows Worcester Journal 30 December 1836.

¹⁵⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 11 November 1836.

¹⁵⁵ Ten Towns Messenger 18 November 1836.

and “to sanction none but the most economical of the local funds” (despite the slurs on their good names)¹⁵⁶

The 1837 results were a whitewash for the Liberals.¹⁵⁷ As a result all eleven Conservative councillors resigned, denouncing the burgesses for having preferred “listening to the calumnies and misrepresentations, industriously and widely circulated to [our] prejudice by designing and interested persons and having elected... other and untried men.”¹⁵⁸ The Conservatives celebrated the coronation of Queen Victoria on their own.¹⁵⁹ With an absolute majority, the Liberal-dominated council promoted petitions to the House of Commons for a complete repeal of Church rates and opposing the new Poor Law.¹⁶⁰ In an effort to drum up income the council charged forty people with non payment of rent. Many claimed they had withheld payment until the parish settled up for services rendered. The Messenger was appalled at the mere thought of Charles Talbot, a Liberal Dissenter, becoming mayor.¹⁶¹ He did and the Liberals controlled the council from 1837–41. In 1841 the Conservatives enjoyed a revival, returning all six candidates. This was not enough to prevent Worth being elected mayor, but they were successful with their proposals for aldermen.¹⁶²

The Conservatives’ revival was illustrated in January 1842 when the Liberal mayor, William Henry Worth, was censured by the councillors for asking Lord Foley, rather than Richard Godson, to address Queen Victoria on the birth of an

¹⁵⁶ Palfrey Collection Handbills BA3762, dated 24 October 1836 and 2 November 1836, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁵⁷ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁵⁸ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁵⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 11 June 1838.

¹⁶⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 3 February 1837 and 10 February 1837.

¹⁶¹ Gilbert, Town and Borough, p 29.

¹⁶² Extracts from an Old Diary, Kidderminster Shuttle 5 January 1895.

heir to the throne. Best, a Conservative, alleged that the mayor had “deteriorated the respectability of his office” and therefore “forfeited the confidence of the council.”¹⁶³ The Messenger heralded the election of Cooper, a hairdresser, in 1841, arising on the death of the Liberal incumbent, as a victory over “ignorance, arrogance, poverty and presumption.”¹⁶⁴

The 1849 elections were bitter. Since 1843, by arrangement there had been no contest with four Conservatives and two Liberals returned unopposed. The election of Best as MP, had, however, reawakened party spirit. The Conservatives were accused of circulating a fictitious list of Liberal candidates. Holloway was back in harness supporting the Liberals.¹⁶⁵ The results of the 1849 election were three councillors for each party – the Conservatives winning two seats in the South ward and the Liberals two in the North ward. Both parties treated their supporters to a yard of beef and a quart of ale for breakfast. In total there were 436 voters. The Conservatives were accused of bringing one voter so old that he was unable to enter the booth and of filling in the voting paper of an illiterate against his preference. The Chronicle claimed that only twelve voters did not vote. Since five of the retiring councillors were Conservatives, this was a net gain to the Liberals. The election of one of the Liberal candidates was challenged on the grounds of corruption.¹⁶⁶ Sadly we do not know the outcome of this claim.

The 1850 election was equally hotly contested. “Vexatious” accused the Conservatives of having “allowed the town to be taxed to the tune of £400

¹⁶³ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁶⁴ Ten Towns Messenger 29 January 1841.

¹⁶⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 24 October 1849.

¹⁶⁶ Worcestershire Chronicle 7 November 1849.

annually.”¹⁶⁷ The result of the election was a six-nil victory for the Liberals. The announcement was greeted by “Three cheers for Gisborne” and “No bread tax.” Victory was ascribed to Liberal unity, with 109 plumpers being achieved. Henry Brinton accused the Conservatives of trying to “nullify the popular vote” by packing the Aldermen with party nominees who could not have won a council election. All the successful candidates promised their full attention to council business. The Liberals did not, however, get their way with the election of the mayor. The vote was tied twelve-twelve and William Boycot junior cast his deciding vote in favour of a fellow Conservative, William Grosvenor.¹⁶⁸ At the elections themselves the Liberals had attempted unsuccessfully to claim seventy-six voters whose rates were compounded by their landlords.¹⁶⁹

There is clear evidence that municipal elections mattered. They mattered to the parties since control over offices gave rise to patronage. They mattered to the voters because as ratepayers they were determined to drive public expenditure down. Indeed surviving “manifestos” are virtually identical, irrespective of party, all claiming to control costs and keep the rates down. Certainly this may help to explain why the council was so dilatory in any proposal to improve public health, from which the labourers would benefit predominantly at the expense of the ratepayers.

Until the real bitterness of the 1849 election, all the issues dealt with in municipal elections were local ones and the minutes of the corporation indicate that the prime concern of the councillors was to squabble over public expenditure and over

¹⁶⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 5 June 1850.

¹⁶⁸ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁶⁹ Worcestershire Chronicle 2 October 1850.

the control of local charities. There were some references to the repeal of the Corn Laws, but only towards the end of the period. The town meeting was used instead to whip up party support over issues such as church rates, the poor law and the extension of the rates to landlords of low value houses, as well as the extension of the railway line through Kidderminster.

Kidderminster voters do not seem not to have regarded consistency of voting in parliamentary and municipal elections as much of a virtue. As has been seen, Godson dominated the parliamentary scene over the period. At the same time, the Liberals enjoyed frequent success at the municipal elections, predominantly in 1836, 1837 and the 1840s, providing the mayor on six occasions. The difference is hardly surprising. The electors were voting for different things, although in both cases money was a factor. In the local elections the real driving force was to cut rates to the minimum level possible. Of course some inducement to vote for a particular party was welcome, if offered, but this was unlikely to outweigh the prime decision – which party would control costs the best.

At least perhaps until 1849 and 1850 there appears to have been no thought that a vote for the Conservatives in a parliamentary election must translate into a vote for the Conservatives in a council election. Of course there must have been a considerable number of party activists who did vote consistently, but the patterns of voting do not bear out Salmon's core theses – consistency of voting and the predominance of national issues at local elections. Perhaps the local elections were a more accurate picture of voter opinion. They took place each year and, at least over time as six councillors out of 18 were elected annually, they determined

the rates burden for the following year. Parliamentary elections were very different. Nationally they might only occur every seven years. But these were fought almost exclusively on national issues and, as the research shows, were seen as theatre and an integral part of the local economy, occasions when money was brought into the borough. Of course many voters would have been consistent in their support at both national and local levels, but Kidderminster does not bear out the argument of voter loyalty. There are too many anomalies to be explained away.

Likewise, it may be argued that Godson's loose coalition of those excluded from the ruling elite – the solicitor, the Anglican, the shopkeeper and the publican – who were essentially voting against the Liberal Dissenter carpet-manufacturers who controlled the town's trade and therefore wealth, could not be held together on an annual basis. The landlord would support Godson because it meant more income around election day; but he could equally vote for a Liberal Councillor if he trusted the Liberals to keep the rates down.

Even so, it should not be assumed that local elections were "pure." In a later period they would be perhaps even more tainted than parliamentary elections. But the amounts of money on offer would tend to be lower. Ebenezer Guest, a Liberal teetotaller, much later recalled the conduct of municipal elections in the 1830s. There was always a good substantial breakfast for voters from eight to eleven at the Wheat Sheaf and the Talbot for Tory and Whig parties respectively. The committee men, party clerks and "stalwarts" tucked in to toast, ham and eggs and cold meat, and tea laced with brandy. At 7:45am they left for the Town Hall to

round up doubtful voters. A discerning voter could split his vote and enjoy breakfast at one inn and lunch at another.¹⁷⁰ Crucially, this was regarded as perfectly reasonable and acceptable. In the days before the secret ballot such behaviour by both the candidate and the elector was the norm. Only the losers complained. Parliamentary elections were an occasion for revelry. The town was decked in the banners of the rival parties and polling was, at its most euphemistic level, boisterous. Municipal elections were on a much more modest scale, but there is something of the circus about both.

8. SUMMARY

There can be no doubt that in terms of parliamentary elections, Richard Godson spanned the age from 1832 to 1849. He managed to create an alliance of envy which won four elections out of five in a period when the Conservatives generally were second-best, and particularly in the boroughs of England. He was a rabble-rouser, expert in saying what his audience wanted to hear at the time. His simple watchwords of “Church, Crown and Constitution” appealed to those voters and non-voters alike who felt ostracised by the successful carpet-manufacturers. He focused on his target audience. If his opponents were mainly Dissenters, he was an ardent supporter of the Church of England; if they were employers he appealed to the employed.

He also rewarded loyalty. After his victory in the 1832 election he held a banquet, with free drink and a band, for those (and only those) who had voted for him. 168 of the 172 took up his offer.¹⁷¹ He was a master of personal abuse, trading on his

¹⁷⁰ Old Kidderminster, Kidderminster Shuttle January 1905.

¹⁷¹ Worcester Herald 12 January 1833.

local background and distrust of “foreigners.” Whatever he said, he was the darling of the mob, whom he used as persuasive “enforcers.” When the Liberals retaliated in 1835, he cried foul. He saw off the Chartists with ease. But he managed to develop and “legitimise” the mob, so that by 1849 they were part of the fabric of party organisation. He was helped by a generally favourable press (the Messenger and the Journal) whose combined circulation exceeded the rival Chronicle. As noted, he appealed to principle, prejudice and pelf. Perhaps principle and prejudice in equal measure, but always bonded by the ubiquitous cement of money.

He was accused of being a weathercock particularly over the Corn Laws, where he shifted his ground for Free Trade to Protectionism and back again as the political barometer changed. Perhaps he wanted to ingratiate himself with the necessary powers to become a judge. A contemporary handbill jingle describes him as “Jim Crow” - “out of place he’d never go, to keep it how he’d wheel about.”¹⁷² He made sure he was the first to declare his candidacy and was often helped by the fact that the Liberals’ eventual candidate was not their first choice. He was a politician ideally suited to his age. But that age was about to change, and there is real doubt that Godson could have changed with it. His early death at the age of 52 has enabled observers to credit him with being the father of working-class Conservatism in Kidderminster.¹⁷³ It is doubtful whether Godson saw himself as such, and he would probably have been horrified at the title.

¹⁷² Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁷³ Smith, op.cit., p 228.

His loose alliance was fit for purpose, but it was not suitable for the hurly-burly of day-to-day local politics. Indeed Godson's public stance was always to concentrate on national issues, where he could engender fear and resentment. His slogans were simple but vague; it was enough that his opponents were out to destroy them.

What does seem clear is that Kidderminster from 1832 to 1850 resembles more the Gash view of politics than that of Philips and Wetherell on two key counts. Firstly, there is no consistent pattern of voting between municipal and parliamentary elections. After the Conservative landslide of 1835 the Liberals were generally more successful in elections to the council, although Godson remained the MP. Secondly, there can be little doubt that, even though Kidderminster was enfranchised in 1832 and therefore had no tradition of bribery to which to live down, there was indiscriminate treating and at the very least selective bribery. Even if one discounts the massive amounts quoted by the losers that the victors spent, it rather looks as though the cost ran to about £10 per voter, or £4,000 per election. The amount spent directly on voters may actually have been less than that spent on non-voters, since the "enforcers" on both sides would need to be fed and aled. Perhaps Rennie's is the most telling comment - that the expenditure required to win in Kidderminster was more than he was inclined to invest.

In one area, however, Gash appears to be incorrect. He describes Kidderminster as a proprietary borough under the control of Lord Ward.¹⁷⁴ It is certainly true

¹⁷⁴ Gash, N, Politics in the Age of Peel. A study in the technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830-1850, (Longman, 1953), p 438.

that Ward made substantial purchases of property in Kidderminster¹⁷⁵ and that in 1838 he bought up the Foley estates.¹⁷⁶ Foley had been High Steward of Kidderminster, so there was scope for exercise of influence. But the only reference to Ward is a solitary toast (without reply) to him as a local magnate at the Conservative Association Meeting in September 1837.¹⁷⁷ If Ward did have anything like the control claimed, it seems inconceivable that he would have backed a loser like Bailey in 1849 election. If anything Ward seems to have been a free-trader at heart and it is known that he “sponsored” Robert Lowe as the Liberal candidate in the 1852 election.

The research for 1832 –1849 has shown the registration process was crucial – at least as much to prevent “enemies” being included on the register as it was to ensure that “friends” were supported and their names incorporated. Party organisation developed as the period progressed. Here the evidence is both interlocking and repetitive as both parties sought to legitimise their use of the non-voters and to organise them into a more respectable force. But in this period the organisation seems generally to be ad hoc, coming into being predominantly at election times.

Industrial relations in Kidderminster were generally at best sullen, and there appears to be in this period little of the factory loyalty which has been claimed for the north-west. This resentment was a useful weapon to a man like Godson who could exploit it.

¹⁷⁵ Ten Towns Messenger 5 June 1837.

¹⁷⁶ Turberville, op.cit., p 314.

¹⁷⁷ Ten Towns Messenger 8 September 1837.

Religion and alcohol also appear to be inter-related strands at least in Kidderminster. Godson's ability to tap into the various strands of principle, prejudice and cash was highly successful. But he left no real legacy, apart from the party machine which could deliver one last victory in 1849 for Best. Godson's was essentially a personal triumph rather than a party success. However he showed the Conservatives how to win parliamentary elections. It is notable that the only two Conservative successes after 1847 were Best in 1849 and Grant in 1865 and 1874. Arguably these victories were achieved by using Godson's methods and certainly both Best and Grant were accused of doing so.

As the Worcestershire Chronicle delicately put it on his death, "truth...forbids us to assign to Mr Godson the praise of strict political consistency."¹⁷⁸ He was a shrewd political operator. In every election he was the first to join the race and made good use of the time. He portrayed himself as a local man and as an independent always appealing to the "Independent Voters of Kidderminster." As befits a barrister he had a quick tongue and specialised in personal abuse of his opponents. His success may be gauged by the presentation to him in 1835 (when he lost) by 1,975 town inhabitants of a silver plate worth £150. The presentation was attended by 7,000 people. The weavers of Pardoe, Hooman and Pardoe also gave him a carpet.¹⁷⁹

This changed in 1849 when the Conservative control of weavers was seriously challenged by an alliance between the Liberals and the Chartists. The impact of Free Trade was spelled out to the inhabitants in radically different ways. Despite the blandishments of votes for all (men), one suspects that Best's victory was

¹⁷⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 8 August 1849.

¹⁷⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 9 April 1835.

rather less a triumph for Protectionism and rather more for his local celebrity status and for his electioneering methods.

Strangely enough in a divided town, only an attack from outside could provide unity. When the Liberal Daily News denounced Kidderminster in 1849 as a borough disgraced by corruption, venality, intimidation and coercion, even the Chronicle was driven to say it was no worse than anywhere else, and a libel on the town and its inhabitants. Nor was the town filthy, unhealthy and disease-ridden. Nor was it true that there were only two “gentlemen” in the town. Nor did the Kidderminster masters treat their workmen like dogs. Nor was there no political opinion, merely personal rivalry.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps the Chronicle protested too much.

¹⁸⁰ Worcestershire Chronicle 26 December 1849.

Chapter 5

“Kill the Pink-Eye” 1851-1864

Robert Lowe - MP for Kidderminster 1852-1859



Kidderminster Public Library

1. INTRODUCTION

The Liberals won all five of the parliamentary elections held in Kidderminster between 1851 and 1864. The town's principal industry of carpet manufacture suffered a severe and prolonged decline and hand-loom weaving was largely replaced by factory production methods. This was mainly financed by Lord Ward, whose industrial and political influence combined with divisions within the Conservative party to achieve political success for the Liberals. However the 1857 election was marked by extreme violence and the attempt to murder the MP Robert Lowe. The research addresses the reasons for this violence and the extent to which legitimate influence replaced bribery and corruption during the period.

2. REGISTRATION AND PARTY ORGANISATION

The electorate in the borough rose from 494 in 1849 to 495 in 1852 and had fallen to 487 by 1859. Playing the registration game remained a clear tactic for both parties, witnessed by Tory allegations on registration claims in the 1862 election. Certainly the formation of a local committee at a tavern to allocate canvassing duties was a tactic well used in Kidderminster.¹

In the 1852 municipal registration for example, the Liberals claimed fifty-two electors of whom forty-five were upheld and made seven objections, of which four were accepted – a net gain of forty-nine votes against the Conservatives, who lodged no claims or objections.² In the parliamentary election for 1852 the Tories objected to forty-eight votes, and succeeded with thirty-six; the Liberals objected

¹ Thomas, J. A, 'The System of Registration and the Development of Party Organisation 1832-1850', *History*, Vol 35, (Feb-Jun 1950), pp. 81-99.

² *Berrows Worcester Journal* 21 October 1852.

to twenty and succeeded with ten – a net gain to the Conservatives of twenty-six.³ All the claims of the Freehold Land Society, a Liberal “front” organisation were rejected. With officers such as Henry Brinton (President), George Turton (Vice President) James Batham (Solicitor) and Ebenezer Guest (Secretary) the Conservatives were bound to object to all their “faggoting” claims” - the splitting of freeholds to create extra votes.⁴ The Liberals also tried to create votes by completing and signing the claim forms on behalf of the occupants. The Conservatives successfully opposed this, and struck out a voter who had not stated on the form the parish in which he lived.⁵ Both sides tried, with patchy success, to strike off opposition defaulters on rates.⁶ In the 1858 registration process both parties successfully objected to ten voters, thus cancelling each other out.⁷ Indeed, the focus was far more on objections rather than claims. In 1859 the position was:-

	Conservatives	Liberals
Claims	7	12
Sustained	5	7
Failed	2	5
Objections	25	24
Sustained	8	17
Failed	17	7

³Berrows Worcester Journal 28 October 1852.

⁴Berrows Worcester Journal 28 October 1852. Townley, C, Kidderminster Revolutionaries, (Private, 1999), p 22.

⁵Palfrey Collection Foley, Scrapbook Vol 11b BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁶Palfrey Collection Foley, Scrapbook Vol 11b BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁷Brierley Hill Advertiser 16 September 1858.

The net result was a gain to the Liberals of eleven votes.⁸ Although the previous avid reporting of the revision courts had been replaced by summaries of the results, both parties placed considerable emphasis and expended great resource on manipulating the system in their favour. This was hardly surprising when the winning margins in the 1859, 1862 and 1865 elections were nine, ten and fifteen respectively. As the Journal observed,⁹ in a marginal constituency the change of a few voters could be critical: -

	Conservatives	Liberals
1859 Election – votes	208	217
Voters no longer on register	(18)	(25)
New voters	27	20
Revised registration	217	212

Shifts might thus change an actual loss of nine votes into a prospective victory by five votes. This did not happen in practice in the 1862 election, but it certainly indicates why both parties were so active in the registration process.

In 1860 the Conservatives attempted to create votes by claiming two electors for joint occupation, to no avail, and the net result was a Liberal gain of twenty-six votes.¹⁰ The pattern of net Liberal gains continued in 1861.¹¹ The process

⁸ Brierley Hill Advertiser 29 October 1859.

⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 29 October 1859.

¹⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 27 October 1860.

¹¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 19 October 1861.

indicates considerable “churn” in the electorate with sixty-three voters having disappeared (13 per cent) and sixty-two new names appearing.¹²

The 1862 revision lasted fourteen days and involved massive numbers of claims and objections never previously witnessed. The Conservatives successfully claimed 323 votes and sustained fifty-four deletions – 377 in total. The Liberals gained 280 votes and fifty-eight deletions – 338 in total. This gave a net gain to the Conservatives of thirty-nine. They, however, claimed a net gain of eighty-one. Ironically, in several instances both parties objected to the same individuals – a clear case of not being sure for whom a claimant intended to vote.¹³ The Liberals had the embarrassment of having to withdraw objections to three voters who it had been discovered would actually vote Liberal.¹⁴ The process would have taken even longer if the Revising Barrister had not let it be known that any further frivolous cases would be charged at double costs. The Conservatives successfully objected to several Liberal voters for non-payment of rates, noted by the Journal as the first time this tactic had been employed since Godson’s days. Objections by the Liberals involving the technical definitions of dwellings were rejected.¹⁵

The numbers of claims in 1863 favoured the Conservatives by nineteen votes¹⁶ and both parties “redoubled their efforts” by “erecting sheds upon fields and garden land.” As a result one in three claimants received objections.¹⁷ The inherent and underlying potential for violence in local politics was clearly

¹² Brierley Hill Advertiser 3 August 1861.

¹³ Brierley Hill Advertiser 18 October 1862.

¹⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 1 November 1862.

¹⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 November 1862.

¹⁶ Brierley Hill Advertiser 31 October 1863.

¹⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 12 September 1863.

illustrated in 1863 when William Best, son of a local Tory Leader W.B. Best, was accused of assaulting George Holloway, son of the local ex-Chartist Liberal grandee, George Holloway, who had attempted to serve him with a notice of objection to Best's vote as a burgess of Kidderminster. Holloway was employed by the notorious Miller Corbet, the Liberal agent. The assault was allegedly that Best had literally kicked him out of the house. Needless to say, Best was defended by William Boycott who accused Holloway of trespassing and deliberately annoying Best by delivering the objection at 8.15pm during a dinner party. The magistrates fined Best 1s, commenting that Holloway had certainly contributed to his own assault.¹⁸

In 1864, the Liberals objected to John Francis, whose wife admitted that the rates had been paid from a "loan" from Friend, the Conservative agent. Although the loan remained unpaid Francis retained the vote. Surprisingly, when the Conservatives opposed Samuel Hunt, for whom "someone" had paid the rates on his behalf, his vote was disallowed. Likewise the Liberals lost their objection to Alfred Kent, a schoolmaster, whose claim depended on occupying a school house for which he paid no rent.¹⁹ A Liberal voter, Frederick Cole, was struck off because his address was incorrectly stated. Overall the Conservatives succeeded with thirteen objections, while the Liberals achieved forty-one, of whom thirty were compounders.²⁰ Four cases were taken on appeal to the Court of Common Pleas, and illustrate graphically the minutiae on which objections could be made. It was held that a person imprisoned for six months could not vote because there was a break in the residence requirement; and that a person need only be twenty-

¹⁸ Brierley Hill Advertiser 26 September 1863.

¹⁹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 1 October 1864.

²⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 8 October 1864.

one years old when he was put on the register, not for the whole period of residence; and that the court could not look behind what appeared to be full payment of rates. The court reserved its judgement in the case of Farmer, whose “building” consisted of a wooden shed for storing potatoes and a pigsty.²¹

Throughout the period the system of claims and objections in respect of municipal elections continued on the same pattern. These are far less reported, and probably did not have as much money and resources lavished on them as the parliamentary process. What is clear is that both the parties in Kidderminster recognised the crucial importance of the registration process and exploited its bureaucratic minutiae. Initially each party employed a local solicitor, Tudor for the Conservatives and Talbot for the Liberals. By the end of the period the process was much larger – in 1852 there were forty-one objections; in 1862 there were 216 objections. The whole process could take up to fourteen days and outside specialist registration barristers were imported from Reading, Exeter and Hereford. The system undoubtedly became more professional and, towards the end of the period, the focus had begun to swing from objections towards claims. Although objections were easier to sustain, both parties came to recognise the idiosyncrasies of the system and tried to place loyal compounders on the register. All in all, manipulation of the registration system was the acceptable face of Victorian politics, particularly in a marginal borough like Kidderminster with around 500 voters. As has been seen, registration was a form-filling exercise, which required boxes to be ticked. If this was done properly, it was not the business of the courts to enquire who had provided the money which paid the

²¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 26 November 1864.

rates. Sixteen voters created or sixteen opponents disfranchised would have won the 1859, 1862 and 1865 elections – just three per cent of the electorate.

Overall the party organisation from 1850 to 1865 does not appear to have changed substantially from the late 1840s. Both parties were eager to involve the non-voters, but the organisation was essentially local, run by the party leaders of the town. The parties really only came together at election periods, but attempted to maintain some sort of solidarity in the intervening periods. It was also an opportunity to reward loyalty. Thus the Liberals organised a dinner for 750 to 800 guests at the Music Hall and Corn Exchange to celebrate Bristow's victory in 1859.²² Bristow worked his constituency by donating £100 to help discharge the debts on the Public Rooms in 1860.²³ A further drinking session was held at the Queen's Head, where the object seems to have been to reward the voters employed by Banks and Morgan. Two recipients of this largess – Weaver and Griffiths – denied they had been coerced into voting Liberal by their employers, contrary to prevailing rumours. Perhaps they protested too much.²⁴ A thoroughly safer affair was a social tea evening, where working men were exhorted to “let the power of reason and argument be their weapons of warfare” so that they would deserve the extension of the suffrage.²⁵ The Liberals kept the pressure up by forming the Non-Electors' Reform Association in 1859, which had been sponsored by the Reform Association. The inaugural meeting was held at 7.30pm at the Plough Inn, which presumably generated a thirsty and therefore enthusiastic audience. They lauded John Bright and damned Robert Lowe (how quickly had

²² Brierley Hill Advertiser 28 August 1859.

²³ Brierley Hill Advertiser 26 May 1860.

²⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 27 August 1859.

²⁵ Brierley Hill Advertiser 14 May 1859.

his popularity waned). The speakers urged working men to join the Association and advance the cause of the extension of the franchise. Notably they specifically excluded full manhood suffrage, but restricted it to those of “sufficient intelligence to distinguish between right and wrong.” The vote would enable labour to defend its own interests.²⁶

The Association met again in June 1860 to support the abolition of Paper Duty. The House of Lords was damned as an “irresponsible body” for opposing the Bill. Bristow was asked to embody the relevant resolutions and present them to the House of Commons. Once again working men were exhorted to unite, gain the vote and press for their interests to be heard.²⁷ A week later the Association deplored the withdrawal of a Reform Bill, particularly the sixty-seven Liberals who declined to support it.²⁸ The Association returned to the attack on the House of Lords’ opposition of the abolition of Paper Duty and supported the stand taken by Gladstone and Bright.²⁹ In October the Association welcomed Bristow at a “soiree” attended by 600 people in the Music Hall. Bristow professed to continue to support further Reform and urged his audience to remember that unity was strength and to act on it.³⁰

The first official meeting of the Liberal Party per se took place in 1864 where John Brinton outlined the principal object of the meeting – to consider the best means of promoting the interest of the Liberal cause in Kidderminster. About 250 Liberal voters attended. They decided to form a Liberal Association, with Brinton

²⁶ Brierley Hill Advertiser 17 December 1859.

²⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 9 June 1860.

²⁸ Brierley Hill Advertiser 16 June 1860.

²⁹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 14 July 1860.

³⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 6 October 1860.

as president, Talbot treasurer and Dixon secretary. A council of management of seventy members was also elected.³¹ The Liberal Association, the heir to the party, met in 1864 to congratulate itself on the success of the registration revision and to promote the Liberal cause which, Brinton claimed, had “the intelligence, the ability and the wealth of Kidderminster.” He opposed the lowering of the municipal franchise qualifications to “a degrading point” on which the Tories had capitalised with “treating and beer.” The Liberals would not stoop to such tactics. Brinton looked forward (with what turned out to be unfounded optimism) to the 1865 election which he was sure would endorse Gladstone’s Free Trade policy. He was concerned at the size of the national debt, but was sanguine about the state of the carpet industry. Talbot advised the Liberals not to take part in the municipal elections, while other speakers denounced the “immoral” practices prevalent at recent municipal elections and accused the Town Council of acting unfairly towards the rate payers, by increasing expenditure and therefore rates. There was general complaint that the Tory-dominated Town Council had been elected by non-ratepayers. Talbot condemned the “jobbery” practised by the Town Council. Sheppard, the saviour of Lowe in 1857, hoped that Liberal success in the revision would “secure them from the trouble, turmoil and immorality of a contested election”.³²

Not to be outdone, the Conservative Party met in October 1863 ahead of the municipal elections. They denied Liberal claims that “they could do nothing without resorting to beer” or that they did not dare to hold an open meeting, and accused the Liberals of coercing working men voters. Ironically, the Liberals

³¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 21 November 1863.

³² Brierley Hill Advertiser 21 October 1864.

were denounced for increasing rates.³³ The Conservative Party met in October 1864, confident of success in the 1865 Parliamentary election and they resolved to reorganise their Association.³⁴ At the end of the period there is evidence of a more systematic, formal and professional approach to party organisation in the borough. For the party faithful there was a clear indication that the major national and international issues of the day were discussed, and it is evident from the speeches of the parliamentary candidates that the focus tended to be on the national rather than local issues. The local issues were, however, a matter of real concern, especially where the level of rates was concerned. The period 1851 to 1864 marked probably the end of the “friends” approach to politics and ushered in a rather more organised system. The meetings of the respective parties in 1863 and 1864 reveal a desire to maintain party loyalty and party consciousness outside the election period. Both parties attempted to claim the high moral ground of conscience over corruption. On the whole the Conservatives seem to have been more sinning than sinned against. This may be because, divided over free trade and weak nationally, they were obliged to resort to the dirty tricks which had at the least accompanied, and may well have been the source of, their success from 1832 to 1849 or because they lacked the financial and economic clout of the Liberals and their sponsor, Lord Ward – a form of “legitimate” influence which for a time could turn Kidderminster into a nomination borough. The limits of this influence in the face of a charismatic, corrupting and corruptible Conservative candidate in Albert Grant will be discussed in the next chapter.

³³ Brierley Hill Advertiser 31 October 1863.

³⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 29 October 1864.

3. CORRUPTION AND VIOLENCE

The press reports of the 1852 election in Kidderminster do not reveal any direct incidents of violence or corruption. Best had crucially lost the support of weavers who declared for Lowe as “the honest friends (sic) of the working classes in their hour of need”³⁵ However quickly Best tried to distance himself from his previous Protectionist past his opposition to Free Trade haunted him. A meeting of the carpet weavers resolved that “looking at our Present State of distress, shortness of work, and cheerless homes, to the future prospects of the Power Loom..... we deem it our duty to use every means to prevent the return of a Protectionist Member for this town”³⁶ Not only did Lowe portray himself as independent “unconnected with either the great parties now struggling for ascendancy,”³⁷ he also proclaimed his Free Trade credentials³⁸ and implied that he would be prepared to support the Derby administration.³⁹ The Conservatives were divided between Protectionists and Free Traders. Now a wolf in sheep’s clothing in the form of Lowe eroded their ability to differentiate themselves. Even worse, Lord Ward publicly declared for Lowe. He later acknowledged his role in Lowe’s success. He denied that Kidderminster was a nominee borough but boasted of the property he owned in the town.⁴⁰ Property meant rent and rent meant votes. Even all this was not the end of Conservative woes. Benjamin Woodward, a Tory carpet manufacturer, was involved in a bitter pay dispute with his employees.⁴¹

³⁵ Handbill of Meeting of Carpet Weavers 23 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

³⁶ Handbill of Meeting of Carpet Weavers 23 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

³⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 12 March 1852.

³⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 14 April 1852.

³⁹ Worcestershire Chronicle 7 July 1852.

⁴⁰ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 September 1852.

⁴¹ Worcestershire Chronicle 28 April and 12 May 1852.

In these circumstances it was no surprise that Lowe won the 1852 election by ninety-four votes, easily the highest winning margin since 1832. Lowe attributed his victory to the legacy of Godson (hastily amended to Gisborne) who “was the first gentleman who had been the means of breaking through the odious system of corruption in the borough, and contesting it on pure and honourable principles.”⁴² But old habits died hard. 120 Special Constables, amounting to one constable to four voters, had to be sworn in to keep the peace during the election.⁴³ Best was accused of trying to put twenty-one farmers (including his own relatives) on the voters’ roll,⁴⁴ and of calling the working classes “rabble.”⁴⁵ Like most of his predecessors Best turned out to be a bad loser. In a letter to the electors he attributed his defeat “to a combination of Parties assisted by influences to which I shall not now allude.”⁴⁶ It was rumoured that he intended to petition against Lowe’s return on the grounds of bribery, and that he had asked many of his supporters not to vote after 12 noon since he knew “how matters were going on”.⁴⁷ The Chronicle was more dismissive of Best’s performance, analysing the voting as: Lowe 246; Best 151; paired four; promised to Lowe but did not vote five; neutral according to promise thirty-two; did not vote thirty-three. This gives a total of 471 out of total electorate of 494. The rest were either registered twice (thirteen), dead (eight) or had emigrated (two).⁴⁸

We do not know why the petition was dropped. It may be that the Liberal majority was too high to dent; or that, with Best’s previous track record, he was

⁴² Worcestershire Chronicle 15 September and 22 September 1852.

⁴³ Berrows Worcester Journal 8 July 1852.

⁴⁴ Handbill 30 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

⁴⁵ Handbill 30 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

⁴⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 15 July 1852.

⁴⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 15 July 1852.

⁴⁸ Worcestershire Chronicle 14 July 1852.

just as likely to have been guilty of electoral malpractice as the Liberals, and knew that they could muddy the waters; or that according to the custom of the time Kidderminster's petition was quietly "paired" with a corresponding Liberal claim.

In 1855 Lowe was appointed Vice-President of the Board of Trade, which required a by-election to be held. His popularity in Kidderminster had already begun to wane because he had refused to support the local publicans over the Beer Bill. Pratchett Martin, a biographer of Lowe, observed that "this was the beginning of his troubles with the baser class of electors, as well as with the thirsty and riotous non-electors, of Kidderminster."⁴⁹ Lowe's candidature was supported by The Times, hardly surprisingly since Lowe was their leader writer, and his election address was extensively reported. Delane, the editor of The Times, confessed that the "contest looked dangerous and it would have been so disgusting to be blocked out of a promising career by a few drunks (sic) carpet weavers"⁵⁰

Lowe was opposed by a local Conservative solicitor, William Boycott, supported by the publican lobby. Although Boycott retired from the contest before the nomination stage, he had put down a marker for the future. He claimed that the unenfranchised of Kidderminster were "well entitled" to the vote and denied that he was an enemy of the carpet manufacturers. Even though Lowe was unopposed, he had to be protected by special constables and the borough police in order to keep the peace. Lowe's speech at the nomination "was received with such a storm of groaning, yelling, whistling and other disturbances that scarcely a word

⁴⁹ Pratchett Martin, A, Life and Letters of Robert Lowe, (Longmans Green, 1893), p 112.

⁵⁰ Delane to Dasent 18 August 1855 (Times Archives) quoted in Koss, S, The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain Vol 1, (Hamish Hamilton, 1981), p 113.

he said could be heard.”⁵¹ Lowe felt obliged to warn the Conservatives not to try to set class interest against the interest of the community.⁵² In an ill-fated remark he denounced the political profligacy and corruption which had attended previous elections. If the electors wanted “money, or beer, or clap-trap, or mob oratory, they must go to another shop than his for it.” He concluded by denouncing those who tried to increase the sale of intoxicating drinks to gain votes.⁵³ All in all, this was hardly a speech calculated to endear him to Kidderminster’s publicans, who, as noted in Chapter 4, were claimed in the 1850 election petition trial to number over 150, of whom at least 120 had the vote.

Palmerston’s government fell in 1857 over its Chinese policy. Once again Lowe was opposed by Boycott, who portrayed himself as the local man.⁵⁴ His cause was helped by hatred in the town of James Pardoe, the owner of the largest carpet factory and Lowe’s agent. Boycott exploited the divisions between employer and worker, particularly the plight of the hand-loom weavers, who were in terminal, but violent, decline, with strikes in 1854 and 1856.⁵⁵ 2,000 hand looms were replaced by 700 power looms⁵⁶ and from 1851 to 1861 the population of Kidderminster fell from 21,000 to 15,400.⁵⁷ The discontented were Boycott’s natural constituents, even though most could not vote. He whipped up resentment by damning the unholy alliance between some Conservatives and the radical shopkeepers, non-conformists and the ruthless mill-owners. Lowe was denounced as a man without either charity or concern for local issues. Certainly Lowe’s

⁵¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 August 1855.

⁵² Berrows Worcester Journal 18 August 1855.

⁵³ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 August 1855.

⁵⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 14 March 1857.

⁵⁵ Smith, L D, Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters. The Hand Loom Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster 1780-1850, (Tomkinson, 1986), pp. 272-273.

⁵⁶ Thompson, M, Woven in Kidderminster, (David Voice, 2002), p 44.

⁵⁷ Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), p 110.

contributions to the Mayor's relief fund for the poor were portrayed as small and grudging.⁵⁸

There were no sustained reports of major bribery and corruption during the election. Kidderminster "had been greatly demoralised by a long and systematic course of bribery" and, according to Lowe's supporter Canon Melville, the mob desired "the bribe and the beer-barrel" against Lowe's appeals "to rectitude and reason."⁵⁹ However there is no real evidence up to the poll of orchestrated electoral malpractice. There was the usual litany of blocking and boycotting of shops and publicans,⁶⁰ but this was, as has been seen, par for the course. Indeed, the need for bribery and treating had partly been replaced in the 1857 election by "influence", no less potent but deemed to be a legitimate exercise of power by Lord Ward. Ward had financed the steam looms which brought prosperity back to the manufacturers. Ward's influence, about which the local press on both sides was noticeably reticent, seems to have ensured that of the 502 voters all but 150 or so could be relied on to support Lowe.⁶¹ Certainly the defection of the Conservative free-traders to the Liberals and the jingoistic support for Palmerston's foreign policy made a Liberal victory certain. Whether this influence was enough to justify Gash's claim that Kidderminster was a proprietary borough⁶² is an entirely different matter. It is clear from the fawning references to Lord Ward at Liberal meetings that people at the time recognised that his economic power both in terms of his investment in the Stour Vale steam-powered

⁵⁸ Berrows *Worcester Journal* 17 January 1857.

⁵⁹ Pratchett Martin, *op.cit.*, pp. 153-154.

⁶⁰ *Worcestershire Chronicle* 22 April 1857.

⁶¹ Winter, J, *Robert Lowe*, (University of Toronto, 1970), pp. 141-142.

⁶² Gash, N, *Politics in the Age of Peel. A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830-1850*, (Longman, 1953), p 438.

carpet works and his substantial ownership of residential property (which guaranteed a pool of “tied” voters) would and did translate into significant political leverage. Exercised strategically at a time when the Conservatives were divided, it could turn for a time into political dominance. However it could not (and in the event did not) survive the resurgence of the Conservatives and the emergence of Baron Albert Grant.

In retrospect the 1857 election was an explosion waiting to happen. In 1855 Lowe had offended the publicans by refusing to support a petition to prolong Sunday opening times. As a result the pubs of Kidderminster became a Tory heartland where beer and vitriol towards the mill owners were served up in equal measure.⁶³ As the election approached the mayor banned brass bands from playing and took on seventy to eighty special constables to try to maintain order. Deprived of their bands, the crowds at nomination drowned out the speeches of Boycott and Lowe with “great clamour” and “vociferations.”⁶⁴ The show of hands favoured Boycott and Lowe demanded a poll. That night Boycott’s supporters learned that some Conservative voters were being held against their will at the Swan. A mob of weavers was dispatched to break down the door and smash the windows.⁶⁵

Polling day started relatively quietly, with nothing beyond some “senseless groaning.”⁶⁶ The calmness ceased at 2pm when the mills closed and the weavers flooded out of work and towards the polling booth on Blakeway Green. By 3pm The Times claimed that 5,000 to 6,000 men and women of the “lower orders”

⁶³ Worcestershire Chronicle 4 July 1855, 15 August 1855.

⁶⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 28 March 1857, The Times 28 March 1857.

⁶⁵ Worcestershire Chronicle 1 April 1857.

⁶⁶ The Times 30 March 1857.

were thronging about the Green.⁶⁷ The Journal thought the crowd could have been up to 8,000 people.⁶⁸ Whatever the exact number, they represented an imposing, volatile and menacing horde. The events which followed were not seriously disputed; the responsibility for those events certainly was.

The crowd soon scattered any respectable persons and “hissed, booed and vilely treated”⁶⁹ any elector turning up to vote if he supported Lowe. Merrefield, the police chief and seventy special constables tried to clear a way for the electors to reach the polling booth and mayor Kiteley attempted to calm the crowd. The local Liberal leaders, Holmes, Pardoe and Hooman were hit by missiles. The result was announced at 4pm – Lowe had won by 234 votes to 146, a majority of eighty-eight on a 75.7 per cent turnout, easily the lowest since 1832.

This seems to have been the signal for the real violence to begin. The ringleaders incited the mob to attack Lowe, Pardoe and their allies, calling for Boycott to “come out, and let us kill the pink-eye” (Lowe was an albino). Boycott, or according to Simcox, a Liberal leader, one of his friends and seconder, Alfred Talbot, mounted the hustings and asked the mob to disperse quietly. Talbot offered Lowe’s party a safe passage away from the hustings but Pardoe rejected it out of hand. Kiteley, seeing the mob turning uglier by the minute, considered reading the Riot Act, but was dissuaded by William Butler Best, the father of John Best, whom Lowe had defeated in 1852, presumably on the grounds that the police were so outnumbered that there were no means of enforcing it.

⁶⁷ The Times 30 March 1857.

⁶⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 4 April 1857.

⁶⁹ The Times 30 March 1857.

Boycott left the hustings at about 3.45pm and, whether prearranged or not, this was the signal for a furious assault on Lowe and his allies, who were subject to a missile attack of stones, brickbats, palings and pennies. The Liberals certainly believed that cause and effect were directly linked. Simcox, one of the victims, claimed that Boycott's pleas for calm were ironical and actually intended to influence the mob – certainly this seems to have been the result. Boycott was also charged with leaving the hustings, despite being begged to stay, saying that Lowe must look after himself and that he was not going to become a special constable. Simcox claimed that the police were powerless and that the 100 special constables actually sided with the mob. There was nothing for it but for the Liberals to leave the hustings as best they could. Even the presence of William Butler Best was no protection.

The beleaguered Liberal party managed to make their way out under a volley of stones and brickbats. After 100 yards they went under an eight to ten foot bank from where, allegedly strategically placed and acting under orders, the mob pelted Lowe and Pardoe with bricks and stones. The rest of the party were also attacked and suffered cuts and bruises. Lowe's skull was fractured and a police constable, Jukes, received injuries from which he later died. Lowe's party just managed to find refuge at Woodfield House, the home of the Headmaster of the Grammar School, the Reverend Sheppard, who had been watching the turn of events through a telescope. He managed to lock the front gate but opened a side gate and dragged Lowe and several others into the house. Sheppard and two friends guarded the gate and the mob was unable to wrench off the locks. One report even claimed that some boarders at the school produced pistols and threatened to

shoot the rioters if they did not disperse. The crowd did let a surgeon, Samuel Stretton, through to treat Lowe, but warned that they would “do for him” before he left the town.

Whether dissuaded by the threat of firearms or because they believed Lowe had taken refuge at the Prince Albert, whose landlord had voted for him, the mob smashed every window in the building. They then decamped back into the town smashing windows and continuing the cries of “Boycott for ever” and “Kill the Pink-Eye”. As further sport they pulled down the shutters of all shops owned by Liberals and ‘bonneted’ (crushed the hat over the eyes) of anyone who opposed them. This continued until midnight, when a troop of fifty Hussars arrived from Birmingham in response to a telegram from the Mayor at 4 pm. The Riot Act was read and the soldiers managed to clear the streets by 2 am. The Army remained on duty until four am and set up camp in the town to guard against further expected riots.⁷⁰

The blame game started immediately, with the local and national press taking up their normal political stances. The Herald and Chronicle, together with the London Times were outraged and were convinced that the attack on Lowe and the riots were politically inspired and orchestrated. By contrast the Journal denounced The Times as a paper “with which ..Mr Lowe is supposed to have some intimate connection”⁷¹ and implied that it was all the Liberals’ fault (and in

⁷⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 4 April 1857, Worcester Herald 28 March 1857, Berrows Worcester Journal 14 March 1857, Berrows Worcester Journal 28 March 1857, Berrows Worcester Journal 4 April 1857, The Times 28 March 1857, The Times 30 March 1857, The Times 31 March 1857, Birmingham Daily Press, quoted in Gilbert, D, Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster, (David Voice, 2004), p 44.

⁷¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 4 April 1857.

particular, Pardoe's) for inflaming the crowds and ignoring offers of protection. Indeed, the Journal also quoted the Reverend Sheppard who "believe[d] that the great majority of the men immediately attacking Mr Lowe were not from Kidderminster. They presented an appearance quite distinct from that of carpet weavers,"⁷² The Times took a dramatically opposite view. Its leader column thundered against the "outrage" which "disgraced Kidderminster," a "transaction of barbarism and ignorance," "plottings of malignity," and a situation unknown since before the 1847 election. It claimed that Lowe's re-election had been certain and the "disreputable partisans [of Boycott] were the planners and perpetrators of this atrocity." Boycott was alleged to be popular with the non-voters and lower classes of Kidderminster, who had been accustomed for many years to share in the "more demonstrative proceedings of election times." He was accused of stirring up the mob by claiming that Lowe cared nothing for the constituency and supported excessive taxes, particularly on tea. It was claimed that the attack on Lowe had been planned the night before the election, with piles of stones heaped up in readiness by the side of the lane from the hustings.

The Times even accused the town authorities of deliberately sighting the hustings well outside the town so that Liberal voters had to walk through Boycott's supporters with no help from the police, who were miserably inefficient, or the special constables, who supported Boycott. Boycott himself was damned as leaving Lowe to the fury of the mob and of being guilty, if not of deliberately inflaming the mob, of reckless abandon.⁷³ Ebenezer Guest, a staunch Liberal and a prime mover in the subsequent trials, also laid the blame at Boycott's door for

⁷² Berrows Worcester Journal 4 April 1857.

⁷³ The Times 1 April 1857.

telling the non-electorate that he would win when there was no chance of doing so.⁷⁴ Guest traced the violence back to Godson, who had secured acquittals for the miners in the riots of 1830 and had encouraged the non-voters to believe they could dictate the choice of the voters. As noted, Sheppard, the hero of the hour, actually defended the police and claimed the majority of the rioters were not from Kidderminster and that indeed many of them appeared to be respectably dressed women who had concealed the stones in their shawls.⁷⁵

The Times published a damning letter from “An Old Reformer” (who may well have been Guest using a pen-name) which claimed that the Godson years were characterised by treating, wholesale bribery and the indiscriminate use of hired mobs. He alleged that in 1841 Ricardo spent £4,000 in a week for his 200 votes while Godson’s 212 cost even more. Lowe’s stance against corruption and his opposition to a Beer Bill in a “thirsty borough” were bitterly resented by the eighty-four publicans and sixty-six beer-shop keepers of whom 109 were voters. He concluded patronisingly by exhorting the ruling classes in Kidderminster to raise the moral and intellectual principles and habits of the people of the town. He damned the light fines (one shilling) on the convicted rioters as disgraceful and demanded action against the demagogues who were the real ringleaders of the riots.⁷⁶ Interestingly the official returns of the candidates’ costs for the election were:

⁷⁴ The Times 31 March 1857.

⁷⁵ The Times 31 March 1857.

⁷⁶ The Times 15 April 1857.

	£	s	d
Lowe	299	18	10
Boycott	56	6	6

Boycott was, of course, the local man, but Lowe's official recorded expenditure was over five times higher.⁷⁷

Retribution was rapid and partisan. It started with the trials of various local men arrested in connection with the disturbances both before and after the Riot Act had been read. All were granted bail, and one was merely fined one shilling. Even the prosecutor admitted it was difficult to single out individuals from a crowd of 400 who had gathered to knock down the Swan.⁷⁸ In an effort to let the fevered temperatures of the town subside, the magistrates adjourned the trials until the assizes the following Spring, and Lowe himself was inclined to be forgiving. In a letter of reply to an address from the mayor and 314 other inhabitants expressing their sympathy and indignation, Lowe claimed to have the support of moderates and hoped to carry "instruction and civilisation among those classes in the borough which recent events have shown to be so deplorably in need of both."⁷⁹

At least he did not call for immediate retribution.

Pardoe, who had also been injured, was not so forgiving. He organised a subscription, which quickly raised £500, to collect evidence and to bring a charge against two of Boycott's principal and more respectable backers – Henry

⁷⁷ British Parliamentary Papers 1852-60, p 797.

⁷⁸ Worcester Herald 4 April 1857.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Pratchet Martin, op.cit., pp. 157-158.

Chellingworth and Alfred Talbot, both described as gentlemen. Talbot got his retaliation in first in a letter to the friendly Journal, claiming that he had advised Lowe not to go to the hustings “in the excited state” of the town.⁸⁰

The Times kept up the pressure by attacking the inhabitants of the Battery, “a very low class of people,” who had pulled down a chimney of one of the “hovels” to provide ammunition and boiled water and “buckets of filthy liquid” to provide an alternative means of attack.⁸¹ The trials started on 12 April 1857 amid fevered excitement, matched by the partisan press reports by The Times and the Journal. The former reported with evident reluctance the defence barrister’s success in removing George Hooman, a Liberal supporter, from the Magistrates’ bench on the grounds that he had subscribed to the fund to pay for the prosecution. Instead they focused on the evidence of Ebenezer Guest who accused Talbot of inciting the mob (which by now had risen to 7,000 strong) to attack Lowe in the “Kill the Pink-Eye” riots. Pardoe collaborated Guest’s account.⁸² “FSL” (identified as Simcox Lea) blamed the violence of the weavers on the 1828 strike and its repercussions.⁸³ Chellingworth’s angry denial of guilt (“was there ever a more monstrous case of injustice and persecution?”) was printed by The Times without comment.⁸⁴ The prosecuting counsel, on learning of Chellingworth’s acquittal, continued to accuse him of being implicated in the attack on Lowe.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 11 April 1857.

⁸¹ The Times 14 April 1857.

⁸² The Times 19 April 1857.

⁸³ The Times 17 April 1857.

⁸⁴ The Times 23 April 1857.

⁸⁵ The Times 25 April 1857.

The Journal concentrated on J. W. Huddleston's defence – like Godson he would become the next Conservative candidate for Kidderminster - and approved the removal of Hooman from the bench.⁸⁶ Guest was accused of prompting the prosecution attorney in the examination of witnesses and Huddleston's claim (entirely unreported in The Times) that there was an absence of sympathy by the masters and employers towards their men was lovingly reported, together with the hostility of the courtroom towards the prosecution – a packed throng who “gave vent to their feelings”⁸⁷ Huddleston also claimed that Lowe himself had incited the electors by calling them “children.”⁸⁸ When Talbot and Chellingworth had been acquitted, the Journal celebrated by denouncing Pardoe for a biased and party-political prosecution and by claiming that, since no local lawyers were prepared to prosecute, the Committee had been forced to get someone from “the hardware village [Birmingham] where professional scruples [were] less urgent.”⁸⁹

In addition it was alleged that witnesses against Boycott's supporters were jeered at, threatened and, in some cases beaten up. Workers were exhorted to give subscriptions to the defence of their “persecuted brothers.” The upshot was that Huddleston, like Godson before him, got suspended sentences for all the rioters as the prosecution case unravelled in the face of a bitter and unified town.⁹⁰ Pardoe's vindictive prosecution could be argued to have effectively dissolved the Liberal

⁸⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 April 1857.

⁸⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 April 1857.

⁸⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 April 1857.

⁸⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 25 April 1857.

⁹⁰ Worcestershire Chronicle 15 April, 22 April, 15 July, 16 December 1857.

coalition. The Tory clergy were so antagonised by the prosecution committee that they would resignedly return to the corruption of the Godson years.⁹¹

The 1857 election riots are critical in seeking an understanding of the conduct of parliamentary elections in Kidderminster. The attack on a government minister, especially a leader-writer for The Times, was bound to receive not only local but also national press coverage. The reports, together with the evidence given at the subsequent trials, give a graphic description of what actually happened on polling day and the sheer scale of involvement of the town's inhabitants in the election process. Although there were only 502 electors out of a population of 20,852 – a mere 2.4 per cent, - and although the turnout of 380 was the only time the percentage of votes to electorate, at 75.7 per cent, fell below 80 per cent in the entire period from 1832 to 1880, there is ample evidence to confirm that polling day in Kidderminster in 1857 remained a focal point in the life of the town, with up to 6,000 inhabitants enjoying the sport. Wasserman and Jaggard's claim that the riots were not habitual but due to specific local tensions just does not stand up to detailed scrutiny. The attempt to murder the town's MP may well have been at the extreme end of the spectrum of electoral violence, but the systematic use of the mob to encourage or intimidate voters is well chronicled in the Godson era from 1832 to 1849. Violence was the norm rather than the exception in Kidderminster elections and the summons to the army to maintain or restore order was equally the order of polling day. There can be no doubt that the 1857 riots were pre-planned. Even accounting for the vengeful accusation of the Liberals, the most likely scenario is that Boycott, even if not directly involved in organising

⁹¹ Winter, J. op.cit., p 145. Worcester Herald 25 July 1857, Berrows Worcester Journal 25 July 1857.

the riots and the attack on Lowe, was guilty by association. He had whipped up the residuum to expect a victory which could never be achieved and, as the inevitable defeat was announced, calmly walked away leaving the victor to his fate.

The election result is a telling example of patronage and influence in mid-Victorian elections. The low turn-out and the massive majority, in Kidderminster electoral terms, indicate the unspoken but acknowledged power of Lord Ward, whose economic muscle was firmly on the Liberal side. The free-trade and non-conformist and employer alliance could deliver electoral success against the brewers' lobby with the Conservatives left to appeal to the drinking voter, the anti carpet manufacturer and, above all, to the vast majority of the citizens who had no vote at all. It remained true that the Kidderminster mob was always Tory in its opinion.

The 1857 riots were to be the last exercise of mob rule in the period under review. Kidderminster would remain a tough divided borough and the popular resentment at "outside interference" continued, as manifested in the disturbances at the trial in 1874 of Albert Grant, but "undue influence" would manifest itself more in terms of corruption and treating than outright violence. The research addresses the issue of how the Conservatives could so consistently and so often recruit so many "foot soldiers" at parliamentary elections. The roots of this allegiance may well be argued to have been developed in an alliance between the publicans and the have-nots - the carpet weavers who resented the financial control of the masters and employers.

What is also clear is that in the glare of publicity – whether in the aftermath of the violent strike of 1828, the challenged victory of John Best in 1849 or the riots of 1857, Kidderminster closed ranks and adopted a siege mentality. It can be no coincidence that the disturbers of the peace in 1828, 1830 and 1857 were first alleged to be outsiders and subsequently either acquitted or received nominal sentences. Likewise Best’s tainted victory in 1849 was upheld. Kidderminster remained in denial until its chosen son arrived in the person of Albert Grant.

Kidderminster’s flirtation with the acceptable face of Victorian political influence did not last long. As the 1859 election loomed, the Journal boasted that Lowe remained as unpopular as ever and faced defeat by the Conservatives.⁹² Lowe admitted that he had been “entirely deserted by the Conservatives”. As a result he resigned, safe in the knowledge that his seat in Calne was guaranteed through the influence of Lord Lansdowne. Lowe alleged that the Tories had “united with that class, unhappily so numerous among you, who look and long for a return to that corruption, which I had begun to hope had passed away for ever,....I will not set the example of recurring to practices which I abhor, and which it has been my pride to discourage.”⁹³

The Conservatives turned to Huddleston, the barrister who had secured the acquittal of the 1857 rioters. Like Boycott he advocated an extension of the franchise “to the intelligent of all classes.” He supported a strong Army and

⁹² Berrows Worcester Journal 9 April 1859.

⁹³ Berrows Worcester Journal 16 April 1859. Brierley Hill Advertiser 16 April 1859.

Navy, but insisted on “rigid economy in every department of the state.”⁹⁴ The Brierley Hill Advertiser claimed that some of the town’s voters were concerned at the prospect of an uncontested election. They had “itchy palms, and there was not the least doubt that many of them were open to a pleasant application, and that £20 or £40 could not be refused.”⁹⁵ Eventually Pardoe found a Liberal candidate from London, Alfred Bristow. Not surprisingly after the 1857 riots, 150 special constables were sworn in to keep the peace, which meant there was one constable for every three voters. The nomination was attended by 3,000 to 4,000 people, but good order was maintained.⁹⁶ In a remarkably high turnout (86.9 per cent) Bristow won, against the odds, by nine votes. Only one dirty trick was reported. A Liberal, Thomas Bull, was reported to have been “bottled” by the Conservatives at the Black Horse all night until 3pm when he was “escorted” to the polls, only to vote for Bristow.⁹⁷ This is a good story, spoiled only by the fact that the poll book does not record his vote or indeed that he was even a voter.⁹⁸ At his post-election dinner, Huddleston blamed his defeat on defections due to “undue influence.”⁹⁹ From here it was a short step to threaten an election petition.¹⁰⁰ In the event the petition was probably “paired” with a Liberal petition,¹⁰¹ together with a payment by Bristow to Huddleston of £700 as a contribution towards the costs incurred.¹⁰² Bristow’s vehement denial of the pairing (with Pontefract) and the payment tend, if anything, to support the hypothesis that this is precisely what did happen.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 9 April 1859.

⁹⁵ Brierley Hill Advertiser 16 April 1859.

⁹⁶ Brierley Hill Advertiser 30 April 1859, Brierley Hill Advertiser 7 May 1859.

⁹⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 7 May 1859.

⁹⁸ Poll Book of the Kidderminster Elections George Friend, Kidderminster 1859

⁹⁹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 25 June 1859.

¹⁰⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 9 July 1859.

¹⁰¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 23 July 1859.

¹⁰² Brierley Hill Advertiser 6 August 1859.

¹⁰³ Brierley Hill Advertiser 20 August 1859.

Tory jibes that Bristow was merely keeping the seat warm were apparently justified when in 1862 he resigned to take up the post of solicitor to the Admiralty at a salary of £1,500. The Liberals fielded Colonel Luke White, accused of being “rejected of Longford”.¹⁰⁴ Huddleston, who could have won had he resorted to bribery, according to the Journal,¹⁰⁵ initially opposed him, but suddenly withdrew. The Journal claimed that Kidderminster was a nomination borough (of Lord Ward.) The only means of winning was through bribery and corruption, which would lead to a commission which would lead to the borough being disfranchised.¹⁰⁶ Huddleston was replaced by John Talbot, nephew of the Earl of Shrewsbury. Even the Liberal press regarded Kidderminster as a “tricky” borough,¹⁰⁷ and the Journal accused the Liberals of achieving their 1859 success by bribery and seeking to do the same in 1862.¹⁰⁸ 5,000 attended the nomination, but although there was great excitement in the town, there was no repetition of the previous violence. The polling booths in Oxford Road and the Horsefair were better sited and the police were out in force. Only one instance of an attempt to molest a voter was recorded. The turnout was 90.9 per cent, the highest ever, and by 4pm White was victorious by ten votes out of 448 cast.¹⁰⁹

The official list of election expenses for White amounted to £571.19s.6d, including £124.10s.9d, costs at the Lion Hotel and “refreshments” of up to £5.14s.2d at 11 other taverns – in total about as much as was spent on the seventy-

¹⁰⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 24 May 1862.

¹⁰⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 24 May 1862.

¹⁰⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 24 May 1862.

¹⁰⁷ Morning Star 21 May 1862.

¹⁰⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 May 1862.

¹⁰⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 May 1862, Brierley Hill Advertiser 24 May 1862.

three special constables (£125.8s.10d).¹¹⁰ The police did manage to maintain order, but the hazardous nature of election malpractice was revealed by the death of Joseph Powell. He was a “watcher” employed by the Tories to guard against voters being kidnapped to prevent them voting. At midnight he tried to stop a suspect carriage but was hit and later died. White prudently donated £50 to his widow and children when it was revealed that the cab driver was employed at White’s headquarters, the Lion Hotel, and declined to disclose the name of his passenger or the destination.¹¹¹ The Tories blamed their defeat on the agitation of the Liberation Society against church rates and the Liberal Government’s influence over “a nomination borough” together with the Liberals’ promotion and bribery of “venal £10 voters.”¹¹² The Journal also muttered darkly at the antics of “a party of Birmingham “roughs” who had been employed by the Liberals. Their threat was nullified by the considerable presence of the police and a party of armed horse soldiers in the vicinity.¹¹³

We are fortunate to have two consecutive poll books preserved for the 1859 and 1862 elections. Only the names and addresses of the voters for each party are given, so it is not possible to attempt to define any patterns of party allegiance by occupation, but the summary results are as follows:-

¹¹⁰ Kidderminster Public Library Collection, BA10470, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹¹¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 31 May 1862.

¹¹² Berrows Worcester Journal 31 May 1862.

¹¹³ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 May 1862.

	1859	1862
	%	%
Liberals	44	47
Conservatives	43	44
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	87	91
Did Not Vote etc	13	9
	<hr/>	<hr/>
Electorate	100	100
	<hr/>	<hr/>

1862 v 1859	Conservative			Liberal		
	Same Vote	Change	New Voters	Same Vote	Change	New Voters
%	65	1	34	63	2	35

What these statistics reveal is that the Liberals benefited more from the increased turnout on an electorate which was virtually unchanged. In addition, of those who voted in both elections, there was a minimal change in allegiance. The number of new voters at 34-35 per cent appears remarkably high. This may be partly explained by changes of address and a considerable number of voters with the same surname – for example there were six electors named Cooper and four named Willis who voted. What this says about corruption is less clear. It is tempting to argue that the consistency of voting indicates a “pure” constituency, and that bribery and corruption were at the margins. The history of parliamentary elections in Kidderminster from 1832 to 1862 does not tend to bear this out. Even allowing for the exaggerated outrage of the losers, it is reasonably clear that, except perhaps for the Lowe years, treating in particular was on an indiscriminate scale. Godson and Best in particular, seem to have been only too willing to “buy”

votes and the fact that the Conservative vote tended to rise especially after 1 p.m. is suspicious. It cannot be explained away simply in terms of the few weavers who were enfranchised turning up to vote as they finished their shift. A briber expects a return on his investment. It may be that the majority of the voters in Kidderminster were genuine partisans, but there was nothing better to cement party loyalty than a free meal washed down with copious amounts of beer.

Treating and bribery from 1850 to 1862 many have been less blatant than before, replaced at least in part by the legitimate influence of Lord Ward. This influence, the political consequence of economic domination, could turn Kidderminster into a nomination borough for a period of time while the Conservatives were weak and divided, both nationally and locally, mainly over free trade, and while the weavers, the bedrock of their support in numbers, if not in votes, had been crushed into subservience by a technological revolution which transformed them from skilled craftsmen into machine operatives. These were the lucky ones. Far more were forced to leave the town in desperation to find work. Many emigrated to Canada or Australia as their traditional industry was effectively destroyed. This desperation merely fuelled the inherent violence in the community. If minor riots had been a consistent feature of elections from 1832 to 1849, requiring troops to be stationed in the town as a matter of course during election periods, the outbreak of sustained, orchestrated and murderous violence in 1857 cannot just be written off as a local incident. Instead it may be argued to be the logical extension of the underlying propensity for violence in the town, whether politically or industrially motivated. Between 1857 and 1862, with a massive police and potential army presence at election times, malpractice was less blatant. It happened, everyone

knew it happened, but it suited the town not to be too open about it. As will be seen, this coyness was joyfully abandoned when Albert Grant, the arch carpetbagger, arrived and Kidderminster could enjoy once again the good old days of Richard Godson.

4. LOCAL AND NATIONAL ISSUES.

There is no doubt that party rivalry in Kidderminster remained strong from 1850 to 1864. Every election was fought, except for Lowe's unopposed victory at the 1855 by-election, and even then Boycott only withdrew at the last minute. Nationally the Liberals controlled Parliament throughout the period apart from two brief interludes in 1852 and 1858. From 1859 Palmerston reigned supreme. The Conservatives were divided over free trade, which arguably lost them, together with Lord Ward's influence, the 1852 election. Certainly Lowe attributed his success to free trade - "supporting the principles of free trade which you send me to advocate."¹¹⁴ Crucially Thomas Evans, chairman of the Carpet Weavers, attacked Best's support of protection as "injuring the stomachs of the poor."¹¹⁵ Further handbills accused Best of relieving the rich to tax the poor¹¹⁶ and claiming that "a Protectionist Government...have [sic] determined, if possible, to add to our misery by again taxing bread."¹¹⁷

In the 1857 election the main issue, for Lowe if not for Boycott, was the support of Palmerston and the Crimean War, although he ingratiated himself to his non-

¹¹⁴ Worcestershire Chronicle 14 July 1852.

¹¹⁵ Handbill dated 30 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

¹¹⁶ Handbill dated 30 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

¹¹⁷ Handbill dated 30 March 1852, Kidderminster Public Library.

conformist allies by claiming that he would abolish Church rates.¹¹⁸ Although Huddleston tried to muddy the waters with support of further franchise reform in the 1859 election, the Liberals' slogans emphasised continuing support for Palmerston's vigorous foreign policy.¹¹⁹ At his celebratory dinner, Bristow of course paid tribute to the architects of free trade, Peel and Cobden.¹²⁰ By 1862 the main national issue was Church rates,¹²¹ but Col. White took great pride in trumpeting Palmerston's foreign policy, particularly towards Italy.¹²² His opponent, Talbot, was forced to play the "local man" card, claiming that victory for White would prove that Kidderminster was "a nomination borough of the Government of Lord Palmerston."¹²³ The Church rate issue had become a real issue in Kidderminster as early as 1860 when George Turton, the Town Mayor, and others issued a hand-bill saying they would not pay the rate, despite a 253 to 121 vote to retain it, with all parishioners entitled to vote. Turton was charged with failure to pay his rates, amounting to £1.15s.8d. The magistrates discreetly found that they had no jurisdiction because Turton objected to the validity of the rate. "Party feeling" ran high.¹²⁴ In 1861 Holloway, the ex-Chartist now Liberal, and Joseph Naylor attempted to disrupt a Church rate meeting.¹²⁵ In 1862 Turton again refused to pay his Church rate. This time the magistrates made an order for payment of £1.7s.8d, together with six other recusants.¹²⁶ Holloway's disruptive tactics continued at the 1862 Church rate meeting, and Turton claimed that the rate was illegal, while Edward Parry, a non-conformist minister and future owner

¹¹⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 14 March 1857.

¹¹⁹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 30 April 1859.

¹²⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 25 June 1859.

¹²¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 31 May 1862, Berrows Worcester Journal 31 May 1862.

¹²² Brierley Hill Advertiser 24 May 1862, 31 May 1862.

¹²³ Brierley Hill Advertiser 31 May 1862.

¹²⁴ Palfrey Collection, BA 3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹²⁵ Brierley Hill Advertiser 16 November 1861.

¹²⁶ Brierley Hill Advertiser 3 May 1862.

of the Kidderminster Shuttle, objected to the rate. All their objections were voted down.¹²⁷ Just as in Godson's day, party rivalry found many outlets in which to express itself.

5. MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

The four contested parliamentary elections in the period were all won by the Liberals. The evidence from the public pronouncements of the party candidates and their supporters is that national issues such as free trade, parliamentary reform and security of Britain's interests predominated. There is little mention of local concerns. The evidence is also of simmering violence and substantial treating.

In 1852, all the six Liberal candidates were returned unopposed.¹²⁸ Following their internal divisions, the Conservatives were in disarray after the parliamentary defeat of Best and adopted the by now familiar tactic of preferring to field no candidates rather than be embarrassed by a severe beating at the polls.

The Conservatives did win two seats in the South Ward in 1853. An ironic Tory handbill advertised "Wanted – 2 candidates for Oldermen [sic]." The persons must be merchants and "if they reside and spend their tin away from the shopkeepers of Kidderminster, so much the better." In addition, "Candidates who never attend church, except the Vestry, to vote against Church Rates, will be preferred."¹²⁹ In 1855 the Journal reported that "scarcely any interest seemed to be taken" in the municipal elections. The voters were not canvassed. In the event, there was no contest in the North Ward (all Liberals), and the Liberals won all

¹²⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 4 October 1862.

¹²⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 4 November 1852.

¹²⁹ Palfrey Collection, Foley Scrapbook Vol 9 BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

three South Ward seats in a low turn-out (around 25 per cent).¹³⁰ In 1856 William Boycott failed to be elected as alderman and accused his opponents of breach of faith, presumably for reneging on some inter-party “deal.”¹³¹

In 1857 Boycott was censured by the Council for a speech on the cattle market, “calculated to bring the council into contempt.”¹³² The general state of mind of the council can be judged by their refusal to give a pension to a policeman forced to retire through ill-health and age on the grounds that “we are all anxious to economise as much as we possibly can and keep down the rates.” Likewise they were reluctant to adopt the Nuisance Removal Act because it would “bring with it a train of officers and a load of taxation perfectly intolerable to pay or even contemplate.”¹³³ The Council also rejected a Government Inspector’s report which would have increased the local police force from thirteen to eighteen.¹³⁴ The Liberals swept to victory in the 1858 elections, winning all six seats.¹³⁵ In 1859 the Council did agree to increase the police force costs by up to £100, but this was rejected out of hand by a public town meeting on the grounds that the cost would be borne by tradesmen for the benefit of the country mansions of the carpet manufacturers and because it added to the “already far too heavy and seriously felt burdens of the ratepayers.”¹³⁶

There was a minor Conservative revival in 1859, winning two of the three seats in the North Ward, while the Liberals won all three in the South Ward. The only

¹³⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 3 November 1855.

¹³¹ Worcester Herald 15 November 1856.

¹³² Worcester Herald 6 October 1857.

¹³³ Worcester Herald 13 December 1856.

¹³⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 18 December 1858.

¹³⁵ Brierley Hill Advertiser 6 November 1858.

¹³⁶ Brierley Hill Advertiser 26 March 1859.

trouble arose when a Liberal candidate went to the Bull Inn, the Conservative headquarters, and received a black eye for his troubles. The Tories campaigned under the slogan “to watch narrowly the expenditure of the borough...and to discharge the duties of the office to the best interests of the ratepayers.”¹³⁷

This watchword was used again in 1859 in the South Ward with the almost identical “endeavour to enforce the strictest economy in public expenditure.”¹³⁸ In 1860, the Liberals produced a handbill entitled “why I should vote for Liberal candidates”, explaining that “I would not have the vote but for the Liberals” and that the policy of the Tories was to get a majority on the town council so that they could fight their way for the MP in Parliament; and a Tory MP meant “self-seeking, extravagance, corruption, jobbery, tyranny and all kinds of abuses.”¹³⁹

The 1861 census revealed that 5,439 inhabitants (26 per cent) had left the borough over the last ten years, adjusting for births and deaths. The average occupancy per household was 4.5 compared with 5.1 in 1851. These numbers illustrate graphically the economic ravages of the 1850s in Kidderminster.¹⁴⁰

The Liberals just retained control of the council in 1861, selecting the mayor by eleven votes to ten. This was despite a Conservative victory in the municipal elections, which were far more keenly contested than in the recent past. The

¹³⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 22 October 1859.

¹³⁸ Brierley Hill Advertiser 22 October 1859, Berrows Worcester Journal 5 November 1859.

¹³⁹ Palfrey Collection Handbill 22 October 1860 BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁴⁰ Palfrey Collection, Vol 3 BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

Tories won all six seats by a handsome majority. Their victory was marked by ringing the church bells, a band parading round the town and large crowd.¹⁴¹

The 1862 election saw both parties try to create a massively increased electorate of nearly 2,000 by claiming compounders as voters when three-quarters were not ratepayers.¹⁴² The election caused “great excitement” and resulted in a Conservative victory leaving them controlling the council by thirteen to ten, with one independent.¹⁴³ The Liberals were divided, with Ebenezer Guest suing George Holloway for £500 for defamation of character.¹⁴⁴ Illegal payments totalling £40 were refunded.¹⁴⁵ The turnout was around 88 per cent at 386 out of 420 – so the campaign to enfranchise compounders had failed. The 1863 elections were a clean sweep for the Conservatives, winning all six seats. The Chronicle accused the Conservatives of intoxicating their supporters to such an extent that even early in the morning they were in “such a state that they could scarcely exercise their franchise.”¹⁴⁶ The night of the election was the scene of “fights and squabbles without number.” The Council now comprised nineteen Conservatives and five Liberals.¹⁴⁷ The Council was worried about the sanitary condition of the town – “the river and drains generally are in a very foul state”¹⁴⁸ – which was regularly hit by violent fever and diarrhoea, but did nothing concrete to relieve or solve the problem. Poor drainage at Thomas Lea’s new Slingfield Mill caused soap suds to flood the meadows and created a major nuisance. Lea refused to pay and the council obediently offered to pay half given “the importance of Mr Lea’s

¹⁴¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 2 November 1861.

¹⁴² Brierley Hill Advertiser 27 September 1862.

¹⁴³ Brierley Hill Advertiser 8 November 1862, Berrows Worcester Journal 25 October 1862.

¹⁴⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 29 November 1862.

¹⁴⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 25 October 1862.

¹⁴⁶ Worcestershire Chronicle 7 November 1863.

¹⁴⁷ Worcestershire Chronicle 7 November 1863, Brierley Hill Advertiser 7 November 1863.

¹⁴⁸ Brierley Hill Advertiser 19 September 1863.

property as contributing to the rates of the borough and of the necessity for effectual drainage in the neighbourhood.”¹⁴⁹ This sort of kow-towing to major Liberal carpet manufactures can only have helped Albert Grant’s campaign in 1865.

Even though the 1863 election was a triumph for the Conservatives, the old tricks of electoral malpractice remained and were employed. Four men were accused of personating voters. The Conservatives attempted to delay the proceedings in the hope that they could find a Liberal who could be charged with a similar offence.¹⁵⁰ By 1864 the Liberals failed to field any candidates and the six Conservatives were duly elected,¹⁵¹ and controlled the Council. The Liberals were reduced to accusing the Council of jobbery by preferring a sewage tender from Ankrett over a lower bid from Bale.¹⁵² They need not have worried. The scheme was deferred until 1867.

What is clear from this study of local elections in the period is that there is no obvious link with parliamentary votes. The Liberals won every parliamentary election; by 1864 not only did the Conservatives dominate the Town Council, the Liberals failed in 1864 to field any candidates, just as the Conservatives had done in 1852. It might be tempting to argue that municipal elections indicated the relative strength of the parties ahead of that experienced in parliamentary elections. Thus the Liberal – controlled town Council from 1852 ushered in the

¹⁴⁹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 26 August 1865, Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p 112, Smith, S.A, The Response of Kidderminster Town Council to the 19th Century Public Health Legislation 1848-1872, (Private, 1992), pp. 48-49.

¹⁵⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 12 December 1863.

¹⁵¹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 5 November 1864.

¹⁵² Brierley Hill Advertiser 12 November 1864.

decade of Liberal MPs; and the Conservative victories from the early 1860s paved the way for the largely Conservative decade from 1865. Certainly there was the scope for the ruling party on the Council to apply patronage to its supporters. However, the real problem with this theory is that there is no contemporary evidence to support it. No-one at the time appears to have seriously believed that controlling the council would somehow deliver the MP of the party's choice. The Liberals might say so in their handbill of 1861, but this seems to have been more sour grapes at the Conservative revival in town politics and a general rallying cry to the party, and it certainly did not prevent the Liberals winning the parliamentary seat again in 1862, when the Conservatives finally controlled the Council.

The party divide is clear, but the battle seems to have been fought on entirely different grounds. In municipal elections, the party slogans are almost indistinguishable – retrenchment, economy and low rates. This was hardly surprising, since for the whole of the period only rate-payers could vote. On the whole canvassing was low-key and turn-out low. This needs to be compared with the crowds of thousands who attended parliamentary candidates' meetings and election days, and the over – 80 per cent turnout record, except for 1857.

While violence in parliamentary elections was the norm and, despite Lowe's efforts, treating was common, there are precious few reports of electoral malpractice in local elections. This is not, of course, to say that they were pure, but the amount of money available to spend must have been far less and there was no point in treating the non-voters.

The parties along with the voters and non-voters seem to have regarded parliamentary and municipal elections as two distinct arenas. The former were mass public events, where substantial sums were invested and where national issues predominated. The latter were also all about money, but here it was the rate-payers' own cash. The whole point of controlling the Council was to restrict the burden of rates. This certainly explains why any proposed outlay for the primary benefit of non-ratepayers, predominantly revolving around drainage, sanitation and public health, was rejected. The only interest that carpet manufacturers had in their employees, at its most basic, was that they should be fit to work. Patronage associated with the council seems to have been a side issue.

6. SUMMARY

The period 1850 to 1864 witnessed the high point of Liberal fortunes in Kidderminster. From 1852 every MP was a Liberal, and they controlled the town council from 1852 to 1862. Ironically, that council failed to implement the Act requiring public baths and wash house (on the grounds of cost),¹⁵³ but was the first council in Worcestershire to establish a public library in 1855.¹⁵⁴

Although the political colour of Kidderminster had changed, there is little evidence that the conduct of parliamentary elections had greatly altered from the 1840s. It is true that the Liberals may have chosen as their candidates nominees who were effectively supplied by the Party, although there is no overt evidence of this. Lowe, Bristow, and White were all from the capital – Lowe a journalist,

¹⁵³ Worcester Chronicle 9 June 1852.

¹⁵⁴ Gilbert, Town and Borough, pp. 35-36.

Bristow a lawyer and White a soldier, accused by the Conservatives of being “Palmerston’s pet”. The Conservatives, however, continued with the old methods – true local men (Best and Boycott), the son of a local landlord (Talbot) and the lawyer who won the acquittal of the 1857 rioters (Huddleston). It is also true that the registration process became more professional, with specialist barristers taking the lead role. The tactic of encouraging the support of non-voters through post-election meetings and celebration dinners, already established in the late 1840s, continued. In addition, the Liberals did begin to try to establish party support on an on-going basis, rather than merely at election times.

Significantly, the period showed the power and limitations of patronage. Lord Ward, who had brought up extensive properties in the 1840s, including the estate of formerly owned by Lord Foley, increased his influence by financing in 1855, to the tune of £20,000, “Lord Ward’s shed,” a factory to house steam-driven looms and rented out to Kiteley and Grosvenor. Ward was also High Steward of Kidderminster and, on his elevation to Earl of Dudley, continued to play an active part in the town’s and the carpet industry’s affairs until his death in 1885. Ward was the sponsor of the vicar of Kidderminster, Thomas Leigh Laughton, who subsequently married Ward’s sister, and of Robert Lowe as MP. Ward, whose wealth was based on coal and iron in Dudley, also supported the Infirmary, the Schools of Art and Science, and Kidderminster’s Public Rooms. He subscribed £500 towards the £5,000 cost of the Rooms, and chaired the founding committee, insisting that the building should be for the benefit of all classes and free of party politics.¹⁵⁵ However, Ward’s influence, which delivered the seat to Lowe in 1852

¹⁵⁵ Marsh, *op.cit.*, pp. 57, 65, Gilbert, *Town and Borough*, p 24.

and 1855 and 1857, was ephemeral. It could turn the scales, and generate handsome majorities of ninety-four in the 1852 and eighty-eight in 1857 – the highest in Kidderminster’s history – but only when the Conservatives were weak and divided over free trade. Certainly the theory that Bristow and White were “government men” is given credence by the fact that at their celebration dinners there is no mention of, or even a toast to, Ward.

What is also clear is that in 1852 and 1857 there was a clear transfer of support from the Conservatives to the Liberals. The Tories’ share of the vote fell from 52.1 per cent in 1849 to 38.2 per cent in 1852 and 38.4 per cent in 1857. This can be attributed to two main factors – firstly the split over free trade and secondly, and probably among the clergy and more respectable voters predominantly, a desire to get away from the electioneering methods of Godson and Best, and a desire to clean up Kidderminster’s image after the bad publicity of the 1849 election petition. But by 1859 the alliance of Liberals and disaffected Conservatives had ended. In that year the Conservatives share of the vote rose to 48.9 per cent and was 48.9 per cent again in 1862. In a period when Palmerston was so popular, this restoration of the Tory strength in Kidderminster can most reasonably be put down to a closing of ranks after the 1857 riots. Free trade was no longer such a divisive issue, but the vindictive manner of Pardoe’s prosecution of the instigators of the violence seems to have convinced the “floating Tories” that they should return to the fold. Better the good old corruption of Godson than the new and brutal regime of the carpet manufacturers.

The virtual destruction of the hand-loom industry and the despair of the weavers now living in poverty goes a long way to explain the riots of 1857. As early as 1847 Claughton had commented that 1,500 families lacked the basic necessities of life in a town of 15,000 inhabitants.¹⁵⁶ By 1856 the Kidderminster Workhouse was full and over 1,700 were being given outdoor relief. By 1862 the relief fund totalled £1,120 to help the “distressed condition of the town.”¹⁵⁷ This despair and the lack of sympathy by the carpet masters meant that the weavers and other labouring classes were a receptive audience for a rabble-rouser like Boycott. They were bitter and jealous. The riot may have been provoked by Liberal arrogance, but it was certainly fuelled by the publicans who were implacably opposed to Lowe, both because of his stand against bribery and because of his stand on the Beer Bill. It was probably also pre-planned. Even allowing for the possible exaggeration of Liberal witnesses, it does appear that if Boycott lost there would inevitably be trouble. The riot needs to be seen in the general context of Kidderminster elections. Nationally it was the most violent outbreak in the 1857 general election. However, violence in Kidderminster elections was habitual, albeit not on this scale. As has been shown in the previous chapter, it was the norm in the 1830s for the Riot Act to be read and for the army to be called in to restore or maintain the peace. It is not too fanciful to argue that the industrial unrest of 1828 and 1830 was manipulated for political ends in the 1830s and that the pattern of the final defeat of the hand-loom industry in 1853 was similarly exploited in 1857. In Kidderminster, as in many small poor working class boroughs, violence was never far beneath the surface, whether on a political or industrial level. Essentially it was the only way the dispossessed non-voters and

¹⁵⁶ Smith, *op.cit.*, p 186.

¹⁵⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 4 January 1862, 22 February 1862.

weavers could make their feelings known. It was hardly surprising that, with the eyes of The Times on the borough, subsequent elections, while no less keenly contested, were marked by a massive police presence which deterred large-scale trouble.

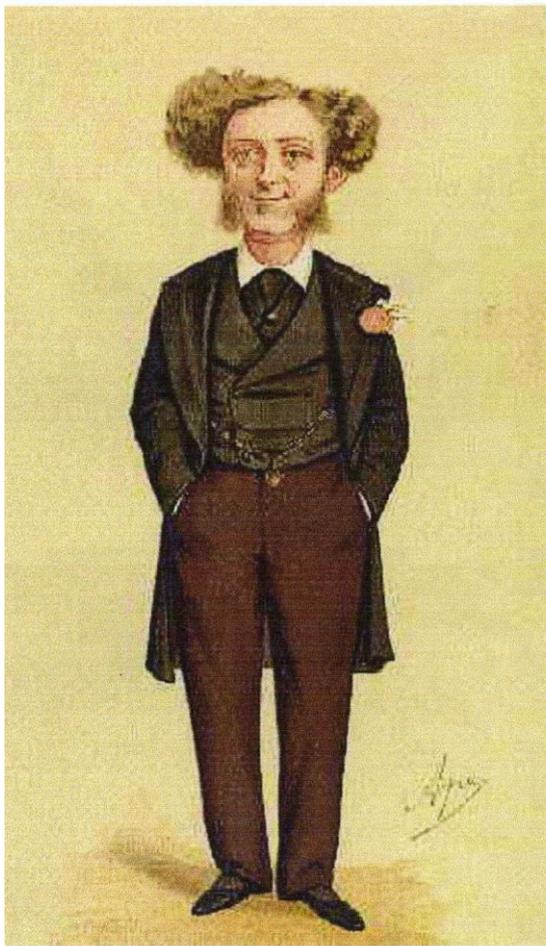
There is little doubt that treating continued to be a staple feature of Kidderminster elections, but after the election petition of 1850 it was far more circumspect. Huddleston's petition against Bristow in 1859 may just have been a means to securing the end of "paired" petitions being dropped, but Bristow's payment of £700 to have the petition removed does indicate that at the very least there was some evidence of electoral malpractice which was best not exposed to public scrutiny. As the next chapter will demonstrate, treating and bribery in Kidderminster as part of the normal and expected election process may have been dormant up to 1865, but it was alive and well and merely waiting to spring back to vigorous life under a master practitioner like Albert Grant. The borough economy depended on "septennial ale" – a classic example of inexhaustible supply and unquenchable demand!

Chapter 6

Carpetbagger 1865-1880

Baron Albert Grant

MP for Kidderminster 1865-1868, 1874.



National Portrait Gallery

1. INTRODUCTION

There were six parliamentary elections between 1865 and 1880 and Albert Grant represented the Conservatives in three of them, winning in 1865 and 1874 and losing to John Brinton in 1880 in a classic case of the carpetbagger against the carpet baron. Grant's victory in 1874 was overturned on petition, which exposed his electioneering techniques of bribery and corruption and threw doubt on the validity of his victory in 1865. Grant's two successes were notable not merely because of the short time available for electioneering but also because he spanned the period before and after the 1867 Reform Act and the 1872 Ballot Act. The electorate in 1874 was nearly five times larger than in 1865 and Grant's tactics changed accordingly. The research assesses the extent to which bribery and corruption were embedded in the whole election process in Kidderminster.

2. REGISTRATION AND PARTY ORGANISATION

Both parties continued to work the revision process for all it was worth. There was a war of words as to who had done best out of the 1864 revision. The Journal's arithmetic was as follows:-

	Made	Sustained
Liberal objections	114	42
Conservative objections	76	18
Liberal claims	N/A	5
Conservative claims	N/A	5
New Liberal voters	N/A	42
New Conservative voters	N/A	66

Ultimately the new Conservatives (plus twenty-four) cancelled out the Liberal gain on objections (plus twenty-four). What this indicates is that both parties understood the critical importance of the registration. In 1864 there were 588 voters, of whom 190 (32.3 per cent) were objected to, and sixty sustained (10.2 per cent). Since Grant won in 1865 by sixteen votes, the intense effort could and would pay dividends.

The 1865 revision was contested as fiercely as ever. The Conservatives made fourteen claims and forty-six objections; the Liberals made twenty-two claims and seventy-eight objections. The lead was taken by Rogers, of Cornwall, for the Liberals, assisted by local solicitor Talbot, while Garrold of Hereford appeared for the Conservatives, assisted by Crowther and Friend. There was an important test case on Francis, whose rent was 3d.6d per week (£9.2s per annum) although each quarter he paid the balance to bring the rent to £15 per annum. Having received verification of this arrangement his vote was accepted although his landlord accused him later in a letter to the press of “gross falsehoods”. John Talbot, son of the Liberal agent, was struck off because a “wooden shed” was not a building within the meaning of the Act. The Liberals were rebuked for “refusing twice to withdraw [an] objection, even when they knew it was untenable, and only withdrew it at the last moment. It was clear that they had objected to the vote on the chance of his [the voter] being absent when his name was called.” The overall result was a “victory” for the Liberals, having sustained twenty-two objections and five claims against fourteen objections for the Conservatives, a net gain of thirteen according to the Journal or, eighteen according to the Advertiser. Oddly in the same edition of the Advertiser the Liberal gain had been inflated to twenty-

four, which the paper thought gave the Liberals an overall majority of twenty. The Journal reckoned the Conservative majority was twenty-five. Reporting was not exactly a precise science. In addition the Advertiser noted that thirty-one “known and professed Liberals (for reasons which were well understood) had voted with the Tories” but hoped that in the absence of “such weighty reasons” they would return to the Liberal fold.¹

The local press did not report the 1866 revision, and 1867 was a damp squib with “no great interest attached, from the improbability of an election taking place during the year.” The Liberals made a net gain of fifteen. Once again objections were the preferred route, with seventy-two in total, but the parties saved themselves the expense of professionals and were represented by local solicitors, Talbot (Liberal) and Crowther (Conservative).² In organisational terms, the Working Men’s Conservative Association met at the Crown and claimed that the cost of draining the town and the new waterworks would actually prove to be profitable.³ The Liberals made efforts to cement their organisation by orchestrating quasi-educational societies, such as the Old Meeting Young Men’s Association, Temperance meetings and the Wesleyan Mutual Improvement Society. A Co-operative society was formed in December 1865.⁴

The 1867 Reform Act changed the face of party organisation in Kidderminster as it did in every borough. The increase in the electorate from 588 in 1868 to 2,323 in 1868 and 3,394 in 1874 meant that the old “shopkeeper / publican” elite of

¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 23 September 1865, 30 September 1865, Brierley Hill Advertiser 23 September 1865, 30 September 1865, 7 October 1865.

² Berrows Worcester Journal 12 October 1867, Kidderminster Times 12 October 1867.

³ Kidderminster Times 2 November 1867.

⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 30 September 1865, 2 December 1865.

voters was inundated by new working class electors. In February 1868 a public meeting of 600 working men denounced the personal ratepaying clauses as “unjust” to the working classes and likely to cause “great distress and general dissatisfaction.” The resolution was forwarded to a Worcestershire MP, Winnington, for presentation to Parliament and the meeting resolved to form a Rate Paying Clause Amendment Association.⁵ In the 1868 election, both Lea and Makins supported full householder franchise, which was achieved in 1869. The pressure for extension of the franchise led to the formation of a branch of the Reform League in Kidderminster with Holloway as president and it was this body which debated interminably the respective virtues of Lea and Bristow. The Reform League regarded itself as an “electoral body” and organised a trial ballot to attempt to decide on one candidate but this did not prevent the sort of factional infighting which led to Holloway, threatening to resign over secret meetings to which he was not invited. The activities of the Reform League in the 1868 election were divisive to the Liberal cause, with the secretary of the National Reform League, George Howell, openly campaigning for Bristow the Liberal MP in 1859, while Holloway supported Lea. As will be seen Bristow’s lawyers also attempted to undermine Lea’s position by letters to the press.

Certainly both Bristow and Lea actively courted the working classes, encouraging them to form “Working Men’s Committees” to support their candidates thus potentially fragmenting the Liberal vote. These committees divided the borough into sub-committees for the purpose of organisation. Lea’s Working Men’s Committee met each week with the candidate and canvassed on his behalf.

⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 15 February 1868.

Attendance at the meetings could reach eighty. All this was cemented by Lea's "generosity" – all the wool-sorters employed by him were given a "substantial dinner" at the Bull together with unlimited free drink.⁶ The Liberal coalition also founded the Kidderminster United Working Men's Club "in honor (sic) of the political enfranchisement of the working classes."⁷ Like many Liberal "special purpose vehicles" the Reform League burnt brightly in 1868 and then appears to have fizzled out once its goals had been achieved. Certainly there is no press reporting of its activities after the 1868 election.

Not to be outdone, the Conservatives formed their own party organisation. The Conservative Association and the Conservative Working Men's Association met at the Black Horse to endorse William Makins' candidature.⁸ Like the Liberals the Conservatives also sponsored spin-off organisations such as the Kidderminster Operatives' Conservative Burial Association with 180 members which met at eight pubs in the town – the Tory heartland. The leadership of the Conservative Association remained, however, controlled by the local party bosses. The Loyal Order of Orangemen also made a comeback.⁹ The Conservatives also organised mass meetings, in which the Working Men's Conservative Association was prominent, to hear Makins' views on the Irish church, foreign policy, education, taxation, union rights, the ballot and church rates.

⁶ Kidderminster Times 14 January 1868, 13 June 1868, 4 July 1868, 25 July 1868, 8 August 1868, 31 August 1868, 3 October 1868, 24 October 1868, 31 October 1868, 18 November 1868. The Era of the Reform League: English Labour and Radical Politics 1857-1883. Documents Selected by Gustav Meyer. Breuilly, J and Niedhart, N and Taylor, A (eds.), (J and J Verlag), 1995, p191.

⁷ Kidderminster Times 26 September 1868, 31 October 1868.

⁸ Kidderminster Times 11 July 1868.

⁹ Kidderminster Times 11 July 1868.

It is noteworthy that all resolutions were seconded by a member of the Working Men's Conservative Association.¹⁰ This body met regularly each month with 200 members and spread to Stourport where the carpet manufacturers there were accused of coercing their employees to vote Liberal. The Kidderminster branch also agreed to send representatives to the Crystal Palace demonstrations.¹¹ As a shock to the system the Conservatives also issued 2,000 free tickets to a meeting of the Working Men's Conservative Association where only tea would be drunk.¹² Old habits died hard. The tea, to which wives were invited, was to have been held at Ford's field, but Ford was threatened with eviction by his Liberal landlord, Ransom, if the event took place there, so it had to be moved.¹³ The only thing which could ruin the event was the weather, which swamped the marquees.¹⁴ The Tories were more successful when they remained on home ground at the Lion, where Makins addressed a crowd of over 500 with the watchwords "the Constitution in church and state" and, more practically, nominated polling district committees, needless to say based at five local pubs. Makins attacked the Liberals as "a Godless government and anarchy and confusion."¹⁵ Over 2,500 attended Makins' rally at the circus adjoining the Market Hall Vaults where a weaver called William Parker was chosen to speak on behalf of the working men. Holloway attended for the Liberals but was "received with such a storm of hisses and groans that his remarks were rendered inaudible."¹⁶

¹⁰ Kidderminster Times 11 July 1868.

¹¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 August 1868.

¹² Berrows Worcester Journal 19 September 1868.

¹³ Berrows Worcester Journal 26 September 1868.

¹⁴ Kidderminster Times 3 October 1868.

¹⁵ Kidderminster Times 17 October 1868.

¹⁶ Kidderminster Times 24 October 1868, 31 October 1868.

The sheer cost of elections in the period ensured that candidates were chosen from the traditional sources – outside lawyers and financiers for the Conservatives and local carpet manufacturers for the Liberals – and both parties targeted the working class vote. The newly enfranchised weavers were the “natural” supporters of neither party. Some of the poorer weavers, who had traditionally supported the Conservatives, probably remained unenfranchised because their lodgings were worth less than £10. Lea’s view in 1868 was that “there was great antagonism in the town between the classes.”¹⁷ However, during this period no candidate stood on a solely “working class” ticket (indeed if such a thing existed.)

As has already been noted, from 1832 the entire population had always taken a keen and boisterous interest in parliamentary elections. Nomination and polling days in particular drew enormous crowds of several thousand, and the nine thousand people who were reported to have attended the 1868 nomination process¹⁸ were not out of the ordinary. Elections had always in Kidderminster been an occasion for revelry, almost like the circus coming to town. Bands played, blue and pink ribbons festooned the streets and beer flowed (except in the Temperance Hall). What does seem to be a change in 1868, and certainly thereafter, is that the new voters became conscious of their political muscle. As has been seen, both parties tried to include them in the process by organising Working Men’s Associations and Lea observed in 1868 that he was “struck by the very independent and straightforward manner in which the majority of power-loom weavers have given their yea or nay”.¹⁹

¹⁷ Kidderminster Shuttle 21 February 1880.

¹⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 21 November 1868.

¹⁹ Kidderminster Times 14 November 1868.

The violence which had characterised earlier elections was more subdued in and from 1868, although Makins was attacked in that year and Grant's mob managed to occupy the Black Horse, Lea's central committee room in 1874. But this really was the tail end of violence and was on nothing like the scale of the 1830s or particularly 1857. Even allowing for Grant's tactics in 1865 and 1874, it is clear that the new voters' loyalties were divided. It is tempting to attempt a demographic analysis of the electorate, a "typical" Conservative or Liberal voter. There really is not enough evidence in Kidderminster for this to be other than highly impressionistic. One may hypothesise perhaps reasonably that if the Shuttle could blame Grant's victory on "the illiterate portion of the community,"²⁰ then the Shuttle would regard its readership as (obviously) literate, but probably also from a more respectable "band" of the working class, whose aspirations and political views might mirror those of their social superiors.

Carter has argued that if the Liberals "came from the higher station" of their class, "further down the social scale local Conservatives entered more favourable territory." The poorer paid weavers had "spent years of fighting Liberal employers" and were "suspicious of rampant capitalism." The Conservatives appealed to the main victims of free trade and laissez-faire.²¹ The basic flaw with this argument is that in the hysterical tones of the Shuttle, anyone who disagreed with its editor, Edward Parry, was likely to be branded "illiterate". The Shuttle was one-eyed in its support of the Liberals.

²⁰ Kidderminster Shuttle 7 February 1874.

²¹ Carter, S, Carpet Knights and Carpet Baggers, (Private, 1995), pp. 17-18.

Without the evidence of the 1868 poll book and thanks to the Ballot Act of 1872, it is not possible to draw any real conclusions, except from what the parties did and how they targeted their potential supporters. What is clear is that the Conservatives were consistent throughout the period from 1832 to 1880. They benefited from hostile industrial relations. If the Liberals could be characterised as the carpet manufacturers (and that body was predominantly Liberal in its political persuasion), the Conservatives' natural constituent was a weaver who had suffered from protracted disputes over women labour in 1874 and the long term decline of his craft. Here there is a real anomaly. Quinton, the Union President was a staunch Conservative; Holloway, his deputy, was a Liberal. They would fight together against the masters, but against one another in politics. This is where Carter's argument is at its weakest. Prior to 1868 only the more wealthy weavers had the vote. According to Carter's hypothesis they should have voted Liberal, but the Conservatives won six of the twelve elections from 1832 to 1865. The Tories were also able to espouse the working man's right to drink in the face of the teetotallers, who tended to be Liberal and who preached the evils of alcohol and the wickedness of the licensed victuallers.²² There is no real evidence to support a stratification of support for each party.

The emphasis on registration was even more pronounced in 1868, since it preceded the election. There were only six or seven lodger claims,²³ but the Conservatives initially objected to 200 voters against the Liberals eight. The Conservatives tried but failed to disfranchise John Brinton the carpet manufacturer on the grounds that he lived in Edgbaston, more than the seven permitted miles

²² Kidderminster Shuttle 2 January 1874.

²³ Berrows Worcester Journal 5 September 1868.

away. The Conservatives succeeded with an Irishman called Cosgrove, whose name according to the rate-book was Coogerry. His defence that “the curious thing about people in this country was the one half of them were not able to spell a man’s name” did him no good. After hearing only half the objections the revising barrister said he would not sit later because ”with the excitement consequent upon the revision the police would not be able to keep order if he did.” Michael McLean was objected to on the grounds that he was on the list three or four times, but his name was spelt incorrectly. Since the voter could not read, the barrister settled for “McCleane” and allowed the vote. The session went on for three days. In summary the Conservatives sustained 103 objections against three for the Liberals.²⁴

After his victory in 1868, Lea continued the tradition of the annual stocktaking dinner for 120 of his employees.²⁵ Surprisingly in 1869 both parties made no objections to the list of voters and only three lodger claims were accepted.²⁶ Lea also supported the Kidderminster Working Men’s Permanent Benefit Building Society.²⁷ The Conservatives were present in larger numbers at the annual dinner of the Kidderminster Licensed Victuallers’ Association.²⁸

The 1871 revision was also low key, with again no objections.²⁹ In 1872 the Conservatives achieved their greatest public relations success by sustaining an objection to Edward Parry, editor and owner of the Shuttle, for not owning

²⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 26 September 1868, 10 October 1868, Kidderminster Times 26 September 1868.

²⁵ Kidderminster Times 9 October 1869.

²⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 2 October 1869.

²⁷ Kidderminster Shuttle 24 September 1870.

²⁸ Kidderminster Shuttle 14 October 1871.

²⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 30 September 1871.

property in the borough. Parry's protests were so vehement that he was asked to leave the court. Parry also contrived to offend his fellow leading Liberals over the School Board of which he was a member. Dixon and Brinton claimed that as a member he could not legally print the Board's accounts.³⁰ In 1873 there were again no objections,³¹ and thereafter the local press declined to report the decisions of the registration courts.

The Conservatives drilled down their organisation into districts, such as the St. George's District Conservative Association³² and the South Ward Working Men's Conservative Association, in what had long been regarded as a Liberal stronghold.³³ There were also political lectures in 1874, such as "Radicalism and Toryism," with a clear steer from the speaker that Radicalism had "faith in the general good sense and general patriotism of the masses."³⁴

There seems to have been in Kidderminster a real absence of the "factory politics" described by Joyce in Blackburn. There the "politics of a town [were] determined solely by the relative number of spindles and looms driven by Tory and Liberal employers". If this had been true in Kidderminster, the Liberals would have won every election. Whatever the factory system produced in Kidderminster, it was not "local partisanship" whereby the factory penetrated into political life.³⁵ Clearly there was some of this in Kidderminster, with Lea's and later Brinton's men expected to vote for their employer. But as already noted, the tradition of

³⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 5 October 1872.

³¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 October 1873.

³² Berrows Worcester Journal 17 October 1874.

³³ Berrows Worcester Journal 30 May 1874.

³⁴ Kidderminster Times 1 November 1874.

³⁵ Joyce, P, 'The Factory Politics of Lancashire in the Later Nineteenth Century' Historical Journal Vol 18, (1975), pp. 525-553.

poor industrial relations and a union boss who was resolutely and loudly Conservative proved an effective political counterbalance in Kidderminster where the town was not deeply marked by “the impress of the factory and its owner,”³⁶ at least not in political terms. There is rather more correlation with Garrard’s observations about Salford after 1867 where “both parties became organisationally more formal and more permanent and with a fairly complete network of polling district associations.” “Both parties remained firmly controlled by their wealthy middle-class members,” although there were “elaborate rituals of mass participation over important decisions.” There is some evidence in Kidderminster, such as the Building Society and the Funeral Association, to support the claim that “local party leaders sought to provide a more than political environment for working class supporters.” Whether they were “involved in social integration” is open to question.³⁷ What is rather more evident, at least from the local press reporting, is that in Kidderminster party organisation only really sprang into action at parliamentary election times although the annual registration process did force the parties to maintain some level of organisation between elections. It may be that politics per se were boring, being lectured to and exhorted; but election times were very different indeed. That was the time when a working man voter had two rich friends who would every seven years listen to what he wanted; buy him a drink as an old and valued acquaintance and perhaps put him on a committee and pay him for nominal services.

The Conservatives had plenty of foot soldiers in Kidderminster, but no one with the wealth or stature to stand for parliament. This explains the appeals by the

³⁶ Joyce, P, *Work, Society and Politics*, (Gregg Revivals, 1980), p 125.

³⁷ Garrard, J, ‘Parties, Members and Voters after 1867’ in *Later Victorian Britain* Gourvish, T. R. and O’Day, A, (eds.), (MacMillan, 1988), pp. 127-150.

party to Grant in 1865 and 1874, Makins in 1868 and Fraser in 1874. However, the local party had the final say in selecting their candidate. Conservative Central Office in the form of the Carlton Club was claimed to have wanted Fraser to stand again in 1880 after Brinton resigned but the local party in the form of Jefferies was determined to have Grant or nobody. Since Grant declined to stand again, the local party decided not to contest the by-election,³⁸ in return for a murky deal in the local council elections.

The Liberals were perhaps more of a coalition of lifestyles than the Conservatives. They were still typified (or in the Tory mind stigmatised) as Dissenting teetotal carpet masters. At the end of the period there was some dissatisfaction among the Liberal rank and file at the dictatorial style of the local party elite,³⁹ leading to a meeting in April 1880 “for the purpose of remodelling the Liberal Association upon a broader and more representative basis.”⁴⁰ This led to a “caucus” style of organisation with a committee for each of the five polling districts. The potential weakness of a coalition was witnessed in 1868 when the Liberal interest fragmented, with initially three candidates. Factional infighting could lead to public falling out as when in 1868 the local Reform League branch accused the local Liberal bosses of being “manufacturers and lawyers” and urging voters to “wait for the people’s candidate.”⁴¹ After an inordinate amount of navel gazing the Liberals always managed ultimately to field a single candidate and when it mattered Bristow, who had targeted the working men as his natural allies, transferred his support to Lea. Even Brinton’s triumphal accession in 1880 was

³⁸ Kidderminster Shuttle 1 May 1880.

³⁹ Kidderminster Times 13 March 1880.

⁴⁰ Kidderminster Times 1 May 1880.

⁴¹ Poster 13 June 1868, Kidderminster Public Library.

fraught. At one stage he withdrew his candidature to ensure party unity,⁴² but since he employed around 1,000 people (20 per cent of the total carpet trade) he could claim that “the process of re-integration has commenced.”⁴³

The development of party organisation in the period is definite but should not be overstated. At the beginning and the end the local party bosses remained in control. They may have made gestures towards democracy and to the massively enlarged electorate, but they still controlled events. The last word in this section is fittingly a report by the Shuttle of a Conservative demonstration to Grant in November 1874. For the “Throttle” and the “pariah” it was hate at first sight. The Shuttle accepted that “some thousands... of the common herd” had turned up to cheer Grant, “a sort of scapegoat sent into the wilderness” as a “political monarch out of business.”⁴⁴ The bitterness with which the elections were fought in Kidderminster can have no more fitting description.

3. VIOLENCE AND CORRUPTION

All told, the 1865 election was hardly good news for the Conservatives, both nationally and in Kidderminster. Palmerston was still an electoral asset for the Liberals and the 1859 election had given them a majority of forty. Locally, the Liberals had won the last five elections and had held the Borough since 1852. The sitting MP, Colonel Luke White, was contesting the seat and, however much the Kidderminster mob remained Tory, there were a lot less of them than before as the population had fallen by 26 per cent, and there had been twelve relatively trouble-free years in the carpet industry. As a result, the Conservatives were less able to

⁴² Kidderminster Shuttle 28 February 1880.

⁴³ Kidderminster Shuttle 20 March 1880.

⁴⁴ Kidderminster Shuttle 7 November 1874.

exploit the habitually bitter industrial relations in Kidderminster than had traditionally been the case. In the event the Liberals won the general election with an increased majority of sixty-two. In Kidderminster the Conservatives managed to turn a Liberal majority of ten into a victory by fifteen votes. The new Tory MP was Albert Grant.

Sadly, we do not know whether Grant chose Kidderminster or whether Kidderminster chose Grant. In any case, for the floating and/or quoting voter of the borough, it was a marriage made in heaven. 1865 was the last election under the old franchise rules of £10 occupancy. There were 588 electors out of a population of 15,399; only 3.8 per cent of the inhabitants of Kidderminster had the vote. Albert Grant bestrides the politics of Kidderminster in the period under review like a colossus, victorious in both 1865 and 1874 when the electorate had increased by over 470 per cent. The old methods remained successful, and such was Grant's perceived appeal that the Tories were only too willing to parade him as their candidate in 1880 when he was both bankrupt and undeniably tainted with bribery and corruption in relation to his victory of 1874.

Grant represented all that was best and worst in Victorian society. His rise and fall were equally meteoric. Born Abraham Gottheimer in poverty in Dublin in 1831, his family moved to London and Grant progressed from being a clerk and a traveller in wine to founding the Mercantile Discount Company in 1859. This failed in 1861. In 1864 he established the Credit Foncier and Mobilier of England, which he used as the main vehicle for promoting companies. There was already a whiff of fraud about his operations which involved buying shares in a

company before they were allocated, puffing them up on a grand scale and then selling them to the public at a substantial profit before the shares fell back to their true worth. It was insider dealing and market manipulation writ large.⁴⁵

The fun and games started early, well before the 1865 election was called. Miller Corbet a noted Liberal solicitor, was accused of assault in April by a staunch Conservative wool-stapler, George Barratt, at the Union Inn. Barratt accused one of the magistrates, Samuel Broom (another Liberal) of bias and conflict of interest. Corbet was accused of abusive language, calling Barratt a “drunken mendicant” and a “babbling parrot” and kicking him. Barratt denied calling Corbet an “untidy attorney”. Corbet claimed provocation and alleged he had been accusing of signing a petition to shut public houses. Corbet’s novel defence was that although he did not deny kicking Barratt, he was lame in that foot and could not have caused injury. The magistrates dismissed his case on the grounds that any assault was “too trivial to notice.”⁴⁶

The election process started dreadfully for the Conservatives, when on 27 June 1865, Luke White indicated his intention to stand by declaring that “I am of the opinion that the Working Classes ought to be admitted to their fair share of Political Power.”⁴⁷ The Tories at that stage had not even chosen a candidate and the Liberals believed that if there was a contest “they will be able to return him [White] by a much larger majority.”⁴⁸ Grant did not arrive in Kidderminster until Thursday 6 July, and polling took place on Wednesday 12 July. In a long letter to

⁴⁵ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (2004), p 277.

⁴⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 29 April 1865, Brierley Hill Advertiser 1 July 1865.

⁴⁷ Brierley Hill Advertiser 1 July 1865.

⁴⁸ Brierley Hill Advertiser 1 July 1865.

the electors he denounced the Ballot as “doing in the dark what it had ought to be the pride of the electors to do in the light” and manhood suffrage as “incompatible with the balance of power of the educated and responsible electors.” He opposed interventionism in foreign affairs, but supported the Navy being “the finest and largest in the world.” While supporting the privileges of the Church of England he would also endorse measures to relieve those Dissenters who had to maintain their own places of worship as well as the Anglican Church. He also promised to second any measures of local interest.

In the limited time available for the canvass, White opened by addressing a crowd of 1,500 at the Lion Hotel. He praised the government’s success in reducing taxes by £16 million and the national debt by £19 million. He claimed that the Union Chargeability Bill would have reduced the town rates by 50 per cent and confirmed his support for an extension of the franchise. He believed that the Liberals had improved their position in the electoral register and this would give them “an easy and decisive victory.”⁴⁹

Grant addressed the electors the following day at the Junction Inn, having travelled from the Railway Station in a carriage drawn by four greys, and accompanied by a brass band. The Brierley Hill Advertiser sniffed that the crowd contained few electors, but conceded that 2,000 including “a good sprinkling of the softer sex” were there to greet him. Grant began with three cheers for the Queen. He claimed to represent “the feelings of Kidderminster at large” and claimed that “no one but a commercial candidate can represent a commercial

⁴⁹ Brierley Hill Advertiser 8 July 1865.

constituency.” He accused the Liberals of thwarting Derby’s Reform Bill and claimed to be a “Liberal Conservative.” He applauded the working classes’ fortitude during the years of the failure of the American cotton supply, and endorsed an extension of the franchise to lodgers and taxpayers, but not to manhood suffrage which would be “legalised tyranny” in the French mould. Grant again denounced interventionism in foreign affairs, condemning Russell’s “meddle and muddle” policy. Once more he expressed sympathy for settling the Church Rates issue.

There was the normal squabbling about the results of the registration process. The Advertiser claimed that the Liberals had a clear majority of thirty-five to forty, while admitting grudgingly that the Conservatives had won over a notable (but unnamed) Liberal defector. The Journal claimed a net gain to the Conservatives of forty-six, giving them a potential majority of thirty-six. Having neatly occupied the moral high ground by insisting on a “measures not men” election and by studiously ignoring the Advertiser’s snide comments on his “German extraction,” Grant raised no objections when one of his chief lieutenants, Talbot, described Luke White as “unworthy of confidence.....useless and a perfect nonentity”⁵⁰

Nomination and the poll were frenetic with “excitement very high”. Francis Quilter, no doubt a disgruntled investor, denounced Grant as a “fraudulent adventurer” and a “confounded German swindler” and sent an address to this effect to all electors. White, who may well have orchestrated these interventions,

⁵⁰ Brierley Hill Advertiser 8 July 1865, The Times 15 June 1865, Berrows Worcester Journal 8 July 1865, Berrows Worcester Journal 22 July 1865.

claimed he should be elected to “prevent the borough being disgraced” and had lodged a petition with the Mayor claiming that Grant was not qualified to be a MP because of his birth. White also circulated Quilter’s handbill round the City of London, touting support for a personal attack on Grant’s honesty. It backfired. Grant triumphantly produced a letter from Charles Ellis of Lloyds testifying to his “thoroughly upright and honourable conduct both in business and private affairs”. Quilter was unwise enough to repeat his claims at the nomination. He was saved from a beating only by the “desperate efforts” of the Liberals. This incident merely served to wind up the excitement in the town to “as high a pitch as it has ever been known to reach.” The magistrates feared violence and swore in more special constables. White refused to debate Quilter’s “scandalous, infamous and libellous attack” with Grant. Grant likened his German parentage to the Prince of Wales and insisted that in his last business failure he had personally ensured all creditors were paid in full.

By the time of the nomination there were 5,000 people crowding around the hustings. The Mayor pleaded for a clean contest in a borough which “was formerly under a stigma from its conduct at election times.” The nomination speeches followed traditional lines. Brinton praised White’s part in the government’s success in reducing the “local burden which had pressed so heavily on every rate payer” and also the “unblemished and untainted life” of the Liberal candidate. Dixon pointed out that the “commercial men” of Kidderminster (i.e. the carpet manufacturers) were all supporting White. For the Conservatives, Woodward defended Grant’s right to change his name (as he had done in the Court of Chancery in 1863). Grant’s abilities were matched only “by his

integrity.....the kindness of his nature, and his liberal charities.” Clearly the Conservatives felt threatened enough by Quilter’s charges and White’s use of them to supply relevant character references from magistrates and clergymen. The candidates’ debate was equally predictable. White appealed to the electors “to prevent the borough being disgraced.” Grant reiterated that “his opinions were those of the great majority of the constituency.” Grant won the show of hands; White duly demanded a poll.

The poll took place the next day, and, to the consternation of the Liberals, Grant won by fifteen votes. The Liberals attributed their defeat to the defection of twenty to thirty voters to Grant, to electors who should have voted for White remaining neutral, and to unfulfilled pledges. The cause of all these disappointments was “dealings with those burgesses who are known to put a money value on their votes.” The Conservatives naturally ascribed their victory to “the natural result of the greater popularity of their principles.” Grant himself claimed “veni, vidi, vici”; “the public voice” had spoken, disgusted by “the vile process of canvassing” adopted by the Liberals. He also paid tribute to the assistance of “the non-voters, as well aselectors, and it is by the kind sympathy of the non-voters that many votes have been secured to me.” Later, Grant’s innocent words would be shown to conceal the dark side of his victories. The polling by time was also telling, and followed the traditions of Godson and Best. At 9am the Liberals led by three; at 10am by fourteen; at 11am by thirty-six; and at 12noon by thirty, by which time 484 votes, 87.2 per cent of the eventual total number had been cast. From 12 noon to 4pm, Grant polled fifty-eight votes against thirteen for White. Grant won the North Ward by twenty votes

and lost the South Ward by five votes. Turnout was 94.4 per cent. Business was “at a complete standstill” but the presence of county police, borough police and special constables managed to maintain order.⁵¹

It is fortunate that the Poll Book of the 1865 election exists, but its use in analysing the result is limited. It lists only the voters names and addresses, without occupation. What the bald figures show is as follows, by comparison with the 1862 election:-

	Same vote as		Change of		New Voters		Total
	1862		vote				
	No.	%	No.	%	No	%	
Liberals	156	58	6	2	108	40	270
Conservatives	164	58	17	6	104	36	285
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	320	58	23	4	212	38	555
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

This does show that the Conservatives had a gain of eleven in terms of change of allegiance, but the real issue is the number of new voters, apparently 38 per cent of those who voted.

As previously noted, this apparent “churn” of votes may be partly due to lack of positive identification information. There were, for example, six voters called Bennet, four called Powell and twelve called Smith, of whom four were named “John Smith.” The 38 per cent churn in electorate, the 19 per cent increase in the

⁵¹ The Times 12 July 1865, 13 July 1865, 15 July 1865, Berrows Worcester Journal 15 July 1865, Brierley Hill Advertiser 15 July 1865.

number of electors and the rise in turnout from 91 per cent in 1862 to 94 per cent in 1865 all make it difficult to evaluate the respective influences of corruption or other drivers on the result. What is certain is that Grant won in Kidderminster with a 2.5 per cent swing to the Conservatives in an election where the Liberals nationally consolidated their hold on government.

Thus far the contemporaneous reporting of the 1865 election does not indicate undue electoral malpractice. The losers of every election always cried “foul” and illegal dealings. These details only emerged after the 1874 election. In the meantime, Grant cemented his victory by promising to “unite all parties” and “to give all my support to any measures which may contribute to the prosperity and advantage of your town.”⁵² The Journal gleefully denounced the “dishonourable and desperate” tactics of the Liberals.⁵³ Grant was also adept at exploiting the legitimate tactics of an MP working his constituency. He quickly donated ten guineas to the Infirmary, £10 to entertain the police and £54.8s to various churches “to the relief of distress”. The Old Meeting House, a hot-bed of Liberal activism, returned Grant’s £5 donation on the grounds that “they opposed the return of Mr Grant as member for the borough, and to receive donations from him now, would not only be inconsistent but have the appearance of a desire to “sponge up on him”. Likewise the Wesleyans returned their £5 donation.⁵⁴ Grant was bothered not one iota; he had made his point. He also donated the cups for the volunteer soldiers’ shooting competition and presented the prizes. Predictably

⁵² Brierley Hill Advertiser 22 July 1865, Berrows Worcester Journal 22 July 1865.

⁵³ Berrows Worcester Journal 22 July 1865.

⁵⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 22 July 1865, 29 July 1865, Brierley Hill Advertiser 29 July 1865.

the event ended at the Horn and Trumpet where Grant paid for a dinner for 90 people.⁵⁵

It was perhaps predictable that a petition was issued against Grant's return as MP on the multiple grounds of gross bribery, corruption and treating, intimidation, abduction and duress, as well as Grant "not being the son or grandson of a father who was a natural born subject of the sovereign of Great Britain and Ireland."⁵⁶ We do not know what happened to that petition. It may well have been quietly "paired" with a Conservative petition, or perhaps the Liberals feared that a contested petition would expose their own malpractices. For whatever reason it was dropped. Certainly Arthur Green of Atherstone wrote to Burcher, a leading supporter of Grant, in connection with the 1874 petition, claiming that "White was returned [in 1862] by paying about 60 persons rates to keep them on the register."⁵⁷

The charges against Grant of malpractice in the 1865 elections were circumstantial but probably genuine. In the 1874 petition trial Russell, QC for the petitioners, was to claim that Grant's victory in 1865 had cost between £15,000 and £20,000.⁵⁸ Certainly several electors admitted to being paid £11 for their vote.⁵⁹ This, however, was normal procedure, at least in Kidderminster. All it establishes is the going rate. What is probably more telling is a claim by Ebenezer Guest writing his memoirs in 1905 under the title "Old Kidderminster." Guest

⁵⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 28 October 1865, Brierley Hill Advertiser 28 October 1865.

⁵⁶ The Times 19 February 1866.

⁵⁷ Danks Archive, BA5278 Box 8, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁵⁸ Kidderminster Shuttle 11 July 1874, Birmingham Morning News 7 July 1874.

⁵⁹ Birmingham Morning News 13 July 1874.

was a Liberal activist but his reminiscences have not been proved to be false and may well be true.

“The Black Horse was the Conservative Headquarters. Wine and gold were in the ascendant, and several thousand pounds were placed, after being put in bags of varying value, in the boots’s bed at the head of the stairs..... The day before the election “good men and true” gave the names of the Free and Independent and undecided men, and the amount that would convince them of the many excellencies of the Baron. Towards midnight, on men hurrying to the boots’s room for fresh arguments, it was found the well was dry. [A local Conservative leader] Cocker was consulted, and there should have been a thousand pounds there, but it was not so [presumably stolen]. The order went forth, “let no voter waiting for a bribe be allowed to go out.” Fiddlers were engaged; some of the men’s wives were admitted and retained, and a night of revelry was spent, but it was full ten o’clock before the Baron’s coffers were replenished and it nearly cost him the election.”⁶⁰

This allegation is not corroborated nor substantiated, but taken with Russell’s claim of Grant’s overall outlay in the election, it has a ring of truth about it. As already noted, Grant also purchased eleven properties in Kidderminster before the election, presumably to create a base of Conservative voters.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Kidderminster Shuttle January 1905.

⁶¹ Gilbert, D, Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster, (David Voice, 2004), p 45.

What conclusions can be drawn from the 1865 election result? Even allowing for the resentment of the Liberals in losing a seat which they expected to retain, the evidence leads one to the view that Grant was indeed “another Godson.”⁶² Although the charge of violence may be discounted, with the usual excitement of the borough at election times kept within bounds, Grant’s electoral victory in 1865 appears to have been achieved through generous oiling of the wheels of the election process. Although Jefferies may have dismissed Russell’s claims that Grant’s costs were up to £20,000, he did admit that £8,000 was a reasonable figure.⁶³ If the total was the average of the two claims at £14,000, it means that each vote cast for Grant cost £49. Allowing for the fact that as an “outsider” Grant’s costs would inevitably be higher, his entire campaign only lasted five days, which means he was spending at the rate of £2,800 per day. To put this expenditure in context £14,000 in current values amounts to a staggering £1.2 million!⁶⁴

1865 was the last election before the 1867 Representation of the People Act dramatically increased the number of voters. In 1865 there were 588 voters, or 3.8 per cent of the population, compared with 390 voters (2.6 per cent) in 1832. Despite the increase, Kidderminster remained a small borough in terms of overall electorate, inevitably prone to, and welcoming of, electorate malpractice. What is clear is that the form of this malpractice really did not change much over the 43 years from 1832 to 1865. Grant actually did in 1865 very much the same as Godson had done before him. There was indiscriminate treating of both voters and non-voters alike, together with selective bribery, and the mob was courted to

⁶² Birmingham Morning News 7 July 1874.

⁶³ Kidderminster Shuttle 11 July 1874.

⁶⁴ <http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2003/rp03-082.pdf> [22 December 2007].

act as persuaders in the black arts of intimidation, blocking and boycotting. Just as Best had snatched victory from Gisborne in 1849 by bribery and corruption in the afternoon of the poll, so did Grant in 1865. It is noticeable that White received no votes at all after 2pm. This seems to have been the classic Conservative tactic in Kidderminster – to wait and see how many votes were needed and then round up the stragglers to ensure victory. It should not be construed that the Liberals, with the public exception of Lowe, were really any more pure. It was just that the Conservatives tended to be much better at the dark arts of electioneering. The one major change was the lack of major violence after 1857. It is at least arguable that the levels of public disturbance which had attended the elections from 1832 to 1852 were likely to reach a crescendo if the circumstances were right for it, but after the attempt to murder Lowe in 1857, and although the election process continued to draw massive, excited and alcohol-inflamed crowds, there were after 1857 enough police on duty to maintain a semblance of order.

Grant's triumph in 1865 may be put into context by the 1868 election, when he did not stand. This was the first election under the Representation of the People Act, 1867, which extended the borough franchise to householders with a one-year residential qualification, and to lodgers who had occupied lodgings worth £10 a year, also for a year.⁶⁵ As a result the electorate of Kidderminster rose by almost four times to 2,323 men. The extension of the parliamentary boundary to include parts of "Kidderminster Foreign" such as Puckson, Comberton and Sion Hill (see appendix 2) also contributed, but these areas were relatively lightly populated and are unlikely to have contributed to a major extent to the extension of the franchise.

⁶⁵ Hanham, H. J, The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain, (Historical Association, 1968), p 35.

The exclusion of “compounders,” lodgers who did not pay their rates in person, but included it as part of their rent, kept around 1,000 voters off the list. They would prove a force to be reckoned with in the 1874 election.

Grant was abroad in 1868, receiving the hereditary title of Baron from King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy for his services in the establishment of the Victor Emmanuel Gallery in Milan. While the Conservatives quickly settled on William Makins of London as their candidate, the Liberals were spoilt for choice with the activities of the Reform League potentially splitting the Liberal vote. Three claimants contested the nomination. Firstly George Griffith, a radical who had a chequered career, a Churchwarden who became a Dissenter, a supporter of Boycott against Lowe in 1857, and who had stood against Lowe in Calne in 1859;⁶⁶ secondly Thomas Lea, a local carpet manufacturer who “hope[d] that the present large expenditure of public money will be reduced”, supported the “protection of the Ballot” and objected to the “obnoxious rate – paying clauses “of the Reform Act;⁶⁷ and thirdly A R Bristow, who had defeated Huddleston in Kidderminster in the 1859 election. Bristow supported household suffrage, the abolition of compulsory Church Rates, free trade and “lessening rates and taxes,” as well as “to strive for and obtain for the working classes that protection of the Ballot – without which their votes are only a mockery, a delusion, and a snare.”⁶⁸ Makins also opposed the rating clauses of the Reform Act, and was “totally opposed to the disestablishment and disendowment “ of the Church of Ireland,

⁶⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 13 June 1868.

⁶⁷ Kidderminster Times 11 June 1868.

⁶⁸ Kidderminster Times 18 July 1868.

while concurring in all measures of retrenchment and economy in public expenditure.”⁶⁹

As the sparring continued at a Conservative meeting at the Corn Exchange, Makins, in response to a question from Holloway, “did not consider that the ballot would be that protection for he looked upon it as a very ready means to enable a man who had sold his vote once to sell it twice.”⁷⁰ Meanwhile the three Liberal candidates continued to hold separate meetings of their supporters, with Lea particularly supported by working men (many of whom he employed). In a letter to the Kidderminster Times “AIP” was concerned that the Liberals would tear themselves apart and “if the two Liberals insist upon going to the poll it is not at all improbable that between them they may seat [sic] the Tory candidate.”⁷¹ Much the same sentiments were voiced by “A. Fred” who wanted “to save the borough from the apprehended disgrace of allowing a Conservative candidate to override the great Liberal element that abounds here.”⁷²

These fears appeared to be confirmed by a public exchange of tetchy correspondence between the election agents of Bristow and Lea. Heckford and Boden for Bristow estimated that of the 2,000 electors, 1,400 would be voting for the first time and that these would be “nearly all working men”. If “we can believe in such an anomaly as a true Conservative working man,” the Conservatives might gain 300 which, with the existing 300 “old” Tories would give a Conservative vote of 600, leaving 1,400 Liberals - 350 “old” and 1,050

⁶⁹ Kidderminster Times 17 July 1868.

⁷⁰ Kidderminster Times 11 July 1868.

⁷¹ Kidderminster Times 25 July 1868.

⁷² Kidderminster Times 4 July 1868.

“new.” Since Grant won the 1865 election by 285 to 270 on a turn-out of 94.4 per cent, the claim of 350 is interesting. However, they continued by claiming that Lea could not muster more than 600, leaving Bristow with 800. On that basis, they argued that Lea should retire in favour of Bristow and support Bristow’s candidacy, in return for which Bristow would “recoup Mr Lea his present expenditure and place all his agents in the same position, pecuniary and otherwise, as if they had been originally retained by him”. In addition, at any election after five years from 1868, Bristow would use his influence to secure the seat for Lea. Talbot and Corbet, Lea’s main supporters, rejected this offer out of hand.⁷³ The plot thickened when Heckford was forced to deny that Bristow wanted “to buy the Borough of Kidderminster,” or that his offer to recompense Lea and his agents was driven by “corrupt motives” and further claimed that in the 1859 election Bristow had paid all his electioneering expenses.⁷⁴ Just to keep the pot boiling, Radford, a Tory activist, also accused the Liberal carpet manufacturers of attempts “to coerce their employees into pledging themselves to vote for the so called Liberal candidate.”⁷⁵

The Kidderminster Times observed that “the party feeling, instead of sobering down, appears to display stronger and more determined features from day to day.” The paper regretted that “so far as the contest has yet proceeded so much acrimony and personality should have become introduced.” “Vulgar clap-trap and unseemly abuse” had become the order of the day. Meanwhile the election agents of Makins and Bristow were exhorting potential voters who had been omitted from the register to contact them free of charge for help in the registration

⁷³ Kidderminster Times 1 August 1868.

⁷⁴ Kidderminster Times 8 August 1868.

⁷⁵ Kidderminster Times 8 August 1868.

process.⁷⁶ Noah Cooke, President of the Power Loom Carpet Weavers Mutual Defence and Provident Association, lent his weight to the Bristow campaign by denouncing Lea's lack of support for the union, while Bristow had "spontaneously given us a pledge that he will support or otherwise promote a measure for the legislation of our Trade Societies and the protection of their funds."⁷⁷ Lea denied the charge, claiming "he had no fear of working men in Kidderminsterotherwise he should have come forward for an old constituency and bought himself in with £80,000 perhaps." He denied strikebreaking, but was forced to admit that people believed that "Kidderminster could be bought for so much money."⁷⁸ This seems very close to admitting the venality of the borough, a concern in no way diminished by Lea entertaining all male employees over twenty-one years of age to a dinner at the Corn Exchange to commemorate "the completion of the annual stocktaking." Wine was, of course, provided and 130 of Lea's workers enjoyed a slap-up evening.⁷⁹

Even by Kidderminster's standards the election violence began early, over six weeks before election, when "the drink maddened "residuum" of Stourport" attacked with a barrage of stones a Conservative procession of "honest and industrious artisans" of Kidderminster as well as the women and children accompanying the procession.⁸⁰ In a startling change to their previous practices, it was the Conservatives who organised a tea party for 2,000 people.⁸¹ More typical were Makins' meetings in Franche to rally the newly-enfranchised area. The

⁷⁶ Kidderminster Times 15 August 1868.

⁷⁷ Kidderminster Times 22 August 1868.

⁷⁸ Kidderminster Times 5 September 1868.

⁷⁹ Kidderminster Times 19 September 1868.

⁸⁰ Kidderminster Times 3 October 1868.

⁸¹ Kidderminster Times 3 October 1868.

venue was the Three Crowns Inn, followed by the Peacock Inn and other public houses on the same evening.⁸² Conversely the meeting of the “unpledged Liberals” at the Temperance Assembly Rooms was “a scene of noisy disorder” which included Conservative hecklers, and the meeting “broke up in the greatest uproar and confusion.”⁸³ The dispute among the Liberals was only resolved ten days before polling when Bristow withdrew as “the result of the arbitration of Mr G. G. Glynn, the Liberal whip.” Most of Bristow’s supporters undertook to vote for Lea.⁸⁴

The underlying and nascent violence in the town was brought into sharp focus by an attempt to blow up Charles Jefferies, the Conservative Mayor of Kidderminster, who would play a pivotal role in Grant’s election campaign in 1874. A police constable found half a can full of gunpowder scattered on the front door step of Jefferies’ house, together with “a quantity of Lucifer matches of a very explosive character when trodden upon.” The intention of the perpetrator was to blow up Jefferies when he returned at “a somewhat late hour.” Fortunately, Jefferies returned home early before the lethal concoction had been placed on his step. Jefferies’ employees offered their sympathy and “great horror and detestation of such a villanous [sic] act.”⁸⁵

The nomination was held amid “great excitement from an early hour in the morning, but by the presence of numerous extra staff of policemen, and about 150 special constables, all attempts at anything like serious disorder was [sic]

⁸² Kidderminster Times 24 October 1868.

⁸³ Kidderminster Times 31 October 1868, Berrows Worcester Journal 31 October 1868.

⁸⁴ The Times 11 November 1868.

⁸⁵ Kidderminster Times 7 November 1868.

effectually checked.” The radical weaver Noah Cooke hoped that “the election would pass over without any of those acts of violence, intimidation and drunkenness.” Lea supported the ballot “so that when an election took place the will of the people might be freely ascertained, without that intimidation and corruption which had prevailed in their own midst.” Makins won the show of hands and Lea demanded a poll.

The Kidderminster Times credited the five new polling districts with dividing “the mob into smaller detachments than that of former years, preventing a repetition of former scenes of turmoil and riot.” Lea led from the start and by ten o’clock “the Conservatives had virtually abandoned the contest, and although means might have been used to have secured Mr Makins’ return, his committee resisted all overtures - preferring to lose rather than to resort to anything dishonourable to gain an undue advantage.” As a result the “golden entertainment was not forthcoming” and Lea won by 1,262 votes to 802. Lea paraded round the town “most of the shops being closed for safety.” The whole election was “made a borough holiday.” Nearly all the factories and mills were closed on election day, and, reminiscent of Godson’s days, around 8,000 to 9,000 people were present to hear the speeches.

The Journal reported that on polling day Makins was attacked by “a party of Mr Lea’s outposts, dragged from his carriage and obliged to go home on foot.” The Journal attributed Makins’ defeat to “other means than ordinary canvassing” but praised him for refusing to allow bribery or treating to be used. It had all ended so nearly peacefully, but in nearby constituencies the Bewdley election was marred

by a riot of 200 Liberal roughs who smashed windows in the Swan Hotel at Stourport. The drinkers inside retaliated and a riot occurred.⁸⁶ The same happened at Cradley Heath, where 700 roughs imported from Lye and Halesowen attacked the police and Conservative supporters in Old Hill. Having defeated the constables in a pitched battle, the mob smashed windows and were only quelled by the arrival of soldiers from Birmingham. The Tories called in their own muscle from Dudley and the police “quietly watched them at a distance” as the rival gangs “went into it in earnest.”⁸⁷

What is clear from the 1868 election in Kidderminster is that even in the absence of a candidate determined to “buy” the seat, public interest in parliamentary elections remained intense. Even without the traditional Conservative “push” in the afternoon of polling day turnout in the 1868 election was 88.9 per cent on an electorate which had risen from 588 to 2,323. It is also clear that corruption and violence remained at least close to the surface of the election process and, as in the case of the disturbance at Stourport (although relatively minor on the Kidderminster Richter scale of mob action) and the attempt to blow up Jefferies, could easily become reality. With the riots of 1857 still very much in mind, the authorities would take no chances on election day and the substantial police presence, together with the easy victory for Lea, kept a lid on public order. In terms of corruption, the expectation of treating, whether in the form of Makins’ meetings at public houses in Franche or the more legitimate (though of blatant motive) dinner for Lea’s employees, remained a feature of Kidderminster elections. It is noteworthy that Lea put the price of a seat in parliament at £80,000

⁸⁶ Kidderminster Times 21 November 1868, Berrows Worcester Journal 21 November 1868.

⁸⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 28 November 1868.

and even more that the Conservatives considered, but then rejected (presumably more on the grounds that the game was up as early as 10am rather than any conversion to electoral purity) their normal tactic of a “surge” of buying votes in the afternoon.

The whole 1874 election process was over in a week. The obvious candidate for the Liberals was the sitting tenant, Thomas Lea, who was duly nominated.⁸⁸ The Conservatives were initially less certain of their candidate. The casting vote seems to have been down to Alderman Jefferies. A prospective candidate, Mr O’Mally, approached Jefferies for his approval. In evidence at the election petition trial, Jefferies damned O’Mally as:

“a very high churchman. He had his hair parted down the middle and his hair was retroussé. I don’t care about gentlemen of that stamp. He was very sanctimonious, he would not drink anything. He would not do for Kidderminster at all.”⁸⁹

O’Mally dug his own grave by telling Jefferies that he would spend £200 of his own money on the election and would invite the local party to cough up anything extra. Jefferies nearly had apoplexy, stating that “he knew nothing of Kidderminster, or he would not talk like that.”⁹⁰ Jefferies is also credited with a classic comment on the appalling state of Kidderminster’s streets. He claimed that throughout Worcestershire when people saw someone walking in the middle

⁸⁸ Kidderminster Times 31 January 1874, Berrows Worcester Journal 31 January 1874.

⁸⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 July 1874.

⁹⁰ Birmingham Morning News 7 July 1874.

of the road, they immediately knew “that is a Kidderminster man.”⁹¹ Jefferies, a relative rarity as a Conservative carpet manufacturer, happily discharged the waste from his factory directly into the River Stour.⁹²

Unfortunately we do not know why the Conservatives turned again to Grant, “a gentleman of generous instincts.”⁹³ By 1874 Grant was probably at the peak of his powers and his success. He had survived the Emma Silver mining company of Utah scandal, for promoting which he had received £100,000. The investors who stumped up £20 per share never received more than a shilling. He had bought fame in 1873 by purchasing land by Kensington Palace and building Kensington House and followed this up by buying a derelict area of Leicester fields, converting the space into a public garden and donating it to the nation. He then bought a Landseer portrait of Sir Walter Scott for 800 guineas and presented it to the National Portrait Gallery. In 1874 he bought the Liberal paper The Echo for £20,000 and turned it into a Tory mouthpiece. Lord Derby was already observing that “the position Albert Grant is making for himself and us will be difficult. He has done too many dirty acts to be whitewashed and too many that are useful to be neglected. Probably some day he will ask for a baronetcy.” And, on the donation of Leicester Square, “in any man, this would be called an act of public spirit; in a disreputable speculator, who has more than once narrowly escaped prosecution for fraud, it is an ingenious device for putting himself right with the world.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Gilbert, N, A History of Kidderminster, (Phillimore, 2004), p 112.

⁹² Kidderminster Shuttle 16 May 1874.

⁹³ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 January 1874.

⁹⁴ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (2004), p 277, The Guardian 24 October 2002.

The voters of Kidderminster showed little concern for such niceties. He was championed as “the friend and supporter of the working classes.” His speeches were attended by over 3,000⁹⁵ people. His appeal was direct and simple. Surviving handbills urged electors to vote for Grant “whose interest is the working man’s interest” and “the genuine friend of labour.” Voters and non-voters were invited to meetings to be held at twelve public houses.⁹⁶ He was ostentatiously seconded as candidate by John Quinton, president of the Carpet Weaver’s Association.⁹⁷ Initially his election team were circumspect. Hatton, Grant’s agent for election expenses, informed Teague, the Landlord of the Barley Mow, that Grant would “not pay for any meal, drinks or refreshment supplied by you” in connection with the election.⁹⁸

While Lea toed the official Liberal party line and trumpeted the £5 million budget surplus,⁹⁹ Grant denounced the “class legislation ... by which one, and that a small part of the community, has...benefited, to the detriment of the other and largest portion.” He decried the radical agenda which has “jeopardised one by one all the Conservative Institutions of the country.” Critically, he opposed Gladstone’s legislative programme to reduce drunkenness, preferring educate the drunkard to see the error of his ways.¹⁰⁰ At a mass meeting of the Liberals, Lea defended the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and the Ballot Act, and once again lauded the £5 million budget surplus, some of which would “relieve the local taxpayers of the country.” Not taunted by Quinton’s loaded question on

⁹⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 January 1874.

⁹⁶ Palfrey Collection, BA3762, Worcestershire Record Office.

⁹⁷ Kidderminster Shuttle 31 January 1874.

⁹⁸ Danks Archive, BA5278, parcel 17(iii), Worcestershire Record Office.

⁹⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 January 1874.

¹⁰⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 31 January 1874.

the disestablishment of the Church of England, Lea was cool towards compulsory School Boards which, “involving increased rates, would make the subject of education unpopular.”¹⁰¹

Grant’s arrival in Kidderminster was marked by his trademark showman’s flourish. The train station was packed with his supporters and bands accompanied him playing “Auld Lang Syne,” together with twenty of his clerks from London “to assist to the local agents under the stress of work caused by the short interval before the election.” His carriage caved in under the pressure of his supporters and he walked to the Lion Hotel where he addressed a massive crowd.

“He had come to renew his courtship with Kidderminster. He knew she had been keeping company, very much against her will, with another, but he hoped she would now come back to her own true love.” “He could not see the working men of Kidderminster deprived of their right to have a candidate of their own choice. ...He had come there as the working men’s candidate.”

He accused the local Liberals of fixing the date of the election “with indecent haste.” Grant sneered at the budget surplus – “for the Premier to take any credit for that was as absurd as if he took credit for the world weather.” He also accused Gladstone of plotting to disfranchise Kidderminster. He charged the Liberals, and Lea specifically, of voting for a bill which paid election expenses out of the poor rates.

¹⁰¹ Kidderminster Times 31 January 1874.

“He was told his chances of success might be impaired by the Liberals bribing a certain number of the electors. He had already stated, and he now stated publicly, that he would be no party directly or indirectly to any illegal or corrupt practices. He had come down to maintain the reputation of Kidderminster, and not to lose it.”

Lea tried to play the “home” card, and predictably the Temperance party pledged their support. He pointed out, quite reasonably, that Grant appeared to have no policies or views. The nomination day was accompanied by the usual excitement, with “people generally... all in a craze, and feeling excited.” There was a fight in the Black Horse where windows were smashed. The magistrates prudently declined to extend opening hours at the Black Horse and the Lion.¹⁰² The police made their plans accordingly and Colonel Carmichael, the chief constable of Worcestershire, stationed an extra 30 men in the town and kept a reserve force in Worcester in case it was needed.¹⁰³

The election itself was a victory for Grant by 1,509 votes to 1,398, a majority of 111 and a swing to the Conservatives of 13 per cent on a turnout of 85.7 per cent. Grant again modestly described his success as “Veni, Vidi, Vici.” This was the first election under the secret ballot. The Kidderminster Times claimed that the turn-out was massive. After deducting duplicated voters, the total number of electors was 3,100. Apart from the 2,907 valid votes, there were forty-two faulty ballot papers. On this basis 2,949 actually polled out of 3,100, a staggering 95.1

¹⁰² Kidderminster Times 31 January 1874.

¹⁰³ Kidderminster Times 7 February 1874.

per cent turn-out. Election day was marked by “the greatest political excitement” but there “was not the slightest attempt at physical force or street ruffianism.” Prudently the shops were shut after dinner. Grant ascribed his victory “to the exertions of the working man of Kidderminster... [who had] nobly vindicated your independence and the right to choose your own member.” He then pushed his luck by claiming that the “victory we have won is enhanced by the fact that it is a pure victory.” Finally, he delivered the real hostage to fortune: “I hope soon to be amongst you again, and when free and unfettered by the electoral law we may have a day’s enjoyment together.”

The Liberals predictably ascribed Grant’s victory to the “most illiterate classes” and to “the grossest means.” In short the election result was “a disgrace to Kidderminster.” They alleged that in one district 124 illiterates voted for Grant against eight for Lea. In a gushing letter to the electors, Grant thanked the working men “by whose cordial aid and personal sacrifice of time my return became assured.”¹⁰⁴ The Shuttle was less forgiving, accusing Grant of transporting voters to the poll and claiming that “votes went very cheap, the highest sum realised was about half a sovereign, vast numbers were eager to sell themselves for half-a-crown or a good skinful of liquor. All the public houses in the Borough except eleven were engaged by Mr Grant as Committee Rooms.” The rage of Edward Hughes, owner of the Shuttle, was all the greater because the Conservatives had neatly and successfully ensured that he was disenfranchised at the registration court.¹⁰⁵ The Journal responded by reprinting an article from Vanity Fair, trumpeting Grant’s business acumen, his generosity in donating

¹⁰⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 7 February 1874, Kidderminster Times 7 February 1874.

¹⁰⁵ Kidderminster Shuttle 7 February 1874.

works of art and Leicester Square and lauding him as “a futureChancellor of the Exchequer.”¹⁰⁶

While Gladstone lamented that he had been “borne down in a torrent of gin and beer,” in Kidderminster Saunders and Burcher, the agents for Grant, properly advertised that all bills, claims and charges in respect of the election must be sent within one month of the declaration of the election to Joseph Hatton, Grant’s agent for election expenses.¹⁰⁷ However, the euphoria did not last beyond the end of February. Rumours began early that the Liberals would lodge a petition against Grant on the grounds of bribery and corrupt practices, although it is noteworthy that Lea stated that “he would...take no part in the matter, nor would he claim the seat should judgement be adverse” to Grant.¹⁰⁸

We do not know why Lea distanced himself from the petition process, but it may well be that he had something to hide. In the 1874 petition process Arthur Green wrote to Burcher, a Grant henchman, claiming that “if the law allowed you to subpoena Talbot to produce the cash book and fair bill book with Lea’s election accounts in [for the 1865 election] they would tell a tale. Arnold at the Vine Inn received £60 or £70 for his bill and Moody of Lea’s committee... received payment under colour of “loss of time.” Green also alleged that an elector named Bailey was fetched from Birmingham to vote.¹⁰⁹ Green followed this up by recommending “that the Conservative party employed detectives to go into all the Liberal Public houses on the night before and the day of the election to detect

¹⁰⁶ Berrows Worcester Journal 7 March 1874.

¹⁰⁷ Kidderminster Times 7 February 1874.

¹⁰⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 21 February 1874.

¹⁰⁹ Danks Archive, BA5278, box 8, Worcestershire Record Office.

treating and bribery etc.”¹¹⁰ If these allegations are true, it certainly would explain why Lea would not want his own electioneering tactics exposed to the cruel light of a petition hearing, just as Gisborne’s had been in the 1850 petition against Best.

Sure enough the threatened petition materialised on 24 February 1874, signed by Henry Willis, a carpet manufacturer, and George Holloway, an auctioneer, accusing Grant of:

“directly and indirectly giving and lending and offering and promising to procure money and other valuable consideration and also office places and employments to and for divers persons having votes in order to induce several voters to vote or abstain from voting and corruptly making such gifts, loans and promises of money on account of such voters having voted or refrained from voting.”¹¹¹

Grant reacted with characteristic righteous indignation. In a telegram to Burcher he claimed that the petition “can only be done for purpose of annoyance but if they mean fighting they shall have plenty of it.” He followed this up in a letter stating that “personally I only hope they will fight it [the petition] that I may have the pleasure of mulching whoever is responsible for costs.” He referred to the Dudley petition presented by the Conservatives: “one thing I know, and that is, that there will be no squaring or setting off as far as I am concerned.” “I think the conduct of the Liberals very blackguardly” but, just in case, Burcher was told to

¹¹⁰ Danks Archive, BA5278, box 8, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹¹¹ Kidderminster Public Library Collection, BA10470, parcel 267 Worcestershire Record Office, Berrows Worcester Journal 28 February 1874.

form an action group of the Tory leaders in Kidderminster, Tovey, Jefferies, Toy, Woodward, Cook and Herring.¹¹²

On 25 February the Conservatives, meeting at the Lion Hotel, expressed “the indignant feelings with which the Conservative party view the unfavourable petition presented against [Grant’s] return to Parliament.” The Conservatives complained that on each of the three occasions during the last twenty-five years [1849, 1865 and 1874], the Liberals had filed a petition against them, while the Conservatives had not petitioned Liberal victories “notwithstanding that in two out of that number... those of 1859 and 1862, the narrowness of the majorities (nine and ten votes respectively), and the circumstances attending each of the two elections, would have warranted the Conservatives in disputing the return on each occasion.”¹¹³ Grant and his supporters whipped up public support by letters to the local press, in which the Working Men’s Association supported Grant and “I.M.Defence” accused the Liberals of failing to exercise “the true spirit of Liberality or Christian charity, rather than abuse, which is generally the result of the base and ignorant, who when they cannot succeed by fairness, abuse and...ill-treat their opponents.” The letter was also an overt attack on the Shuttle and its editor, who was enraged not only at Grant’s victory but also, as noted, because the Conservatives had successfully opposed his registration as a voter.¹¹⁴ Grant regarded the petition as “wanton” and “groundless”, and was determined to defend both himself and “the fair name of the Borough of Kidderminster” which the

¹¹² Berrows Worcester Journal 28 February 1874.

¹¹³ Kidderminster Times 28 February 1874.

¹¹⁴ Kidderminster Times 28 February 1874.

petition sought to “disgrace and sully,” claiming that victory was “one of the purest in the kingdom.”¹¹⁵

Grant meant business. He returned to Kidderminster on 28 February and addressed the crowd from the Lion Hotel. He was cheered on by bands, the town was awash with blue, the bells of St Mary’s rang out (somewhat partisanly), and, of course, “windows were broken at a house at the bottom of Comberton Road, where the Liberal colours were displayed.” The crowd booed as they passed the offices of the Shuttle. The Lion’s roof was lit up with coloured fires as Grant addressed the crowd. It was a defiant but ultimately damning speech. Grant started by attributing his victory to him being “the working man’s friend,” their votes won “not by gold, but by the enthusiasm which you have brought into the election yourselves.” He damned the petition as “infamous” and that of “a clique of a very few individuals” who had “sullied” his victory by accusing the electors of Kidderminster of being corrupt. Grant claimed that Kidderminster electors “have shown that by the operation of the ballot they were determined to vindicate their independence, and return a member after their own heart.” “My conscience tells me I am free from the stain of bribery.” He urged the Liberal Party to disown the petition and blamed the petitioners for being hustled by Miller Corbet. On the charges of personally bribing electors, Grant claimed that he “was not left alone one minute” from his arrival until his departure and it was therefore impossible for him to have done so. To claim otherwise was “an utter lie and invention of the enemy.” It was also a lie that “anyone was bribed by my knowledge, or authority, or by any one entitled to represent me.” He claimed that his expenses would not

¹¹⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 28 February 1874.

amount to £300 while the Liberals had spent over £3,000, which must have been on bribery, and Grant undertook to unearth all cases of bribery perpetrated by the Liberals. “If they think I am going to lie quietly down and let them kick me, they will find they have the wrong sow by the ear.”

Grant went on to have a swipe at “that enlightened journal called the Shuttle... which ought to be called the Throttle for it seeks to throttle men’s reputations.” The Shuttle had accused Grant of feeding the people with “pap.” Grant quoted from a letter he had received from a Kidderminster elector stating that “I never saw an election conducted so orderly and purely as the last. There was less drinking than I ever saw at an election, and I believe this had much to do with winning the election...I fear that the object of the petition is money.” So far so good. It was a classic Grant speech, preaching to the converted, and neatly claiming that an attack on his integrity was an attack on the integrity of the town and its voters. He should have stopped there. The original petition was withdrawn on 2 April. All might very well have ended happily for Grant, but he could not resist the temptation to reward his supporters.

“You know when I returned thanks from this place after my election, I promised the town that so far as I could contribute to it, I would come down, and have two or three day’s justification. Don’t think this counts for anything, but at Easter I hope to come down for three or four days, to say a word to you, when we will all have a good spree together. We have got to be on our good behaviour and look sober and look serious as though we were very much alarmed but immediately after this matter is disposed

ofthen we will redouble the enjoyment.” With that Grant swept off back to London by special train.¹¹⁶

When the “official” election expenses were filed with the Town Clerk, Grant’s costs amounted to £1,203.7s.5d. (compared with his £300 estimate) while Lea’s were £615.7s.2d, compared with £1,031.12s.1d in 1868. Grant’s expenses included £266.18s for hotels, £143.13s.6d. for clerks from London and £274.8s for advertising. Lea’s main cost was £252 for professional agents. The Journal defended Grant’s costs in the two-day whirlwind campaign by the need to bring staff from London and house them in hotels. As noted, on 4 April, Grant having confirmed to the court that he had not “offered any pecuniary inducement to the petitioners” to withdraw their petitions, it was withdrawn, with Holloway and Willis required to pay all costs.¹¹⁷

Having previously informed his supporters “just returned from taking legal opinion. Regret but absolutely impossible any demonstration can take place. Must therefore be abandoned,”¹¹⁸ Grant and his advisers felt confident enough to approve the “spree” on 26 May 1874. This took the form of a feast for 2,300 women. “The town itself appeared in gala attire” with many streets festooned with banners. Some of the 6,000 Grant medallions which had been ordered for the “monster demonstration” were distributed at the event. After the tea there was a

¹¹⁶ Kidderminster Times 7 March 1874, Kidderminster Public Library Collection, BA10470 899:310 parcel 267, Worcestershire Record Office.

¹¹⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 18 April 1874.

¹¹⁸ Undated Fragmentary Note From Grant in Danks Archive, BA5278 parcel 34, Worcestershire Record Office.

“brilliant display of fireworks.” “Thousands of persons congregated to witness the display.”¹¹⁹

The Liberals pounced on the “spree” and lodged a second petition against Grant’s return on 4 June 1874, signed by James Youngjohns, a tuner, and Charles Thomas, a weaver, alleging seventeen separate counts of bribery and corruption. These included a payment of £1,000 to Jefferies and Burcher for corrupt practices, together with individual bribes ranging from five shillings to £8, as well as treating various voters. But their trump card was that “meat, drink, provision and other entertainment was given by Grant in respect of ...corrupt promises” on 25 and 26 May to “voters, wives of voters and relatives of voters.”¹²⁰

The battle lines were soon drawn. The Conservatives organised rallies of support for Grant, with Longmore, secretary of the Conservative Working Men’s Association and John Quinton, president of the Carpet Weavers’ Association in 1866, 1870 and 1874, prominent in their “disgust and abhorrence that a second vexatious and infamous petition has been lodged against Baron Grant” and calling for subscriptions to defray his costs.¹²¹

The press reporting of the petition trial was tribal and predictable. The Shuttle lovingly and gloatingly reported every word; the Journal could barely bring itself to provide even a severely abridged and highly edited version. The trial started inauspiciously in hot and humid weather. Tory “roughs” assaulted Holloway and other Liberal worthies as they made their way to the court at the Corn Exchange

¹¹⁹ Berrows Worcester Journal 30 May 1874.

¹²⁰ Kidderminster Shuttle 13 June 1874.

¹²¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 20 June 1874.

and Music Hall. Grant proceeded to the Lion Hotel where he addressed “an immense crowd” proclaiming his innocence. The public gallery was packed with Grant’s supporters who cheered his entrance into the court. Russell, counsel for the petitioners, began by complaining that on the previous evening one of his attorneys had been attacked by a large mob. He continued by claiming that Grant’s victory in 1865 had cost £15,000 to £20,000, which had been charged to Credit Foncier, damning the election as the “golden age” of Kidderminster. Grant’s campaigning was, according to Russell, centred on the pubs. Seven pubs had been placarded as Grant’s committee rooms and of 102 public houses and twenty beerhouses in the town, only twenty were Liberal. He claimed that Grant had visited six pubs on a single day. Much was made of the original “spree” which, with the bands, carriages, horses, marquees, tables, 2,000 dinners, 8,000 yards of blue ribbon, fireworks and 6,000 teas, would have cost £1,480, quite apart from the medals with Grant’s portrait. On 1 May Grant had sent two cheques payable to “expenses or bearer” for £500 each to finance the entertainment. When this jollification had to be cancelled on legal advice, Jefferies and Burcher had paid the cheque back to Grant on 16 May.

Although Grant’s counsel managed to discredit Bailey, the private detective hired by a local Liberal leader, “Slinking Dick” Powell, clear evidence of paid personation was provided – Wheeler had voted as Weaver and received a whiskey and 20s from “a stranger” at the Lion. Jefferies and Burcher tried to distance Grant from the “spree”, claiming that it was all their own idea. What was clear from the procession of witnesses in to the box was that Grant held court in the Woolpack, the New Inn, the Clarendon, the Castle, the Lyttleton Arms, the Olive

Tree and a host of other pubs, where drink was freely available and food had been provided – ham, pickles and beef at the New Inn. The landlord of the Lyttleton Arms was so incensed by Walker's evidence of treating that he beat him up. Charles Downton confirmed that his only duty "as a committee-man was to drink two glasses of whiskey" at the Barrell. Russell concentrated on this line of attack with John Mole and others who alleged they had been told they would be paid after the election was over. The barmaid at the Lion, Grant's headquarters, gave her evidence wearing blue ribbons and confirmed that Grant had spent £266.18s at the Lion in two days. Grant's barrister Hawkins tried to convince the judge that this could be accounted for by Grant's penchant for fine living and also attempted, with less success, to show that the Liberals were just as prone to treating as the Conservatives, and were quite happy to give the same Wheeler who had voted as Weaver 30s worth of drink. It was alleged Wheeler invoiced Edge, a local Conservative who kept the Globe, for "eating and drinking, and cash given to voters and for committee rooms." Hawkins also tried, more successfully, to cast doubt on the clearly Liberal witnesses who had each received 7s.6d from Miller Corbet and "Slinking Dick" Powell to "remember" their evidence.

All told, the route to the polling booth seemed to have been a circuitous pub-crawl! Lunch at the Woolpack lasted from 1pm to 11pm. A voter called Rew went to the Clarendon (quart of ale), followed by the Castle, the Wheat Sheaf (glass of ale), the Barley Mow and then the omnibus to the polling booth. There seems to have been a going rate for various groups – the railwaymen would vote for 3s and the ninety Irish voters (2.7 per cent of the electorate) for £40. As the trial progressed Lloyd, the landlord of the Lion, was accused of intimidating

witnesses and was rebuked by the judge. In the end the judge decided that he had heard enough witnesses like Baker, who had received five glasses of gin and peppermint and the promise of shoes and trousers for his vote, and fifteen further witnesses were not called. Jefferies' evidence was a masterpiece of evasion. The election "was as honest a piece of business as ever I had anything to do with." - so honest that telegrams and letters had all been destroyed. He denied that "the last six votes at [the 1865] election cost £1,250." In keeping with his general attitude he claimed he had torn up a letter from Grant to postpone the banquet and used it "to light my pipe." He denied Russell's claim that Grant would "find money to fight the municipal election" – a denial which will be discussed subsequently, in the light of the election petitions arising from those elections in 1874. Jefferies also denounced Makins, the Conservative candidate in 1868, as "a chicken-hearted fellow, after spending £3,500, for not spending more." Like Jefferies, Burcher had destroyed all letters to and from Grant and his expenses agent, Hatton. Burcher also claimed that Grant knew nothing of the celebrations which had been planned, but had merely sent £300 in gold to pay off those suppliers who had already produced the goods.

Hawkins chose not to call Grant in his own defence, and argued that "not one single man had ventured to say even in a whisper that Mr Grant had been privy to any act of corruption during the election and there was nothing except rumour against Mr Grant's principal supporters." Grant's promise of a spree was either misreported or "amounted to nothing" In any case, the "great demonstration" had not taken place and Grant was "not an accessory to or responsible for the tea which did take place." All Grant had done was to provide the fireworks, which

“formed a general entertainment for the whole of the inhabitants of the borough.” The Shuttle contrived to condense Hawkin’s address of two and a half-hours into two columns. Russell claimed that sixteen of Grant’s agents were guilty of corruption, and six of these were on his committee. Treating and bribery had taken place in at least six pubs. He argued that Grant’s promise of a spree was a corrupt practice; that the tea and fireworks were “a reward in furtherance of such corrupt practice;” that the payments of £1,000 and £300 were also a furtherance of the corrupt practice; and that the promise and subsequent carrying out of the entertainment was a corrupt treat.¹²²

The trial had lasted ten days. The judge found that “from all I have heard and seen, I think there are a great many electors in Kidderminster who would be influenced by Grant’s promise before the election of “a day’s enjoyment.” Grant was “a gentleman well known for his munificence and for the liberality of his gifts.” The “spree” would have cost over £1,480. The judge regarded the failure to call Grant and Hatton (the expenses agent) significant and found it “very surprising that so few documents are in existence.” He found that the abandonment of the great demonstration did not “act retrospectively so as to get rid of all the attempts to carry it out.” “The promise amounted to a corrupt practice, which could not be purged by sending back to Grant the £1,000 which was intended to fund the spree”. Judge Mellor found that Grant was guilty of corrupt practice by “promising before and at the time of the election to certain voters.... that he would in the event of his being returned... give to such voters an entertainment, consisting of meat and drink, with the view and intent to induce

¹²² Kidderminster Shuttle 11 July 1874, 18 July 1874, Berrows Worcester Journal 11 July 1874, 18 July 1874, Birmingham Morning News 7 July 1874, 8 July 187, 9 July 1874, 12 July 1874.

such voters to vote for him,” and by inducing “a number of voters to vote for... Grant... by virtue of a promise.... that their names should be put down on a committee, and that it would be worth to them 10s each when it was all over.” There was also a “good deal of illegal treating.” Grant was unseated and his return declared null and void. The judge finished by condemning the “disturbing [of] the proceeding of the court,” and Jefferies’ assertion that the election was “an honest piece of work.” He challenged the inhabitants of Kidderminster to cease to “evade” the election law, whether they “be high or low.”¹²³

The Shuttle was predictably even more censorious, accusing the Conservatives of being “weak and bungling accessories” guilty of “flagrant turpitude.” The re-run election should be held “entirely away from public houses” and the Conservatives should separate themselves from “the corruption and intimidation on which [they] have hitherto mainly relied.”¹²⁴ After the trial a handbill was published describing the “Chronicles of the Kidderites” which accused Corbet of “conspiring” against Grant by buying “false witnesses” and bribes against him, as well as describing Lea’s hands as “polluted.”¹²⁵ It is difficult to exculpate Grant, but an 1875 House of Commons report on the prevention of corrupt practices did note “the decision [to unseat Grant] was one upon which no impartial jury would have been unanimous,” and certainly it was doubtful whether Grant should have been disqualified for seven years, since a promise to treat was not equivalent to corrupt practice as defined.¹²⁶

¹²³ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, pp. 92-99, <http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk/fulltext.do?area=hcpp&id=1874-05042&s> (22 March 2007).

¹²⁴ Kidderminster Shuttle 18 July 1874.

¹²⁵ Handbill in Kidderminster Public Library.

¹²⁶ British Parliamentary Papers vol 5 Government Elections 1870-98.

It is important to recognise that the 1874 election gave rise to twenty-two election petitions of which ten were successful.¹²⁷ Furthermore, this was the fifth time that an election petition had been issued in respect of Kidderminster elections – three by the Liberals and two by the Conservatives, although only two – 1849 and 1874 – had actually come to trial. The focus and detail given in this section to the petition process is justified because it illustrates quite clearly how parliamentary elections were conducted in Kidderminster. In 1874 the evidence was all one-sided. It may well be that Lea and the Liberals were not whiter than white, but unlike the 1849 petition, the Conservatives were unable to find a single witness who would testify to Liberal malpractice. It is likely that Lea relied on his “influence” as a major local employer in terms of entertaining his employees to an annual dinner and possibly dragooning of his worker voters, although again this was never proved. Grant was a showman and an illusionist, and it is arguable that Kidderminster needed Grant just as much as Grant needed Kidderminster. The town was a “prosy” borough¹²⁸ and many of its voters characterised by a “lack of seriousness... [which] prominent and lowly seemed to have with regard to corruption.”¹²⁹ In a real sense Grant was “another Godson” as the crowd had cried during his speech from the Lion balcony after his victory in January. What Grant’s victory in 1874 illustrates clearly is the real sense of continuity from 1832 and the sense of community. Kidderminster’s parliamentary boundaries had not been much changed by the 1867 Reform Act. Even after the extension of the franchise it remained a relatively small borough in terms of voters. Before then, with a registration of between 383 (1835) and 588 (1865), it was always likely to

¹²⁷ O’Leary, C, The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections 1868-1911, (Oxford University Press, 1962), App 1.

¹²⁸ Birmingham Morning News 7 July 1874.

¹²⁹ Kidderminster Election, British Parliamentary Papers 1874, p 216.

be prone to bribery and corruption, since cash judiciously invested could easily swing an election. Even after 1865 the old ways died hard. Kidderminster's neighbour, Bewdley, was if anything even more corrupt. Glass was unseated in 1868 and his agents found guilty of corrupt treating. There was the usual panoply of malpractice – bribery, paying for remote electors to vote, treating, sham loans and payment for services of no value.¹³⁰

Grant's victory of 1874 reflected not only the continuity of the traditional election process in Kidderminster, but also introduced new tactics, probably as a result of the massively increased electorate. The habitual treating appears, if anything, to have been intensified. On polling day Grant held "open house" at over ninety of Kidderminster's pubs,¹³¹ while at the trial Russell produced a long list of landlords who had treated voters and non-voters during the spree in late May.¹³² This was accompanied by bribery of individual voters by Grant's supporters. The going rate was well down on 1865, usually 10s to £1, and witnesses stated that although Burcher "dare not give you anything or promise you anything ... a friend will visit in the course of the day."¹³³ To this extent, Grant was the heir of Godson. In 1874 the Conservatives in Kidderminster were well-oiled in every sense of the word – well organised, well-financed and well supplied with alcohol. There is no doubt that these actions by and on behalf of Grant were illegal, even if expected. However, just on the other side of the legal line was his "nursing" of the constituency. After his victory in 1865, as noted, Grant made donations to all Kidderminster's churches to help the poor. Thomas Lea had provided an annual

¹³⁰ British Parliamentary Papers, Select Committee on Parliamentary and Municipal Elections. Bewdley Election 25 January 1869.

¹³¹ Kidderminster Shuttle 7 February 1874.

¹³² Berrows Worcester Journal 11 July 1874.

¹³³ Birmingham Morning News 13 July 1874.

outing for all the borough's school children¹³⁴ and, after losing his seat in 1874, took his employees and their families by special train to Malvern.¹³⁵ It was no wonder then that he distanced himself from the 1874 petition. There was no overt violence during the election, but the rowdy scenes in court do indicate a continuing simmering resentment.

Grant had shown himself to be adept at exploiting the opportunities presented by a small electorate in 1865. His triumph was to show how to extend and develop these opportunities to a much larger franchise. First there was the "jollification" which, had it proceeded as intended, would have bound the venal voters to Grant as the fount of all largess. Moreover, as both Burcher and the judge observed, the medals which were produced with a likeness of Grant would have confirmed not only his victory, but also "have the effect subsequently of keeping the party together on many future occasions."¹³⁶ Finally, there was the ingenious policy of not only using the Conservative strength in the publican lobby but also the refinement of turning the pubs into committee rooms and then co-opting on to the committee voters who would be paid for rendering no service apart from their vote. All this was underpinned by an outright and unabashed appeal to the rights of the "working man" which were implied to be different from those of his employer, who in Kidderminster at least, would be, and would be portrayed as anti-pub, anti-Anglican and anti-Conservative.

The by-election took place on 31 July 1874, just fourteen days after the announcement of the election petition verdict. The Conservatives chose Sir

¹³⁴ Brierley Hill Advertiser 3 June 1865.

¹³⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 26 September 1874.

¹³⁶ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers. Kidderminster Election 1874, p 94.

William Fraser, while the Liberals' candidate was George Lea, brother of Grant's opponent in the last election. Lea applauded the achievements of the Liberals – Parliamentary reform and the repeal of the Corn Laws. He supported the extension of the county franchise and the rights of labour to combine and unite. "Labour should be protected in the same way that capital was protected." He advocated a national system of state education, and opposed Conservative plans for denominational schools. He favoured non-intervention in foreign policy. Predictably he insisted on conducting the election "fairly and absolutely purely." In endorsing his brother, Thomas Lea urged him to be not only a Liberal representative but also "a working man's representative," seeking to match Grant's appeal in the earlier election.¹³⁷

The Conservatives put a brave face on things. Fraser was greeted at the railway station just as Grant had been and conveyed to the Lion. At 8pm he addressed a crowd of 4,000 to 5,000 strong. There was the inevitable diatribe from Radford against the Liberals – "the shame did not attach to the whole of the Liberal party, but merely to a section of it." He claimed that the existence of eighteen candidates "showed everybody did not think Kidderminster was as corrupt as it was reported by the petitions." Fraser claimed to represent "the cause of the people." The "rights and independence" of Kidderminster's voters had been "menaced" by a faction. He cited Disraeli's dictum that "the working man of England is a Conservative." Fraser asserted that he had always promoted the cause of putting up "buildings where the artisans and the working men could find comfortable houses." He supported the policy of Church of England schools, and

¹³⁷ Kidderminster Times 25 July 1874.

then appealed to his audience that “the future destiny of this mighty empire is ... in the hands of the working man. You are the backbone of England.”¹³⁸

At the final rallies the Liberals “could not understand... how working men could vote for a Conservative. The Tories were trying to put the iron heel of despotism on every working man’s combination.” Lea was confident of victory and emphasised his support for state education. Needless to say he believed the “working man is really Liberal” and the Liberal cause was “just and righteous.” Both Lea and Fraser tried to outdo one another in apologies, Lea for not being his brother and Fraser for not being Grant. Fraser also sought to counter his disadvantage at being an “outsider” by parading a list of Worcestershire worthies who were his friends. He reiterated his support for “legislation specially favourable to the working man” and claimed that “the workmen and employer should be equal in the eye of the law.”¹³⁹ Interestingly, though he was cool on the county franchise being extended, he did support women’s suffrage.

Once again Quinton, president of the Power Loom Carpet Weavers Mutual Defence and Provident Association, was prominent in his support of the Conservatives. The Tories also made much of a letter of support for Fraser from Grant, who protested his innocence and urged the electors to “vindicate your independence” and remove their enemies’ slur of corruption. There was no overt violence, but a Liberal “infiltrator” into a Conservative meeting was “kicked, hustled and driven away” while two reporters for the Liberal press (the Morning News and Gazette) were attacked and their notebooks destroyed. Fraser came out

¹³⁸ Kidderminster Times 1 August 1874.

¹³⁹ Kidderminster Times 1 August 1874. Berrows Worcester Journal 1 August 1874.

in favour of “rapid and cheap arbitration” in industrial disputes. He urged his supporters to vote early. Woodward said it was the duty of Kidderminster to elect Fraser “to vindicate themselves.” Jefferies was in typically truculent mood, urging Kidderminster “not to be ruled by a clique;... not to be governed by a lot of chapel-goers in a vestry.” “Go early to the poll and avenge the injury which had been done them.” “Wipe out the stigma cast upon Kidderminster.” Grant declined to come to Kidderminster to support Fraser because “I am advised that my presence might jeopardise, on legal grounds,...Fraser’s return.”¹⁴⁰

Of 3,394 electors, 2,969 actually voted, a turn-out of 87.5 per cent. Although the election as always caused “great excitement” there was good order and few fights, with an absence of “heavy drinking.”¹⁴¹ However, just in case, the Chief Constable of Worcestershire attended the election and 50 county policemen were brought in to support the local force. Fraser won by 333 votes, polling 1,651 against Lea’s 1,318, 222 more than Grant in January. Since the Irish voters went over to the Liberals, the Conservative victory was even more striking. Clearly the petition had backfired, and the Conservative appeal to the electors to vindicate themselves and establish their independence was a potent message. The Conservatives gloated in their victory, having bands to play “see the conquering hero here comes.” 2,300 inhabitants of the town signed a petition to the House of Commons in defence of Grant requesting a retrospective change in the law regarding bribery. The Liberals started squabbling in the press, “Veritas” blaming their defeat on “putting up a local mediocrity” while “One in authority” defended the Lea brothers. The Liberals threatened to bring a petition against Fraser

¹⁴⁰ Kidderminster Times 8 August 1874, Berrows Worcester Journal 8 August 1874.

¹⁴¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 22 August 1874.

claiming “they can prove several illegal acts.” Presumably this was just sour grapes because, with the eyes of the nation on them, the Kidderminster Conservatives probably would not have dared to employ their normal tactics although this had not deterred Kidderminster’s neighbour Bewdley, where not only the 1868 election but also the 1869 re-run were both declared void on the grounds of bribery and corruption .

Nothing more was heard of a petition, but the recrimination continued in council meetings over who should pay for the election petition costs, which amounted to £52.18s, mainly £32.7s.8d for the trial itself. Corbet asked for a full list “of all voters in the borough who corruptly voted for Baron Grant,” while Cooke accused Corbet of spending £650 on the election.¹⁴² Fraser himself decided to pay all his own expenses at the by-election,¹⁴³ while the whole saga was completed by a county court case in which Thomas Austin, a Liberal, accused William Purser, a Conservative, of assaulting him in a Conservative pub, the Pheasant just after the original election. Austin, who was acknowledged to be drunk at the time, had claimed £50 damages and was awarded £7.10s, the judge having observed that this was “one of the most paltry public-house squabbles ever whipped or coaxed into a law suit.”¹⁴⁴

When Disraeli called a snap general election for the end of March 1880, both parties scrambled for a candidate and both came up with predictable choices. The Liberals opted for John Brinton, now the largest carpet manufacturer in the town,

¹⁴² Berrows Worcester Journal 22 August 1874.

¹⁴³ Berrows Worcester Journal 26 September 1874.

¹⁴⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 3 October 1874.

while the Conservatives trotted out Albert Grant for the third time.¹⁴⁵ By now Grant's star was descending fast. In 1876 he had been accused of fraudulent promotion of the Lisbon Tramways Company. Although the charge of fraud was rejected, the plaintiff was awarded £700. His attempt to rebuild his fortunes by founding the General Banking Company had failed and in February 1877 he was declared bankrupt. In June 1877 there were eighty-nine actions outstanding against him and he was forced to sell off his art collection. By 1879 his affairs were in liquidation.¹⁴⁶ He was hardly an ideal candidate, but he was a two-time winner in Kidderminster, a fact of which he made great play. Once again Quinton, a past president of the Weavers Union seconded his nomination.¹⁴⁷ Grant's letter to the electors dwelt inevitably on his unseating "upon the most frivolous pretences."

Grant supported the Conservative government's foreign policy in the wars in Afghanistan and Zululand, and applauded Disraeli's "firm stand" at the Council Board at Berlin. He also defended the government's financial policy which "has been economically managed consistent with efficiency." He accused the Liberals both of obstructing domestic legislation, describing their policies as "meddle and muddle," and of wanting to disestablish the Church of England. In a direct appeal to the publican vote, he was "entirely opposed to unnecessary and irritating legislation affecting Licensed Victuallers. All quack nostrums.. will have my persistent opposition. I look.. on a Public-house as a working man's club."¹⁴⁸ Grant was met by "a great assemblage of people" wearing blue ribbons. Bands

¹⁴⁵ Kidderminster Times 16 March 1880.

¹⁴⁶ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (2004) p 278.

¹⁴⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 20 March 1880.

¹⁴⁸ Kidderminster Times 27 March 1880.

played and Grant addressed the crowd from the Lion Hotel balcony, just as he had in 1874.

He claimed to be the champion of “the independence of your votes, and of your right to return any member you think fit, without being dictated to by a minority.” “I am the popular candidate.” Grant again applauded Disraeli’s, now Lord Beaconsfield’s, foreign policy towards Russia and his safeguarding of India. In finance, the national debt had been reduced by £18 million and the government had reduced taxation while “upholding the honour of the country.” Sugar duty had also been abolished. He asked whether, “I deserve to be turned out... over a cup of tea? The Liberals .. would not even give you a cup of tea, and I believe would hardly give you a cup of water.” A Conservative supporter, Bytheway, accused Bright and Brinton of “reducing [the working man’s] wages.” Grant also spoke at the Peacock, accusing the Liberals of overtaxing the people, while the Conservatives had reduced income tax and local rates. Grant described himself as “a political monarch out of business” and looked forward to replacing his “nominee”, Fraser.¹⁴⁹

Brinton’s letter to the electors was brief and to the point. He was a local man and was supported by 1,200 electors who had signed a requisition requesting him to stand. His first public meeting attracted a crowd of 7,000. Just as the Liberals had tried unsuccessfully to disrupt Grant’s meetings, so the Tories failed to disrupt Brinton’s. A leading Liberal W. Green said he “hated.. the foreign policy of the present government,” which had “mismanaged the affairs of the nation.” Brinton

¹⁴⁹ Kidderminster Times 27 March 1880, Berrows Worcester Journal 27 March 1880.

claimed to represent “your wants and wishes as a mercantile community.” He applauded the new public buildings and supported public education. He wanted to “place the constitution of this country on a more secure and stable basis.” The Liberals’ aim was “to avoid, as much as possible, being embroiled in foreign wars.” To do otherwise would “incur such a load of taxation as would break the back of the country at large.” Brinton’s supporters hailed him as a fellow townsman who had helped to found the infirmary, unlike “a stranger who would come here to get their votes then go to London and think no more of them.”¹⁵⁰ Perhaps stung by these taunts, Grant paraded two local county worthies, Colonel Knight (MP for West Worcestershire) and Sir Edward Lechmere (MP for Bewdley), in his support, but to no avail. Brinton polled 1,795 votes to Grant’s 1,472, a Liberal majority of 323, a swing to the Liberals of 10.5 per cent on a turnout of 90.6 per cent. Once deductions for deaths, duplicates and removals were taken into account, the turnout was 96.1 per cent, helped by the provision of transport to take electors to the polls.

There was good order throughout the day. The Irish¹⁵¹ had supported Brinton, and the Liberals gloated in their “honest, truthful and good” victory. Brinton claimed to remember the 1832 election (he was born in 1827) and recalled trying to protect Lowe in 1857. He asserted that neither he, nor any other Liberal manufacturer, “[had] contemplated for one instant to dictate to any of our workpeople how they should vote on this occasion.” He described Kidderminster’s electoral history as “a dark spot and blot among constituencies,” and he made much of his standing as a local man and a commercial man. “The result... proved it was the cause of the

¹⁵⁰ Kidderminster Times 27 March 1880.

¹⁵¹ The Irish community in Kidderminster was concentrated on Silver Street and numbered approximately 120 households. As noted, in 1874 there were ninety Irish voters.

people and it was the cause of the working classes.”¹⁵² Grant would later say that “it is quite evident that there has been some agency at work to obtain such a result, and if you value your independence you will take such measures as may be necessary to find out to what treacherous agency the result of the election is owing.”¹⁵³

The Shuttle predictably regarded the borough as having “at last vindicated itself” from Grant’s “work of political demoralisation.” The Shuttle hoped that Grant “will now drop into that obscurity whence he originally emerged to work the ruin of thousands.” Patronisingly, it congratulated Brinton for not “pandering to the inferior nature of his hearers.” It claimed that “even the poorest and most ignorant have caught glimpses of higher things in politics than beer and money.” “The only drawback upon the whole election” had been the attempt made by Conservative manufacturers “to damage him among the weavers, and to make political capital out of trade troubles honourably settled.”¹⁵⁴ Brinton himself praised “the unbroken peace and good humour which has prevailed in the town.”¹⁵⁵ Less forgivingly the Midland Counties Sunday School Union (a Nonconformist organisation meeting at the Old Meeting Hall) confirmed that “Christian duty” had been done at the election.¹⁵⁶ The peace in Kidderminster was in sharp contrast to Ledbury, where riots had occurred with over 200 people

¹⁵² Berrows Worcester Journal 3 April 1880.

¹⁵³ Kidderminster Times 3 April 1880, Berrows Worcester Journal 17 April 1880.

¹⁵⁴ Kidderminster Shuttle 3 April 1880.

¹⁵⁵ Kidderminster Shuttle 3 April 1880.

¹⁵⁶ Kidderminster Times 10 April 1880.

throwing stones.¹⁵⁷ The same applied at Evesham when a brewer named Hammond was beaten up to prevent him from voting.¹⁵⁸

By the standards of previous elections in Kidderminster 1880 was a tame affair. There were no real accusations of malpractice on either side. The Conservatives and the Liberals were careful to hold their meetings in the open air, well away from pubs, and the charge of undue influence by Liberal carpet manufacturers over their employees to vote appropriately merely illustrated that there were more Liberal mill owners than Conservative. Certainly in Kidderminster terms the election must have been pure, if only because Grant was unwilling or, after his bankruptcy, unable to conduct the election as he had in 1865 and 1874.

Yet within three weeks Brinton had been forced to resign because his victory was declared technically void since his agent, Miller Corbet, had been involved in the municipal election enquiry of 1875.¹⁵⁹ According to the Journal this merely saved the Conservatives the trouble of bringing a petition against Brinton alleging treating, bribery and intimidation. The Liberals were accused of carrying on “such a system of open bribery as alarmed and disgusted some of the leading members of the party” in the 1874 municipal elections. Corbet was reported for bribery and was therefore forbidden to act as Brinton’s election agent since the seven-year disqualification period had not elapsed. Brinton’s election was therefore void. The Tories agreed with Brinton that if he resigned they would not pursue the election petition and Brinton resolved to stand again.¹⁶⁰ Corbet

¹⁵⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 17 April 1880.

¹⁵⁸ Berrows Worcester Journal 24 April 1880.

¹⁵⁹ Kidderminster Times 24 April 1880.

¹⁶⁰ Berrows Worcester Journal 1 May 1880.

protested his apologies and undertook to support Brinton as a volunteer. Brinton himself proclaimed that his victory had been won “fairly and honourably,” and the Liberal carpet manufacturers, notably Dixon, Green and Tomkinson, rallied round him. Just as the Conservatives had denounced the “meanness of a clique” to Grant in 1874, so did the Liberals to Brinton in 1880.

The Conservatives dithered for a candidate. Grant would not stand again, but the “Carlton Club are backing up Sir William Fraser,” who had won the by-election in 1874. In the event, a deal was done. The Conservatives would not oppose Brinton if the Liberals agreed that the Tories “would increase the number of aldermen of their party in the council, leaving the Liberals the choice of Mayor.”¹⁶¹ Kidderminster’s threatened petition was not alone. There were also petitions at Cheltenham, Gloucester, Tewksbury, Evesham, Worcester and Bewdley.¹⁶² The party grandees’ compromise in Kidderminster worked, but not before a mass meeting of 1,000 people, mainly workmen, demanded a contest, no doubt partly from a desire for good sport and partly from conviction, but also because the municipal elections would effectively be rigged. Holloway, by now a Liberal alderman, claimed the “working men in the North Ward were so venal, and so corrupt, that they would not go to poll for any man who would not pay them for their votes or bribe them with beer.” The electors had been “hoodwinked and disgraced and sold.” “Five or six could not meet in a little room and ignore the great working population of Kidderminster.”¹⁶³ Needless to say, the protest came to nothing.

¹⁶¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 8 May 1880, Kidderminster Times 1 May 1880.

¹⁶² Berrows Worcester Journal 1 May 1880.

¹⁶³ Berrows Worcester Journal 8 May 1880.

So just when it seemed that the period might end with a whimper of purity, it nearly went off with a bang. It is clear from the evidence that the elections of 1865 and 1874 are classic examples of how a rich ruthless man could effectively buy a seat in a relatively poor constituency with a relatively small electorate. Grant's victory in 1865 was all the more remarkable because it went against the national trend. Overall the Liberals increased their majority in the House of Commons, and they lost only four seats in the English boroughs, of which Kidderminster was one. That victory, against the incumbent MP, showed how successful the judicious application of cash could be. In essence Grant's campaign in 1865 was electioneering in the old style. Although winning again in 1874 was easier in that the Conservative tide was in flood, he managed to cement his victory on a massively increased electorate. Not even Grant could afford the 1865 going rate. Instead he appealed blatantly to the interests of the working man and provided the notorious entertainment.

The key, but unanswerable, question is whether Grant would have won in 1865 anyway, without the resort to malpractice. It seems unlikely. Corruption and to a lesser extent intimidation were so deeply embedded in the Kidderminster election process that certainly the Conservatives, without the natural local power base of the Liberal carpet manufacturers, probably did not believe they could win without bribery and treating. This is not to say that the Liberals were pure, but in choosing Thomas Lea, George Lea and John Brinton as their candidates, local major employers of labour (or a close relative), they could afford to rely rather more on paternalistic influence over their men in terms of job security and housing and, on the legal side of the treating coin, the massive entertainment of men as employees

rather than voters. Copying this tactic in 1874 was Grant's downfall. Certainly Grant and probably the voters saw this as merely levelling the playing field and regarded the practice as perfectly normal and indeed their right. Why did Grant win and Makins lose? Partially it is a matter of public mood and partially charisma, but mainly one is driven to the conclusion that ruthless determination and inexhaustible resources would triumph. In 1880, faced with the industrial muscle and local influence of Brinton, and without the ability to induce voters to support him, Grant was a spent force, possibly the last dinosaur.

This section has subsumed discussion of local and national issues within the analysis of violence and corruption. The 1865 and 1874 election campaigns were so brief that policy statements were perforce brief and, one suspects, ritualistic. Both parties throughout appealed to the "working man," particularly from 1868. Grant denounced the ballot and stood on an Anglican and strong Navy ticket, while the Liberals in 1865 and 1874 proclaimed the budget surplus. The battle in 1874 was for the votes of the newly enfranchised carpet workers with Grant and Lea both claiming to be the natural candidate to represent their interests. Perhaps not surprisingly in this period the elections were less about policies and more about personalities, particularly those involving Grant, whose shadow also dominated the 1874 by-election. In 1880 Brinton won the election as the local man. In this case, with the carpet bagger unable to deliver his brand of politics because his purse was empty, the carpet baron would win because he was the local man, almost irrespective of policies.

4. MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

1864 saw a Liberal MP but fourteen of the eighteen council seats held by the Conservatives. 1865 was a disastrous year for the Liberals. Not only did they lose the parliamentary seat but also all representation on the town council. The Conservatives offered a deal of three candidates from each party but the Liberals rejected this, and at a meeting of local Conservatives attended by 250 people they chose their candidates. The Advertiser complained that under the Conservatives “rates have gone up unpleasantly”...“and it is humiliating to the Liberals to find that they who pay the greater amount of rates should have no control over their disposal.” The Conservatives won easily, their victory marred only by a Liberal claim that Boycott, himself a councillor, was not qualified to act as a nominator because he was not a resident householder. In the South ward there was a turnout of around 88.2 per cent. “A Ratepayer” claimed that the Conservatives won by “corrupting influences brought to bear upon the working classes” in the South ward.¹⁶⁴ The Conservatives also enjoyed a clean sweep in 1866 “in a day entirely devoid of interest,” with John Brinton only receiving two votes in the South ward, supposedly the Liberal stronghold. Indeed the entire votes given to the six Liberal candidates were over 50 votes less than the lowest successful Conservative.¹⁶⁵

1868 saw the emergence of the “anti-drainage” party, a breakaway group of predominately Liberals, including Miller Corbet, who opposed “wasting” taxpayer’s money on improved town hygiene. Appealing to the smaller ratepayers who opposed “so lavish an expenditure of the public money,” all six Liberal anti-drainage candidates were elected. The turnout was low – 55.8 per cent in the

¹⁶⁴ Berrows Worcester Journal 28 October 1865, 4 November 1865, Brierley Hill Advertiser 28 October 1865, 4 November 1865.

¹⁶⁵ Berrows Worcester Journal 3 November 1866.

North ward and 58.0 per cent in the South ward. The Conservative council had reaped the backlash of Lea's Slingmill works polluting the Stour and the cost of dealing with the sewage. Minutes of council meetings record the antipathy between Jefferies and Holloway. Jefferies could not resist attacking the Liberal carpet manufacturers who had supported the drainage scheme "but [held] aloof from the support of the drainage candidates" for political purposes.¹⁶⁶

Skirmishing in 1868 began early with "True Blue" claiming that the Radicals "made the working man bear the lamp rate". Radical leaders were described as "the infidel," the bully," and "the champion of fines and low wages."¹⁶⁷ The Conservatives, however, were in a quandary. They "unhesitatingly pledged themselves to the utmost economy and strictest of watchfulness against unnecessary expenditure" but supported the drainage schemes. At a mass meeting at the Lion the Conservative candidates complained that the last Liberal administration had been "messed and muddled" and "the Town Hall ... was allowed to fall into a dilapidated state." The Conservatives had reduced taxes while keeping the town well lit, a new Market Hall was planned and council debt had been reduced. Some of the candidates "knew the town wanted draining but [they] believed that the feeling of the town was so strong against it that it would be unwise to seek to force it upon them." In an interesting aside, two Conservative candidates departed from local issues and denounced plans to disestablish the Church of Ireland and the Liberal foreign policy.

¹⁶⁶ Kidderminster Times 26 October 1867, 2 November 1867, 23 November 1867, Berrows Worcester Journal 2 November 1867, 9 November 1867.

¹⁶⁷ Kidderminster Times 1 August 1868.

The town mass meeting in 1868 to adopt candidates was marred by a squabble over who should be chairman. The Conservatives tried to eject the Liberals. As a result the police were called to restore order. They took an hour and a half to clear the room. The council continued to wrangle over the cost of the drainage scheme. A new and significant development was a public meeting of the Conservatives held at the Corn Exchange to give each of their candidates “the opportunity of expressing his views on municipal matters.” 600 people attended to hear Woodward defend the council of “certain charges of corruption, extravagance and mismanagement.” He also claimed that the “Stour was no longer the filthy stream it had been, carrying disease and death to those living near its banks” and also that the pavements had been altered “and most economically altered too.” The greatest opprobrium was reserved for the “obnoxious” Miller Corbet. The ubiquitous Quinton accused the Liberals of promising economy but practising profligacy. The election itself was accompanied by excitement which “far exceeded that of former years.”¹⁶⁸

The 1869 election was fully contested (twelve Liberals and twelve Conservatives up for six seats) “with considerable spirit” and again the Conservatives held private meetings to rally support. The Conservatives won all three seats in the North ward and one in the South to retain control of the council. There was trouble at the South ward at 3:40pm “when a gross and unprincipled attempt was made to obstruct voters recording their votes.” No votes were recorded from 3:45pm and the benches and tables of the Aldermen were “broken up into matchwood.” The Aldermen themselves were driven into the Town Hall.

¹⁶⁸ Kidderminster Times 24 October 1868, 31 October 1868, 7 November 1868, Berrows Worcester Journal 14 November 1868.

Predictably each side blamed the other for the violence. The Kidderminster Times reported that “a large number of ladies voted in both wards.”¹⁶⁹

The town was “in continual commotion,” with fights “the rule and not the exception.” The result was announced “in none of the most orderly of humours” and left the council divided with fifteen Conservatives to nine Liberals. The Conservatives alleged broken promises and prevention of electors from voting. As usual the Kidderminster mob was “Tory in its opinion,” loudly cheering Conservative speeches while drowning out the statements of the Liberals.¹⁷⁰

In 1870 the Shuttle urged electors to exercise their vote and exhorted the council not to vote for the mayor on strict party lines. In particular it opposed the potential re-election of William Cowen (“feebleness of decent mediocrity”) as mayor for a third consecutive year. The Conservative candidates in the North ward faithfully pledged themselves “to true economy, and strict watchfulness against unnecessary and lavish expenditure”. In the South ward the Liberals won, with an independent beating the two Conservatives. Around 1,000 burgesses voted in the South ward, with many still waiting when the polls closed at 4pm. The Shuttle alleged that the North ward election had been disrupted by a “beer inspired mob.” At 3pm “the leading wire-puller of the Conservative party” summoned “the imperial guard of the party from their purlieus in Blackwell Street” to drum up Conservative support. “Up they came, leaving many a congenial tap and lovely bung.” The Conservative mob attacked the polling

¹⁶⁹ Kidderminster Times 16 October 1869, 6 November 1869, Berrows Worcester Journal 6 November 1869.

¹⁷⁰ Kidderminster Times 16 October 1869, 6 November 1869, Berrows Worcester Journal 6 November 1869.

station and ensured that no votes were cast for thirty minutes. Ultimately two Liberals, including John Brinton and Miller Corbet, were returned, Corbet by just two votes from the Conservatives. The Shuttle gloated that “the important manufacturing interests of the town are efficiently represented. Indeed, nearly all classes of the community are now represented, with the exception of the pugilistic and rowdy section.” An attempt was made to break into the Town Clerk’s office to check the votes, but Miller Corbet sealed the documents up.¹⁷¹

The Liberal candidates in 1871 claimed that “being large ratepayers ourselves it will be to our advantage as well as yours [the burgesses] to carry out all improvements with efficiency and economy.” The Shuttle claimed that “the old hand-loom of Toryism is worked out.” The Liberals asserted that of the thirty-two largest carpet manufacturers in the town twenty-six were Liberal and that such “a large portion of the intelligence and capital” of the town “ought to exercise its just influence.” In addition they alleged that the Tories would make “an attempt at blocking.” The Conservatives had offered a “deal” to leave ten Liberals and fourteen Conservatives on the Council but the Liberals rejected this offer. In the event the Liberals won all the seats in the South ward while the Conservatives won two in the North Ward. As a result the Liberals achieved a majority on the council and the right to select three aldermen.¹⁷²

It was alleged in a letter to the Shuttle that the Liberal carpet manufacturers were enclosing common land and that they were trying to crush Parry and his paper for standing up to them. Likewise Alfred Penney accused the Liberal candidate and

¹⁷¹ Kidderminster Shuttle 1 October 1870, 22 October 1870, 29 October 1870, 5 November 1870.

¹⁷² Kidderminster Shuttle 28 October 1871, 4 November 1871, 11 November 1871.

carpet manufacturer George Hands of sacking employees merely for being members of a trade union. The Shuttle denounced the Conservatives for hypocrisy in complaining of the “rapidly increasing burden” of rates. The Shuttle compared this to “Satan reproving sin” and “a cynical contempt for the intelligence of the Kidderminster electors.” The “gigantic scheme of new drainage and waterworks system... was .. a huge Frankenstein,” and the decision to go ahead was taken by the Conservatives. The Liberals’ letter to the electors dwelt at length on this claiming that the “costly and extravagant scheme.. to which the council very rashly committed itself five year’s [sic] ago” would demand to be carried out” in the most efficient manner, and at the same time “with strict regard to economy.” Conservative candidate Crowther called this “a dastardly attempt by an anonymous scribbler to blacken his character,” particularly the claim that he and his family used his influence on the council to make a fortune selling their land to the council for the drainage scheme. The Shuttle also argued that although Crowther might be “honourable” in his profession he was “unscrupulous in politics.”

The 1872 election was the first to be held under the Ballot Act. Public excitement raged for a fortnight, the burgesses “displaying all their old election fire and a little more.” The Shuttle described the Conservatives as “imperfectly educated” and resorting to “slander and personal abuse.” It rebuked both “the Bung fraternity” and the teetotallers, the latter for claiming that “if ever you wish to have a carpeted dwelling vote for no Publican.” The Shuttle accused both sides of giving “sugar,” and otherwise improperly “sweetening the electors,” on a scale “never more openly, unblushingly, and persistently asked for in the streets.” “It

speaks but little for the political status of a large portion of the Kidderminster electors to find the practice still exists and promises to survive the introduction of the Ballot.” The “satellites” of Cook and Hassell (two Conservative candidates) had, “evidently been imbibing” and these “roughs and vagabonds” attacked the crowd. The Conservatives attempted to keep track of voters, a trick copied by the Liberals. Parry, the editor of the Shuttle, raved against his exclusion as a voter as “unrighteous” and “for purely party purposes.” There was one case of attempted personation by an Irish youth and the Shuttle predictably claimed that there were “more illiterates” in the North [a Conservative stronghold] than the South ward. Two candidates failed to name their agents, and Miller Corbet was “mugged in Swan Street by Tory roughs.” The weather was very wet “so that there were no riotous gatherings.” The darkness at the announcement of the results at 8:30pm and the noise “resembled a scene from Dante’s Inferno.” In the North ward, the Conservatives won two seats (including Cook and Hassell) on a turnout estimated at 80.9 per cent and the Liberals won the three South ward seats on a turnout of 73.4 per cent. The Shuttle crowed at the results and denounced “the dirty, cruel and lying attempts to blacken” the character of George Holloway. The end result was a council consisting of sixteen Liberals and eight Conservatives.¹⁷³

In 1873 the Conservatives were accused of putting forward “bogus nominations.” There were twenty-four candidates, of whom four were called William Green, three Crowthers, three Stookes, three Harveys, three Arnolds and two Packwoods. The ballot proved to be, especially to the illiterate voters, who were rather numerous, almost a “comedy of errors.” The Shuttle ranted happily about the

¹⁷³ Kidderminster Shuttle 19 October 1872, 26 October 1872, 2 November 1872, Berrows Worcester Journal 9 November 1872.

“thirsty” voters who only “came to the surface” at election times and accused the Tories of using their own committee room as a polling station. The Liberals had protested and claimed that “law and order had prevailed over Conservative rowdyism.” The Shuttle wanted to disenfranchise every illiterate voter under forty years of age.” In the South ward, about twenty minutes before closing, the Corn Exchange was declared to be full of voters and the doors fastened. About twenty men who claimed to be Liberals kicked the door down and the police were attacked. The mob threw 5,000 patent specifications on to the floor, trampled on them and tore them up. The Liberals won two of the three seats in the South ward while the Conservatives won two of the three seats in the North. Since five of the retiring councillors were Liberal, this represented a gain of two to the Conservatives. There were no reported cases of personation.¹⁷⁴

1874 began perversely when on the death of Hassell, J P Harvey (Liberal) opposed J J Harvey (Conservative) – another real headache for the illiterate voters. Holloway, a staunch Liberal, accused Grant of winning the parliamentary seat by unfair means and J P Harvey agreed that no “working man could be Conservative.” The Conservatives actually won by a landslide – 645 votes to 304. No-one voted after 2:30pm, when Grant was due to arrive in the town.

The normal municipal elections for 1874 were to prove notorious. They started badly when Tory roughs disrupted a Liberal meeting to select their candidates. The actual election passed off apparently quietly enough with about fifty carriages provided by both sides to convey voters to the poll. Thanks to the several polling

¹⁷⁴ Kidderminster Shuttle 1 November 1873, 8 November 1873, Berrows Worcester Journal 11 November 1873.

stations there was no great physical violence but Grant “worked like a nigger for the Tory cause and openly gave away champagne to the crowd round his carriage.” There were “several free fights,” but generally the police were in control. The overall result was a draw, the Conservatives winning two seats in the North ward and the Liberals two in the South, despite the Conservatives nominating Dixon’s (the mayor) father and brother in order to confuse the voters. Since four Liberals and two Conservatives were retiring, there was a net gain to the Tories of two seats.¹⁷⁵ However, the petition disease apparent at the parliamentary election proved contagious and sure enough it was forthcoming. Attempts at a compromise failed. The Conservatives claimed that a forged statement had been issued by the Liberals that Cook had retired, but he succeeded in an election conducted, according to the Journal, “without bribery or treating.” The election petition hearings were held in January 1875. Twenty-eight witnesses were produced alleging bribes of £5.17s.6d given to thirty voters in the South ward alone at four pubs and a further ten bribes given by Miller Corbet’s brother at his surgery amounting to £2.5s.6d. One witness who received 7s.6d “thought it was a good box of pills and ...there were many persons waiting outside the surgery for some of the same medicine.” Further claims were made by the Conservatives of bribery (4s was the going rate) and treating at the Hen and Chickens. One witness, Mary Dean, admitted she had been drunk, earning the rebuke from the Commissioner that “if women who had the municipal franchise behaved so badly they would not get the parliamentary franchise.”

¹⁷⁵ Kidderminster Times 28 February 1874, 7 March 1874, Berrows Worcester Journal 7 March 1874.

Several witnesses claimed they had been treated by the Liberals at the Kings Head. Gethin was alleged to be the Liberal paymaster but, just as in Grant's case, all the records had been destroyed. Commissioner Saunders found, after an enquiry lasting twelve days, that the successful Liberal candidate in the North ward, Hampton, was not implicated in any act of bribery, but "upon the question of general corruption in the town, he was bound to declare the seat void." He accused Miller Corbet of having "been worse than all the others.. in the nefarious practices of bribery," having spent £30 on the day of the poll in support of his brother.

The Commissioner believed that 200 to 300 of the 1,500 voters in the North ward had been bribed. In a letter to the Kidderminster Times Samuel Lloyd claimed that the Liberal boss Pemberton Talbot had sacked him from his job at the public baths for giving evidence against the Liberals. The Hampton case was the most reported, probably for having the effrontery to win a seat for the Liberals in the North ward. But the Conservatives also accused Dixon and Green of bribery and treating in the South ward, and, in a tit-for-tat exercise the Liberals petitioned against Boycott in the South ward for corruption, bribery, coercion, intimidation and not occupying a house in Kidderminster, and Hughes and Coxon in the North ward for treating. Dixon and Green were acquitted, but forty-one persons were "proved to have been guilty of corrupt practices." However a certificate of indemnity had been promised to them. In the Hampton case seventy persons were guilty of corrupt practices, but again a certificate of indemnity had been promised. The petitions against Boycott, Hughes and Coxon were withdrawn "for lack of evidence." The sword of Damocles hung over those persons who were implicated

but not called as witnesses. They did not receive certificates of exemption from prosecution and remained liable to prosecution for penalties of £100.¹⁷⁶

1874 is a clear case of how deeply embedded bribery and corruption were in the entire election process in Kidderminster, both parliamentary and municipal. There is no real reason to suppose that 1874 was any worse than previous municipal elections except that the Conservatives were determined to have their revenge for the unseating of Grant and their failure to win all three seats in the North ward. Their ability to trot out witness after witness, just as the Liberals had been able to do for the Grant petition, is probably a fair indication just how widespread the malpractices were.

It was confirmed before the 1875 municipal elections that Dr David Corbet had been found guilty of corrupt practices and from his own evidence those practices were “with a view to securing his re-election” to the council. The Board of Health refused to sanction Corbet’s appointment and, has been shown, his conviction and the implication of his brother, Miller, led to Brinton having to accept the Chiltern Hundreds after his election as MP in 1880. The council, however, on strict party lines, decided to uphold his appointment in a debate full of “ebullition of feeling... and repeated calls for order.”¹⁷⁷

1875 saw the Conservative win all six seats in a contest which not even the Journal could be bothered to report in detail. The Liberals started early with a

¹⁷⁶ Kidderminster Shuttle 31 October 1874, 7 November 1874, Berrows Worcester Journal 7 November 1874, 28 November 1874, 6 January 1875, 30 January 1875, 6 February 1875, 13 February 1875., Kidderminster Times 18 September 1875, Kidderminster Public Library Collection, BA10470 899:310 parcel 26 Worcestershire Record Office.

¹⁷⁷ Berrows Worcester Journal 16 October 1875, 7 November 1875.

mass meeting in the Temperance Hall attended by 200 to 300 members. They opposed the purchase of the local gas company on the grounds of cost and denounced the Roman Catholics for having been given their liberation by the Liberals but having returned the favour “with scurrilous abuse.” Talbot found it necessary to defend the local party from the charge that “they went to Birmingham for their policy and system of organisation,” a clear reference to the “caucus” approach adopted there. For the Conservatives, Jefferies in characteristically ebullient mood asked his followers to vindicate Grant. The Tories supported the purchase of the gas works, which would “go towards the reduction of the rates.” Conservative voters were urged “not to split their vote..., but to vote straight, as the Liberals always did.” Polling itself was quiet with “an utter absence of any unfair means to influence the lower class of electors” other than the hiring of carriages to take them to the poll. As had become predictable the Conservatives easily won the three seats in the North ward while the Liberals carried the South ward.

In 1877 only the North ward seats were contested because the Conservative mayor, Thomas Radford, acting on legal advice, had disqualified the entire South ward. The Liberals supported land societies on the grounds that they would not increase the rates to pay for streets, but opposed “any measure calculated to increase the rates of the borough.” The Conservatives had spread a rumour that H. Scott, a Liberal candidate, had sent his employees to prison, a charge which he denied. Miller Corbet denounced Radford’s action in appointing three Conservatives to represent the South ward on the grounds that the Liberal nominations were invalid. The Conservatives naturally described Corbet as “the

worst man in the town.” Herring argued that “working men had more sense than to join land clubs and throw away money in buying land at a high price” and that the improvements in the town were due to the Conservatives. Jefferies denounced the “scurrilous” attacks on the mayor, accusing (though not naming) Corbet as “an educated blackguard” and guilty of “trash and rubbish...[and]... horrid lies.” The mayor had acted correctly. Jefferies welcomed the Roman Catholics and the vicar of St Mary’s accused Liberalism of being “Republicanism and Communism.”

The three Conservative candidates swept home in the North ward in a quiet election, with Corbet losing by 138 votes to the lowest Conservative. Predictably Herring and Corbet had a stand-up row as to who should thank the presiding officers. Corbet accused Herring of “ignorance and stupidity.” To pay him back the Conservative mob drowned out every word of Corbet’s speech and he needed police protection from the crowd. Indeed a relay of the county police had been called in to the town to counter “angry feeling simmering in the town.” The Kidderminster Times deprecated “the bitterness of spoken and written language.” As a result of the elections the Conservatives claimed all six seats and controlled the council.¹⁷⁸

1878 saw a return to normality. The Conservatives controlled the North ward and the Liberals the south. The Conservatives supported the benefits of a “good supply of water” and the drainage system. The mayor accused the Liberal Non-conformists of failing to support the Liberal Anglicans in the School Board

¹⁷⁸ Kidderminster Times 3 November 1877, Berrows Worcester Journal 3 November 1877.

elections. Jefferies trumpeted the success of the Conservatives. “Seventeen years ago a more deplorable place was not to be found in the county of Worcester. Now they were in such a position that even Worcester people said they deserved to be the capital of the county.” He reserved particular scorn for Corbet who “had paid so much for illegitimate expenses” that he could not afford to pay for legitimate ones. The Liberals were scorned as “untried men.” Once again Quinton seconded the motions of support for the candidates. The Liberals accused the Conservatives of preaching retrenchment but they did not know what retrenchment meant. Herring was charged by the Liberals with being an arbitrary dictator. The “draw” result was an essence a victory for the Liberals since five of the retiring councillors were Conservatives. The Tories continued, however, to control the council.¹⁷⁹

In 1879 the Conservatives did not contest the South ward. In the North ward the Liberals campaigned on the slogan “peace, retrenchment and reform.” Unusually there was reference to national politics and the Conservative Government’s foreign policy and increased taxation were denounced. The Conservatives claimed that the Liberals wanted all the improvements in the town to be in the South ward and “even wanted the Post Office moved from the North ward to the South ward.” They appealed for the support of the Roman Catholics and the women voters. The Liberals had called the voters of the North ward “swine” and “threw difficulties in the way of the illiterate voters.” In the event one Liberal, Roden, the son of a previous Conservative mayor, was elected and the Liberals

¹⁷⁹ Kidderminster Times 2 November 1878, Berrows Worcester Journal 8 November 1878.

controlled the council by thirteen to eleven and selected the mayor. The turnout was 89.2 per cent.¹⁸⁰

In 1880 a cosy party deal to arrange three councillors from each party to be returned unopposed was thrown into confusion by the Ratepayers' Protection Association, which demanded that each candidate should oppose any increase in the rates, raising of loans and paying compensation to owners of property to set back buildings. As a result the parties agreed to contest all seats. In order to forestall the Ratepayers party, the Liberals backed Rogers, nominally independent but in reality a Conservative in the South ward, while in the North ward the Conservatives backed Chadwick, a known Liberal, but standing as an independent. In the event the Liberals returned two councillors in the South ward, together with Rogers, while the Conservatives returned two in the North ward, together with Chadwick. Overall the composition of the Council remained the same, but when the results were announced Herring "thought when the town came to know how Mr Chadwick had won the seat, they would repent it, and so would Mr Chadwick." He claimed that the Conservatives "had not bribed a single individual ... [but] did not believe that others could say the same."

An election petition was raised against Chadwick's election on the grounds of bribery and treating. He was found guilty and his election void. Voters had been "retained and employed for payment and reward as canvassers" and Chadwick and his agent had "paid and agreed to pay money on account of the conveyance of voters to and from the poll." This was a rich accusation since it had long been

¹⁸⁰ Kidderminster Times 8 November 1879, Berrows Worcester Journal 8 November 1879.

common practice on both sides to provide transport. The judge held that “general corruption, bribery, treating and intimidation prevailed.”¹⁸¹ Even if, as seems likely, the Conservative action was motivated by pique that Chadwick had had the effrontery to beat a Conservative in their fortress, though perversely they had supported him as being preferable to the ratepayers’ candidate, the judgement shows that malpractice was rife.

What conclusions can be drawn from the results of Municipal elections during the period? One thing stands out immediately - the fortress mentality of the North ward for the Conservatives and the South ward for the Liberals. Certainly the Conservatives appeared to believe that any loss of a seat in their stronghold could only have been achieved by corruption. Their belief was borne out both in 1874 (Hampton and Corbet) and 1880 (Chadwick) when the extent of the Liberal malpractice became clear. In the two cases brought to trial a total of 111 witnesses were given immunity from prosecution and this only applied to those called. Uncalled witnesses had to sweat it out, although there is no evidence that they were actually fined. The Liberals seem to have taken a leaf (or even a chapter) out of Grant’s book and it is ironic that while in parliamentary elections it was always the Conservatives who were most likely to resort to skulduggery, in the municipal elections it was the Liberals who appear to have led the way in overt malpractice, particularly under the organisation and leadership of Miller Corbet.

¹⁸¹ Berrows Worcester Journal 23 October 1880, 30 October 1880, 6 November 1880, Kidderminster Public Library Collection, BA10470 899:310 parcel 270, Worcestershire Record Office.

The question is why anyone would lay out cash to be a councillor. For an MP, particularly a candidate like Grant, the investment in bribery and corruption would bring an immediate and tangible return – a seat in the House of Commons with all the contacts, opportunities and respectability that brought. The benefits of a similar investment for a local councillor are far less obvious. Councillors were always being accused of jobbery, but this would have been on a far smaller scale. Even David Corbet could not have afforded to pay much in bribes to be elected Medical Officer at a salary of £100 per annum. In any case since a reading of the Minutes of the Council indicates that all important decisions were taken on party lines, while the position of the councillor could, and certainly did, bring social kudos, to be a member of the minority party was unlikely to bring financial rewards. Perhaps the answer was that to be a councillor was the highest ambition for the wealthy, to join the club and be recognised as a leading citizen of the town. Certainly this ambition and the undoubted bitter party rivalry in the town may explain why the Liberals would overstep the mark. The Conservatives on the whole, being less overtly wealthy, could probably not afford bribes in municipal elections. They left this to their MPs. In any case, in the North ward they expected to win so there was no need to bribe, and the South ward was on the whole a lost cause. Instead they concentrated more on dirty tricks such as nominating candidates with the same name as the Liberal councillors and sharply using the law to disqualify the Liberal nominations in 1877. As in parliamentary elections, violence was muted. Of course there were petty scuffles and both sides liked to parade their own “roughs” but this was probably more for show than pure intimidation as it had been in the parliamentary elections of the 1830s and 1840s.

5. SUMMARY

It is clear that the dividing lines between the parties were very clearly drawn, but it was a club for two only. The parties could and would arrange “deals” at election times whereby there were uncontested elections and the status quo of the Conservatives and Liberals on council was maintained, but they would close ranks in 1868 and 1880 to make sure that the independents were kept firmly in their place. For most of the period the focus of the candidates was firmly (and naturally) on local issues such as the drainage and water system and the gas works. The election addresses of both parties tended to be indistinguishable – economy and efficiency were the order of the day. But on a few occasions national issues – the economy, foreign policy, education, the Irish Church – did raise their heads in a one-dimensional way. Both sides indulged happily and frequently in personal and political abuse. The Tories were obstructionists intent on preventing progress; the Liberals were Radicals intent on destroying society. To this extent the municipal elections aped the parliamentary elections. There is no doubt that there were clear party differences and these differences could be widened and aggravated by combative personalities such as Jefferies for the Conservatives and Corbet for the Liberals. The party faithful were fed the diet which they wanted and expected. For the pragmatic voter there was always, both before and after the Ballot Act, the opportunity to obtain reward from hawking his vote. In both parliamentary and municipal elections, either the number of “quoting” voters was very large and/or the strategy and tactics of the parties was on an indiscriminate scattergun approach without really attempting to target likely “converts.”

Is there any coherent pattern between municipal and parliamentary results? Having won the vote for MP in 1865, the Conservatives also gained control of the council. The Liberals became the majority party in 1872, four years after their parliamentary victory in 1868. The Conservatives regained mastery in 1875, one year after Grant's (and subsequently Fraser's) victory as MP. By 1879 the Liberals were back in power ahead of their parliamentary victory in 1880. The pattern would continue into the 1890s when the electors appeared to see no problem or contradiction in voting for Frederick Godson as their MP but for a Liberal council. The evidence shows that, if nothing else, the town's electors were fickle. A vote for a parliamentary candidate did not necessarily translate into a vote for that party's municipal candidate. Again one is driven back to the belief that the elections were for entirely different purposes. Municipal elections were essentially all about the rates and reducing them. Voting for an MP was both a statement of party allegiance and an opportunity to be paid for it. As has been seen, bribery was also on offer at least at some local elections. So why would an elector take 5s from Miller Corbet to vote for a Liberal town council and 5s from Albert Grant to vote for a Conservative MP? Of course we do not even know whether, post 1872, the elector did actually vote the way he was paid to vote.

It is probably too cynical, even in Kidderminster, to ascribe pure market forces to the electoral process – the highest bidder syndrome. This does not explain the strength of the Conservatives in the North ward and the Liberals in the South. What is more reasonable is that local elections were determined on local issues – primarily which party could be more trusted to keep the rates down. It was a

different matter in a parliamentary election. A voter's preoccupation with his standard of living might well lead him to believe, with or without the benefit of direct financial inducement, that since the Liberals could be seen in the borough as representing the large manufacturers and therefore the large ratepayers, his interest lay with them in reducing the financial burden of the rates. These considerations did not apply when it came to voting for the town's MP. Here the politics of envy and resentment could be allied to the pragmatism of the purse. A larger than life character like Grant preaching a simple gospel designed to appeal to the principles and prejudices of the working man was plausible, persuasive and profitable. The elector would see no contradiction in this fluctuating allegiance because a different game was being played.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

It is important to set parliamentary elections in Kidderminster in context. Hanham estimated that Kidderminster was one of sixty-four English boroughs (which represented 22 per cent of total English boroughs) between 1865 and 1884 which “possessed a corrupt element,” of which twenty-one were “extremely corrupt.” “Only” eight of the sixty-four had been created by the 1832 Reform Act.¹ Since four of the eight, including Kidderminster, were among the twenty-one newly enfranchised single-seat boroughs, their record (19 per cent) illustrates that the new boroughs were no better than the old. In addition, several of Kidderminster’s near neighbours, Bewdley, Cheltenham, Evesham, Gloucester, Hereford, Ludlow, Tewkesbury and Worcester were also corrupt. If one subscribes to the effect of environment and peer pressure in development, it is hardly surprising that Kidderminster grew up to be a young electoral delinquent.

There is clear evidence of corruption and violence within the electoral process in Kidderminster from 1832 to 1880. These need to be measured both in intensity and across the period. So far as violence is concerned, it is reasonable to test the definitions proposed by Wasserman and Jaggard.² As already noted riot was defined as a serious and sustained outbreak of collective violence, involving the implicit or explicit use of force, intimidation or coercion, which resulted in physical damage to persons or property.” A disturbance was a less serious breach

¹ Hanham, H. J, Elections and Party Management. Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone, (Harvester, 1978), p 263.

² Wasserman, J and Jaggard, E, ‘Electoral Violence in Mid-Century England and Wales’ Historical Research, Vol 80 no 207, (February 2007), p 128.

of the peace involving occasional crowd violence. An incident was a noisy or demonstrative action by a crowd which disrupted the proceedings of an election campaign. The problem with these definitions is that ultimately they are subjective. As the authors imply, it is probably better to concentrate on the treatment than the symptoms. Thus a riot would be characterised by the reading of the Riot Act and / or restoration of public order by the police or the army. A disturbance would involve a lesser but positive response by the authorities. However, even if one accepts this additional criterion, there remains the problem of the situation where violence was either mitigated or thwarted by the actions of the authorities, for example by increasing the police presence or stationing the army at hand. Therefore it is proposed that the above definitions are sub-divided into “actual” and “threatened”. It is accepted that this also involves even more subjectivity. Did a riot not take place because of the measures of the authorities or were their actions premature and unnecessary? With these caveats the parliamentary elections in Kidderminster from 1832 to 1880 are analysed as follows:-

Election	Type	Riot		Disturbance		Incident	
		Actual	Threatened	Actual	Threatened	Actual	Threatened
1832	General	–	√	√	–	–	–
1835	General	√	–	–	√	–	–
1837	General	–	–	–	√	–	–
1841	General	–	–	√	–	–	–
1847	General	–	–	–	–	–	–
1849	By	–	–	–	–	√	–
1852	General	–	–	–	–	–	√
1855	By	–	–	–	–	–	√
1857	General	√	–	–	–	–	–
1859	General	–	–	–	–	–	–
1862	General	–	–	–	–	–	–
1865	General	–	–	–	–	–	–
1868	General	–	–	–	–	√	–
1874	General	–	–	–	–	–	–
1874	By	–	–	–	–	–	–
1880	General	–	–	–	–	–	–

The above analysis has been adapted and tailored for Kidderminster. The borough was used, and perhaps inured, to violence, whether industrial or political. The 1830 strike had involved stoning, destruction of property, the reading of the Riot Act and the calling in of the army. Mobs of up to 3,000 weavers roamed the streets. Godson was welcomed in 1832 by a crowd of 6,000 and Philips and his

friends were stoned. A weaver acting as a special constable killed a voter and troops of the Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry were stationed in the town to prevent riot, but the authorities did not actually lose control. The Chambers English Dictionary definition of a riot as “a disturbance of the peace by a crowd (legally three or more)” could include any Saturday night in Victorian Kidderminster. Herein is the real problem of definition. What would be a riot for a quiet rural backwater would be the norm for a rough borough like Kidderminster.

If anything, the 1835 election was more violent than 1832. A troop of Lancers from Birmingham was imported to keep order, as were, allegedly, outside “bludgeon-men” to disrupt it. There was a riot involving 150 men and claims that colliers were brought in from the neighbouring towns to attack the weavers. The magistrates were so unnerved that for the 1837 election a troop of Dragoons was sent to the town and over 100 special constables sworn in. As a result polling day was relatively quiet. In 1841 the Liberals were accused of sending for the “Stourbridge brickbat and bludgeon-men” and a Conservative mob of 300 strong smashed the windows of the Liberal pubs. If there was no trouble in 1847, it was only because Godson was returned unopposed. In 1849 the police superintendent was accused of ordering a hundred of the ubiquitous bludgeon-men and armed gangs roamed the streets. The 1852 election passed off peacefully, very possibly because 120 special constables were sworn in and in 1855, although Lowe was unopposed, he still needed the protection of the borough police and special constables. Just how useful the special constables would really be in the face of a mob set on violence was answered in 1857 – no use at all. Having said that, in the

face of a hostile crowd of up to 8,000 and a gang determined to murder Lowe, or at the least recklessly careless whether he died or not, it is difficult to see how much more the police could have done. The attack was followed by an orgy of destruction of property until the Riot Act was read and a troop of fifty Hussars arrived. The interesting aside is Kidderminster's tendency in times of crisis to close ranks against outside interference in the trial of the rioters in 1857, as it had done after the 1830 riots and would do so again in 1874 at the Grant trial.

1857 was the last major electoral violence in the town. Thereafter, hardly surprisingly, the authorities took massive precautions – in 1859 there was one special constable for every three voters. By Kidderminster's standards the 1862 election was entirely peaceful, helped no doubt by a troop of armed cavalry in the neighbourhood. Henceforth, with the exception of an attempt to blow up the Tory mayor, Jefferies, and an attack on Makins in 1868, the violence at elections was sporadic and half-hearted, helped by expanding the polling booths from one to five, which tended to disperse the mob.

This analysis reveals the limitations of Wasserman and Jaggard's definitions. Their model may well be useful at looking across constituencies over a time span, but it tells us little about violence within a community across a time span. Their conclusion that violence was more likely to occur in large boroughs (size being determined by the number of electors), seems hardly surprising, but also of limited value, since in Kidderminster at least the perpetrators of the violence were not voters. They are right to caution against the notion that election violence was an early form of football hooliganism. They are on less certain ground in describing

the disorder in Kidderminster as due to specific local issues rather than as “a product of habitual patterns of violence.”³ The two are not incompatible, far from it in Kidderminster’s case. There was, at least up to 1857, a clear predisposition to violence in industrial conflicts relating to the carpet trade and this spilled seamlessly over to the political arena, particularly in the hands of unscrupulous operators like Godson and Boycott.

From 1832 to 1847 violence in Kidderminster elections was the norm, particularly in the earlier years. Although the novelty of elections after 1832 may have had some impact this may more reasonably be traced back to the strikes of 1828 and 1830 and the souring of relations between masters and weavers for a generation. The final explosion of violence in Kidderminster in 1857 followed a bitter strike in 1853 and disputes in 1854 (when the cavalry was needed to maintain order) and 1856. This, allied to rabble-raising by Boycott and Lowe’s alienation of the publican lobby and denouncement of bribery made it likely that there would be trouble particularly if Boycott lost the election, as he was bound to do. The sheer scale does seem to have taken the authorities by surprise. The murderous intent and apparent planning and organisation of the mob imply that this was not merely a spontaneous outburst of resentment. That may have been the root cause of the fire, but its flames were fanned by Boycott and his supporters. Certainly the contemporary reporting, however biased, indicates that local Liberal activists believed that the violence was politically motivated and traced the blame back to Godson for encouraging the disenfranchised to believe they could dictate the outcome of elections.

³ Wasserman and Jaggard, op.cit., p 154.

After 1857 the actions taken by the authorities generally meant that although Kidderminster elections were almost always accompanied by “great excitement,” public order was generally maintained. Both parties in the 1830s were adept at harnessing the power of the mob, but the Conservatives tended to be better at it. Certainly they had in the ever more disadvantaged weavers a ready army of foot soldiers. Although Godson was outgunned in 1835 he could and did make political capital out of accusing the Liberals of intimidating employees and tradesmen. In 1837 and 1841 the Conservatives won the battle of the mobs, with an effective strength of around 300 men. There is no doubt that armed gangs patrolled the streets and indulged in what would now be termed “turf wars.” Certainly in 1857 all the violence was perpetrated by the Conservative mob. These were the same people who had seen off the Chartists in 1838 – the weaver, the drinker, the anti-dissenter and, although said as a term of distaste, it was true that the Kidderminster mob had always been Tory in its opinion. As noted the Liberals tended, after 1835, to avoid direct physical confrontation, concentrating instead on threats of notice to quit or sacking employees who did not toe the party line.

Elections in Victorian Kidderminster were a public spectacle in which the whole town – voters and non-voters alike – took part. Crowds ranging from 5,000 up to 15,000 would routinely meet the candidates and listen to (or disrupt) their speeches. Of course elections were a source of income for shopkeepers and tradesmen, particularly the pub landlords, but they were also an occasion for boisterous celebrations. There was a festive spirit as Election Day approached,

with the town regaled with the red and blue banners and streamers of the two parties and their laurel and oak bough symbols. Bands played, flags and ribbons were festooned across the streets and street vendors sold nuts and sweets. In 1849 the election took place on market day and there is a clear impression of a mass open-air carnival. Revelry, free beer and gluttony were the order of the day. This could quickly degenerate into drunken brawls between rival gangs and, as has been seen in 1857 in particular, to something much worse.

If violence was a conspicuous feature of Kidderminster elections, at least up to 1857 and sporadically thereafter, bribery and treating were from the outset and until 1874 the staple fare of the electoral process. In contested elections it was the norm for the defeated party or candidate to assume (and allege loudly) that they had only lost because of electoral malpractice. From 1832 to 1880 there were twelve general elections, of which eleven were contested. There were five by-elections of which three were contested. Kidderminster voted in 92 per cent of general elections, compared with 60 per cent on a national scale.⁴

This raises the predictable question of party loyalty and partisanship. Clearly Kidderminster was a town with distinct and frequently bitter political rivalries. The local leaders seem to have regarded it as a point of pride to contest the seat. It is, however, a running theme throughout the period that the selected candidate had to have, or have access to, deep pockets and/or deep influence. Certainly for the Conservatives, who lacked figures of substantial wealth in the local community, it was necessary to look outside for their candidates, men who could afford the cost

⁴ Cook, C, Britain in the Nineteenth Century, (Pearson, 1999), p 90.

of becoming an MP. Only two of the Conservative candidates from 1832 to 1880, John Best and William Boycott, were local in the true sense. The others were lawyers (Godson, Huddleston and Makins), landed gentry (Talbot and Fraser) or financiers (Grant). This compares with three Liberals (Lea, Lea and Brinton) who were born and bred in Kidderminster. All the evidence is that becoming an MP for Kidderminster was a costly business and, as Samson Ricardo discovered in 1841, it was almost as expensive to lose.

Turnout at the fourteen contested elections only fell below 80 per cent once (in 1857) and on three occasions, in 1862, 1865 and 1880 was over 90 per cent. Since Kidderminster until 1868 had an electorate of less than 600, and since in six elections in the period the winning majority was less than twenty, it might be presumed that any bribery or treating could have been around the margins, with the candidates relying first on their committed and partisan supporters and only bribing the few venal “floating” voters who would make the difference between winning and losing. This does not seem to have been the case in Kidderminster. Indeed there were six election petitions threatened from 1832 to 1880, of which two came to trial (1849 and 1874), one de facto succeeded (1880) and three were not proceeded with (1852, 1859 and 1865). Three petitions, two of which came to trial, alleged bribery by the Conservatives; the other three claimed malpractice by the Liberals.

The malpractice in Kidderminster began in 1832, notable because since the town had not previously been enfranchised it might be expected to have no legacy of dirty tricks. The tale about the £50 bribe offered to one voter just before the polls

closed may be apocryphal but it has the ring of truth about it in the light of every other election in the period. The following table shows the amounts alleged to have been spent on bribery in each election, together with the modern equivalent and cost per vote. Almost without exception the claims were made by the losers and there must therefore be doubt about the actual sums. The sheer scale, however, even if exaggerated, is remarkable.

Election	Party	Bribery Alleged £	Votes Obtained	Cost Per Vote £	Modern Equivalent £ ⁵
1835	Lib	7,000	197	8.5	609,700
1841	Cons	4,000+	212	18.9+	283,600+
1841	Lib	4,000	200	20.0	283,600
1865	Cons	8,000-20,000	285	28.1 – 70.2	689,600-1,724,000
1868	Cons	3,500	802	4.4	280,400
1874	Cons	1,480	1,509	1.0	114,500

The two key years are 1835 and 1865 where the numbers alleged are, “complete.” In 1835 the Liberals were accused of spending £7,000 and Godson later alleged that one invoice alone totalled £4,283. The Liberals themselves admitted that one of their local leaders, Shemmons, had a remote farm which was used to hold “bottled voters,” while the Conservatives alleged that the Liberals had paid £306 to import 300 colliers for intimidation and had paid publicans for their votes and tradesmen for fictitious invoices provided they voted for Philips. In 1865 even

⁵ House of Commons Research Paper 99/20 23 February 1999.

Jefferies put Grant's costs at £8,000 while prosecuting counsel at his trial estimated £20,000. Jefferies is also the source for the £3,500 spent by Makins in 1868, "a chicken-hearted fellow for not spending more." The £1,480 for 1874 is solely the cost of the "spree" and does not include the bribes and treating, test cases of which were proved at the petition trial.

1841 proves the thesis that the whole election process in Kidderminster was ingrained with corruption when the original Liberal candidate withdrew and publicly stated that the costs which he would need to incur "according to the custom of this borough" were too high for him to bear. The Liberals claimed that Godson's bribery and treating in 1841 had made the town a "bye-word in the country." Even though Godson was unopposed in 1847 he issued tickets promising free drinks to voters. We do not know the total amount spent by Best in winning the seat in 1849, but the election petition clearly indicates that even after his death, Godson's tactics lived on, with promises to landlords, a litany of bribed voters (sums from £5 to £50) and indiscriminate treating. Like Grant in 1874, Best did not give evidence and much evidence had been destroyed but his lawyer was adept in demonstrating that the Liberals were equally guilty of bribery. Godson was accused in his grave of "an enormous system of expenditure."

Corruption was replaced for a time by "influence" in the 1850s when the local magnate Lord Ward declared for the Liberals. This influence was greatly assisted by the Conservative split over free trade and their inability to field a rich candidate. But it could not survive a Conservative resurgence and the arrival of

Grant in 1865. Indeed the writing was on the wall as early as 1859 when the Liberals, while naturally denying any and all guilt, paid the Conservatives £700 to drop an election petition. In 1862 there were mutterings about treating by White and allegations that he paid sixty men's rates to keep them on the register. Certainly his official costs at the Lion and other "refreshments" were about the same as that spent on seventy-three special constables.

There is no doubt that Grant's successful whirlwind campaigns in 1865 and 1874 were achieved through widespread and indiscriminate bribery and treating of both voters and non-voters alike. Grant's campaign in 1865 of five days meant that he was spending something like £3,000 per day. He was certainly "another Godson" and a classic example of how a determined rich man could win a seat like Kidderminster which preferred "the bribe and the beer barrel" to political principles. Grant also showed how bribery and treating could span both the Ballot Act of 1872 and the vast increase in voters (from 588 in 1865 to 3,394 in 1874). The direct cost of a bribe seems to have fallen from around £11 in 1865 to around 10s in 1874, but the treating continued and was accompanied by a new tactic of paying "committee men" to do nothing. The other Conservative tactic of waiting until around noon and then setting in motion the real work of rounding up floating voters and transporting them to the poll was pursued by Godson, Best and Grant in their turn. In 1865 for example, White was ahead until noon. Thereafter Grant received fifty-eight votes against White's thirteen, and White received no votes at all after 2pm. Likewise, Gisborne's lead of twenty-eight at noon had been transformed into a majority of seventeen for Best in the 1849 election. Jefferies denied (none too convincingly) at the 1874 trial that the last six votes in 1865 had

cost £1,250. Ironically the Conservatives tried to gain some credit in 1868 for not repeating this tactic.

In 1874 the failure to give evidence and the destruction of potentially incriminating documents probably condemned Grant, although the tactic had worked for Best in 1849. In 1880 the Conservatives successfully blackmailed Brinton into resigning and standing for re-election because his agent, Miller Corbet, had been found guilty of corruption in the 1874 municipal election. What is true, however, is that throughout the period Kidderminster was a town where bribery and treating were not selective, discriminate or sporadic, but deeply embedded in the electoral process and the whole psyche of the town. Kidderminster may not be unusual in this respect and it may not by any means have been among the worst offenders but this study of the electoral process illustrates that any idea that a “modern” party political system based on partisanship and principle arose from the 1832 Reform Act did not, at the very least, occur in every small borough. Indeed reports of the death of corruption and bribery in Kidderminster until at least 1880 were very premature. Brinton may not have been too far from the mark in describing Kidderminster’s electoral history as “a dark spot and blot amongst the constituencies.”

All the evidence shows that throughout the period from 1832 to 1880 Kidderminster was a corrupt borough and apart from Lowe’s victories in 1852 and 1857 each contested campaign was marked by bribery and treating on a substantial scale, particularly by the Conservatives under Godson and Grant. In order to assess the extent and success of this malpractice it is reasonable to focus

on occasions when Kidderminster voted against the national result. This happened in four contested elections:-

	<u>Kidderminster</u>	<u>National</u>
1832	Conservative – Godson	Liberal
1837	Conservative – Godson	Liberal
1852	Liberal –Lowe	Conservative
1865	Conservative – Grant	Liberal

Of course any assessment has to be somewhat impressionistic, but, based on the evidence, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Conservative victories of 1832, 1837 and particularly 1865 were achieved by illegal means. This does not in any sense mean that the Liberals were innocent, merely that Godson and Grant were past masters at electoral malpractice. The most documented case is the election of 1865, when Grant’s whirlwind campaign not only unseated the existing MP but also was a Tory success in an election which overall witnessed an increased Liberal majority. There is no convincing evidence that the electors of Kidderminster were any more “pure” and driven by genuine party loyalty in 1880 than they were in 1832. The offering and receipt of a bribe or treat does not seem to have been regarded as a real offence throughout the period. The Shuttle might rant and rave but the “average” elector regarded it as his right and part of the normal ritual of a parliamentary election experience.

The election of 1880 marked the end of what might be called “the golden age” of corruption in Kidderminster elections. The cumulative impact of increasing

legislation (the Ballot Act of 1872 and the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act of 1883 specifically focused on curbing malpractice, while the Representation of the People Act, 1884 provided a uniform franchise for boroughs and counties and the Redistribution of Seats Act, 1885) created for the most part single-seat constituencies which were essentially artificial divisions of a similar size, thus removing the sense of local community. Although Kidderminster was not at all affected by the Acts of 1884 and 1885, the overall impact of the legislation meant that, with the 1867 Reform Act, the extension of the franchise made it prohibitively expensive to continue the old methods of bribery and effectively broke up the local community party system. However, it should not be assumed that overnight the electors of Kidderminster saw the blinding light on the road to Damascus. And certainly not on the road to Worcester, where as late as 1906 at least 500 electors sold their votes for 10s, and had done so for over 30 years. One frank Conservative admitted that “from his childhood he had known no election to be won at Worcester except through bribery.”⁶ Having said that, legislation and a change in public attitudes did combine to curb malpractice.⁷

The 1880 election was technically the last one in Kidderminster tainted by major accusations of corruption. Old habits, including the apparently inevitable belief that defeat at the polls must have been the result of dirty tricks by the opponents, died hard. The Conservatives did accuse the Liberals of treating a small group of working men in a single pub in 1885, when they lost for a second time to John Brinton.⁸ Their defeated candidate, Frederick Godson, dropped a threat to petition

⁶ O’Leary, C, The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections 1868-1911, (Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 220-222.

⁷ O’Leary, op.cit., pp. 229-233.

⁸ Kidderminster Sun 28 November 1885.

for Brinton's unseating on the grounds, so he claimed, that if the Tories were successful, Kidderminster could easily be disenfranchised.⁹ Certainly Godson's victory in 1886 was the first not to be accompanied by charges of malpractice. That victory, and the divisions in the Liberal party over Irish Home Rule, ushered in a golden age for the Conservatives. In twenty-four elections from 1886 to 1983, when Kidderminster became part of the Wyre Forest constituency, the Conservatives won twenty-two times. One of the two losers was Stanley Baldwin in 1906, who as noted, recalled with sorrow that all political meetings seemed to take place in pubs and that the voters expected to be treated.¹⁰ There are only two more instances of alleged bribery. In 1933 Labour was accused of bribing electors by providing houses let at uneconomically low rents. They retaliated by challenging the Conservatives to cease "the pernicious practice of shillings and beer at election times."¹¹ Finally, in the 2005 election the Conservative candidate was reported to the Director of Public Prosecution for offering eighteen year-old voters free trips to the House of Commons.¹²

In terms of registration and organisation of the parties in Kidderminster, it is clear throughout the period that both Conservatives and Liberals paid great attention to making sure their supporters were put on to the voting register and strove to exclude opponents. In a town where the parties tended to be evenly balanced this was essential. The system became more professional, with specialist lawyers replacing the local solicitors and the whole process taking several days. As the

⁹ Kidderminster Sun 12 December 1885.

¹⁰ Gilbert, D, Town and Borough: A Civic History of Kidderminster, (David Voice, 2004), p 86.

¹¹ Kidderminster Shuttle 21 October 1933, 28 October 1933, 11 November 1933.

¹² Kidderminster Shuttle 31 March 2005.

number of electors grew, so did the opportunity for claims and objections, especially in election years. Up to 200 voters might be objected to, as in 1862.

Likewise party organisation developed from a local and informal circle of influential “friends” which existed essentially only at election times to encompass the whole range of the population, voters and non-voters alike. In 1837 Godson formed the Kidderminster Conservative Association and, tellingly, the Operatives Conservative Society. His appeal was to those not included in the town’s carpetocracy elite – the Anglican, the drinker and the weaver. The Liberals founded the Kidderminster Reform Association and the special purpose Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association followed in 1849. They also orchestrated the Kidderminster Operatives and supported the Kidderminster Freehold Land Society. Pressure Groups, particularly among the weavers, were used to drum up support.

The parties tried in the 1850s to maintain some sort of solidarity outside election years, with patchy success. Certainly press reports tend only to focus on meetings when the election process was in motion. In 1864 the Liberal Party *per se* was re-launched as the Liberal Association, and the Conservatives also formalised their own organisation. By 1865 there was a more systematic formal and professional approach to party organisation in Kidderminster. Major national and international issues were discussed, as were local concerns, particularly rates. As the period progressed both sides tried to instil party consciousness by forming more pressure groups such as the Working Men’s Conservative Association and Temperance Societies. Certainly the 1867 Reform Act, which dramatically increased the

electorate, did change party structure as the parties strove to bid for the support of the newly enfranchised working classes. The Liberals formed the Reform League and Working Men's Committees; the Conservatives retaliated by re-launching the Conservative Working Men's Association and the Kidderminster Operatives Conservative Burial Association and the Loyal Order of Orangemen.

The Conservatives, particularly under Jefferies, maintained a determined local control over their choice of candidate. If they could not have Grant again in the 1880 by-election they would have no one and preferred to allow Brinton to stand unopposed in return for a typically murky deal on the local elections. The Liberals were more of a coalition of interests and there was some demand for a more democratic organisation to replace the rule by the local elite. The Liberals were always more likely to fragment than the Conservatives (unless it was over free trade), but they always eventually managed to field a single candidate in parliamentary elections. So at the end of the period, for all their efforts, each party remained controlled by the local party bosses. They may have made gestures to the enlarged electorate but they remained in charge. There had been some attempt to make party loyalty a permanent and all-embracing feature of Kidderminster political life, but generally the electoral machinery remained in idle gear until the accelerator was applied in election years.

Can anything be learned from comparative voting patterns at parliamentary and municipal elections? The following table shows control of the Council from 1836 (following the first direct elections required by the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act) and the party controlling the parliamentary seat.

An asterisk denotes the year of a parliamentary election.

	Council	MP
1836	Con	Lib
1837	Lib	Con*
1838	Lib	Con
1839	Lib	Con
1840	Lib	Con
1841	Lib	Con*
1842	Lib	Con
1843	Con	Con
1844	Con	Con
1845	Con	Con
1846	Con	Con
1847	Con	Con*
1848	Con	Con
1849	Con	Con*
1850	Con	Con
1851	Con	Con
1852	Lib	Lib*
1853	Lib	Lib
1854	Lib	Lib
1855	Lib	Lib*
1856	Lib	Lib
1857	Lib	Lib*
1858	Lib	Lib
1859	Lib	Lib*
1860	Lib	Lib
1861	Lib	Lib
1862	Con	Lib*
1863	Con	Lib
1864	Con	Lib
1865	Con	Con*
1866	Con	Con
1867	Con	Con
1868	Con	Lib*
1869	Con	Lib
1870	Con	Lib
1871	Con	Lib
1872	Lib	Lib
1873	Lib	Lib
1874	Lib	Con*
1875	Con	Con
1876	Con	Con
1877	Con	Con
1878	Con	Con
1879	Lib	Con
1880	Lib	Lib*

It is difficult to draw tenable conclusions from this analysis. The Conservatives controlled the Council for 24 years in this period and the Liberals for 21 years. The Conservatives also provided the MP for 24 years and the Liberals for 21 years, but there are substantial overlaps, from 1837 to 1842, 1862 to 1864 and 1868 to 1871, where the council was run by a party different to that supplying the MP. Three conclusions may safely be drawn, first; in particular in the later stages of the period there appeared a “fortress” mentality – the North ward for the Conservatives and the South ward for the Liberals; second; the malpractice evident in parliamentary elections is mirrored in local elections, in particular in 1874 and 1880, but with allegations of corruption on various other occasions; and third there is no discernible pattern which would lead to a sustainable conclusion that the municipal election results could be a reliable guide to parliamentary elections. The latter, occurring potentially only every seven years and dealing with national issues, were a snapshot of voter intentions at a point in time. They were essentially theatre. The local elections, on an annual basis, were an opportunity for the electorate to express their views on predominantly local concerns, primarily the rates. Efficiency and economy began at home. A vote for a municipal candidate was not a reliable signal for voting intentions at the parliamentary election. Why should it be? The elections were for and about entirely different things.

It is dangerous to draw broad conclusions from specific examples but what is clear, at least in Kidderminster, is that a vigorous political divide does not preclude the dark underbelly of the Victorian electoral system. It is not credible

that Godson and Grant would have been so liberal with their largess if they did not expect a tangible return on their investment. The size of their target audience may be a matter for debate, but the methods are not, nor their success. A study of the political process in Kidderminster may only be valid for Kidderminster, and care should be taken about drawing broader conclusions, but it does have a number of key features which are both valid and valuable to further the debate. There is ample evidence of vigorous, not to say bitter, political contests; of bribery, corruption and violence; of generally at best “armed-truce” industrial relations, but more often difficult and confrontational; of a distinct religious divide between Anglicanism and Non-conformity in the spiritual home of Richard Baxter; and of the influence of alcohol and the brewers’ lobby in a town which (like so many others) claimed to have more public houses per head of population in England than any other.

Kidderminster – Parliamentary Election Results 1832-1880

Year	Type	Cons	Votes	Libs	Votes	Victor	Majority	% Majority	% Swing	Electors	% Turnout	Population ¹	Electorate % Population	National Result	Election Petition
1832	G	R. Godson	172	G.R. Philips	159	C	13	3.9	-	390	84.9	14,981	2.6	L	No
1835	G	R. Godson	121	G.R. Philips	197	L	78	24.5	13.8L	383	83.8	14,981	2.6	L	No
1837	G	R. Godson	198	J. Bagshaw	157	C	41	11.5	17.7C	440	80.7	14,981	2.9	L	No
1841	G	R. Godson	212	S. Ricardo	200	C	12	2.9	3.7L	482	85.5	17,500	2.8	C	No
1847	G	R. Godson	-	-	-	C	N/A	N/A	-	548	N/A	17,500	3.1	L	No
1849	B	J. Best	217	T. Gisborne	200	C	17	4.1	0.5C	494	84.4	17,500	2.8	N/A	Yes
1852	G	J. Best	152	R. Lowe	246	L	94	23.6	13.8L	495	80.4	20,852	2.4	C	Yes
1855	B	-	-	R. Lowe	-	L	N/A	N/A	-	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	L	No
1857	G	W. Boycott	146	R. Lowe	234	L	88	23.2	0.2C	502	75.7	20,852	2.4	N/A	No
1859	G	J.W. Huddleston	207	A.R. Bristow	216	L	9	4.0	10.5C	487	86.9	20,852	2.3	L	Yes
1862	B	J.G. Talbot	219	L. White	229	L	10	2.2	-	493	90.9	15,399	3.2	N/A	No
1865	G	A. Grant	285	L. White	270	C	15	2.7	2.5C	588	94.4	15,399	3.8	L	Yes
1868	G	W.T. Makins	802	T. Lea	1,262	L	460	22.3	12.5L	2,323	88.9	15,399	15.1	L	No
1874	G	A. Grant	1,509	T. Lea	1,398	C	111	3.8	13.0C	3,394	85.7	20,814	16.3	C	Yes
1874	B	W. Fraser	1,651	G. H Lea	1,318	C	333	11.2	3.7C	3,394	87.5	20,814	16.3	N/A	No
1880	G	A. Grant	1,472	J. Brinton	1,795	L	323	9.9	10.5L	3,606	90.6	20,814	17.3	L	Yes ²
1880	B	-	-	J. Brinton	-	L	N/A	N/A	-	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No

¹ Population numbers are for the borough of Kidderminster rather than the parliamentary constituency which was larger (1,000 estimated in 1832)

² Brinton resigned and sought re-election in order to avoid the possibility of a petition because his election agent had been reported for bribery at a previous municipal election

Key:

G – General Election

B – By-Election

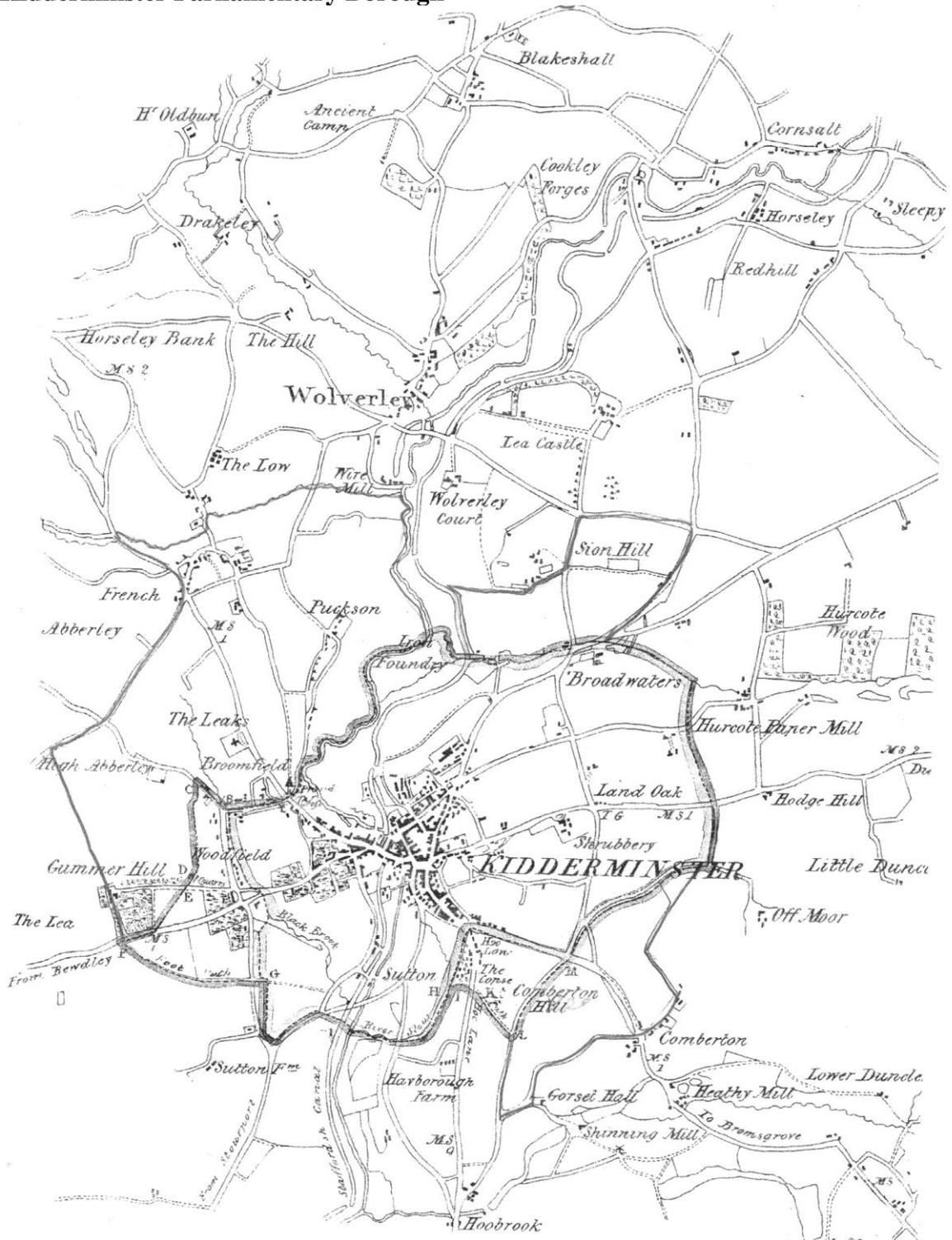
C – Conservative

L – Liberal

Sources:

- 1) Candidates, votes, electorate, election petitions: Craig, F.W.S, British Parliamentary Election Results, (MacMillan, 1974, 1977) Vol 1 pp. 165-6, Vol 2, p 126.
- 2) National Result: Cook, C, Britain in the Nineteenth Century 1815-1914, (Pearson, 1999), pp. 69-93.

Kidderminster Parliamentary Borough



Source: Report of the Boundary Commissioners 1831. Scale: 2 inches = 1 Mile.

Key: Kidderminster Borough Boundary 1831 = Green
 Parliamentary Constituency Boundary 1832-1867 = Green + Red
 Parliamentary Constituency Boundary from 1868 = Green + Red + Blue

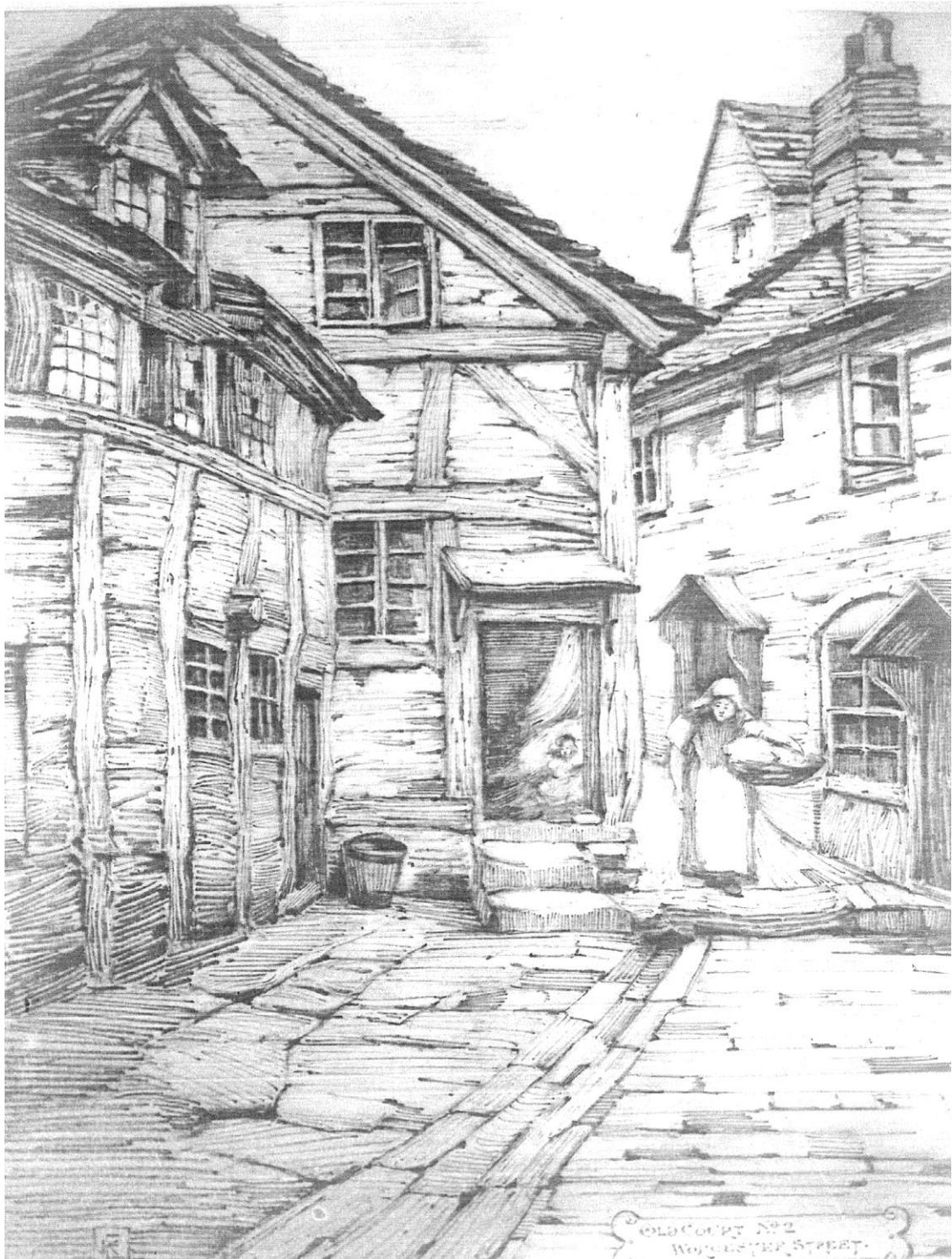
Public Splendour



No. 12 PUBLIC ROOMS, Vicar Street (now part of the Town Hall) 1855
The Public Rooms were erected by public subscription and opened on January 4th, 1855. They contain a concert room 85' x 46' with organ and corn exchange and cost £5,800. The Public Rooms became part of the Town Hall in 1876.

Bewdley Museum

Private Squalor



**Old Court No 2, Worcester Street.
Kidderminster Library**

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Abbreviations:

WRO – Worcester Records Office
KPL – Kidderminster Public Library
BPL – Birmingham Public Library

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