

**THE RADICAL EXPERIMENT IN LIVERPOOL AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON THE REFORM MOVEMENT IN THE
EARLY VICTORIAN PERIOD**

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by

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work within this thesis was entirely composed by myself and does not include material previously published.

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This thesis has been a long voyage for all concerned. In the best tradition of Cavafy there has always been a destination in mind but arrival there has not been something to be hurried: much better for the journey to last years, so that when you finally reach port you are old but have grown rich with all that has been learned along the way. Consequently, I owe a vast debt to my supervisors who, whilst not discouraging me from pursuing avenues that will at some point in the future deliver additional fruits, have gently steered me in the proclaimed direction and stuck with it for many years. To John Belchem, who accompanied me almost to journey's end, I am grateful for widening my historiographical aspirations and instilling in me a regard for "proper history". To Graeme Milne, who has sailed with me for the entire journey, I can only express my amazement at his stamina and gratitude for his having ensured that the final stages were completed with due rigour. To Will Ashworth, who has welcomed me at his seminars and latterly, as a supervisor, has provided a timely reminder that research should always be an enjoyable process, I am also most grateful. Most recently, I wish to thank Professor Charles Esdaile and Dr. Joan Allen for the trouble they have taken as examiners of this thesis and for the helpful advice they have given. Finally, I must acknowledge the support of all those fellow research students and members of staff who have listened intently and provided encouragement at the numerous seminars where I have waxed lyrical on aspects of Liverpool's radicalism.

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ABSTRACT

THE RADICAL EXPERIMENT IN LIVERPOOL AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE REFORM MOVEMENT IN THE EARLY VICTORIAN PERIOD

This thesis investigates the development of radical politics in Liverpool in the first half of the nineteenth century and argues that distinctive events and trends in Liverpool exercised an important influence on the activities of the Reform Movement nationally between 1848 and 1854. It addresses two important but largely neglected areas of historiography: first, the political history of Liverpool in the years between the abolition of the slave trade and the mass influx of Irish refugees in mid-century, during which time the town rose to commercial pre-eminence; secondly, the influence of major provincial centres such as Liverpool on politics at the national level.

The origins of Liverpool's reformist Town Council of 1835-1841 are traced and show a continuity of thought and personalities over several decades against a backdrop of Tory paternalism and institutionalised corruption. The new reformist administration is seen as laying the foundations of a modern society through good governance, financial economy, civil liberty and innovation. On the Corn Laws issue, Liverpool's reformers were reluctant to follow Manchester's lead, preferring to pursue free trade on a broad front. This study follows their progress and shows how, ultimately, their thinking on financial reform influenced Cobden's "National Budget" and remained an ever-present stimulus for several decades.

The most prominent of Liverpool's radical reformers was Sir Joshua Walmsley, whose achievements in both municipal and national politics have received much less attention from historians than they have merited. This study details the influences and experiences in his early career and then traces how, through political dexterity, he pushed parliamentary reform to the forefront of the national political agenda and established the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association in 1849. The influence exerted by his Liverpool background on both his political development and style of campaigning may be seen throughout his parliamentary career.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACLL	Anti-Corn Law League
ACLLLB	<i>Anti-Corn Law League Letter-Books</i> (Manchester Archives)
CM	<i>Liverpool Council Minutes</i> (Liverpool Record Office)
ECM	<i>Liverpool Education Committee Minutes</i> (Liverpool Record Office)
LAMA	Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association
LFRA	Liverpool Financial Reform Association
LvRO	Liverpool Record Office
MFRA	Metropolitan Financial Reform Association
MFRA	Metropolitan Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association
MPFRA	Metropolitan Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association
NFLS	National Freehold Land Society
NPFRA	National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association
NRA	National Reform Association
THSLC	<i>Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire</i>
TRA	(Liverpool) Tradesmen's Reform Association
WCM	<i>Liverpool Watch Committee Minutes</i> (Liverpool Record Office)

When, in time to come, the political student sits down to look over the roll of our departed ones, this name, Joshua Walmsley, will be found there as amongst the noblest and the best of our many sons.

Samuel Greg Rathbone, Liverpool, 20 November 1871

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The genesis of the present research lay in the conviction that the historiography of radical politics in the decade following the 1832 Reform Act had neglected events and trends in Liverpool that were both distinctive – as being to a significant degree the product of local circumstances – and, by virtue of Liverpool’s commercial standing, a potential source of influence on the direction of politics nationally. The findings of this research confirm that Liverpool’s experiences and political outlook were in many respects distinctive and substantially different from those of Manchester, which have generally been viewed as the dominant influence on radical politics in the 1840s and 1850s. This thesis seeks to show that during the crucial period in 1848-49 when the future direction of radical politics was being reappraised (in the aftermath of the repeal of the Corn Laws, the commercial crisis of 1847, Chartism and revolution in Europe) the two most prominent campaign issues under consideration – financial and parliamentary reform – both owed much of their formulation to events and opinions in Liverpool that can be traced back a decade or more.

The connecting thread between municipal and parliamentary levels was most obviously provided by Sir Joshua Walmsley (1794-1871), who emerged as the most powerful (and most radical) mainstream politician in Liverpool during the reformist municipal administration of 1835-1841 and subsequently, as a Member of Parliament between 1847 and 1857, spearheaded a renewed campaign for parliamentary reform. Walmsley’s individual role throughout is confirmed as central, and his rise to national prominence as president of the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association may be attributed to a combination of skilful political manipulation and learning from earlier personal failures.

Although this study focuses principally on the development of political movements and their ideas and, intentionally, has not been constructed as a biography of the chief actor, it is inevitable that particular attention should be given to Walmsley himself. Many of his contemporaries were the product of the same influences and played significant roles but Walmsley was much more than “first amongst equals” or a figurehead for a wider group of like-minded reformers. The evidence shows that he was repeatedly seeking to shape events in accordance with his personal views and to provide himself with the stature and authority to do so.

Liverpool's experiences, although distinctive and a unique influence on national politics, nevertheless shared a number of elements with other regions. As will be shown in the succeeding chapters, the emergence of radical ideas was not the product of a sudden break from local tradition but the logical consequence of a continuing process of development that spanned half a century. This continuity is evident not just in thought but, as might be expected, in the life-long commitment of individuals to their political causes. Prominent reformers from the Peterloo era (and before) were still active in the 1840s and beyond. In this respect Liverpool broadly conforms to the idea of continuity in radicalism propounded by Eugenio Biagini and others.¹ Similarly, Miles Taylor in his seminal study of mid-Victorian radicalism draws attention to research showing that the Liberal Party of the late 1850s evolved from a fusion of Whig constitutionalism and liberal Toryism.² Nowhere is this fusion better illustrated than in Liverpool where the advanced radicalism of Walmsley can be traced back to the traditions of its most celebrated MPs – the constitutional dissent of William Roscoe on the one side and the liberal Toryism of George Canning and William Huskisson on the other.

In certain other respects Liverpool's political development is very different, most notably in the relative absence of popular radicalism: the drive for reform was almost exclusively the preserve of the merchant class and the educated. John Belchem and Kevin Moore have shown that Liverpool's "exceptionalism" and, in particular, the lack of working class agitation and violence was largely due to the peculiar status of the town's freemen and their dependency on paternalistic (mostly Tory) employers.³ In turn, this unique situation derived from other distinctive factors that set Liverpool apart from other places. Unlike Manchester, Liverpool had been a parliamentary borough for centuries and was not struggling to assert itself. Of equal importance was the almost complete absence of domination by local aristocrats and landowners. Unlike many other boroughs, Liverpool was free to follow its own path and to channel its views and grievances through its two MPs.

What emerged from Liverpool in the early Victorian period was not a political school in the sense that we refer to the Manchester School and the Birmingham School,

¹ E. F. Biagini and A. J. Reid, (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991).

² M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 6-7.

³ J. Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* (Liverpool, 2000), pp.155-76; K. Moore, 'Liverpool in the 'Heroic Age' of Popular Radicalism', *THSLC*, 138 (1989), pp. 137-57.

although in later years the Liverpool Financial Reform Association was close to achieving this status. Instead we can see three main strands developing and then their synthesis in the hands of one key individual, whose achievements have never been fully understood or acknowledged. First, there was an innovative and radical approach to transforming Liverpool's local governance. Secondly, the new generation of reformist politicians sought to widen their political base by drawing in the large number of tradesmen who straddled the huge divide between the merchant establishment and the poor freemen. (The new breed of populist Tories – another exceptional feature on Liverpool's political landscape – pursued the same objective, with both sides producing remarkably able figures in the role of culture-broker.) Thirdly, Liverpool's commitment to free trade extended well beyond anything advocated by the Anti-Corn Law League. (Local protectionism – and later opposition in some quarters to repeal of the Navigation Acts – was in part due to local employment factors and not any defence of landed interests.⁴) Walmsley's significance as a politician lies partly in the role he played in Liverpool between 1835 and 1841 but, more importantly, in the way he translated Liverpool's experiences and lessons onto the national stage after 1848 and created a movement in the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association that briefly promised so much.

Little to support or contradict the conclusions of this thesis is to be found in the principal secondary sources for the period. For instance, Boyd Hilton makes scant mention of Liverpool after the demise of Canning (1827) and Huskisson (1830).⁵ Nor is this deficiency confined to modern historians: Harriet Martineau devoted few words to Liverpool, even though her clergyman brother James was at the heart of the Unitarian community there, which was so closely identified with reform issues.⁶ This evidential void derives from historiographical neglect of two significant areas:

⁴ Belchem, *ibid.*

⁵ B. Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006).

⁶ H. Martineau, *The History of England during the Thirty Years Peace* (London, 1849-50).

- first, the affairs of major provincial population centres like Liverpool;⁷
- secondly, extra-parliamentary political campaigns that did not lead to violence or major civil commotion.

Liverpool has derived a degree of vicarious attention from its prestigious association with Canning and Huskisson between 1812 and 1830 but in-depth analysis of its development and internal political tensions largely ceases after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.⁸ Systematic coverage of political and social issues resumes towards the end of the century, most notably in Philip Waller's landmark study.⁹ However, in this and other works, the impetus came from specific socio-political issues, whether sectarianism or public health. The notion that Liverpool's history in the nineteenth century was significantly different from that of other major population centres and worth investigating as a corrective to mainstream historiography has been slow to take hold but, in a series of works written and/or edited by John Belchem since 1992, the concept of Liverpool exceptionalism has been convincingly developed.¹⁰ The research presented in this thesis provides further evidence of events in Liverpool bucking the national trend. However, there is still need of a general political history of Liverpool between 1807 and the 1867 Reform Act.

Amongst the various socio-political contributions, Frank Neal's monograph on Liverpool's sectarianism stands out¹¹. Whilst it does not seek to be a general history of the period covered by this thesis, its treatment of the least appealing aspect of Liverpool exceptionalism sets the context for several of the political issues

⁷ Modern scholarship is gradually replacing the works of local historians but provincial centres remain in need of more assiduous examination, whether in terms of setting local events within a national context or, as with the present study, assessing provincial influences on events at the national level. Amongst the noteworthy examples of this new trend are Peter Taylor's monograph on Bolton's place in Britain's industrial history and Joan Allen's study of the influential Newcastle Radical Joseph Cowen: see P. Taylor, *Popular Politics in Early Industrial Britain: Bolton, 1825-1850* (Keele, 1995) and J. Allen, *Joseph Cowen and Popular Radicalism on Tyneside, 1829-1900* (Monmouth, 2007).

⁸ Neil Collins has touched on some of the issues in his wide-ranging study of parliamentary and municipal elections: *Politics and Elections in Nineteenth Century Liverpool* (Aldershot, 1994).

⁹ P. J. Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism. A Political and Social History of Liverpool 1868-1939* (Liverpool, 1981).

¹⁰ Principally, J. Belchem, (ed.), *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour: Essays in Liverpool History, 1790-1940* (Liverpool, 1992); J. Belchem, *Merseypride*; J. Belchem, (ed.), *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character & History* (Liverpool, 2006).

¹¹ F. Neal, *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914* (Manchester, 1988).

examined here, notably policing and education. The wider political context is also set out in a valuable and wide-ranging study by Derek Fraser, which for the most part focuses on northern towns.¹² Fraser does not attempt to follow Liverpool's experiences continuously but makes frequent reference to them and in particular provides a detailed statistical analysis of municipal and parliamentary elections. Similarly, in a survey of municipal governance edited by Robert Morris and Richard Trainor, Liverpool's challenges in areas such as public health and policing are matched by the experiences of other towns.¹³

The national context for both municipal and parliamentary elections after 1832 has been admirably set out in keynote works by Matthew Roberts¹⁴ and Philip Salmon.¹⁵ While Roberts surveys and reassesses the origins and development of mass political movements, Salmon specifically addresses the impact of electoral reform. Neither work includes detailed consideration of Liverpool but, in the light of the increasingly bitter struggle between Reformers and Conservatives in Liverpool during the 1830s, Roberts's analysis of popular Conservatism is highly relevant.¹⁶ This theme is also explored in Matthew Cragoe's article on the establishment of Conservative Associations across the country.¹⁷ The Liverpool Tradesmen's Conservative Association may be seen as not entirely typical.

This period has been covered in a number of historical works by Liverpool's indigenous historians but none devotes much attention to either the development of Liverpool's own brand of radicalism or to its interface with radical politics elsewhere. The celebrated antiquary James Picton, who was also a long-standing municipal politician, followed the "general and descriptive" style of an earlier generation – exemplified by William Enfield, James Wallace and John Corry – and compiled a worthy collection of annals and topographical detail, punctuated only occasionally

¹² D. Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England* (London, 1979).

¹³ R. J. Morris and R. H. Trainor, (eds.), *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750* (Aldershot, 2000).

¹⁴ M. Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England, 1832-1914* (Basingstoke, 2009).

¹⁵ P. Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832-1841* (London, 2002).

¹⁶ Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, pp. 111ff.

¹⁷ M. Cragoe, 'The Great Reform Act and the Modernization of British Politics: The Impact of Conservative Associations, 1835-1841', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2008), pp. 581-603.

by personal assessments.¹⁸ Still the best general history of Liverpool is that of Ramsay Muir, written at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁹ Although a commemorative work with a necessarily broad sweep, it offers good insights into the town's politics.

A separate municipal history by Muir and Platt detailed the development of local government from the earliest days up to 1835.²⁰ In the same era James Touzeau produced a lengthy municipal history of similar scope.²¹ Touzeau's style is annalistic and he professed the unusual purpose of supplying information in "as unpretentious yet entertaining manner as possible".²² Brian White continued the story up until the mid-twentieth century, applying rather more critical analysis. An obvious drawback with the limited scope and municipal focus of these works is that they do not seek to place local developments in the national context nor follow the engagement of the same protagonists with national politics.²³

The publication of Muir's works around the 700th anniversary of Liverpool's receiving its charter (properly, letters patent) as a royal borough in 1207 underlines the pride (and indeed confidence) felt by city elders and citizens alike in Liverpool's long history of parliamentary representation, municipal government and, since the seventeenth century, freedom from aristocratic domination. Similar feelings led to the publication in 2006 of *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character and History*, a work of varied and well-rounded modern scholarship.²⁴ In interpreting Liverpool's politics in the nineteenth century and making comparisons with other major centres of

¹⁸ J. A. Picton, *Memorials of Liverpool*, 2nd ed. (London & Liverpool, 1875); W. Enfield, *An Essay towards the History of Liverpool* (Warrington, 1773); [J. Wallace], *A General and Descriptive History of the Ancient and Present State of the Town of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1795); [J. Corry], *The History of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1810).

¹⁹ R. Muir, *A History of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1907). Belchem pays a fond tribute to Muir in *Merseypride*, pp. 6-18.

²⁰ R. Muir and E. M. Platt, *A History of Municipal Government in Liverpool from the Earliest Times to the Municipal Reform Act of 1835* (Liverpool, 1906).

²¹ J. Touzeau, *The Rise and Progress of Liverpool from 1551 to 1835* (Liverpool, 1910).

²² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 1.

²³ B. D. White, *A History of the Corporation of Liverpool 1835-1914* (Liverpool, 1951).

²⁴ J. Belchem, (ed.), *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character and History* (Liverpool, 2006).

population (notably Manchester), it is important to bear this distinctive characteristic in mind and make due allowance for it when examining the actions of individuals.²⁵

Liverpool's place in the politics of free trade has also received scant attention, despite the town's commercial importance in the period. It seems that the dominant role of Manchester's Radicals, notably Richard Cobden and John Bright, has precluded commensurate study of their regional allies and of the links between them. This applies equally to the classic history of the Anti-Corn Law League by Norman McCord and the more recent thematic study by Norman Longmate.²⁶ Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, in their reassessment of the Anti-Corn Law League, point out that, aside from Manchester and Bolton, only Liverpool sent delegates to all eight national conferences but do not look closely at Liverpool's engagement.²⁷ The activities of Lawrence Heyworth and (Sir) William Brown in particular have not been fully recognised.²⁸ In the context of the present research, what these works contribute is an understanding of the social composition of the Anti-Corn Law League and of its often violent confrontations with the Chartists.²⁹ This legacy will be detected later in the attitude of prominent Leaguers such as Cobden to the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association.

By contrast, Liverpool's commercial growth has been documented in minute detail, with lengthy treatises on trade as a whole and on individual commodities such as cotton.³⁰ These works, written with self-evident pride, are extended advertisements for Liverpool as much as historical records. Much the same is true of the numerous accounts of individual trading-houses: few set their achievements in any historical

²⁵ See also White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, p. 3.

²⁶ N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League 1838-1846*, 2nd ed. (London, 1968); N. Longmate, *The Breadstealers: The Fight against the Corn Laws, 1838-1846* (London, 1984).

²⁷ P. A. Pickering and A. Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000), p. 47 and Appendix 2.

²⁸ For instance, Brown, one of the most famous of Liverpool's entrepreneurs and an MP, maintained a regular correspondence over several decades with George Wilson, chairman and then president of the Anti-Corn Law League, and was one of the principal beneficiaries of the League's electioneering. Fraser draws on some of this correspondence in *Urban Politics*, pp. 19-20, 151 and 181.

²⁹ See, for example, Longmate, *Breadstealers*, pp. 157-64 and 81-95 respectively.

³⁰ T. Baines, *History of the Commerce and Town of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1852); T. Ellison, *The Cotton Trade of Great Britain* (London, 1886). A more dispassionate and considered analysis of Liverpool's trade in the immediately following period is provided by G. J. Milne, *Trade and Traders in Mid-Victorian Liverpool* (Liverpool, 2000).

context and most fail to give a rounded portrayal of their subjects as both businessmen and highly active members of local society (and political stalwarts). Thus, the commercial interests of William Rathbone V (1787-1868) have had more written about them than his achievements in political and social reform over half a century. There is still scope for investigating Liverpool's attitudes on key issues such as free trade through a holistic study of leading merchants. This would have the merit of helping us to understand why merchants with similar backgrounds who had grown up in the same trading-houses could take strongly opposing positions on a range of issues.

What must also be borne in mind is that, as Liverpool's clamour for free trade grew, the mercantile classes already had a long heritage of close involvement in the running of the port (and indeed the town) and free traders had come to the fore in the late 1830s.³¹ The role of this mercantile élite in transforming Liverpool during the eighteenth century has been detailed by Jane Longmore.³² This process was not unique to Liverpool but did seem to favour port towns with a proactive Corporation.³³ The great political changes of the early nineteenth century did nothing to interrupt this development.

With so little coverage by secondary sources of Liverpool's political life in the first half of the nineteenth century, it comes as no surprise that specific references to even a key figure like Sir Joshua Walmsley are thin on the ground but it is important to note that the same is true of his contemporaries. Like Rathbone, (Sir) William Brown (1784-1864) achieved prominence through his commercial and philanthropic activities but, although his parliamentary career was unremarkable, his role as an advocate of free trade in the 1840s was more important than the existing historiography might suggest. In the absence of any substantial assistance from secondary sources, unravelling the various strands of Liverpool's political thinking between 1832 and 1848 has required an unusual degree of data mining in largely unexplored primary sources.

The final part of this thesis focuses on the creation and relatively brief existence of the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association (NPFRA). The political backdrop for the emergence of the NPFRA has been summarised by Roland

³¹ Milne, *Trade and Traders*, p. 3.

³² J. Longmore, 'Civic Liverpool: 1680-1800' in Belchem, (ed.), *Liverpool 800*, pp. 113-69.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.168.

Quinault, who makes the highly pertinent point that major reforms had generally had a long gestation period.³⁴ The NPFRA attracted considerable press coverage but has been accorded comparatively little space in secondary sources.³⁵ There are several reasons for this. Miles Taylor found that historians of radicalism and liberalism in the 1850s were few and far between and borrowed heavily from the histories of Chartism and the Gladstone era.³⁶ He further suggests that the 1850s seem tame by comparison with the tumultuous decades on either side. Most obviously, the NPFRA was predicated on extra-parliamentary campaigning, while most of the historiography for the period has maintained the traditional focus on party politics and the House of Commons. Furthermore, it was a rather dull organisation, lacking the flair of the Anti-Corn Law League and, from the outset, intent on avoiding violence or civil commotion. In the final evaluation, it was also deemed to have failed. Taylor, in what is still the most important study of radicalism during the 1850s, intentionally concentrates on parliamentary activity and so finds comparatively little space for the NPFRA (and Walmsley).³⁷ However, his extensive mining of personal correspondence reveals numerous insights into the interaction not only between leading Radicals but also with their Chartist allies.

Frances Gillespie, writing over half a century earlier, devoted a chapter to the NPFRA (and other contemporary movements) and offered an unusual slant in that she was primarily looking at the engagement of the working classes rather than the more commonly considered role of the middle class politicians.³⁸ Most importantly, she recognised that what was being attempted was an alliance between the Radicals and working class activists.³⁹ The massive history of English radicalism written by Simon Maccoby in the same era adopted a more traditional approach to

³⁴ R. Quinault, 'Democracy and the Mid-Victorians', in M. Hewitt, (ed.), *An Age of Equipoise? Reassessing Mid-Victorian Britain* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 109-21.

³⁵ This is true even of Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, an important work incorporating the latest scholarship.

³⁶ *Decline of British Radicalism*, p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

³⁸ F. E. Gillespie, *The Political History of the English Working Classes, 1850-1867* (Chicago, 1923).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

its subject.⁴⁰ The activities of both the NPFRA and Walmsley received scant mention and no attempt was made to interpret their impact.

The most germane and noteworthy contribution to understanding the NPFRA is a dedicated article by Nicholas Edsall, which follows its progress in some detail and makes extensive use of primary sources.⁴¹ Edsall rather bluntly deems it a failed movement but does also succeed in placing it within a wider context and gives it credit for what it did achieve. Edsall's findings are considered further in Chapter 7. Most recently, Robert Saunders covers much the same ground as Taylor but follows through beyond the failure of the Reform Movement up to the 1867 Reform Act.⁴² He looks briefly at the emergence of the NPFRA, drawing extensively on Edsall's article, but does not address the highly significant interaction of Radicals and Chartists. He almost omits any mention of the Liverpool Financial Reform Association. However, his focus on Lord John Russell leads him to the attractive conclusion that Russell never really abandoned the finality of the 1832 Reform Act and that his reform bills aimed to protect a constitutional model that was fundamentally at odds with the wishes of the Radicals.⁴³

The historiography of Chartism is massive but has mostly given little attention to the engagement of Feargus O'Connor and others with the NPFRA. One can only surmise that this is partly because it did not in the event lead to substantial political gain and partly because it was not viewed as mainstream activity. Moreover, it took place when O'Connor's health was beginning to deteriorate sharply. In the most notable of recent general histories of Chartism, Malcolm Chase flags up the lack of direction in Chartism in 1849 and a drift towards "the politics of the possible".⁴⁴ O'Connor's biographer Paul Pickering suggests he may have succumbed to wooing

⁴⁰ S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism, 1832-1852* (London, 1935); *1853-1886* (London, 1938).

⁴¹ N. C. Edsall, 'A Failed National Movement: the Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association, 1848-1854', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 49 (1976), pp. 108–31.

⁴² R. Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867* (Aldershot, 2011). This full-length study builds on his earlier articles: 'Lord John Russell and Parliamentary Reform, 1848-67', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 120, No. 489 (2005), pp. 1289-1315, and 'The Politics of Reform and the Making of the Second Reform Act, 1848-1867', *Historical Journal*, 50.3 (2007), pp. 571-91.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁴ M. Chase, *Chartism A New History* (Manchester, 2007), p. 333.

(possibly unintentional) from Walmsley.⁴⁵ In a series of definitive articles, Chase has also detailed the contrasting histories of both the Chartists' National Land Company and the NPFRA's National Freehold Land Society.⁴⁶

The research presented in this thesis cannot overturn the obvious historical fact that the NPFRA failed to secure its primary aim. However, it does permit a more generous assessment of the NPFRA's usefulness and provides new insights into its origins and place in radical politics.

The historiography has treated a rival (but not incompatible) reform movement more sympathetically. Indeed, the Liverpool Financial Reform Association (LFRA) is one of few Liverpool institutions in the Victorian era to have received due attention, with a dedicated article by W. N. Calkins and extensive consideration by Geoffrey Searle.⁴⁷ What is lacking in these appraisals of the LFRA is a clear understanding of how the movement came to be founded. For this, its links to Liverpool's free trade agitation in the 1840s need to be shown. Equally, the ultimate failure of the LFRA to have financial reform accepted as the primary issue for radical politics can be seen as in large part due to Walmsley's skill in setting up and manipulating the NPFRA.

In the absence of significant coverage of Liverpool politics and the NPFRA in secondary literature, correspondingly greater reliance has had to be placed on exploiting primary sources. In the belief that history is often best told in the words of those making it, where appropriate, extensive (and often lengthy) quotations have been included in this narrative. In large part this has meant the Liverpool press for the earlier period and the London press from 1848.⁴⁸ An unexpected finding is the extent to which reporting, whether on local events in Liverpool or on a London-

⁴⁵ P. A. Pickering, *Feargus O'Connor: A Political Life* (Monmouth, 2008), p. 136.

⁴⁶ M. Chase, 'Out of Radicalism: The Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 419 (1991), pp. 319-345; 'Wholesome Object Lessons': The Chartist Land Plan in Retrospect', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 118, No. 475 (2003), pp. 59-85; 'Chartism and the Land: 'The Mighty People's Question'', in M. Cragoe and P. Readman, (eds.), *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 57-73. See also "'Labour's Candidates': Chartism at the Parliamentary Polls', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2009), pp. 64-89.

⁴⁷ W. N. Calkins, 'A Victorian Free Trade Lobby', *Economic History Review*, 13.1, 1960, pp. 90-104; G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 57-63.

⁴⁸ M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, p. 14, attests to the value of the provincial press for the study of radical politics, characterising it as more dynamic than has been recognised.

based organisation like the NPFRA, spread rapidly to every corner of the nation. The use of London correspondents by provincial papers and of local agents by London papers, augmented by extensive syndication (and plagiarism), spread knowledge liberally to those who could afford the cover price.

The nineteenth century press has been the subject of a vast number of books. Those written at the time broadly divide into two categories: straightforward (and frequently voluminous) historical narratives, generally with substantial anecdotal content, and memoirs or autobiographies by members of the press. In the former category, the two-volume *The Newspaper Press: its origin – progress – and present position* by James Grant is a worthy and typical example.⁴⁹ In the autobiographical category, *Forty Years' Recollections: Literary and Political* by the Chartist Thomas Frost is more interesting than most, partly because of its humanity but also because Frost was both a journalist and a political activist.⁵⁰

In the modern era the best general history of the popular press is still that of Alan Lee.⁵¹ Although this work concentrates on the period after the repeal of stamp duty in 1855, it frequently refers back to earlier in the nineteenth century and defines the context for the press-related issues covered in this research. In particular, its comprehensive coverage of the provincial press sets an example for others to follow.⁵² For radicals of all shades the potential importance of the press was readily evident and, as Aled Jones has shown, the Chartist movement achieved notable success in harnessing its power, shaping not only print culture but also political culture.⁵³ The wider subject of press influence in the nineteenth century has also been thoroughly examined in a thematic study by Jones.⁵⁴ This helps our understanding, in particular, of the environment within which the *Daily News*

⁴⁹ J. Grant, *The Newspaper Press: its origin – progress – and present position* (London, 1871). Aled Jones has summarised the history of press histories in *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth Century England* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 51-68.

⁵⁰ T. Frost, *Forty Years' Recollections: Literary and Political* (London, 1880).

⁵¹ A. J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press, 1855-1914* (London, 1976).

⁵² For general reference, see L. Brake and M. Demoor, (eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* (Gent, 2009) and the expanded digital edition in *C19 Index* (ProQuest).

⁵³ A. G. Jones, 'Chartist journalism and print culture in Britain', in J. Allen, and O. R. Ashton, (eds.), *Papers for the People: A Study of the Chartist Press* (London, 2005), pp. 1ff.

⁵⁴ A. Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth Century England* (Aldershot, 1996).

struggled to establish itself as a reformist newspaper.⁵⁵ Most recently, Mark Hampton has approached press history from a new angle – the perceptions of government and the educated classes: his wide-ranging but brief overview of the nineteenth century press provides an excellent context for the reappraisal of traditional narratives.⁵⁶

Liverpool was blessed with a vibrant local press, mostly comprising quality weekly newspapers that aspired to provide full and accurate reporting of political events both locally and nationally. The majority of the papers espoused reform and several proprietors (on both sides of the political divide) were personally involved in municipal politics. From the excellent coverage of the frequent political meetings it is possible to follow the various strands of radical thinking over extended periods.

The availability of an ever increasing number of nineteenth century newspapers and periodicals in digital form has been an indispensable aid. What was previously a much underused resource now offers seemingly boundless new information and insights. The present-day historian has access to (and is obliged to digest) a far greater volume of data than could previously have been perused by even the most diligent denizen of newspaper reading-rooms. This is not without danger, as the temptation not to search out other less accessible sources must be resisted and, like all other sources, newspapers have to be viewed in their proper context. James Mussell's recent contribution on the implications of the digital age for newspaper-based research is most timely.⁵⁷

The availability in digital form of the radical-leaning *Liverpool Mercury* has transformed the scope of the present research. Although its coverage is politically one-sided (and, on occasion, blinkered) and thus needs to be moderated by reference to the Tory press, it is a ready source of undisputed facts about local events and personalities that cannot easily be found elsewhere. Only rarely is the *Mercury's* reporting in need of amplification from other reformist newspapers.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-3.

⁵⁶ M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (Urbana, 2004), pp. 19-39.

⁵⁷ J. Mussell, *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age* (Basingstoke, 2012). See also Matthew Roberts's review: 'Essay in Review', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (2013), pp. 113-26. Both Mussell (p. 125) and Roberts (p. 117) draw attention to the frequent shortcomings of optical character recognition (OCR). The present author can confirm that the results often do not include a substantial proportion of the actual occurrences of search terms. This is especially true when there are issues with the state of the newsprint and if newspaper pages have not been entirely flat when scanned.

Although much less accessible (and in general of inferior journalistic quality) the Tory press does provide an important counterbalance. Alongside the staid reporting of the *Liverpool Courier*, two populist newspapers, the *Liverpool Standard* and the *Liverpool Mail*, gave full vent to grass-roots Tory opinions and, by dint of frequent recourse to scurrility, openly hinted at the secrets and other shortcomings of their political opponents. In the case of Walmsley, who largely succeeded in keeping his origins and business life away from public scrutiny, there are helpful clues to his background and wider sympathies.

Press sources are complemented by the manuscript records of Liverpool Corporation: though often dry and skeletal, these can also provide – especially in committee reports – unexpected insights into local issues. The principal drawback of these sources is that they mostly report conclusions and actions to be taken and rarely include the preceding discussion. Fortunately, these gaps can often be filled from newspaper reports. These local records are supplemented by the detailed, first-hand evidence presented to a succession of government commissions and inquiries on elections, local government and social conditions. Frequently, the hard facts are accompanied by statements from witnesses giving both sides of the argument. The extent of this documentation in terms of both volume and scope is staggering: without it our understanding of Liverpool and many other towns would be much poorer.

Other documentary records are scarce but surviving correspondence between leading proponents of free trade in Liverpool and their colleagues in Manchester (most importantly in the letter-books of the Anti-Corn Law League) sheds light on both their cooperation and policy differences.⁵⁸ Sadly, there is nothing comparable for Liverpool to the voluminous collections of letters hoarded by the Manchester School over many years.

The major collections of family papers held in Liverpool have yielded relatively little that is directly relevant to the present research. The archives of the Rathbone family, for instance, are extensive but, with two important exceptions (cited in Chapter 5, ii), relatively few items add significantly to our understanding of the family's important role in events of the 1830s and 1840s.⁵⁹ The papers of Joseph

⁵⁸ Anti-Corn Law League Letter-Books [ACLLLB], GB127.BR MS f 337.2 A1 (Manchester Archives).

⁵⁹ Rathbone Papers, GB 141 RP (University of Liverpool).

Blanco White, a Spanish-born theologian who settled in Liverpool in 1835, include much material from the six years he spent within the Unitarian community.⁶⁰ However, in the words of his literary executor, he was a solitary man and a recluse.⁶¹ Nevertheless, although – unlike many Unitarians – he rarely participated in public life, he was occasionally moved to record incisive comments about the nature of local politics (see Chapter 4, iii and iv).

The general picture is similar for primary sources dealing with events after 1848. The London and provincial press usually provided full coverage of NPFRA events, occasionally supplementing this with an editorial. The Liberal press was generally sympathetic and Walmsley personally had long since been well placed to benefit as an early proprietor of the *Daily News*.⁶² The leading Liverpool papers, notably the *Liverpool Mercury* and the *Liverpool Journal*, continued to offer their townsman Walmsley enthusiastic support for his efforts on the national stage. Some of the more revealing commentaries are to be found in publications (e.g., Chartist-leaning) that might not have been expected to offer encouragement.

Personal correspondence between Walmsley and other Radicals is not extensive. The fact that Walmsley, Cobden and J. B. Smith were next-door neighbours in Westbourne Terrace obviously reduced the need for letter-writing. However, although – like any Victorian man of substance – Walmsley had need to dash off a profusion of brief notes and occasionally produced letters of greater substance, it is hard to escape the conclusion that he was not a man of letters in any sense. Unlike Cobden, he clearly did not see correspondence as a main plank of his campaigning but instead put the most effort into face-to-face meetings, whether in public or private. Fortunately, much of what little correspondence survives comprises letters exchanged with Cobden when on their travels and this is supplemented by

⁶⁰ Blanco White Papers, GB 141 BW (University of Liverpool). The Rathbone Papers, GB 141 RP V.4, contain a further collection of Blanco White's correspondence.

⁶¹ Revd. J. H. Thom, (ed.), *The Life of the Rev. Joseph Blanco White, written by himself; with portions of his correspondence* (London, 1845), Vol. I, p. v.

⁶² Walmsley's activities (and writing) as a proprietor of the *Daily News* are largely invisible. However, there is good reason to suppose that he was highly active behind the scenes and had considerable patronage at his disposal. In 1852 the Chartist George Holyoake, then writing for the *Leader*, recorded in his diary an offer of employment over breakfast with Walmsley (Joseph McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake* (London, 1908), Vol. I, p. 169). Furthermore, M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, p. 18, notes Walmsley was still responsible for the newspaper's coverage of parliamentary reform as late as 1859.

Cobden's voluminous correspondence with other Radicals.⁶³ (Perhaps surprisingly, in view of their shared commitment to parliamentary reform, there is no evidence of any sustained dialogue between Walmsley and Bright.) In addition there is a rather bland correspondence between Walmsley and Robert Heywood, his patron in the Bolton constituency.⁶⁴ For the early history of the NPFRA, the dedicated scrapbook kept by the veteran reformer Francis Place is invaluable.⁶⁵ This source was highlighted by Edsall and includes original NPFRA documents, which amplify and occasionally provide a context for what may be gleaned from the press.

Although Walmsley collected material for prospective memoirs in notebooks, which have not come down to us, after his death the task of writing his biography fell to his son Hugh Mulleneux Walmsley, a former military man, travel writer and novelist.⁶⁶ It is evident that Walmsley himself, looking back in later life, recalled some events imperfectly and his son, according to the rules of Victorian biography as set by Samuel Smiles, was more intent on illustrating his father's virtues through anecdote than seeking to understand his political outlook and to set out the enduring beliefs that underpinned much of his career. Equally, the son saw no need to detail his father's background or business activities and the evidence suggests that, where necessary, he was quite prepared to falsify the record. Those public figures with whom Walmsley collaborated over the years – Cobden and Joseph Hume excepted – receive scant mention. However, the biography partially redeems itself through its inclusion of many otherwise unrecorded letters from Cobden and Hume (but, sadly, not from Walmsley himself).

⁶³ Much (but by no means all) of Cobden's correspondence for the relevant years has been included in Anthony Howe's multi-volume edition, *The Letters of Richard Cobden*, principally Vol. II: 1848-1853 (Oxford, 2010).

⁶⁴ Heywood Papers, ZHE/45-49 (Bolton Archives).

⁶⁵ Francis Place Collection, Set 48 (British Library).

⁶⁶ H. M. Walmsley, *The Life of Sir Joshua Walmsley* (London, 1879).

Structure of thesis

In Chapter 2 a context is provided both for the sudden demise of Tory dominance in Liverpool in 1835 and for the ensuing institution of a wide-ranging set of municipal reforms by the Reformers after their decisive electoral victory. The 1835 Municipal Corporations Act was instrumental in enabling these changes and was itself in no small part the product of widespread corruption and abuses of power in Liverpool. This act proved to be of far greater significance for Liverpool than the 1832 Reform Act.

Dissent and the espousal of reformist and radical ideas were not unique to Liverpool but local circumstances repeatedly fashioned the shape and intensity of such ideas. In consequence – and in contrast to other urban centres such as Manchester – there was no serious risk of sustained public disorder but Liverpool did experience a growing revolt against government policies and local corruption. This dissent is considered under two headings: first, the “discontent” shown between 1793 and 1835 on a range of national issues, starting with the war against France and culminating with parliamentary reform; secondly, the local impact of “Old Corruption” and specifically the abuses associated with the old Common Council in the two decades before it was swept away in the wake of the Municipal Corporations Act.

Chapter 3 explores the varied personal backgrounds and nascent political ideas of the Liverpool Reformers at the time of the 1835 municipal election and compares the Reform candidates with their superficially similar Conservative opponents. Election addresses are studied in particular detail. Many Reformers shared similar ideas but no evidence emerges of a concerted political platform or structured programme of work for the new council. The role of Liverpool’s press and election tactics are also considered. Although the election was taking place at the high tide of reform nationally, the outcome in Liverpool was not a foregone conclusion; however, it has been possible to identify clearly a number of factors that explain the scale of the crushing defeat inflicted on the Conservative candidates.

Chapter 4 examines the conduct of the new reformist council between 1836 and 1841. Detailed studies are made of the reforms attempted in policing and education and their rationale. Huge improvements were made in policing but a bold attempt to introduce inclusive and non-sectarian schooling proved to be a costly political failure. An explanation is also offered as to why there was no corresponding initiative on social reform to deal with public health issues. As the council pursued its reforming agenda, an energetic and ambitious new leader, Joshua Walmsley,

rapidly emerged from political obscurity. However, the misjudgements of the Reformers and a gradual swing of the political pendulum back towards Conservatism brought about the removal of the Reformers from municipal power in 1841.

Chapter 5 traces the changing attitudes of Liverpool's merchants towards the Corn Laws, free trade and financial reform. Support for the Anti-Corn Law League fluctuated and reflected a local preference for tackling trade restrictions on a much wider front. Defeats for candidates standing on free trade platforms in the 1837 and 1841 general elections severely damaged the careers of leading Radicals and led to Walmsley's departure from Liverpool and a period of retirement from active politics. No longer responsible for municipal government, the Reformers were free to concentrate on free trade and financial reform. This led to the early development of both a distinctive free trade movement in the (largely ignored) Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association and a highly articulate and influential lobby for financial reform, the Liverpool Financial Reform Association (LFRA).

In Chapter 6 the principal focus of this study moves away from Liverpool to London. The rise to prominence of the LFRA shows that events outside the capital were still relevant and that Liverpool continued to be a source of influential ideas. However, it was in London during 1848 and the years immediately following that the events which gave parliamentary reform a new lease of life were played out. Those events were heavily influenced by Liverpool's experiences in the 1830s and 1840s and their orchestration owed more than has hitherto been apparent to the skilful political manoeuvring of Walmsley. The creation by Walmsley of the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association (NPFRA) in 1849 and the assumption of effective control by Walmsley's Liverpool coterie are traced step-by-step. Almost in defiance of the wishes of his friend and neighbour Cobden, Walmsley steered the national reform agenda away from financial reform to parliamentary reform.

Chapter 7 considers the reasons why the NPFRA, despite an energetic start, failed to achieve its main objective and ultimately withered away. Chief amongst these are seen to be the lack of commitment by Walmsley's fellow Radicals, notably those of the Manchester School, and the failure to achieve an enduring alliance with the Chartists. The state of the economy and a growing preoccupation with peace and war in Europe were also instrumental. The NPFRA, however, was not a total failure and in some areas it delivered benefits that lasted beyond its own relatively short life. It identified the need for cooperation between the classes, if major reforms were

to be achieved, and that, despite the inevitable difficulties, this was possible, thus paving the way for wider political coalitions. On a practical level, the creation and success of the offshoot National Freehold Land Society represented an important step in the development of modern building societies. Equally, the removal of taxes on newspapers had been an early NPFRA objective and the eventual abolition of stamp duty in 1855, which was in large part due to the activities of Walmsley and his fellow Radicals, helped create an affordable press.

Chapter 8 presents the overall conclusions of this research.

Appendix 1 follows Walmsley's political development, as evidenced by his municipal and parliamentary election addresses issued between 1835 and 1857.

Appendix 2 seeks to fill a historiographical void by providing a short biography of Walmsley drawn from original sources. This is justified by his pivotal role in both the politics and industrialisation of the nineteenth century. Previous summary accounts of Walmsley's life have suffered from their dependence on the 1879 biography written by his son.

CHAPTER 2

THE RISE OF RADICALISM IN LIVERPOOL, 1815-1835

This chapter traces the gradual rise of radicalism in Liverpool, which culminated in the Reformers taking control of the Town Council in 1835 after decades of Tory dominance. (The municipal election itself is examined in Chapter 3.) Liverpool experienced a growing revolt against government policies and corruption at both national and local levels but circumstances peculiar to the town meant that there was no serious risk of sustained public disorder. This dissent is considered under two headings: first, the “discontent” shown between 1793 and 1835 on a range of national issues, starting with the war against France and culminating with parliamentary reform; secondly, the local impact of “Old Corruption” and specifically the abuses associated with the pre-1835 council. The introduction of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 was due in no small part to the much publicised shortcomings of local governance in Liverpool and in turn this legislation exercised far greater influence on Liverpool’s future development than the 1832 Reform Act.

National discontent

With the ignominious end to the American War of Independence still fresh in the mind, the storming of the Bastille in 1789 unleashed a wave of pamphleteering on the subjects of revolution, human rights and war. Having earlier challenged royal authority in *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, Edmund Burke now published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790 and, with his defence of religion and monarchy and denunciation of revolution and abstract principles, put down the marker for what became Tory ideology in the early nineteenth century.⁶⁷ In turn, this much-printed work provoked Thomas Paine to respond with *Rights of Man* and thereby establish a rival ideology that was more influential than might be inferred from the paucity of direct references to Paine by later radical politicians.⁶⁸ However, it was Pitt’s declaration of war on France in early 1793 that prompted the most distinguished of Liverpool’s radical-leaning intellectuals to burst into political

⁶⁷ [E. Burke], *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (London, 1770); E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1790); Hilton, *Mad, Bad, & Dangerous*, pp. 58-61; E. Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain* (London, 2009), pp. 225-9.

⁶⁸ T. Paine, *Rights of Man: being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French revolution* (London, 1791); *Rights of Man. Part The Second. Combining Principle and Practice* (London, 1792); Hilton, *Mad, Bad, & Dangerous*, pp. 69-70; Vallance, *Radical History*, pp. 230-42.

print.⁶⁹ Within the year, the physician James Currie and the lawyer William Roscoe had issued pamphlets fervently arguing for peace with France: *A Letter, Commercial and Political* by Jasper Wilson Esq (a pseudonym of Currie) and *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Failures* (published anonymously by Roscoe).⁷⁰ In choosing his title, Roscoe was clearly evoking memories of Burke's earlier, more radical work. His current view of Burke was epitomised in a satirical ballad (also published anonymously) entitled *The Life, Death, and Wonderful Atchievements of Edmund Burke*.⁷¹

Currie and Roscoe contended that the war was against Britain's commercial and economic interests, a sentiment with which many merchants and tradesmen in Liverpool would have concurred, but saying so publicly risked charges of disloyalty and republicanism, especially for those known to have a radical outlook. Accordingly, both Currie and Roscoe elected to hide their identity and publish their works in London.⁷² Furthermore, in basing their case on commercial and economic arguments they had no need to disclose the extent of any sympathies for more

⁶⁹ From shortly before the American War of Independence the Town Council had abandoned their support for the Whigs and espoused Toryism and the claims of the Crown to larger powers. However, support for the Whigs within what was now a Tory-dominated town remained substantial. See Muir, *History of Liverpool*, pp. 215-6.

⁷⁰ [J. Currie], *A Letter, Commercial and Political, addressed to the R^t H^{onble} William Pitt: in which the Real Interests of Britain, in the Present Crisis, are considered, and some observations are offered on the General State of Europe* (London, 1793); [W. Roscoe], *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Failures* (London, 1793).

⁷¹ [Liverpool], 1791.

Like him this PAINÉ the world did range, / Its monsters to subdue, / And more than Hercules he fought, / And more than him he slew. // This dreadful foe, when EDMUND saw, / He felt his fate and sigh'd, / His head received the thundering blow – / He fainted, gasp'd, and died.

⁷² The Liverpool poet and bookseller Edward Rushton made no attempt to hide his radical views and saw his business suffer: see Revd. W. Shepherd, (ed.), *Poems and Other Writings, by the Late Edward Rushton* (London, 1824), pp. xx-xxi. The recent bicentenary of Rushton's death in 1814 occasioned a much deserved flurry of scholarly attention, notably P. Baines, (ed.), *The Collected Writings of Edward Rushton* (Liverpool, 2014) and F. Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics, 1782-1814* (Liverpool, 2014). See also E. Rushton, *Poems* (London, 1806), E. Rushton Jr., 'Biographical Sketch of Edward Rushton', *Belfast Magazine*, Vol. XIII (1814), pp. 474-85, and W. Hunter, *Forgotten Hero: The Life and Times of Edward Rushton* (Liverpool, 2002). Rushton's influence was much reduced by his unwillingness to engage in public life: Shepherd, *Poems and Other Writings*, p. xxvii-xxviii, wrote of him that in his maturer years Rushton's republican principles were the subject of private discussion rather than of assertion in public debate and that he took little or no part in the party struggles of his day.

revolutionary ideas.⁷³ However, this was the radicalism of the merchants and middle classes and very different from the approach of the London Corresponding Society.⁷⁴ Kevin Moore has explained this apparent anomaly in terms of the status of Liverpool's freemen, whose ability to wield influence locally militated against any need to agitate for wider reform.⁷⁵

As the war with France continued, Roscoe issued further pleas for peace and in 1806 took the bold step of standing for parliament.⁷⁶ In keeping with the times, his platform before and during the election was uninformative; at his victory dinner he was rather more explicit on what he saw as the key issues: the preservation of peace, since this would benefit commerce; the abolition of slavery, but gradually and with compensation; and reform in parliament so as to eliminate bribery and corruption both amongst electors and MPs.⁷⁷ It seems likely that Roscoe's victory was largely due to his consistent anti-war stance and personal stature but his success was short-lived as a new general election was called in the following year. Roscoe attempted to withdraw from the ensuing parliamentary contest in May 1807 because of the violence generated by pro-slavery and "No Popery" factions but was nominated all the same by his supporters, only to be soundly beaten at the poll.

Within months of Roscoe's defeat the radical faction in Liverpool was confronted with an issue that offended against all notions of commercial freedom and also offered the prospect of creating a broad-based coalition – the Orders in Council. A

⁷³ The historiography of Currie and Roscoe is extensive. William Wallace Currie, the future mayor, wrote a biography of his father, including extensive correspondence: *Memoir of the Life, Writings and Correspondence of James Currie, M.D.* (London, 1831). Roscoe's son Henry penned a similar work: *The Life of William Roscoe*, (London, 1833). Amongst modern biographies, the most notable are: G. Chandler, *William Roscoe of Liverpool* (London, 1953) and A. M. Wilson, *William Roscoe: Commerce and Culture* (Liverpool, 2008).

⁷⁴ The wider context for the actions of Currie and Roscoe is well set out in J. Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 16ff, and Vallance, *Radical History*, pp. 230-54.

⁷⁵ Moore, 'Liverpool in the 'Heroic Age' of Popular Radicalism'.

⁷⁶ W. Roscoe, *Observations on the Present Relative Situation of Great Britain and France* (Liverpool, 1802); *Considerations on the Causes, Objects and Consequences of the Present War, and on the Expediency, or the Danger of Peace with France* (London, 1808); *Remarks on the Proposals made to Great Britain, for opening Negotiations for Peace in the Year 1807* (London, 1808); *Brief Observations on the Address to His Majesty proposed by Earl Grey in the House of Lords, 13th June, 1810* (Liverpool, 1810).

⁷⁷ [Anon.], *History of the Election, for Members of Parliament, for the Borough of Liverpool, 1806* (Liverpool, 1806).

new Order in Council of November 1807 extended one from earlier in the year and provided for the searching of neutral ships. Retaliation by the United States led to a serious decline in transatlantic trade and, even though the Orders were revoked in 1812, this proved too late to forestall the War of 1812. In February 1808 a meeting of merchants engaged in the American trade, in which the Radicals were heavily represented, caused petitions to be sent to parliament requesting repeal of the Orders in Council.⁷⁸ This means of applying pressure on the government of the day, the public meeting followed by petitioning of parliament, became a standard tactic of the Liverpool Radicals over the next few decades.

Roscoe was highly active in the “Friends of Peace” and was well-connected outside Liverpool.⁷⁹ However, his engagement with them extended beyond the issues raised by the current wars. In 1810 the up-and-coming Whig reformer Henry Brougham, who had just entered the House of Commons (ironically, for the rotten borough of Camelford), circulated a letter to close acquaintances outlining his thoughts on parliamentary reform and seeking comments.⁸⁰ Roscoe responded with a detailed letter of a more radical tone and was persuaded to issue it as a pamphlet in the following year.⁸¹ The key tenets were that the right of voting should be extended to “all who, as householders, are heads of families, and contribute to the exigencies of the state”, that “all persons holding places and pensions should be incapable of being elected” and that anomalies in representation should be rectified.⁸² This was not universal male suffrage but it was certainly an advanced position and went far beyond what Whigs like Brougham were considering.

Overestimating the support for even his own moderate platform, in 1812 Brougham agreed to stand in Liverpool in a landmark election, which saw the introduction of George Canning as one of the Tory candidates. Brougham was soundly defeated, polling just 1,131 votes to Canning’s 1,631, with even the merchants, who had reason to appreciate his efforts in relation to the Orders in Council, voting heavily

⁷⁸ Picton, *Memorials*, Vol. I, pp. 285-6; J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 220ff.

⁷⁹ Cookson, *ibid.*, *passim*.

⁸⁰ H. Roscoe, *Life*, Vol. II, pp. 6-19. This important episode is ignored in most other works about Roscoe.

⁸¹ W. Roscoe, *A Letter to Henry Brougham, Esq. M.P. on the subject of Reform in the Representation of the People in Parliament* (Liverpool, 1811).

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 4 and 6.

against him.⁸³ The failure of Roscoe's bank in 1816 and his subsequent bankruptcy in 1820 caused Roscoe to withdraw from almost all political activity.⁸⁴ In 1831, on the eve of the 1832 Reform Act, he was persuaded to reissue his pamphlet with a new preface, presumably penned by Roscoe himself.⁸⁵ Tellingly, this preface lamented the indifference to the subject on first publication and "the false and violent language, the ridicule and contempt, and the denunciations which were then and have been since heaped upon the friends of Reform".⁸⁶ Roscoe and Brougham were both far in advance of opinion in Liverpool and the loss of both to the local political scene was tragic for the reform movement. No reformer of national stature emerged for nearly two decades, whereas the Tory establishment, seeing the need to move on, adroitly secured the services of such distinguished politicians as Canning and Huskisson.

For Liverpool, the years between 1815 and 1835 can be viewed as a time of burgeoning trade and prosperity, expanding infrastructure, notably in docks and warehouses, and exponential population growth, in part vital to economic development but in part a serious drain on community resources.⁸⁷ However true, this portrayal tends to mask the severe tensions that existed in society and the periods of extreme economic uncertainty. The old self-elected Common Council concentrated on running Liverpool's affairs and, being Tory through and through, generally refrained from challenging the policies of successive Tory governments, in which the town's celebrated representatives Canning and Huskisson played major parts. For their part, the Radicals sought not only to challenge the authority of the council but also to harness the influence of the nation's second largest centre of trade and use it as leverage against the government of the day on a whole range of social, economic and political issues. Crucially, this approach did not depend on the support of the town's MPs in order to achieve the desired impact at national level: the election in 1830 of an MP sympathetic to reform (William Ewart) was an advantage and a source of inspiration but representations had been made before

⁸³ *The Poll for the Election of Members of Parliament* (Liverpool, 1812).

⁸⁴ Chandler, *William Roscoe*, p.121.

⁸⁵ W. Roscoe, *A Letter to Henry Brougham, Esq., M.P. now Lord Brougham and Vaux, Lord High Chancellor, etc. on the Subject of Reform in the Representation of the People in Parliament* (London, 1831).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Baines, *History*, p. 590.

then in the teeth of opposition from the deeply conservative General Isaac Gascoyne and the less rigid Canning and Huskisson.

Liverpool was well-endowed with societies, commercial associations, charitable foundations and other institutions that worked quietly to achieve their aims. Many drew their membership from across political and religious divides and seemed to engender effective cooperation. However, direct challenges to the government on contentious issues required larger-scale and more vociferous action. The two main opportunities were parliamentary elections and public meetings. In most years several such events took place.

No less than eleven parliamentary elections were held in Liverpool between 1816 and 1835.⁸⁸ With preliminary meetings to requisition and introduce candidates and polling spread over several days, interspersed with speeches from the hustings and fringe meetings, the Radicals had frequent opportunities in front of huge crowds to promote their own views, castigate Tory candidates and governments and hold sitting MPs to account in the most forthright manner.⁸⁹ In 1826, when Huskisson and Gascoyne were re-elected without opposition from any Whig or Radical, Edward Rushton nevertheless declared “that he now stood forward in the exercise of his rights, as a freeman, to express his opinion of the conduct of their representatives in the last Parliament, and to demand from them such explanations as the points on which he should touch might require”.⁹⁰

In an ideal world the Radicals would have wished to unseat at least one of the Tory incumbents (the combination of one Tory and one Whig or Radical was seen as a fair outcome) but their electoral efforts over successive contests were generally lamentable. Before Ewart only the then Viscount Sefton in 1818 came close to being

⁸⁸ The number was inflated because of the need for cabinet ministers to seek re-endorsement, by Huskisson’s death in 1830 and by Denison’s declining to accept election in 1831.

⁸⁹ Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, pp. 14-16, has a brief but colourful description of nineteenth century elections. Frank O’Gorman has analysed the phenomenon in ‘Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780-1860’, *Past and Present*, 135 (1992), pp. 79-115.

⁹⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 16 June 1826. This Edward Rushton was the son of the radical poet of the same name.

elected.⁹¹ Their candidates mostly lacked the stature of Canning and Huskisson and the local influence of Gascoyne. They were thus at a disadvantage before they tried to argue the merits of their political views, many of which (e.g., on parliamentary reform) were not what the deeply conservative and protectionist Liverpool freemen wished to hear. As mentioned above, in 1826 no candidate was put forward and in August 1830 the Radical stalwart Colonel George Williams actually declared on the hustings that he did not want to be elected.⁹² Although on his first appearance at the by-election in November 1830 the young Ewart was not self-evidently radical-leaning, it is easy to see why he was embraced by most (but by no means all) of the leading Radicals, since he clearly looked the part and promised electability.⁹³ Finding an equally electable running-mate for him at subsequent elections proved an intractable problem.

The Radicals succeeded in generating greater political capital from public meetings than they did from parliamentary elections. The oft-repeated tactic was to deliver up a requisition signed by a sizeable number of freemen to the mayor, formally requesting him to convene a meeting in the Town Hall to decide appropriate action on a specific issue. Up until 1826 the mayor tended to acquiesce in this once or twice a year. The art was to couch the requisition in terms that suggested the discussion was of relevance to the whole community and was not overtly party political. For his part, the mayor felt able to refuse to hold a meeting if these criteria were not met or if there was risk of serious disorder. In the charged atmosphere of 1817 and 1819, requisitions to discuss reform were turned down. After 1826, as political views polarised and reform was the all-consuming issue, meetings in the Town Hall were no longer approved and mass public meetings in the open air became the norm. The great attraction of the meeting in the Town Hall chaired by the mayor was that, although attendance was limited to about 400 by the size of the

⁹¹ Sefton polled only 1,280 votes compared to 1,654 for Canning but came close to the 1,441 cast for Gascoyne, the second Tory elected. The precise figures vary slightly, depending on source: *The Squib-book, being a Collection of the Addresses, Songs, Squibs, and Other Papers issued during the Contested Election at Liverpool, in June, 1818* (Liverpool, 1818); p. 59; *Liverpool Mercury*, 26 June 1818; *The Poll for the Election of a Member of Parliament for the Borough of Liverpool, in the room of the late Right Hon. William Huskisson* (Liverpool, 1830).

⁹² *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 August 1830.

⁹³ Ewart was the son of a prominent local merchant and Oxford educated. At his adoption William Rathbone highlighted his status as a townsman, his wife's connection with the manufacturing interest and his pronouncements on the Corn Laws and other oppressive legislation (*Liverpool Mercury*, 22 October 1830).

court-room used, any resolution or petition of Parliament that was approved carried the full weight of the Corporation and the town's MPs were more or less obliged to lend their support.

Three meetings in the Town Hall were convened (in 1815, 1825 and 1826) to protest against the impact of the Corn Laws.⁹⁴ In 1816 and 1825 there were meetings to object to any re-imposition of a property or income tax and to request repeal of the Window Tax.⁹⁵ Economic "distresses", "pauperism", "exigencies" and "sufferings" were the subject of meetings in 1816, 1820 (twice), 1822 and 1826.⁹⁶ (The December 1820 meeting on exigencies was noteworthy for the deliberate disruption, allegedly orchestrated by the Tory MP (Sir) John Gladstone, that resulted from an influx of Tory tradesmen.⁹⁷) 1824 saw two meetings address overseas issues – the Greeks' War of Independence and recognition of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies in "North and South America" (which touched upon economic interests as much as political liberty).⁹⁸

The immediate object of these meetings (as indeed of open-air meetings) was to pass a series of resolutions calling for specific measures to be taken. These principally took the form of: an address to the King, Prince Regent or Queen; a petition to one or both Houses of Parliament; or a public subscription to raise funds for a particular cause or relief of those suffering. The addresses and petitions, depending on their political content, might be delivered either by the town's MPs or by sympathetic Whigs (whether in the House of Commons or House of Lords). Much discussion was devoted to the propriety of approaching the Crown and much ingenuity was evident in the way a congratulatory address might be imbued with a wholly political flavour. There was no guarantee that these approaches to the Crown or Parliament would have any impact but they served to draw attention to particular issues and grievances and, arguably, were an effective form of direct action that circumvented the often unsupportive attitudes of the town's official representatives in Parliament.

⁹⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 March 1815, 15 April 1825 and 17 November 1826.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 March 1816 and 18 March 1825.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18 October 1816, 29 December 1820, 17 May 1822 and 5 May 1826; Picton, *Memorials*, Vol. I, pp. 370-1 and 375-6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 December 1820.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20 February and 11 June 1824.

Mass open-air meetings represented a raising of the stakes and were often the inevitable consequence of the mayor declining to approve a requisition for a meeting in the Town Hall. What the meetings lost by the lack of official Corporation sanction they gained by the sheer scale of attendance and the resulting galvanisation of popular support. From an adult male population rising in this period from perhaps 30,000 to 50,000, it was common for attendance to reach 10,000. It is not just the scale of attendance that is significant. It was the middle classes who orchestrated all such events but large numbers of those attending were clearly from the working classes and apparently content to follow their lead and not push forward leaders of their own.⁹⁹ Accordingly, it would be wrong to brand such agitation as exclusively middle-class in character.

Because of its capacity, the preferred venue was almost always Clayton Square.¹⁰⁰ The resolutions passed not only carried considerable weight but also sent a message of the scale of public disorder that might result if the popular will was thwarted. One subject was predominant – reform. The emphasis shifted with the times but throughout the period this subject (and this alone) could always guarantee a large-scale turn-out. Where a specific trigger for a meeting was missing, the cause could be kept in the public consciousness by hijacking a traditional celebration. Thus in 1831 the coronation of William IV was the pretext for a series of mass meetings, the true purpose of which was patently clear.

The succession of mass meetings (all but one in Clayton Square) on issues relating to reform is impressive, even if one suspects that press estimates of crowd size were somewhat exaggerated:

1817 - parliamentary reform (10,000); *habeas corpus* (several thousand)

1819 - parliamentary reform (6-8,000); Peterloo (7,000)

1831 - parliamentary reform (3,000 in the Music Hall); the coronation of William IV (5,000 and 15,000); parliamentary reform (5,000 and 10,000)

1832 - parliamentary reform (18,000)

⁹⁹ Moore, 'Liverpool in the 'Heroic Age' of Popular Radicalism', p. 138. See also Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, pp. 37-50.

¹⁰⁰ Recent commercial developments have substantially changed the character and size of the square. The *Liverpool Mercury*, 2 January 1835, estimated that the square could accommodate 25,000 comfortably.

1834 - Wellington's return to office (15,000); introduction of the parliamentary candidate James Morris (10-12,000)

1835 - municipal reform (7-8,000).¹⁰¹

Whilst this agitation avoided the extreme reaction of the authorities in Manchester in 1819 or the popular violence of Bristol and Nottingham in 1831, personal safety and public order were always under threat. The reform meeting in 1819, held shortly after Peterloo, took place under the gaze of the Liverpool Light Horse and a "multitude" of special constables.¹⁰²

In addition to these public open-air meetings, the Radicals and other reform-minded groupings also convened numerous smaller-scale meetings in private premises, some of which were thrown open to public attendance. In 1823 a meeting of up to 1,000 people in the Pantheon Room approved a subscription for the Spanish Constitutionals against French aggression.¹⁰³ In 1830 it was the turn of the French Constitutionals to be voted a subscription in support of the widows, orphans and wounded of Paris by a meeting in the Music Hall attended by 2,000 people.¹⁰⁴ In 1828 the Society for the Abolition of West India Slavery convened a major meeting in the Music Hall, following up an earlier one in 1826: most of the speakers were prominent Radicals.¹⁰⁵ No forum was overlooked: in 1830 a requisition was served on the Churchwardens of the Parish of Liverpool to convene a meeting of rate-payers about parliamentary reform. This led to the unusual situation of Non-Conformist Radicals addressing a meeting that commenced in St Nicholas's Church.¹⁰⁶

Sustaining this remarkable level of public activity over two decades required the Radicals to have strength in depth. Many of their number maintained their dedication to the cause over most of this period and went on to serve as Reformers in the new Town Council elected in 1835. In Liverpool, as elsewhere, it is

¹⁰¹ The crowd sizes have been extracted from the *Liverpool Mercury*: 21 February and 4 July 1817; 3 September and 1 October 1819; 29 April, 9 and 23 September and 14 October 1831; 18 May 1832; 28 November 1834; 2 January and 14 August, 1835.

¹⁰² *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 September 1819.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 15 August 1823.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 August 1830.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 April 1828.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 December 1830. See also Fraser, *Urban Politics*, p. 29, for such tactics.

noteworthy how the Radicals stuck to their task over several decades, despite the absence of tangible results for most of the time. The two father figures, who both lived to see the triumphs of the 1832 Reform Act and the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, were the Reverend William Shepherd and Colonel George Williams (who in 1832 became the first MP of the new Ashton-under-Lyne constituency). They were highly active during elections and spoke at numerous meetings. Also prominent from their generation were Dr. Peter Crompton, Thomas Booth, J. K. Casey, James Cropper and Francis Jordan.¹⁰⁷

A younger generation then emerged, their names regularly appearing in accounts of public meetings. Amongst the most active were four of the six mayors who subsequently held office when the Reformers were in power: William Wallace Currie, William Earle Jnr., William Rathbone and Thomas Bolton. Of the remaining two, Hugh Hornby spoke only occasionally but was deeply involved in other moves directed against the old council; Joshua Walmsley, by contrast, was virtually nowhere to be heard. The long list of regular speakers, few of whom confined themselves to narrow specialisations, includes: James Aikin, Thomas Blackburn, Henry Booth, James Brancker, Thomas Coglean, John Cropper Jnr., Hardman Earle, John Ewart, Thomas Fletcher, John Holmes, Samuel Hope, Lord Molyneux, Edward Rushton, Richard Sheil, Egerton Smith, John Smith, Thomas Thornely (later to become an MP), Ottiwell Wood, John Ashton Yates (another future MP) and Joseph Brooks Yates. Other prominent participants include several very distinguished members of the business community who advocated reform in the early years but found the subsequent reform agenda too radical and switched their allegiance to the Tories: Adam Hodgson, Charles Lawrence and Joseph Sandars.

The almost total lack of involvement by Walmsley is in itself interesting, given his later prominence, and will be considered further in Chapter 3. However, a crucial point to be recognised is that Liverpool's radicalism in the late 1830s was not simply the product of steady progress overseen by an unchanging cast of established and influential figures. Much was owed to a late influx of new men like Walmsley, who did not feel as constrained as the old guard in the degree of reform that they sought to achieve nor accept that they should serve their time before seeking a prominent role.

¹⁰⁷ The lists of speakers in this and the following paragraph have been compiled from reports in the *Liverpool Mercury*, which regularly published the names of the principal participants in public meetings.

Old Corporation, Old Corruption

Up to this point, the present survey of radicalism in Liverpool has been confined to national issues. However, local factors played a part of at least equal importance in promoting an appetite for political reform. Liverpool was not unique in its position as a town riddled with institutional corruption but it was the very epitome of an old corporation beset by “Old Corruption”. Its affairs were to feature prominently in the hearings of the Royal Commission that paved the way for the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act.¹⁰⁸

Old Corruption, as defined by its most outspoken opponents, William Cobbett and John Wade, extended far beyond personal venality or electoral bribery. Rubinstein has divided the practices cited between “the political influence of the crown – the patronage which the government continued to have at its disposal to bribe or reward members of parliament, voters, municipal corporations and the like” and “the fruits of previous corruption which, though gradually reformed, continued to exist and continued to be a charge on the public purse”.¹⁰⁹ The latter category included sinecures and the pluralist holding of office. For his part, Harling has summarised what Cobbett and his fellow Radicals meant by Old Corruption as “a parasitical system – ostensibly built up to enormous proportions during the Napoleonic wars – through which the élite fed its insatiable appetite for power and money at the people’s expense”.¹¹⁰ Government contracts, pensions and church preferment, he continues, were doled out by ministers to reward hangers-on or purchase support; rotten boroughs enabled ministers and aristocrats to pack the House of Commons with men subservient to their will; and the growing tax burden hit the common people hard, while barely touching big property-holders.

Whilst Liverpool could not be totally immune from any malaise afflicting the national body (regressive taxation being a prime example), its particular circumstances as a borough provided some protection, and the principal abuses against which Reformers inveighed were predominantly of local creation. In successive editions of

¹⁰⁸ Muir and Platt, *Municipal Government*, pp. 133-50, give a succinct summary of Liverpool’s municipal administration in the run-up to the Municipal Corporations Act, drawing mostly on the evidence submitted to the Royal Commission. See also White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, pp. 8-18.

¹⁰⁹ W. D. Rubinstein, ‘The End of “Old Corruption” in Britain, 1780-1860’, *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), p. 57.

¹¹⁰ P. Harling, ‘Rethinking “Old Corruption”’, *Past and Present*, 147 (1995), p. 127.

The Black Book; or Corruption Unmasked!, the principal contemporary compendium of early nineteenth century abuses, John Wade had surprisingly little to say about the nation's second port.¹¹¹ Unlike the metropolis, Liverpool was not awash with positions (sinecures or otherwise) at the disposal of ministers. The Earls of Derby and Sefton, the only notable aristocrats on Liverpool's doorstep, did not control any parliamentary boroughs, and the ecclesiastical livings they were patrons of did not directly impinge on Liverpool's affairs. (As Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire, however, the Earl of Derby potentially did exercise some influence on local affairs through the selection of magistrates by the Lord Chancellor.)

What made Liverpool different and allowed the Corporation to pursue its own path, relatively untroubled by external forces, was the ownership of land within the borough. Through an astute deal with Lord Molyneux back in 1672, by far the largest landlord was the Corporation itself and not the local aristocracy or landed gentry.¹¹² As a consequence, the Corporation also became patron of the livings of the churches it built within the borough. The power that elsewhere resided with the aristocracy and the clergy was instead the prerogative of the Corporation and was wielded by its controlling element, the Common Council. However, not even the council was omnipotent: paradoxically, the prevalence of wholesale electoral bribery and "treating" illustrates the limitations of the influence that could be gained through patronage or intimidation. Thus Liverpool's corruption was largely indigenous.

The second big difference between Liverpool and other municipal corporations was the ever greater affluence resulting from the town's commercial growth. The biggest beneficiary was the Exchequer, through the dues levied by the Boards of Customs and Excise, but the Corporation benefitted twice over, first through town dues, "fines" for property leases and rents and secondly through port duties.¹¹³ (Although the Liverpool Dock Estate was legally a separate institution from the Corporation, the Dock Trustees comprised the Common Council *en bloc* and the executive Dock Committee had a built-in majority of council members. This duality was not typical of port towns and necessitates a degree of caution in interpreting dock issues.) With

¹¹¹ J. Wade, *The Black Book; or Corruption Unmasked!* (London, 1820).

¹¹² Muir and Platt, *Municipal Government*, p. 119. In 1777 the Corporation purchased outright from the then Earl of Sefton the rights and properties rented since 1672 and so acquired the full freehold.

¹¹³ In 1832 the Port of Liverpool collected Customs revenue alone of nearly £4M: see *First Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Municipal Corporations in England and Wales* (London, 1835), p. 2739.

so much money under the Corporation's direct or indirect control, there was plenty of scope for personal enrichment through fraud, profiteering and corruption. In a system of closed municipal government with little public accounting or accountability, it is no surprise that such abuses became endemic in the eighteenth century and were slow to die out in the nineteenth.

In another of Liverpool's paradoxes, the national notoriety in the early 1830s that led to so many abuses being investigated and exposed was not the result of campaigning by reformers of Wade's ilk or even of truly outrageous behaviour by any long-standing practitioner of Old Corruption. On the contrary, what caused Liverpool to attract such obloquy was the flagrant, wholesale bribery applied by supporters of William Ewart, soon to become the darling of the Liverpool Reformers, at the by-election in 1830 after Huskisson's untimely demise. The campaign of Ewart's opponent, his fellow Whig John Evelyn Denison, had also depended on profligate bribery but it was the petition against Ewart's election that started a sequence of three damning reports by Select Committees¹¹⁴ and, in no small part, contributed to the establishment in 1833 of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Municipal Corporations of England and Wales.¹¹⁵ The Select Committees were diligent and many of the witnesses were surprisingly willing to incriminate themselves. Similarly, the Commissioners who took evidence in Liverpool in November 1833 on the current state of Liverpool Corporation allowed all parties to submit evidence on a wide range of issues touching upon both the Corporation and the Dock Estate and were regaled – during proceedings frequently punctuated by mirth – with much pleading, self-justification and, in what seems an urge for

¹¹⁴ *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on Liverpool Election Petition*, (London, 1831); *Report from the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Petition on Liverpool Borough* (London, 1833); *Report from the Select Committee on Liverpool Borough Elections* (London, 1833).

¹¹⁵ The Commission did not report for a further two years: *First Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Municipal Corporations in England and Wales* (London, 1835). The appendices [*Royal Commission App.*] contain a "Report on the Corporation of Liverpool" (pp. 2687-2744) and a "Report on the Trust of the Liverpool Dock Estate" (pp. 2745-2780). The detailed evidence given to the Commissioners in Liverpool between 4 and 30 November 1833 was published in three versions: by the *Liverpool Mercury* in its weekly editions; as *A Copious Report of the Inquiry into the Affairs of the Corporation of Liverpool before His Majesty's Commissioners, George Hutton Wilkinson and Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Esqrs.* (Liverpool: Egerton Smith & Co., 1833), a consolidated version of the newspaper reports; and as *A Report of the Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry into the existing state of the Corporation of Liverpool etc [Court of Inquiry]*, printed by order of the Common Council of Liverpool (Liverpool, 1834), the most detailed version.

catharsis, even more damning confessions from principals than the Select Committees had elicited.

In the 1820 edition of *The Black Book*, Wade directed especial venom at the “notorious” Canning, then President of the Board of Trade and a Liverpool MP, “the celebrated defender of all that is vicious in the *higher orders*, and the reviler of all that is virtuous in the *lower orders*”. More specifically, Canning was cited because, in addition to his main salary of £6,000, he drew another £446 7s 0d as Receiver-General of the Alien Office and had procured a pension out of Leeward Island duties since 1799 for his (remarried) mother and sister worth £500. Huskisson, yet to succeed Canning as one of Liverpool’s MPs and not then in a ministerial post, was likewise listed for drawing a government pension of £1,200 since 1801 (allegedly secured in order to facilitate his marriage settlement) in addition to being First Commissioner of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues and Colonial Agent for Ceylon.¹¹⁶ (Harling argues that both Canning and Huskisson received unfair treatment and that Huskisson was acutely aware of the need not to give grounds for a charge of impropriety.¹¹⁷) The long-serving MP General Gascoyne was included because of his army pension; however, it was his political actions and not his pension that aroused the ire of Liverpool’s Reformers.¹¹⁸

In his 1832 and 1835 editions Wade added a curious miscellany of abuses relating to Liverpool.¹¹⁹ Understandably, he highlighted the generous salaries paid to four office-holders in Customs: the Collector of Customs, £2,500; the Inspector-General, £700; the Comptroller, £600; and the Clerk, £500.¹²⁰ He also mentions a fraud perpetrated in 1830 by two (unnamed) Liverpool merchant-houses, who exploited the very heavy duty on hard soap (an imposition in itself considered excessive in view of the threat from cholera).¹²¹ More bizarrely, Wade quotes a report that “within these last five years there have been discovered among the prostitutes of that

¹¹⁶ Wade, *Black Book* (1820), pp. 54 and 434.

¹¹⁷ Harling, ‘Old Corruption’, pp. 146-7. Harling develops his thinking in *The Waning of “Old Corruption”: the politics of economical reform in Britain, 1779-1846* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 156-59.

¹¹⁸ Wade, *Black Book* (1820), p. 432.

¹¹⁹ J. Wade, *The Black Book: An Exposition of Abuses in Church and State etc.* (London, 1832 and 1835).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 509, 516, 527 and 539.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

dissolute sea-port no less than twenty-five young women the *daughters of Welch clergymen*".¹²² On a more uplifting note, Wade recognised that great towns like Liverpool had achieved opulence and magnificence through the efforts of their own people and had had to contend against institutions hostile to improvement.¹²³ One concludes that, whatever Liverpool's shortcomings, local circumstances afforded a degree of immunity from the sort of abuses that Wade had most to say about.

With further inquiry, Wade might usefully have drawn attention to the exercise of Corporation patronage over positions within the Established Church in Liverpool. In 1829 the Reverend Augustus Campbell was selected as one of Liverpool's two Rectors, a position worth about £1,000 p.a.; he nevertheless felt unable to give up the Rectory of Childwall, worth a further £250 after expenses. Campbell, the only significant pluralist, was but one of many ministers in Liverpool in this period with close family relationships to council members, others being the Reverends Aspinall and Lawrence at St Luke's, Leigh and Case at St George's, Dawson at St Michael's, Robinson and Statham at St Martin's and Blundell at St Anne's.¹²⁴

The Corporation of Liverpool, formally comprising the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses, was the model of a closed corporation, with a self-elected town council and with both the mayor and MPs elected by a hereditary body of burgesses/freemen. The Common Council and the freemen were not obvious partners in government and at least half of the freemen were tradesmen eking out a meagre existence rather than sharing in Liverpool's growing prosperity but the council did enough to secure the freemen's status to safeguard their own position, and "treating" and/or bribery at elections generally achieved the required outcome. Not everything, though, was quite as it seemed. The 41-man Common Council was both an oligarchy, riddled with nepotism, and a meritocracy. In the 1830s its membership mostly drew on a small number of well-connected families: the leading Reformer (and future mayor) Thomas Bolton famously presented the Royal Commission with a "family tree of the Corporation" listing 46 family relationships held by 27 of its members with past or present members and key office-holders; furthermore 9 members had received

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 595.

¹²⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 November 1833 (evidence of 7 November); *Royal Commission App.*, pp. 2730-31.

freeman status by gift.¹²⁵ However, many of these families were relatively new to power, either having migrated to Liverpool from other parts of the UK or found wealth from humble origins. A small number of men from such backgrounds who showed ability and had the right social and religious credentials were co-opted to the council. In short, the council was consummately exclusive – and indeed homogeneous – but not the exclusive preserve of old wealth.

The freemen also were not quite what they seemed. In Liverpool, they had long since lost exclusive rights to trade (unlike guild members in other towns) and most were too poor to derive any benefit from their exemption from town dues, unlike the better-off merchants in their number, who stood to save a considerable sum each year. What mattered most was the preservation of their work in the maritime trades.¹²⁶ Their only effective bargaining tool was the vote (and to achieve this at a cost of £2 for registration often required a politically-motivated subvention). The ability of rich incomers to buy freedom had disappeared in the eighteenth century and most freemen claimed their status on the basis of having been born within Liverpool to a father who was a freeman at the time. However, a seven-year apprenticeship to a freeman provided another route to becoming a freeman and this was followed by the sons of (not least merchant) families who could afford the sizeable apprenticeship fees. All told, no more than about 10% of Liverpool's adult male population were freemen.

The charges levelled against the Common Council by the Reformers over many years rarely implied personal corruption. That would have been difficult to prove and outside politics the leading figures were generally on good terms socially and in business. Those who enriched themselves were (with the notable exception of the Town Clerk Thomas Foster) at one or two stages removed from the council. Equally, there were few critics of the council's general policy in improving Liverpool's fabric and dock facilities. The principal abuses may be summarised as: nepotism (as detailed above); excessive expenditure on capital projects, which allowed others to enrich themselves, legally or otherwise; the unrepresentative

¹²⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 November 1833 (evidence of 21 November) and 6 December 1833 (evidence of 30 November).

¹²⁶ Muir, *History of Liverpool*, p. 247, points out that since its heyday between 1778 and 1811 Liverpool's shipbuilding industry – for reasons that are not obvious – had been in slow decline.

nature of the council's membership; and, flowing from this, the allocation of disproportionate resources to one (minority) section of the population.¹²⁷

Recusant Lancastrian Catholicism, the increasing influx of Irish Catholics and the proliferation of well-supported Non-Conformist denominations meant that by 1831 adherents of the Established Church were agreed to be in a slight minority. And yet, even after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the Catholic Relief Act in 1829, the Common Council did not include a single Non-Conformist or Roman Catholic, despite numerous vacancies having arisen.¹²⁸ Similarly, only a handful of Whigs were co-opted and by 1835 only two of these were aligned with the Reformers. One is left to speculate whether the root of the discrimination was religious or political prejudice. The presence of a Catholic or Non-Conformist might well have upset the more outspoken ministers of the Established Church but would not *per se* have threatened the ruling class. However, the understandable tendency of disadvantaged Catholics and Non-Conformists to support reform was probably of greater concern. With accustomed aplomb, the Town Clerk informed the Royal Commission that "no Dissenter or Roman Catholic had been rejected, in as much as there had been no nomination!"¹²⁹

The Established Church, by virtue of its very status, received substantial financial assistance from the Corporation: this included grants of land for new churches, payment of part or all of construction costs, the salaries of rectors and ministers, and even the purchase of pews in St Thomas's Church. By contrast, other churches could at best hope to receive a grant of Corporation land.

Those who engaged in politics or other forms of unpaid public service in the early nineteenth century were already rich men and it was not uncommon for them to withdraw from hands-on commercial activity in order to find adequate time for their new activities. The mayor in particular needed to be rich in order to afford, on top of any election expenses, the cost of regular entertaining. His annual allowance of £1,200 was unlikely to be adequate. Otherwise his only perquisite was to be able to

¹²⁷ The question of whether the exemption of freemen merchants from town dues acted to the commercial disadvantage of "foreigners" [i.e., those who were not freemen] was also aired extensively before the Royal Commission but this was an issue of reform rather than malfeasance.

¹²⁸ Even the future Reformer mayor William Wallace Currie, of Scottish Presbyterian origins and baptised in a Unitarian chapel, had been assimilated into the Established Church.

¹²⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 November 1833 (evidence of 28 November).

nominate one new freeman, usually a member of his own family. The situation was very different for paid office-holders, notably the Town Clerk. Thomas Foster received a notional basic salary of £105 but the scale of fees for various official transactions had ensured his predecessor William Statham an income of some £4-5,000 and Foster was subsequently shown to have collected rather more.¹³⁰ Of each £2 paid for admission as a freeman, the Town Clerk received 17s.¹³¹ The Corporation's Treasurer, John D. Case, like Foster a council member, received a salary of £1,000 but was debarred from engaging in trade (which would probably have been more lucrative). Key jobs were invariably given to those with close family connections to council members.

Controls were occasionally applied to officials who stood to gain too much income or have a conflict of interest. In 1825 the Receiver of Town Dues had his 3% commission reduced to 2.5%.¹³² In 1831 the Harbour Master, an appointment of the Dock Estate with a total salary of £500, was reminded of the prohibition on personally owning ships or engaging in trade and was obliged to sell off his fleet of steam-boats.¹³³ Individual dock-masters stood to enhance their income considerably by affording preferential treatment to those willing to pay. Such payments were viewed as gratuities rather than bribes!

The Corporation's annual income averaged about £100,000 and most of this was spent on capital construction projects.¹³⁴ The Dock Estate's annual budget was approximately £200,000 and was spent in the same way.¹³⁵ Such levels of expenditure on construction offered potentially huge profits to those undertaking the procurement of supplies or carrying out the actual work. Those doling out the work, especially the Corporation Surveyor (salary £1,000) and the Surveyor of the Dock Estate (salary £1,500), possessed enormous powers of patronage.¹³⁶ In 1833 the former was John Foster, brother of the Town Clerk, who had succeeded his father

¹³⁰ *Royal Commission App.*, p. 2700.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2712.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 2693.

¹³³ *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 November 1833 (evidence of 11 November), and *Royal Commission App.*, p. 2761.

¹³⁴ *Royal Commission App.*, pp. 2717 and 2725.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2770.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2708 and 2756.

John “King” Foster; the latter was Jesse Hartley, who had taken over from “King” Foster in 1824 and built up a fine reputation but still had to work with another member of the Foster clan, William, Secretary to the Dock Committee. “King” Foster was a feared man and, although before his eventual demise some of his activities had been circumscribed, his sons continued to attract widespread loathing for their self-enrichment and the abuses of their subordinates. The builder and politician Samuel Holme attributed the Reformers’ success in 1835 to a popular determination to be rid of the Fosters.¹³⁷ Having become Surveyor to both the Corporation and the Dock Estate, as well as having his own extensive construction business, “King” Foster ingratiated himself with various council members by deferring payment on work carried out for them. Plans drawn up by Foster were approved by the council and the work carried out by Foster’s own company; Foster’s accounts for this work were certified by Foster himself and sent directly to the Corporation Treasurer for payment. Other builders toed Foster’s line or had to forego employment. Amongst his subordinates, abuses were more blatant, involving “favouritism, secret partnerships, presents and actual money”.¹³⁸ “King” Foster’s early death removed the most powerful member of the family but the influence of his sons persisted until 1835.

Representing Liverpool in Parliament during the early nineteenth century was seen as a signal honour and elections were often contested by high profile candidates (Brougham and Palmerston as much as Canning and Huskisson). There was clearly kudos in representing a populous constituency with a relatively large electorate and of great importance to commerce and the national economy. (Liverpool’s affluence does not in itself ever seem to have been seen as a means of personal enrichment.) In 1812 Canning abandoned a safe seat in Petersfield for a hotly contested election and what became “the pride of my publick life”.¹³⁹ Again in 1823, as he wavered over abandoning his long-standing representation of Chichester, Huskisson was well aware of the honour being conferred on him by Liverpool’s merchants.¹⁴⁰ Similar considerations evidently prompted Ewart and Denison to contest the 1830 by-election drawing on any and all resources. (Such were the scale and blatant

¹³⁷ S. Holme, *An Autobiography*, [2007], pp. 98 and 223.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89 and pp.84-100 *passim*.

¹³⁹ See S. M. Lee, “‘The pride of my publick life’: George Canning and the representation of Liverpool, 1812-1823”, *THSLC*, 149 (1999), pp. 73-98.

¹⁴⁰ Letter to Col. John Bolton, 29 January 1823 (private collection).

nature of the bribery that neither candidate can have been unaware of, or an unwilling party to, the electoral abuses.)

The second Select Committee of 1833, in reviewing evidence relating to the years 1823-1832, found that before 1830 there was no evidence of “particular Bribery or Treating”, except in the 1827 election for mayor, attributing this to the elections not being keenly contested.¹⁴¹ The conclusions on the 1830 by-election were:

That at this Contest in 1830, for a representative, the Election cost each Candidate, or his Friends, upwards of £40,000.

That from Documents and evidence on the Minutes of this Committee, it appears that 2,661 individual Freemen of the Borough at this election were systematically bribed; and that no Evidence has been tendered before the Committee to refute this imputed Bribery.

Thereafter, it was reported:¹⁴²

That in the Elections subsequent to 1830, the suspension of the Writ and the proposed Bill of Disenfranchisement appear to have had a beneficial effect in restraining the practice of Bribery and Corruption.

The evidence of the attorney and Reformer Peter Woods to the Royal Commission provided first-hand confirmation by a leading electioneer of corrupt electoral practices back to 1790.¹⁴³ In the early elections it was largely a question of “treating” to beer or rum, though after the election in 1796 a subscription on behalf of the Whig Colonel (later General Sir) Banastre Tarleton funded a payment of 2s 6d to each of his voters (seemingly recompense for a day’s loss of wages). William Roscoe’s epic victory in 1806 saw the commencement of bribery by cash and in 1812 the unsuccessful campaign of the Whigs Henry Brougham and Thomas Creevey cost £17,000. In a surprisingly candid moment, the most prominent of the Reformers, William Rathbone, testified to the pervasiveness of bribery:¹⁴⁴

It is with regret I add that I believe within the last twenty-five or thirty years nearly a quarter of a million has been spent in the manner detailed in that

¹⁴¹ *Report from the Select Committee on Liverpool Borough Elections* (London, 1833), p. 4.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴³ *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 November 1833 (evidence of 22 November).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 November 1833 (evidence of 20 November).

report. The evil has been so extended and general as almost to have ceased to be considered to be wrong, and I am far from wishing to attempt to conceal that, in my younger years, I did not escape the contagion, and that the corrupter is worse than the corrupted; but the money I spent was my own, not raised by any indirect means, and used to oppose those who had the loaves and the fishes to give, not, therefore, with any view of profitable investment, expecting, in return, a provision for children, relations, or dependents.

In later life, Holme displayed similar contrition (but only in private) over his own active role on the Tory side in electioneering, which extended back to Canning's re-election in 1816.¹⁴⁵ Public houses were "opened" to freemen up to a fortnight before elections for free eating and drinking. (The subsequent bills from licensees were often grossly inflated.) Wives demanded ribbon. Many working men held back from voting in the expectation of more than free drink.

No election that was contested could, I think, have cost the two parties less than £25,000 to £30,000. It was a blessing when the system was altered, for it was a scene of drunkenness and riot.¹⁴⁶

Thus the bribery employed by the Ewart and Denison camps in 1830 was consistent with recent practice but carried to unparalleled limits. Detailed accounts were kept of individual bribes.¹⁴⁷ Over half of those voting received bribes, the average on both sides being about £15. Individual amounts varied considerably: a staymaker like Robert Amery received £12; a moderately well-off blockmaker like John Croston £15; but a score of freemen, mostly in maritime trades, received £50 or more. Denison's camp, in particular, offered lavish bribes (£80 to the merchant Richard Higginson), presumably in a vain last-minute attempt to catch up with Ewart. The 1833 Select Committee made another pertinent comment.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Holme, *Autobiography*, pp. 156-160.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Not only did both sides keep detailed accounts; they also exchanged information after the event! Several annotated copies of the election poll book were made, one of which survives in the British Library (*The Poll for the Election of a Member of Parliament for the Borough of Liverpool, in the room of the late Right Hon. William Huskisson* (Liverpool, 1830), shelf mark 10349e10).

¹⁴⁸ *Liverpool Borough Elections* (1833), p. 7.

Your Committee cannot conclude this Report without directing the attention of Your Honourable House to the conduct of Freemen in a better class of life and in good circumstances, who have shown fully as much readiness to take Bribes as the poorest and most destitute of their Fellow-burgesses.

A serious charge of a different nature was made against General Gascoyne and his campaign team in connection with the 1818 and 1820 elections:¹⁴⁹

That it has been proved that, at two different periods before 1823, Two Offices in the Customs were bargained for and sold; and that the proceeds of these Sales, as they arose, were separately handed over to the Committee for the time being, of one of the Candidates for the Representation of Liverpool.

The direct involvement of an MP in securing government positions, however lowly, was very much what Wade had in his sights.

By the time of the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act and ensuing municipal election, much had already changed. The Common Council had been under siege from the Reformers, notably Bolton, for several years and its activities, though not controlled, were subject to increasing scrutiny. Opportunities for personal enrichment at the expense of the Corporation and Dock Estate had been curtailed and the Foster dynasty had lost much, if not all, of its power. The conduct of elections after 1830, whilst not entirely above suspicion, was passably fair. The effect of the Municipal Corporations Act was to introduce a new set of rules that encouraged good governance and wider popular representation and, conversely, made the return of systematic, institutional abuses less likely. In the case of Liverpool this amounted to a lot more than just “a change of men”, which Derek Fraser argues was the situation in many places.¹⁵⁰

The ensuing municipal election in 1835 and the subsequent turn-over of office-holders in the reformed administration did indeed introduce a wholly new set of personalities, largely untainted by previous scandals (but not entirely without their own history). In the years that followed, Liverpool’s governance was rarely free of blemishes and political life was turbulent but, in much the same way as the town

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4. The posts as landing-waiters cost up to £400.

¹⁵⁰ D. Fraser, (ed.), *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1982), p. 2. Fraser’s introduction is a succinct summary of what the Municipal Corporations Act did and did not change.

adapted to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, so after 1835 a common consensus allowed everyone to move on and put the years of Old Corruption behind them.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIVERPOOL MUNICIPAL ELECTION, 1835

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the conduct of the 1835 municipal election in Liverpool.¹⁵¹ It explores the varied personal backgrounds and nascent political ideas of the Liverpool Reformers and compares them with those of their superficially similar Conservative opponents. The role of election tactics and Liverpool's vibrant press are also considered.

Election addresses have been closely studied and in rather more detail than has been usual in broadly similar research about northern towns.¹⁵² These addresses provide an unparalleled snapshot of what Liverpool's leading citizens, both Reformers and Tories, thought about a wide range of issues both local and national. In the case of the Reformers, they also provide a context for the reform measures subsequently introduced and a first glimpse at the early political careers of future MPs like Walmsley and Lawrence Heyworth and distinguished local politicians like Richard Sheil.

All historians of Liverpool agree that – for Liverpool – the Municipal Corporations Act was one of the defining landmarks in the town's history. It was much more than just a change in the way that the town was administered. Muir went so far as to state that previously “the Council had not regarded itself as being in any way charged with securing the welfare of the whole body of inhabitants, but had looked upon itself merely as the trustee for the small privileged body of freemen.”¹⁵³ As will be seen in Chapter 4, many facets of Liverpool life were transformed. In electoral

¹⁵¹ The wider context for both municipal and parliamentary elections after 1832 has been admirably set out by Philip Salmon in *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832-1841* (London, 2002). Part III covers municipal aspects (but does not accord Liverpool detailed consideration). Matthew Cragoe ('The Great Reform Act and the Modernization of British Politics: The Impact of Conservative Associations, 1835-1841', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2008), pp. 581-603) has built on this and related research and provided a context for the development of Liverpool's distinctive brand of Conservatism.

¹⁵² See, for example, D. Fraser, (ed.), *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1982). However, the section by Vic Gatrell, 'Incorporation and the pursuit of Liberal hegemony in Manchester', offers an extensive analysis of the protagonists (Unitarians and Tories) in Manchester's local politics between 1790 and its incorporation as a borough in 1838.

¹⁵³ Muir, *History of Liverpool*, p. 309.

terms, the municipal elections across the country produced dramatic results but in many places (including Liverpool) the political change was relatively short-lived.¹⁵⁴ The long-term electoral impact came from the institution of annual elections based on a wider municipal franchise and what that meant for the conduct of party politics.

Liverpool's first-ever election of town councillors by popular franchise took place within a single day on Saturday 26 December 1835.¹⁵⁵ (Boxing Day had yet to be instituted and, moreover, on Christmas Day the Liverpool papers had published their normal editions.) The outcome of the election, though known to all as soon as polling closed, was formally declared the next day and the new Town Council assembled for the first time, for the purpose of swearing in, on 29 December.

The election affords a detailed snapshot of who the leading Reformers were in the new era following the 1832 Reform Act, what their personal backgrounds were and what they professed to believe in. Although this was not a parliamentary election, the views of many candidates had a resonance beyond municipal politics. Furthermore, with no clear framework yet devised for municipal electioneering there was no such thing as a party manifesto. On the surface, the election might appear to be a straightforward contest between two slates of candidates representing widely different ideologies but, whilst this was essentially true, what we read in the candidates' addresses was mostly the personal views of individuals, unconstrained by any party whip.

Notwithstanding Liverpool's well-attested reputation for commotion and corruption in both parliamentary and mayoral elections (or perhaps because of it), the municipal election seems to have been a staid affair. There was much contention over electoral tactics but, despite what was potentially at stake for both burgesses and the unenfranchised, there is no evidence of street violence or bribery. The prevailing impression is that both sides sensed a new beginning in municipal government and were unsure of how the electoral process should be conducted. The passing of both the Reform Act in 1832 and the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 had been preceded by widespread agitation and detailed documentation of past electoral

¹⁵⁴ P. Salmon, 'Local Politics and Partisanship: the Electoral Impact of Municipal Reform, 1835', *Parliamentary History*, 19.3 (2000), pp. 357-76. See also Hilton, *Mad, Bad, & Dangerous*, pp. 498-9.

¹⁵⁵ See R. Bennett, *A Record of Elections Parliamentary and Municipal for Liverpool, etc.* (Liverpool, 1878), a very useful compilation of election results from 1832 to 1878, and *The Poll for the Election of Town Councillors for the Borough of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1836).

abuses, and it was clearly in no-one's interest to be seen to be perpetuating discredited practices.

The electorate (or *burgess roll*) in 1835 was substantially greater than it had been for the parliamentary elections prior to 1832 when only freemen had the vote but, even so, it represented a small minority of Liverpool's adult male population. The burgesses on election-day totalled 6,802.¹⁵⁶ By contrast, the total population of Liverpool had passed 200,000 by the time of the 1831 Census.¹⁵⁷ Burgesses were thus a small minority of the adult male population, probably less than 15%.

The voters (still styled *burgesses* but no longer all *freemen*) comprised the town's rate-payers – i.e., those residing within the parliamentary borough and rated in respect of either a house or business premises since at least 1 January 1833. Anyone rated for both domestic and business premises could be entered in the roll twice but could only vote once: where the properties nominated fell in different wards there was scope for tactical voting (and this proved a significant element in the 1835 election with 1,204 electors having double entries in the roll¹⁵⁸). The qualification for voting was different from, and more restrictive than, that in parliamentary elections, in which freemen who did not meet the property requirement could still vote. One obvious consequence of this was that the municipal electorate was more “middle-class” in character, having lost a significant number of the poorer freemen. (It also follows that the results of a municipal election could not be taken as an accurate guide to the outcome of a parliamentary election within the same year.)

The pre-1835 Town Council comprised the mayor, aldermen and councillors, 41 members in total. The mayor was formally elected by the freemen and on occasion there was a fully contested and closely fought election. The aldermen were former mayors, who also acted as the borough's magistrates. The councillors, all freemen, were simply selected by the council on the basis of an introduction by one of its existing members and held office indefinitely. Of 39 council members in 1834, 6 had been in office since before 1810 (one, George Case, since 1775!) and a further 11 since before 1820.

¹⁵⁶ *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 January, 1836. *The Poll for the Election of Town Councillors* offers slightly different figures for the election and lists individual burgess numbers up to 6,803.

¹⁵⁷ *Royal Commission App.*, p. 2736.

¹⁵⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 January 1836.

Whatever their political origins, by the time of the 1835 municipal election virtually all the members of the council may broadly be considered Conservatives/Tories; only two members (Earle and Currie) remained in the Whig camp and subsequently stood against the Conservatives. The councillors were similarly unrepresentative of Liverpool's religious diversity. As mentioned in Chapter 2, adherents to the Established Church within the town were no longer in a clear majority: there were substantial numbers of both Non-Conformists and Roman Catholics (largely of Irish descent). However, the council lacked any Non-Conformists or Catholics.

The election promised burgesses the opportunity not only to vote for candidates for the first time but also to choose from a wider field of candidates than the council had ever been drawn from – not just merchants and the occasional lawyer from the ranks of the freemen but also non-freemen, members of the medical profession and even tradesmen. The candidates were also drawn from all the major religious denominations and sects. This is not to say that, taken as a whole, the candidates were representative of the population or even the electorate. They were uniformly well-off and, with few exceptions, were part of the local establishment: those who had been excluded from power in the council often held influential positions in commerce and charitable institutions alongside their political rivals. Most of the candidates seem to have been well known to each other. In commerce they were united: the list of proprietors in the second (1826) enabling bill for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway includes the names of 7 Conservatives and 6 Reformers (and each side also included one prominent objector).¹⁵⁹

Although almost everyone involved was keen to stress the need for councillors to exercise independence of mind and not pursue party politics, in reality the election was inherently political. There were no genuinely independent candidates. Two slates of candidates were drawn up by the two main political factions of the day – the Conservatives/Tories and the Reformers. Independence was rather a question of being able to exercise much greater freedom of thought and action that would be the norm today within a party framework that was not clearly delineated and lacked any central manifesto.

¹⁵⁹ *An Act for making and maintaining a Railway or Tramroad from the Town of Liverpool to the Town of Manchester, with certain branches therefrom, all in the County of Lancaster* (7 Geo. IV Cap. xlix).

In the wake of the Municipal Corporations Act, Liverpool was divided into 16 redefined wards (12 covering the town proper and 4 the outlying areas).¹⁶⁰ Each ward was allocated 3 councillors. Once elected, the 48 new councillors were required to elect 16 aldermen. After that, the new council could elect one of its number as the mayor. In each following year one third of the seats for councillors would be re-contested. At the end of three years the tenure of half the aldermen would be revisited by councillors. This electoral system was, in principle, a huge step forward but an equally huge flaw was evident to all from the outset: whichever side secured a majority in the first election would be well placed, through the nomination of 16 aldermen, to hold onto power for years to come – almost as unsatisfactory a situation as had obtained with the old, self-elected Common Council.

The candidates

The two slates of prospective councillors were well matched and, as individuals, were superficially almost indistinguishable. As yet, they could not be considered to be representing organised political parties but the Municipal Corporations Act had unintentionally accelerated the move in that direction. Party organisation was well-established for parliamentary elections (though more evident in the campaigning than in any political platform) but in between there was less cause for formal structures. However, annual municipal elections increased the need for organised politics and this tendency was accelerated by the polarised Reformer-Tory politics of towns like Liverpool.¹⁶¹ By 1836 the first recognisable political parties were being set up in Liverpool and these were not simply formalised versions of earlier election-time structures: see Chapter 5, ii.

The labels “Conservatives” and “Reformers” were the ones preferred by the respective sides and give the best impression of the underlying political tenets. However, the Conservatives were consistently called Tories by their opponents, which obscured the presence within their number of several former “constitutional” Whigs like Charles Lawrence. For their part, the Conservatives showed a reluctance to acknowledge the label “Reformers”, often simply referring to their “opponents”.

¹⁶⁰ The wards in order were: Everton and Kirkdale, Scotland, Vauxhall, St Paul's, Exchange, Castle Street, St Peter's, Pitt Street, Great George, Rodney Street, Abercromby, Lime Street, St Anne Street, West Derby, South Toxteth and North Toxteth.

¹⁶¹ Salmon notes the increasing interplay between national and local politics and ascribes scrutiny of electoral registers as one of the prime reasons ('Electoral Impact', pp. 362-7).

Whilst they had seen too much reform in recent years, they did not wish reform to be seen as the monopoly of their opponents: Joseph Sandars, for instance, was willing to support “all useful Reforms, whether pertaining to local or public questions”.¹⁶² The leading Tory mouthpiece, the *Liverpool Courier*, whose proprietor Thomas Kaye was himself a Conservative candidate, directed its fulminations alternately against “Whig-Radicals” and the “so-called liberal party”.

The Conservatives fielded 47 candidates in all across the 16 wards. (The absence of a third candidate in Great George Ward was due to the nomination by both sides of James Lawrence, a brewer with enormous influence in the ward. Lawrence sided with the Reformers but, in the event, virtually every burgess in the ward cast a vote for him. He subsequently defected to the Tories!) Twelve candidates had served on the old council, including 6 former mayors, but they numbered less than a third of its members and just a quarter of the new slate. Quite clearly, many members of the old council (and not just the oldest members) had either decided that their time was up or were disinclined to engage in a free electoral process. At least half of the Conservative candidates were freemen but, conversely, a significant minority were not. Equally significant is the breakdown of occupations: although about two thirds of the candidates were brokers or merchants (or former merchants styling themselves “Gent” or “Esq”), the professions were better represented (3 lawyers and a physician) and, above all, the “tradesmen” had been invited to participate. These tradesmen were not the freemen shipwrights and their like who had played such a prominent part in Liverpool elections but, rather, wealthy manufacturers (and not that different from some of the “merchants” who both produced and traded commodities). Their presence in the Conservative camp was seen as important by the leadership. What does not seem to have changed at all is the overwhelming adherence to the Established Church. It is hard to identify a Non-Conformist amongst the Conservatives. (Joseph Sandars had had his elder children baptised in a Unitarian chapel but, with minor reservations, now proclaimed his support for the Established Church.)

The Reformers put up a full slate of 48 candidates, of whom only Currie and Earle had served on the old council. Naturally, as Whigs supporting national reform measures, neither had had a realistic opportunity of being elected mayor, though they had been councillors since 1815 and 1817 respectively. (Currie had tried several times.) Some other candidates had a long political pedigree. As far back as

¹⁶² *Liverpool Courier*, 23 December 1835.

1807, a Tory squib by Roscoe's opponents portrayed the Irishman Francis Jordan as Guy Fawkes and John Holmes, a merchant and manufacturer of cudbear (a dye), as Clarifier of Urine to the Pope (i.e., Roscoe)!¹⁶³ Whilst the Reformers lacked experience of government, they were as established in the community as their opponents. Three quarters were merchants, brokers and bankers and they included members of prominent local families (e.g., Cropper, Earle, Holt, Hope and Rathbone). The other candidates seem at times to have been nominated with a view to almost perfect symmetry with their opponents – no lawyer but two members of the medical profession, another printer and newspaper proprietor (Egerton Smith of the *Liverpool Mercury*) and a variety of tradesmen/manufacturers (including brewers and an anchor smith). This gave rise to a series of little contests between like candidates. The brewers fought each other in Vauxhall Ward, the iron-workers in Pitt Street Ward, the corn merchants and cotton brokers in West Derby Ward and the timber merchants in South Toxteth Ward. Business partners like the Conservative Sandars and the Reformer Walmsley did not stand directly against each other but Sandars did face a challenge from the family of Samuel Blain, his former partner in the corn trade.¹⁶⁴

The big difference between the make-up of the two sides – and a key element in determining an individual's political development – was religion.¹⁶⁵ Just as the Conservative candidates were not representative of the whole community, so the Reformers included a disproportionate number of Unitarians, although precisely how many Reformers were Unitarians or members of other Non-Conformist sects is not easy to determine. Before 1837 most Non-Conformists did not have the option of getting married outside the Established Church and many felt obliged to baptise children in the local parish church either *faute de mieux* or with a view to securing social status. Furthermore, there was movement between the Established Church and the various sects.

The future Tory mayor Samuel Holme claimed that “there were sixteen or seventeen persons nominated by their opponents who were of one religious creed, and the

¹⁶³ Picton, *Memorials*, Vol. I, p. 284.

¹⁶⁴ Sandars and Walmsley were partners with George Stephenson in the Snibstone Colliery Company.

¹⁶⁵ Neal, *Sectarian Violence*, p. 39. See also Hilton, *Mad, Bad, & Dangerous*, pp. 162-6, for a summary of the impact of religion on local politics in Leeds, Bradford and Manchester.

members of a sect not by far the most numerous in the town".¹⁶⁶ This claim clearly refers to the Unitarians, prominent members of whose faith had been highly active in agitation for reform over several decades.¹⁶⁷ Reform and Unitarianism were clearly associated in the public consciousness but, equally clearly, accurate knowledge of who practised which religion in his private life was not widespread. The *Liverpool Mercury* several times carried items about who was and was not a Dissenter. It is easy to see how confusion arose: for instance, although an avowed member of the Established Church, patron of the living of St Luke's and a member of the congregation of St Andrew's (a church built by the Gladstone family), Walmsley had as his business partner in the corn trade a member of the Unitarian Booth family. The Reformers certainly did include a significant proportion of Unitarians (and other Non-Conformists) but it is unlikely that they numbered quite as many as 16 or 17.

Of equal significance was the presence on the Reformers' slate of three Roman Catholics. Two were English Catholics and as such were begrudgingly accorded a degree of respect by their opponents. The third, however, was Richard Sheil, an Irishman, and he was reviled by the Tories for his unstinting efforts to improve the lot of his fellow Irish Catholics.¹⁶⁸

One of the most interesting commentaries on the merits of individual candidates was published in the staunchly Tory *Liverpool Standard*.¹⁶⁹ It was probably written by Samuel Holme, at that time one of the newspaper's covert proprietors. The author's comments about the Conservative candidates predictably stressed values such as membership of the Church of England, a long-standing attachment to Liverpool with substantial property holdings, independent wealth, the status of merchant or major employer and generosity to local charities. These were, of course, the values that had underpinned the old council. In keeping with the

¹⁶⁶ *Liverpool Courier*, 23 December 1835; *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 December 1835 (which reported Holme's figure as 18).

¹⁶⁷ The classic (if rather dated) work on Unitarianism in Liverpool is A. Holt, *Walking Together. A Study in Liverpool Nonconformity, 1688-1938* (London, 1938). More recently, R. Watts, *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England, 1760-1860* (London, 1998), has emphasized the importance of education to nineteenth century Unitarians.

¹⁶⁸ For many years Sheil was the only Irish Catholic elected to the Town Council. He is still esteemed as one of the greatest Irishmen of nineteenth century Liverpool and has the unusual distinction of a bus route named after him.

¹⁶⁹ *Liverpool Standard*, 25 December 1835.

newspaper's generally combative tone, many of the comments about the Reformers (described as the "radical candidates") often amounted to no more than sneering. Relative newcomers to Liverpool, shopkeepers, those living on a small competence and, above all, members of religious minorities were lambasted. Unitarians were characterised as "belonging to one of the most jobbing, dishonest, and treacherous of all the religious sects in England". The veteran Reformer (and prominent Unitarian) Rathbone attracted particular odium for having allegedly once stuck his head in the carriage of the revered old Tory MP General Gascoyne and hooted (or worse) in his face! The diatribe against Sheil not only typifies the vehemence of the accusations against many of the Reformers but is an early example of the sectarianism that Holme, in league with the Anglican clergy, fomented against Liverpool's Irish population:

Richard Shiel [sic] is an Irish Roman Catholic, almost a stranger in Liverpool, and was once a purser's clerk in the navy, has little or no property in Liverpool, has no claims whatsoever upon the burgesses of Liverpool, and has pushed himself forward into the ranks of a political faction by sheer impudence. He is supposed to be an orator, but he has an awful and intolerable brogue. He is a liberal in the worst sense of that term. He is perpetually prating about the national debt, and yet he is a pensioner of the crown.

Amongst those curtly dismissed as unqualified for office was Walmsley:

Mr. Walmsley is only known as a corn-broker, and that not much beyond the Corn Exchange. What his qualifications are for a seat in the Council are totally unknown to us, and we believe to the burgesses generally.

This appraisal is not altogether unfair and confirms what is evident from other sources: in the long years when the flames of radicalism were being kindled in Liverpool, there is scarcely any contemporary evidence of Walmsley engaging in front-line politics or trying to develop a prominent public profile (see Chapter 2). One must conclude that in the best Liverpool tradition he was largely preoccupied with accumulating wealth.

In his biography, his son Hugh notes that in this period other interests besides those of business were entering into his father's life and mentions various public meetings.¹⁷⁰ Walmsley is said to have "watched with keen interest" the growth of

¹⁷⁰ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 59.

liberalism in Liverpool, as appeals were made on behalf of the Spanish and the Greeks; to have spoken at meetings called to express abhorrence of the slave trade; and to have attended meetings on the Corn Laws. Further: "In 1826 Mr Walmsley joined the Liverpool Mechanics' Institute [sic], and shortly after was elected president."¹⁷¹ The newspaper records of public meetings (see Chapter 2) indicate that Walmsley was neither a prominent nor active participant. The absence of any regular mention of him in political meetings before 1835 does not necessarily mean that he did not attend or occasionally speak but he was clearly not recognised by reporters as someone whose words or mere presence were worthy of note.

The first reference to Walmsley in a political context was in late 1831, when he was listed as a committee member of the new Parliamentary Reform Union set up in Liverpool.¹⁷² Separately, in November 1834, Walmsley was one of about 40 Reformers invited to discuss a response to Wellington's return to office.¹⁷³ However, at the subsequent public meeting on 24 November he is not amongst the reported speakers and is one of the few organisers not even listed as attending.

Walmsley's almost lack of engagement in politics even extended to not exercising his right as a freeman to vote in parliamentary elections. After voting for Canning in 1816, he then did not vote in at least five subsequent elections (1818, 1820, 1823, 1826 and 1830/November) and may have abstained in some of the others (1830/August, 1831/May and 1831/October).¹⁷⁴ Not until the general election immediately following the Reform Act in 1832 is he known to have recorded another vote, at which time he supported the Reformers' ticket of William Ewart and Thomas Thornely.¹⁷⁵ The timing of Walmsley's taking up freeman status (by inheritance) in relation to the 1816 election strongly suggests that his fee was paid for by Canning's campaign and, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, it seems likely that he viewed his move into the Reformers' camp as a logical continuation of the liberal Toryism of Canning and Huskisson. (Walmsley was not alone in this: one of the leading pro-reform newspapers, *The Albion*, carried a quotation by Canning on its masthead.)

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁷² *Liverpool Mercury*, 30 December 1831.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 21 November 1834.

¹⁷⁴ *The Poll for the Election of a Member of Parliament* (Liverpool, 1816); Register of Freeman, 352 CLE/REG 2/4 (LvRO); *The Poll for the Election of a Member of Parliament* (Liverpool, 1830).

¹⁷⁵ *The Poll for the Election of Members of Parliament* (Liverpool, 1833).

Walmsley did indeed become a member of the Liverpool Mechanics' Institution, founded in 1825, but he was not one of the earliest members nor initially a donor. Hugh Walmsley's brief summary of his involvement (quoted above) is misleading and reads as a deliberate attempt to give his father an early public profile when none existed. In 1832, however, Walmsley was one of a number of prominent citizens subscribing £25 towards the cost of a new building for the institution (and thereby also attaining the status of life member).¹⁷⁶ In December 1833 he was appointed to the Building Committee, on which he served until the new premises were completed in 1837, but he did not seek to emulate the munificence of his brother-in-law James Mulleneux, who contributed £500.¹⁷⁷ In 1836, by then a member of the new Town Council, he was appointed a vice-president and in 1839, the same year that he was elected mayor, he became president.¹⁷⁸ Thus his rise to prominence within the philanthropic circles of the Mechanics' Institution mirrored his political success and was not a precursor to it.

Walmsley's wealth was founded on the corn trade and his partnership from 1818 with George Booth. Few details of his dealings emerge from his son's biography but by 1826 he had streamlined his holdings and accumulated sufficient capital to diversify his business interests. So, in 1826 we find Walmsley as one of the 58 proprietors named in the act enabling the Liverpool and Manchester Railway.¹⁷⁹ Walmsley soon established himself as one of George Stephenson's most loyal Liverpool backers and in 1832 entered into a partnership with him and fellow Liverpool corn merchant Joseph Sandars and provided the largest capital contribution for the pioneering "Snibstone Colliery Company" near Leicester.¹⁸⁰ Thus Holme was probably correct to say that Walmsley was not well-known beyond the Corn Exchange but he had undoubtedly made his mark within Liverpool's entrepreneurial élite.

¹⁷⁶ Liverpool Mechanics' Institution [LMI], 373 INS 9/1 (LvRO), 9 December 1832.

¹⁷⁷ LMI, 373 INS 1/3, 9 December 1833.

¹⁷⁸ LMI, 373 INS 1/1/1, 1 February 1836; *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 March 1839.

¹⁷⁹ *An Act for making and maintaining a Railway or Tramroad from the Town of Liverpool to the Town of Manchester, with certain branches therefrom, all in the County of Lancaster* (7 Geo. IV Cap. xlix).

¹⁸⁰ Indenture (Articles of Partnership), 26 July 1832 (Tyne & Wear Archives Service).

Election addresses¹⁸¹

The Conservative candidates approached the election in a markedly different way from the Reformers. In their passive attitude towards election addresses it can be argued that they were out of touch with the times (and even arrogant) but, in their preference for personal canvassing, they established this contentious tactic as the norm. By the time of polling all but 13 candidates (out of 95) had issued either personal or joint statements to the burgesses, which were printed in the local newspapers. (The absence of any written addresses, by either side, to the electors in Everton and Kirkdale Ward and Great George Ward suggests a compact and adherence to old ways, whereby the candidates appeared on their platforms at the appointed time and set out their fitness for office without touching on specific issues.)

In those wards where written addresses were published, the Conservative candidates, with few exceptions, settled for modest statements of their suitability and general pledges to discharge their duties as councillors conscientiously and independently. The address of the immediate past mayor, John Wright, is typical: "being fully convinced a man is better known by his acts than his by his promises, I fearlessly refer you to the last twenty-three years of my life" and "I will still act as I have ever yet done, honestly, independently, and conscientiously, having for my objects the particular interests of your Ward, the general prosperity of the good old Town, and the welfare of its Inhabitants".¹⁸² This line was inherently unlikely to impress any but the most entrenched Tories. The old council had been assailed for years with charges of partiality and worse and, now that reform had been achieved after a bitter struggle, renewed pledges of honesty and independence will have carried little weight. Furthermore, the Conservatives were having to contend with a raft of promises from the Reformers and, although these did not add up to a totally coherent agenda for the new council, the absence of any comparable proposals from the Conservatives could only have left them looking bereft of ideas and not seriously intending to change their discredited ways.

¹⁸¹ The election addresses of both sides were published repeatedly in all local newspapers from late November right up to the election. The *Liverpool Mercury* included some or all addresses in each (weekly) edition between 13 November and 25 December 1835.

¹⁸² *Liverpool Courier*, 23 December 1835.

The Abercromby Ward candidates (Robertson Gladstone, Thomas Kaye and William Ripley) at least acknowledged the changed order by assuring electors that they would “endeavour to secure to you the full benefit of such privileges as the Municipal Reform Act is calculated to confer on this great and important community”, without indicating what these might be.¹⁸³ The Rodney Street Ward trio (Joseph Brandreth, Henry Lawrence and John Heywood Turner) were almost alone in tackling their opponents head-on by asserting their past support of reform but defining clear limits: “We have always been supporters of civil and religious liberty, of retrenchment and rational reform, but we profess, at the same time, our undiminished attachment to that constitution which, till the present era, has always been considered the glory of our country, and to those Institutions under which our liberty and prosperity have been so long secured.”¹⁸⁴ Thomas Sands and Joseph Sandars penned personal addresses in similar vein.¹⁸⁵ In the most eloquent of all the Conservative statements Sandars set out his personal manifesto:¹⁸⁶

Should the Council be converted into an arena for party politics ... as I know it lawfully may be ... I will support the Established Church, purified of pluralities and non-residence, and strengthened by a more just distribution of its revenues. Any sinister or open attack on the integrity of and independence of the House of Lords I will manfully resist... Every measure of well-considered economy, and all useful Reforms, whether pertaining to local or public questions, shall have my most unflinching support.

On 17 December the Conservatives held a public meeting, reported in the *Liverpool Courier* as being attended by about a thousand people, to endorse the list of candidates and solicit the support of the electors.¹⁸⁷ Several of those candidates who spoke did little to advance their cause but there were perceptive contributions from the lawyer Ambrose Lace and John Wright. Picking up a theme alluded to in a

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* The 1835 Municipal Corporations Act was usually referred to locally as the Municipal Reform Bill (or Act).

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* A shorter account was published in the *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 December 1835.

number of Conservative election addresses, Lace characterised the introduction of politics into the conduct of those who got onto the new council as improper:¹⁸⁸

The very object sought to be avoided in the municipal reform bill was to prevent corporations from being made political engines. Now, if this conduct was to be adopted, they would be as much political engines as they ever had been.

In an era of intense political debate at the national level, it was perhaps always inevitable that this should spill over onto the local stage. Lace then tried to reclaim the middle ground from the Reformers by asserting Conservative support for reform, financial economy and good government:

[it had been said] that those candidates who were supported by the reformers – and he confessed that, to a certain extent, he was a reformer – were the only gentlemen to whom they could look for good and efficient government in the new council. He confessed, that if this were true he should be ashamed to stand there. He hoped, that he and every other candidate who was in that room were as much opposed to misgovernment and extravagance as any one among their opponents. He did not know why any party should arrogate to themselves alone economy and good government.

As a long-serving councillor (and twice mayor), Wright chose to be surprisingly candid and contrite. Having asserted that he had never given “a vote influenced either by the desire of emolument, power, place, or any other consideration, except the good of the town”, he continued:¹⁸⁹

I am willing at all times to own that I may be wrong; I have no doubt of having been wrong in many of my votes in the Council; but I again express my feeling that I voted to the best of my judgment, and, though succeeding times have shown that those votes have not many of them been what I hoped they would have been, yet I assure you that they were given with the earnest desire to be right.

Despite the loud cheers that followed, it is not surprising that Wright failed to secure election to the new council.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

The greatest impression on the meeting was seemingly made by Samuel Holme, who was not even a candidate. He was the son of a builder and the forthright advocate of the Conservative tradesmen. His speech was in sharp contrast to the understated written addresses of the candidates. To the accompaniment of regular cheering he flayed the Tories' opponents (amongst whom he numbered some of his most excellent personal friends), accusing them of being "inoculated with a spirit of republicanism", "favourable to democracy, however respectable they might be" and overrepresented by members of one creed (i.e., the Unitarians).¹⁹⁰ However, he then turned his ire on the merchant class, expressing his regret that they had, "with unpardonable apathy, for the most part slunk into hiding places, and thrown the great burden of the struggle on the tradesmen". He hoped that the merchants "would shake off the love of ease with which they had invested themselves, and feel it their duty to come forward and aid the King, the Lords, and the Commons". Wright endorsed Holme's complaint about the merchants, characterising their dislike of personal canvassing as foolish.¹⁹¹

To the modern perception, the Reformers made a much better fist of their election addresses than did their opponents. In part this may be seen as a well-calculated attempt to get their message across to the greatest number of people but it was also a necessary consequence of the deeply seated aversion of the merchants to personal canvassing. Public meetings alone would not have given candidates enough exposure. The addresses published in the local press generally have much more substance than those of the Conservatives. Old hands like Currie and Earle, who had evidently imbibed some of the ethos of their colleagues on the old council, struggled with the new format, managing little more than a mention of their many years of service and a promise of good conduct. Both did, however, acknowledge the greater authority of the new council – "constitutional, and far more honourable" in Earle's words – over the old, to which Currie had been introduced "by the partiality of my private friends".¹⁹² Other candidates, whether jointly or individually, often set out their principles and made no attempt to disguise their political motivation. The proprietor of the *Liverpool Mercury*, Egerton Smith, who was well-known for his eccentricity, was characteristically idiosyncratic from the outset, declaring "I have not the slightest ambition to be a member of the Council" and "I am

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 and 11 December 1835.

opposed, on constitutional grounds, to the custom of giving or requiring pledges”.¹⁹³ Uniquely, he also added: “if I should ... discover that I cannot discharge the duties required of me to your satisfaction, and to my own also, I will ... resign the trust”. He was duly elected.

The Reformers had clearly worked upon some aspects of their public image in concerted fashion. They consistently associated themselves with past reform, and the Municipal Corporations Act in particular, sometimes contrasting the Tories’ opposition to change, and pledged themselves to remedy every abuse. They repeatedly intoned the key words “reform”, “liberty” and “freedom”. At the same time, they were careful to avoid using dated or inflammatory terms – hence no mention of Whigs, radicalism or democracy. Only one candidate, Charles Birch, declared his opinions to be “liberal”, a term most often found in the Tory *Courier*.¹⁹⁴

The main issues highlighted were: economical management of the Corporation’s finances, free from improper uses; civil and religious liberty; education; and policing. A few candidates also advocated improved recreational facilities for the poorer classes, not least to encourage “temperance and honest industry”. For his part, the physician James Carson drew special attention to issues of public health “such as the removal of nuisances, and the prevention of deposits or works which may vitiate the atmosphere in a way that may be detrimental to life”.¹⁹⁵ Most issues were rooted in Liverpool’s local needs as a large community, even if there was often a clear connection to national politics. It is interesting to note, though, a nineteenth century manifestation of “pavement politics”: in St Paul’s Ward the candidates observed: “We find that many of your Streets are in a wretched state, that they are neither Lighted nor Cleaned, that you require the Market you had in Pownall square to be restored to you”.¹⁹⁶

The old council had been accused for years by the Reformers of financial mismanagement, whether favouring their friends, using money for improper (e.g., party political) purposes or simply being profligate. Rathbone and his fellow candidates in Pitt Street Ward advocated that “the Funds of the Corporation, being raised from all, should be expended for the benefit of all, without reference to Sect,

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1835.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1835.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1835.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11 December 1835.

Party, or Class of Society”; that “all personal partialities or jobbing must be resolutely set aside”; and that there must be “economy in the expenditure of the funds”.¹⁹⁷ Several Reformers like Walmsley in Castle Street Ward and the candidates in St Peter’s Ward explicitly called for the reduction of local burdens and taxes.¹⁹⁸ (Walmsley’s election address is discussed further in Appendix 1.) Charles Birch went further: “That the Corporate Estate, under salutary management, must continue rapidly to increase in value, there is no doubt; and past experience renders it no unreasonable expectation, that, aided by a frugal distribution of the growing income, the Town Council may be enabled, before the lapse of many years, not only to dispense altogether with the levying of a Borough Rate, but ultimately to relieve the Inhabitants from a material portion of the Local Taxes”.¹⁹⁹ Liverpool was indeed fortunate in the size of its income from docks and estates but, as the city grew, so did its needs and Birch’s approach was unduly optimistic. However, the need for economy was to become a recurrent theme of Liverpool’s Reformers.

Irrespective of how many individual Reformers were from religious minorities, the issue of civil and religious liberty was keenly felt by all. The doctrinal aspect was neatly stated by Sheil: “Religion is the duty which man owes to his creator ... he cannot, therefore, conform ... to the opinions of other men, if he be not convinced of their correctness; and he that attempts to force him to do so, or to punish him for not doing so, usurps the divine prerogative.”²⁰⁰ Walmsley adopted a more practical line on the issue: “I have ever advocated, and shall continue to advocate, the cause of Civil and Religious Liberty, believing that its extension is not only consistent with pure Christianity, but highly essential to the well-being of society.”²⁰¹ This statement acknowledged the simple but, in Liverpool, largely unacceptable fact that a society divided by religion could not function to best effect and promote its own prosperity to the utmost. The importance of the religious issue to the Reformers is well illustrated by one of their first acts after the election. At a public meeting chaired by Rathbone and with Walmsley (who had topped the poll in Castle Street Ward) proposing the

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1835.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 December and 20 November 1835.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1835.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1835.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1835.

first motion, an invitation to visit Liverpool was issued to Daniel O’Connell, MP for Dublin and the accepted champion of the cause of civil and religious liberty.²⁰²

The extension of education was closely linked to civil and religious liberty and it was to become the most bitterly fought issue of the ensuing years. Many candidates mentioned education in passing, clearly without realising how contentious the subject would become. Carson, however, did his best to inflame the situation by calling for “the establishment of a public system of education ... that shall be commensurate to the present condition and future prospects of Liverpool; and exempted from those restrictions and invidious distinctions which, more or less, deform all the seminaries of education which have had their origin in remote and barbarous times, and under the influence of a religious sect predominant for the time”.²⁰³ Once more it is Sheil who provides a clear perspective, showing that there was more to the issue than equality of opportunity:²⁰⁴

Under a free government every man has, or ought to have, a voice in the selection of those by whom the laws are to be made for the protection of the lives, liberty, and property of the people. This selection never can be judiciously made by ignorant men – hence the conclusion is inevitable, that no government, whether local or general, can be said to approach perfection that does not make as ample provision, as circumstances will permit, for the education of all the members of the community.

The level of importance attached here to education reflects the attention accorded by individual Reformers then and in the future in such diverse areas as Mechanics’ Institutions and newspaper publishing.

The Municipal Corporations Act required boroughs to institute effective policing (by all accounts something lacking in Liverpool, despite some changes by the old council). Very few candidates raised the issue, probably because much of the responsibility for policing lay with the Parish and not the Corporation. The new requirement was set out by Birch: “the establishment of an efficient Day and Night Police, carried on upon a uniform and consistent plan, and affording protection at all

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 22 January 1836.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1835.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

hours to persons and property ... without, if possible, making additional levies upon the pockets of the Rate-payers”.²⁰⁵

Overall, the Reformers offered a varied package of measures, calculated to appeal to various sections of the electorate. In sharp contrast, the Conservatives seemed to have very little to offer other than more of the same and thereby can be seen as surrendering the political initiative. Politics could no longer be kept separate from local government (if it ever had been) and there was no coherent Conservative agenda. One Reformer, Richard Alison, reflected on this increasing politicisation: “It would be desirable that party spirit could be wholly subdued, but I much fear that in this state of political excitement, it is scarcely possible; we should at least endeavour to moderate its rage ... by a spirit of conciliation.”²⁰⁶

With the two most prominent newspaper proprietors (Thomas Kaye and Egerton Smith) personally contesting the election, press coverage was inevitably polarised. Each side naturally concentrated on the utterances and actions of its own candidates but the full set of election addresses was printed in each newspaper. Beyond that, however, the *Courier* and the *Mercury* approached their task in different ways. In two lengthy leaders on 9 and 23 December the *Courier* was bitterly critical of the “Whig-Radical party”, pouncing on statements made by their supporters and denouncing their intentions. No serious attempt was made to set out constructive reasons why the electors might vote for the Conservatives. Thus, in the first leader, the Whigs were accused of “revolutionising the Corporations”, their object being “not so much the reformation of abuses as the acquisition of power”.²⁰⁷ The *Courier* argued that, prior to municipal reform, both the Tories and the Whigs had practised political exclusiveness in running their boroughs and “Experience, and that very recent experience, entitles us to affirm, that let the liberal party make head in the Council, and the new state of things will be even worse than the old.” It concluded: “we seriously put it to the burgesses of this town, whether, with this truth before their eyes, they will commit their interests to men who openly avow that they intend only to substitute one set of abuses for another, or to those who, however, from conscientious motives, they may oppose a measure of change in its progress,

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1835.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1835.

²⁰⁷ *Liverpool Courier*, 9 December 1835.

have always, when that measure has become the law of the land, manifested a disposition to make it work for good.”

In its second leader, the *Courier* continued to lament the increasing politicisation of the election: “Politics once set up as the Shibboleth to office or to favour, the necessity for any other qualification is very soon lost sight of.”²⁰⁸ It then seized on loose talk and accused the Reformers of planning to unseat the sitting Tory MP, Lord Sandon, and remove the Town Clerk without proper compensation: “Therefore, to rid themselves without cost of the town clerk, he is to be put upon a mere nominal salary – say 1s. per annum – in order that he may be forced to resign, by which he disentitles himself from all compensation!” The fate of the Town Clerk was soon to become a vexed issue for the Reformers and the *Courier* was clearly intent on making the most of it.

The *Mercury* saw a role for itself in promoting the cause of the Reformers by ensuring that the election was properly organised and that the voters knew how to cast their votes in accordance with the new regulations. In mid-November, as soon as the provisional Burgess List was published, the *Mercury* told readers who were entitled to vote but had been omitted from the list how to get registered.²⁰⁹ It also requested information about “objectionable votes” to be given to the Reform Association with a view to getting the names struck off the list. “It has been ascertained ... that there are a great number of names on the list which have no right to be there; whilst ... perhaps a much greater number have been omitted, which ought to be inserted. Within the last three days between three and four hundred additional claims have been sent in to the Reform Association.” On the eve of the election, voters were reminded how their votes should be cast and those who had not yet received voting-papers were told where they could be acquired.

In the same article the *Mercury* challenged a Conservative address “in which they deprecate the making of the question (i.e., the municipal election) dependent in any shape on the politics or religion of the candidates”, robustly pointing out the previous state of affairs on the council:

This would be all very well did it come from any other source, but emanating from a body of men who have all along been the supporters of corporate

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 23 December 1835.

²⁰⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 13 November 1835.

corruption, the unflinching champions of the self-election system, and all its abuses, and the deadly opponents of reform in every shape, it strikes us, and must strike the mind of every reflecting man, as ridiculous in the highest degree. We should like to hear of a single instance in which those men will nominate or support any candidate not of their own party in religion or politics.

No candidate's address put it so succinctly and forcibly. The *Mercury* produced a similar line in its final peroration on the eve of the election:²¹⁰

The course which the electors ought to pursue on this momentous occasion is, however, plain. If they approve of the old system, with all its vices and abuses ... let them, by all means, vote for the Tory candidates, many of whom have been all their lives bound up with that system, and exerted themselves to the utmost of their ability to perpetuate it, whilst all of them, whatever their present professions may be, have in their secret hearts regretted the salutary change which places the Corporate body under the control of public opinion. If on the other hand, they approve of the great measure of municipal reform, they ought undoubtedly to entrust the working of it, in the first instance at least, to men who have been all along its steady and consistent advocates, and will, no doubt, to the best of their ability, endeavour to secure to the community all the advantages which may fairly be expected from it, if honestly administered.

What is interesting is that the *Mercury* put so much emphasis on voting for those who had advocated change and none whatsoever on the future changes promised in the Reformers' election addresses. Were votes for the Reformers endorsing past actions or a mandate for widespread change?

The conduct of the municipal election lacked much of the excitement of previous (and subsequent) parliamentary elections. There seems to have been no significant mischief, beyond the posting of placards highlighting the supposed religious opinions of some Reformers or reminding burgesses that who they voted for would soon be publicly known. Two issues do, however, merit attention – canvassing and tactical voting. The idea of a candidate or his supporters conducting a personal canvass of electors was nothing new. Indeed it had often been accompanied by wholesale bribery. However, the new start inherent in the Municipal Corporations Act evidently created a strong feeling, especially amongst the merchants, who

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1835.

comprised the vast majority of candidates and a significant proportion of the voters, against personal canvassing. Public meetings and short written addresses were considered sufficient. This feeling was particularly evident amongst the Reformers but even some Conservatives like the candidates in Scotland Ward shared this outlook: "In order that we may not interfere with the freedom and independence of your suffrages, and thereby become guilty of a want of proper and delicate propriety to you and ourselves, we abstain from a personal canvass".²¹¹ Most Conservatives saw things differently and, as mentioned above, the merchants were berated at the great Tory meeting on 17 December for not pulling their weight and participating in canvassing. Tory canvassing was noticed from the outset of the campaign and was deprecated in the *Mercury*. Later the *Mercury* claimed that Tory canvassers, on finding they could not induce burgesses to vote for their candidates, had endeavoured to induce them either to absent themselves at the time of the election or to abstain from voting.²¹² Many of the Reformers declared in their addresses that they would not engage in canvassing for much the same reasons as the Scotland Ward Conservatives. In St Peter's Ward the Reformers noted that canvassing was taking place in many wards but pledged to avoid it themselves unless their opponents compelled them to resort to it "in self-defence".²¹³ In West Derby Ward George Holt expressed the fear that "the practice, if now adopted, might serve as a precedent on all future occasions".²¹⁴ In this respect, the new start faltered.

Tactical voting played a significant part in the electoral strategy of both sides. With over 1,200 burgesses (about a fifth of the electorate) being registered twice but only able to vote in one ward, there was plenty of scope to direct votes where they would have the most impact. This tactic was assisted by the (wholly legitimate) presence in polling stations of nominees from the two sides, who were allowed to see the voting-papers. Thus both sides could maintain an accurate tally of the situation throughout polling. The *Mercury* provided a wonderfully graphic account of the polling: by early afternoon the Reformers had a clear idea of where additional pressure needed to be applied and so launched forth their "double voters", who had been held in reserve at their headquarters in the Angel Inn.²¹⁵ No-one can have

²¹¹ *Liverpool Courier*, 23 December 1835.

²¹² *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 December 1835.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 20 November 1835.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 December 1835.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1 January 1836.

intended the new electoral system to be managed in this way. In later years, the Radicals on the national stage were also assiduous in devising imaginative schemes to extend the franchise in their favour.

The outcome of the election was a landslide victory for the Reformers, who won all but 5 of the 48 seats contested.²¹⁶ Twelve wards returned only Reformers. The two Reformers who had served on the old council, Currie and Earle, were both elected but only two of their 12 former Conservative colleagues standing joined them – Charles Horsfall and John Shaw Leigh. Five former mayors, including Sir Thomas Brancker and Charles Lawrence, failed to win seats. Of the three new Conservative councillors, John Barton, Henry Lawrence and Joseph Sandars, none was a freeman: the traditional background of Tory councillors was beginning to change. The sweeping victory of the Reformers may be seen as the last act of a picaresque local drama that had been proceeding with gathering pace towards an inevitable conclusion. This air of inevitability undoubtedly explains the restrained conduct of the reformist candidates and the lack of any real fight amongst the Tories.

On 31 December the new councillors met to appoint 16 aldermen.²¹⁷ No spirit of conciliation was evident: only one person generally deemed to be a Conservative was selected – Ormerod Heyworth – and he was the brother of Lawrence Heyworth, an increasingly prominent Reformer. The 5 unsuccessful Reformers were all selected as aldermen, along with 10 others from their own side. It is easy to imagine the reaction of Kaye in the *Courier* office as the Reformers lived up to his newspaper's expectations! With this overwhelming majority, the Reformers could have been expected to retain power on the council for many years. In the event, after a promising start, one important strand of their platform soon began to unravel and to threaten their future prospects.

²¹⁶ Council Minutes [CM], 28 December 1835, 352 MIN/COU II 1/1 (LvRO), pp. 1-3; *The Poll for the Election of Town Councillors for the Borough of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1836).

²¹⁷ CM, 31 December 1835, pp. 4-5; *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 January 1836.

CHAPTER 4

“WHAT HAVE THE COUNCIL DONE?”

This chapter examines the conduct of the new reformist council between 1836 and 1841 and, in particular, how the Reformers tackled what we would now consider to be three of the most important issues in urban life: policing, education and public health/living conditions. Detailed studies are made of the reforms attempted in policing and education and their rationale. An explanation is also offered as to why there was no corresponding initiative on social reform to deal with Liverpool’s notorious public health issues.

What is most striking about the actions of the Reformers is their willingness to address issues from first principles and pursue bold and innovative policies that fully merit the term “radical”. Nonetheless, their powers were circumscribed and there were consequent limitations on what they could hope to achieve.

As the council pursued its reforming agenda, an energetic and ambitious new leader, Joshua Walmsley, rapidly emerged from political obscurity. However, the misjudgements of the Reformers and a gradual swing of the political pendulum back towards Conservatism eventually brought about the removal of the Reformers from municipal power in 1841.²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Fraser, *Urban Politics*, pp.133-8, achieves the improbable feat of capturing the character and principal events of six frenetic years in as many pages, complete with key statistics and some pithy quotes.

i. THE NEW ORDER

What Liverpool experienced during the six years that the Reformers held sway in the Town Council amounted to a transformation of municipal life. The changes affected every aspect of local government. The last vestiges of Old Corruption were swept away and, for the most part, the new measures were accepted by all and endured for the rest of the century, notwithstanding the return to power of the Tories. Muir makes the important point that this should not be seen as a wholly new beginning in Liverpool's history: the new council had to deal with conditions inherited from the previous administration and could only make slow and piecemeal changes.²¹⁹ Moreover, this process was "necessarily largely governed by the traditions and the point of view which six centuries had implanted". As will be seen, some changes were not universally welcomed and in some areas the council found it had limited powers for intervention but in general Liverpool was in the forefront of adapting to the changed circumstances (political, economic and social) of the Victoria era.²²⁰

It cannot have been evident to anyone how the new council would go about its business. With no manifesto or even a publically acknowledged leader, the Reformers were not well placed to introduce a new order. Furthermore, only two of their number (Currie and Earle) had served on the old council. For the rest, there was a steep learning curve to negotiate. And yet in the early years there was a natural order of precedence which determined who came to the fore and evidence of a practical approach to the sequence in which specific issues were addressed. The leading Reformers of the previous two decades were rewarded with the office of mayor, a role that was mostly ceremonial and hence at a remove from day-to-day politics. Thus in five years out of six, the office was occupied by the veterans Currie, Earle, Rathbone, Hornby and Bolton.²²¹

In social and commercial standing (and in some cases in religion also) the Reformers were not so very different from their Tory predecessors. Politically, they

²¹⁹ Muir and Platt, *Municipal Government*, p. 150.

²²⁰ See White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, pp. 19-29, for a concise account of the new council's activities. Its tone is rather begrudging and White considered that it was in the years after 1841 that municipal government was revolutionised.

²²¹ The other mayor was Walmsley, whose election in 1839 was at the expense of yet another veteran Reformer: see Chapter 5.

were moderate in their pursuit of reform.²²² The *de facto* leader of the Reformers (and the arch villain of the piece in Tory eyes) was Rathbone but it suited everyone's convenience that he should make way for Currie and Earle to be elected mayor ahead of him and thereby allow him to take the chair of key council committees.

The initial preoccupation of the new council was to reorganise its functions, eliminating financial waste and disposing of discredited place-holders. The last aspect was pay-back time for those who had benefitted from the endemic cronyism of the old council, notably the Town Clerk Thomas Foster. However, the overall approach was characteristic of the Reformers – a fresh look at the whole issue and a drive towards financial stringency to the benefit of both traders and other ratepayers that would have brought delight to the old campaigners John Wade (now no longer the radical force he had once been) and Joseph Hume (the standard-bearer in Parliament for austerity and accountability).

In October 1836, as the Reformers' first year in power drew to an end, the Town Council heard a rousing speech setting out their achievements to date.²²³ The speaker's declared purpose was to answer the question "What have the Council done?" However, this was an unscheduled contribution and was slipped in during procedural business. The speaker in question was not a senior figure amongst the Reformers or chairman of any influential committee. It was in fact Joshua Walmsley, a political *parvenu* and amongst the least known of the Reformers. What Walmsley said (and had the council issue as a pamphlet) was well said and a fine (and rare) example of how to communicate with the wider populace. That it was said by Walmsley and not by one of the senior Reformers was extraordinary and the clearest of indications that he considered himself to have arrived as a politician and was a man of considerable ambition. Furthermore, this was just one of the earliest in a series of carefully prepared actions over more than a decade when he seized the moment and made a decisive intervention that represented both a significant political statement and a determination to place himself in the forefront of future activity from that moment on. (As is set out below, he had also been very active in

²²² White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, p. 4, argued that, in 1835, any reform sponsored by Liverpool's wealthy merchants was likely "to be cautious, to have little tendency to alter the balance of social forces, and to pay small regard in the details of its design to the actual wishes of those it was intended to benefit".

²²³ J. Walmsley, *What have the Council done? A speech delivered by Mr. Walmsley* (Liverpool, 1836); *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 October 1836.

the work of committees, where he had similarly established his presence.) The speech was noteworthy for the amount of research underpinning it: Walmsley had taken the trouble to search out detailed information on subjects he had not himself been closely involved with.

He started off by sketching the difficulties the council had encountered on taking office:

The Corporate offices were filled by persons conspicuous in hostility to popular rights. Almost every department of the local government was defective: a profuse and extravagant expenditure pervaded it; establishments were maintained at a cost more than double the amount at which they have since been taken on contract by the very individuals who previously held them; large sums were annually paid for the support of churches and their incumbents ...

The Reformers' principal target was Thomas Foster, who was forced into retirement with a substantial annuity, which he did not live long enough to enjoy. The new policy for the employment of officials was to avoid obviously partisan or nepotistic appointments (such as the relatives and friends of councillors) and reduce opportunities for personal enrichment by introducing (much reduced) fixed salaries, abolishing personal fees and excluding private business activity. Even though the Corporation employed surprisingly few senior officials by modern standards, the application of these new principles to administrative and legal posts resulted in an immediate and very substantial saving of about £10,000 p.a. In one fell swoop, the Reformers were able to boast of financial stringency, greater efficiency and non-partisan appointments based on professional competence. They were also seen to have followed up on the many declarations on these topics which they had made in their election statements and turned them into a coherent plan of action.

The other main areas highlighted by Walmsley were policing and education, which are considered next.

ii. REFORMING LAW AND ORDER

It had never been the intention of the Reformers from the outset to establish a new police force as the centrepiece of various reforms in the administration of justice and upholding of the law.²²⁴ It might also seem an odd measure for Reformers or Radicals to espouse, given the history of state repression in recent decades and the generally negative attitude towards the newly established Metropolitan Police.²²⁵ However, this proved to be an important step in Liverpool's development and bore all the hallmarks of the Reformers' approach to putting governance on a new footing: the issue was examined from first principles; this was followed by instant and far-reaching action; and due attention was paid to financial stringency. In the process we can observe real innovation and an attempt to understand some of the social causes of criminal behaviour. Beyond that, reform of policing provided a stage for the aspiring Walmsley to show his abilities and ambition, whilst at the same time forging the first of the personal bonds that were to underpin his later parliamentary career. In the space of a year Walmsley moved from being unknown to achieving public prominence, and policing was not the only area in which he drew attention. For all these reasons it is worth following events in considerable detail.

As with other facets of Liverpool's municipal development, the process of change in law and order commenced well before the Reformers gained power in 1835 but, untypically, the thorough overhaul of policing that resulted owed more to the vision, diligence and aspirations of key individuals than any specific provisions of the Municipal Corporations Act. The need for change had become apparent even to the deeply conservative Old Corporation as the rapid growth in population and

²²⁴ For a general history of Liverpool's police, see W. R. Cockcroft, *From Cutlasses to Computers: The Police Force in Liverpool (1836-1989)* (1991). Some aspects of the force's early years are covered by Midwinter, *Law and Order* and *Old Liverpool*. The most noteworthy recent contribution has been from John E. Archer, *The Monster Evil: Policing and Violence in Victorian Liverpool* (Liverpool, 2011). However, this work does not look in detail at the early years of the Liverpool Constabulary Force. Similarly, Michael Macilwee, in another detailed study, *The Liverpool Underworld: Crime in the City, 1750-1900* (Liverpool, 2011) focuses on crime rather than the organisation of policing.

²²⁵ The national context for the reform of policing is authoritatively provided in a series of works by Clive Emsley: *The English Police: A Political and Social History*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, 1996); *The Great British Bobby: A History of Policing from the 18th Century to the Present* (London, 2009) and *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900*, 4th ed. (Abingdon, 2013). The consequences of the Municipal Corporations Act for towns like Liverpool are detailed in *Great British Bobby*, pp. 77-90, and *Crime and Society*, pp. 236ff. The early unpopularity of the Metropolitan Police, in large part due to its military look and expense, is covered in *English Police*, pp. 26-7.

urbanisation and the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars transformed early nineteenth century Liverpool.

Writing in 1796, some three decades before the first modern constabularies took shape, William Moss felt able to commend his Liverpool home to visitors:²²⁶

The Police of the town is well preserved. A street assault and robbery is seldom or never heard of; nor is a burglary or other kind of house robbery ever attempted to any extent by violence. Thefts of that kind are of a petty nature; as may be observed by the sessions calendar, quarterly. The nightly watch is well attended, and is doubled in the winter season, when it goes half hourly; and the inhabitants are as secure in their beds as in the most retired village. The streets being in general well lighted with lamps contributes much to the general security.

A highway robbery, of any import, is rarely heard of in the neighbouring roads. Adventurers in that way have seldom succeeded; for as there are no lurking places for their security, and their retreat being cut off on one side by the river, the hue and cry, from the rarity of the occurrence, has always been so general as to ensure detection: even the town, from the vigilance of the police, will not afford a hiding place. This security from personal assault may be considered as a comfort not usually attendant on a large town.

This reassuring portrait of Liverpool does not ring entirely true of a growing port in time of war, where battles between sailors and press-gangs are well-attested.²²⁷ One is left to conclude that Moss's genteel side of Liverpool did not include Sailortown. His contemporary and fellow topographer James Wallace was less impressed with Liverpool's character. In describing the new borough gaol in Great Howard Street, he conjured up one of the truly memorable passages in Liverpool's historiography:²²⁸

This temple of the goddess Laverna is situated at the northern extremity of the town, where it rises in all the glare of ostentatious majesty; a stranger on being informed it is the common jail must be immediately prejudiced by a very indifferent opinion of the honesty or reputed wealth of a place which requires a building for the reception of villany [sic] and insolvency that

²²⁶ [W. Moss], *The Liverpool Guide* (Liverpool, 1796), pp 120-1.

²²⁷ See, for example, Muir, *History of Liverpool*, p. 209.

²²⁸ Wallace, *History of Liverpool*, pp. 177-8.

covers more than twice the ground and contains more than twice the number of cells and dormitories than the prison of Newgate and on fair calculation will hold more than half the inhabitants of Liverpool.

The gaol subsequently proved to be an over-achievement in a period when only debtors and prisoners-of-war could expect to be incarcerated for lengthy periods and the authorities generally lacked the means to apprehend anyone not caught red-handed.

Later writers were united in their contempt for the constables and watchmen responsible for maintaining law and order.²²⁹ By a strange coincidence, two future mayors, Walmsley and Samuel Holme, both included accounts of Liverpool in the year 1809 in their memoirs (written half a century later). Walmsley was brief and to the point.²³⁰

At night the town was lit by oil-lamps, few and far between, that flickered and blew out when the wind was high. It was guarded by a police composed of sixty old men, known as the "old Charlies", so aged and feeble that the inhabitants could only account for their filling the post by supposing that, when men were considered too decrepit for any other employment, they were elected guardians of the public safety.

Holme gave full rein to the humorous possibilities.²³¹

The charge of all the property and of the sleepers was nightly committed to the care of less than 100 old men miscalled 'watchmen'. Many of them were aged and decrepit and each had a certain round of streets allotted him which it was his duty to patrol once in the hour, calling out the time and saying 'a wet night' or 'a fair night' as the case might be. His calls were of course a signal to all thieves and vagabonds of his approach and nobody seemed to think it a mistake that he should give them a warning. Each of these venerable guardians had a watchbox in the middle of his circuit ... and it was a common practice with the rakes of that day, when they discovered a

²²⁹ The Revd. James Aspinall, anonymous author of *Liverpool A Few Years Since. By An Old Stager* (London and Liverpool, 1852), was primarily intent on amusing his readers and gives a droll portrayal of the town's watchmen (pp. 94-6). His account may well have influenced subsequent authors, just as Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* provided the blueprint for memoirs of school-days.

²³⁰ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 17.

²³¹ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 51. The story of the watchbox may owe something to Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1821).

watchman asleep, to throw down the watchbox with the door face on the ground so that the inmate was unable to extricate himself until the box was lifted up and which did not generally take place till the following morning.

As Holme implied above, policing was almost exclusively concerned with theft, with or without accompanying violence. Moreover, Midwinter has shown, albeit for a slightly later period, that the vast majority of indictable offences in Lancashire related to theft: public order offences and crimes of violence accounted for only a very small percentage.²³² Drunken behaviour was endemic but often did not lead to any intervention by police or more than temporary detention in a lock-up: only the more serious cases came before the local magistrates.

Large-scale public disorder (rioting) represented a separate law enforcement issue. Provincial towns (Liverpool included) had relatively few constables and watchmen at their disposal and this made it difficult for them to control rioting. The swearing in of special constables did not materially improve the authorities' capability. In Liverpool, rioting during parliamentary elections was a regular occurrence, notably during Roscoe's re-election campaign of 1807 and that of Canning in 1816. Few arrests were made. The young Holme witnessed the stoning of Canning's party in Duke Street and later commented on the absence of troops, regular police or any control during elections.²³³ The mass open-air political meetings on reform issues between 1817 and 1832 offered considerable scope for disorder but, to the credit of all concerned, little occurred. In 1819, faced with a mass meeting in Clayton Square in the wake of Peterloo, the mayor and magistrates called on military assistance in the form of the Liverpool Light Horse Volunteers.²³⁴ In the event, no such assistance proved necessary. If the Liverpool authorities perceived the need for the military, they were fortunate to have a local force on hand. The Light Horse was comprised of local inhabitants, who could be expected to treat their fellow citizens with greater restraint than a county yeomanry or regular cavalry unit.²³⁵ There were other occasions when military assistance was requested but it is not always clear whether

²³² E. C. Midwinter, *Law and Order in Early Victorian Lancashire* (York, 1968), pp. 5-6.

²³³ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 157.

²³⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 October 1819.

²³⁵ Holme was a member of the Light Horse but does not say whether he witnessed the 1819 meeting. From his account (*Autobiography*, p. 155) and newspaper reports, the Light Horse was mostly called on for ceremonial duties but earlier in 1819 a troop was detailed to St Helens in case of trouble from the colliers (*Liverpool Mercury*, 18 February 1819).

it was actually provided, which units were involved and what resulted.²³⁶ Compared to other towns in Lancashire, Liverpool, if not entirely a haven of peace and quiet, at least managed to avoid the worst excesses of turbulent times.²³⁷

As the need for more effective policing became overwhelming, the obvious option was to follow the lead of Sir Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police, newly established under the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829. At a relatively low cost, a full-time police force had been introduced that employed tried and tested organisational and personnel practices from the army and Irish police.²³⁸ Accordingly, in August 1830, the Commissioners of the Watch appointed William Parlour as Superintendant [sic] of the Nightly Watch. Parlour came to Liverpool from the Metropolitan Police on the recommendation of Peel himself following an application from the Commissioners of the Watch.²³⁹ In 1833 he declared that he had been an army officer for over 20 years (15 years on active service, then on half-pay) and had spent 15 months with the Metropolitan Police organising two of its divisions.²⁴⁰ Parlour's experience of policing was clearly limited: what he most had to offer was experience of military discipline and organisation.

As Superintendant of the Nightly Watch, Parlour was but one of three senior police officers responsible for law enforcement in Liverpool. He reported to the Commissioners of the Watch, who themselves reported to the Select Vestry of the Parish of Liverpool (and not the Corporation or local magistrates). The Commissioners included all aldermen (by virtue of their status as magistrates) and 18 other householders but invariably the aldermen did not attend!²⁴¹ A separate Superintendant of Police was responsible for the small force of constables employed by the Corporation; he reported to the local magistrates. The third senior

²³⁶ A. Bryson, 'Riotous Liverpool, 1815–1860', in Belchem (ed.), *Popular Politics*, p. 103, mentions nine occasions between 1815 and 1835. In December 1831 military units were called upon to assist the Nightly Watch in controlling a great fire in Fenwick Street. Whereas the 43rd Light Infantry were "civil and unpresuming", the 8th Hussars, from the moment of their arrival, "behaved with most unnecessary and uncalled for violence" and later became drunk (*Liverpool Mercury*, 30 December 1831).

²³⁷ Moore, 'Liverpool in the 'Heroic Age' of Popular Radicalism'.

²³⁸ M. Stallion and D. S. Wall, *The British Police* (Police History Society, 1999), p. 3.

²³⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 July 1831.

²⁴⁰ *A Report of the Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry into the existing state of the Corporation of Liverpool etc [Court of Inquiry]* (Liverpool, 1834), pp. 412-3.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

officer was the Superintendent of the Dock Police, who controlled a separate force of constables; his employer was the Dock Committee. The scope for confused policing is all too evident and is well-attested. Less expected but equally well reported is the cooperation between forces when faced with a serious threat, whether rioting or fire: see mention below of the July 1835 rioting.

Parlour's tenure with the Nightly Watch was short-lived. In June 1831 he was appointed by the magistrates to the more lucrative post of Superintendent of Police following the death of John Miller.²⁴² (He later claimed there had been 20 competitors for the post.²⁴³) In July another military man, Lieutenant John Shipp, took over as Superintendent of the Nightly Watch.²⁴⁴ Shipp had had a chequered career, growing up in a workhouse and twice being discharged from the army before becoming an inspector in the Metropolitan Police, but his conduct at fires drew fulsome praise, as at the Fenwick Street fire in 1831:²⁴⁵

Mr. Shipp, the active and meritorious superintendent of the nightly watch, who is always at his post, was indefatigable in his endeavours to check the progress of the flames, and to preserve order and to prevent robbery. It was principally owing to his exertions and those of his men that the Parish-office, which caught fire several times, was preserved, and the flames prevented from extending up Water-street and, probably, along Castle-street. They are deserving of every commendation, and we think that something more substantial than empty praise would not be ill-bestowed.

Shipp's authorship of an open letter against flogging also marks him out as an unusually humane thinker.²⁴⁶ In addition, he found time to be a playwright, with several popular works to his name. In April 1833 he applied for the new post of Deputy Governor of the Workhouse, announcing his candidacy in the press, but, on

²⁴² *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 July 1831.

²⁴³ *Court of Inquiry*, pp. 412-3.

²⁴⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 July 1831.

²⁴⁵ E. C. Midwinter, *Old Liverpool* (Newton Abbot, 1971), p. 61; *Liverpool Mercury*, 30 December 1831.

²⁴⁶ J. Shipp, *Flogging and its substitute. A voice from the ranks: or, a letter to Sir F. Burdett on the barbarous and degrading system of flogging soldiers and sailors* (London, 1831).

the death of the Governor a few weeks later, he was in fact appointed Governor.²⁴⁷ In June the Commissioners of the Watch, with no less than 16 candidates to choose from, appointed the Irish Catholic author and journalist Michael James Whitty as the new Superintendent of the Nightly Watch, this despite his lack of any police or military experience.²⁴⁸ That Whitty applied for the post is not easy to explain (except in terms of needing well-paid employment), that he was appointed even less so. It would seem that the Commissioners (perhaps mindful of the experiences of the Metropolitan Police noted above) did not want the militarisation of policing to go too far and valued education and literacy above relevant experience. Whitty had been editor for three years of the *Liverpool Journal*, a weekly newspaper that supported reform and was sympathetic to Roman Catholicism.²⁴⁹ Once again the Commissioners had made a most enlightened appointment of a type that the old council would never have contemplated for one of its own posts.

Meanwhile, a sub-committee of the Dock Committee had just decided that it was time for the Dock Police to follow the example of the Nightly Watch and the Liverpool Police. Following complaints about the Dock Police under Enoch Broadley, the sub-committee was set up in November 1832 and its report in January 1833 concluded.²⁵⁰

[It] is necessary to re-model the dock Police, and put it on a more efficient footing. ... [It] is desirable that a more active superintendent with two inspectors should be engaged, and the Sub-committee recommend application being made to the Commissioners of Police, in London, or to other quarters, to ascertain whether they have any persons in their employ, who they can recommend to fill those situations.

²⁴⁷ *Liverpool Mercury*, 20 April 1832, 12 April 1833 and 24 May 1833. Shipp died suddenly in early 1834. His lengthy obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1834, pp. 539-43) attests to the popularity and impact of his memoirs of military life.

²⁴⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, 21 June 1833. Whitty was the son of a County Wexford corn merchant but soon turned to writing and journalism. In 1824 a two-volume work on Ireland was published: *Tales of Irish Life, illustrative of the manners, customs, and condition of the people*. Whitty was enticed to Liverpool in about 1830 to become the first editor of the *Liverpool Journal* (*Liverpool Mercury*, 11 June 1873).

²⁴⁹ Whitty's departure from the *Liverpool Journal* was undoubtedly the consequence of the proprietor, Robert Rockliff, being sued for libel by the Radical Henry "Orator" Hunt following a sloppy piece of election reporting (*Examiner*, 23 June 1833).

²⁵⁰ *Court of Inquiry*, p. 130.

In early February the sub-committee engaged Maurice Matthew George Dowling of the Metropolitan Police, on the recommendation of Colonel Rowan, one of the Commissioners.²⁵¹ Dowling had led a varied career, commencing with active service in the Royal Navy as a boy. After holding a position responsible for the payment of military pensions and undertaking a major fraud investigation in Ireland, he served as a Gentleman-at-Arms in attendance on George IV and William IV.²⁵²

Thus by 1833 all three police forces in Liverpool had seen change at the top and the introduction of chief officers with experience of both the Metropolitan Police and the military, with only Whitty's appointment going against this trend. When Liverpool was visited in November 1833 by two Commissioners from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Municipal Corporations of England and Wales, the Corporation was well placed to demonstrate that law enforcement had not been neglected.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry

The evidence presented to the Commissioners provides a detailed snapshot of how Liverpool's policing was organised in 1833, and little changed up until the Reformers took power at the end of 1835. The quality and extent of the policing was less well covered but the Commissioners took pains to hear anyone and everyone, however petty the evidence being presented, and this openness has provided additional insights.

Parlour, as Superintendent of Police, was paid £400 p.a. by the Corporation and received a house adjacent to the police office rent-free. (The Town Clerk added that the salary had just been raised from £300 so as to avoid any jealousy of the new Superintendent of the Dock Police with his salary of £500 p.a.²⁵³) Parlour governed 52 constables, of whom 9 were head-constables each responsible for a district. Constables received 3s 6d per day and were obliged to contribute to a superannuation fund to be drawn on for sickness or on leaving. They also received

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* and *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 February 1833.

²⁵² *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 November 1853. By a strange coincidence, Dowling – like Shipp and Whitty – had cultural aspirations, composing a series of operatic burlesques.

²⁵³ *Court of Inquiry*, p. 44. The *Liverpool Mercury* (8 November 1833) had a field-day with the Town Clerk's explanation and alleged talk of preventing a "collision", also pointing out the further danger of a collision involving the much less well paid Superintendent of the Nightly Watch: "It should also be remembered that Mr. Whitty, who is a stalwart fellow, prowls about by night, and may watch his opportunity to bring about the *collision*, in the most effective manner, probably, by putting Mr. Dowling in one of the docks ..."

a suit of clothes every year and a greatcoat every 3 years. Ordinarily, the force was considered sufficiently strong but on “special occasions”, such as that year’s music festival and the 1832 parliamentary election, several hundred extra constables were sworn in.²⁵⁴

Overall, the Town Clerk was well satisfied: “The constabulary force is on a system by which the community has hitherto been very well protected, and has been very often much praised for the early detection of offenders.”²⁵⁵ Parlour was equally proud of his force: “The efficiency of the Liverpool Police is as great as that of any similar body with which I am acquainted. There is not a town in the kingdom where, comparatively speaking, so few depredations are committed, notwithstanding the circumstances of its being a sea-port town.” Parlour testified that, in addition, he regularly attended night-time fires with nearly all his men. He also commented that the Sabbath was infinitely better observed in Liverpool than in the suburbs of London.²⁵⁶

Whitty, as Superintendent of the Nightly Watch, was paid a modest 200 guineas p.a. by the Parish of Liverpool, with no other emoluments. He had at his disposal about 120 watchmen. They patrolled 16 districts, for each of which there was a captain in charge. The watchmen were paid 18s per week but had 1s deducted for clothing. Whitty himself did not give evidence to the Royal Commission: that was done by one of the Commissioners of the Watch, who stressed that they appointed watchmen and directed everything connected with the Nightly Watch.²⁵⁷ Whitty’s absence is regrettable since he was a man of firm opinions and unafraid to voice them: in the light of subsequent developments, his views on policing would have been informative.

Finally, Dowling, as Superintendent of the Dock Police, was paid £500 p.a. by the Dock Committee. His predecessor had received only £300 but, in another vestige of Old Corruption, had benefitted from a proportion of the fines inflicted by the magistrates. Dowling was appointed on the basis that he would receive no share of fines and would devote the whole of his time to the discharge of his duties. He also had to provide a surety of £500, a huge imposition. Dowling had a force of 4

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-6.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 412-3.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

inspectors, 12 serjeants [sic] and 135 privates. (The military influence is more readily evident than in the other forces.) The privates were paid 18s per week “besides clothing”. Just as the Commissioners of the Watch reserved the right to appoint watchmen, so the Dock Committee retained responsibility for their police appointments.²⁵⁸

Perhaps the most substantial policing issue raised with the Royal Commission was the state of affairs in Toxteth Park and other extra-parochial communities. Two prominent Reformers, Currie, then a member of the council, and Jordan, who were both residents of Toxteth Park, described in strong language the problems resulting from having only four constables, paid for by private subscription, to patrol the whole of Toxteth Park, including Harrington, with its population of 25,000.²⁵⁹ Currie spoke about “not only a denial of justice, but a positive impunity for crime, in consequence of the want of an effective police for that district”. He continued: “... the police and watchmen of Liverpool, if they do their duty, drive all the desperate ruffians and thieves out of Liverpool into Harrington, and a large proportion of the population of Harrington consists of a class of people most degrading to human nature.” Jordan, himself an Irishman, decried the filthy state of a “clachan” near his house called Jerry-hill [near Northumberland Street], where two thirds of the inhabitants were “bad characters” driven out of Liverpool. Currie argued that the jurisdiction of the Borough of Liverpool should be extended as far as the limits of the parliamentary borough, thus including Everton, Kirkdale, Low Hill and Toxteth Park. The Town Clerk pointed out in response that the intentions of Liverpool’s magistrates in this respect had been frustrated by opposition from the townships. (The issue of policing had become caught up in wider Poor Law considerations.) For the Reformers this was another instance of one part of Liverpool’s population receiving unequal treatment from the old council.

Other complaints were specifically directed against Parlour’s constables. A local boatman accused the head-constable at the Pier Head of neglecting his police duties in order to earn income from hiring out a crane. He also felt the other constables there had too comfortable an existence and ought to be rotated, as happened with the Dock Police. A cotton broker alleged that constables in the town were open to receiving “douceurs” and, through a system of patronage, would

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 448-50.

ignore people breaking the law unless it was impossible not to notice. He also drew attention to the large numbers of constables loitering around the police-office in the morning. Parlour denied these allegations strenuously, asserting that only one constable had been the subject of a complaint, for receiving 2s 6d. He further explained that, with 20-40 cases being heard daily by the magistrates, it was necessary for the constables to attend the police-office to brief him on arrests and be on hand to give evidence in court.²⁶⁰

Notwithstanding these issues, it is clear that by and large Parlour and his force were respected. One of the lawyers briefed to represent the interests of townspeople conceded: "It is no part of my instructions to make any charge against the Liverpool Police, or the management of the gaols. As far as my information goes, the town is well contented with the police, and with the appointment of the present superintendant." Yet more telling was the testimonial volunteered by Rathbone: "I believe Mr. Parlour's appointment was thought a very good one by the public at large. I cannot flatter myself with being particularly popular with the constituted authorities; yet I must say that I have always been treated with great civility by the constables, and the constituted authorities generally." His statement was greeted with applause.²⁶¹

While municipal authorities across the country waited to see what changes would be recommended by the Royal Commission and whether these would result in legislation, Liverpool witnessed some highly significant developments in law enforcement. In 1834 a 39-page booklet was published, entitled "Instructions for the Liverpool Watch". It represents a thoughtful and humane guide to community policing: its precepts and sentiments would not have been out of place as late as the 1960s. The prime author was clearly a man of some refinement and is unlikely to have been from a military background. It is tempting to detect the hand of Whitty, although one cannot totally discount the earlier influence of Shipp. Watchmen were told what to do, how to avoid obvious pitfalls and to refrain from ill-treating those under arrest. They were to act with firmness but not interfere needlessly, especially with drunks making their way home quietly. Watchmen abiding by these instructions would have performed valuable public service, a far cry from the days of the Old Charlies. However, subsequent events suggest that most watchmen were unable to

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 406-9 and 412-3.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

achieve this high standard. In past years one obstacle had been the physical infirmity of many watchmen but this was changing.²⁶²

Latterly ... the veteran battalions, the cripples, wheezers, coughers, and asthmatics, were superseded by a more stalwart race, who looked as if they would stand no nonsense, and could do a little fighting at a pinch. The last of these men, whom we recollect before the establishment of the New Police, had the beat in the neighbourhood of Clayton-square. ... He was a six-foot, muscular Irishman.

The Irishman was also a fervent admirer of "The Liberator", Daniel O'Connell, and again one is tempted to detect the hand of Whitty in his appointment.

Other changes to policing were also in the air. During 1834 the Town Council prepared the ground for a parliamentary bill to establish a day-police force.²⁶³ In March 1835 a petition from the Corporation of Liverpool was presented to Parliament, "praying that leave be given to bring in a Bill for raising and maintaining an effective Police Force for the said town, and for releasing the Parishioners from liabilities to certain accustomed annual payments to the Rectors and Curates thereof, and for rendering the Petitioners liable to such payments out of the corporate funds".²⁶⁴ The Liverpool Day-Police Bill proceeded as far as a second reading in May 1835 (but only by a narrow margin) before being overtaken by the wider issue of municipal reform.²⁶⁵ Its progress generated a series of petitions from the Commissioners of the Watch and sundry groups of burgesses, parishioners, rate-payers and other inhabitants, "praying" to have their objections heard or that the Bill "may not pass into a law".²⁶⁶

In a typical example of Liverpool's fractured politics, the House of Commons motion in favour of a second reading was proposed by Liverpool's Tory MP, Lord Sandon, and the opposition was led by his Radical colleague, William Ewart. Ewart was supported by an array of Radicals, including the Liverpool merchant Thomas Thornely, Daniel O'Connell and Richard Lalor Sheil (a cousin of the Liverpool

²⁶² Aspinall, *Liverpool*, p. 96.

²⁶³ Bryson, 'Riotous Liverpool', p. 103.

²⁶⁴ *House of Commons Journal*, Vol. 19, 9 March 1835, p. 60.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 March 1835, p. 126; 17 March 1835, p. 132; and 22 May 1835, p. 276.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 May 1835, p. 276; 2 June 1835, p. 302; and 5 June 1835, p. 318.

municipal politician Richard Sheil). Ewart's contention was that, although the bill "was called a Police Bill, the real object of it was to provide payment for the clergy of the parish of Liverpool out of the funds of the Corporation". He argued that Liverpool already had an efficient police but that, if the Corporation wanted a police, there should be a separate bill or the existing provisions of the Lighting and Watching Act of 1833 should be used. He concluded by damning the bill as "a Corporation job".²⁶⁷ Nobody in the debate saw fit to discuss whether a day-police (presumably based on Parlour's force) was needed. However, it is interesting that – for whatever motive – the idea was being aired and that it wasn't the Reformers who were taking the lead.

As the Day-Police Bill fell into limbo, the need for effective law enforcement in Liverpool was brought into sharp focus by untypically severe rioting on 12-13 July 1835. The rioting was exclusively perpetrated by Irish Catholics, who had gathered in reaction to rumours of an Orange procession to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne and then attacked watchmen after they arrested a ringleader. The mob freed the prisoner and laid siege to the Vauxhall Road bridewell at the north end of the town, where the watchmen had taken refuge. Alerted by the bridewell's bell, Whitty hastened to the scene and was fortunate not to be killed: he attributed his preservation to the actions of two of the rioters who had recognised him (presumably as a fellow Irish Catholic) and done their best to ward off blows directed at him. Whitty regrouped his watchmen and was reinforced by his fire-police ("armed with their tomahawks") and by Parlour and his constables. Together they fought back the rioters. They were then joined by Dowling and the Dock Police and shortly afterwards by the mayor and 200 troops of the 80th Regiment. The following day the rioters reformed in Park Lane at the south end of the town but dispersed on the appearance of the soldiers, regrouping once more in Vauxhall Road. The combined police forces, supplemented by 500 special constables hastily sworn in, faced down the rioters and made numerous arrests. Between 60 and 70 of the rioters appeared before the magistrates on 14 July.²⁶⁸ Forty-three were subsequently convicted and sentenced to up to six months.²⁶⁹

Sectarian riots of this nature were not unknown in Liverpool. Orange marches in 1819 and 1820 had led to serious disorder and substantial sentences for the small

²⁶⁷ *Hansard*, 22 May 1835.

²⁶⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 July 1835; *Bell's Life in London*, 19 July 1835.

²⁶⁹ Bryson, 'Riotous Liverpool', p. 110.

numbers arrested. Until 1835, subsequent events had passed off with only minor incidents.²⁷⁰ Now the capabilities of the forces of law and order had been tested to breaking point and, although there was much that the authorities could take comfort from, the consequences in terms of personal injuries and riot damage could have been much worse.

As a new chapter in Liverpool's municipal history beckoned, Liverpool's policing did not appear to be in particularly bad shape, especially in comparison with other provincial towns. Responsibility was fragmented and the quality of some constables and watchmen was open to question but, as has been noted above, there were signs that Whitty was beginning to improve the efficacy of the Nightly Watch.

The New Police

No one could have expected that within ten weeks of being elected on 26 December 1835 the new council would have evaluated its policing needs, organised and recruited a new Corporation police force and published an unprecedented crime survey. The Municipal Corporations Act, which had finally entered the statute books in September 1835, was only partly responsible for this burst of activity, and policing reform had barely been touched upon during the municipal election. Furthermore, as already mentioned, no-one prominent had made an issue of policing in evidence to Royal Commission in 1833 and, as noted above, earlier in 1835 Ewart had told the House of Commons of his satisfaction with the police.

The key provision on policing in the Municipal Corporations Act was the requirement:²⁷¹

that the Council to be elected for any Borough shall, immediately after their First Election, and so from time to time thereafter as they shall deem expedient, appoint for such time as they may think proper, a sufficient number of their own body, who, together with the Mayor of the Borough for the time being, shall be and be called the Watch Committee for such Borough ...

What the Act did not do was specify how policing was to be organised but the implication for the Corporation was obvious: it would have control over the Nightly

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

²⁷¹ 5 & 6 Will. IV Cap. 76, §76.

Watch in addition to its existing police force and could hardly perpetuate separate management arrangements. The Watch Committee was required “within Three Weeks after their first formation” to appoint “a sufficient number of fit men ... to act as Constables for preserving the peace by day and by night, and preventing robberies and other felonies, and apprehending offenders against the peace”.²⁷² This further provision did not in itself require significant organisational change: rebadging would suffice. It is also interesting to note that the only felony worthy of specific mention was robbery. The Act’s other provisions in respect of policing relate to the powers, conduct and payment of constables and to the machinery of justice at local level.²⁷³

Only one candidate in the municipal election seemingly picked up on these provisions of the Act. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the Reformer Charles Birch had advocated “the establishment of an efficient Day and Night Police, carried on upon a uniform and consistent plan, and affording protection at all hours to persons and property ... without, if possible, making additional levies upon the pockets of the Rate-payers”.²⁷⁴ Strangely, Birch did not become a member of the Watch Committee, although his Castle Street Ward colleague Walmsley did and the latter would have been well aware of his views. Otherwise, the Reformers standing in West Derby Ward had blandly announced that “the subject of Lighting, Watching, Police &c ... will be matter for close attention”.²⁷⁵

On 8 January 1836 the new council discharged its obligation under the Municipal Corporations Act by appointing a Watch Committee: 24 members were selected (three eighths of the total number of councillors and aldermen) in recognition of the amount of routine business required to oversee policing, the fire service, lighting and cleaning.²⁷⁶ On 16 January the Watch Committee met for the first time, declaring its readiness to take over the functions of the Parish’s Commissioners of the Watch and appointing a nine-man sub-committee, which included Walmsley, “to

²⁷² *Ibid.*, §76.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, §76-86.

²⁷⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 December 1835. Birch, in addition to his primary calling as a merchant, had also been the proprietor of *The Albion*. As such he will have made the acquaintance of Whitty, when the latter was editor of the *Liverpool Journal*, and his proposal on policing may conceivably owe something to Whitty’s influence.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 November 1835.

²⁷⁶ Council Minutes [CM], 8 January 1836, 352 MIN/COU II 1/1 (LvRO), pp. 21-2.

enquire into the necessary arrangements for carrying into effect the provisions of the [Municipal Corporations] Act relating to the duties of this Committee”.²⁷⁷ The committee chose the veteran Reformer John Holmes as their first chairman. Holmes was a respected herring and cudbear merchant and a partner in the family’s Isle of Man bank. He had been a supporter of Roscoe in 1807 and for a quarter of a century had served the Highways Board of the Parish of Liverpool.²⁷⁸ Nothing in Holmes’s pedigree marked him out as someone likely to introduce major change; rather, he would have been viewed by his colleagues as a safe pair of hands and it is likely that, had the need for extensive reform of policing been identified in advance, a more prominent Reformer would have been ushered into the chairman’s post. However, Holmes’s appointment was clearly the result of careful consideration. Control of policing and allied functions was being transferred from the Parish to the Town Council or, viewed another way, from the Church of England to a Town Council that was no longer in its thrall. This required a high degree of trust from the Parish and no-one was better placed than Holmes, a long-standing servant of the Parish, to ensure that everything went smoothly.

On 23 January the sub-committee made an interim report on the “New Police”, under the signature of William Earle, amongst the most prominent of the veteran Reformers (and destined to become mayor later that year).²⁷⁹ Despite almost daily meetings, they were not yet ready to make a full report but had satisfied themselves that “a day and night Police cannot be sufficiently effective with a less force than Three hundred and sixty Constables, exclusive of Officers and Bridewell Keepers”, to be paid 18s per day at a total cost, including uniforms, of £18,648 p.a. With a view to expediency, they recommended taking “such men from the present establishment of Police as may be deemed eligible” and advertising for the rest. An advertisement duly appeared, calling for 300 men immediately between the ages of 22 and 35, “able to read and write with facility”, “well recommended for good temper, sobriety, honesty, activity and intelligence” and “not to keep a Public House,

²⁷⁷ Watch Committee Minutes [WCM], 16 January 1836, 352 MIN/WAT 1/1 (LvRO), pp. 3-4.

²⁷⁸ In 1836 Holmes was already over 60 years old; he continued to serve on the council until his death, just short of his 80th birthday. His stature amongst the Reformers was not such that he was elected mayor during their six years in power but the wide respect he commanded is well illustrated by his subsequent election in 1849. Unfortunately, his reputation suffered after his death when it became apparent that the family bank was insolvent and large losses were incurred by depositors. See *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 October 1853.

²⁷⁹ WCM, 23 January 1836, pp. 8-9.

or deal in any Excisable Articles”.²⁸⁰ The proposed force was almost twice the combined size of Parlour’s Police and Whitty’s Nightly Watch: given that the Reformers had made much play in the municipal election of the need for economical management of the Corporation’s finances and that two members of the sub-committee proposing it (Walmsley and Woollwright) had explicitly called for a reduction in local taxes, the sub-committee’s findings were extremely bold and needed careful presentation.

Just five days after their first report, the sub-committee reported back to the Watch Committee on 28 January with a detailed proposal, which went forward to the full council on 3 February.²⁸¹ There it was duly approved.²⁸² The new council was clearly prepared to implement major reforms without delay and conduct its business at a brisk pace.

The immediate requirement was “the establishment of a Day and Night Police on a plan at once efficient and economical”. The Dock Police was excluded from consideration on the grounds that the Municipal Corporations Act provided for the Dock Trustees to retain control for a further period.²⁸³ However, the Watch Committee expressed “their decided opinion that it is essential to the good government of the Police and the consolidation of strength whenever it is called for, as well as for economy, and for carrying the spirit of the Municipal [Corporations] Act into full effect, that the whole Constabulary Force of the Town, the adjoining districts within the Parliamentary limits and the Docks with the Port and Harbour, should be under one controlling and regulating Committee, acting by the advice and under the Council of the Borough.” (This further amalgamation was only put on hold until 1837.)

The new police, to be styled “the Constabulary Force”, would be under the control of a “Head Constable” in order to receive “that regularity and that unity of purpose which results from an undivided, immediate and constant direction”. It would have three components:

²⁸⁰ *Liverpool City Police 1836-1951*, H352.2 LIV (LvRO), p. 4.

²⁸¹ WCM, 28 January 1836, pp. 10-19.

²⁸² CM, 3 February 1836, p. 60.

²⁸³ §74 of the Act specifically exempted Liverpool’s Dock Trustees from certain of its provisions.

- a Permanent Body, comprising the Head Constable, 4 Superintendents, 24 Inspectors, 290 men, 60 extra men on a part-time basis, 10 Bridewell Keepers, and one horse for the Head Constable, at a cost of £19,482 p.a.
- a Central Police Office, comprising one In-door Superintendent or Commissioner, 8 Constables (supplemented, as required, by 15-20 men from the Permanent Body), one Bridewell Keeper (plus wife), 4 Turnkeys, 2 Clerks and one Office Keeper, at a cost of £1,722 p.a. plus contingent expenses of £2,545 p.a.
- the Fire Police, comprising one Foreman and one Assistant, calling on 40 Policemen from the Permanent Body, at a cost of £251 p.a.

Thus the total cost for a new police force (including fire police) covering the whole parliamentary borough (except the docks) during both the day and the night was set at £24,000 p.a. This sum compared with existing annual expenditure of £21,000 on less comprehensive policing services from a considerably smaller total workforce:

- the Corporation Police, comprising one Superintendent, 9 Head Constables, 44 Constables, 4 Clerks, one Bridewell Keeper, 3 Turnkeys and, as required, Special Constables, at a cost of £8,000 p.a.
- the Nightly Watch, comprising one Superintendent, 16 Captains, 130 Watchmen, 16 Patrol and 3 Bridewell Keepers, at a cost of £9,200 p.a.
- Police in the outlying districts (Toxteth Park, Low Hill, Edge Hill, Everton and Kirkdale), paid for by private subscription, at a cost of £3,400 p.a.
- The Fire Police, at a cost of £400 p.a.

In this way the Watch Committee could point to much improved arrangements for policing at an additional cost of just £3,000 (or <15%). The differential, though, was twice as big, if the cost of privately funded policing was excluded. The additional cost was largely due to the doubling in size of what had been the Nightly Watch. The reduction of the relatively expensive Corporation Police to, in effect, a headquarters staff provided a partial offset. The largest single element of the new budget was the salaries of the 290 constables on the beat. Although higher standards were expected of the new policemen, the weekly pay was pegged at 18s. The Watch Committee justified this financial economy with the argument that “men well qualified to form the permanent body can be procured for eighteen shillings per week, with, in addition, the principal articles of clothing”. This proved to be true, at least in terms of procurement, but a high turn-over suggests that many recruits

found it difficult keeping up to the required standard and those who could were able to find easier money elsewhere.²⁸⁴

In seeking to justify higher expenditure, the author(s) of the Watch Committee report also advanced a novel idea: “they [the Watch Committee] are not without hopes that the preventive force contemplated will, by diminishing crime, prove a saving in contingent expenses to a much greater amount than the difference between the cost of the old system and that of the plan now submitted”. The contingent expenses in question are perhaps no more than those associated with the judicial process but the notion that there was more to the cost of crime than simply the expenses of policing was soon to be developed much further.

If achieving real economy was difficult, the goal of greater efficiency was demonstrably easier to attain. The Corporation Police was foremost in the firing line, since it “is not employed as a preventive force, being chiefly engaged in the apprehension of felons, the service of warrants and summonses, attendance on the magistrates, and at the daily and sessional courts”. Further, “the Committee could not discover that any part of it was systematically employed as a permanent street patrol”. This emphasis on preventive policing pervades the thinking of Liverpool’s Watch Committee, as it did of most others in the period. Efficiency was to be achieved by replacing policing that had grown in a haphazard way over the years and depended on inadequate personnel by what might nowadays be termed a total policing solution: a unified force (temporarily excluding the Dock Police) of higher calibre constables, properly organised and led, with jurisdiction over both town and suburbs and ensuring public safety by day as well as at night. More efficient use of resources was to be accompanied by a substantial injection of additional manpower.

An immediate problem for the Watch Committee was who should be in charge of the new force, given that they already had two Superintendants in Parlour and Whitty and in due course were likely to acquire a third in Dowling, of the Dock Police. If pay were seen as a criterion of seniority, Parlour and Dowling were well ahead of Whitty. And yet on 15 February the Watch Committee “resolved

²⁸⁴ The working week was a punishing set of asymmetric shifts, made worse by unforeseen exigencies and the physical demands of the job. Although the day was neatly divided into three 8-hour shifts, 202 of the 290 constables were required for the night shift (2200-0600) and only 88 in the morning (0600-1400) and afternoon (1400-2200). The gap between shifts was sometimes 16 hours, sometimes just 8.

unanimously” that Whitty be appointed to the new post.²⁸⁵ The inclusion of “unanimously” clearly indicates a contentious decision. The report presented to the Watch Committee on 28 January and subsequently to the full council on 3 February was outspoken on the relative merits of Parlour and Whitty. On the former, the conclusion was: “Your Committee regret that they cannot recommend his being retained in any of the new arrangements.” With regard to the latter: “This officer they can strongly recommend as a person well qualified for the appointment of Head Constable.” The cause of Parlour’s fall from grace since the plaudits volunteered to the Royal Commission in 1833 is not entirely clear. The perceived inefficiency of the Corporation Police when scrutinised by the new members of the Watch Committee suggests serious shortcomings in Parlour’s leadership of the force. More damning still was the finding that “a vicious system has long existed” in the force. What this referred to is not stated but, overall, one is left with the suspicion that Parlour may have been too closely associated with the Old Corporation to be trusted with upholding the new institutions introduced by the Reformers.²⁸⁶

The State of Crime

As the new force continued to take shape, further justification of its establishment was provided in what appears to have been an unsolicited report by Walmsley on the state of crime in Liverpool. At a meeting of the Watch Committee on 29 February – chaired most unusually by the mayor himself – Walmsley’s report was referred to a sub-committee for revision before being submitted to the council.²⁸⁷ Notwithstanding this untypical vetting stage, the report was duly submitted to the council under Holmes’s signature on 2 March. Not only was the report approved but 500 copies were to be printed for the benefit of the council and magistrates.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ WCM, 15 February 1836, p. 28.

²⁸⁶ Parlour did not go quietly. Having been tipped off about the report presented to the Watch Committee on 28 January, he wrote to Holmes, requesting a copy of the charges against him, which – understandably – he felt seriously affected his character, and an opportunity to meet his accusers (CM, 3 February 1836, p. 60). In June he submitted a claim for compensation, which was rejected by the council (CM, 6 July 1836, pp. 184-6). This ruling was upheld by the Lords of the Treasury in 1837 (*Liverpool Mercury*, 9 June 1837).

²⁸⁷ WCM, 29 February 1836, p. 51.

²⁸⁸ CM, 2 March 1836, pp. 101-5, which includes the text of Walmsley’s report. No original copy of the published text has been found but it was reprinted in *First Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire as to the best means of establishing an efficient Constabulary Force in the Counties of England and Wales* (London, 1839), pp. 215-7 (Appendix No. 7).

Walmsley himself provides the explanation of what lay behind the anguished deliberations of the Watch Committee and council:²⁸⁹

When I read my report on the state of crime in Liverpool, the council refused to believe it. ... Some laughed at the report, deeming such a state of things impossible, others contended that it must be founded on mistaken statistics. The matter might have dropped here, but I demanded a committee of inquiry [presumably the sub-committee of the Watch Committee], and it was granted. ... A discussion ensued in the town council as to whether the report should be published. Some feared that it would fix a stigma upon Liverpool; others, on the contrary, maintained that it would redound to its credit, as being the first town that had boldly confronted the evil.

So, what was it about Walmsley's report that provoked such a reaction? The headline assertion was that crime was costing the town of Liverpool at least £700,000 p.a. This sum, which was vastly greater than the combined income of the Corporation and the Docks, had been calculated on the basis of the estimated number of thieves and prostitutes operating in the town.²⁹⁰ There were reckoned to be over 2,000 adult male thieves and over 1,200 children assisting them. This criminal activity was supported by several hundred receivers of stolen property, hundreds of disorderly pubs and beer-houses and over 300 brothels. The scale of criminality (and once again this mostly relates to property theft) cannot have been a surprise to anyone living in the centre of town but may have been less evident to the wealthy members of the council, many of whom now lived some distance away from their business premises. What will have been a shock was the financial cost attributed to crime, since this was a novel approach, clearly designed to impress Liverpool's merchants. Walmsley argued that, if this were to be materially diminished, efficient policing was required, hence the new organisation. What he will also have realised – but did not state explicitly – was that, in the light of the new figure for the cost of crime, the increased cost of policing would not be questioned.

The report adhered to the prevailing belief that policing should be focused on the prevention of crime “which it needs no argument to prove is much more beneficial to society than its detection”. In due course this approach would be modified (and

²⁸⁹ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 81-82.

²⁹⁰ CM, 2 March 1836, p. 104. Confusing to the modern perception of crime, the figure of £700,000 includes not just the proceeds of theft (which account for less than half the total) but also income from prostitution.

Liverpool's detectives would achieve considerable acclaim) but systematic policing with the prevention of crime as its object was itself still a relatively new concept. Liverpool's new police force was organised to provide a greatly improved deterrent to crime by dint of better patrolling but Walmsley's report took the concept a stage further by highlighting the role of receivers, landlords and prostitutes in supporting criminal enterprise and by advocating stricter law enforcement.²⁹¹

Receivers of stolen property are the chief supporters of thieves; it is through them the thief is enabled to profit by his theft; it is not enough for him to steal, he must be able to dispose of the property he has stolen. There are some hundreds of these receivers in Liverpool, and it may be impossible entirely to eradicate them from so large and populous a place; but, under the constant observation of a well-regulated Police, with a Magistracy determined to enforce the laws, their mode of life would become so dangerous, difficult, and precarious, that it may be fairly calculated the great majority of them would abandon it.

What Walmsley did not do at this juncture was look behind crime and the facilitation of crime and examine its underlying causes. However, although the sociology of crime was not well-established at this early date, Walmsley was moving in this direction. He was also showing a very methodical approach based on carefully conducted investigations and gathering of statistics. In September 1837 the prestigious British Association for the Advancement of Science held its annual conference in Liverpool and Walmsley, as ever alive to the possibilities offered for publicising his police work locally and nationally, presented a paper on crime to the Statistical Section. Part of Walmsley's motivation was undoubtedly to introduce himself to the great and the good from all parts of the country, and the British Association, both in its conference attendees and wider membership, was replete with prominent figures from many branches of scientific and cultural life. However, it was also the mark of an innovative (and brave) merchant to address a leading scientific body and engage them in discussion of a radically new approach to crime and policing.

In his paper Walmsley reaffirmed his earlier findings and included several comments about the social conditions of the thieves and prostitutes.²⁹² He pointed

²⁹¹ CM, 2 March 1836, p. 101-2.

²⁹² *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 September 1837; *Report of the Seventh Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (London, 1838), p. 139.

out that their average income of perhaps £80 p.a. could not be considered “an excessive temptation to a life of crime and sin” and that the mass of them led “a life of misery”. He had been informed that, of the 419 inmates of the borough gaol, half could neither read nor write or could only read imperfectly. He concluded:

I have come forward at this time solely with the hope that the subject may be taken up by those able and willing to devise and carry into effect some means for the amelioration of the condition of so many of our fellow-creatures. The surveillance of a vigilant police unquestionably lessens the opportunities for the commission of crime, and leads to the quick detection of the offenders; but humanity requires, that while we take measures to punish, we should use means to reclaim.

Whilst Walmsley and his colleagues worked hard in some areas (notably education and the Corn Laws) to improve social conditions, it was left to their Tory successors to tackle fundamental issues such as housing and the water supply. Even so, Walmsley’s report on crime statistics was recognised as a significant contribution to policing policy. When the Royal Commission on establishing an efficient Constabulary Force in the counties of England and Wales reported in 1839, Walmsley’s original 1836 report was quoted in its entirety.²⁹³

By the time of his report on the state of crime, Walmsley’s presence on the new council was becoming inescapable. With no political pedigree and without waiting to establish his credentials, he had sprung into action immediately and his principal focus was law and order. On 6 January 1836, even before he had been appointed to the Watch Committee, he moved the motion in council which saw the appointment of Liverpool’s first professional, salaried police magistrate.²⁹⁴ On 4 February he was appointed to a committee charged with enquiring into Liverpool’s civil courts, the Court of Passage and the Court of Requests. The subsequent report bore Walmsley’s signature as chairman.²⁹⁵ Appointed to the Watch Committee on 8 January, Walmsley was a member of the sub-committee that devised the organisation of the New Police and reported back on 28 January. On 3 February he was tasked with drawing up conditions of service with the Town Clerk for the new constables. He reported back on 6 February and, in the absence of Holmes, chaired

²⁹³ *First Report of the Commissioners* (London, 1839), pp. 11-12 and 215-7 (Appendix No. 7).

²⁹⁴ CM, 6 January 1836, p. 12.

²⁹⁵ CM, 4 February 1836, pp. 74-5; and 27 February 1836, pp. 83-5.

the Watch Committee's meeting for the first time.²⁹⁶ And then on 29 February he delivered his report on the state of crime.

The Watch Committee rapidly became Walmsley's fiefdom. In November 1836, when the various committees were reconstituted after the annual municipal election, Walmsley was elected chairman. He was re-elected in 1837 and 1838 and again in 1840 after completing his year as mayor. Having taken time out in mid-1841 to attend to his parliamentary campaign, Walmsley returned to the chair on 3 July to take the Head Constable's report on the election riots! He chaired his last meeting on 9 October 1841.

Although Walmsley was the driving force for police reform on the council, he clearly could not have acquired so much information nor framed and implemented so many changes so quickly without expert assistance. The key to his investigations was the access and aid he could command from his new official position. Some of his information came from direct personal experience:²⁹⁷

I set about exploring through all their ramifications the dens of crime in the borough. My position enabled me to command the aid necessary for this purpose. It was a loathsome task to undertake, but I pursued it to the end, hunting vice through all its windings till I traced it to its nurseries, and it was often at the risk of personal danger that I made the survey. ... Step by step, I collected my information, and accumulated proofs of my assertions; then I embodied the whole in writing, and laid it before the municipal board.

At times the load was shared. William Blain, a fellow member of the Watch Committee, later identified himself with Walmsley's work and said that he had himself made considerable personal investigation of the state of crime.²⁹⁸

Some of the changes must have been conceived in outline before the Reformers took power. The obvious candidate for this crucial supporting role is Whitty. Parlour had fallen from favour and his police force had been discredited: he is most unlikely to have contributed significantly to the new order. By contrast, Whitty had been praised by the Watch Committee and had become the principal beneficiary of the organisational changes. Walmsley himself later praised Whitty's contribution: "His

²⁹⁶ WCM, 3 February 1836, p. 21; and 6 February 1836, p. 22.

²⁹⁷ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 80-81.

²⁹⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 September 1837.

tact and experience greatly aided me in framing a code of rules and regulations that have stood the test of practice."²⁹⁹ This implies Whitty was engaged with Walmsley from the outset, a view which is supported by a testimonial from Whitty (probably written after Walmsley's death):³⁰⁰

I had practically studied the question, and was thoroughly acquainted with what ought to be done. Mr. Walmsley knew this, and listened to me with great deference, soon mastering all details as thoroughly as I did[.] ... The Liverpool police force was the first established out of London, and Mr. Walmsley mainly contributed to this.

Whether Walmsley and Whitty were acquainted before the Reformers took power is unknown. It is conceivable that Walmsley, as a prominent corn broker, had business dealings with Whitty's father, once an affluent County Wexford corn merchant, but there is no suggestion that Walmsley had any plans for reforming policing prior to his election.

Why Walmsley should have espoused this particular cause to such an extent can only be surmised. As a child he will have heard of his uncle Joshua's going up to London to give evidence in a capital case at the Old Bailey. Many years later, soon after starting in business, Walmsley was engaged by the creditors of a corn dealer who had defaulted and absconded to France to track him down and make him see reason. In the course of an unsuccessful pursuit, Walmsley learned how ineffectual the unreformed police of London were.³⁰¹ More recently, he will have been aware of efforts by his cousin John Walmsley, a lead merchant, to stop his flat-boat from being stolen. However, none of this really explains Walmsley's interest in law and order.

The inescapable conclusion is that Walmsley was simply looking for a suitable cause to launch his political career. Although he had also been appointed to the Education Committee (and in due course this would take up much of his time), there he was in the company of the redoubtable Rathbone and opportunities for controlling the agenda were limited. The report on the state of crime in Liverpool was a typical Walmsley masterstroke: it had not been called for but was impressive and attracted attention over a prolonged period. The very same technique would be

²⁹⁹ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 83.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-55.

employed later in 1836 on an even grander scale in his speech “What have the Council done?” To his credit, Walmsley stuck to his task until the very end of his career in municipal politics. He later recalled his time setting up the new police: “It took me three years to mature a code of regulations, and personally to inspect the carrying out of its details. Many hours of the day, and frequently large portions of the night, I devoted to the task.”³⁰²

The long awaited amalgamation of Dowling’s Dock Police with Whitty’s Constabulary Force was finally scheduled for 25 June 1837. Walmsley and two other Watch Committee members had been charged as far back as 2 March 1836 with conferring with the Dock Trustees on how to effect the union “on fair and equitable terms”. Detailed planning commenced immediately after Walmsley had been elected chairman of the Watch Committee with the formation of another sub-committee on 26 November to inquire into the power of the council and the Dock Trustees under existing legal authorities to consolidate the two police forces and, if this were practicable, to produce a plan. This sub-committee, having worked in full consultation with a sub-committee of the Dock Committee, eventually presented its report on 12 April 1837, recommending amalgamation. Reappointed to finalise details of the amalgamation, the sub-committee, headed by Walmsley himself, reported back on 6 May and their recommendations on amalgamation were duly approved by both the council and the Dock Committee and the date set for 25 June.³⁰³

The sub-committee’s first report argued for amalgamation on the grounds of efficiency and economy. In an echo of past findings, it appeared “that there exist constant bickering and jealousies between the two Police forces arising chiefly from supposed acts of mutual interference; that the Superintendent of the Borough Police [i.e., Whitty] has never in any instance received from the Dock Police information of any felony or upon any other subject whatsoever, and that the ends of Justice have often been defeated”. In the opinion of Whitty and Dowling, an assumption of superiority by one force over the other would always exist and “it would be important that the two forces should be united under one Superintendent as a means of promoting a more constant quick and free communication between all parts of the Borough”. The sub-committee also pointed out that the most destructive fires took

³⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 83-4.

³⁰³ WCM, 2 March 1836, p. 53; 8 April 1837, pp. 293-8; 6 May 1837, pp. 312-4; and 10 June 1837, p. 327.

place near the docks but the present Dock Police were not well-practised as firemen and amalgamation would lead to better handling of fires. Equally, it was suggested that a unified force, able to bring 500 men to bear in one place, “would have a great moral effect in preventing Riots”.

The economic arguments for amalgamation were twofold. First, the required police duties could be performed by a smaller number of men than were employed by the two separate forces. Secondly, in the case of riots, the need to swear in special constables, who in one year had cost £800, would be obviated. One economy not called for was the saving of one post at the top. Whereas Parlour had been deemed expendable, it is clear that Dowling’s continued presence was considered highly desirable. It will be recalled that, in the first detailed proposals for reorganisation put to the Watch Committee on 28 January 1836, provision was made for an “In-door Superintendent or Commissioner”. This well-remunerated post with the grandiose title of Commissioner may be seen from the outset as the means of keeping Dowling sweet: it could hardly be justified in other terms.

The sub-committee’s second report on 6 May established pecking order and perquisites. Whitty, as Head Constable, was to receive an increased salary of 500 *guineas*, Dowling’s current house and £50 p.a. for his horse. Dowling, as Commissioner, would get 500 *pounds* and Whitty’s house, “it being clearly understood that the Commissioner do act under the superintendence of the Head Constable”. Evidently, Dowling was content to bide his time but, when ill-health persuaded Whitty to return to journalism in early 1844, Dowling was passed over again. However, the new appointee as Head Constable, Henry Miller, formerly Superintendent of the Glasgow Police Force, lasted less than a year and Dowling was finally appointed Head Constable in January 1845.

Other, smaller changes helped usher in a new approach to the business of managing policing. At a meeting of the council in November 1837, following that year’s municipal election, Walmsley, as outgoing chairman of the Watch Committee, moved the appointment of a new committee. Instead of observing convention and allowing council members full freedom of choice, he submitted a list of proposed members, indicating how many times those who were to be re-appointed had attended the Watch Office. (Out on their own at the top of the list, with an astonishingly high rate of attendance, were two Reformers, the retired sugar refiner William Thornhill and the octogenarian merchant Francis Jordan.) Walmsley explained that his nominations were also intended to provide the Watch Committee

with a representative from of each of the 16 wards, to whom questions might properly be referred. This blatant attempt to increase the accountability of committee members both to the council and their respective wards drew complaints from a small number of councillors but Walmsley got his way, probably alienating some on his own side in the process.³⁰⁴

Just as crime statistics played a significant part in the original justification for a new police force in Liverpool, so their continued collection (and oft disputed interpretation) would become a regular facet of policing, not just in Liverpool but nationally (and to this day!). By the time Walmsley addressed the British Association in September 1837 he was able to refine some of the statistics he had produced in his original state of crime report (the number of criminals had been underestimated) and referred to a “more recent inquiry, carried on by better means, afforded by a more experienced police force”. However, even he did not appreciate quite where this aspect of more efficient policing would lead:³⁰⁵

I am glad to see that so great an interest is now taken in criminal statistics. One of our worthy magistrates, a few days since, observed that people were wont to go in search of the picturesque, but that now they come in pursuit of crime. Like Sancho Panza's hare, they start up where least expected; but the subject being disagreeable and repulsive, there is no danger, I apprehend, of this kind of research becoming mischievously fashionable.

Any proper interpretation of such statistics was made more difficult by the absence of similar returns for other major towns. In the 1840s parliamentary papers were compiled, which tabulated crime by region, but until then Liverpool's Watch Committee was almost on its own. Even the Royal Commission on establishing an efficient Constabulary Force in the counties of England and Wales, reporting in early 1839, was obliged, in the absence of widespread and reliable statistics, to make do for the most part with questionnaires and anecdotal evidence.

In February 1839, a month before the Royal Commission went to press, Walmsley produced a further, much more detailed report on policing and crime in Liverpool during 1838, complete with 10 statistical tables.³⁰⁶ The stated purpose of the report was to permit the “agency of the Police in the prevention and detection of crime and

³⁰⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 10 November 1837.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 22 September 1837.

³⁰⁶ WCM, 2 February 1839, pp. 628-41.

the efficiency of the Force” to be “correctly tested and ascertained”. In part, this was to justify “the large amount of £50,000 for the support of the Police and other Establishments connected with the Administration of Justice”: by 1838 the strength of the police had risen to 574, substantially more than in 1836. The report stressed the importance of character in a police officer “in enforcing and preserving a wholesome respect of the Law” and noted with satisfaction that “the Character of the Police Force had progressively improved”. Whether or not this perception was justified, the statistics indicate that disciplinary proceedings were rife.

The preventive approach to policing was pursued systematically. One sixth of those apprehended by the police were classed as “Suspicious Characters and Reputed Thieves” (i.e., they were suspected of being about to commit a crime); of these, two fifths received summary punishment from the magistrates. Furthermore, the occupiers of 1,242 houses and business premises found insecure at night were sent written notices. About half the crimes reported related to various types of property theft. A 50% reduction in “known professional thieves” in 1838, by comparison with 1837, was attributed to their migratory habits: under no particular obligation to reside in any one place, they would select those districts where they could pursue crime with the least chance of interruption or detection. The remaining crimes were mostly to do with drunkenness and other disorderly behaviour. Significantly, crimes of violence – other than common assault – and street-robberies were minimal. It would appear that Liverpool was a relatively safe place!

Some of the Watch Committee’s conclusions would have caused greater surprise. Punishment alone, it was argued, could not be expected to bring about much diminution in the number of professional criminals, since almost half those sentenced to transportation in 1838 had, prior to their offence, been reputable people. (The corollary of this – and no doubt an uncomfortable inference – was that relatively few of the known professional thieves who had not elected to leave Liverpool of their own accord had been convicted of a serious offence and given a heavy sentence.) Concern was also expressed about the high re-offending rate of juveniles, who in time would become professional thieves. In line with recommendations from the Inspector of Prisons, the report urged the council to adopt measures for the reformation of juvenile offenders.

The selection of policemen for the new force in 1836 had been more rigorous than ever before.³⁰⁷ Of the old Nightly Watch, initially only 53 men had been accepted and another 28 noted as “good men and serviceable”; it is likely that no-one from Parlour’s constables was retained. The remaining two hundred or so men were selected from external applicants. The behaviour and character of the policemen was monitored closely and members of the Watch Committee sat regularly to hear disciplinary charges. The 1839 Watch Committee report shows an astonishingly high rate of offending. At the end of 1838 the Constabulary Force comprised 574 men. In the course of that year, 101 men (including 3 Inspectors) had been dismissed, 486 had been fined (including 8 Inspectors) and 290 cautioned! On a more positive note, 520 men had been rewarded and 15 promoted. (Opportunities for promotion were limited both by the flat management structure and the perceived need for a social division between ranks.) The police also faced a high risk of violence in the knowledge that offenders were unlikely to receive a heavy sentence. In 1838, 339 instances of common assault on a police officer were recorded: most resulted in summary punishment by magistrates and only 8 in committal for trial at the Quarter Sessions or Assizes.

A no more flattering portrayal of police life is provided by an unexpected source. Between October 1843 and January 1844 an anonymous series of articles entitled *The Life of a Policeman* appeared in a weekly periodical.³⁰⁸ The author claimed to be an ex-constable who had joined the Liverpool Police in 183- [sic] and subsequently gone to work for the Metropolitan Police. Detailed accounts of real events suggest that he had indeed served as a constable in Liverpool in the period 1839-41. The anti-heroes of his narrative (“blue devils” to their adversaries) are engaged in a constant battle of wits with their ever-vigilant Inspectors as they endeavour to steal away from plodding the beat to find time for drinking, smoking, sleeping and paramours. Sweeteners from the public they are protecting are always welcome, sometimes financial, sometimes in kind. Also pitted against them are the stern members of the Watch Committee, specifically Messrs. Thornhill and Jordan, but proving a breach of rules on the part of streetwise constables is no easy matter.

What does emerge from these part fictional, part true tales is a picture of what policing Liverpool in the late 1830s actually meant. If one makes allowance for the

³⁰⁷ WCM, 15 February 1836, p. 27.

³⁰⁸ *Penny Satirist*, 28 October 1843 - 20 January 1844.

requirements of satire (without denying the regular occurrence of indiscipline, inefficiency and petty corruption), there remains a convincing account of regular patrolling along familiar beats, frequent encounters with drunkenness and disorderly behaviour (not least by women of dubious circumstances) and, perhaps surprisingly, a consistently humane approach to the public, including trouble-makers and numerous Irish, all of which is occasionally punctuated by a major tragedy, whether the murder of PC David Bailey or a destructive hurricane. Whatever the shortcomings of numerous individual policemen, there can be no doubt that both the Watch Committee and the Constabulary's senior officers were absolutely determined to create a police force that was free of inefficiency and indiscipline.

The legacy

The biggest achievement of the Reformers in the field of law and order was simply to seize the moment and, aided by the Municipal Corporations Act, create an enlarged and unified police force, organised in accordance with what were considered at the time to be the most advanced and progressive principles.³⁰⁹ This was done quickly and efficiently and without any significant hostility from the public. A precedent had been set some years earlier by the establishment of the Metropolitan Police but Liverpool was amongst the first provincial boroughs to take action. By contrast, policing in Manchester (a function of no less than three separate forces) was caught up in a political row over the town's new Charter of Incorporation, such that the Home Office had to seek the Manchester Police Act of 1839 and impose an external Commissioner. Only in 1842 did Manchester regain full control of its policing.

The early development of crime statistics in Liverpool was also an important step. Even before the more detailed record keeping evident in the Watch Committee's report for 1838, Liverpool was one of few locations that could supply the Royal Commission on establishing an efficient Constabulary Force in the counties of England and Wales with the required data. It was explicitly stated that no means could be found of acquiring such information from Manchester.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, p. 20, rates this as the only activity by the new council in which any considerable measure of success was attained.

³¹⁰ *First Report of the Commissioners*, pp. 8-9. The locations apart from Liverpool that supplied information were the Metropolitan Police district, Bristol, Bath, Kingston-upon-Hull and Newcastle.

The efficiency of Liverpool's police and its impact on crime are difficult to judge. Certainly those in authority believed that they had effected improvements and this could be demonstrated by the statistics they produced. However, the usual difficulties inherent in interpreting crime statistics are evident. This is particularly true of the period under study since a high proportion of offences recorded (approximately one half) related to "suspicion" or drunken behaviour: how many people were charged will have depended to a considerable extent on policing policy. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that social conditions in Liverpool were constant from year to year: it seems more likely that the ever greater influx of Irish (and other) immigrants created conditions that would have increased the challenges facing the police.

The Royal Commission's report cites anecdotal evidence from professional thieves that suggests Liverpool was too hot for some:³¹¹

I considered that in London and Liverpool, or such places as have got the new police, there is little to be done, unless it be picking pockets. People there think they are safe under the eye of the new police, and will take large sums of money in their pockets.

One thief was quoted as saying that the most important obstructions which could be placed in the way of depredations were a more efficient police, similar to London and Liverpool. He added that there were very few robberies in the centre of Liverpool and all that took place were on the outskirts, outside the police districts. However, receivers of stolen property were said to be more numerous and pay better prices than those in London.³¹² Another offender admitted to being wary of Liverpool's police: "I was afraid of meeting the old knowing officers at Liverpool; they knew me and used to frisk me."³¹³ Such evidence is entirely plausible but, no doubt, it was also what the Royal Commission wanted to hear. A final gloss on police efficiency is provided by the changed state of affairs in the notorious Jerry-hill quarter of Toxteth Park, formerly of so much concern to Francis Jordan. Continuing representations from residents led to a police investigation which revealed only two

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

robberies over a considerable period and concluded that nothing would be achieved by deploying additional policemen.³¹⁴

During Whitty's tenure as Head Constable (and more so thereafter) the frequency of rioting increased. The causes varied but, inevitably, sectarian battles, reflecting religious and political polarisation, became more common.³¹⁵ Anti-police riots, often associated with attempts to rescue prisoners, increased in number (but did not peak until the years after 1844). In general, the police managed to retain control of the situation and, although military support was occasionally requested, troops were never used against rioters.³¹⁶ This highly desirable outcome depended on a large police force and the ability to deploy mounted police. The joint endeavours of Whitty and the Watch Committee ensured the necessary resources. Ironically, the greatest challenge came during the 1841 parliamentary election, in which Walmsley was a candidate. Whitty's subsequent report to the Watch Committee is a graphic account of numerous actions akin to cavalry charges over several days but the mobs (up to 20,000 strong) were dispersed, casualties were few and damage to property, although widespread, amounted to just £500.³¹⁷ In a further vindication of the value of trained police over the military, a force of 175 Chelsea Pensioners enrolled as Extra Constables had to be confined inside the St James Market till midnight "lest they might, if sooner let out, create a disturbance themselves, as they also had been fearfully excited".

For Walmsley, his success in establishing the Constabulary Force and his role as chairman of the Watch Committee launched his political career. Almost overnight he had pushed himself – uninvited – to the forefront of the Reformers and provided himself with opportunities for attracting further attention, as at the conference of the British Association. A key element had been his working relationship with Whitty, who on his return to journalism provided Walmsley with wholehearted press support. At a later date Whitty's son Edward was to play a different but highly important role in furthering Walmsley's political aspirations (see Chapter 6). However, not everything that Walmsley pursued was governed by personal ambition. His patronage of the Irish Catholic Whitty and their sympathetic handling

³¹⁴ WCM, 25 August 1838, p. 538.

³¹⁵ See Neal, *Sectarian Violence*, especially pp. 54-64.

³¹⁶ Bryson, 'Riotous Liverpool', p. 129 and pp. 113-27 *passim*.

³¹⁷ WCM, 3 July 1841, 352 MIN/WAT 1/2, pp. 421-7.

of potentially disastrous sectarian tensions proved to be of great benefit to the community but was from the personal point of view a risky step. Equally, his move to make members of the Watch Committee more accountable to the electorate (and show up non-attendance) may be seen as a small but worthy act of radicalism that promised to alienate some of his fellow Reformers. Furthermore, some of his comments on the causes of crime were breaking new ground and hinting at ideas on social reform that went well beyond what Liverpool's well-heeled merchants were comfortable hearing. The councillors that worked most closely with him were invariably the new men amongst the Reformers. A gap was rapidly developing between them and the old guard led by Rathbone.

iii. EDUCATION AND THE CORPORATION SCHOOLS

Of all the issues that the Reformers tackled it was the so-called “education question” that provoked the strongest reaction, not just from their political opponents but also from local ministers of the Established Church and even some prominent members of their own caucus. Ultimately, the issue undoubtedly did considerable damage to the electoral prospects of the Reformers but, ironically, it can be argued that they came close to wearing down the opposition to their measures and establishing a widespread system of public education unparalleled in England. That they lost power in 1841 and saw their educational reforms unpicked should be attributed less to this or any other specific issue but rather to a combination of national trends and a peculiarly local manifestation of “Church and State” politics.

Hilton has characterised the English school system at the beginning of the nineteenth century as “exceptionally diverse” and by 1843 as stuck in a “denominational quagmire for decades to come”.³¹⁸ There was little governmental intervention and little cooperation between Protestant denominations. Liverpool was beset with the same educational deficiencies as many other towns but, to its misfortune, had one further problem that was essentially unique in England. Whereas the Protestant denominations muddled through and provided a safety-net for at least some of their poorer adherents, there was little provision by anyone for the increasingly numerous and mostly very poor Irish Catholics. Their plight had simply been ignored by the old council.

Liverpool’s education policy in the years 1836-1841 has been fully detailed by James Murphy in an admirably thorough and detailed monograph that constitutes one of very few full-length contributions to the historiography of early Victorian Liverpool.³¹⁹ Murphy draws extensively on municipal records and contemporary newspaper reports (both reformist and Tory) and presents a cohesive account of events in Liverpool and how they were influenced by (and in turn influenced) educational policy elsewhere in England. This section broadly follows Murphy’s analysis and does not seek to précis his narrative but rather to look more closely at the local political context, including how education became a frontline issue and what motivated some of the key players. Frank Neal also covers the education question (though in much less detail) as part of his study of sectarianism,

³¹⁸ Hilton, *Mad, Bad, & Dangerous*, pp. 534-8.

³¹⁹ J. Murphy, *The Religious Problem in English Education* (Liverpool, 1959).

approaching it from a different angle as an example of “No Popery” politics that helped bring down the Reformers.³²⁰

We have seen earlier that, in their individual election addresses, the Reformers concentrated on a small number of key issues, principally economical management of the Corporation’s finances, civil and religious liberty, and education. It was obvious how corrective measures could be taken on the first of these issues and in their first year in office the Reformers acted swiftly and vigorously. The pursuit of civil and religious liberty did not lend itself to a clearly defined set of reforms: in large part it was a question of ensuring that – as Rathbone had put it – “the Funds of the Corporation, being raised from all, should be expended for the benefit of all, without reference to Sect, Party, or Class of Society”. This principle could clearly be applied to education as readily as other areas of municipal life but the candidates who mentioned education mostly offered no clue as to what, if anything, they had in mind. The two exceptions were James Carson and Richard Sheil (see Chapter 3). Carson had lived up to his reputation for speaking his mind by calling for the establishment of a public system of education that was free of sectarian influence. Even in these heady times Carson’s extreme language was hardly likely to win a following. In contrast, Sheil had offered a clearer and more constructive perspective, showing that there was more to the issue than equality of opportunity: the selection of lawmakers required an educated electorate. This foreshadowed the later proposal of Radical politicians at the national level that extension of the franchise should be linked to improvements in the state of education of the masses.

Liverpool’s record in public education had not been a proud one.³²¹ With free grammar schools well-established across the country, the old council had seen fit to allow its own school, founded in the early sixteenth century, to close down in about 1803 and, despite occasional talk of providing a new school, nothing was done. On a more positive note, in late 1824 the old council began deliberations on the establishment of one or more elementary schools for the education of children of indigent parents in accordance with the Church of England. A committee soon recommended the building of a North Free School in Bevington Bush and a South Free School in Park Lane. Much of the credit is due to two of its members who would feature prominently in the reform era: Thomas Case, an old Tory with an

³²⁰ Neal, *Sectarian Violence*, pp. 43-54.

³²¹ Murphy, *Religious Problem*, pp. 2-9.

unusually progressive attitude to social issues, and William Wallace Currie, later the first mayor of the new council.

Both schools opened in early 1827. An advertisement for the North School stipulated that boys would be accepted at the age of 7 and girls at 6. In keeping with the constitution of the Corporation of Liverpool, which formally comprised the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses, children of freemen (burgesses) were to be given priority.³²² This selective approach and the imposition of practices of the Established Church were typical of the measures taken by the old council that fuelled the calls by Reformers for civil and religious liberty. Not only were the freemen a small (and gradually diminishing) minority of the town's rapidly growing population but even within their number not everyone belonged to the Church of England.

The Free Schools, later known as the Corporation Schools, were always a small (and relatively low cost) concession to the requirement for public education. Although they each admitted hundreds of boys and girls, far greater numbers of pupils were educated in schools attached to the town's churches and chapels and in the private "dame schools".³²³ An unknown (but large) number of children, Protestant as well as Irish Catholic, received no elementary education at all. For the lucky minority whose parents could afford to invest in secondary education, private schools abounded within Liverpool, in the outlying districts and yet further afield, especially in the northern counties. Pride of place in the town went to the Royal Institution School, which opened in 1819. Run on liberal principles, it provided a largely classical education to the sons of the local great and good, irrespective of religious affiliation. As Murphy has pointed out, leading Church of England ministers, who subsequently opposed reform of the Corporation Schools, had no compunction about sending their own sons to this school, which – unlike its later rival, the Liverpool Collegiate Institution – did not base its system of education on the teaching of the Established Church.³²⁴ The liberal principles of the Royal Institution School were taken a step further with the founding of the Mechanics' Institution, which enjoyed support from all sectors of the community. When the

³²² *Liverpool Mercury*, 13 April 1827.

³²³ The charitable school of the Bluecoat Hospital occupied a distinguished and almost unique position amongst Liverpool's schools.

³²⁴ Murphy, *Religious Problem*, p. 215n. Murphy does not mention that the ministers in question also included none other than the Revd. Hugh M'Neile, the scourge of the Reformers.

Mechanics' Institution moved to purpose-built premises in 1837, the scope of its child education programme expanded to include both high and lower schools and, in accordance with the wishes of the principal benefactors, none of the teaching posts were to be filled by ministers of religion.³²⁵

When the new council contemplated its forthcoming work in early 1836, education will have been of interest to many of its members and, in the context of promoting civil and religious liberty, action of some sort could perhaps be expected. On the other hand, the Corporation Schools were a small part of the town's educational establishment and benefitted only the poorest classes. There were other priorities with a more direct bearing on the town's financial and commercial well-being. This drive towards good governance and fiscal restraint after decades of old corruption also meant that there would be little enthusiasm for new schemes that could not easily be funded or justified in terms of enabling commerce. It is no surprise, therefore, that, although issues such as municipal organisation, finance and even policing received immediate attention and were treated to far-reaching reforms introduced with breathtaking speed, education was put in the pending tray. An Education Committee was established on 8 January 1836 "to promote the Improvement and Education of the Poorer Classes, to inquire into the means now in operation for these objects, and to report what farther may seem necessary and desirable".³²⁶ However, the committee did not commence its business in earnest until 22 March, when a sub-committee was formed to draw up a "general report" on the state of the Corporation Schools.³²⁷ At the same meeting the committee passed a pre-emptive resolution "that in the first Report of this Committee to the Council it be recommended that the Irish National Education System be introduced into the Corporation Schools".

Despite the slow start, the composition of the twelve-man Education Committee indicated that its remit was of importance. The chair was taken by Rathbone, the driving force behind the Reformers and, as such, a busy man in the early days of the new municipal administration. His colleagues included two future mayors (Hornby and Walmsley) and a former Tory mayor (Charles Horsfall). They were joined by the two Reformers who had highlighted education in their election

³²⁵ Liverpool Mechanics' Institution, 373 INS 1/3, 15 August 1837.

³²⁶ CM, 352 MIN/COU II 1/1, p. 22.

³²⁷ Education Committee Minutes [ECM], 352 MIN/EDU 1/1 (LvRO), pp. 2-3.

addresses, Carson and Sheil. Walmsley, Sheil and Horsfall were all closely involved with the then ongoing project to build new premises for the Mechanics' Institution in Mount Street and Walmsley had started his adult life as a schoolmaster.³²⁸ The religious diversity of the Reformers was well reflected in the committee's composition and, although every major denomination was represented, none accounted for more than a third of the membership. There were four members of the Established Church, one of the Church of Scotland, two Independents, one Baptist, one Roman Catholic and three Unitarians, including Rathbone. As education became a political battleground, both these individual religious affiliations and the specific educational needs of the various religious communities became of secondary importance compared to the ideological commitment of the Reformers to civil and religious liberty and the equally determined resistance of local Church of England ministers and a new generation of Tory politicians to further constitutional reforms and, specifically, to any change in the Church-State relationship.

When the Education Committee finally started work, events moved swiftly. The sub-committee of Rathbone, Samuel Hope and Thomas Blackburn presented an initial situation report on 29 March 1836, which was approved by the committee and then prepared for submission to the full council.³²⁹ This report, replete with facts and figures, was typical of the approach taken by the Reformers in deciding how to proceed on a particular issue. At this early stage there was no attempt to produce a definitive set of clear-cut recommendations: this can be interpreted as a deliberate move by Rathbone not to rush into precipitate action. Instead the report described the operation and attendance of the schools, set out the deficiencies in their construction and the costs of remedial building work, highlighted wasteful expenditure and outlined what further research they needed to undertake.

The figures indicated that educational provision was more extensive than one might have supposed but nonetheless a full one third of the school-age population did not receive regular schooling. Of an estimated population of 43,000 between the ages of 5 and 14, about 13,000 attended "ordinary" (i.e., private) schools, 13,020 went to the 87 "public" (i.e., church) schools and the remainder were "destitute of all

³²⁸ Walmsley had become an usher at his school in Westmorland and had also taught in Liverpool for a short period: see Appendix 2.

³²⁹ ECM, pp. 3-7.

instruction” apart from a minority attending Sunday schools.³³⁰ The Church of England schools accounted for half the public day school population, with the Corporation Schools admitting just over 1,500. It is noteworthy that, unlike other church schools, those of the Church of England took in proportionately fewer girls and significantly fewer infants. They were also far more likely to charge school fees, however small. Perhaps the most glaring statistic is the paucity of education for Roman Catholic children. With the (predominantly Roman Catholic) Irish population of Liverpool amounting to about a quarter of the total and constituting a much larger proportion of the poorest social classes without the means to afford private schooling, just 1,660 pupils were enrolled in 11 church schools.

Of the Corporation Schools, the North School could accommodate 400 boys, 350 girls and 250 infants but the numbers enrolled were rather less – 353, 256 and 230 respectively – and average attendance still lower – about 320, 200 and 120. The South School had 304 boys, 230 girls and 170 infants on the books and average attendance of about 260, 240 [sic] and 160 respectively. These figures suggest that the schools were being underutilised and that absenteeism was a problem. The children each paid 1½d per week, which in effect covered most of the salaries of the teachers. All the children were required to attend church on Sunday morning and learn the Church of England catechism.

In their concluding remarks, the Education Committee repeated the Reformers’ mantra in assuring the council that “they consider economy as a most important consideration in any plans for the benefit of the Poor”. More significantly, they added:³³¹

They will immediately proceed to enquire into what plans have been found most effectual for the Physical Intellectual Moral and Religious Improvement of the Pupils in similar Schools particularly those adopted by the Irish Education Board; and cautiously to make trial of whatever shall appear most desirable taking care to avoid any thing sectarian or exclusive in the regulations or in the Religious instructions imparted in order that the schools may be open to and be sought by all.

³³⁰ The number of schools reflects the number of places of worship. Each church or chapel would have separate schools for boys and girls and sometimes for infants as well, though often they would share the same buildings.

³³¹ ECM, pp. 6-7.

Ideologically and practically, the Irish system was the obvious way forward for the Reformers. The schools would be opened up to all who needed to fall back on public education, irrespective of religious affiliation, thereby promoting civil and religious liberty. On a practical level, the needs of at least some of the numerous indigent Roman Catholics could be accommodated without need of expensive investment in new schools. The logic was doubtless seen as compelling but the words “cautiously to make trial” indicate that opposition to any such proposals might well be encountered. Other approaches to providing an educational safety-net for the poor may have been aired (as they were later in 1836, notably by Charles Birch) but the problem for the Reformers was their ingrained fiscal conservatism and need to disassociate themselves from the perceived spending excesses of the old council. Ironically, their political opponents might have been persuaded to digest additional spending on the poor more readily than fundamental changes to the operation of the existing schools.

The first opposition manifested itself at the very next meeting of the Education Committee on 2 April 1836, when John Cropper submitted his resignation in a forthright note:³³²

As I see I cannot be of any use on this Committee and as I differ on so many grounds with almost all on the Committee and as I consider the appropriation of the Corporate Funds to these purposes until there is a surplus is illegal I beg to resign my appointment.

John Cropper was a much respected Reformer but he did not carry the same authority as his famous abolitionist father, James. He was viewed as something of an eccentric and, having abandoned his Quaker roots, he had embarked on a restless religious progression round several Non-Conformist congregations.

Before the committee’s report had gone before the full council, a letter was received from the Junior Rector of Liverpool, the Reverend Augustus Campbell, on behalf of the Committee of Management of the Corporation Schools. Campbell enquired, in an apparently polite manner, whether the council would be disposed to allow his committee to retain the management of the Corporation Schools so long as they undertook to pay the ordinary expenses apart from maintenance.³³³ Campbell was evidently proposing to take the schools further into the Church of England fold but it

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

is not clear whether he was willing to contemplate any concessions on religious instruction or admissions policy. In any event, he duly received a lengthy response from Rathbone as chairman of the Education Committee.³³⁴ Rathbone's letter was blunt. He had long been personally unpopular with his political opponents and his style on this occasion verged on the dismissive. Although he had doubtless calculated that he would have the weight of the council behind him, it was boldness bordering on the rash to confront a leading representative of the Established Church in this manner. Rathbone pointed out that the council had decided to defray the expense of the schools, that management of them could not be delegated to the clergy of one persuasion and that "by the exercise of a little mutual concession and liberal ... Christian feeling" the Committee's plans would promote "a useful moral and religious Education of the Poor". To his credit, Campbell did not disengage from continuing efforts by both sides to find a compromise but, for Campbell and the hitherto equally moderate Tory veteran Horsfall, room for manoeuvre was rapidly running out as more strident new voices came to the fore.

The Education Committee pressed on, securing approval in principle for its proposals from the full council on 1 June 1836. After a few important amendments to clarify the timetabling of religious instruction, in which for the first time Walmsley was instrumental, the proposals were finally approved by the council on 6 July. The storm then broke and reached its peak at a public meeting held in the Amphitheatre on 13 July.³³⁵ The meeting was convened by the "Clergy", with representation from several denominations in addition to the Established Church, "for the purpose of obtaining Subscriptions for the erection of Public Schools, where the children may be educated from the Bible, and not from the selections and notes of the Irish Board of Commissioners on Scriptural education, as determined by the Council".³³⁶ As

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

³³⁵ Just before this meeting, the Revd. Joseph Blanco White, who had arrived in Liverpool and joined the Unitarian community in early 1835, recorded in his journal a bleak assessment of Liverpool's population: "The general character of this town makes, besides, a painful impression upon me: I think I see the deep, hideous marks which the Slave trade, to which it owes enormous growth, impressed upon its inhabitants. ... The violence of party feeling, among the higher ranks, and the large mixture of real, mixed, and pretended enthusiasm, connected with the political Church of this realm, make me shrink more and more from all contact with society." (Revd. J. H. Thom, (ed.), *The Life of the Rev. Joseph Blanco White, written by himself; with portions of his correspondence* (London, 1845), Vol. II, pp. 244-5; Blanco White Papers, BW III/2, pp. 142-3, 11 July 1836.)

³³⁶ Friends of Scriptural Education, *A Full Report of the Speeches & Proceedings at the meeting held at the Amphitheatre on Wednesday, July 13, 1836* (Liverpool, 1836), p. 3.

Murphy has pointed out, most of the speakers, who included the two rectors, argued their case in a restrained and responsible manner.³³⁷ However, now that the issue had passed to public debate, the Reverend Hugh M'Neile, who had been in Liverpool for only a couple of years and had yet to achieve a dominant position in the local Church of England communion, found himself presented with an ideal opportunity to promote his own extreme views and portray the issue as part of a greater conspiracy, to which his response was his accustomed war-cry of "No Popery".³³⁸

Undoubtedly, M'Neile stole the show, despite some obscure theology, but a further highly significant contribution, passed over by Murphy, was made by Samuel Holme, speaking as the representative of the Tradesmen's Conservative Association.³³⁹ Holme echoed M'Neile in seeing a Popish plot:

The Town-council of this town seem to have acted under some spell, some strong enchantment, in the present instance, and I cannot help thinking and saying that this school scheme has been imported from Ireland to further the interests of Popery.

Without saying so explicitly, Holme was astutely lining up his fellow Conservative tradesmen and the new uncompromising breed of Tory, of which he was an increasingly prominent member, as the defenders of the Established Church.

In these early days the driving forces behind the work of the Education Committee were two Non-Conformists: Rathbone, a Unitarian, and Blackburn, an Independent. Both continued with their efforts for the five years they were members of the council, though for one year, while mayor, Rathbone had to stand back from proceedings.³⁴⁰ After the first year, Blackburn took over as chairman of the Education Committee. An outsider might have supposed that the reforms were as sectarian as the system they had replaced, the more so because the Town Council which approved them was in large part made up of other Non-Conformists. However, the Reformers included in their number a significant minority of adherents to the Church of England

³³⁷ Murphy, *Religious Problem*, pp. 58-60.

³³⁸ Neal, *Sectarian Violence*, p. 44, characterises the intervention of M'Neile and his supporters in the clergy in local politics as "an injection of anti-Catholicism into local politics on a scale unparalleled in England and Wales".

³³⁹ Friends of Scriptural Education, *A Full Report*, pp. 30-33.

³⁴⁰ Both were defeated in the municipal election of 1840.

and, over the six-year period that the issue was fought out, these played a full part in implementing and defending the reforms. Hornby and Walmsley served on the committee throughout the period except for the year each was mayor. Another mayor, Earle, served for four years and yet another, Currie, for a single year. These prominent members of the Established Church were clearly not intent on destroying it or promoting the interests of other denominations: for them the issue was one of civil and religious liberty – offering elementary education to those most in need of it, irrespective of religious affiliation. Even a bitter political foe like Holme recognised that he was dealing with some worthy opponents. In his memoirs, he acknowledged – albeit with mellowness born of advancing years – that amongst the “first-class men” with whom he had served on the council were Rathbone, Blackburn and Hornby.³⁴¹

The best speaker was Thomas Blackburne [sic] who was an eloquent and zealous man, a very bitter dissenter and an extreme politician. He was a good man in private and he and I soon got into controversy on the education question.

In the early days of the dispute the only minister of the Church of England to support the changes was James Aspinall of St Luke’s church. Aspinall did what he could to assist both the case for reform and the practical running of the schools, which badly needed ministers and visitors to provide the religious instruction for the Protestant children. However, in the eyes of the opposition he was twice tainted. First, he was supposed to be bitter at having lost out to Campbell during the election for Junior Rector in 1829.³⁴² More importantly, as minister of St Luke’s he was inevitably closely associated with its patron, none other than Walmsley (who had purchased the advowson in 1836), even though he himself had been elected by the old council back in 1830.³⁴³

After the tumultuous denunciation of the Reformers’ education policy at the Amphitheatre, the case for the defence was set out most prominently in two

³⁴¹ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 242.

³⁴² See, for example, Holme, *Autobiography*, pp. 62-3. However, Aspinall was not in fact a candidate for election. The post he failed to secure was that of Campbell’s replacement at St George’s: see *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 November 1829.

³⁴³ *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 December 1830 and 24 January 1851. Walmsley’s motivation was no doubt to promote his own standing in the community and advertise his adherence to the Established Church but it is conceivable that he was also looking to protect Aspinall’s position. St Luke’s was also opposite the old Walmsley mansion in Berry Street.

pamphlets published later in 1836. Aside from vague talk of Popish plots, which perhaps sounded more plausible to the poorly educated tradesmen of this period than it would nowadays, the most damaging allegations – couched in inflammatory language – talked of mutilation of the bible and of its exclusion from the schools. That this was demonstrably not accurate did not stop the accusations from being intoned repeatedly.

The first concerted defence in writing was by Blackburn in his pamphlet dated 10 August 1836.³⁴⁴ It was an outspoken and eloquent defence of what the Town Council had done and why, but it also recalled the sort of intemperate language used earlier by Carson. Blackburn deplored the political character of the meeting at the Amphitheatre and made the accusation that “if the movement did not originate in a desire to bring the Town and Council into discredit, and get the Tories in at the next election, it at least derived no small share of its support from that feeling”.³⁴⁵ He also contended right at the beginning that “on the ground of justice, humanity and sound policy” the very large Irish Catholic population of Liverpool was entitled to sympathy and kindness.³⁴⁶ Well though he articulated the case for reform of the Corporation Schools, Blackburn nevertheless lived up to Holme’s characterisation of him. He lashed out in all directions and made gratuitously disparaging remarks about the Established Church. In so doing, he ignored the very precept (taken from the Irish National schools) that appeared on the title-page of his pamphlet:

Quarrelling with our neighbours, and abusing them, is not the way to convince them that we are in the right and they in the wrong. It is more likely to convince them that we have not a Christian spirit.

The second written defence was contained in the pamphlet recording Walmsley’s speech to the Town Council on 12 October 1836, in which he set out the council’s overall achievements during its first year in power.³⁴⁷ The speech was a carefully crafted advert for responsible reform and Walmsley devoted a sizeable portion of it

³⁴⁴ T. Blackburn, *A Defence of the System adopted in the Corporation Schools of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1836).

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁴⁷ J. Walmsley, *What have the Council done?*

to education, knowing that this would reach a wide audience amongst the more literate classes.³⁴⁸ He tackled the principal allegation of the opposition head-on:

The great objection made to the system is the withdrawal of the Bible and the substitution of the Irish extracts. It is true the Bible is no longer used as a mere class book for the purpose of teaching children to read, but it may most unhesitatingly be denied that it is withdrawn from the purposes of religious instruction: on the contrary, it may fearlessly be asserted that in no public school of the town is the religious instruction of the children better attended to.

Walmsley went on to detail what few proponents or detractors had done, namely the daily schedule of religious instruction for Protestant children, which included the bible and church catechism.

In the following year the *literati* of Liverpool were able to bask in the glory afforded by hosting the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, which coincided with the re-opening after rebuilding and a subsequent fire of the Mechanics' Institution. Making the keynote speech at the latter event on 15 September 1837 was the celebrated educationalist (Sir) Thomas Wyse, MP. As a guest, Wyse was naturally lavish in his praise of both the Mechanics' Institution ("a noble temple") and of Liverpool:³⁴⁹

A few years ago this town was a mere hamlet – it is now a sort of second London; we have already in its proportions the characteristics of a Metropolis.

However, Wyse also made a series of observations touching obliquely on the educational issues experienced in Liverpool: how the bible was read in schools but not actually used to teach religion; how a large proportion of the population received no schooling; and how he hoped a national system of education could be introduced "without encroaching on the rights of any sect or class".³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ Walmsley was well placed to comment. Rathbone acknowledged that only Walmsley had seen more than he had of the working of the Corporation Schools: Rathbone Papers, RP XXII.1, pp. 91-3 (letter of 15 November 1836).

³⁴⁹ Liverpool Mechanics' Institution, *Prospectus of the Course of Instruction, Terms, & Regulations of the Schools Attached to the Liverpool Mechanics' Institution: with a Speech by Thomas Wyse, Esq. M.P.* (Liverpool, 1837), p. 23.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 32 and 47.

In so far as impartial appraisals of the new system were attempted, two of the most compelling and influential came from outsiders. In 1839 an obscure lecturer, Dr. Sleigh, who had recently become the latest in a series of eccentric editors of the Tory *Liverpool Standard*, resigned his position in protest at seeing his open-minded writing about the Corporation Schools censored by the proprietors. That the proprietors were displeased is not surprising, and the subsequent outcry following his resignation and publication of a pamphlet detailing his findings provided valuable ammunition to the Reformers from a most unexpected quarter.³⁵¹ Whilst Sleigh was hardly any sort of prestigious authority, he had occupied, however briefly, a leading position in the Tory camp, only to undermine their loudly proclaimed accusations. Moreover, unlike some detractors, Sleigh had actually made a series of visits to the Corporation Schools and found no fault with the regime:³⁵²

To conclude: he [i.e., Sleigh] confesses he was perfectly astonished at the contrast between what he saw in these schools, and what he had heard and read respecting them: for, instead of finding them, what he had been induced to believe – mere devices of men to bring all religion into contempt; he found them more like theological seminaries – far more strict in the inculcation of simple *biblical* truths than those universities in which those who oppose the Schools obtain their A.M. and D.D.

The author of the second appraisal, (Sir) Charles Trevelyan, was very different from Sleigh and moved in elevated circles. His pamphlet was detailed and authoritative and was widely reviewed and cited.³⁵³ He could find no fault in the way the Corporation Schools were run and indeed viewed them as a model for other situations.³⁵⁴

If it be practicable to give a sound religious education to Protestants and Roman Catholics in common, it must be still easier to obtain the same result where none but Protestants have to be taught, which is the case in ninety-nine places out of a hundred in this island.

By late 1840, the education question had been largely dormant for some time after several years of attritional politicking. The Reformers still had no intention of

³⁵¹ [W. Sleigh], *A Visit to the Corporation Schools in Liverpool, April 1839* (Liverpool, 1839).

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁵³ C. E. Trevelyan, *The Liverpool Corporation Schools* (Liverpool, 1840).

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

retreating on the basic issue of non-sectarian elementary education and there was less pressure on them to compromise. They also evidently saw no need to avoid attracting attention to the Corporation Schools once more. With Rathbone and Blackburn failing to gain re-election to the council, it was natural that the new chairman of the Education Committee would be Walmsley, who had just completed his year as mayor, in which he had tried to cut a non-partisan figure. Given his all-too-visible ambition to stand for Parliament at the next opportunity, Walmsley had every incentive to take personal control of a thorny issue that could yet do further damage to the Reformers, who were now likely to lose power at the next municipal election. Equally, his own steadfast commitment to civil and religious liberty since his first election address in 1835 meant that a hard-won reform needed consolidating and safeguarding against the eventuality of a new Tory-dominated Education Committee.

Instead of lowering the profile of the schools, Walmsley pressed ahead with plans for expansion that had been under consideration since the previous year. However, on the initiative of Hornby, efforts were made to get more Tories involved in the work of the Education Committee, and four of the more moderate representatives, including Thomas Case, agreed to do so without prejudice to their position. However, what slim prospects there were of reconciliation disappeared with the Tories' resounding victory in the municipal election of 1841 and the ascendancy of hardliners close to M'Neile. On 29 December the new Education Committee recommended reinstatement of essentially the same rules for the operation of the Corporation Schools as had obtained before 1836.³⁵⁵ The full council approved these rules on 5 January 1842, thereby signalling an exodus of the Roman Catholic children and returning them to their original deprived status.

With many Protestant children (but by no means all) having been withdrawn from the Corporation Schools soon after the reforms of 1836, it had been possible for substantial numbers of Roman Catholics to be admitted. In late 1838 the schools had on their books 934 Catholics and 733 Protestants (and 51 infants of unknown faith).³⁵⁶ In late 1841, immediately after the Reformers lost power, the figures were similar: 936 Catholics and 634 Protestants, of whom 434 belonged to the Church of

³⁵⁵ ECM, pp. 191-6.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

England.³⁵⁷ Six months later the turnaround was starkly evident. Just 99 Catholic children remained, while the number of Protestants had more than doubled to 1,333, of whom 1,037 belonged to the Church of England.

Murphy is undoubtedly correct in arguing that the Reformers' election losses leading up to their final defeat in 1841 were not entirely due to the education issue and that the issue *per se* no longer commanded as much attention as it had formerly. There were indeed other local issues that had inflicted damage, not to mention a steady national swing of the pendulum away from continuing reform to a more conservative outlook. That said, education was a perpetual thorn in the side of the Reformers, weakening their support in a period when their electoral superiority in terms of votes was actually much less than their huge majority on the council suggested. More importantly, education was the issue that galvanised the revival of the Tory party in Liverpool and opened the way for a close alliance between Tories like Holme and increasingly politicised and openly sectarian churchmen like M'Neile.

The longer-term impact of the rescinding of the education reforms was mixed. The Catholic Church was spurred into making greater provision for education but, with the Tories running municipal affairs for the rest of the nineteenth century, there was no prospect of any return to integrated schools, and sectarianism was left to take its course. For those observing Liverpool's experiences, the educational reforms of 1836-1841 were seen to have failed. And yet, had the Reformers managed their programme more astutely towards the end of their period in office and held onto their majority in the council for just a few more years, a widespread system of non-sectarian education might have become established and thereby created a viable precedent for other large towns.

The attempt to reform the Corporation Schools will always be associated with Rathbone. Though a committed Unitarian, he was even willing to teach the Church of England catechism himself when insufficient ministers could be persuaded to assist.³⁵⁸ One might have assumed that the system he and his colleagues devised for non-sectarian education would have been considered by them as acceptable for all major denominations. Yet some years after the controversy had died down, a prominent Unitarian minister in Liverpool, James Martineau, returned to the subject and argued for an even more extreme approach to religious instruction based on

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³⁵⁸ Murphy, *Religious Problem*, p. 70.

exclusion of the Old Testament, as being unfit for the moral education of children, and dependence on the Christian element of the scriptures.³⁵⁹ In so doing, Martineau confirmed the earlier opinion of Trevelyan that no united plan of religious education could include the Unitarians without the doctrinal element being cut down to a level below what would be acceptable to other denominations.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Revd. J. Martineau, *The Bible and Child; A Discourse* (London, 1845).

³⁶⁰ C. E. Trevelyan, *Corporation Schools*, pp. 19-20.

iv. SOCIAL REFORM

It is clear from their election addresses that the members of the new Town Council, who assembled for the first time on 31 December 1835, had both a collective view of their priorities and a narrowly defined interpretation of their corporate responsibilities. The emphasis was very much on economical management of the Corporation's finances, free from improper uses, and on civil and religious liberty. A crucial element of this policy was that the burden of rates and other local taxes should not be increased. As we have seen, the concept of civil and religious liberty was also of primary importance and extended beyond the mere participation of Non-Conformists and Roman Catholics in municipal politics, important though that reform was. These two overriding (and wide-ranging) priorities accounted for much of the Reformers' energies in their six years of municipal power. The relative lack of action – except in respect of education – on what today would be considered social issues is conspicuous. There are obvious contributory reasons. First and foremost, the traditional role of municipal government was narrow and the Reformers in 1835 gave no indication that they were seeking to extend it. The Parish of Liverpool, through the Select Vestry, was still responsible for implementing the Poor Laws and for highways and sewerage and, through the parish rates, controlled one of the main sources of public funding, though even this was limited by statute.

The role of charitable organisations (and individuals) is also relevant. These had long made a substantial contribution to public education, and their foundations frequently offered the only available forms of welfare for the poorest classes, whether the acclaimed Infirmary or Egerton Smith's modest Night Asylum for the Houseless Poor. In the absence of guilds, Liverpool's rich combined as individuals to further their charitable purposes, and the scale of their generosity and the degree of mutual cooperation were in no way affected by religious or political divides. Such individual charity as was disbursed by the Select Vestry was supplemented by relief administered by the Liverpool Provident District Society, which had been set up in 1829 with the object of "improving the moral and religious condition of the poor, and promoting their temporal comfort by affording them seasonable counsel in the hour of trouble, and pecuniary aid in times of *extreme distress and unavoidable calamity*".³⁶¹ Private generosity notwithstanding, many of the less savoury realities

³⁶¹ Liverpool Provident District Society, *Report from the Committee, Liverpool Mercury*, 23 July 1830.

of Liverpool life continued to fall outside the scope of both municipal and charitable institutions.

Social reform measures (if one excludes slavery) had never featured prominently in the numerous public meetings and petitions that the Reformers had instigated in the two decades before 1835, the emphasis – understandably – having been on political and economic reform. One cause that did attract a limited measure of support was that of child chimney-sweeps. (Liverpool did not at least share the problems other northern towns had with child employment in mills and coal-mines.) The town was very slow to follow London's lead but for a couple of years from 1828 the Liverpool Association for Superseding the Use of Children in Sweeping Chimneys maintained an active existence.³⁶² Its Committee included many of the most prominent names associated with reformist politics but what is telling is that the association was run from the outset by the female members of their families! Male assistance was provided by a Committee of Reference comprising three future members of the 1835 Town Council – Thomas Brockhurst Barclay, Edward Cropper and William Wallace Currie – and Edward Roscoe (the son of William). The relative lack of action on key social problems (notably housing and public health) raises further questions – to be considered below – about the extent to which their acute nature was generally known by those with influence and whether such knowledge made any difference.³⁶³

In the second half of the nineteenth century Liverpool is credited as having led the way nationally in reforming public health and related areas of social welfare.³⁶⁴ Much of the credit is rightfully given to Dr. William Duncan and James Newlands, whose appointments in January 1847 as Medical Officer of Health and Local Surveyor (later Borough Engineer) respectively followed the passing of the 1846

³⁶² N. van Manen, 'The climbing boy campaigns in Britain, c1770-1840: Cultures of reform, languages of health and experiences of childhood' (Ph.D. thesis, University of York, 2010).

³⁶³ Evidently, not all ladies in Liverpool were sympathetic to the climbing boys. See *Kaleidoscope*, 4 March 1828: "It is stated that a female, of extremely respectable appearance and connexions, actually lighted the fire in her grate, knowing that a poor boy was up the chimney, and thereby nearly suffocated him; and stated as her reason for doing so, that he staid too long in the chimney!"

³⁶⁴ The main issues are succinctly covered in several modern works: C. G. Pooley, 'Living in Liverpool: The Modern City', in Belchem, (ed.), *Liverpool 800*, pp. 171-255; J. Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse* (Liverpool, 2007), pp. 56-61.

“Sanatory Act” [sic].³⁶⁵ This was a local act proposed by the Corporation and not a public act to be implemented across the country. That it went forward from a Town Council dominated by hard-line Tories at a time when other boroughs had yet to come to grips with the issues rather than during the six-year administration of the Reformers might suggest that its timing was simply the result of local circumstances having finally become unsustainable. In fact Liverpool’s progress on public health issues had begun some years before.

It is a moot point how well Liverpool’s élite knew their own town in the 1830s. Although many merchants had removed themselves to country locations several miles outside town and others lived in mansions on the periphery, their counting-houses and the exchanges were all in the old part of town. It would have been impossible for them not to notice the insalubrious courts, cellars and tenements behind major thoroughfares, even if they had no occasion to go inside them. Some professional men such as clerics and doctors would have been intimately aware of what lay within but, as an editorial in the *Liverpool Mercury* pointed out in 1829, few apart from Methodist visitors and Roman Catholic priests were willing to risk going inside.³⁶⁶ Foreshadowing Duncan’s approach to dealing with such squalor, the article continued:

If the members [i.e., district visitors], whose duty it may be to visit the cellars or dwellings of the most destitute class of the poor, would make themselves acquainted with the properties and virtues of the disinfecting fluid, or chloride of lime, it would greatly enhance the value of their services and insure their own personal safety; and they would do well to recommend, if not enforce, the practice of whitewashing, to which people accustomed to wallow in filth have an objection, which ought to be surmounted.

A certain degree of ignorance on the part of members of the Town Council is revealed in the response to Walmsley’s report in early 1836 on the state of crime, when he was greeted with disbelief and laughter and some members wanted the

³⁶⁵ For Duncan and public health history, see W. M. Frazer, *Duncan of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1947). For Newlands and the history of Liverpool’s sewers, see G. N. Olsen, ‘Liverpool’s drainage history: seventeenth century to MEPAS’, in *Municipal Engineer*, 121 (1997), pp. 67-77. The Liverpool “Sanatory Act” was properly *An Act for the Improvement of the Sewerage and Drainage of the Borough of Liverpool, and for making further Provisions for the Sanatory Regulation of the said Borough* (9 & 10 Vict. Cap. cxxvii). White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, pp. 30-47, gives a detailed account of administrative and legislative changes after 1835.

³⁶⁶ *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 December 1829.

report suppressed.³⁶⁷ A similar incident arose in 1837 when Liverpool hosted the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. A report by the Manchester Statistical Society on the condition of the working classes around Manchester contained a comparison with the allegedly greater number of inhabited cellars in Liverpool and provoked much surprise. Confirmation of the statistical findings was subsequently provided by the Head Constable, Whitty, who confessed that even he had not until then believed that “so great a number of people resided in such objectionable places”.³⁶⁸

This mentality, prevalent amongst even the more enlightened members of Liverpool’s élite, had been the subject of a scathing assessment by the theologian Blanco White in 1836:³⁶⁹

The present object of my attention is that very common, but still respectable character, which acknowledges the existence of a great number of errors and abuses, wishes for improvement, and is even ready to sacrifice something to Reform, but which, at the same time, feels a decided fear, amounting frequently to horror, of every man who wishes to show the whole extent of the evils which call for a remedy. ... I know indeed few Reformers, either personally or in print, who appear to me really to wish for more than to keep the enemy in check: of progress they are quite afraid; the boldest of them shrink back with horror when the *root* of our evils begins to be laid bare.

If further evidence of squalid conditions was needed, it came in the reports of the Reverend John Johns, Minister to the Poor, of the Liverpool Domestic Mission Society. The Domestic Mission was founded and largely funded by Unitarians. The driving force behind it, the Reverend John Hamilton Thom, specifically cited Walmsley’s report in highlighting the effects of housing on juvenile crime.³⁷⁰ In his first report in 1837 Johns confined himself to a passing reference to “damp and

³⁶⁷ In his memoirs of these events (quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 81) Walmsley wrote: “I have gone down into damp, dark cellars, unfit for human habitations, where men and women lived huddled together. These were necessarily the head-quarters of disease and crime.”

³⁶⁸ *Report of a Committee of the Manchester Statistical Society, on the Condition of the Working Classes* (London 1838), pp. 8-10. Whitty added some surprising observations about cellars: they were not necessarily cheaper to rent than rooms above ground-level and appealed to those pursuing a retail trade or wishing to be independent of their landlord.

³⁶⁹ Thom, (ed.), *The Life of the Rev. Joseph Blanco White*, Vol. III, Appendix 4, pp. 422-3.

³⁷⁰ *Prospectus of the Objects and Plan of a Ministry for the Poor* (Liverpool, 1836).

sepulchral-looking cellars” but (perhaps with a note of disingenuity) remarked: “I am willing to believe that the sufferings of these unfortunate beings are unknown to the classes of society above them.”³⁷¹ The following year Johns spelt out the almost heretical conclusion that improving the lower orders was not just a question of providing moral support:³⁷²

In mentioning *any* of the causes of the immorality and consequent misery of the lower orders of the city poor, it is impossible to omit, as it is to overlook or to forget, the influence which their *places of abode* frequently have upon their conduct.

He went on to describe, from first-hand experience, cellars “which, though in some instances, they are dry and commodious, yet are more usually damp, dark and ruinous, and more like graves dug for the living than their homes” and courts in which “from original mal-construction and subsequent misuse, the houses are barely habitable even by the lowest of the low”.³⁷³ It is unlikely that Johns’s outpourings were widely read outside Non-Conformist circles but he will have been an unimpeachable source of information for the substantial group of Unitarians on the Town Council, several of whom, including Rathbone, had provided the funding for the Domestic Mission. After 1838 ignorance of the state of housing and attendant ills was no longer a credible position. It must also have been clear that any amelioration of living conditions for large numbers of the poor required more than religious ministrations and the pecuniary aid of the Provident District Society.

An ideal opportunity for municipal action was missed in 1839 when the town’s detailed building regulations were updated and consolidated.³⁷⁴ The following year

³⁷¹ *First Report Addressed to the Committee of the Liverpool Domestic Mission Society* (Liverpool, 1837).

³⁷² *Second Report Addressed to the Committee of the Liverpool Domestic Mission Society* (Liverpool, 1838), p. 20.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁷⁴ *An Act for altering, amending, consolidating, and enlarging the Provisions of certain Acts relating to the Regulation of Buildings in the Borough of Liverpool* (2 & 3 Vict. Cap. xcii). An earlier (1837) local omnibus Act, *An Act for altering, amending, improving, and extending the Provisions of certain Acts of Parliament relating to the Town of Liverpool* (7 Will. IV & 1 Vict. Cap. cxv), had similarly evaded the underlying core issues, confining itself to the more visible public nuisances (e.g., the disposal of “nightsoil”, cellar entrances that swallowed up unsuspecting pedestrians, the playing of football in the streets and victuallers harbouring policemen on duty). Both Acts deferred to the powers of the Parish’s Commissioners of Paving and Sewerage and Surveyors of Highways.

Liverpool's sanitary shortcomings were further highlighted – at the national level and in a very public way – through the inquiries of the Select Committee on the Health of Towns and the Poor Law Commissioners. These inquiries marked the arrival of Dr. Duncan in the politics of public health and were arguably as important for Liverpool's subsequent development as his better known contributions in 1843-4. This was not in fact his first public intervention: in 1833 he had spoken in forthright terms to the Royal Commissioners about insanitary conditions in courts and cellars but nothing had come of it.³⁷⁵ The issue was drowned in the sea of other revelations and the Town Clerk disputed Duncan's figures. Duncan himself conceded that Liverpool was no worse than other urban centres.

Duncan appeared before the Select Committee in April 1840 as a private individual, describing himself as physician to the Dispensaries for 10 years.³⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that no officer of the Corporation or member of the Town Council appeared before either inquiry, whereas Manchester was represented before the Select Committee by none other than Alderman Richard Cobden.³⁷⁷ Duncan testified in detail about the state of Liverpool's housing and the threat to public health. He followed this up with a lengthy written report to the Poor Law Commissioners in August 1840.³⁷⁸ This form of communication allowed him to recommend a set of highly interventionist "remedies": regulation of the building of courts or houses for the working classes; cellars not to be inhabited, or at least properly ventilated; every court or house to have an underground drain; regulation of lodging-houses; no pigs, donkeys, manure, etc to be kept in dwellings; punishment for depositing "filth" in the streets; and the appointment of a Board of Health and an Inspector of Public Health to point out nuisances and supervise the health of the community.³⁷⁹

Although it would take a further seven years before most of these recommendations were being actively implemented, Duncan's initial impact on the Reformers running

³⁷⁵ *Court of Inquiry*, pp. 400-2.

³⁷⁶ *Report from the Select Committee on the Health of Towns* (London, 1840) pp. 141-51.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-8. Much of Cobden's evidence actually comprised comments on evidence related to Liverpool!

³⁷⁸ *Local Reports on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of England, in consequence of an Inquiry directed to be made by the Poor Law Commissioners* (London, 1842), pp. 282-94.

³⁷⁹ Duncan also pointed out in his report that Corporation leases (which only covered a part of the town) had for 30 years prohibited the habitation of cellars but had never been enforced.

the Town Council was probably quite marked. Unlike several of his fellow physicians, he never entered electoral politics but he was very well connected to prominent Reformers and his opinions were likely to be both heard and respected by them, despite their current preoccupation with extricating themselves from the problems caused by the Corporation Schools issue. The former mayor Currie was his maternal uncle and William McMurdo Duncan, also a member of the council, was another uncle.

In the autumn of 1840, during the last weeks of Walmsley's mayoralty, the council engaged in a flurry of activity, which seems like a direct response to Duncan's high-profile public agitation. In September, at the instigation of Rathbone, a special committee was set up to investigate the provision of bath-houses for the poor with additional facilities for washing clothes. In October the council approved the construction of the celebrated baths and wash-house in Upper Frederick Street (of which Kitty Wilkinson and her husband were the first superintendents).³⁸⁰ In keeping with the Reformers' cost-conscious approach to public finances, satisfaction was expressed that, after the initial construction costs, the new facilities would be self-supporting through the imposition of small charges for use.

Then at the very end of October, the aged Tory Thomas Case, with the support of Rathbone and other Reformers, gave advance notice of a motion that he would put before the incoming council after the forthcoming municipal election: "That a committee be appointed to make all necessary inquiries, and to take into consideration the subject of inhabited cellars and small dwellings in back courts, with reference to the health of the town and the comfort and convenience of the poorer inhabitants".³⁸¹ The Health of Town Committee was duly set up in November with Case as its unlikely chairman. Case's election to the council in 1838 had caused a furore in Reformer circles but he had a good record as a philanthropist and was evidently trusted by his political opponents on public health issues.³⁸²

The Health of Town Committee under Case pursued its mission during the last year that the Reformers had a majority on the council, despite the loss of key supporters including Rathbone, who had suffered electoral defeat twice in a matter of weeks, and Currie, who had died suddenly at the end of 1840. By the time the committee's

³⁸⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 September and 9 October 1840.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 8 November 1840.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 9 November 1838.

proposals had become law in mid-1842 with the passing of the first of Liverpool's ground-breaking public health acts, the Tories had won control of the council but the violent personal and political animosities that characterised much else (notably education) seem not to have impinged on public health issues. The common interest was evidently too plain. However, at this early juncture in the progress of social reform, there was still one line that could not be crossed – that separating the responsibilities of the council and the Select Vestry.

In early 1836 the Select Vestry had graciously yielded its role in policing to the council with a view to the rationalisation of functions and resources. Since then the education issue and continuing recriminations over financial support for the Established Church had destroyed the relationship between the Reformers and the Parish. Thus even in 1842 the climate was not right for the Select Vestry to be asked to make further concessions – in its responsibilities for highways, paving and sewerage – that would facilitate action by the council on housing and public health.

In January 1842, as a local bill was being prepared on behalf of the Select Vestry to update provision for paving and sewerage, the former mayor William Earle sought to upset the *status quo* by proposing the insertion of a clause enabling the Commissioners of Paving and Sewerage to transfer their powers to the council. Earle made the highly revealing admission that he had long considered the division of responsibility to be extraordinary but had known when the Reformers were in power that “it would have been in vain to bring forward a motion ... because it would have been said that they wanted political power, though he did not know what power could be obtained by such a course”.³⁸³ As Earle will have been aware, he could not even have counted on the support of all his Reformer colleagues. On this occasion the Tory majority defeated his proposal with the support of another veteran Reformer, John Holmes. Holmes had been a pillar of the Select Vestry for many years and probably had cause to rue the previous encroachment on its traditional responsibilities. As chairman of the council's Watch Committee in 1836 he had overseen the transfer of policing responsibility only to find himself supplanted by the more energetic and radical Walmsley.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 14 January 1842.

In June 1842 Liverpool's first avowed public health act was finally enacted.³⁸⁴ It mandated the appointment of a Health Committee, to be assisted by surveyors. The building of courts was regulated and cellars in courts were not to be occupied as dwellings. From July 1844 cellars in any house were not be let as dwellings unless they met a string of requirements covering height, lighting and ventilation. Infringements were liable to a penalty of up to 5s per day. Many of these provisions were retained in subsequent legislation. However, as before, what the 1842 Act could not do was impinge on the Select Vestry's responsibilities for paving and sewerage of streets and certain private property rights of those owning courts.

It is against this background that the subsequent activities of Duncan and others need to be set. Duncan's papers on the high rate of mortality in Liverpool, read to the Literary and Philosophical Society in February and March 1843 and subsequently repackaged for wider consumption, clearly stated the case for further action and helped promote the 1846 "Sanatory Act" [sic].³⁸⁵ Over and above the key new appointments of a Medical Officer of Health and a Local Surveyor (Borough Engineer), the crucial change was to grant the Corporation control over paving and sewerage in both streets and courts. Thus in 1846, for the first time, Liverpool's council was in charge of the whole problem. (Even the recalcitrant Holmes received some compensation for the Select Vestry's lost responsibilities: in 1849 the Tory majority bestowed the honour denied him in earlier years by his Reformer colleagues and elected him mayor.)

The huge improvements in public health in the decades following 1846 were dependent on one further enabling action: the provision of a copious supply of running water under the control of the Corporation.³⁸⁶ This was achieved in two stages, first by the Corporation's acquisition of the town's water companies in 1847 through the Liverpool Corporation Waterworks Act and secondly by the hugely

³⁸⁴ *An Act for the Promotion of the Health of the Inhabitants of the Borough of Liverpool, and the better Regulation of Buildings in the said Borough* (5 & 6 Vict. Cap. xlv).

³⁸⁵ W. Duncan, *On the physical causes of the high rate of mortality in Liverpool* (Liverpool: Joshua Walmsley, 1843). (The printer was Sir Joshua Walmsley's first cousin.) Much the same evidence was presented by Duncan to the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts: *First Report of the Commissioners* (London, 1844), Appendix, pp. 12-33.

³⁸⁶ Until this was achieved the concept of sewerage was little more than drainage (i.e., the removal of surface water). Sewerage in the modern sense (i.e., water-borne removal of solid waste) would take many years of sanitary engineering to achieve.

expensive and controversial Rivington Pike project, which started delivering water to Liverpool in 1857. Here again progress was achieved by an unlikely cross-party alliance between Samuel Holme and William Earle. Holme's interest was initially in the inadequacy of water supplies for fighting warehouse fires but in 1844 he had been introduced by Rathbone to Edwin Chadwick and, like Duncan, he had supplied copious written evidence to Chadwick's Royal Commission for Inquiring into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts.³⁸⁷

From a modern perspective, one inevitably asks the question of whether Liverpool's Town Council could and should have done more to address housing and public health issues between 1835 and 1846. The evidence suggests that in fact more was done before 1846 than has generally been appreciated. This process started with the recognition that there was a problem and led to the 1842 Act and the Upper Frederick Street baths and wash-house.

Yet more could have been done, as was shown to be the case by the total overhaul of policing, if the Reformers had been able to assume responsibility for all aspects of the problem. Their inability to do so, openly admitted by Earle, was in large part due to the long-running battle over education between the Reformers on the one side and the Parish and the Tories on the other. (In due course the Parish bowed to the inevitable but in the knowledge that the Tory-run council was committed to safeguard the interests of the Established Church.) Where the council already carried influence, as in building regulations, more action could have been taken earlier, albeit at the expense of alienating rate-paying landlords. The Reformers will also have been aware of the likely financial cost of some remedial measures (and of possible calls for compensation) but this does not seem to have been a major factor.

On the positive side, Liverpool took early action against urban social problems that were not unique to Liverpool some years before comparable action elsewhere and in advance of the 1848 Public Health Act that was the culmination of Chadwick's various reports. Crucial to this action was the understanding that traditional measures aimed at the individual such as charitable aid and religious ministrations, however useful in themselves (and valued by those funding them), were not likely to have a major impact on the living conditions of the poorest classes, who could be numbered in the tens of thousands. It is also to Liverpool's credit that action was in

³⁸⁷ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 252; *First Report of the Commissioners*, Appendix, pp. 185-98.

hand before the town was visited by the twin disasters of 1847-9 – the sudden increase in Irish refugees from the potato famine and the epidemics of typhus, typhoid, dysentery, scarlet fever and cholera – and that this was not a knee-jerk reaction to them. Without the new powers of the 1846 “Sanatory Act”, the authorities would have had even greater difficulty in coping with an unparalleled public health crisis.

v. THE END OF THE EXPERIMENT

In October 1841 the Reformers finally lost power. This was not the result of a sudden change of mind on the part of the voters who had so dramatically ushered in an era of reform just six years previously nor the consequence of any single contentious measure introduced by the Reformers. Rather it may be seen as the culmination of a slow swing of the political pendulum whereby the innately Conservative majority within the electorate, having contributed to a comprehensive overhaul of Liverpool's decayed municipal governance and with no appetite for a rolling programme of further reforms, gradually reverted to type and year by year returned an increasing number of Tory candidates. There can be no doubt that an important contributing factor was the rise of a new brand of Conservatism that had been conditioned by Liverpool's unique racial and religious demography.³⁸⁸ The perceived threats of being swamped by the steadily increasing number of Irish Catholics (even before the potato famine) and ruled by minority sects such as the Unitarians unsettled the local Church of England establishment and were exploited to the full by hard-line Tories like Holme, acting in concert with the Reverend M'Neile. This local variation on the traditional Tory platform of "Church and State" was highly successful and characterised the Tory administration of Liverpool in the 1840s. In the perception of the electors, the Tories would also have appeared an increasingly unified party, whereas the Reformers (as will be seen in Chapter 5) were clearly experiencing a sometimes acrimonious transition from the moderate politics of the old guard around Rathbone to the genuinely radical ideas espoused by Walmsley.³⁸⁹

In 1835 the Reformers had 43 councillors out of 48 and 15 aldermen out of 16. The election outcome was in modern parlance a landslide but in many wards the Reformers had quite small majorities. The Tory vote did not have to increase by very much for the Reformers' majority on the Town Council to start coming down.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁸ Belchem, *Merseypride*, pp. 155-60.

³⁸⁹ Collins, *Politics and Elections*, p. 25, attributes the failure of the Reformers to retain power to a lack of nearly all the qualities required to sustain a reforming administration: "positive leadership, discipline and a clear consensus on the most important goals". There is an element of truth in the charge but, in an era before the development of modern political parties, this was only to be expected.

³⁹⁰ Fraser highlights the unusual paucity of uncontested elections between 1835 and 1841 as evidence of the degree of acrimony and political controversy (*Urban Politics*, pp. 134 and 219-22).

By 1838, despite the furore over the Corporation Schools, the Reformers still had 32 councillors and all 16 aldermen. The crucial change came in 1840 when, after a series of closely-fought battles in the wards, the Reformers were reduced to just 21 councillors plus their 16 aldermen, as against 27 Tory councillors. In 1841 the Tories had only to win two wards from the Reformers and hold on to their existing seats in order to achieve an overall majority for the first time, which could then be cemented by the selection of 8 new aldermen.³⁹¹ As has been noted above, the prospect of losing power induced the Reformers to pursue a more inclusive approach in order to protect their reforms in the longer term. However, it was to no avail. In the 1841 municipal election the Tories won 13 out of 16 wards, secured an overall majority and then selected 8 new Tory aldermen. The swing of the pendulum was complete and Tory domination was restored for decades to come.

Although the radical experiment in Liverpool had come to a definitive end, with the Reformers having contributed substantially to their own demise, there was an enduring legacy. The whole machinery of the Corporation had been overhauled and put on a new basis that was both efficient and cost-effective. Good governance had been established and Old Corruption was firmly banished. On top of this, Liverpool now had one of the finest (and largest) police forces in the country. Despite its loathing of the Reformers, the new Tory administration made no attempt to undo these particular reforms. From a modern perspective it is easy to see the negative legacy of the Reformers' defeat and the local triumph of Tory "Church and State" politics. The educational needs of Non-Conformists and Irish Catholics were ignored and sectarianism was positively encouraged with enduringly disastrous consequences. Although the electorate in 1841 was far from representative of Liverpool's population, the majority got what they had voted for.

Muir has provided a fitting tribute to the work of the Reformers by contrasting the state of Liverpool in 1835 and 1907.³⁹²

In 1835 the borough did little for its inhabitants; it was a place where they dwelt as they best might until they should have made enough money to be able to leave it. But now, what does the city not do for its citizens? [...] Every year its services grow greater, and though there are still too many who are whelmed in such sodden and sordid poverty that they have no ground for

³⁹¹ The *Liverpool Mercury* was apoplectic in a post-election editorial, talking of the people returning to "their old vomit of Toryism" (6 November 1840, quoted by Fraser, *ibid.*, p. 135).

³⁹² Muir, *History of Liverpool*, pp. 337-8.

gratitude to the world ... yet to most inhabitants the services which the city renders are so great, that it begins at last to have a real claim on their reverence.

The achievements of the Reformers between 1835 and 1841 were patchy but they did represent the start of a long progression towards a more caring society.

Few of the leading Reformers succeeded in continuing their municipal careers beyond 1841. Rathbone had lost his seat on the Town Council in 1840 (by one vote) and failed in the same year to take over from Currie after the latter's sudden death. His personal unpopularity in political matters and highhanded behaviour detracted from the reputation of one of Liverpool's greatest benefactors and libertarians. Nevertheless, during a minor resurgence of the Reformers in 1845 Rathbone secured a further three-year term on the Town Council. Perhaps the most surprising comeback was effected by Sheil. After some years devoted to personal business and promoting the interests of Liverpool's Irish Catholic population, he returned to the Town Council in 1855 and served a further three terms as a councillor and was then appointed an alderman – a surprising and signal honour from a Tory-dominated Town Council. By a supreme irony he took the place vacated by his old vilifier Holme.

The biggest casualty of the Reformers' demise might seem to have been Walmsley, now Sir Joshua, having been knighted in 1840 during his year of office as mayor. This will be considered in Chapter 5, which explores Liverpool's attitudes to the Corn Laws and free trade and their influence on the crucial 1841 parliamentary election. For the present it is sufficient to note that by 1841 Walmsley's sights were firmly fixed on a parliamentary career. He was diligent in carrying out his remaining duties as a councillor (and in effect was the unspoken leader of the Reformers) and had done what he could to salvage the educational reforms. On a personal level his six years on the Town Council had seen him emerge from political anonymity and become a major political influence in his home town with a knighthood to boot. As the events of 1841 unfolded, the impending demise of the Reformers was regrettable and meant that much of his hard work on educational reform would be undone but he was already plotting a new career on the national stage, for which he had acquired a wealth of practical experience and personal connections.

CHAPTER 5

THE CORN LAWS AND FREE TRADE

In the previous chapter we considered the actions of the Reformers during the years they controlled the Town Council and had the opportunity to shape many aspects of local life. Even here their freedom of action was circumscribed by the comparatively narrow scope of municipal government. The same was largely true in matters economic and commercial. Although the Town Council and the notionally independent Dock Committee together derived a very considerable income from commerce and did what they could to facilitate the prosperity of local merchants and the maritime trades, they had no control and minimal influence over the formulation and implementation of national laws relating to taxes and duties.³⁹³ Since these impositions often worked against the commercial interests of the merchants, there were regular manifestations of discontent. Whilst Tory merchants mostly endeavoured to stay loyal to successive Tory governments and the town's Tory MPs (notably Canning and Huskisson), the Whigs and Radicals repeatedly agitated for concessions in this sector as well as in parliamentary reform.

In this chapter we trace the changing attitudes of Liverpool's merchants towards the Corn Laws and wider financial reform. Over time these led to the early development of both a distinctive free trade movement and a highly articulate and influential association for financial reform. Given the importance of Liverpool to the nation's commercial prosperity, the opinions of its merchants were undoubtedly influential.

The complex history of the Corn Laws has been well documented. Susan Fairlie has written the most accessible modern study of their economic impact.³⁹⁴ The political context is best provided by Boyd Hilton.³⁹⁵ The history of the Anti-Corn Law League has been comprehensively documented by a succession of historians. Norman McCord's concise narrative follows traditional lines; later works by Norman Longmate and, most recently, Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell adopt a more

³⁹³ See Chapter 2 for the relationship between the two bodies.

³⁹⁴ S. Fairlie, 'The Nineteenth Century Corn Law Reconsidered', *Economic History Review*, XVIII, 3 (1965), pp. 562-75. More specialist studies include J. Prest, 'A Large Amount or Small? Revenue and the Nineteenth-Century Corn Laws', *Historical Journal*, 39.2 (1996), pp. 467-78, and A. Ward, 'The Corn Laws and English Wheat Prices, 1815-1846', *Atlantic Economic Journal*, 32.3 (2004), pp. 245-55.

³⁹⁵ Hilton, *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous*, pp. 264-8, 279-80, 305-7, 504 and 543-7.

thematic approach.³⁹⁶ Little, however, has been written about this aspect of Liverpool's history by any of the above authors. The new evidence set out in this thesis indicates that Liverpool, as a port handling infinitely diverse commodities, often saw things differently from the inland manufacturing centre of Manchester. It also provides a measure of recognition to Liverpool-based campaigners, such as Joshua Walmsley, William Brown, Thomas Thornely and Lawrence Heyworth.

³⁹⁶ N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League 1838-1846*, 2nd ed. (London, 1968); N. Longmate, *The Breadstealers: The Fight against the Corn Laws, 1838-1846* (London, 1984); P. A. Pickering and A. Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000).

i. LIVERPOOL'S EXPERIENCE, 1815-1841

In 1847 Sir Joshua Walmsley, seeking to relaunch his political career after the demise of the Liverpool Reformers and his previous parliamentary aspirations, introduced himself to the electors of Leicester as “the friend and advocate of the poor man”.³⁹⁷

... I see that the enemy has been abroad among you, and that they have found out something very bad in this Sir Joshua: it is that he is a corn-dealer! ... I feel that I must plead guilty to the ... impeachment that I *was* a corn-dealer; that I *did* employ great numbers of ships in that trade; that I *did* import corn in large quantities from the sea-board, and the western districts and wide-spread prairies of America – from the shores of the Baltic and the Mediterranean and the Black Sea; yes, gentlemen, from various quarters of the world, I did bring corn to this country in spite of those laws which were passed with the sanction of the very men who raise the cry against me; and are you, the poor men, to accuse me of starving you because I sought to render corn cheaper and more plentiful among you? ... I was the first corn-dealer in this kingdom who stood boldly forward (and I am obliged to speak for myself) who stood boldly forward to demand the abolition of those laws which ground you down to the very stones. ...

This and other theatricality in a similar vein ensured Walmsley's election to Parliament by a predominantly urban electorate that was very different in its outlook from that of Liverpool in the general elections of 1837 and 1841, which had snubbed first Walmsley's nominee (Howard Elphinstone) and then Walmsley himself.³⁹⁸ Whilst Walmsley's account of his political stand was essentially true, it necessarily glossed over Liverpool's cautious approach to the Corn Laws question and his own discontinuous engagement with it.

There had always been laws to regulate the importation of corn but the first so-called Corn Law, the Importation Act of 1815, following on from two decades of disrupted trade, enforced self-dependence and consequentially high prices, was seen as something new and of unpredictable effect.³⁹⁹ A public meeting in Liverpool

³⁹⁷ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 31 July 1847.

³⁹⁸ The 1837 and 1841 elections are considered in detail below.

³⁹⁹ See Longmate, *Breadstealers*, pp. 1-16, for a neat summary of early agitation against the Corn Laws.

in 1815 reflected this uncertainty.⁴⁰⁰ The very fact that the mayor agreed to convene a meeting in the Town Hall is evidence that the issue was of general concern and not simply a means of attacking the Tory government. Those who felt that domestic agriculture required protection were nevertheless uncomfortable about the high level of protection (notably, the 80s a quarter importation limit on wheat). The most vocal opponent, the excitable Radical Colonel George Williams, was well placed to see all sides of the issue, as a former military man and a farmer, and to identify the common goal:

That we should lean upon our own resources in preference to those of any foreign country, for this essential article, is our obvious policy certainly, and there can be no more pernicious error than any endeavour to depreciate the price of corn below what is requisite to encourage its growth and to produce plenty ...

Williams decried the introduction of what he termed a “poll tax”, intended to reduce the national debt, and favoured measures to encourage agricultural productivity. In passing he took a swipe at the clergy and the negative effect of their tithe, an issue that would be revisited. The discussion was mostly confined to the matter in hand and resulted in a resolution that a petition be presented to the House of Lords opposing any change to the existing laws.

The very high price of wheat for several years following the disastrous harvest of 1816 allowed some importation of foreign wheat but did little to assuage widespread popular agitation. The Importation Act of 1822 did not change much, and lower wheat prices effectively curtailed any large-scale importation until Huskisson finally introduced the sliding-scale of duty for imported corn in his Importation Act of 1828. In the build-up to this significant liberalising measure, two more public meetings chaired by the mayor were held in Liverpool. The first in April 1825 (by which time Huskisson had become one of Liverpool’s MPs) is especially significant since it preceded by just a few weeks a statement by Huskisson in the House of Commons that signalled eventual change.⁴⁰¹

... he [Huskisson] had always understood, that the great *desideratum* in this important question was to provide for a steadiness of price, and to guard

⁴⁰⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 March 1815.

⁴⁰¹ W. Huskisson, *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Huskisson* (London, 1831), Vol. II, p. 395.

against excessive fluctuations in it from the vicissitudes of trade. How did the present law provide for these ends? By limiting the markets from which we drew our supplies – by destroying the vent which we should otherwise have for our produce, whenever we were blessed with a superabundant harvest – and by exposing us to an alternate fluctuation of high and low prices.

At this point Huskisson – quite apart from his own severe doubts – was under pressure from various quarters but the resolutions passed by the Liverpool meeting can only have encouraged his intended change of course. Liverpool was his constituency; the Tory-run Corporation had invariably swallowed any feelings of dissent against the government; and he himself had enjoyed considerable bipartisan support. In this instance those arguing for change included the former mayor Thomas Case. This unusual consensus had been facilitated by the self-proclaimed moderation of the Whigs: in opening the debate William Wallace Currie opined that the resolutions and petition “were characterized by a moderation which could give offence to none, but must conciliate all” and “trusted that a parliamentary revision of these laws would prove ... that the landed interest and the farmer would be as much benefited by a change as any other class”.⁴⁰²

Currie and his fellow petitioners did not presume to tell Parliament how the laws should be revised but considered one indispensable change should be to “allow the importation of corn at all times on a fixed and ... a moderate duty, so as to do away with the present uncertainty, which was equally injurious to the landowner and the farmer, the manufacturer and the merchant”. Case stressed that there was no intention to recommend that foreign corn have no duty on it and, for his own part, favoured a moderate import duty. Most of the discussion was sharply focused on the agricultural aspects but one speaker, the Reformer John Smith, chose to set out the benefits of free trade:

... [W]e should not take corn from other countries merely to serve those countries, but to serve ourselves. Trade must not only be mutual, but beneficial, or it would not be persevered in. Corn is the money of some countries; and if we do not take such money, those countries will not purchase our manufactures.

⁴⁰² *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 April 1825.

Smith then spoiled his argument rather by overestimating the likely scale of corn imports and the resulting benefits:

Our extra supplies of corn would be derived from several different countries. If one nation were likely to go to war with us, others would have a direct interest in preserving peace with us, that they might more profitably supply us with corn. The other party, perceiving the advantage they were thus throwing away, would, therefore, pause before they decided.

In November 1826, as change failed to materialise, the public debate in Liverpool resumed but the tone was beginning to change. The new mayor, Thomas Littledale, a cotton broker with an obvious interest in promoting trade with North America, was amenable to chairing another meeting in the Town Hall but there was little in the reported proceedings of a bipartisan nature.⁴⁰³ The resolutions were proposed and seconded by a succession of leading Reformers, the only notable exception being the future mayor Nicholas Robinson.⁴⁰⁴ According to the opening speaker (the Reformer Henry Booth), the first resolution was to have been proposed by Sir John Tobin, the Tory grandee. If this was true, Tobin's absence from what was to be a sustained and orchestrated opposition attack on the government was understandable. More remarkable was the active involvement in the meeting of four merchants with personal experience of the corn trade – Booth, Robinson, David Hodgson and Rathbone.⁴⁰⁵ In an era when the general merchant had not yet given way to the specialist, the corn trade was an exception and was acknowledged to require particular skill. However, the merchants, brokers and dealers who worked

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1826.

⁴⁰⁴ The roll-call is almost unprecedented and included Henry Booth, William Wallace Currie, James Brancker Jnr., Thomas Bolton, Thomas Thornely, William Rathbone, William Brown, John Smith, John Cropper, Egerton Smith, Col. George Williams and Dr. Peter Crompton.

⁴⁰⁵ Henry Booth, though by now fully engaged with the projected Liverpool & Manchester Railway, came from a family of corn merchants. His father Thomas and uncle George were both prominent Liverpool merchants and his cousin George Booth Jnr., a corn broker, was Joshua Walmsley's partner. Henry had worked for his father and then run his own business in the corn trade but, though he had soon given up, he retained an active interest in the political dimension. See R. Smiles, *Memoir of the Late Henry Booth* (London, 1869), p. 19. Nicholas Robinson was a very wealthy corn merchant with a more liberal outlook than most of his Tory colleagues in the Town Council. David Hodgson was another corn merchant and a former treasurer of the Corn Exchange. William Rathbone is best known as a cotton broker but his company Rathbone Brothers traded in diverse commodities, including corn. In 1839 Rathbone partially rid himself of his troublesome corn business by setting up an enduring partnership to work it with Ross T. Smyth. See S. Mariner, *Rathbones of Liverpool, 1845-73* (Liverpool, 1961), pp. 17-20.

the trade stood to make themselves wealthy, Corn Laws or not. Thus their involvement in protests against the Corn Laws suggests a combination of altruism and grand commercial strategy.

The tenor of the meeting is striking: of nine resolutions, only one addressed the plight of the working classes and then in terms of “the present distressed state of our manufacturing population, arising out of the inadequate demand for manufactured goods”.⁴⁰⁶ This clearly reflected the recent economic crisis, which had hit the cotton trade particularly hard, and scarcely did justice to those workers in diverse sectors who had been suffering from high food prices for years. By contrast, no less than five resolutions may broadly be categorised as arguments for free trade. The first set out the basic principle:⁴⁰⁷

That it is highly expedient to encourage a free interchange of commodities between different countries, by which means the people of each nation may be induced to apply themselves to the production of such commodities as they have a natural facility of supplying, reciprocally exchanging the same with each other; each country being thus enabled to obtain the greatest quantity of useful and agreeable products, and at the cheapest rate.

A later resolution cut to what may be perceived as the most pressing concern of the Liverpool merchants:⁴⁰⁸

... that for several years past, however, there has been a gradual diminution in the export of many articles of British manufacture, previously consumed in Foreign Countries, but now manufactured there; and it is the opinion of this Meeting, that several branches of manufactures in other countries have been prematurely commenced and protected by high duties, in consequence of our Laws against the Importation of Grain; and that if these Laws be not speedily amended, there is reason to apprehend a still further diminution of the Export Trade, and of the national wealth.

As in the previous year, no specific proposals were put forward on the appropriate level of duty (a tactic which avoided the obvious difficulty of reaching agreement upon any particular figure) but the consensus was for retaining an importation duty,

⁴⁰⁶ *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 November 1826.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

albeit one set at a “moderate” level and without any sliding scale. Retention was justified by two main considerations – a desire not to do an injustice to farmers and recognition that the legislators whom they were petitioning were themselves landowners. For many years there was little support for more radical measures. Walmsley noted “that the most advanced reformers had not dared as yet to advocate a total repeal; a moderate fixed duty being as yet the most startling innovation they dared to propose”.⁴⁰⁹

In fact, one veteran Reformer, Dr. Crompton, did move a resolution calling for total abolition of the Corn Laws, characterising them as “the worst of monopolies, a satire on legislation, cruel and impolitic”.⁴¹⁰ However, this departure from the consensus occasioned anxious interventions from Booth, Currie and Rathbone before the motion was defeated. A further threat to the meeting’s harmony came, predictably, from Williams. He described the resolutions as too moderate and wished the Corn Laws and all monopolies to be “exploded”. Not just the Corn Laws but also clerical tithes and the Game Laws needed to be modified. This unwelcome outburst was ruled out of order by the mayor, with encouragement from Rathbone.

Booth returned to the fray in 1833 with an influential pamphlet on free trade.⁴¹¹ The corn trade was just one, albeit important, element of his argumentation. What he sought to do was highlight the negative effects of current trading restrictions on the working classes. Taking his examples from a wide variety of merchant trades pursued in Liverpool, Booth illustrated the effect on employment and poverty. On the subject of the Corn Laws he wrote:⁴¹²

The advocates of Free Trade, we apprehend, would not, under existing circumstances, object to a determinate duty on *Wheat*, gradually introduced, commencing at 10s per quarter, and diminishing one shilling per quarter yearly, till it should arrive at a settled permanent duty of 6s or 7s per quarter.

Thus the cautious approach to reform still prevailed. However, Booth was nothing if not honest in highlighting one consequence of lower duty: “[W]e would guard

⁴⁰⁹ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 59.

⁴¹⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 November 1826.

⁴¹¹ H. Booth, *Free Trade, As it affects the People, Addressed to a Reformed Parliament* (Liverpool, 1833). A condensed version entitled *Substance of Mr. Henry Booth’s Pamphlet on Free Trade* etc was published in London at about the same time.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

against exciting delusive hopes in the minds of the labouring classes; for it must not be disguised, that as commodities become cheaper wages will become lower".⁴¹³ This unpalatable outcome was later a cause of concern to the Anti-Corn Law League and something that the Liverpool merchants seemed unable not to proclaim.

One indication of the potential impact of Booth's pamphlet was that it provoked a strong response in the form of four detailed letters to the *Liverpool Standard* from (Sir) John Gladstone, writing under the pen-name *Mercator*.⁴¹⁴ Gladstone ridiculed the notion of lower wages being acceptable and predicted both agricultural ruin from large-scale importation of foreign crops and a consequential risk of being held hostage on prices.

The general election of 1837 refocused attention in Liverpool on the Corn Laws. The Radical incumbent Ewart, who was rightly worried about his prospects of beating off the two Tories, was standing alongside Howard Elphinstone, a Radical of impeccable credentials. Ewart had always made the right noises on the Corn Laws – as he did on this occasion – but, equally, this was not his foremost priority. Elphinstone passionately proclaimed his support for a succession of radical causes, including repeal of the Corn Laws, and made the context clear.⁴¹⁵

I am an advocate for free trade, because all monopolies are injurious to the general good of society. ... I am opposed to all restrictions on commerce, and I consequently shall vote for the repeal of the corn laws. [*Tremendous cheering.*] The corn laws are neither more nor less than an extension of the pension list to the whole landed aristocracy of this country. The Tories are for dear bread, the Reformers are for cheap bread; and we are for repealing the corn laws, not only because that would lower the price of wheat to thirty-five shillings, but because, by so doing, we should increase trade and commerce, and afford to the manufacturing interests an opportunity of employing their capital, and consequently of benefiting not only themselves, but the workmen whom they employ.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴¹⁴ Subsequently published in a pamphlet as *Mercator's Reply to Mr. Booth's Pamphlet on Free Trade* (Liverpool, 1833).

⁴¹⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 Jul 1837.

Elphinstone did not define what he understood by repeal of the Corn Laws but the (unrealistically) low price for wheat quoted suggests that he envisaged abolition of all duty on imports. If so, he was going further than most, including – as we shall see – his sponsor Walmsley. One novel element (perhaps the earliest appearance of this campaign symbol of the free traders) was the brandishing of loaves:⁴¹⁶

These were a big and a little loaf borne on poles. The first bore the inscription, “No Corn Laws! The Reformers’ Loaf!” The second, “Sandon’s Corn Laws, and his Tory Loaf.”

In the event, Liverpool was not ready for further reform and free trade and rejected both Ewart and Elphinstone decisively.⁴¹⁷

In September 1838 an Anti-Corn Law Association was formed in Manchester and in March 1839 the Anti-Corn Law League [ACLL] was born.⁴¹⁸ There was occasional denunciation of the Corn Laws in Liverpool and, just as Cobden and his associates, having previously considered making the (secret) ballot the main rallying cause for Radicals, had decided to focus instead on the Corn Laws, so Walmsley was beginning to skew his approach. At a local meeting of the Edge Hill Mechanics’ Club, he told his audience that.⁴¹⁹

They wanted greater political rights than those they at present possessed. ... They had been told of final measures; but he knew of no final measures until he saw the people in the full possession of their rights, and that would only be when they had household suffrage and the vote by ballot. He looked for even greater measures than these to be carried by the people. He looked for the gradual and total abolition of those laws which were made for the benefit of the few at the cost of the suffering many – the hateful corn laws. They

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.* See also H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 97.

⁴¹⁷ Collins, *Politics and Elections*, p. 32, cites an address by John Finch “on Ewart’s behalf” that was issued on 800 placards and, amongst other things, called for universal suffrage. It did not attract comment in the press and it is most unlikely that Ewart (or Elphinstone) had any prior knowledge of it. Finch, a local merchant and prominent Owenite, was the father of John Finch Jnr., who would soon have a leading role along more conventional lines in the LAMA and LFRA. See J. Finch, *The Millennium. The Wisdom of Jesus, and the Foolery of Sectarianism, in Twelve Letters* (Liverpool, 1837).

⁴¹⁸ McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, pp. 34-54; Longmate, *Breadstealers*, pp. 17-34. These events and the subsequent history of the Anti-Corn Law League are set out succinctly but Liverpool and its politicians rate surprisingly scant mention, partly because of their uneven engagement with the cause and partly because of the scarcity of surviving correspondence.

⁴¹⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 December 1838.

should remember that one-third of the earnings of the working man went into the pockets of the aristocracy. ... How much less labour would they not have to perform, – how much more time would they not have for the improvement of their children, – how much more money would they not have if they could save two or three shillings a week.

Walmsley was holding firm with an advanced position on parliamentary reform but he was now giving more emphasis to the Corn Laws. There is no mention of reduced wages but instead of more spending money and reduced working hours. Equally significant is the reference to total abolition, albeit in steps. A few days later he delivered a similarly weighted address (but, untypically, using stronger language) to the annual meeting of his political powerbase, the Tradesmen's Reform Association:⁴²⁰

But what *he* [Walmsley] asked for the operative classes was, the repeal of the rate-paying clauses, the extension of the suffrage, and, above all, just laws for Ireland ... One step farther – he asked for the repeal of that odious and wicked tax, the canker worm of our national prosperity, which restrained the bounty of Providence, and doomed to poverty those who are justly called the producers of all wealth, for the sake of pampering the few who rioted in wealth and luxury. [*Great cheering.*] He need not tell them that he alluded to the corn laws – laws the most wicked that the cupidity of man ever devised for the purpose of robbing his fellow-creatures. [*Great applause.*]

The Manchester Association announced its intentions by hosting a public dinner on 23 January 1839 in the Corn Exchange, to be followed by a conference. Half a dozen prominent northern towns were represented by their mayors but not Liverpool. Rathbone, a previous mayor, declined an invitation, pleading “engagements at home”.⁴²¹ Thomas Thornely, now MP for Wolverhampton but still based in Liverpool, was also unable to attend because of “important private engagements”.⁴²² As with other prominent absentees, it is impossible to gauge how genuine their reasons were. By contrast, Ewart, no longer an MP, gratefully accepted his seat on high table and declared his “warm interest” in the meeting's

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1838.

⁴²¹ Anti-Corn Law League Letter-Books [ACLLLB], GB127.BR MS f 337.2 A1, i. 8, 31 December 1838 (Manchester Archives).

⁴²² *Ibid.*, i. 7, 31 December 1838.

subject.⁴²³ The “official” Liverpool delegates, Walmsley and Bolton, who would both soon become mayor but were evidently not well-known outside Liverpool at this time, took their seats amongst the wider audience and did not play a significant part in the evening’s proceedings.⁴²⁴

Walmsley, Bolton and perhaps two others had been requested to attend the dinner by an “Anti-Corn Law Committee”, which had been appointed on 19 January to carry into effect the resolutions passed at a public meeting convened by Liverpool’s mayor on 16 January. As had happened in 1826, the meeting discussed a series of resolutions proposed and seconded by leading Reformers, including Thornely, Booth, Walmsley, Rathbone and Bolton, and adopted a petition based on them.⁴²⁵ The petition was to be presented to both Houses of Parliament and, by a delightful twist, the approved means of delivery to the House of Commons was the town’s two Tory MPs. Although the professed purpose of the meeting was to consider the question of the Corn Laws, three of the four substantive resolutions were straightforward pitches in support of free trade; just one, proposed by Booth and seconded by Walmsley’s brother-in-law James Mulleneux, addressed the Corn Laws *per se*:

That the clear and direct tendency of the existing Corn Laws is grievously to cripple our commerce and manufactures, to limit employment, and cut short the supplies for the maintenance of the labouring population, and thus to destroy, or seriously to curtail, the main sources of our national prosperity.

The “labouring population” does rate a brief mention but, once again, the tenor of this and the other resolutions is very much about the prosperity of merchants and manufacturers. The actual discussion was more rounded but was conducted without benefit of any contribution from any prominent Tory or opponent of change.⁴²⁶

Two contentious issues were aired – the effect of repeal on wages and whether repeal should be gradual or immediate. As Booth had done in his 1833 pamphlet, the merchant (and former councillor) Lawrence Heyworth openly conceded the

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, i. 18, 6 January 1839.

⁴²⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 January 1839.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1839.

⁴²⁶ Sir John Gladstone was later to voice his opposition in the first of a series of pamphlets on the Corn Laws entitled *The Repeal of the Corn Laws, with its probable consequences, briefly examined and considered* (London, 1839).

(politically awkward) claim that the effect of repeal would be to reduce wages and the cost of manufactured goods. By contrast, Walmsley cited a great list of economic authorities in order to disprove the “very popular fallacy” that the price of labour was dependent on the price of food.

The original text of the proposed petition to Parliament evidently stopped well short of demanding the total and immediate repeal espoused by the Manchester association. Out of perceived fairness to farmers who were committed to paying the high rents set in long leases, the aim once more seems to have been a gradual reduction of duty over a 5-6 year period. An amendment with the effect of replacing this cautious approach with a demand for “unconditional and total repeal” was carried overwhelmingly, despite the concerted opposition of Bolton, Booth, Currie and Rathbone. Walmsley appears to have kept his own counsel. He later wrote:⁴²⁷

For years ... I had seen clearly that the Corn Laws were vicious and ruinous. I knew the sliding scale must be abolished, and that with it would cease the continual fluctuations in the price of food, which made life so harassing to the millions, yet I thought it possible that in the present state of trade a small fixed duty upon corn might be necessary. However, ... at the public dinner given by the Manchester Association ... all hesitation vanished from my mind. As I listened to the arguments of the different speakers, I became convinced that total and immediate repeal was the one right and just claim to be advanced. From henceforth I joined my humble endeavours with those of the Anti-Corn-Law League, to procure such repeal, with the resolve to accept no compromise.

Walmsley and Bolton had thus been despatched to the Manchester meeting in furtherance of the new Committee’s aim “to procure an immediate and total abolition of the Corn Laws”, a line which Bolton had argued against and Walmsley had yet to adopt!⁴²⁸ Over the next few years, not everyone in Liverpool felt able to abide by this line.

For the present, the Committee (soon part of an Anti-Corn Law Association) operated under Walmsley as chairman and with Tindal Atkinson as secretary; a finance committee had also been appointed. The sum of £300 was solicited from Liverpool by the Manchester Association for a general fund: whether it was paid in

⁴²⁷ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 103-4.

⁴²⁸ ACLLLB, i. 66, 19 January 1839.

full is not known.⁴²⁹ References to the Liverpool Association's activities are scarce, which suggests that it did not have a high public profile and that Manchester's exclusive Anti-Corn Law focus was not considered appropriate for Liverpool. The pairing of Walmsley and Atkinson was not accidental: they had worked together for two years as president and honorary secretary respectively of the Tradesmen's Reform Association (TRA). Given that Walmsley had not played an especially prominent part in the 16 January public meeting, his appearance as chairman of the new Anti-Corn Law Association suggests that, on the one hand, other potential candidates were wary of the association's stated aim but also that Walmsley had seen this as another opportunity to deploy his established organisational gifts and resources in furtherance of his own political aspirations.

Walmsley followed up his attendance at the Manchester meeting with more active participation in the celebrated assembly of Anti-Corn Law delegates at Brown's Hotel in Westminster in early February 1839. By then the Liverpool petition had attracted some 6,000 signatures.⁴³⁰ On this occasion his fellow Liverpool delegate was the merchant and shipowner James Aiken. Walmsley has left a detailed account of proceedings and of his own first tentative steps – as a total innocent – in national politics.⁴³¹ His expert knowledge of the corn trade seems to have given him an opportunity to be heard and participate to a degree beyond his status as a minor municipal politician. A speech of his was even reported in a London newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle*.⁴³² Walmsley's lowly position is unexpectedly confirmed by the fact that, for all his attendance at the Manchester meeting as leader of the Liverpool delegation, he had not previously met Cobden.

Walmsley's front-line engagement with Anti-Corn Law agitation did not last long. In November 1839 he was elected mayor at the second attempt. Although civic office had never been seen as an insuperable obstacle to political activity (witness the participation of half a dozen mayors in the Manchester public dinner), Walmsley

⁴²⁹ McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, p. 49.

⁴³⁰ ACLLLB, i. 77, 28 January 1839.

⁴³¹ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 104-13.

⁴³² *Morning Chronicle*, 9 February 1839.

chose to follow a purist line, as when declining an invitation to the ACLL's banquet in January 1840.⁴³³

Presiding ... over a Community which may call upon me with the strictest impartiality to regulate its proceedings and convey its sentiments, whatever they may be, on this question, I feel it to be my duty to deprive myself of the gratification of being present and cooperating at your meeting.

There is no reason to doubt Walmsley's sincerity: from the time they had assumed office in Liverpool in 1835 the Reformers had conscientiously striven to improve standards in public life. However, one can also observe that what Walmsley lost in terms of political exposure could be compensated for by positioning himself as a non-partisan representative of all the electors, a platform that he was to adopt for the 1841 general election.

With Walmsley standing aside, Liverpool's commitment to ACLL agitation was ambivalent. The most vocal campaigner (and apparently the new chairman of the local association) was now Heyworth. Although he was a personally courageous and committed advocate of free trade, his impact, especially at public meetings, was reduced by his tendency to invoke divine authority and by his reputation as a passionate teetotaler.⁴³⁴ Writing to the chairman of the ACLL in March 1840, Heyworth was uncertain whether a forthcoming meeting of the Liverpool association would include him in the list of deputies for the next campaign in London.⁴³⁵

My name amongst others was named; but, as my ultra views of a total Repeal of these wicked & obnoxious Laws, in accordance with the opinions held in Manchester, are not participated in by the Majority of the leading party here, it is probable that individuals, whose timid policy, distorted apprehension of supposed injury the few may sustain by a change, & contracted estimate of the universal benefit such a change in our Corn Laws will confer on every Class, even on the Landholders themselves, will be selected to support modified measures of Repeal.

⁴³³ ACLLLB, ii. 300, 23 December 1839. In the event, Liverpool sent a sizeable delegation headed by the former mayor William Earle and including Heyworth and Mulleneux (*Liverpool Mercury*, 17 January 1840).

⁴³⁴ See Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's Bread*, pp. 131, 170 and 200, for this aspect of Heyworth's behaviour. However, Heyworth's religious mentality was entirely in keeping with that of many other Leaguers: *ibid.*, pp. 88ff.

⁴³⁵ ACLLLB, iii. 404, 3 March 1840.

Later in March, the TRA (from which Walmsley had also stepped down) was to go over the issue again. Heyworth reported back to Manchester:⁴³⁶

... on the authority of our Secretary Mr Atkinson, I believe the body of the people are for the whole measure & no compromise; which I shall strenuously advocate, even to the verge of a rupture with the temporising party ...

For good measure Heyworth enclosed a “paper containing some observations I have made on the Abominable Corn Laws, taken in a Religious view”.⁴³⁷ The situation in Liverpool did not get any better in April, nor did Heyworth’s increasingly rabid prose:⁴³⁸

Tomorrow we expect to call a meeting of the Anti Corn Law Association: but as yet I apprehend we have not reached the point of exciting that moral indignation against the iniquity of the Corn Laws & restrictions on Commerce generally which should in every humane & well regulated mind create. Their maligna[nt] turpitude, entailing misery & destitution in each succeeding generation of mankind, ought to cause every bosom to thrill with horror & abhorrence at their existence & string every nerve with a determination to diffuse universal knowledge of their unmitigated tendency to evil & that continually & so, by the conviction of the malignancy of the laws in the minds of all, excepting the stupidly selfish & sordid, obtain once and for ever, their total repeal & abolition.

His term as mayor completed, Walmsley returned to the political fray at the end of 1840. In an effort to mobilise the working classes as well as the electors, the Liverpool Operative Anti-Corn Law Association had by then been set up along the lines of similar organisations in Manchester and a few other towns.⁴³⁹ (It may also have served to provide muscle and deflect any disruptive activity by Chartists or other opponents.⁴⁴⁰) Amongst the “operatives” the most active individual was an

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, iii. 448, 17 March 1840.

⁴³⁷ Heyworth had a series of pamphlets published on free trade issues. The first, *To the Working Classes ... on the Natural Law of Wages* (Manchester, 1841), was printed for the National Anti-Corn Law League.

⁴³⁸ ACLLLB, iv. 480, 8 April 1840.

⁴³⁹ Moore, “This Whig and Tory Ridden Town”, pp. 64-5; Pickering and Tyrrell, *People’s Bread*, pp. 144-5.

⁴⁴⁰ McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, pp. 96-8.

otherwise unknown labourer called Robert Jones. Heyworth had chaired a public meeting in September 1840 and Walmsley followed suit in January 1841, delivering a keynote speech that was even reported in *The Times*.⁴⁴¹ In an interesting development of the argumentation, repeal of the Corn Laws was directly equated with free trade:

The first question that would come before them was the adoption of a petition for a repeal of the iniquitous duties on food, and it was to him a source of the highest gratification to see the industrial classes at length arousing themselves to a sense of what was due to them on that great, that important, that vital question. He considered it the question of questions. He considered that all questions – household suffrage, vote by ballot, and the various questions which distracted, and had distracted them for a long time – fell into insignificance compared with the question of free trade.

Free trade was becoming Walmsley's big issue for Liverpool. His next personal goal had, for some time, been to attain the representation of Liverpool in Parliament but, before the Whig government's downfall at the beginning of June 1841 gave him his opportunity, Walmsley presided over the visit to Liverpool on 24 May of a deputation from the Manchester area, including Cobden.⁴⁴² A circular from the Council of the National Anti-Corn Law League had been sent to each Liverpool elector advertising the meeting. Despite a Tory protest about "Manchester dictation", attendance inside the Amphitheatre was estimated at 5,000, with vast numbers unable to obtain admittance. Walmsley used his position as chairman of the meeting to repeat a rather disingenuous claim about the nature of the League's campaign and the visiting delegation:⁴⁴³

... they came not in the spirit of dictation, but they came as men of all parties – Whig, Tory, and radical – to speak to their fellow-men in a neighbouring town, to show their distresses, to appeal for assistance, to explain to them their wants and wishes. They came not here as manufacturers; they came not as agriculturalists; they came not as merchants; but they came as men. They came to show, if they could, that the corn laws were an unjust and iniquitous tax.

⁴⁴¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 October 1840 and 15 January 1841; *The Times*, 16 January 1841.

⁴⁴² *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 May 1841.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

This non-partisan approach was shortly to feature in Walmsley's parliamentary challenge.

The whole tenor of the speeches by the visiting delegation was different from that prevalent in previous meetings in Liverpool. The suffering of workers featured prominently and it was observed that "suffering had not yet visited Liverpool with the same degree of intensity". The focus on the Corn Laws was much stronger and there was not the rampant advocacy of free trade principles. Walmsley was proud that it was he who had introduced Cobden to Liverpool and later wrote:⁴⁴⁴

In Liverpool great excitement was caused by Mr Cobden's visit. The feelings of the monopolists and anti-monopolists were strained to the utmost pitch. Upwards of thirteen thousand families in the town were dependent upon parish relief. Whatever, therefore, could affect the price of bread was of vital import. Notwithstanding the intensity of feeling aroused, the great Anti-Corn-Law meeting passed off quietly enough. Cobden's eloquence, his earnest concentrated manner, produced a marked impression on his audience, amongst which were many antagonistic to his cause.

⁴⁴⁴ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 126-7.

ii. THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF 1841

It was at this momentous point in the history of extra-parliamentary campaigning that Walmsley was presented with his long sought for opportunity to contest the representation of Liverpool. It was also an opportunity for the electors of Liverpool not just to express their usual loyalties to Whig and Tory factions but to register a statement on the preferred future direction of Liverpool's commercial activity – free trade or continued protectionism. Before we examine the conduct of what proved a highly significant election in Liverpool's history, some historical context is required, especially as municipal and parliamentary elections had not followed entirely parallel paths since the 1832 Reform Act. Furthermore, although politics was always to the fore in the selection of candidates and the ensuing elections, Liverpool had recently established a tradition of attracting prominent or well-connected candidates, notably Canning, Brougham and Huskisson.

At the municipal level, the urge for reform in the wake of the 1832 Act had been compounded by the corruption endemic in the Old Corporation and this had given the Reformers their overwhelming majority in the 1835 municipal election. By the time of the 1841 parliamentary election this majority had almost evaporated and would have done so earlier but for the way that aldermen were selected. At the parliamentary level, support for Whigs and Radicals was always much less clear-cut. Aside from Roscoe's brief tenure in 1806-7, Liverpool regularly returned two Tories until the death of Huskisson in 1830 created an unexpected vacancy.

Two ambitious candidates came forward, who may fairly be described as young toffs rather than party men: William Ewart, who had previously represented the pocket borough of Bletchingley, and John Evelyn Denison. Both were Whiggish but Ewart had the advantage of coming from a respected and well-connected local family. Ewart attracted most of the Whig electors, Denison most of the Tories, but politically there was little between them. Ewart emerged victorious in one of the most corrupt elections of all time (see Chapter 2) and, despite being unseated on petition in March 1831, re-established himself at the general election later in 1831. On this occasion Denison was also elected but opted to sit instead for the Nottinghamshire constituency, which created a further vacancy in Liverpool, soon to be filled by another young toff, this time the confirmed Tory Lord Sandon (heir to the Earl of Harrowby), who had previously sat for Tiverton.

At the general election immediately following the 1832 Act, it might have been expected that Liverpool would fall in line with other major boroughs and return two Whigs. In fact Sandon just held on to his seat against a solid challenge from the Reformer Thomas Thornely. Then in 1835, the same year that the Reformers took control of the Town Council, Sandon topped the poll and Ewart only secured the second seat by a small margin. Thus, while the electors were keen to see local government reformed, there was no such clarity at the parliamentary level and the position of Ewart, as an increasingly Radical MP, was under threat. For his part, Thornely had anticipated this situation and successfully contested Wolverhampton, which he went on to hold for over two decades.

With general elections coming round every few years, the Reformers could mount another challenge to Sandon in 1837 but by now the tide had ebbed and Ewart, realising he was doomed, made a botched attempt to line up an Irish seat as a fall-back. The Tories duly reclaimed the second Liverpool seat. A new element in the election was the involvement of the Tradesmen's Reform Association (TRA), of which Walmsley was president. This had been instrumental in the selection of the Radical Howard Elphinstone as the second candidate and it was Walmsley who introduced him to Liverpool and then formally nominated him on the hustings.⁴⁴⁵ The Reformers had been optimistic about the prospects of both Ewart and Elphinstone, despite the evidence of previous elections and the obvious fact that the Reformers' slate lacked broad appeal, being composed of two avowed Radicals. A further cause for optimism was that the requisition inviting Elphinstone to stand had been signed by a record number of electors – about 4,000 out of a registered electorate of just over 11,000.⁴⁴⁶ The ensuing defeat was a bitter pill for the Reformers and resulted in equally bitter recriminations. A report to the TRA alleged intimidation and highlighted the large number of non-voters, over 2,000.⁴⁴⁷ Crucially, 238 signatories of the requisition to Elphinstone had voted for the Tories; a further 277 had not voted at all; and even 30 members of the TRA had voted for the Tories. A self-evident lesson in the febrile world of parliamentary politics was that signatures on a requisition did not amount to votes, and yet the same mistake would soon be repeated.

⁴⁴⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 July and 28 July 1837.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11 August 1837, extracted from *Liverpool Times*.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 August 1837, extracted from *Liverpool Telegraph*.

For Walmsley, Elphinstone's defeat was the first setback in his hitherto meteoric rise. Barely a year and a half after being elected to the Town Council he was pulling most of the strings in the Reformers' parliamentary election campaign. Although his energetic activities on the Town Council had greatly enhanced his personal profile, he owed his new-found power to another of his far-sighted strategic moves – the founding of the TRA at the end of 1836.⁴⁴⁸ There was already a Reform Association in existence, dominated by the merchant class, but that did not seek to act on a regular basis and was much preoccupied with elector registration. Walmsley's twin masterstrokes were to engage a much wider section of the population (not all of whom will have been eligible to vote) and to set up a standing party machine across the whole constituency with committee members drawn from each ward. From the outset Walmsley was in charge of the TRA as president and, with membership passing 2,500 in the first year, he had suddenly become the spokesman of not just the rank-and-file Reformers who did the legwork during campaigns but of many more senior figures, including councillors, who maintained close relations with the association. As will be seen, the old guard of the Reformers, headed by Rathbone, soon found themselves sidelined. They would also have been alarmed by the sort of truly radical ideology that underpinned the association. The first annual report in late 1837 pompously intoned:⁴⁴⁹

The want of an association constructed upon popular principles, embodying and concentrating the scattered elements of power, which in too many instances had been wasted in isolated and fruitless efforts, was widely felt ... Governed by a constitution, framed expressly with a view to carry into practice the theory of popular control and responsibility, the experiment of convening monthly meetings for the purpose of consulting the opinions and receiving the sanction of the members to the various important steps which the committee have from time to time felt it necessary to take, has been attended by the best results, inasmuch as the current of public feeling has been correctly ascertained, while the discussions which have taken place upon subjects of vital importance to the welfare and liberties of the people, have tended in the most forcible manner to illustrate their use and the beneficial tendency of their influence.

As the report conceded, the Tories had earlier “succeeded in forming a society, which, from the exertions of its leaders, had daily become more formidable in point

⁴⁴⁸ *Bell's Life in London*, 11 December 1836.

⁴⁴⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 October 1837.

of influence, and was progressively augmenting its numbers". This was the Tradesmen's Conservative Association, which – as the Tradesmen's Conservative Society – had been active before the 1835 municipal election. It really came to prominence with a large dinner a few weeks after the election in January 1836, which marked the beginning of the Tory fight-back and the growing influence of its president, Samuel Holme.⁴⁵⁰ In later years Holme recalled being struck by how "the middle classes, having obtained their wishes and become electors, had a latent conservative tendency and that their good sense would make them friends of good order and the enemies of political disturbance".⁴⁵¹ His aim was to foster such feelings and create a "rallying point". Another imaginative move by Holme and his friends had been to set up the twice weekly *Liverpool Standard* in 1832 in the wake of the Reform Act as a vehicle for robust presentation of Conservative principles and "spicy" assaults on the Reformers.⁴⁵² This was not something that Walmsley needed to emulate at this stage. As later events show, he was well aware of the importance of the press but, whereas Holme saw the need for a Conservative newspaper with more impact than the staid *Liverpool Courier*, the Reformers already had the support of a clutch of supportive newspapers representing every shade of the spectrum (*Liverpool Mercury*, *Liverpool Chronicle*, *The Albion*, *Liverpool Times* and *Liverpool Journal*).

The mobilisation of the TRA and its rapid transformation into a powerbase for Walmsley and like-minded Radicals at a time when Walmsley was also much preoccupied with policing matters bears testament to both his energy and his organisational ability. However, he was also gathering around himself a small clique of loyal and efficient aides. Principal among these was Tindal Atkinson, a young Londoner of humble origins who had come to Liverpool in the early 1830s and earned a living as a house painter. He improved himself such that by 1835 he had become secretary to the Literary and Scientific Institution, in which capacity he was spotted by Walmsley, who was steadily acquiring influence in the much more prestigious Liverpool Mechanics' Institution.⁴⁵³ Walmsley had him appointed

⁴⁵⁰ *Standard*, 22 January 1836. Cragoe, 'The Great Reform Act and the Modernization of British Politics', surveys the new Conservative Associations. What Holme created in Liverpool was by no means typical. See also Roberts, *Political Movements in Urban England*, pp. 99-101.

⁴⁵¹ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 213.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 242-3.

⁴⁵³ *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 15 February 1890, extracted from *Liverpool Daily Post*.

secretary to the TRA and also assisted him in training to become a barrister. As noted above, in 1839 Atkinson also became secretary to the Liverpool Anti-Corn Law Association. In his professional life he subsequently achieved distinction as a barrister, then as Serjeant-at-Law and finally as a County Court judge. However, his attachment to Walmsley was renewed a decade later when he became honorary secretary to the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association and, in effect, Walmsley's principal aide in his most notable political campaign.

That Walmsley aspired to stand for Parliament at the earliest opportunity was evident to all from a very early stage in his political career. After the establishment of the TRA the next obvious step on the path was to become mayor. He made an audacious first attempt in 1838. By then the three best known Reformers (Currie, Earle and Rathbone) had served their terms as mayor and, although there were other worthy contenders from the old guard, it was less obvious who should be next in line for this honour. The less-than-transparent selection process adopted by the Reformers was to discuss rival claims in a private meeting and then vote *en bloc* for their preferred candidate at the formal session of the Town Council. The justification for this was to pre-empt any attempt by the Tory minority to exploit the balance of power in a close contest. At the 1838 caucus the establishment candidate, Hornby, and Walmsley received an equal number of votes in the first round but, once two other candidates had been eliminated, Hornby won the run-off by the small majority of five. The next day Hornby was elected mayor by a large majority but not before one of Walmsley's supporters had broken with convention and formally nominated him.⁴⁵⁴ This can only have served to lower Walmsley's stock with many of the Reformers.

Undeterred, Walmsley stood again in 1839 but not before he had been reproved by one of the Reformers' elder statesmen for his presumptuous ambition. The alderman in question is nowhere named but was probably a close ally of Rathbone called Eyre Evans, whom Holme later accused Walmsley of thrusting aside in his ambition to become mayor.⁴⁵⁵ In his memoirs Walmsley wrote that he had confirmed his intention to fill the office of mayor as a step to the representation of Liverpool in Parliament, adding for good measure that the alderman would find himself voting for

⁴⁵⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 9 November 1838.

⁴⁵⁵ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 217.

him.⁴⁵⁶ At about the same time one of Rathbone's sons wrote: "... whatever activity Mr. Walmsley may lately have shown, it is only lately; and if he and his friends try to force him higher than people in general consider him to have deserved, it will have quite the different effect from what they wish".⁴⁵⁷ Despite all, Walmsley duly became mayor with no opposition.⁴⁵⁸

By all accounts, in his year of office Walmsley was an exemplary inclusive and non-partisan mayor. The otherwise hostile *Liverpool Mail* sang his praises:⁴⁵⁹

Sir Joshua Walmsley has conducted himself during his whole mayoralty with a fairness and impartiality which reflect upon him the highest credit. He was the first reformed mayor who drew around him at civic entertainments men of all shades of opinion.

Equally significantly, it was not just the dispossessed Tories who were invited in. Walmsley made a point of also including tradesmen.⁴⁶⁰ What he lost by removing himself from front-line politics, he restored through dignified behaviour (and largesse) in a respected municipal office and by the fortuitous acquisition of a knighthood. It was Walmsley's good luck that he happened to be in office when Queen Victoria got married and so could pass on the well-wishes of the nation's second city.⁴⁶¹

When the time came for Walmsley to offer himself as a parliamentary candidate in 1841 he could justifiably feel that he was the obvious person to stand against the Tories and that he had done as much as was humanly possible in the previous six years to improve both his personal standing and his electability. However, even before he started campaigning, he was vulnerable in three areas: the receding appetite for further reforms; his humble origins and personal reputation; and, above all, internal dissension amongst the Reformers. The first aspect has already been covered above and in due course the 1841 general election proved disastrous for

⁴⁵⁶ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 117.

⁴⁵⁷ J. Murphy, 'The Liverpool Corporation schools and the movement for national elementary education' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool, 1955), Appendix E, quoting Rathbone Papers (letter of 13 January 1839).

⁴⁵⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 November 1839.

⁴⁵⁹ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 123-4.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

the outgoing Whig government and a mixed blessing for Radicals. The other two aspects merit further consideration.

Walmsley was the son of a noted marble mason and builder and benefitted from a decent education, first at a well thought of school just outside Liverpool and then at one of the infamous “northern schools” (a fate he shared with Cobden).⁴⁶² His family background, however, was dysfunctional: his father had his wife consigned to the workhouse, presumably on grounds of mental health, and Joshua was one of a large number of illegitimate children from a succession of common-law wives. Illegitimacy was a major stigma in public life: in the 1823 election Huskisson had been wrongly accused by his Radical opponent of being illegitimate and had taken great umbrage.⁴⁶³ Walmsley’s only full sister, Sarah, was a further complication. Although the family all belonged to the Established Church, Sarah converted to Roman Catholicism as an adult and eventually joined a Franciscan convent in Paris, becoming Abbess some years later. The combination of illegitimacy and Roman Catholicism in the family could have damaged Walmsley’s image quite badly. However, it seems that no-one was fully aware of these circumstances. Even Holme, whose father knew the Walmsley family well, was apparently unaware of the whole story. Some rumours did get out but they were insubstantial and inaccurate.⁴⁶⁴

A further slur on Walmsley’s reputation that occasionally surfaced was that he had made his fortune as a corn merchant in the 1820s by exploiting several loopholes in the Corn Laws that in effect allowed some foodstuffs to be brought into England without payment of duty.⁴⁶⁵ Such practices exploited the peculiar status of the Isle of Man and were perfectly legal for a time, provided there was no passing off of foreign commodities as Manx produce, but subsequently attracted much adverse comment

⁴⁶² See Appendix 2 for a concise biography of Walmsley.

⁴⁶³ Huskisson, *Speeches*, Vol. III, pp. 648-9.

⁴⁶⁴ The *Liverpool Mail* (26 June 1841) wrote: “Sir Joshua is indignant at the report that his Christian name was given to him because he was the son of none. [Qy. Nun.] The prefix was given to him in honour of his maternal grandfather.” In this convoluted squib, alluding to the biblical Joshua whose father was Nun, doubts are cast on Walmsley’s origins and legitimacy, and there is apparently a garbled reference to his sister. Walmsley was in fact named after his paternal uncle. Needless to say, H. M. Walmsley’s version of his father’s origins is most economical with the truth (*Life*, pp. 1-2).

⁴⁶⁵ An editorial in the *Liverpool Standard* (18 June 1841), which - as ever - one suspects was written by Samuel Holme, made much of the charge in an assessment of Walmsley’s worth as a parliamentary candidate.

in Parliament. Published lists of imports show a high level of trade with the Isle of Man and in the early 1820s Walmsley was a partner in several firms, based jointly in the Isle of Man and Liverpool, which dealt in corn, flour and biscuits.⁴⁶⁶ The allegations against the Booth & Walmsley partnership are probably true in part but it is unlikely that imports from the Isle of Man were the only source of their rapidly growing prosperity.⁴⁶⁷ Whatever the propriety of the Isle of Man trade, Booth & Walmsley were given a highly favourable assessment when they applied to the Liverpool branch of the Bank of England in late 1827 for a discount account. The Liverpool branch reported to London that the partnership “are considered to be carrying on a good business” and “it is the general opinion that the House has done well”.⁴⁶⁸ The partnership was duly granted a discount account with a limit of £10,000. Walmsley had been very successful and few in Liverpool would hold that against him.

By far the most serious vulnerability that Walmsley had to face as he entered the election was the internal dissension amongst the Reformers, as much a class struggle between the old guard and the new men as between advocates of moderate and advanced reform. Walmsley knew exactly what he was up against. He later recalled a meeting with “the Whig notabilities” in a counting-house in Pool Lane (the premises of Rathbone) at which he was assailed for having dared “to aspire to the position of representative of a town like Liverpool, when so many of higher standing had never dreamt of such a thing”.⁴⁶⁹ His response was simply to point to the requisition presented to him that day “bearing upwards of three thousand six hundred signatures – the most numerously-signed requisition that had ever emanated from the electors of Liverpool”. On this last point Walmsley was mistaken (Elphinstone had received about 4,000 signatures in 1837) but no-one could doubt the head of steam behind his candidacy. Rathbone had tried to pre-empt this eventuality. At a large dinner party, probably in early 1840, which had

⁴⁶⁶ *London Gazette*, 26 April 1823.

⁴⁶⁷ *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 and 28 November 1871. Responding to an obituary of Walmsley that attributed his wealth to the corn trade with Ireland, a well-informed correspondent identifying himself as T.G. (probably Sir Thomas Gladstone, whose father Sir John Gladstone had been a leading corn merchant) detailed two schemes for evading duty that were centred on the Isle of Man in 1820-1 and 1827-8. He stopped just short of accusing Walmsley of criminal activity but asserted that he had grown rich from the Manx trade.

⁴⁶⁸ Bank of England, Liverpool Branch, C/129/95, private letter no. 44, 22 December 1827 (Bank of England); Bank of England no. 27, 3 January 1828.

⁴⁶⁹ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 128-9.

been convened to take “active measures” about Walmsley, the principal conclusion was to attend meetings of the TRA and “endeavour to take it out of the hands in which it now is”.⁴⁷⁰ Some had even proposed not fielding a candidate “to prevent weakening the party by a defeat”. It is not surprising that Rathbone’s entourage objected to Walmsley’s politics and ambition but it is also quite clear that patrician attitudes had not died out after the 1832 Reform Act: Walmsly [sic] and Tindal Atkinson, “the leaders of the popular party”, were simply an ex-usher and a painter.⁴⁷¹

Walmsley was clearly up against it from the outset of the election campaign and he knew it. In his first big speech on 14 June he conceded that there was dissension in the ranks of the Reformers.⁴⁷²

I neither conceal from myself nor from you, that there are those amongst us, equal in energy in the cause of reform to myself, who have not yet accorded me that hearty goodwill, which, though I perhaps have no reason to expect, I did yet hope to obtain. But I do hope, and I am almost certain of the fact, that they will merge all minor differences in the defence of that great principle – the support of those measures which we now come to advocate.

Walmsley’s election strategy was to present himself as a non-partisan advocate of free trade. His son – with more than a touch of hagiography - later summarised this stance:⁴⁷³

Sir Joshua described himself as belonging to no party. He was simply an “Anti-Monopolist”; in all sincerity he could thus describe himself, for with him, as with all genuine reformers, every political dogma he held was sanctified by a constant reference to the needs of the people. The repeal of the Corn Laws, the removal of all restrictions on commerce, was not a party question, but an aim some men had set themselves to attain for the better welfare of the whole nation.

⁴⁷⁰ Murphy, Ph.D. thesis, Appendix E, quoting Rathbone Papers. The letter quoted, RP IX.3.15, survives in the form of a typed transcript and has been dated 10 February 1841. Other content indicates that it was written in February 1840.

⁴⁷¹ Rathbone Papers, RP IX.3.15. The letter’s author, Samuel Greg Rathbone, was one of William Rathbone’s sons.

⁴⁷² *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 June 1841.

⁴⁷³ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 131.

This approach was obviously intended to distance Walmsley's campaign from previous more clear-cut confrontations between Reformers and Tories. Just conceivably it might draw in some merchants who would see commercial merit that outweighed political loyalty to the Tories. However, Walmsley was always going to have difficulty in playing down his credentials as a Radical. Moreover, his line on free trade issues was probably too uncompromising even for potentially sympathetic Liverpool merchants, and those suffering most from the Corn Laws and other protectionist measures generally did not possess the vote.

Walmsley's proposer was Colonel George Williams, that most extreme of Radicals, and the first campaign advertisement, under the banner heading "Walmsley and Free Trade", announced a public meeting of the "Requisitionists to Sir Josh. Walmsley, and the Friends of Free Trade".⁴⁷⁴ The choice of the influential (but rather uninspiring) William Brown as his seconder was more fortunate. Walmsley's other constant companion was the Irish Catholic Sheil.⁴⁷⁵ These were all worthy and (within their own spheres) influential men who were in tune with Walmsley's political outlook but they were neither representative of the Reformers' constituency nor in the first rank of prominence. Walmsley's running mate, none other than the outgoing Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston, was clearly selected to add some political nobility to the Reformers' ticket and broaden its appeal by providing a counterbalance to Walmsley's advanced radicalism. However, the requisition to Palmerston was a botched affair and at no point did he show any serious interest in representing Liverpool or assist in the election campaign.

In his declaration as a candidate, Walmsley unambiguously made free trade the top issue:⁴⁷⁶

Prohibitory and protective duties for the benefit of particular classes of a community, I believe to be as inexpedient as they are unjust. This belief, founded on reflection, has gained strength from upwards of twenty years' experience in commercial life. Mere party distractions seem to me of little moment when compared with the great objects of extending the field for human employment; opening to the capitalist, for the exercise of his skill and enterprise, the markets of the world, and securing to the industrious masses

⁴⁷⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 June 1841.

⁴⁷⁵ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 130.

⁴⁷⁶ *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 June 1841.

the means of improving their physical and social condition. I am convinced that FREE TRADE is an essential element of progressive national prosperity, and I would support every measure calculated to give that spirit to our commercial policy.

However, noticeably absent from this address is any mention of the “total and immediate” repeal of the Corn Laws, retention of which had caused Heyworth so much angst in the previous year.

The ensuing meeting on 14 June benefitted from the presence on the platform of Rathbone, who made a suitably supportive speech, but few of Rathbone’s closest allies were in attendance.⁴⁷⁷ The opening address (by Blackburn) drew attention to the wider significance of the election and is probably a fair reflection of Liverpool’s opinion of its own status:

They were entering on a contest of immense importance, not merely to Liverpool, but to the whole empire, and he trusted that Liverpool would redeem herself from the disgrace of sending anti-commercial and anti-social men to represent this great commercial town, and that she would send Lord Palmerston and Sir Joshua Walmsley. He trusted they would send two representatives on the present occasion who would tell the empire at large that Liverpool was determined to enjoy the full advantages of a free commercial intercourse with the whole world.

During his own speech Walmsley reiterated his belief in free trade, artfully linking this to the Liverpool Tory tradition:

I believe monopolies to be as unjust as they are unequal in their operation. I believe them to be unsanctioned by any law, moral or divine, and I believe further that they have not answered even the selfish ends of their promoters. The principles of free trade are no longer theories, thanks to the immortal Huskisson.⁴⁷⁸ He showed us – he proved to demonstration the justice and wisdom of this principle – that the nearer we approached to unrestricted commerce, the greater would be the development of the energies of our country.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 June 1841 (speeches of Rathbone, Blackburn and Walmsley).

⁴⁷⁸ Walmsley had voted for Canning in 1816. This adulation of Huskisson, entirely natural for a Liverpool merchant, suggests that he may have stayed within the Tory fold until at least 1830.

Not surprisingly, Walmsley was picked up (twice) for not alluding to the Corn Laws in his published election address. The first time he avoided the issue by talking about monopolies in general. The second time he finally nailed his colours to the mast:

It has been asked whether I would do away, entirely and immediately, with the obnoxious corn laws. Gentlemen, I ask for one thing – justice – nothing more, nothing less. I have set out with this principle, let us ask for the total repeal of the corn laws because we know those laws to be unjust, unequal, most destructive to the best interests of society, striking at the root of our commerce and manufactures, and injuring and destroying our manufacturing population. The ramifications reach to every stage and every grade of society, depriving you of food, education and all that is desirable and dear to you.

It would seem that the word “immediate” was still not uttered but no one could have doubted Walmsley’s commitment on the issue.

The hustings and voting on 29-30 June were unruly, with Walmsley (whose diminutive stature was not suited to a crowded platform) in particular having difficulty in making himself heard.⁴⁷⁹ Despite careful planning by the police, rioting started even before the outcome was known and got worse thereafter.⁴⁸⁰ Some incidents might be characterised as traditional election violence between fringe elements in the two factions but the biggest threat to public order came from large-scale rioting in two parts of the town by the Irish. (It is difficult not to interpret this rioting as the product of desperation by the poorest of the unenfranchised classes as they saw what little prospect they had of a better future, promised them by Walmsley and their co-religionist Sheil, slowly slip away.)

The outcome of the election was a decisive defeat for Walmsley, who polled only 4,647 votes compared to the 5,979 of Lord Sandon.⁴⁸¹ The breakdown of voting shows that Walmsley topped the poll of householders but did poorly amongst freemen who did not have householder status. His free trade platform may have

⁴⁷⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 2 July 1841. The *Liverpool Standard* (23 March 1841) once made great play of Walmsley’s “deficiency in longitudinal proportions” and likened him to Napoleon.

⁴⁸⁰ WCM, 3 July 1841, 352 MIN/WAT 1/2, pp. 421-7.

⁴⁸¹ *The Poll for the Election of Members of Parliament* (Liverpool, 1841).

won a few extra votes amongst merchants and the more affluent tradesmen but the traditionally conservative and protectionist freemen were as hostile as ever.⁴⁸² The leading Reformers all voted for Walmsley, as they were bound to do, but there they stopped and “the powerful interest of the party had not been used in his favour”.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² By all accounts the election was free of treating and bribery. The Revd. William Shepherd wrote: “As Walmsley did not begin the practice, the Conservatives did not open their purses, for they were sure of the old freemen, who will never forgive the attempt of some of our party to disenfranchise them ...” (Moore, “This Whig and Tory Ridden Town”, p. 52, quoting letter to Lord Brougham of 11 September 1841, Brougham MSS (University College London)).

⁴⁸³ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 135.

iii. THE CORN LAWS AND FREE TRADE, 1841-1848

Walmsley's resounding defeat and subsequent withdrawal from public life in Liverpool once he had completed his term as a councillor in October 1841 closed a chapter in Anti-Corn Law agitation and free trade campaigning. In September the news had leaked out that he was about to leave Liverpool "almost immediately" and had taken a lease on Ranton Abbey near Stafford, a decision that the *Liverpool Mail* said had been taken "within the last few days".⁴⁸⁴ Along with the departure of Liverpool's most prominent political personality went the extensive and effective organisational structures he had created. With the historian's hindsight this may be seen as a double blow to the development of liberal politics in Liverpool. Walmsley had worked hard to engage supporters of reform across class boundaries and the TRA was the most obvious manifestation of this. Without him, the Reformers reverted to old ways and their politics were the politics of the merchant class. Fraser has concluded that "throughout the middle decades of the century Liverpool Liberalism found it difficult to harness together elite Whiggism and retail and artisan radicalism".⁴⁸⁵ Equally damaging was the loss of the political machinery embodied in the TRA, which resembled a modern political party. As will be seen in Chapter 6, Walmsley had learned what could be achieved by an efficient political organisation and in later years sought to create a national analogue.

Those wishing to continue the free trade campaign would have to regroup and it would be Thornely (now MP for Wolverhampton but still closely associated with Liverpool), Heyworth and Brown who led the way. Despite Walmsley's precipitate departure, the long-standing commitment of many liberally-minded merchants to the free trade cause persisted and was twice repackaged in the 1840s, first through the Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association (LAMA) and then, at the close of the decade, through the Liverpool Financial Reform Association (LFRA). In varying degrees these new organisations tried to present themselves as non-party political, which entailed the separation of free trade and fiscal policy from the wider reform agenda (notably extension of the franchise). As will be seen, their efforts to achieve a broader consensus failed, in that their membership remained predominantly Liberal and, with the odd high-profile exception, attracted few Conservatives. Although Walmsley had himself tried this approach in styling himself simply as an "Anti-

⁴⁸⁴ *The Times*, 11 September 1841, extracted from *Liverpool Mail*.

⁴⁸⁵ Fraser, *Urban politics*, p. 190.

Monopolist” during the 1841 election, no voter then (or later) can have been in any doubt as to the wider political affiliations of the leading free traders. However, the new exclusive focus on free trade ran the risk of seeming irrelevant, on the one hand, to much of the population and providing a distraction, on the other, from other pressing socio-political issues, such as the franchise.

That events panned out in this way in Liverpool should not be seen as surprising. As we have seen, from the first so-called Corn Law, the Importation Act of 1815, the response of Liverpool’s Reformers had almost always been moderate by comparison with events elsewhere. Thus in 1825, the clear intent of their public meeting had been to nudge the town’s sympathetic Tory MP William Huskisson further in the direction of liberalising trade in general, and specific proposals on the Corn Laws had been moderated so as to facilitate progress on the broader issue. Despite his party affiliation, Huskisson was almost universally respected by the Reformers, not least Walmsley: paradoxically, his influence on the Reformers was probably greater than in his own party. Against this preoccupation with free trade rather than specific issues such as the Corn Laws, the alignment of Walmsley and Heyworth in 1838-41 with the extreme ACLL agenda clearly discomforted many of their colleagues like Rathbone but the worsening economic climate would eventually see the “total and immediate” line on the Corn Laws prevail and a similarly radical stance adopted on the wider free trade question. What, of course, had allowed the free trade lobby to pursue the big issue was Liverpool’s relative stability and affluence in the 1830s: different social conditions in and around Manchester encouraged a sharper focus and precipitated different political reactions.

Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association

The timing of the foundation of the LAMA (an important organisation that has been almost totally overlooked in the historiography of free trade, unlike its successor, the LFRA) was clearly a consequence of the electoral defeat of the Reformers at the municipal election in October 1841. No longer responsible for running the Town Council and with a decisive defeat inflicted in June at the parliamentary election, the Reformers who still had fight left in them needed to regroup and plan their future political strategy. On 6 December 1841, at a private meeting of the “Friends of Free Trade” chaired by Thornely, it was resolved “to form a society for the purpose of exposing the injustice, and aiding the overthrow, of the corn-laws, the sugar, coffee,

and timber duties, and of all other commercial and agricultural monopolies and protections of every kind”.⁴⁸⁶

By the time of the inaugural public meeting on 6 January 1842 Thornely had been installed as president of the association and the aims of the new organisation worked out. In Thornely’s words, these were:⁴⁸⁷

... to procure the repeal of the present Corn-laws ... to obtain the removal of all restrictions upon the trade and commerce of the country, and to establish as the principle upon which the trade and commerce of the country should be conducted, that wherever the people of the United Kingdom could buy at the cheapest rate, and sell at the dearest, they should be permitted to do so *without any legislative interference whatsoever.*

The tenor of the platform speeches was uncompromising, with none of the equivocation that had driven Heyworth to distraction in 1840 when promoting the ACLL’s “total and immediate” line. This was only to be expected, given that the leading lights of the new association were Thornely, Heyworth and Sheil. However, the general acceptance of more radical views (in other words, the polarisation of the Reformers) was probably due to the deteriorating economic situation, which can only have served to reinforce the views of those believing that it was monopolies that brought about commercial and social distress.

The membership list of the association is a roll-call of Liverpool’s Reformers (including the former mayors Earle, Rathbone, Hornby and even the absentee Walmsley).⁴⁸⁸ However, alongside other veterans like Heyworth and Sheil, new faces were emerging that would also achieve prominence later in the LFRA: the merchant Charles Holland, the cotton broker James Mellor, the merchant and smalt (glass) manufacturer Charles Edward Rawlins (the association’s honorary secretary) and the distiller James Mulleneux (Walmsley’s brother-in-law and the association’s joint treasurer). In no sense was the membership broadly based, despite Thornely’s proclaimed wish that “It had not been their object to form any political association; they invited gentlemen of every political principle to join them, if

⁴⁸⁶ *Liverpool Mercury*, 10 December 1841.

⁴⁸⁷ *Speeches Delivered at the First Meeting of the Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association [LAMA Speeches]* (Liverpool, 1842), p. 3; *Liverpool Mercury*, 7 January 1842.

⁴⁸⁸ *First Annual Report of the Council of the Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association* (Liverpool, 1843).

they approved of the objects of the association; they sought assistance from the community in general".⁴⁸⁹ There is no evidence that this invitation made any impact on Tory merchants.

Equally, the free trade merchant coterie was no longer underpinned by Walmsley's TRA (though it is of interest that the Operative Anti-Corn Law Association held a spirited meeting as late as 4 January 1842) and Thornely's appeal was unlikely to achieve resonance amongst the lower orders.⁴⁹⁰ A Chartist given a lengthy hearing at the LAMA's inaugural meeting on 6 January flagged up the inherent weakness of the association's agenda: there was no mention of "the monopoly of legislation", which was the origin of all the others; what was needed was universal suffrage.⁴⁹¹ Initial laughter at the mention of universal suffrage then turned to uproar. At the close of the meeting Sheil drew the attention of the working men present to a fable of William Cobbett about greyhounds and hares and "recommended them to pursue only one object at a time, as that would afford sufficient employment for all".⁴⁹² This was the strategy of the ACLL, which would in due course prove successful on that specific issue, but similar objections would later be raised when the LFRA was set up.

The LAMA maintained its initial momentum throughout 1842 and 1843 with a flurry of monthly meetings, tea parties and press statements, reaching its climax on 6 December 1843 with a public meeting attended by Cobden and Bright.⁴⁹³ Thereafter, with the exception of its annual general meeting, its activities received less attention in the press. Crucially, it proved unable to extend its influence beyond its original limited circle. Thornely remained as president until 1846 but, in his frequent absences from Liverpool, the vice-presidents, notably Heyworth, Sheil and Brown, chaired proceedings. Brown was not one of the original vice-presidents (or even a founding member) but his stance on free trade had been clear to all since seconding Walmsley in the 1841 election and, by the time Thornely stood down in early 1846, Brown had become the obvious successor. Having built up a commercial empire and considerable experience of public service with the Dock

⁴⁸⁹ *LAMA Speeches*, p. 3.

⁴⁹⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 7 January 1842.

⁴⁹¹ *LAMA Speeches*, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁹³ *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 December 1843; *The Times*, 8 December 1843.

Committee and as an alderman, he had also developed parliamentary aspirations. Though by all accounts a poor public speaker, he became MP for South Lancashire at the second attempt in a by-election in July 1846, with heavy backing from Manchester, and held the seat until 1859.⁴⁹⁴

In keeping with its title and original aims, the LAMA campaigned against all trade monopolies and restrictions, whether affecting corn, sugar, tea or sundry other commodities. However, it was essentially a local organisation and, ultimately, despite its broad remit, not easily distinguished from other regional organisations affiliated to the ACLL. The letter-books of the ACLL for the years after 1840 have not survived and so it is difficult to gauge how far Liverpool's further engagement extended beyond mere lip service. One suspects that it was largely a question of individual efforts. Heyworth continued his personal campaign and penned a series of mass-produced pamphlets on the Corn Laws and free trade generally, some of which were published by (or for) the ACLL.⁴⁹⁵ Even by the standards of the day, Heyworth's argumentation was imbued with a full measure of religiosity. However, his reputation on reform issues was sufficiently high for him to secure the parliamentary representation of Derby at a by-election in 1848 and hold it – with a brief interruption – for 10 years.⁴⁹⁶ In its financial support of the League, the association lagged well behind Manchester, especially in the early days, but gradually achieved a measure of respectability. Following Cobden's visit in 1843, Liverpool's contribution towards the Great League Fund topped £5,000 and in 1846 nearly £8,000 was subscribed to Cobden's testimonial.⁴⁹⁷

Notwithstanding its blinkered view of free trade as the cure for almost all evils, the LAMA does occasionally surprise. With a modern perspective, we can see that in one area it almost pulled off a notable advance in political thinking. In preparation

⁴⁹⁴ Like Heyworth, he was closely connected to the Manchester School and maintained a long-running correspondence with George Wilson, chairman and then president of the ACLL. See also Fraser, *Urban Politics*, p. 211.

⁴⁹⁵ *To the Working Classes ... on the Natural Law of Wages* (Manchester, 1841); *To the British Public. How does cheap bread produce high wages and promote general prosperity?* (Manchester, 1842), reissued in *On the Corn Laws and Other Legislative Restrictions* (Manchester, 1843 and 1844); *On Economic Fiscal Legislation* (London, 1845).

⁴⁹⁶ Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's Bread*, pp. 131-2, draw attention to the charm and impact of Heyworth's remarkable daughter Lawrencina, who often travelled with him.

⁴⁹⁷ *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 and 15 December 1843; 5 February 1847. One is left with the impression that the Liverpool free traders reckoned Cobden's potential value to their wider cause as above that of the Anti-Corn Law League.

for the inaugural meeting in January 1842, some research was carried out into the deteriorating state of Liverpool's trade over the previous 2-3 years. Evidence was presented for each branch of trade and Thornely could affirm that, in respect of the "labouring classes", there was as much distress in the outer districts of Liverpool as in any part of the manufacturing districts of the country.⁴⁹⁸

It had previously been held that extreme need had passed Liverpool by: indeed in May 1841 Cobden's Manchester delegation had told a public meeting that "suffering had not yet visited Liverpool with the same degree of intensity".⁴⁹⁹ Prior to the new evidence being presented to the association, "considerable diversity of opinion prevailed, even among its own Members, as to the extent of distress existing in this town, as compared with former periods". Thereafter, even the most sceptical were convinced "that a degree of wretchedness existed which it was no longer safe to conceal".

This episode recalls the reaction to Walmsley's State of Crime report in 1836, which was also greeted initially by disbelief and then by the suggestion that it should be suppressed. It provides further evidence that many of Liverpool's leading merchants and public figures were still out of touch with the realities of an urban population under increasing stress. Further field work was commissioned and in April 1842 the association published *Statistics of Vauxhall Ward, Liverpool, Shewing the Actual Condition of More than Five Thousand Families*.⁵⁰⁰ This study by the merchant John Finch provides a detailed and broader picture of the economic and social conditions in a district that was already crowded with immigrants from around the UK some years before the Irish famine. It will have been clear to any reader that living conditions, whether or not they resulted from the adverse effects of monopolies, were not solely due to moral deficiencies and passing misfortune and that, in the meantime, the wretched inhabitants required more than religious comforting if they were to improve their personal well-being and escape from squalor. Finch's work was ahead of its time and, like other pioneering studies of the period, failed to achieve any real impact.

⁴⁹⁸ *LAMA Speeches*, p. 4.

⁴⁹⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 28 May 1841.

⁵⁰⁰ Liverpool: Joshua Walmsley [the publisher], 23 April 1842. It is the source of the two brief quotations in the previous paragraph.

The LAMA was dissolved in early 1847 in circumstances verging on the mysterious. Members gathered on 12 January to take the annual report but were asked to adjourn the meeting. Negotiations had been going on for some time about a “change in the character of the Association” and in the past day information had been received which materially affected the situation.⁵⁰¹ Brown also announced that he was standing down as president. The meeting reconvened on 1 February for the purpose of dissolving the association, “inasmuch as the two great monopolies of corn and sugar were in a fair way of being destroyed, and as the leading statesmen of the country had recognised the principle of free trade as the guiding rule of future commercial legislation”.⁵⁰²

Peel had finally given way on the Corn Laws in 1846 and the issue-specific ACLL had immediately disbanded but for the LAMA to claim victory on free trade was over-optimistic and it is hard not to look for other forces at work, especially in view of Brown’s precipitate departure. One speaker argued that, after long agitation, the people were exhausted and further fund-raising would be difficult; several members stressed the importance of campaigning on only one issue at a time. Whilst there is clearly need of further research on the reasons behind the LAMA’s dissolution, three main possibilities suggest themselves. First, it may have been intimated by someone within government that the association had largely achieved its mission and that further agitation would be counter-productive. However, this is to accord the association a greater degree of influence than it ever seems to have achieved. Secondly, there may have been a proposal to switch the focus to the Navigation Acts. As later proved to be the case, this was a contentious issue in Liverpool and Brown, as both merchant and shipowner, may have felt he was best off away from the controversy. Finally, and perhaps most plausibly in view of the strictures about single-issue campaigns and subsequent discussion within the Liverpool Financial Reform Association, a faction within the membership may have proposed widening the LAMA’s scope and embracing parliamentary reform. Such a move would have risked fracturing the association’s long-preserved unanimity of purpose: radicalism in free trade was a wholly different proposition from the reforms that Radicals and Chartists were seeking in other areas!

⁵⁰¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 January 1847.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 5 February 1847.

Liverpool Financial Reform Association

Little more than a year after the demise of the LAMA, the Liverpool Financial Reform Association was established in April 1848. It is one of very few early Victorian institutions in Liverpool to feature prominently in modern historiography, with studies by W. N. Calkins and G. R. Searle.⁵⁰³ Its numerous publications, in particular those issued in the first few years, were undoubtedly influential, catching a popular mood in favour of cheaper government, but crucial to its success were the credibility of its leadership and its status as a national organisation rather than an outpost of London or Manchester.

Calkins views the LFRA as an “offshoot” of the Liverpool Association for the Reduction of Duty on Tea and cites a sympathetic and most atmospheric sketch of life in the new organisation by the ACLL writer Alexander Somerville.⁵⁰⁴ There is doubtless an element of truth in this: the tea lobby’s leading members from within the tea and allied trades moved across to the new organisation and seemingly provided its first premises. However, neither they nor the tea issue constitute a satisfactory explanation. The association for the Reduction of Duty on Tea was set up in 1846 and attracted relatively little attention, even in Liverpool. When a keynote meeting of northern commercial associations took place to discuss the duty on tea, Liverpool’s voice was largely provided by the likes of Rathbone (representing Brown) and Heyworth, whose interest was in free trade rather than tea.⁵⁰⁵

The true ancestry of the LFRA is to be found in the LAMA. The membership of the two organisations is strikingly similar and the leading lights of the earlier organisation mostly held office in the later one. The two organisations did not share an identical purpose but both were outspoken advocates of free trade and believed that the subject had to be tackled on a broad front and not piecemeal. Equally, they recognised the need not to dilute their effectiveness (or perhaps jeopardise consensus) by embracing parliamentary reform. The key questions about the founding of the LFRA thus centre on the motivation for the return to active service of

⁵⁰³ W. N. Calkins, ‘A Victorian Free Trade Lobby’, in *Economic History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1960), pp. 90-104; G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 57-63.

⁵⁰⁴ Calkins, ‘Free Trade Lobby’, p. 91, citing Somerville quoted in *Liverpool Mercury*, 9 July 1850.

⁵⁰⁵ *Liverpool Mercury*, 31 December 1847.

the old free traders so soon after their disbanding and, subsequently, their extraordinary choice of leader.

Searle has identified the importance of a public meeting in Liverpool, chaired by the Tory mayor Thomas Berry Horsfall on 24 February 1848, to discuss the budget statement of Lord John Russell's government.⁵⁰⁶ The meeting was avowedly non-partisan, Russell having succeeded by high public spending in upsetting both of Liverpool's main parties, the Tories and the Reformers. However, notwithstanding the colour of Russell's Whig government, few Tories spoke out, the most strident contributions on their side coming in a letter from Sir John Gladstone and in the mayor's own comments. As usual, the main speeches mostly came from Reformers who had been vocal in public meetings since 1835 (or even earlier) and more recently had been active in the LAMA, including Heyworth, Sheil, Earle and Hornby. The surprise ingredient in this gathering was Sir John's second son, Robertson.

Robertson Gladstone had been a Tory stalwart with extreme views for two decades and, as a covert proprietor of the *Liverpool Standard*, had rubbished the Reformers in spicy leaders.⁵⁰⁷ He had even served as mayor in 1842 but was now in the process of developing a liberal outlook. In November 1847 he had been introduced by Earle as the Reformers' candidate at a by-election for the Town Council in his old ward (Abercromby). The *Liverpool Mercury* was clearly bemused by Gladstone's candidacy (he was described as a "liberal Conservative") and by his unwillingness even to issue an election address.⁵⁰⁸ In the event he was narrowly defeated, with a suggestion that the Tories had let alcohol flow freely once more.⁵⁰⁹ However, something significant was taking place in the local political scene. Why Gladstone chose to re-enter the fray with dramatic interventions at the by-election and the public meeting on the budget and then to follow this up by playing a leading role in setting up the LFRA is not altogether clear. Calkins suggests a combination of intellectual conviction and political ambition (and furthermore Gladstone will have contemplated the recent parliamentary success of Brown) but the notion that a

⁵⁰⁶ Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics*, p. 56; *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 February 1848.

⁵⁰⁷ Holme, *Autobiography*, p. 242. Walmsley had been one of the principal targets of the *Standard's* robust journalism.

⁵⁰⁸ *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 November 1847.

⁵⁰⁹ The situation was doubly extraordinary in that in 1838 Gladstone had ousted Earle from his seat in the same ward using the lavish treating and bribery long associated with the Gladstone family.

Gladstone would see financial reform rather than family and commercial influence as the best route to a parliamentary career is unconvincing.⁵¹⁰

It is easier to understand why the free trade community flocked to the LFRA (and their motives would have resonated with Gladstone and indeed Tory merchants and entrepreneurs). The air of self-satisfaction and complacency that had attended the winding up of the LAMA in early 1847 had soon been followed by a national financial crisis with railway and banking interests hard hit. This was a direct threat to the livelihood of Liverpool's commercial classes and of greater personal concern than the Corn Laws had ever been. As late as January 1848 no need was seen for renewed agitation but the following month's events in parliament were eagerly awaited.⁵¹¹ Following the budget statement, the public meeting in February 1848 recognised the severity of the crisis and offered the prospect of concerted, non-partisan action of a type that the LAMA had aspired to but never achieved. Having accepted the need for action, Liverpool's Reformers will have seen Gladstone's re-emergence as the opportunity to forge a non-partisan consensus.

Not everything went smoothly during the founding of the LFRA. Gladstone presided over a preliminary meeting on 14 April 1848 which drew up the association's objectives: a general retrenchment in the national expenditure; the revision of assessed taxes – of the malt tax, and of the excise and stamp duties; the transfer to direct taxation of those imposts which interfere with the industry and limit the subsistence of the people; the equitable appointment of all needful taxation.⁵¹² The association was duly established at a public meeting on 19 April, again chaired by Gladstone.⁵¹³ However, Brown thought it "unnecessary to form a new association, seeing that they already had one in existence, having nearly the same object in view" – a reference to the National Confederation. This was countered by Sheil, who felt that there would be ample work for both organisations.

It was James Mulleneux who raised the crucial question relating to the new association's mission. Without actually proposing that it should go beyond financial

⁵¹⁰ Calkins, 'Free Trade Lobby', pp. 92-3.

⁵¹¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 January 1848. The membership of LAMA reconvened on 3 January 1848 for a presentation of plate to the Honorary Secretary, Charles Edward Rawlins. There was no hint in the speeches of any new organisation being set up.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 18 April 1848.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 21 April 1848. Curiously, the association considered its birthday to be 20 April.

and commercial issues, he drew attention to the fact that a large group of MPs was contemplating an extension of the suffrage and was ready to receive the cooperation of all large towns, more especially of Liverpool (see Chapter 6). Gladstone disposed of the notion forthwith. He “considered it desirable to unite, if possible, gentlemen of every shade of politics in the association, and though the question of the suffrage was important, it would not be desirable to mix it up with their present objects”. Aside from the traditional Tory opposition to further reform, Gladstone will have been aware that any suggestion of shared aims at the present time with Chartist agitators would have risked alienating some Reformers as well. Despite this pragmatic approach, the LFRA never achieved a cross-party consensus. No prominent Tory (if we exclude Gladstone) joined it. One is left to speculate that this had more to do with wariness of becoming involved in agitation during troubled times or associating with known Reformers than any disagreement with the LFRA’s initial agenda. (In time to come, when the free trade versus protectionism debate resurfaced, Tory non-participation was only to be expected.)

The National Confederation had come into being a little earlier than the LFRA with objectives that covered taxation at both the national and local levels and it received enthusiastic support from the veteran Reformer John Smith, now proprietor of the *Liverpool Mercury*.⁵¹⁴ It was clear to all that some rationalisation was appropriate and the National Confederation was willing to amalgamate with the LFRA if the latter would agree to campaign on local taxation.⁵¹⁵ However, this proved a stumbling block and so the two organisations maintained a friendly separation. It is hard to see how the two memberships could have got on together: the National Confederation was in effect a local, grass-roots organisation, while the LFRA was a vehicle for the political establishment and had grand aspirations.

A further challenge to the objectives of the LFRA presented itself at this time in the form of two letters from Walmsley, now MP for Leicester. The first letter, addressed to Robertson Gladstone and dated 22 April, was evidently in response to a personal letter from him (but written in his new official capacity) announcing the founding of the LFRA.⁵¹⁶ The second, dated 24 April, addressed to his brother-in-law James Mulleneux, reads as a private letter in response to one from Mulleneux giving news

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 January and 25 February 1848.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 and 5 May 1848.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 April 1848.

of his latest political affiliations.⁵¹⁷ Having been largely absent from Liverpool during Gladstone's political transformation, Walmsley can be excused if he had not yet seen reason to forgive Gladstone his earlier Tory excesses. In any event, his letter to Gladstone verged on the brusque:

It cannot have escaped, indeed it is clear it has not escaped, your observation, that the House of Commons is not the Commons' House, and until it be so the exclusive privileges of a privileged class will be assailed, but assailed in vain. ... I am under the firm belief that the extension of the franchise and the equalization of the representation constitute the bases upon which the future structure of all legislative improvement must stand.

Walmsley's admonition to the Liverpool LFRA was crystal clear: it should not eschew engagement with parliamentary reform. His letter to Mulleneux developed the same theme at greater length and in a rather didactic fashion, given that Mulleneux had previously raised the issue with Gladstone:

How these [financial] reforms are to be achieved is the great question of the present day. It appears to me that you and your colleagues are proposing to raise a superstructure without a foundation. Consider, before you decide upon your course, the difficulties you have to encounter; what reforms you have to expect from a House of Commons, the majority in which is nominated and governed by an aristocracy, who, so far from sympathizing with, are hostile to the true interests of the people.

Walmsley was not prepared to let go of the issue. At a meeting of the association on 27 September 1848, he took the opportunity afforded by supporting a motion to repeat his message.⁵¹⁸ Sandwiched between complimentary remarks about Gladstone, he set out the case for parliamentary reform and was well received by the audience.

As Calkins and Searle have shown, Cobden was more inclined than Bright or Walmsley to follow Gladstone's lead and pursue financial reform as a separate issue from parliamentary reform and one of higher priority.⁵¹⁹ Cobden's "National Budget" was famously issued in a letter to Robertson Gladstone of 18 December

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28 April 1848.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29 September 1848.

⁵¹⁹ Calkins, 'Free Trade Lobby', pp. 99-100; Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics*, pp. 59-63.

1848 and presented to a meeting of the Liverpool LFRA on 20 December.⁵²⁰ However, Cobden eventually gave ground in 1849 and thereafter parliamentary and financial reform were to be pursued jointly. This pivotal decision undermined the LFRA's status but did not deny it an influential role that was maintained for many years.

In the next chapter we shall consider the primacy issue from the other end and examine how the London-based National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association came into being and assumed the key role of providing a national platform for advocates of reform. Central to this is the sudden re-emergence of Walmsley as a politician with the personal skills and ambition to shape the new organisation and its agenda.

⁵²⁰ LFRA, *Financial Reform Tracts*, No. 6 (Liverpool, [1848]).

CHAPTER 6

THE REBIRTH OF PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

The principal focus of this study now moves away from Liverpool to London. This is not to say that events outside the capital were no longer of relevance or that Liverpool had ceased to be a source of influential ideas. The rise to prominence of the LFRA shows the contrary to be true. However, it was in London during 1848 and the years immediately following that the events which gave parliamentary reform a new lease of life were played out. This chapter will seek to show that those events were heavily influenced by Liverpool's experiences in the 1830s and 1840s and that their orchestration owed more than has hitherto been apparent to the skilful political manoeuvring of Walmsley.

It is not the intention here to reconstruct a detailed political history of the late 1840s and early 1850s, or even a fully rounded appreciation of Radical politics in this period. The latter on its own would be a massive task and in his seminal work Miles Taylor has shown that just the parliamentary aspects require a lengthy study.⁵²¹ Rather, the intention is to focus on key moments and activities where the Liverpool influence, most often but not exclusively brought to bear by Walmsley, is clearly evident. In accordance with this approach, particular attention is given to the interaction between Walmsley and Cobden. Now next-door neighbours in "Radical Row" in Paddington, they maintained a genuinely cordial relationship until Cobden's death in 1865. There was much close collaboration on parliamentary reform but equally there were differences of opinion on how to achieve it and whether indeed it should take primacy over other issues, notably financial reform. For these issues Edsall has provided a well-researched and balanced account and also incorporated his findings in a later biography of Cobden.⁵²² These are amongst the very few publications to do justice to Walmsley's role in the period.

Joseph Hume's Motion in the House of Commons

On 13 April 1848 a meeting of Radical MPs, chaired by Joseph Hume, convened at 14 St James's Square, the address of the Free Trade Club. The meeting, which must have been carefully planned some days previously, followed a requisition

⁵²¹ M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*.

⁵²² N. C. Edsall, 'A Failed National Movement'; *Richard Cobden, Independent Radical* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 192-215.

signed by 51 MPs. The outcome of the meeting was a sparsely worded but highly significant set of resolutions.⁵²³

- That it appears to this meeting that a more cordial understanding and co-operation are urgently required among such members of parliament as are favourable to the extension of the suffrage, an equitable arrangement of taxation, a reduction of expenditure, and the general advance of reform principles throughout Great Britain and Ireland.
- That Joseph Hume, Esq., M.P., be chairman.
- That Richard Cobden, Esq., M.P., be deputy chairman.
- That Sir Joshua Walmsley [sic] be the honorary secretary.

Such a gathering had long been overdue if the individual talents of the Radicals were to be combined in order to seize the opportunity of exercising leverage on Lord John Russell's new Whig ministry. Who actually attended the meeting is not known. Equally, the tenor of the discussion on the primary resolution can only be surmised but subsequent events (and a later critique by Walmsley) suggest that the resolution meant different things to different people. Hume's leading role is no surprise: the subjects under discussion had long been objects of passion to him and, as the doyen of Radicals in Parliament, he had the prestige to attract the active participation of others. Similarly, Cobden's appointment as deputy chairman to Hume recognised his preeminent position in Radical politics following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, even if his subsequent actions and European travels had lacked a clear domestic focus.

Walmsley's position, however, is more intriguing and his appointment as honorary secretary was clearly not just the result of his long-standing admiration of Hume and close friendship with his next-door neighbour Cobden. Although he had acquired influence as an industrialist and part proprietor of the *Daily News*, in political terms he was a *parvenu*, someone unlikely to have been plucked at random. The most likely explanation is that Walmsley – with the full acquiescence of Hume – had been a prime mover, possibly even the instigator, of the requisition that led to the meeting on 13 April. As an active participant behind the scenes he would have played a part in the framing of the resolutions and emerged as the obvious candidate to become honorary secretary. Support for this interpretation is provided in Walmsley's

⁵²³ *The Times*, 15 April 1848.

memoirs. In what is almost certainly a reference to this meeting, Walmsley claimed: “At my suggestion a few political friends were brought together, and it was unanimously resolved to hold a meeting at the Free Trade Hall [sic]. Endeavours were made to thwart it, but all adverse efforts failed, and the hall was crowded.”⁵²⁴ The meeting had come out of the blue and its setting up bore all the hallmarks of earlier dramatic interventions by Walmsley. As with his 1836 speech “What have the Council done?” and the subsequent establishment of the Tradesmen’s Reform Association, this now was Walmsley signalling his arrival in the Radical camp and seeking to carve out a position of influence. To his credit he was also seeking to set the agenda and not merely respond to a general mood of the times. As will be seen, by the time the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association was established in 1849 Walmsley had, through skilful manoeuvring and exceptional powers of organisation, progressed in little more than a year from a relatively insignificant new MP to president of a national campaigning movement.

Walmsley continued his recollections with an appraisal of where Hume and Cobden were coming from.⁵²⁵ Whereas Hume was seeking, by an extension of the franchise, to bring about financial reform and fairer taxation, Cobden, absorbed in his aspirations after universal peace and unfettered, world-wide commerce, was intent on protesting against the taxation that funded war. For his own part, Walmsley “simply went on the right the people had to a wider representation”. Irrespective of such motives, what the meeting did do was place “extension of the suffrage” (whatever precisely that meant) once more in the forefront of Radical thinking, alongside the issues that had increasingly dominated their agenda in the last decade, fairer taxation and retrenchment, as free trade gradually lost its contentious nature.

The 51 signatures on the requisition did not represent the maximum strength of the Radicals, as later parliamentary votes indicated, but they had clearly been achieved by systematic canvassing. With individuality much prized and no uniformity of thought amongst leading Radicals to rally behind, many radical-leaning MPs would

⁵²⁴ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 192. Walmsley’s son is muddled in his chronology. It also appears that Walmsley himself, perhaps writing in about 1862, may have conflated the private meeting in the Free Trade Club with a later public meeting in the Free Trade Hall. In any event, his subsequent comments about the motives of Hume, Cobden and himself, as also the ensuing correspondence with Cobden, undoubtedly relate to the meeting on 13 April.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

naturally have resisted any attempts to corral them. Moreover, it was perfectly possible to take an “ultra” line on one set of issues (e.g., financial reform and free trade) but adopt a much more cautious line on another set (e.g., extension of the franchise and parliamentary reform). This may account for the absence from the list of William Brown, whose interests were primarily economic and commercial. It is less obvious why another Liverpool Radical stalwart, Thomas Thornely (now MP for Wolverhampton), was missing. Conceivably, this was connected to his chairmanship of the Select Committee examining the Chartist petition. However, William Ewart (now MP for Dumfries) and Walmsley’s Birkenhead-based business colleague (Sir) William Jackson (MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme) subscribed their names.

The state of the nation in April 1848 was vastly different from what it had been in the previous year. At the time of the general election in July-August 1847, parliamentary reform had not been a frontline issue for even the most prominent Radicals; the financial crisis of 1847-8 was only just beginning to loom large; the revolutions in Europe had not started; and, perhaps most importantly, the final resurgence of Chartism had yet to peak. When Hume had contested his safe seat of Montrose, the main issue had proved to be the Navigation Laws.⁵²⁶ Cobden, when writing to his Stockport constituents from Venice, had emphasised free trade, food production and the Navigation Laws.⁵²⁷ Similarly, those backers who were seeking to draft him for the West Riding constituency simply looked upon him as a free trader.⁵²⁸ Even Walmsley had contested Leicester largely on a free trade platform.⁵²⁹ His election

⁵²⁶ *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 September 1847; *Dundee Courier*, 10 September 1847; *Aberdeen Journal*, 11 September 1847.

⁵²⁷ *Manchester Times*, 9 July 1847.

⁵²⁸ *Leeds Mercury*, 7 August 1847.

⁵²⁹ Taylor’s characterisation (*Decline of British Radicalism*, pp. 28-9 and 67) of Walmsley as having acquired independent means by marrying into property and as an outside independent candidate in Leicester needs qualification. Walmsley’s father-in-law, the Liverpool distiller Hugh Mulleneux, had acquired considerable wealth and, at his death in 1838, made provision for his daughter and thereafter the Walmsley children. However, Walmsley did not benefit directly and, in any case, by then he had already achieved sufficient personal wealth to have invested heavily in several industrial ventures. Rather, Walmsley fits another of Taylor’s profiles – that of having acquired independent means “by speculative or prudent accumulation of industrial wealth”. Walmsley was indeed an independent candidate in Leicester in the sense that he was not beholden to anyone within the corporation. However, as proprietor of a Leicester railway and owner of a local colliery he was amongst the most influential businessmen in the region.

address made only a brief reference to parliamentary reform: "I hold that enfranchisement should steadily keep pace with increasing intelligence, and the independence of the Voter should, as far as possible, be secured."⁵³⁰ These were the identical words he had used at Liverpool in 1841.⁵³¹

In the aftermath of the general election, with a substantial number of Radicals elected and the Conservatives (Protectionists and Peelites) in disarray, it might have been expected that the Radicals would seek to exploit their strength and apply concerted pressure on Lord John Russell's Whig administration. For someone like Walmsley, who had returned to active politics after six years shared between the roles of a leading industrialist and a country squire, the lack of concerted activity by the Radicals and the apparent indifference of Lord John Russell to any further parliamentary reform must have been galling. His previous record in Liverpool would suggest that, having settled into his new environment in London, he would soon have been on the look-out for a suitable opportunity to make his mark.

The outbreak of revolutionary activity in Europe in February 1848 and its rapid spread served as a warning that such tumults could spread to the UK.⁵³² The National Petition of the Chartists had been attracting signatures for some months and in March 1848 the Executive Committee decided that it should be presented to the House of Commons on 10 April.⁵³³ The announcement was prefaced with a veiled threat:

The glorious achievement of the noble inhabitants of the French capital, has carried consternation into the ranks of the enemies of democracy in every land, and in none more than in this island of ours, which abounds in slavery and despotism.

It was thus no surprise that the government reacted as strongly as it did to the mass meeting on Kennington Common and proposed march on Parliament. In the run-up to this the Radicals were in an awkward position, favouring parliamentary reform (and in many cases sympathising with most of the Chartists' demands) but strongly opposed to the tactics of the Chartists' leaders, physical force in particular. They

⁵³⁰ *Leicester Chronicle*, 24 July 1847.

⁵³¹ See Appendix 1 for Walmsley's election addresses.

⁵³² See Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote*, pp. 27-33.

⁵³³ *Northern Star*, 18 March 1848.

had to devise a political path that avoided the obvious threat – that of being seen as too close to the Chartists and abetting revolution – whilst still pursuing their own reform measures. And yet the situation was replete with opportunities. There was scope to head off the Chartists and the talk of revolution by proposing a responsible set of reforms. In this, the Radicals might hope to engender support not only from outside their own circle in Parliament but also from individual Chartists. At Leicester, Walmsley had shown that the local Chartists were prepared to give him their support rather than field a candidate of their own and, by splitting the vote, risk seeing an unsympathetic representative elected.

Whoever it was who instigated the meeting that Hume chaired on 13 April 1848 (just 3 days after the mass meeting on Kennington Common), it is hard not to view its timing as a response to the perceived Chartist threat. Equally, whether or not Walmsley was a prime mover, he left the meeting imbued with a strong desire to take action on parliamentary reform. While others were still digesting the implications, within days Walmsley was writing in stark terms to his brother-in-law and the newly constituted LFRA, stressing the paramount importance of reforming the House of Commons (see Chapter 5, iii).

The outcome of the meeting was relayed to the press in a carefully controlled manner. Most papers simply published the brief resolutions and the names of the MPs who had signed the requisition. By the standards of the day, a resolution agreeing “that a more cordial understanding and co-operation are urgently required” but unaccompanied by any plan of action represented a very hesitant start. It serves to illustrate just how disparate the Radicals were, despite the closely managed campaign against the Corn Laws. With its inside track to the Radicals, the *Daily News* presented a lengthy analysis of the failings of the current Parliament and the “gross mismanagement” of the Chartist leaders: a deep and spreading spirit of dissatisfaction, fraught with anarchical tendencies, needed to be brought into legitimate channels by means of recognised leaders amongst the constituted authorities.⁵³⁴ The new party, even though in a minority, would be well placed to act effectively in Parliament. Interestingly, the *Daily News* was in no doubt that a new party was being formed, even though this was not explicit in the meeting’s principal resolution.

⁵³⁴ *Daily News*, 15 April 1848.

The *Liverpool Journal* responded enthusiastically to news of Hume's meeting at the Free Trade Club, describing the event as "unquestionably the most important movement made since the formation of the Anti-Corn Law League".⁵³⁵ The committee contained "some of the most far-seeing, energetic, honest, resolute public men in the country and their country will not deny them ample support".⁵³⁶ Whilst crediting the Chartists with having drawn attention to the defects of the 1832 Reform Act, the *Journal* was less rigid on which issues should be pursued. The omission of specific mention to the ballot and short parliaments pointed to the practical character of the new initiative. What makes this particular piece of journalism so interesting is that the author was probably Edward Whitty (b.1827), a son of Michael James Whitty, the *Journal's* proprietor and a long-standing friend of Walmsley. The precocious Whitty was working in London as a parliamentary reporter for *The Times* and a columnist for his father's newspaper. Edward Whitty was one of the founders of parliamentary sketch-writing but, in the present context, his significance lies in the fact that, as a young man of decidedly radical views, he saw the new Radical consensus as the best hope for progress and, as will be seen, was soon to take on a key organisational role.

The press in general soon adopted the by-line "Reform Movement" for coverage of further developments. The speed with which this happened and its universality suggests that this was the preferred description of the requisitionists. Certainly, the *Daily News's* perception of a new party in the making was not shared by Cobden. In a letter to Walmsley, dated 22 April 1848, he urged caution:⁵³⁷

Before we take another step, we must be prepared to co-operate amongst ourselves. Now, I do not see the material for a parliamentary union at present. The country will by-and-by give us that union. But if we attempt to do something and then are shown up in the House as a disunited party, we shall only discourage our friends out of doors. The fact is, more importance has been attached to our meeting than it deserves.

⁵³⁵ *Liverpool Journal*, 22 April 1848.

⁵³⁶ The *Liverpool Journal* proudly credited its townsman Walmsley with being the originator of the new movement. The editor of the *Leicestershire Mercury* (22 April 1848), who was also well placed to know about Walmsley's role, begged to differ on this point and tactfully described the requisitionists as hearty fellow-workers.

⁵³⁷ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 193-4.

Cobden further intoned that the Radicals were not in a position to issue an address, since there was no plan of action to go with it. Such caution was understandable and, with the deflation of the immediate Chartist threat, there was less pressure to take immediate action. What Cobden did do was meet with old members of the ACLL in Manchester and arrange for their major benefactors to be sounded out on parliamentary reform: he did not expect to carry all of them with such an agenda at first.⁵³⁸

Predictably, Walmsley's Leicester constituency was more vocal and hosted two large-scale public meetings, on 17 April 1848 to thank Walmsley and his equally radical colleague Richard Gardner for their actions and then on 27 April to publicise their support for Hume's forthcoming motion.⁵³⁹ For those looking on from Westminster, what would have been clearly evident was the strength of support in a large industrial town and the pragmatic cooperation of Liberals and Chartists. In responding to the support from Leicester, Walmsley stated his new political platform unambiguously: "I am persuaded that no effectual measure of Reform – no important reduction of expenditure – no real equalization of the burthens of taxation, will even [ever?] be effected until there *is* a fair representation of the people."⁵⁴⁰ However, in an appeal for unity, he advocated concessions on all sides: "Let those who think we ask too much, grant all they conscientiously can; and those who seek perfection at once, accept as a dividend all they can obtain." Ominously, in another letter to his constituency, Walmsley expressed his regret that circumstances over which he had no control had restricted his ability to contribute.⁵⁴¹ This can only be a reference to a petition to unseat him on grounds of bribery, which would shortly be heard by a Select Committee.

After further discussions with his colleagues, Hume served notice in the House of Commons on 12 May 1848 of his intention to bring forward a motion later in May.⁵⁴² On 23 May it was after 11pm when his turn came and with regret he announced that it was too late to do his subject justice and so he would now fix the motion for the

⁵³⁸ Letter to Walmsley of 28 April 1848, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 194-5.

⁵³⁹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 22 and 29 April 1848.

⁵⁴⁰ Letter of 20 April 1848, quoted in *Leicestershire Mercury*, 22 April 1848.

⁵⁴¹ Letter of 19 April 1848, quoted in *Leicestershire Mercury*, 22 April 1848.

⁵⁴² *Hansard*, 12 May 1848; *Daily News*, 13 May 1848.

next available date, 20 June.⁵⁴³ One evening session proved insufficient for the debate to be concluded and so discussion continued on 6 July, culminating in a formal division. Unlike his opening speech, Hume's motion was concise and direct, lacking the specificity on key issues that might distract or deter:

That this house as at present constituted does not fairly represent the population, the property, or industry of the country, from which has arisen great and increasing discontent in the minds of a large portion of the people.

That with a view to amend the representation of the people leave be given to bring in bills for the purpose of providing:

- That the elective franchise shall be so extended as to include all householders;
- That votes shall be taken by ballot;
- That the duration of parliament shall not exceed three years;
- And that the apportionment of members to population shall be made more equal.

However, coming in the wake of the People's Charter with its six beautifully succinct and far-reaching points (universal suffrage, no property qualification, annual parliaments, equal representation, payment of members, and vote by ballot), Hume's "four points" were inevitably going to be seen as a pale imitation of the Chartists' platform and within days of their publication they had been disparagingly labelled the "Little Charter".⁵⁴⁴

When finally introducing his motion on 20 June, Hume invited further unhelpful comparisons by delaying proceedings for upwards of an hour by presenting a vast number of "family petitions" that could hardly trump the Chartists' recent monster petition, whether or not they had inflated the number of signatures. Much of his speech was devoted to proving not just how many males over 21 were excluded from the franchise but also how the distribution of seats amongst those who were entitled to vote was unequal. Hume claimed to have made some calculations of his own but commended a pamphlet by Alexander Mackay, a London barrister, as being much more correct and accurate.⁵⁴⁵ Mackay's work entitled *Electoral Districts*;

⁵⁴³ *Daily News*, 24 May 1848.

⁵⁴⁴ The origin of the expression is not easy to trace. It was an obvious pejorative and had reached the provincial press by 27 May (*Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*).

⁵⁴⁵ *Hansard*, 20 June 1848.

or the apportionment of the representation of the country on the basis of its population was a detailed statistical study of parliamentary representation by reference to both population and the payment of rates.⁵⁴⁶ It was published sometime in 1848 and first came to the attention of the press a few days before Hume was due to have tabled his motion on 24 May. If its publication was not linked to the new movement, the timing was certainly fortuitous. For his part, Hume claimed that it predated the foundation of the movement. In any event, the pamphlet was evidently highly influential amongst reformers. Responding to Hume's motion, Disraeli also made an unexpected reference to the pamphlet:⁵⁴⁷

I have here the manifesto of the new party on this subject. Sir Joshua Walmsley, in the most obliging manner, placed in my hand this pamphlet, as the acknowledged manifesto of the new party. Giving me credit for that candid disposition which I hope I possess, he concluded that, after reading this important and elaborate document, I should be unable to resist the force of its arguments and its statements.

It seems unlikely that Walmsley would have presumed to give the pamphlet the status of an official manifesto but his espousal of it is entirely typical of his analytic approach to public life. Just as in his time as chairman of the Watch Committee in Liverpool he had compiled detailed statistics on crime, here again he was using detailed statistics to justify the case for parliamentary reform, sure in the belief that no rational man could ignore them. With so many vested interests at stake, this attitude could be seen as naive but it was fascinatingly prescient on the part of Walmsley to identify the maverick Disraeli as someone who might respond to logic in the longer term interests of his party. On this occasion Disraeli was dismissive of the pamphlet but in 1867 he judged that the advantage lay in bringing forward the second Reform Act.⁵⁴⁸ There is nothing to link Walmsley directly with the writing of Mackay's pamphlet but it is clear that he saw its potential and made sure that it came to the attention of all parties ahead of the parliamentary debate.

Any prospect of Hume's motion exercising any noticeable influence on the Whig government disappeared with the unreceptive response from the Prime Minister

⁵⁴⁶ London, 1848.

⁵⁴⁷ *Hansard*, 20 June 1848.

⁵⁴⁸ In 1868 Walmsley commissioned the eminent artist Charles Lucy to paint a series of portraits of his personal heroes, past and present. Amongst contemporary parliamentarians Disraeli was the only subject who was not a prominent Liberal.

himself. Having gone through the various issues, Lord John Russell proceeded to his scathing conclusion:⁵⁴⁹

I trust ... that you will not choose at this time to accede to any vague and indefinite proposal of some measure of reform, which, while it apparently stops short of adopting the People's Charter, cannot actually stop short of ultimately enacting that great change...

In trying to address principles rather than detail Hume had left himself open to such a response but what Russell clearly could not see (both then and in the future) was how any substantive reform measures could be introduced without opening the door for further demands.

When the debate on Hume's motion resumed on 6 July 1848, events slowly moved to their expected conclusion. Cobden made a spirited intervention, in the course of which he set out not just why reform was necessary but what it would lead to. He foresaw that the new voters "would advocate a severe economy in the Government" and that "the taxation necessary for the expenditure of the State would be more equitably levied".⁵⁵⁰ This was essentially the same message that Walmsley had delivered to the LFRA: parliamentary reform was the essential precursor to financial reform. For his part, the Chartist Feargus O'Connor also declared his begrudging support for Hume: he would vote for his motion "as a choice of evils, his [i.e., Hume's] proposition being good as far as it went, and certainly better than nothing at all, but he could not accept it as a final settlement of the question".⁵⁵¹

The division following the debate resulted in defeat for Hume by 351 votes to 84. Whilst this was a crushing defeat, there was room for optimism in that the new movement was in its infancy and had progressed within three months from 51 signatures on a requisition in April to 84 votes in the House of Commons. Almost exactly a year later, O'Connor would bring his own motion before Parliament on the People's Charter. On that occasion only 13 MPs (including Walmsley) plus two tellers supported the motion: they represented just a small fraction of the Radicals who had voted for Hume's motion.

⁵⁴⁹ *Hansard*, 20 June 1848.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6 July 1848.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Hume's motion showed not just that securing parliamentary reform would be a difficult task but also that its strongly individualistic supporters would be difficult to corral. The fiercely supportive *Liverpool Journal* accepted the motion's inevitable outcome after the first day's debate and found comfort not in the burgeoning support for reform but in the prospect of defeat leading to a better, more radical set of proposals!⁵⁵²

... we are not sorry for it [the motion]. Time, and criticism, and hatred are the ordeals which must refine, and improve, and strengthen it. We have no objection to the motion as it stands; but we would have less objection to a better measure. It goes pretty far; but it might go farther with advantage.

Walmsley's unseating and re-election

The defeat of Hume's motion temporarily brought to an end the flurry of excitement surrounding parliamentary reform. Press coverage that had previously been both lively and extensive fell away almost overnight and the new Reform Movement received scant attention. By contrast, as the year wore on, financial reform and specifically the activities of the LFRA garnered increasing coverage throughout the country. As was indicated by his National Budget, launched in December 1848, this was Cobden's principal concern.

Walmsley's brief career as an MP unravelled just as he was coming into his own. On 24 May 1848, the day originally scheduled for Hume's motion, the Select Committee on the Leicester Election Petition began hearing evidence of alleged (small-scale) bribery at the 1847 election. The evidence was much disputed but on 31 May the Committee announced:⁵⁵³

That Sir Joshua Walmsley, Knt., and Richard Gardner, Esq., were, by their Agents, guilty of bribery, at the last Election for the Borough of Leicester.

That it was not proved that these acts of bribery were committed with the knowledge and consent of Sir Joshua Walmsley, Knt., and Richard Gardner, Esq.

⁵⁵² *Liverpool Journal*, 24 June 1848.

⁵⁵³ *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Leicester Election Petition* (London, 1848).

The fact that both MPs escaped without a formal slur on their personal integrity can have been scant consolation for being unseated.

The two ousted MPs returned to Leicester on 28 August 1848 to address the meeting that would select the candidates for the forthcoming by-election.⁵⁵⁴ In an understandably bitter speech Walmsley railed against the perjury that had led to their unseating before moving on to denounce the government's attitude to the national debt and taxation. He attributed all such financial woes to the composition of the House of Commons and the lack of fair representation, rehearsing the arguments and details compiled by Mackay. He urged his audience to "petition and petition again" for reform since there were not more than 68 MPs who had joined the new Reform Party.

Although no longer an MP, Walmsley was invited by his fellow Radicals to remain as honorary secretary to the Reform Movement. This can be seen as both a courtesy to a colleague in misfortune and recognition of his importance as a hardworking organiser. In what was intended as a compliment, Cobden later wrote that Walmsley "was a great favorite in the House amongst the independent members, & made himself useful as a kind of volunteer whipper-in".⁵⁵⁵ In a move which echoed one of his groundbreaking surveys in Liverpool, Walmsley seems to have embarked on a tour of the North of England and supplied Cobden with what the latter described as "a sort of political stock-taking of public opinion in the North".⁵⁵⁶ No doubt this tour also served to introduce Walmsley to the power-brokers in the northern boroughs who might in due course facilitate his return to the House of Commons.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Walmsley went on to speak at a key meeting of the LFRA on 27 September 1848.⁵⁵⁷ The fact that he was invited to join the platform by the chairman strongly suggests that he had attended as a member and not as one

⁵⁵⁴ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 2 September 1848.

⁵⁵⁵ Letter of 20 December 1848 to Edmund Ashworth, in A. Howe, (ed.), *The Letters of Richard Cobden, Vol. II: 1848-1853 [Cobden Letters]* (Oxford, 2010), p. 87.

⁵⁵⁶ Letter to Walmsley of 25 September 1848, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 198-9. The precise scope and purpose of this tour is not evident from other primary sources. Since it did not include formal speaking engagements, there was little opportunity for the press to report his progress. Equally, it is not clear whether Liverpool and specifically the LFRA meeting on 27 September (which postdates Cobden's letter) were part of the tour.

⁵⁵⁷ *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 September 1848.

of the official speakers. The sole current MP present and the first speaker after the chairman was in fact Lawrence Heyworth, who had been among the most prominent and most radical of the Liverpool Reformers earlier in the decade and had recently been returned at a by-election as the MP for Derby. From his warm reception, Walmsley clearly still had influence, though he may not have been entirely popular in some quarters following his rough words with Robertson Gladstone and James Mulleneux back in April 1848. Cobden clearly favoured Walmsley taking the lead with the Liverpool Reformers, on the grounds that he could “legitimately” appear at Liverpool, since he was “one of them”, and that, in order to command attention, a meeting “ought to be a local affair”.⁵⁵⁸ Walmsley delivered a lengthy speech in support of the evening’s motion on financial reform but his purpose in attending the meeting became evident in the second part of the speech, in which he essentially repeated the message he had delivered in Leicester a few days before about the unrepresentative nature of the House of Commons and how little influence the major boroughs had. His speech was less direct than his letter-writing had been but his meaning was not difficult to see.

At this meeting Walmsley was accompanied by the barrister Tindal Atkinson. Since the demise of the TRA he had pursued his legal career with considerable success and had been one of the team defending Walmsley and Gardner before the Select Committee on the Leicester Election Petition. It is not clear what, if any, involvement Atkinson had had with Walmsley’s parliamentary work but, as will be seen, the partnership was soon to be resumed.

Walmsley’s intervention in the Liverpool meeting met with Cobden’s approval.⁵⁵⁹ It is frustrating that Walmsley’s own letter giving his account of the meeting has not survived but one assumes that, when Cobden wrote “You hit the nail right on the head. Don’t be afraid to repeat the blow again and again”, he was referring to Walmsley’s deliberate introduction of parliamentary reform into the discussion. At the same time, Cobden was intent on keeping Hume quiet on the grounds that their task would “not be accomplished by proclamation, or even public meetings or petitions, but by hard work, done in the same methodical way in which we conduct our private affairs”. Evidently, the *modus operandi* of the ACLL was not to be

⁵⁵⁸ Letter to Walmsley of 4 October 1848, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 201-2.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

repeated. Cobden was also beginning to set more store by tactical schemes to widen the franchise through freehold societies.

For his part, Hume, beset by ill-health, was soon finding fault with the LFRA for not tackling the major sources of expenditure (the Armed Forces and the Colonies) head-on and was expressing doubts about the prospects of parliamentary reform. In a letter to Walmsley he wrote.⁵⁶⁰

I observe with regret, that in the country there does not seem to be that desire for parliamentary reform which is at the root of all reforms. ... But to be true to our principles we must look to a change in the House of Commons, as the *best and only effectual means* of effecting these objects.

However, like Cobden, he saw the freehold societies as one of the best options for achieving change.

In December a slight change in the political landscape transformed Walmsley's personal fortunes rather sooner than he might have expected and in due course facilitated a very significant change in the Radicals' approach. The Radical MP for Bolton, (Sir) John Bowring, suddenly announced that he was giving up his seat (it was subsequently revealed that he was to become Consul at Canton) and it was soon rumoured that Walmsley would contest the by-election. Bolton was an attractive proposition but not without potential pitfalls. It was a northern manufacturing town, close to Manchester, and hence suitable ground for advocates of reform. It had returned a good Radical in Bowring, and in the local quilt manufacturer Robert Heywood there was a powerful patron with a decent record of supporting reform.⁵⁶¹ However, there was also a local sense of fair play in politics, whereby the Radical Bowring had been paired with a local Conservative. A new Radical candidate could not be guaranteed a trouble-free path to election. Moreover, although Walmsley had an excellent reputation for supporting religious minorities, he would need the full support of the Unitarian Heywood, and in Liverpool his election campaign in 1841 had been fatally undermined by his falling out with Rathbone and other prominent Unitarians.

⁵⁶⁰ Letter of 17 November 1848, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 203-6.

⁵⁶¹ For Heywood, see W.E. Brown, *Robert Heywood of Bolton* (East Ardsley, 1970) and P. Taylor, *Popular Politics in Early Industrial Britain: Bolton, 1825-1850* (Keele, 1995), *passim*. Sadly, Taylor's cut-off date of 1850 has resulted in Walmsley receiving no more than a passing mention.

Cobden took a rather dimmer view of Bolton. Whereas he had been encouraged by the way in which Derby and Leicester had just returned good Radicals, on the basis of a report from Manchester he characterised Bolton as “a wretched political sink hole”, where either a Tory or nondescript would get in.⁵⁶² (This was well before news of Bowring’s departure had broken.) He continued: “It discourages me to see so little public spirit, morality, or mind in those manufacturing towns.”⁵⁶³

In the event, the Bolton Liberals selected Walmsley as their candidate and Walmsley opted to accept the bird in the hand rather than take Cobden’s prejudice to heart. In composing his election address, which was released on 20 December, Walmsley was faced with a dilemma.⁵⁶⁴ The world had moved on since Liverpool in 1841 and Leicester in 1847 and, for the Radical, the issues that had supplanted free trade were plain to see but which should take primacy? Should it be the parliamentary reform that he and Hume had argued for earlier in the year or should it be the financial reform championed by the new LFRA and which Cobden seemed increasingly to favour? The outcome was a totally new election address that encapsulated the thinking Walmsley would pursue for the rest of his parliamentary career. The agenda was now parliamentary reform (although the actual word “reform” nowhere appeared):

I consider a House of Commons faithfully representing the great majority of the People is indispensable, and to render such House of Commons the just reflex of the public mind it is necessary that every male resident of full age, in the occupation of premises rated to the relief of the poor, should be entitled to a vote at each parliamentary election; that such vote should be taken by Ballot; that the duration of Parliament should be limited to Three Years; and that a more equal system of electoral districts, based on population and property, should be established throughout the kingdom.

In essence this was Hume’s Little Charter with a few words of clarification on the basis of a wider franchise. Walmsley added that he wished to see stability given to the throne and would seek to attain his objects “by loyal, peaceful, and constitutional

⁵⁶² Letters to Walmsley of 4 and 8 September 1848, Add MS 37108 (West Sussex RO).

⁵⁶³ Cobden later renewed the tirade: “I feel convinced that some of our best members will henceforth be sent up by the Counties – I will back East Sussex, for instance, against such beastly political holes as Bolton Wigan & Stockport”. (Letter of 23 November 1848 to John Bright, *Cobden Letters*, p. 83.)

⁵⁶⁴ *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 23 December 1848. See Appendix 1 for a fuller account of the contents.

means, by progressive rather than impulsive changes". Walmsley was putting clear water between himself and the Chartists and this was an appeal to the middle classes. He admitted as much when he declared his willingness "to become one of those organs by which the opinions of the middle classes of this country may be made known in the councils of the nation". He envisaged that his proposals would result in the "removal of abuses, the reduction and equalization of taxation, the extension of education, the abandonment of class legislation, and the removal of every unnecessary restriction on the commerce and industry of the country". In other words, parliamentary reform was the route to all other reforms and Walmsley was clear in his own mind that it should take precedence in public campaigning.

On 8 February 1849 Walmsley was duly re-elected to Parliament, albeit with a modest majority over his local Conservative opponent.⁵⁶⁵ He himself sounded quite relieved, having feared initially that some points in his political creed might not meet the views of all.⁵⁶⁶ For its part, Walmsley's own newspaper, the *Daily News*, featured a curious editorial welcoming his election.⁵⁶⁷ It was written by someone with knowledge of the northern boroughs and, from its choice of arguments and language, it is tempting to see the hand of none other than Cobden. Although not corrupt, Bolton had "hitherto been sadly wavering and undetermined in respect of political principle" and had been represented by "that most colourless and nondescript of politicians". Walmsley, during the short time he had been an MP, had taken "an active and useful part in bringing about the increased concert and efficacy which was witnessed last session in the movements of the real reformers in the house". Most surprisingly, the leader's headline opinion was that Walmsley's election was a good omen for the cause of financial reform. Mention of parliamentary reform was confined to the words "re-adjustment of the elective franchise", hidden away at the foot of the article. Cobden certainly wrote to a local backer thanking everyone in Bolton for returning "so good a Reformer" and expressing his confidence in the borough for the future.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁵ *Daily News*, 9 February 1849.

⁵⁶⁶ *To the Electors and other Inhabitants of the Borough of Bolton*, 9 February 1849, Heywood Papers, ZHE/45/7 (Bolton Archives).

⁵⁶⁷ *Daily News*, 9 February 1849.

⁵⁶⁸ Letter of 9 February 1849 to Edmund Ashworth, Heywood Papers, ZHE/45/8.

Financial reform takes centre stage

For all Walmsley's very public strictures and Hume's coolness, the LFRA gathered momentum in the second half of 1848. It attracted considerable attention in the press and drew new members from all round the country. It published a string of financial tracts and these circulated widely. Their content was dry in the extreme and was seen by some as simply a reinvention of John Wade's *Black Book* (see Chapter 2). However, for Liverpool's merchants and similar communities elsewhere, this was indisputable evidence of government wastage and poor fiscal management. Walmsley might argue that change required parliamentary reform but others, notably Robertson Gladstone, saw virtue in keeping financial reform separate from more contentious and partisan issues.

The first five Financial Reform Tracts issued by the LFRA in 1848 covered the Civil List (No. 1), the Pension List (No. 2), Taxation (No. 3), Army Expenditure (No. 4) and the Army, Ordnance, Commissariat, Navy, Colonies (No. 5). Immensely detailed financial information of this sort would never have wide appeal or form the basis of a popular movement. The working classes generally received scant mention. Tract No. 3 on taxation was different in making some effort to illustrate the effects of taxes and duties on them: "To what, under such a crushing load of taxation, has the poor man to look for comfort and happiness? Shelter, food, fuel, all taxed, all put beyond his reach, except the almost spontaneous productions of the earth – potatoes, water, and mud." However, despite the occasional outburst about social conditions, this financial analysis was a pale shadow of the pioneering study undertaken for the LAMA by John Finch in 1842 (see Chapter 5, iii). Ironically, Finch himself was now a member of the LFRA.

At the same time that Walmsley was committing himself ever more to parliamentary reform (and in the process seeking to influence his Liverpool compatriots), Cobden was becoming increasingly attracted to the work of the LFRA. He was clear what the LFRA's role should be and did not wish similar associations that were beginning to spring up round the country to assume a broader remit. In particular, he was working hard behind the scenes to ensure that a public meeting in Manchester on 10 January 1849 confined itself to financial reform and did not also take up parliamentary reform.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁹ Letter of 23 December 1848 to Henry Ashworth, *Cobden Letters*, p. 92.

In early December 1848 Cobden visited Liverpool, staying with the cotton broker James Mellor, who was a prominent local Liberal and also a member of the LFRA council. Cobden was invited to attend the regular council meeting on 7 December and spent an hour and a half discussing financial reform. The report in the *Liverpool Mercury* makes it sound that this exchange of ideas was arranged at the last minute but it is much more likely to have been programmed into Cobden's itinerary well in advance, given that he was an infrequent visitor to Liverpool.⁵⁷⁰ Cobden was reported to have undertaken to make a "public communication" to the LFRA within a few days.

The next full meeting of the LFRA was scheduled for 20 December and Cobden spent much of the month finishing off a missive to Robertson Gladstone. He had revealed plans for what he variously called a "People's Budget" or a "National Budget" in mid-November.⁵⁷¹ His intention was to give financial reformers something concrete to work on, thereby preventing them from wasting time on "vague generalities". The LFRA could not have been accused of producing vague generalities but its analysis lacked any clear purpose. Cobden's plan was beautifully simple: severe retrenchment in spending on the Armed Forces and, to a lesser extent, in other (civil) expenditure would yield savings of £11.5M and increased death duties would contribute a further £1.5M; these accruals would be used to reduce taxes and duties by the same amount, thereby easing the burden on counties and towns, merchants and the poor, who would thus have a common interest in pursuing the reforms.

Cobden's letter to Robertson Gladstone, dated 18 December 1848, was sent off the following day and arrived in Liverpool on 20 December, just in time for it to be read out at the LFRA's meeting that evening (but only after lengthy contributions from Gladstone and the secretary). Cobden's "National Budget for 1849" ran to only 5 pages when published in the LFRA's Financial Reform Tract No. 6.⁵⁷² His financial proposals had undergone modest changes in their gestation. The final balance sheet showed savings of £10.5M and additional taxation of £1M being offset by reductions in taxes and duties of just under £11.5M. LFRA members were predictably enthusiastic about Cobden's proposals. Fittingly, the resolution of

⁵⁷⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 December 1848.

⁵⁷¹ Letters of 13 November 1848 to Joseph Sturge and of 16 November 1848 to John Bright, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 78-81.

⁵⁷² This pamphlet also included Cobden's letter and Gladstone's introductory speech.

support was proposed by Lawrence Heyworth, who for many years had been the leading advocate in Liverpool of the ACLL.

Cobden's tactic in so publicly aligning himself with the LFRA carried advantages for both parties. It was a boost for the LFRA, which although a provincial organisation was attracting members and support from all round the country, to be associated with a national politician presenting a "National Budget". For Cobden it was an opportunity both to establish the mould for campaigning on financial reform and also to highlight that the call for reform was not just coming from Westminster politicians but from grass roots in the provinces. Not least, as he himself conceded in a candid letter to Bright, he had "never for a moment ceased to be of the opinion that any new agitation which might arise would have greater force with the public if it did not *seem* to spring from Manchester".⁵⁷³ Equally, it has to be said that Cobden was seizing the moment and was not committing himself to a long-term alliance with the LFRA. In the same letter he showed more than a little cynicism and condescension about the LFRA when considering future plans for Manchester:

Can our friends there [Manchester] conform to the wise maxim of Burke that "they who would lead must sometimes follow"? Are they prepared to fall into the Liverpool movement for Financial Reform, & cooperate with it, as it did with us on Free-trade? ... When I say that Manchester should fall into the movement begun at Liverpool I mean that it should only seem to follow. From the moment that Manchester men took it in hand they would take the lead, & if we entered frankly into the agitation, there would be no jealousy on the part of our neighbors, but I believe they would hail a meeting in the [Manchester] Free-trade Hall with more satisfaction than in their own Amphitheatre. By joining them upon the "Budget", we should have still another advantage – we should not be committed to all the crude, & in some cases absurd publications they have put forth but we should come out upon a national plan large enough to attract the attention & cooperation of all parts of the Kingdom.

Events in Manchester were beginning to loom large, with major implications for both financial and parliamentary reform. The specific issue was a public meeting eventually scheduled for 10 January 1849 in the Free Trade Hall. Cobden was well aware that his Manchester compatriots had enthusiastically welcomed the formation of the Reform Movement at the Free Trade Club in London on 13 April 1848 and he

⁵⁷³ Letter of 22 December 1848, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 89-91.

himself had been party to the subsequent consultation with former members of the ACLL at Newall's Buildings in Manchester on 27 April 1848. What he now needed to do was shape the discussion and resolutions of the forthcoming meeting in accordance with his latest thinking on how and when to tackle the two reform agendas. In the letter to Bright quoted above, Cobden proposed a complete U-turn on parliamentary reform, justifying it in stark terms:

I know there is the difficulty of our meeting about Reform at the Free Trade Club, & yet the sooner that is shelved the better. It was a protest which will keep, & always serves to fall back upon; & you know as well as I that the materials got together then were rotten enough in themselves & could only be depended upon whilst the electoral body was feeling strongly upon Parliamentary Reform. We can't conceal from ourselves that there is less warmth now for organic change amongst the upper section of the middle class than there was then, & we must wait the returning tide. Then there is the circular that was sent out from Newall's Buildings upon the four points. That will serve to quote & to fall back upon too. But even if we are brought to confess that we were off the right track for a moment, I would rather do that than persist obstinately in a course that was not judicious merely to shew we were right or persisted in believing ourselves so.

In response to further signs of resistance from Bright and others in Manchester to the exclusion of parliamentary reform from the agenda, Cobden wrote back expressing no little exasperation and indicating in the strongest terms that no-one should look to him to play a part.⁵⁷⁴ The power wielded by Cobden is quite striking, given that Bright was no lightweight and throughout 1848 had been seized of the need for parliamentary reform and to pursue the ideas of a "Commons' League".⁵⁷⁵ Cobden argued that resolutions supporting parliamentary reform would imply a responsibility to do something and, in particular, hold public meetings. In turn, that required speakers "and I candidly tell you that out of my own legitimate political territory I can't attend a public meeting". (It was a mantra of Cobden that agitation should be seen to be generated locally and not provoked by itinerant agitators.) Cobden further pleaded that the "wear and tear of Parliament and the daily treadmill of correspondence" were as much as he was fit for. Realising that his longer term commitment to parliamentary reform might come into question, he declared that he

⁵⁷⁴ Letter of 27 December 1848 to Bright, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 97-8.

⁵⁷⁵ G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1913), pp. 182-4; Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, pp. 29-30.

did not wish to recant from what he had said in support of Hume's motion but "at this moment the public mind gives the go by to the object of that motion & prefers retrenchment & financial reform". He concluded: "But I repeat for the dozenth time, if we formally unite the 4 points [Hume's motion] or any other Parliamentary Reform with the financial reform as the objects of our [Manchester] Association we separate ourselves from all the Financial Reform Associations, & we set up a mongrel agitation which will not have the support of the Country, at the present time."

In a sense Cobden was reaffirming the strategic (but opportunistic) approach that had seen the ACLL focus exclusively on one issue, eschewing Liverpool's wider free trade focus. However, although he was now seeking to pend parliamentary reform until the political climate was more receptive, in making the present goal widespread financial reform he was finally accepting the validity of the approach advocated successively in Liverpool over the previous decade by Walmsley, Heyworth and, most recently, Robertson Gladstone.

The agonising about the Manchester meeting dragged on and culminated in a dinner party hosted by Walmsley on 31 December 1848. The guests included Cobden, Hume and the Manchester MP Thomas Milner Gibson. Cobden subsequently reported to Bright that the others "are all for Parliamentary Reform, but all of opinion that Financial Reform has the first call from the public".⁵⁷⁶ Cobden had his own way but evidently with just enough hints of the need for parliamentary reform for the others to go along with it. Together they sketched out a plan for the Manchester meeting, whereby Cobden would move a resolution on cooperation with the LFRA for reduced expenditure and more equitable taxation, Gibson would speak on the need for tax-payers "to possess a more direct & complete control over the conduct of the House of Commons" in order to make permanent the economy that would result from agitation throughout the country, and Bright would advocate renewed use of the old Anti-Corn Law tactic of extending the franchise through purchase of freehold qualification. In the event the Manchester meeting on 10 January 1849 passed off exactly as scripted. Depending on the affiliation of the newspaper reporting the event, attendance was variously estimated between 6,000 and 12,000.⁵⁷⁷ As one might expect, the *Daily News* loyally gave the impression that only financial reform had ever been up for discussion.

⁵⁷⁶ Letter of 3 January 1849, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 102-3.

⁵⁷⁷ *Daily News*, 12 January 1849; *Standard*, 11 January 1849.

Reform in the Metropolis

In the course of deliberations on Manchester, Cobden and Walmsley had also been in contact with Francis Place, London's most venerable Radical and one of those who had assisted in the drafting of the People's Charter in 1838.⁵⁷⁸ In early December 1848, two emissaries had asked Place to draw up an address on parliamentary reform and he had responded with a flyer based on Hume's motion grandiosely titled "Great Reform League".⁵⁷⁹ Cobden and Walmsley subsequently visited Place in person and Cobden reported that, although Place had "a paper constitution cut & dry, ready for the basis of another Reform agitation", he reportedly "avowed his opinion that it was useless to try to thrust parliamentary before Financial Reform at the present moment."⁵⁸⁰ Cobden followed up this meeting with a letter to Place setting out why, in the light of the Manchester meeting, he was convinced that they should concentrate their efforts on reducing taxation.⁵⁸¹ He noted that the "better class of mechanics" had been worried by the violence of O'Connor and the Chartists and "had no faith at present in any immediate gain from the advocacy of Parliamentary Reform." In order to further financial reform in London, he advocated "spontaneous" meetings at a local level which he himself had neither orchestrated nor attended and he enquired of Place whether he could stimulate any of the local men to action. What subsequently transpired in London over the following six months could not have been predicted and served to undermine much of what Cobden had so carefully set up in the last months of 1848.

On 29 January 1849 a local meeting of financial reformers took place in London in the new Whittington Club (formerly the Crown and Anchor Tavern, off the Strand, which had long been associated with reformist politics). Invitations were issued by

⁵⁷⁸ As recognised by Edsall, the Francis Place Collection [Place Collection] in the British Library provides many unique insights into events during 1849 and 1850. Set 48 contains a volume, the first part of which is entitled "Financial and Parliamentary Reform, 1848-1849". In addition to the accustomed newspaper reports, it comprises personal correspondence, printed documents and advertising material. The *Reformer's Almanack and Political Year-book, 1850*, pp. 33-6, gives a potted account of the founding of the Reform Movement and subsequent events up to October 1849. The 1850 edition (and possibly only that one) carried the banner "Under the Sanction of the National Reform Association".

⁵⁷⁹ Place Collection, Index and fo. 1, 8 December 1848.

⁵⁸⁰ Letter of 3 January 1849, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 102-3.

⁵⁸¹ Letter of 16 January 1849, *Cobden Letters*, p. 109.

Place himself.⁵⁸² The meeting was an organisational shambles. Those attending had expected both Place and Walmsley to attend. Since then, of course, Walmsley had agreed to stand in the Bolton by-election and had doubtless been much preoccupied with it throughout January. On 27 January, while in Bolton for the canvass, he had received a letter, apparently from Place, enclosing a copy of the circular for the meeting and asking that he preside over it. Wrong-footed and presumably unaware of the date that had been settled upon, Walmsley could only tender his apologies to Place, whilst offering to put his services at the disposal of the committee and “either take the chair or the doorkeeper’s position” in the new association. Significantly, he added that he had given Cobden a copy of the proposed rules.⁵⁸³

Place and Walmsley had clearly been involved with the local London reformers from the outset and the latter was evidently keeping his lines clear with Cobden. Whether Cobden would have entirely approved of Walmsley, who had no association with London other than through having become an MP, playing such a prominent part in the foundation of a metropolitan association is a moot point. However, Walmsley could claim that since first being elected for Leicester in 1847 his residence had been in London and had remained there after his unseating.

To the embarrassment of the local organiser, not only Walmsley but Place also was absent from the meeting. The declared objects of the meeting were to form a society to promote a reduction of taxation, economical expenditure and “a further amendment of the representation of the people in the House of Commons as may effectually prevent the occurrence of the sad calamities which, from want of a due control on the part of the people in the management of their affairs, have been produced in most of the states of Europe”.⁵⁸⁴ This language was a bit stronger than at Manchester earlier in the month but was essentially an elaboration on the theme of achieving a “more direct & complete control over the conduct of the House of Commons”. The resolutions that followed bore a close resemblance to those at the Manchester meeting, with the key difference that the meeting agreed to form the Metropolitan Financial Reform Association (MFRA) and proceeded to appoint a general committee. The creation of the new association received brief mention in

⁵⁸² Place Collection, fo. 27, 22 January 1849.

⁵⁸³ *Daily News*, 30 January 1849.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

the press, with the absence of any widely known political figures having substantially detracted from its perceived importance. Events in Liverpool and Manchester had been much better staged.

Nevertheless, the day after the meeting, Place sent Walmsley a summary account of the meeting, expressing his satisfaction at the way proceedings had been conducted.⁵⁸⁵ Of the 200 “picked men” invited, 80 had attended. Walmsley’s absence was much regretted but his letter of apology to Place had been read out and elicited hearty cheers. Most significantly, Place assured Walmsley that on his return to London he would be elected chairman of the association.

The committee convened at Anderton’s Hotel in Fleet Street on 8 February 1849, the very day that Walmsley was returned to Parliament by the Bolton electors, and resolved to hold a “preliminary public meeting” at the same venue on 22 February.⁵⁸⁶ In the event, the meeting was rearranged for the next day, evidently because the Metropolitan Fancy Rabbit Club (a *bona fide* rabbit-breeding organisation and not a parody of any financial reform association) had booked the premises first. A small, one column-inch advertisement in the *Daily News* announced the preliminary public meeting “for the purpose of forming an Association to co-operate with the Liverpool Financial Reform Association, and all similar bodies”.⁵⁸⁷ The public meeting duly passed a couple of resolutions on financial reform (with no mention of parliamentary reform) and approved the formation of a Financial Reform Association.⁵⁸⁸ Even the *Daily News* devoted few column-inches to the meeting.

There is no evidence of any MP participating in the public meeting on 23 February. The Radicals George Thompson and John Williams, the Members for Tower Hamlets and Macclesfield respectively, sent letters of apology for the public meeting but Walmsley was not mentioned at all.⁵⁸⁹ No clear leadership was apparent: the three meetings in January and February each had a different chairman. The general

⁵⁸⁵ Place Collection, fo. 41, 30 January 1849.

⁵⁸⁶ *Lloyd’s Weekly*, 11 February 1849.

⁵⁸⁷ *Daily News*, 20 February 1849. By then the embryonic MFRA had started publication of its weekly *Financial and Parliamentary Reformer*. The first three issues (Place Collection, fo. 119-48) provide very extensive coverage of LFRA meetings and republish LFRA tracts.

⁵⁸⁸ *Daily News*, 24 February 1849.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

confusion was compounded when John Matson, a financial reformer with a long pedigree, issued a pamphlet just before the public meeting, entitled *A New Budget for Lord John Russell*.⁵⁹⁰ He styled himself secretary to the MFRA but did include a disclaimer to the effect that the opinion expressed was his own and should not be understood as being that of the MFRA. Matson's approach was similar to that of Cobden and the LFRA but he proposed going further. The pamphlet's publication (and by an MFRA officer at that) was ill-timed, given the current drive towards cooperation and consensus.

Just two weeks after the public meeting, the local political landscape changed completely. On 5 March 1849 the *Daily News* carried an address to the people of London in the name of the Metropolitan Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association (MFPRA). The address was signed "Joshua Walmsley, President". Its scope was vast, covering not just the flagship measures advocated by Cobden and Hume but much else, including education and freedom of the press. The MFPRA aimed to be strictly constitutional and would act only within the law. Its first efforts would be to strengthen the "people's party" in the House of Commons through overseeing registration of voters and enabling MFPRA members to become freeholders. Finding a balance between financial and parliamentary reform drew the address's author into some tortuous prose. Although convinced that any great change required wider enfranchisement, the association recognised the financial burdens on industry and all classes and would cooperate vigorously with agitation for financial reform. However, parliamentary reform would not be left in abeyance, as events in Europe had demonstrated the need to adopt a similarly enlightened policy as had led to the [1832] Reform Act and free trade. The association would seek "a large extension of the franchise and the complete independence of its exercise [i.e., the secret ballot] – the means of education placed within the reach of all – the extinction of monopolies, unlimited freedom of commerce, and the total abolition of exclusive privileges – an untaxed and unfettered press" etc.

The manifesto could not have been broader and was totally lacking in the sort of specificity and practicality favoured by Cobden and so successful in the days of the ACLL. Walmsley's personal beliefs from the past decade feature strongly, notably total free trade and universal education. As a proprietor of the *Daily News*, who had needed deep pockets, he had good reason to include press reform and in due

⁵⁹⁰ J. Matson, *A New Budget for Lord John Russell* (London, 1849, letter dated 27 January 1849). It was briefly reviewed in *The Era* on 18 February.

course this would become one of the Radicals' most significant achievements in Parliament.

Nowhere was the address greeted with more approval than in the columns of the *Liverpool Journal*.⁵⁹¹ In a lengthy article replete with imaginative prose (which suggests that it was written either by the proprietor Michael Whitty or the London correspondent, his son Edward), the paper noted that London had now moved in the direction set by Liverpool but, by joining parliamentary reform to financial reform, had rectified the mistake of the LFRA: "the cart and horse are to be retained in their legitimate position of progress".⁵⁹² Although the provinces had distinguished themselves by greater efforts for reform than had been noticeable in the metropolis, they needed to remember that they could do nothing without London and this had been the experience of even the ACLL. London must now lead the way and "the suggestion, no doubt, came from Liverpool" [i.e., Walmsley]. With consummate prescience (or the inside track on Walmsley's intentions) the *Journal* noted the MFPRA's operations would be confined to London but expressed "the hope of seeing all the provincial societies acknowledging this central league as their legitimate head, and, therefore, fusing themselves into the one body."

Walmsley had clearly been busy since his return from Bolton and seems to have felt emboldened by becoming an MP once more. Nothing in his address to the people when launching the MFPRA could have been expected on the basis of the MFRA's first tentative deliberations, certainly not the prominence given to parliamentary reform. The very title of the new association was a direct challenge to the whole approach that Cobden had worked so hard to impress on Bright and the Manchester reformers. Walmsley could have been excused for becoming involved with a local London association rather than sticking to his own territory (seen by Cobden as being Liverpool). Equally, having been preoccupied in Bolton at the time of the first meeting, he had not been well placed to influence those attending to follow Manchester's lead in not setting up another association to rival Liverpool. However, since then he had presided over the establishment of an association committed equally to both financial and parliamentary reform. It must have been clear to Cobden and everyone else that Walmsley had no intention of following a line that accorded absolute primacy to financial reform.

⁵⁹¹ *Liverpool Journal*, 10 March 1849.

⁵⁹² Michael Whitty had reason to be gratified by the inclusion of press reform. He would later have a starring role in the campaign for the abolition of stamp duty.

By the time of the MFPRA's first public meeting on 22 May 1849, several key appointments had been made within its organisational structure. In support of Walmsley as president there were two honorary secretaries, Tindal Atkinson and Robert Russell, and the secretary, Edward Whitty.⁵⁹³ These appointments underline Walmsley's dominant position in the new association. Atkinson, now a successful barrister in his early forties, was Walmsley's protégé and had been secretary of the TRA in Liverpool. He was often in Walmsley's company (as at the meeting of the LFRA in September 1848). In 1848 he had achieved public prominence by defending a number of Chartists in the courts. Although he was in no sense a Chartist, his actions on their behalf will have encouraged cooperation between the two movements.

Whitty's appointment as the principal organiser in the MFPRA was further evidence of Walmsley's intent to shape and run the association through a team of trusted henchmen. However, Whitty was much more than the precocious son of a close Liverpool friend. Still in his early twenties, he was beginning to develop a formidable reputation for innovative parliamentary reporting with *The Times* and the *Liverpool Journal*.⁵⁹⁴ His writing skills and links to the press must have been extremely valuable. His role as secretary, especially when the MFPRA was being set up, will have been time-consuming and he seems to have held the post for not much more than a year. Thereafter he remained devoted to Walmsley and so his departure was probably due to a wish to return to full-time journalism.

Walmsley's decisive move was remarkable for the speed and efficiency with which it was carried out. It resembled the way he had taken over the running of the Watch Committee's business in 1836 and then set up the TRA. In the boldness of the challenge to the accepted leadership of the Reform Movement it also recalled Walmsley's speech to the Town Council in 1836. Walmsley is unlikely to have embarked on this course without considerable deliberation and planning. He was aware of the local action to set up a financial reform association and was hand in glove with Place in instigating it. It was unfortunate that the Bolton election had

⁵⁹³ *Daily News*, 28 April 1849; *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 April 1849. Russell was initially appointed "pro tem" in mid-April but was later confirmed in post. Atkinson's appointment may have been made slightly later. Whitty was appointed at the end of March.

⁵⁹⁴ In August 1852 he would begin his landmark series of parliamentary sketches for the *Leader*, published first as *Hints to New M.P.'s by an Experienced "Stranger"* and then as *A Stranger in Parliament*. Versions of some of these pieces also appeared in the *Liverpool Journal* in his regular column *Notes in Parliament*.

prevented his participating in the first meeting but he had remained engaged by offering to take the chair in the future. In his absence the new association had followed the lines of the LFRA and done nothing to suggest a wider purpose. Walmsley's address to the people of London marked not only his taking control but also a major change from the direction of the original MFRA.

His son's biography glosses over this turn of events and no light is shed in contemporary sources other than the documents preserved by Place. When the MFPRA appealed for subscriptions in late April 1849 and published those received to date, Cobden and other prominent figures were shown to have contributed the going rate of £10 (with only Walmsley and a few others subscribing more).⁵⁹⁵ Looking back in October, Cobden wrote: "I do not object to Walmsley's proceedings – in fact I am grateful to anybody that does anything but stagnate. I subscribed my mite to his association and have cheered him on."⁵⁹⁶ For his part, Francis Place was rapidly becoming disenchanted with the organisation he had helped to form. His unhappiness did not stem from any political difference but from the way that the association was being transformed: "This seems to indicate a revolution. I know not how nor by whom."⁵⁹⁷ Place was re-elected to the association's council in January 1850 but by then he had ceased to be a significant player (and was no longer assiduously collecting papers relating to the organisation).

The MFPRA's first public meeting for its members on 22 May 1849, at the London Tavern in Bishopsgate, sought to build on Walmsley's address. Its declared purposes were to publicise the "principles and objects" of the new association and "to promote an effectual reform of our representative system".⁵⁹⁸ The reform in question was Hume's four points. The packed platform included nine MPs from all round the country, amongst them Thompson, Williams and Heyworth but not Hume, who was seriously ill, or any of the Manchester Radicals. The *Daily News* chose not to characterise the audience but *The Times*, with an air of disapproval, reckoned

⁵⁹⁵ *Daily News*, 28 April 1849.

⁵⁹⁶ Letter of 1 October 1849 to Bright, in J. Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden* (London, 1881), Vol. II, p. 51.

⁵⁹⁷ Letter of 28 March 1849 to John Matson, Place Collection, fo. 193.

⁵⁹⁸ *Daily News*, 23 May 1849; *The Times*, 23 May 1849; *Liverpool Journal*, 26 May 1849. Accounts of the meeting were clearly derived from the work of a "reporting ring" made up of journalists from several newspapers. The fullest version was in the *Daily News*. The *Liverpool Journal* published this version in an abbreviated form but also drew on some of the succinct précis in *The Times*.

that the vast majority of those present belonged to “the Chartist section of the community”. Significantly, among the platform party was Joseph Sturge, the Birmingham-based peace campaigner and close acquaintance of Cobden. As founder (in 1842) of the Complete Suffrage Union, Sturge had seen cooperation between the middle and working classes as crucial to parliamentary reform: this approach was fast becoming central to Walmsley’s own strategy.

Just as in the old days of the TRA in Liverpool, Walmsley opened proceedings and then called on Atkinson to read out a report from the association’s council. The key announcement, formalising what had been evident from Walmsley’s public address, was that the council had come to the conclusion that “the agitation for parliamentary reform should precede that for financial ameliorations”. A motion from the floor soon saw the association’s name changed to reflect this prioritisation: it thus became the Metropolitan Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association (MPFRA).⁵⁹⁹ However, the two main resolutions of the meeting were well-balanced and urged comprehensive reform in both areas.

The restyled MPFRA saw its profile, appeal and scope rise with each public meeting. On 4 July, at the Princess’s Theatre in Oxford Street, there were two highly significant additions to the platform party.⁶⁰⁰ For the first time Hume was well enough to attend and thereby show his support for the association and its objectives. Much less predictable was the presence of Feargus O’Connor. The previous day his motion on the People’s Charter had received short shrift in the House of Commons, being voted down by 222 to 13 (plus the two tellers), with Hume and Walmsley amongst the few Radicals who had supported him.⁶⁰¹ Hume (but not Walmsley) had also spoken. A policy of mutual support was slowly taking form. O’Connor made a short speech to the MPFRA, declaring this was the first time he had ever addressed a middle-class meeting and he was now seeking “to allay any antagonism which might tend to continue the predominance of the aristocratic class”. He added that he was “the more induced to this course from the conviction of the sincerity of Mr Hume, and other leaders of this movement, who had supported his motion the preceding night”. He would be prepared to accept new rights in

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ *Daily News*, 5 July 1849.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4 Jul 1849; *Morning Post*, 5 July 1849.

instalments but he was convinced that “until the whole of the Charter was obtained, financial reform would be a bag of moonshine”.⁶⁰²

The entente with the Chartists was again evident at the next public meeting on 13 August, at the Drury Lane Theatre, when upwards of 4,000 people were present.⁶⁰³ This was termed an “aggregate meeting” with representation from the new “branch societies” springing up across London and further afield. Untypically, many women were also present. Once more O’Connor took his place on the platform but the number of MPs present was not increasing. Hume had been stranded on Jersey and, in an ambiguous letter which Walmsley did his best to interpret in a positive light, Cobden tendered his regrets, though observing: “You have many years of good work before you, and it will not therefore be amiss to keep an army of reserve for another campaign. In the meantime, you are doing battle heroically.”⁶⁰⁴

At the heart of the meeting was another report from the MPFRA council.⁶⁰⁵ The parliamentary reform agenda was much the same as before but with the addition of a fifth point borrowed from the People’s Charter – the abolition of the property requirement for MPs. The gap between the MPFRA and the Chartists was getting ever narrower. Within the metropolis the plan of agitation was stated to entail public meetings around the various boroughs in succession: so far meetings had been held in Lambeth, Finsbury, Marylebone, Tower Hamlets, Greenwich, Southwark, West London and Westminster. On a more practical level, two actions were commended – scrutinising voter registers and, in county constituencies, extending the franchise through freehold qualification societies. However, the most far-reaching development since the last meeting was that the council’s proposal to turn the MPFRA into a national organisation:

⁶⁰² O’Connor’s motivation for this political *volte face* in lending his support to Hume and Walmsley is not altogether clear and has not been convincingly explained by historians of Chartism. Pickering, *Feergus O’Connor*, pp. 136-7, suggests that O’Connor may have been wooed by Walmsley (perhaps without the latter realising) but also points out that he blew hot and cold on the question of cooperation. Chase, *Chartism A New History*, p. 333-6, flags up the lack of direction in Chartism in 1849 and a drift towards “the politics of the possible”. He also points to the influence of the Irish nationalist (Sir) Charles Gavan Duffy, an NPFRA admirer. (Duffy was also on very close terms with Edward Whitty: see Duffy’s *My Life in Two Hemispheres* (London, 1898), Vol. II, pp. 10-11.) In any event, O’Connor was clearly hoping he could steer the agenda of the MPFRA and later the NPFRA.

⁶⁰³ *Daily News*, 14 August 1849.

⁶⁰⁴ Letter of 7 August 1849 to Edward Whitty, *The Times*, 14 August 1849.

⁶⁰⁵ *Daily News*, 14 August 1849.

The movement having now become a fact of unequivocal import, and having ensured the support of the metropolis and its environs, the council, in obedience to the necessity of its position, and in compliance with repeated invitations from many of the largest provincial towns, no longer hesitates to extend the operations of the association to the whole kingdom. Its scope, like its object, is now national; and the council earnestly calls upon the enlightened reformers in all parts of the country at once to unite with this great movement for the extension of popular rights.

Shortly afterwards (and with no fanfare) the news emerged that the council had duly resolved that henceforth the title of the association was to be “The National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association”.⁶⁰⁶

In little more than six months the idea of a local association for financial reform had been transformed into a budding national organisation for widespread reform that could fill meeting-halls to capacity and generate substantial (and often favourable) press coverage. The most striking characteristic of the association was the burgeoning cooperation between the middle-class supporters of the Reform Movement and the Chartists. Walmsley characterised this as involving “liberal and active concession” by one class and “generous moderation” by the other.⁶⁰⁷ By any standards all of this was a remarkable political achievement, the more so in that the leading proponent was out on his own for much of the time and was neither a household name nor a natural orator. The support of a well-known and respected veteran Radical in Hume was of crucial importance, though ill-health had severely hampered his ability to assist and few would have seen him as a front-line activist in a campaigning organisation. A handful of MPs had provided regular support but again these were not from the front rank of the Reform Movement. The vision had become reality largely through the hard work and organisation of Walmsley and his personal team.

For Walmsley the establishment of the NPFRA was a personal triumph. He had bounced back from being unseated, returned to Parliament and masterminded a major new political organisation. He had established a powerful platform for both himself and his fellow Radicals and put both parliamentary and financial reform

⁶⁰⁶ *Daily News*, 25 August 1849. The new title is first seen on a printed account of the council’s report to the Drury Lane meeting (Place Collection, fo. 245).

⁶⁰⁷ *Report of the Council of the National Reform Association*, 22 December 1849, Heywood Papers, ZHE/45/76.

much higher up the nation's agenda. Ambition certainly played a part. He had shown his ambition on many occasions in Liverpool and had ultimately lost the support of key fellow Reformers. His status as a *parvenu* had made him particularly vulnerable. However, he had also shown himself as clear-headed and far-sighted and a consummate organiser. What he and Atkinson had done on small scale with the TRA had served as blueprint on a much larger stage.⁶⁰⁸ Irrespective of who had been behind the coming together of Hume and the other 50 MPs of the Reform Movement, it was undoubtedly Walmsley who had pressed the case for giving parliamentary reform primacy and in so doing challenged Cobden's perception.

Thus far the prospects of parliamentary reform looked good, with well-attended public meetings and provincial associations and branches springing up around the country. What was less clear was how this could be turned into real pressure on Lord John Russell's government, which had faced down the Chartists and not shown any enthusiasm for rewriting the 1832 Reform Act. Equally, the lack of unambiguous support from Radical MPs will have been a cause for concern. Their groundbreaking meeting in April 1848 that had seemed to promise so much had not actually led to significant cooperation or practical measures apart from Hume's motion in the House of Commons. Any new organisation would not find it easy attracting their wholehearted support and participation.

Cobden's take on recent developments saw both positive and negative aspects.⁶⁰⁹ Walmsley had "brought middle-class people and Chartists together without setting them by the ears" and, although he had "rather shocked some moderate Liberals by his broad doctrines", he had brought others along with him. However, "mere public demonstrations" would do nothing and Cobden had impressed this on him several times: "I prize the privileges of our platforms, & the power of public discussion & denunciation as much as any body, but public meetings for parliamentary reform, which do not tend to systematised work ... will be viewed by the aristocracy with complacency as the harmless blowing off of steam." Cobden had urged Walmsley to work at getting people in the boroughs who were "favorable to the 4 points" to take

⁶⁰⁸ It is tempting to view the National Charter Association, founded in 1840, as another model for the NPFRA. Its national scope and role were strikingly similar. Chase, *Chartism A New History*, p. 163, has characterised the National Charter Association as "the first national political party", providing "an organisational focus within a movement hitherto without a formal structure".

⁶⁰⁹ Letter of 1 October 1849 to Bright, in Morley, *Richard Cobden*, Vol. II, p. 51; letter of 8 December 1849 to Bright, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 166-7.

control of voter registration and at increasing freehold qualifications in the counties. He believed that in 2-3 years with resolute work they would achieve “a respectable position” in the House of Commons. Even Cobden’s moderate and very practical objectives could have been seen as optimistic.

CHAPTER 7

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY AND FINANCIAL REFORM ASSOCIATION

In the last chapter, evidence was presented indicating the high degree of Liverpool influence during the rebirth of campaigning for parliamentary reform. In the event, it was parliamentary and not financial reform that was accorded primacy within what became the NPFRA. Walmsley was not the only Radical who had advocated this direction: Hume was clearly the guiding spirit and, in his exchanges with Cobden, Bright had clearly favoured some such outcome. However, without the deliberate (almost manipulative) planning applied by Walmsley, ably assisted by his Liverpool coterie, there would have been no NPFRA and probably no national campaign for parliamentary reform (or indeed financial reform).

Within the current chapter it is not proposed to provide a detailed account of the NPFRA's activities or of the wider debate on parliamentary reform in the period 1849-1854, after which the start of the Crimean War diverted attention to more pressing national issues. That would be outside the scope of the present study, which is focused on how Liverpool's distinctive experiences over several decades subsequently informed and shaped the politics of the period at the national level. Nonetheless, what the NPFRA actually did in its short life would one day also deserve closer attention. It was an energetic, largely extra-parliamentary, organisation which spawned action in many parts of the country and the few historical works that have recognised its importance and accorded it serious consideration have not tried to provide fully detailed accounts of its activities.⁶¹⁰ In the title of his short monograph, Edsall has bluntly characterised the NPFRA as "A Failed National Movement" and this is obviously true since, as Edsall points out, it failed to achieve any of its key ends.⁶¹¹ However, Edsall also concedes that the NPFRA was not just a futile attempt to keep outdated radicalism alive and that in certain respects it did lay the groundwork for the later revival of parliamentary reform as a popular issue.⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ See Chapter 1 for general comments on works by Edsall, Gillespie and Taylor. Edsall ('A Failed National Movement') provides a lot of good detail from primary sources and comes closest to meeting the historiographic requirement.

⁶¹¹ Edsall, 'A Failed National Movement', p. 108.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

In the year after its inception the NPFRA held over 220 public meetings and published 120,000 copies of its tracts.⁶¹³ The figure for public meetings presumably includes those organised by branch associations and other events to which NPFRA speakers were invited. Not much literature that was comparable to, for instance, the tracts of the LFRA was ever published by the NPFRA. However, reports of its various proceedings were widely distributed and these served to keep branch associations and key supporters informed of policy decisions.⁶¹⁴ Walmsley reckoned that in the life of the NPFRA “upwards of six hundred large meetings were held, and in no instance did we fail to obtain a vote in favour of our programme”.⁶¹⁵

For Walmsley the pace was fast and furious. In 1849 and 1850 especially he toured the whole country tirelessly drumming up support for the association and its objectives. In November 1849 he attended a major meeting of freehold land societies in Birmingham (on the 13th) and then toured Scotland, speaking in Edinburgh (19th), Glasgow (26th), Paisley (27th), Perth (29th) and Greenock (30th) and probably other places besides in between Edinburgh and Glasgow. This was after he had already visited Aberdeen and Newcastle in October. His health occasionally failed him (cholera in 1849 and several illnesses in 1851) but he rarely missed an engagement. In an era when trains had not totally replaced stagecoaches and long-distance travel was still arduous, whistle-stop tours of this type were certainly not a regular feature of Victorian political life. Lack of energy was obviously not amongst the reasons why the NPFRA failed.

Early in 1851 the NPFRA was rewarded out of the blue with unexpected encouragement from Lord John Russell. On 11 February Walmsley enquired of Russell in the House of Commons whether any extension of the franchise was intended and was duly fobbed off.⁶¹⁶ However, when on 20 February Locke King sought permission to table a bill on the county franchise, Russell announced his intention to bring in a reform bill in the following session.⁶¹⁷ This was a call to arms for the Reform Movement and a cause for greater cooperation under the banner of

⁶¹³ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 215. It was not long before the NPFRA’s unwieldy title was commonly abbreviated to the National Reform Association, even on some official stationery.

⁶¹⁴ See, for example, *Report of the Council of the National Reform Association to the Members of the Association*, December 1849, Heywood Papers, ZHE/45/76.

⁶¹⁵ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 215.

⁶¹⁶ *Hansard*, 11 February 1851; H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 218-19.

⁶¹⁷ *Hansard*, 20 February 1851; H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 219-20.

the NPFRA. Cobden made a rare (and suitably contrite) appearance at one of the NPFRA's monthly soirées in London and promised his full attention to parliamentary reform.⁶¹⁸

... I shall say to my friends, everywhere throughout the country, to all those who are practical men, and with whom I have had the honour of associating on other questions, that we shall forfeit our character as a practical people, unless between now and the next spring we throw ourselves into this agitation for Parliamentary Reform, in a manner that shall prove to the world, that English people have not lost that old attribute of this nation, but that they still know how to seize the proper time of doing their own work in their own way. I will say, moreover, that I will take this question apart from all other questions. I do not want to see any other subject coupled with this.

A particularly significant implication of this statement was that Cobden would try to bring Manchester into the fold. Since the enthusiastic reform meeting of January 1849, Manchester had gone its own way but eventually followed the lead of Liverpool and the metropolis and set up its own Financial and Parliamentary Reform Association with the old Anti-Corn Law campaigner George Wilson as chairman. This did not, however, lead to a close and harmonious relationship with the NPFRA and, when Walmsley and his fellow MP George Thompson led a heavyweight delegation to Manchester in February 1850, the public meeting in the Free Trade Hall was noteworthy for the absence of local luminaries.⁶¹⁹ However, when Walmsley and Thompson returned to Manchester for a major regional conference of reformers on 3 December 1851 under the auspices of the renamed [Manchester] Parliamentary Reform Association, there was a full turn-out of local MPs, including Cobden, Bright and Milner Gibson. Unfortunately, physical proximity did not lead to a harmonious meeting of minds: the discussion was often fractious, with Walmsley in particular not his usual conciliatory self and Cobden, as the last keynote speaker, having to restore the peace.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁸ *National Reform Tract Nos. 21-24* (London, 1851), p. 26; H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 220-1; R. Quinault, 'Cobden and Democracy', in A. Howe and S. Morgan, (eds.), *Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Liberalism* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 63-4.

⁶¹⁹ *Daily News*, 15 February 1850.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1851; Parliamentary Reform Association, 4 December 1851, Heywood Papers, ZHE/47/112.

At the very end of 1851 Walmsley experienced some sort of personal *crise*, brought on by ill-health and overworking (and quite possibly the conduct of the Manchester meeting). It seems that he had suggested to Hume that he wished to give up at least some of his duties, having asked himself why he should “work and toil to effect reform at so great a sacrifice of health, time, and money”.⁶²¹ In response, Hume had gently reminded him of the need to improve the condition of their less fortunate fellow-countrymen. Walmsley stuck to his task.

The prospect of parliamentary reform came no closer. On 9 February 1852 Russell tabled notice of a government bill to extend the right of voting and amend certain other aspects of parliamentary representation.⁶²² This was what the Reform Movement had been waiting for since the previous February and provided both a welcome fillip for the NPFRA and an opportunity to step forward as the authority on the subject and to exercise an unexpected degree of influence on government policy.⁶²³ Hume, Bright and Walmsley all spoke in the debate, endorsing some of the proposals, such as the reduced financial qualifications for voters and the abolition of the property qualification for MPs, and expressing regret at the absence of other reforms they had been advocating. Hume correctly characterised the bill as a patching up of the 1832 Reform Act and equally lacking in any underlying principle. Bright argued that any considerable extension of the franchise should be accompanied by introduction of the secret ballot in order to militate against coercion of tenants and employees. For his part, Walmsley focused on his favourite theme of a fairer distribution of seats amongst the boroughs and counties. In the event, within days of Russell’s announcement his administration had left office.

Two years later, as a member of the Earl of Aberdeen’s coalition government, Russell tried again and introduced a new Reform Bill in February 1854.⁶²⁴ It promised a slightly different set of concessions and attracted more support from the Radicals than its predecessor. Walmsley later wrote that, although he recognised that the bill fell short of Hume’s Little Charter, he had welcomed the absence of the

⁶²¹ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 185-8, quoting letter of Hume of 27 December 1851.

⁶²² *Hansard*, 9 February 1852; H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 237-9.

⁶²³ Edsall, *Richard Cobden*, p. 210, suggests that, as a result of Russell’s first announcement in 1851, “the all-but-moribund NPFRA revived overnight”. (See also Edsall, ‘A Failed National Movement’, pp. 117-8.) Moribund is far too strong a term given that throughout 1850 the NPFRA had been highly active.

⁶²⁴ *Hansard*, 13 February 1854.

“clumsy contrivances” and “timidity” of the 1852 bill.⁶²⁵ He reckoned that the changes in the franchise would increase the number of voters by one third and also highlighted the proposed redistribution of seats. At his instigation, the NPFRA had formally determined to give the bill its “hearty support”. An earlier meeting of MPs on 21 February 1854 had followed Hume’s recommendation “to support it as a whole rather than run any risk of endangering the bill by insisting too pertinaciously upon what they conceived would be improvements”.⁶²⁶ What is most noteworthy about the NPFRA council’s meeting is that, although there were half a dozen MPs in attendance, including Walmsley and Hume, even the *Daily News* only accorded it a few column-inches.⁶²⁷ The views of the NPFRA were no longer as marketable as they once had been. The fact that the NPFRA was more ready to support Russell’s bill than it had been in 1852 when the degree of reform being offered was hardly greater than before betokens a much weaker position. It was clearly not the organisation it had been two or three years earlier and was having to make the best of it.⁶²⁸

Despite the measured support of Radical MPs and the NPFRA to the government’s bill, the outcome was the same as in 1852. In April 1854 Russell was obliged to postpone the second reading because, with the country at war with Russia, there was no longer a suitable climate for discussing such a potentially divisive issue.⁶²⁹ Once Aberdeen had given way to Palmerston at the beginning of 1855, there was no prospect of Russell’s bill, which Palmerston had long opposed, being revived. With the demise of the bill went the last real opportunity for the NPFRA, already a shadow of its former self and attracting little publicity, to strut the national stage in any meaningful way.⁶³⁰

What else, if anything, the NPFRA tried to achieve is lost in a historiographic void. In the 1856 edition of the *Political Annual and Reformer’s Hand-book* (presumably

⁶²⁵ Quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 285-6.

⁶²⁶ *Daily News*, 22 February 1854.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 February 1854.

⁶²⁸ See also Edsall, ‘A Failed National Movement’, pp. 120-1.

⁶²⁹ *Hansard*, 11 April 1854.

⁶³⁰ Edsall, ‘A Failed National Movement’, p. 121, describes these events as the final blow to the NPFRA.

compiled in late 1855) it was described as having “virtually died out”.⁶³¹ The 1854 and 1855 editions likewise found nothing worthy of mention. This contrasts with fulsome coverage in the earlier *Reformer’s Almanack and Political Year-book* between 1849 and 1853 and the *Political Annual’s* enthusiastic reporting in the 1856 edition of John Arthur Roebuck’s new Administrative Reform Association.

Decline and fall

In considering the reasons behind the NPFRA’s failure to make a sustained impact and bring about any immediate measure of parliamentary reform, historians have proposed several contributory factors, which apply equally to the Reform Movement as a whole during the late 1840s and early 1850s, and to these one or two more may be added from the current research. The relative importance of each is difficult to assess but it is clear that all will have taken their toll on the NPFRA’s prospects. In the following paragraphs, commitment and unity of purpose, relations with the Chartists, a prosperous economy, outreach in the regions, strategy, image and communications, and the Crimean War are each examined in turn.

Few of Walmsley’s Radical colleagues in Parliament made any sustained contribution to the programme of public meetings around the country. These were obviously crucial to the success of the movement, either being requested by branch associations wishing to foster local support or orchestrated by the NPFRA with a view to establishing a presence in a major town.⁶³² As might be expected, Hume was highly supportive but his declining health often resulted in a last-minute inability to attend.

⁶³¹ *Political Annual and Reformer’s Hand-book for 1856* (London, [1855]), p. 12. Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, p. 110, is precipitate in writing that the final dissolution of the NPFRA had been officially announced in 1855.

⁶³² The ability of the NPFRA to organise its programme efficiently is questioned by Edsall (‘A Failed National Movement’, pp. 122-3). No doubt mistakes were made but overall the NPFRA showed itself remarkably capable in running a nationwide movement. Some of the deficiencies ascribed to poor organisation could equally well be laid at the door of the frequent reluctance of leading Radicals to cooperate fully with each other and accept what they seemingly viewed as intrusions into their own territory.

Walmsley aside, the most consistently supportive advocate for the NPFRA was George Thompson, who had been involved from the outset and frequently shared the billing with Walmsley at public meetings.⁶³³ Cobden's position was never less than ambiguous. At meetings sponsored by the NPFRA he was more often mentioned for having tendered his regrets than for having spoken from the platform. In part this was clearly due to his continuing doubts about the sense of pursuing parliamentary reform above financial reform and to his strong preference for focusing on voter registration and freehold qualification. However, there is no doubt that he was also both unconvinced by the NPFRA's campaign strategy centred on public meetings and personally squeamish about speaking outside his own region. Early on he wrote to Walmsley expressing his doubts after a public meeting in Norwich:⁶³⁴

If such a meeting could be got up without the attendance of Hume, yourself, and other stars, it would have been a sign of spontaneous feeling. As it is, people can conclude that the meeting assembled to hear and stare at certain public men ... Then comes the question, how such a demonstration can be turned to good? Be assured it is only by impressing on your friends the benefits of organisation and steady work at the registration and at forty-shilling freeholds, that any impression will be made.

In mid-1850 an anonymous pamphlet was published in London in the form of an open letter to Walmsley about parliamentary reform.⁶³⁵ Its unknown author was well-informed and, for all his strictures, was openly supportive of Walmsley himself. (The general tenor is such that there can be no suggestion that the pamphlet was any sort of put-up job with Walmsley's connivance.) What is most telling is the characterisation of other leading Radicals and the openly voiced suspicion of their motives. Whatever the truth of these observations, the NPFRA was failing to create

⁶³³ The political bond between Walmsley and the slightly younger Thompson (1804-1878) is striking, especially in view of their very different careers. Thompson was born in Liverpool but travelled widely in his calling as an abolitionist. In 1832 he famously engaged in an epic public debate in Liverpool with a pro-slavery agent, which lasted several days. Walmsley is said to have attended and spoken at meetings "called to express abhorrence of the slave trade" and it is tempting to think that in these formative years before he became a politician he made the acquaintance of Thompson (H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 59).

⁶³⁴ Letter of 6 October 1849, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 215-6.

⁶³⁵ [Anon.], *Prospects of Reform: A Letter to Sir Joshua Walmsley, M.P.* (London, [1850]).

the impression of joint purpose or unity. The author was especially scathing about relations with Cobden and Manchester:⁶³⁶

Where, more especially, were those masters in the Manchester School – John Bright, Milner Gibson, Richard Cobden? Rumour says that not only are they not with you, but that they are against you. The legends of “the [Anti-Corn Law] League,” it is said, have induced a belief with Messrs. Gibson and Bright that agitation is the destiny of Manchester, and that no meeting can be entitled to their attendance which does not vote Mr. [George] Wilson into the chair.

In later life Walmsley was saddened by the failure of his Radical colleagues to offer full support to parliamentary reform:⁶³⁷

The Manchester school fell away from us after a while. What motives or circumstances produced this lukewarm feeling I am unable now to determine. Although they voted with us in the House of Commons, they did little more. Cobden even seemed more anxious for financial reform and the ballot, than for an extension of the suffrage. Had the party acted together, with the energy and zeal that the members of the National Reform Association have evinced, we should not now be still looking for an extension of the suffrage.

It is easy to forget that in the parliaments between 1847 and 1857 the Radical MPs were never a homogeneous group and remained fiercely independent in their outlook and activities. The relatively disciplined age of the Liberal Party had not yet dawned and corralling such a body into an effective and unified force was always going to be a nigh impossible task. Miles Taylor points out that even the so-called Manchester School were not beholden to Cobden and Bright nor guaranteed to be in agreement on individual issues.⁶³⁸

The second key factor in the NPFRA’s decline concerns the uneasy relationship between Radicals and Chartists. One thing that Cobden did later concede was that, by holding meetings “in the spirit of Mr Hume’s motion”, Walmsley had conciliated large masses of the working classes and enabled other such meetings to take

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16. See also Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, pp. 91-2.

⁶³⁷ Note from 1862, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 211-2.

⁶³⁸ M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, p. 49.

place.⁶³⁹ In fact this was a huge achievement. Not only had Walmsley through his engagement with the Chartists persuaded the more violent elements not to disrupt public meetings in the way they had done in the days of the ACLL but he had effectively brought a significant proportion of the Chartist movement into the NPFRA fold. The NPFRA's leadership might be dominated by middle-class Radicals but the council included representatives from many different political backgrounds and, under Walmsley's direction as culture-broker, the NPFRA was clearly intent on forging a coalition between elements of the middle and working classes.⁶⁴⁰ For the Chartists it entailed accepting that reform could best be achieved by degrees through a tactical alliance with a middle-class movement led by someone they believed to be sincere. However, it was not just a question of common interest: crucial to this marriage of convenience was a feeling on the part of the Chartists that they were being treated with respect. This was not the first time that Walmsley had tried to win the Chartists round. In the days of the ACLL he had addressed an open letter to the Chartists, seeking to induce them to join the middle classes in their attempts to attain practical and useful reforms".⁶⁴¹ Then and now Walmsley saw the value of creating a consensus beyond the ranks of the middle classes.⁶⁴²

For O'Connor to be accepted on the platform at NPFRA meetings was highly significant and probably one more reason why so many Radical MPs found reasons not to be present, just as they had not followed Hume and Walmsley in supporting O'Connor's motion on the People's Charter in 1849. It was not only in London that O'Connor was welcomed onto the platform: he also sat alongside Walmsley and Thompson in Aberdeen in October 1849.⁶⁴³ To begin with, leading Chartists were full of compliments for their new middle-class colleagues. In the inaugural edition of his new weekly paper in November 1849, the publisher George Reynolds sang

⁶³⁹ *Daily News*, 4 December 1851.

⁶⁴⁰ Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, p. 77. Gillespie, p. 85, also draws attention to the earlier initiative of Joseph Sturge and his Complete Suffrage Union.

⁶⁴¹ *To the Working Men of the United Kingdom*, 31 August 1839, *Morning Chronicle*, 3 September 1839; H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 113-4.

⁶⁴² Edsall, *Richard Cobden*, p. 215, justly credits Walmsley and the NPFRA with having begun the difficult business of building political bridges across class lines, with almost no assistance from Cobden.

⁶⁴³ *Daily News*, 18 October 1849.

Walmsley's praises in terms that equalled any of the other encomia he had received from Liberal newspapers:⁶⁴⁴

Sir Joshua Walmsley, the Member for Bolton, must now be considered the Leader of the Middle Class Movement. This gentleman is thoroughly honest and an undoubted Liberal: indeed, he himself has admitted in the admirable speeches which he has delivered at recent public meetings, that he goes beyond the principle he set forth in the "profession of faith" promulgated by the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association. Sir Joshua is a man of business habits, shrewdness, tact, and indomitable perseverance: he is straightforward in his character and his speeches; and his acquaintance with the real wants and interest of the masses is apparent in the mode in which he addresses them from the platform. His votes in Parliament have always been on the right side; and it should be recorded that he was one of the fifteen who supported Mr O'Connor's motion for the People's Charter last session.

Soon, however, Reynolds was taking umbrage. In his annual motion on parliamentary reform in February 1850 Hume, injudiciously, had voiced his real thoughts and accused the Chartists of having "rendered the principles of reform odious".⁶⁴⁵ Reynolds publicly denounced Hume and then cast aspersions on Walmsley for having failed in his own speech to defend the Chartists and rebuke Hume.⁶⁴⁶ Worse followed when shortly after the annual NPFRA conference in April 1850 Reynolds, himself a member of the council, published an open letter to Walmsley, decrying a series of alleged actions at various public and council meetings that served to deny Chartists a fair hearing.⁶⁴⁷ What is clear is that, although Walmsley welcomed Chartist engagement, he was unwilling to see the NPFRA's objectives subverted and made identical with those of the People's Charter. Not all Chartists were so inflexible as Reynolds. Their support for Walmsley

⁶⁴⁴ *Reynolds's Political Instructor*, 10 November 1849, quoted in *Northern Star*, 17 November 1849. In 1850 this became *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* and then in 1851 simply *Reynolds's Newspaper*.

⁶⁴⁵ *Hansard*, 28 February 1850.

⁶⁴⁶ *Northern Star*, 9 March 1850. Chartists like George Harney, who had kept their distance from the NPFRA, were uncompromising. In early 1850 Harney wrote that the object of Cobden and Walmsley was to extend the suffrage so as to swamp the House of Commons with representatives of the Manchester School (Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, p. 87, citing *Democratic Review*, February 1850). Not for the first time, Walmsley was being tainted by association.

⁶⁴⁷ *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper*, 23 June 1850.

was an important factor in his election as MP for Leicester in 1852. In general, Walmsley lived up to his reputation for tact in his own pronouncements on Chartist leaders. However, in a letter to his Bolton sponsor Heywood he was forthright about O'Connor: "Fergus [sic] O'Connor is lost for any good, and his power of evil is greatly reduced but I am truly glad to learn that he was unable to make mischief."⁶⁴⁸

This picture of a marriage of convenience between Radicals and Chartists is reflected at all levels. In his memoirs Thomas Frost, then a young journalist in Croydon, recalls how he encouraged local Chartists to join the new branch of the NPFRA and "endeavour to use its machinery for the furtherance of our own aims".⁶⁴⁹ This led to seats on the local committee but Frost was careful not to pursue a majority for fear of breaking up the movement. From the outset Frost was suspicious of his new allies, believing that they only cared about enfranchising shopkeepers and reducing taxation (if need be, without parliamentary reform). In short, there was clearly no real trust or unity between the various NPFRA factions and without these vital qualities there could be no effective campaigning.

In her study of the working classes, Gillespie attached great importance to the breakdown in relations between the two sides.⁶⁵⁰ Although she acknowledged other causes, she viewed the continuing antagonism between the classes and their suspicion of each other's motives as key factors in the failure of the NPFRA. To persuade an unwilling government to make concessions on parliamentary reform that in all probability would adversely affect its future electoral prospects required real pressure. A solid alliance across class barriers offered the best chance of success but the NPFRA was never able to present itself as more than a temporary coalition of some factions and not a unified opposition movement embracing all advocates of parliamentary reform.

The third key factor relates to the improving state of the national economy and its impact on the appetite for political struggle. It was not only the Chartists who were falling away from the NPFRA. Just as Cobden and his closest associates had failed to maintain the level of commitment they had shown in the early days of the Reform Movement in 1848, so activists and workers were also displaying unexpected levels

⁶⁴⁸ Letter of 4 February 1851, Heywood Papers, ZHE/47/11.

⁶⁴⁹ T. Frost, *Forty Years' Recollections: Literary and Political* (London, 1880), pp. 203-9; Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, pp. 91 and 99-100.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

of apathy towards parliamentary reform. In October 1850 Cobden apprised Walmsley of the realities of what could be expected from the veterans of the ACLL, on whom Walmsley had counted.⁶⁵¹ Very few of those who were not already dead or grown old were in the mood for beginning another labour on this scale. Similarly, in November 1852 Heywood in Bolton, Walmsley's own new stamping-ground, told the NPFRA that there would be great difficulty in rousing the masses: "People are so much engaged in business and the work people well employed with [the price of] provisions so very low there is little disposition to enquire into or make any effort to correct national mismanagement."⁶⁵² The unexpected economic upturn that had followed so soon after the dismal experiences of 1847 and 1848 had diminished the popular appetite for further agitation. Edsall considers this prosperity as the single greatest reason why the NPFRA failed.⁶⁵³ He argues that it changed the mood of the middle classes and allowed the government to avoid unpopular rises in taxation. Gillespie detected a similar change in the working classes: better economic conditions "deprived the masses of the one effective stimulant to agitation".⁶⁵⁴ She concluded that this, coupled with the antagonism and suspicion between the classes, caused the effort to create a great people's party to fail.

Miles Taylor identifies a fourth key factor affecting the Reform Movement in general and equally applicable to the NPFRA – a failure to mobilise support in traditionally responsive parts of the country, including the north-west.⁶⁵⁵ The present research confirms the inability of the NPFRA to achieve outreach to key regions, despite the number of miles travelled by Walmsley, Thompson and others. Ironically, the biggest set-backs were in Liverpool and Manchester. Walmsley's repeated strictures to the LFRA in 1848 failed either to get parliamentary reform on to its agenda or to persuade elements of it subsequently to set up a local branch of the NPFRA. Although Manchester did eventually set up a Parliamentary Reform Association, this was very much an independently-minded local organisation and not the key regional outpost of the NPFRA that it should have been. In both cases one suspects that

⁶⁵¹ Letter of 20 October 1850, quoted in H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, pp. 210-1.

⁶⁵² Letter of 2 December 1852, Heywood Papers, ZHE/48/92.

⁶⁵³ Edsall, 'A Failed National Movement', p. 130, and *Richard Cobden*, pp. 207-8.

⁶⁵⁴ Gillespie, *English Working Classes*, p. 108.

⁶⁵⁵ M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, pp. 159 and 189. P. Taylor, *Popular Politics in Early Industrial Britain*, p. 183, identifies Bolton as the only town in Lancashire where the NPFRA received significant support.

difficult personal relationships were allowed to impede the NPFRA's progress: the old animosity between Walmsley and Robertson Gladstone is unlikely to have healed and the aloofness of the Manchester School from events they did not control probably explains their low profile in the NPFRA. However, what must also be inferred is that the leading reformers in both Liverpool and Manchester, who were vital to the success of any campaigning in the region, were either largely indifferent to parliamentary reform or balked at the notion of a wider alliance with Chartist elements. This failure to engage key regions left the NPFRA looking too much like a London-centric movement.⁶⁵⁶

Arguably the fifth key factor in the NPFRA's failure was one of strategy. As stated above, the prospects for success were predicated on an alliance between Radicals and the working classes. However, in turn this had to generate real pressure on the government. For all the speechmaking in large auditoria and dissemination of countless tracts, at some point there would need to be large-scale public meetings in the open air. This was what the Reformers had done in Liverpool for many years before they achieved public office and was an important part of the ACLL's successful strategy. The problem, of course, was that such mass gatherings had become discredited by Chartist actions, notably the Kennington Common demonstration in 1848. The NPFRA clearly judged that any benefit from this sort of approach would be outweighed by the obvious risks: that they might have difficulty in controlling the meetings and ensuring there was no violence (or threat of it); that the meetings might well alienate many of their own members and the middle classes in general; and that the government might either cease to entertain any sort of political accommodation with the NPFRA or, worse, overreact in their policing response. The path the NPFRA chose is entirely understandable but it did weaken its position.

A sixth factor may be found in the format of the meetings and multifarious publications of the NPFRA. To some extent any such perception is conditioned by modern ideas of what a political movement should do and how it should be viewed from the outside. The NPFRA's meetings, soirées and conferences were – with very few exceptions – well organised and models of decorum: they often included ladies in the audience. A common feature was the singing of the NPFRA anthem – the

⁶⁵⁶ See also M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, p. 172.

People's Anthem (or *God save the people!*) by Ebenezer Elliott.⁶⁵⁷ However, the meetings invariably went on for a very long time and featured speech after long speech, each full of detail. They were very much geared to a middle class and educated audience. Although these events were entirely typical of the era they will not have widened the appeal of the Reform Movement.

Equally, the NPFRA's many publications do not overwhelm the modern reader. Again they were mostly intended for the middle classes. A few flyers do survive where the message is more direct and some of Walmsley's own pronouncements as president are well-written and will have made an impact, in much the same way as his election material (see Appendix 1) was usually succinct and well-directed. However, on the basis of such NPFRA documents as are available, the overriding impression is that the organisation was not trying as hard as it could to get its message across to the less well educated tradesmen and working classes. This same tendency is evident in the *Daily News*. In this period the newspaper was only selling 3-4,000 copies per day and its style indicates that it was not seeking to reach readers beyond the educated classes. For all its ample and supportive coverage of the NPFRA, the paper was not really helping to spread the message to potential new supporters. Arguably, Walmsley's gold would have been better invested in a mass-circulation popular weekly!

The seventh and final factor that requires a brief mention is the Crimean War. This certainly marked the end of the NPFRA's useful existence. However, the historiography is united in assessing that its demise was already in train and inevitable. This is clearly the case but the judgement requires slight qualification. From well before the start of Britain's direct involvement, events in Europe were becoming a major distraction from domestic affairs.⁶⁵⁸ It should also be noted that by then even many of those Radicals who not long before had agitated for parliamentary reform (and not just Cobden) had become preoccupied by the issues surrounding peace and war. Furthermore, as Gillespie pointed out, the working classes also forgot their own political exclusion as their attention turned to Russian oppression.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁷ This poem was immensely popular over many years but was a curious choice, given its perception by many as being anti-monarchist and irreligious.

⁶⁵⁸ M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, pp. 190-1.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

Successes

The failure of the NPFRA to achieve its primary objective does not mean that it had failed to achieve any meaningful progress or reform. Its active existence between 1849 and 1854 was a brief period in the time-line of reform and, even without the debilitating impact of the Crimean War, it would have taken many more years for such a major programme of reform to have been pushed through.⁶⁶⁰ The platform rhetoric exuded optimism of swift gains but this was never a realistic proposition. Had Russell's second Reform Bill succeeded, then perceptions of the NPFRA would be very different. Russell's motives for tabling a slightly more comprehensive and attractive set of reforms than had been envisaged (or could be guaranteed an easy passage through Parliament) are not obvious. Although he was a sincere supporter of measured reform, the decline of Chartism had removed one source of pressure and the NPFRA had never managed to transform enthusiasm at public meetings into wider agitation. However, there was a very well-mannered and reasonable character to everything the NPFRA undertook and surely there is a strong possibility that Walmsley and his colleagues had actually won over Russell in crucial areas through their constant repetition of the shortcomings (and associated unfairness) of the 1832 Reform Act.⁶⁶¹

The NPFRA and not least Walmsley himself also pioneered a new style of politics for the Victorian era whereby the politicians addressed themselves jointly and, for much of the time, equally to both the middle classes and the working classes. In the early days this approach was remarkably successful and, although class relations within the movement later became fractious, they did not break down entirely and the basic point was proved. In the words of Edsall, "it undoubtedly smoothed the way for the even greater class harmony which characterized the reform movement after 1858, and justifies our viewing the Reform Association as a transitional movement rather than a dead end".⁶⁶² The NPFRA might have failed in its main objectives but it had nonetheless served a beneficial purpose.

⁶⁶⁰ Quinault, 'Democracy and the Mid-Victorians', p. 112, points out that major reforms generally had a long gestation period.

⁶⁶¹ Edsall ('A Failed National Movement', p. 130, and again in *Richard Cobden*, p. 215) argues that, without the agitation for Hume's Little Charter, Russell would not have abandoned the finality of the 1832 Reform Act as early as he did.

⁶⁶² Edsall, 'A Failed National Movement', p. 131.

Aside from the main thrust of the NPFRA's campaign for parliamentary reform, two areas of activity, both of which ultimately achieved a degree of success, merit particular attention: first, the direct involvement of the NPFRA in the establishment of a national freehold land society, and, secondly, the engagement of leading Radical MPs, notably Walmsley and Cobden, in the pursuit of press reform, another NPFRA objective.

National Freehold Land Society

The establishment in late 1849 of an offshoot organisation, the National Freehold Land Society (NFLS), more properly known as the National Permanent Mutual Benefit Building Society, was an enduring achievement for the NPFRA. The historiography of Victorian land movements is more voluminous than that of most issues covered in this thesis. The definitive modern study has been provided by Malcolm Chase and a more recent essay by F. M. L. Thompson has looked in more detail at Cobden's involvement with land schemes.⁶⁶³ Contemporary accounts by Thomas Beggs, the first secretary of the NFLS, and in the *Reformer's Almanack* contain clear statements of the background to the NFLS's creation and its year-by-year progress.⁶⁶⁴ In the following paragraphs the intention is simply to outline the development of the NFLS as it relates to the NPFRA and in so doing fill a few small gaps in the historiography, the most important of which concerns Walmsley's personal involvement: modern authors have tended to ignore Walmsley and focus almost exclusively on Cobden's role.

This was not the first occasion in recent history when political organisations had sought to make imaginative use of land ownership. The ACLL had reacted to losses at the 1841 general election by having its supporters purchase land (or chief rents), predominantly in northern counties, that would meet the 40s requirement and so qualify for a vote.⁶⁶⁵ Cobden graciously admitted that the original idea had come from one Charles Walker of Rochdale and claimed that the creation of thousands of

⁶⁶³ M. Chase, 'Out of Radicalism: The Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 419 (1991), pp. 319-345; F. M. L. Thompson, 'Cobden, Free Trade in Land, and the Road to the Abbey National', in A. Howe and S. Morgan, eds., *Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Liberalism* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 68-79.

⁶⁶⁴ T. Beggs, 'Freehold Land Societies', in *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (1853), pp. 338-46. Beggs had previously been engaged by the LFRA to lecture around the country on financial reform (*Daily News*, 20 April 1849). However, although he had this connection with Liverpool, he was not one of Walmsley's old associates.

⁶⁶⁵ Longmate, *Breadstealers*, pp. 190-4, details some of the schemes implemented.

new franchises had secured the return of free traders in several county constituencies, including the West Riding of Yorkshire and South Lancashire.⁶⁶⁶ These two successes were achieved at by-elections in 1846 (the long-term beneficiary in South Lancashire being William Brown of Liverpool, a close confidant of George Wilson, the League's president).⁶⁶⁷ In 1847 Cobden had then put his faith in his own scheme, choosing to take the West Riding as his seat in preference to his former constituency of Stockport. Looking back in 1853, Beggs accepted that the scheme had met its main (political) purpose but found that the commercial aspects were generally unsatisfactory and had failed to encourage further investment in freeholds.⁶⁶⁸

Passing mention must also be made of the Chartists' National Land Company, set up in 1846-7.⁶⁶⁹ In some respects O'Connor's scheme was similar to Cobden's in that a key goal was the creation of new county franchises but a fundamental difference was that O'Connor was also pursuing an altruistic (and ultimately impractical) objective of setting up workers on the land as smallholders. In the event, despite a huge level of subscription from tens of thousands of supporters, the National Land Company proved an administrative and legal shambles. It was finally wound up in 1851. As Cobden and Walmsley pondered their own scheme in 1849, the National Land Company must have seemed a stark warning of the potential pitfalls ahead.

A much more attractive land scheme was pioneered in Birmingham from 1847. The Birmingham Freehold Land Society was largely the brainchild of James Taylor, previously best known for his involvement with the temperance movement.⁶⁷⁰ It proved very successful in attracting investment and promoting the establishment of

⁶⁶⁶ *Daily News*, 27 November 1849.

⁶⁶⁷ Brown had also benefitted from assiduous registration challenges in the preceding few years: see Longmate, *Breadstealers*, p. 189.

⁶⁶⁸ Beggs, 'Freehold Land Societies', p. 339.

⁶⁶⁹ See M. Chase, 'Wholesome Object Lessons': The Chartist Land Plan in Retrospect', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 118, No. 475 (2003), pp. 59-85; 'Labour's Candidates': Chartism at the Parliamentary Polls', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2009), pp. 64-89; 'Chartism and the Land: 'The Mighty People's Question'', in M. Cragoe and P. Readman, (eds.), *The Land Question in Britain, 1750-1950* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 57-73.

⁶⁷⁰ Chase, 'Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement', p. 326.

other societies in the region. The *Reformer's Almanack*, showing the influence of temperance, advertised the appeal of land ownership:⁶⁷¹

Why should an Englishman henceforth supplicate parliament, in vain, to grant him a vote, when he may owe to his virtuous prudence and economy his own enfranchisement? The cost of a single pint of beer a day, from the date of the promulgation of the "People's Charter" to the present time, amounts to more money than would buy a county qualification.

Taylor's grand object was "to purchase freehold building land in large quantities, and retail it to the members at the wholesale price".⁶⁷² He claimed this represented an improvement over the ACLL's plan, which had involved individual purchases "and it never occurred to them to make joint purchases on a large scale. Buy a bullock, and the cost is cheap, compared with buying only a pound of steaks." Notwithstanding Taylor's aspersions, Cobden followed the actions of the Birmingham Society very closely. As early as September 1848 he had forwarded to Walmsley information about the society that he had solicited from one of the town's MPs.⁶⁷³

Unsurprisingly, the idea of a Freehold Land Society for the London area appeared soon after the restyled Metropolitan Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association came into being. By June 1849 a prospectus had been issued for the Metropolitan and Home Counties Freehold Land Society.⁶⁷⁴ On 27 October 1849 the National Freehold Land Society, as it had since become, issued an advertisement of its own.⁶⁷⁵ Walmsley was named as president and Cobden and Hume as vice-presidents. The chief object of the society was "to qualify its members to vote at Elections for Counties". Shares were priced at £30 each and the order of distributing plots amongst the members was to be determined by lot. The society's hierarchy is revealing: notably, Walmsley and not Cobden was elected President. Aside from possible ambition on Walmsley's part and gracious deference on Cobden's, there were practical reasons why this should be so. The NPFRA had a very strong Chartist contingent and, for many, Cobden would have been a much less

⁶⁷¹ *The Reformer's Almanack and Political Year-book, 1849* (London, 1848), p. 65.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶⁷³ Letter of 28 September 1848 (Add MS 37108, West Sussex RO).

⁶⁷⁴ *Daily News*, 8 June 1849.

⁶⁷⁵ *The Reformer's Almanack and Political Year-book, 1850* (London, 1849).

acceptable leader than the conciliatory Walmsley. Equally, Walmsley was a very rich and well-connected businessman, who could be guaranteed to inspire confidence in subscribers. Finally, Walmsley had shown himself an efficient and hardworking administrator, whereas Cobden was increasingly reluctant to commit himself to new, time-consuming endeavours. As O'Connor was demonstrating with the National Land Company, being a registered officer of a public company entailed both considerable work and substantial personal financial risk.

In November 1849 the new freehold land societies convened a national conference and public meeting in Birmingham. The scale of attendance indicates their increasing popularity and influence, though most of the delegates were from the midland counties, Yorkshire and London.⁶⁷⁶ The keynote speakers were Taylor and Cobden but there were also contributions from Bright, Walmsley and Thompson. Two weeks later, on 26 November, the NFLS introduced itself at a public meeting in the London Tavern.⁶⁷⁷ For once, Walmsley was not present, at that time being off on his Scottish tour with Thompson. Cobden dominated the event with a comprehensive and rousing speech. He pointed out that the society had been formed to enable individuals, by small monthly contributions, to acquire a county franchise; those participating would be both saving and acquiring a vote. It was not a part of any body engaged in wider agitation, such as the newly formed Birmingham Freeholders Union. A key feature was that the society was registered as a building society and, although as such it could not purchase and divide up land, this function would be undertaken by the directors, who would then make plots available to members. Cobden reiterated his long-held view that only means of effecting reform through constitutional and non-violent means was through the 40s qualification. This might require seven years to accomplish but some rewards would be reaped before then. In this and other events connected with the NFLS Cobden exhibited the spirit and commitment he had given to the ACLL but mostly felt unable to summon up for the NPFRA.⁶⁷⁸

In a period when all the freehold land societies seemed to be doing well, the NFLS in particular prospered, with near exponential growth. It was not just the largest

⁶⁷⁶ *Daily News*, 14 November 1849.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 27 November 1849.

⁶⁷⁸ Chase, 'Mid-Victorian Freehold Land Movement', p. 335, characterises Cobden as "incapable of thinking in terms of a wider reforming movement" and quotes critical comments from Bright and another Radical MP, John Arthur Roebuck.

society but also the best managed.⁶⁷⁹ One of the earliest plots of land purchased by the Uxbridge branch of the NFLS was named “Walmsley Terrace” in honour of the society’s president.⁶⁸⁰ By the end of 1851 there were nearly 7,000 members, subscribing over 14,000 shares. Estates had been purchased throughout the home counties and occasionally further afield in the south-west. The following year saw the total number of shares issued pass 34,000 and by then no less than 80 estates had been purchased.⁶⁸¹ As a commercial entity the NFLS was a great success but the number of new franchises was relatively small: only 2,776 plots had been taken up, with a further 491 in train. Some minor electoral successes were claimed in the 1852 election but after three years of operation the NFLS still had a long way to go. On the eve of the Crimean War Walmsley announced the results for 1853: another 29,742 shares had been issued, bringing the total since June 1849 to 66,843.⁶⁸²

Not long before Beggs, no longer the secretary of the NFLS, had publicly delivered his considered thoughts on this and other such building societies.⁶⁸³ His own background in the temperance and other social movements meant that he was more concerned about the welfare of poor workers than the political objectives. He characterised the new societies as an experiment and was unconvinced that in their present form they represented the best form of saving for working men. It was good that they promoted thrift (and, as claimed by Taylor, “rescued money from the public houses”) but they also encouraged speculation in a complex market. That so many people wanted to acquire small properties was cause for rejoicing but they needed guidance on how the business of freehold land societies might be conducted safely. Beggs was sceptical about the real political value of the societies and acknowledged only one instance where there had been an impact at the polling booths. There was nothing to guarantee that someone who acquired a freehold qualification would actually vote for the desired candidate. Furthermore, the political focus of the societies had rapidly been overtaken by commercial considerations.

Just as the impending Crimean War blighted the political prospects of the NPFRA, so the NFLS saw its dealings in land temporarily stagnate, with procedural

⁶⁷⁹ *The Reformer’s Almanack and Political Year-book, 1852* (London, 1851), p. 73.

⁶⁸⁰ *Daily News*, 18 September 1850; *National Reform Tract No.3* (London, 1850).

⁶⁸¹ *The Reformer’s Almanack and Political Year-book, 1853* (London, 1852), p. 97.

⁶⁸² *Daily News*, 17 February 1854.

⁶⁸³ Beggs, ‘Freehold Land Societies’, especially pp. 343-6.

restrictions also impeding progress. However, its financial profile continued to go from strength to strength. In 1856 the Board of Trade agreed that the NFLS could deal in land and do so under the terms of the new Limited Liability Act of 1855.⁶⁸⁴ This dispensation finally freed the directors of the society from most of the personal responsibility and financial liability they had nobly agreed to shoulder for many years. In the light of this development the NFLS decided that in future its land operations would be carried out by a separate limited company to be called the British Land Company.⁶⁸⁵ This new company was formally registered in the same year under the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856.⁶⁸⁶ With the passing of Disraeli's 1867 Reform Act, the NFLS and the British Land Company lost their primary function. However, both continued their distinguished careers, albeit in changed form. The former survived as part of the Abbey National until 2010. The latter, now rebranded as British Land, has undergone a major revival after a period of decline. Both have represented fulsome testimony to the perspicacity and sound organisation of their founders.

Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps

Reform of the press had been an unexpected feature of Walmsley's inaugural address to the people of London in March 1849 on becoming president of the NPFRA (see Chapter 6) and yet the potential of the press to assist in the cause of reform had long been evident. For decades the Liverpool Reformers had had to plead their case in a predominantly Tory town but had been much assisted by the local press, the majority of whose papers were firmly supportive and of such quality that many Tories read them. Walmsley himself had been the darling of the liberal press and had seen his advanced ideas preferred to those of the political establishment. When additional proprietors were being sought for the new *Daily News*, which eventually commenced publication in January 1846, it was natural that the affluent Walmsley, then in semi-retirement and living the life of a country squire, should be approached and accept, despite the financial uncertainties. Unlike several fellow proprietors (including the Radical MP William Jackson), whose pockets were not deep enough to sustain the *Daily News'* repeated losses, Walmsley stayed the

⁶⁸⁴ *Daily News*, 29 May 1856.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Memories of O'Connor's National Land Company, dissolved in 1851, precluded any attempt to choose the obvious name for the new company.

⁶⁸⁶ *Daily News*, 25 October 1856.

course and kept his stake in the business until he finally retired from active politics in 1857.⁶⁸⁷

In a letter to Walmsley, Cobden summarised what he had expected of the *Daily News*.⁶⁸⁸

It has always struck me that what was wanted in a new daily paper was a new direction of politics to suit a coming want in public opinion not already catered for by the existing papers. This is not easily hit upon – because if too much in advance of opinion upon any topic the paper is in danger of not floating until the public mind grows up to it.

However, there was another aspect and that was how to make the press less beholden to the wealthy and more accessible to the less affluent classes. This was what Walmsley had in mind when he referred to “an untaxed and unfettered press” in his address.⁶⁸⁹ Cobden explained the issue succinctly:⁶⁹⁰

The great evil is the price & that arises out of the stamp. A daily paper at 5d is a luxury beyond the reach of the mass of the middle class, & not to be dreamed of by the working people; consequently our morning daily journals look to the support of cliques, or the aristocracy of rank or money. If we had no stamp, there would be daily papers at all prices from a penny upwards & all shades of opinion would be supported. We must try to get rid of the stamp.

In the complex world of press finance, stamp duty (though only 1d) and, to a lesser extent, advertisement duty had a disproportionate effect on cover price and circulation. The *Daily News*' price of 5d was typical of “cheap” papers. The innovative provincial press in Liverpool had seen a cut-price newspaper (the *Liverpool Weekly News*) emerge in 1846 with a cover price of just 3d but that had

⁶⁸⁷ J. Grant, *The Newspaper Press: its origin – progress – and present position* (London, 1871), Vol. II, pp. 79-80 and 86; S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London, 1981), Vol. 1, pp. 95 and 119; M. Taylor, *Decline of British Radicalism*, p. 38; Dissolution of partnership (Walmsley/Allcard/Smith), 1857 (O/093, London Metropolitan Archives). With total estimated losses for the newspaper of £200,000 in the first 10 years, Walmsley's individual liability will have been huge and represented an immense (and largely unsung) personal commitment to the Radical cause.

⁶⁸⁸ Letter of 30 January 1848, *Cobden Letters*, pp. 13-15.

⁶⁸⁹ *Daily News*, 5 March 1849.

⁶⁹⁰ Letter of 5 November 1849 to Joseph Sturge, *Cobden Letters*, p. 162.

soon been driven out of business in a price war led by Michael Whitty's *Liverpool Journal*.⁶⁹¹ Whitty's commercial expertise would eventually inform a press revolution.

Untypically, stamp duty was an issue that could be expected to draw support from outside the relatively small group of Radical MPs.⁶⁹² (It had always been a political tax and not primarily a revenue-collecting measure, though it did raise a substantial amount of money.) In April 1851 the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps was convened and one third of its members were Radicals (Thomas Milner Gibson, chairman, plus Cobden, Walmsley, Ewart and Sir William Molesworth).⁶⁹³ The star witness proved to be Michael Whitty, who as well as being the proprietor of the *Liverpool Journal* was also the Liverpool agent of the *Daily News*, no doubt on Walmsley's recommendation. Whitty was led through his evidence by Walmsley and provided expert confirmation of his key proposition that cheap, unstamped newspapers "would improve the working classes in intelligence, and fit them for higher positions".⁶⁹⁴ He then accepted the further proposition from Walmsley that, with the removal of the stamp, advertisement and paper duties, well-conducted one penny newspapers would be published and added that he himself would publish one instantly.⁶⁹⁵

The issuing of the final report of the Select Committee in July 1851 represents a landmark in the history of the British press. The committee neatly avoided any consideration of whether newspapers might need to be taxed then or in the future simply as a source of revenue and focused on their basic conclusion: they did not consider news to be a desirable subject of taxation.⁶⁹⁶ In the event, it was not until 1855 that stamp duty was finally abolished but the Radicals had done their work well in 1851 and what emerged was in no small part due to Walmsley and Whitty. In May 1855 Whitty proudly announced that his promise was about to be redeemed

⁶⁹¹ N. Foggo, 'Liverpool Journal', in *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, in *C19 Index* (ProQuest).

⁶⁹² See Lee, *Origins of the Popular Press*, pp. 42-9, for a general account of the stamp duty issue.

⁶⁹³ Molesworth seems not to have attended any of the committee's sessions.

⁶⁹⁴ *Report from the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps* (London, 1851), §603, p. 94.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, §622, p. 97.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

with the publication of the *Daily Post*, the first edition of which duly appeared on 11 June 1855 and was amongst the very first of the one penny dailies.⁶⁹⁷

Liverpool Financial Reform Association

Whilst the NPFRA proved to have a relatively short life, the LFRA became an enduring Liverpool institution. It was still active in the spring of 1914 but became defunct soon after, seemingly another casualty of more pressing wartime preoccupations. However, its influence had long since waned. In its hey-day of the late 1840s and early 1850s, with Robertson Gladstone firmly at the helm, the association published tract after tract and its proceedings were well covered in both the provincial and national press. The meeting of minds between Gladstone and Cobden at the end of 1848 that gave financial reform such a high profile was not repeated; nor did the LFRA provide a similar platform for any other leading financial reformer to that accorded to Cobden and his National Budget. For all its energy, there is considerable doubt over the extent to which the LFRA exercised any real influence, as opposed to simply laying out the facts for others to digest and utilise. In his detailed study, Calkins found no evidence that it had ever directly influenced the financial policy of the British government.⁶⁹⁸

Ironically, what the LFRA did succeed in doing was to close off Liverpool as a prospective centre of NPFRA agitation. The members had endorsed (or at least accepted) Gladstone's insistence that the association should confine itself to financial reform and the inevitable consequence of this was that this left no spare organisers and activists for a local branch of the NPFRA. In the spring of 1850 a meeting to set up a local branch was postponed.⁶⁹⁹ A second attempt was made in the autumn, with ambitious plans to install William Rathbone as its head, hold a public meeting and invite Hume, Cobden, Bright and Walmsley to a grand banquet.⁷⁰⁰ This initiative was never likely to get off the ground. Walmsley's somewhat intemperate dealings with Robertson Gladstone and his brother-in-law James Mulleneux in 1848 will not have helped his cause but there were other factors peculiar to Liverpool. The local merchants (including Walmsley) had come to favour a wide-ranging version of free trade but (unlike Walmsley) were less inclined

⁶⁹⁷ *Liverpool Journal*, 26 May 1855.

⁶⁹⁸ Calkins, 'Free Trade Lobby', p. 90.

⁶⁹⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 2 April 1850; Calkins, 'Free Trade Lobby', p. 97.

⁷⁰⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 October 1850.

to support agitation on other issues. For their part, the working classes were similar to those of Bolton, as described by Heywood. They had come through the financial crisis of 1847-8, which had affected Liverpool badly, and had no compelling reason to rebel against the paternalistic culture that had characterised Liverpool over the past century. The upshot was that Liverpool stayed apart from the debate on parliamentary reform and neither Walmsley nor any other prominent NPFRA figure was invited to attend a public meeting.

Gladstone and Cobden did have one further meeting of minds but not primarily on the subject of financial reform. In 1853 both turned their attention to the issue of world peace. In January Gladstone, nominally speaking on behalf of the LFRA but almost certainly representing his own views, wrote to the Peace Conference which was being held in Manchester and argued for the abolition of international treaties and British diplomatic missions.⁷⁰¹ (It is noteworthy that the entire Manchester political establishment attended, a turn-out that was never accorded to the NPFRA.) In mid-1853, as war with Russia loomed, Gladstone expanded his thinking and published it as an LFRA tract.⁷⁰² Cobden hailed the publication: "There is a capital tract published by the Liverpool Financial Reform Assocⁿ signed Robertson Gladstone going the whole hog for non intervention."⁷⁰³

Walmsley's later years

The outbreak of the Crimean war effectively brought an end to Walmsley's political career. With the NPFRA reduced to an irrelevance, he had lost his principal platform and any realistic opportunity to achieve his cherished objective of parliamentary reform. In 1852 he had given up his seat in Bolton when Parliament was dissolved and chosen to stand once more in Leicester.⁷⁰⁴ He had been returned with a comfortable majority at the general election on a typically wide-ranging and radical platform (see Appendix 1) and in high spirits had urged everyone to join the

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4 February 1853.

⁷⁰² LFRA, *Financial Reform Tracts, New Series no. V: Turkey, Russia, and English Interference* (Liverpool, 1853).

⁷⁰³ Letter of 8 Jul 1853 to Joseph Sturge, *Cobden Letters*, p. 507.

⁷⁰⁴ Letters of 4 Mar 1852 to Robert Heywood and John Biggs, Heywood Papers, ZHE/48/20-21. Unlike his colleague Richard Gardner, at the time of his unseating Walmsley does not seem to have offered to stand again in Leicester at some point in the future. However, his correspondence with his sponsors in Bolton and Leicester indicates the strength of his desire to regain his seat in Leicester.

NPFRA.⁷⁰⁵ With parliamentary reform in abeyance, Walmsley took a fateful step in 1854 when he agreed to present a petition from the Goldsmiths' Company requesting that the British Museum be opened to the public on Sundays after divine service.⁷⁰⁶

Walmsley had long courted disfavour with the Church of England with his championship of religious minorities, both Non-Conformist and Roman Catholic, but his becoming associated with a cause that could be construed as anti-Sabbatarian was politically dangerous and unlikely to go down well even with his Leicester constituents. That he did so was largely in homage to Hume, who had been closely identified with the cause but was in failing health.⁷⁰⁷ He went on to table motions in the House of Commons in both 1855 and 1856 in favour of opening the British Museum and National Gallery on Sunday afternoons.⁷⁰⁸ In 1856 he agreed to become president of the new National Sunday League and retained the office until 1869, when his own failing health required him to give up all public functions. It is clear that, when Walmsley assumed Hume's mantle, he did so in the knowledge that his Leicester seat was already in jeopardy owing to a falling out with some of the local manufacturers over the rents they charged framework knitters.⁷⁰⁹ He seems to have reached the conclusion that publically espousing Sunday opening could not further damage his prospects for re-election. In the event, after issuing a rather defensive (even defeatist) electoral address in the 1857 general election (see Appendix 1), he made a spirited defence of his seat, losing by just a few hundred votes. Had he not given his opponent a convenient excuse for standing against him, he might yet have prolonged his parliamentary career.

Walmsley's precise motives in committing almost his entire career as an MP to parliamentary reform are impossible to gauge. In the course of 1848 he had correctly divined that the time was ripe for concerted action and opportunistically he had pressed ahead, without letting the potential catastrophe of being unseated get

⁷⁰⁵ *Leicester Chronicle*, 10 July 1852. The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland holds an extensive and most evocative collection of election ephemera from the 1852 election (M15/131-193). It well illustrates the variety of calumnies that could be heaped on an independently-minded MP by a politically and religiously diverse constituency.

⁷⁰⁶ *Free Sunday Advocate and National Sunday League Record*, December 1871.

⁷⁰⁷ Hume died on 20 February 1855.

⁷⁰⁸ *Hansard*, 20 March 1855 and 21 February 1856.

⁷⁰⁹ H. M. Walmsley, *Life*, p. 315; *Free Sunday Advocate*, December 1871.

in his way. His application to the task was remarkable, given the reluctance of Cobden and others to go along with it, and there can be no doubt that having himself installed at the head of a new national organisation will have gratified his strong personal ambition. However, what made this acceptable was that, as Cobden had remarked, he was somebody who was actually willing to do something for the Radical cause at a time when so many others were not really committed to cooperation and joint activity. Walmsley certainly tried to achieve what he saw as a just outcome for middle and working classes alike. Whatever his failings, personal and strategic, no-one can fault his effort and commitment. Equally, he saw himself as a son of Liverpool, where he had made his fortune and where his experiences had shaped his political outlook. Although for the last three decades of his life he resided a long way from his roots, his final resting place is in Liverpool.⁷¹⁰ Amidst the usual glowing tributes to an old parliamentarian, one is especially significant. It appeared in the *Liverpool Mercury* under the signature S.G.R. (Samuel Greg Rathbone) and was thus penned by one of the Reformers who had chosen not to give their full support to Walmsley at the 1841 general election (see Chapter 5, ii).⁷¹¹ As others did, Rathbone affirmed Walmsley's "honest and unselfish character", his freedom from bigotry and his belief in constitutional amendment, not revolution. More perceptively, he saw Walmsley as an innovator but could not pretend that he was not also an extreme politician. Most tellingly, Rathbone conceded that it was "in the house of his friends" that Walmsley had met with his bitterest foes.

Perhaps the most fitting epitaph is to be found in the dedication of Edward Whitty's book on the 1852-53 session of Parliament:⁷¹²

A Book, written to illustrate the present defective system of the British Parliament, is properly dedicated to that Member of Parliament most distinctly identified with the question of "Reform," and this book is therefore dedicated to SIR JOSHUA WALMSLEY.

⁷¹⁰ An impressive polished stone vault in the graveyard of St Mary's, Edge Hill, contains the remains of Sir Joshua and his wife and several of their children.

⁷¹¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 22 November 1871.

⁷¹² E. M. Whitty, *History of the Session 1852-3: A Parliamentary Retrospect* (London, 1853).

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

The starting point for the present research was a conviction that historians had neglected distinctive events and trends in Liverpool in the decades following the 1832 Reform Act and thereby overlooked a potentially important source of influence on politics nationally. In particular, there were grounds for supposing that Liverpool's political and economic radicalism had helped to determine the direction of radical politics in the aftermath of the momentous domestic and international events of 1847-8. At an individual level, it was evident that Sir Joshua Walmsley had played a leading role both in Liverpool's reforming municipal administration of 1835-41 and subsequently between 1847 and 1857 in the parliamentary Reform Movement. However, it was less clear how much the radicalism of Walmsley and his Liverpool contemporaries in the 1830s and 1840s might have owed to any distinctive local tradition. Similarly, the precise circumstances surrounding the formation of the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association (NPFRA) in 1849 had received little attention from historians and there was reason to investigate the extent to which Walmsley's actions were, on the one hand, deliberate rather than merely opportunistic and, on the other, substantially influenced by his Liverpool background.

In the course of this research, key aspects of Liverpool's political development and municipal reform over three decades have been examined in detail. Whilst this has focused on the activities of Radicals and Reformers only, clear evidence has emerged of distinctive trends in both political and economic thought. This supports the earlier research by John Belchem and others, which identified a wider "exceptionalism" born of Liverpool's historical circumstances.⁷¹³ In turn, examination of the early years of the parliamentary Reform Movement shows the influence of Liverpool's economic radicalism and then of Walmsley's personal crusade for parliamentary reform, itself in large part the product of his experiences in Liverpool. It is now evident that Walmsley was far more instrumental in setting up and establishing the agenda of the NPFRA than has been recognised and, whilst

⁷¹³ Principally, J. Belchem, (ed.), *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour: Essays in Liverpool History, 1790-1940* (Liverpool, 1992); J. Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* (Liverpool, 2000); J. Belchem, (ed.), *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character & History* (Liverpool, 2006).

learning from his successes and set-backs in Liverpool, he had remained constant in his underlying beliefs on both reform and economic issues.

The Reform Movement

Although the findings on Liverpool's political development in the first half of the nineteenth century serve to improve our understanding of an important and much neglected period in the borough's history, the prime significance of this research lies in what it reveals about the influence of Liverpool, as a major provincial centre, on politics at the national level in 1848-9. An important element of the methodology has been to examine not just the careers of prominent individuals but also the organisation and activities of political associations. This approach has revealed a more complex political landscape than the more usual, narrow focus on key individuals would have done and shed considerable light on the background to public pronouncements.

The Liverpool Financial Reform Association (LFRA) emerged in 1848 and its importance has been recognised by W. N. Calkins and Geoffrey Searle.⁷¹⁴ However, the LFRA was also the heir to a long tradition of economic radicalism derived from Liverpool's port status. From the end of the Napoleonic wars, Liverpool's merchants repeatedly agitated for the reduction of trade restrictions on a broad front. During the life of the Anti-Corn Law League, Liverpool offered varying degrees of support but was always more concerned with economic reform of much wider scope: the very name of the Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association (LAMA), whose existence has largely been ignored, proclaims its difference in outlook from Manchester. When Cobden pursued his short-lived flirtation with the LFRA in late 1848 and issued his "National Budget", he may be seen as espousing a distinctive brand of economic and fiscal reform that had developed gradually in Liverpool over three decades. Ironically, the most vocal opposition to this from within the Reform Movement came from none other than Walmsley and, although personal animosities with Robertson Gladstone may have played a small part, his disagreement with the LFRA centred not on the content of its policies but on its promotion of financial reform to the exclusion of parliamentary reform. Indeed, with his early commitment to the Anti-Corn Law League and his decision to fight the 1841 parliamentary election on an

⁷¹⁴ W. N. Calkins, 'A Victorian Free Trade Lobby', *Economic History Review*, 13.1, 1960, pp. 90-104; G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial Politics in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 57-63.

advanced free trade platform, Walmsley more than anyone in Liverpool had championed the economic agenda.

A more lasting influence on the direction of the Reform Movement was Walmsley's NPFRA. It advocated a wide range of reforms but its focus was largely on parliamentary reform, as being the only path that would lead to other reforms. Although key parts of its relatively brief active existence have been ably covered by Nicholas Edsall, the extent of Walmsley's involvement with its creation, almost in defiance of Cobden's wishes, and the degree of control he exercised over it have not previously been detailed.⁷¹⁵ Again, Liverpool's influence is readily evident but not in the same way as with the LFRA. What Walmsley instituted with the NPFRA was an analogue of his Tradesmen's Reform Association in Liverpool – a well-organised political movement that was under the control of trusted henchmen from Liverpool and which sought to widen the base of its support by embracing classes largely excluded from the political process. That he chose to nail his colours to parliamentary reform in 1848 when he had stood in both the 1841 and 1847 general elections as a free trader may plausibly be attributed to two main factors – one opportunistic and one arguably more considered. The resurgence of Chartism in 1848 against a backdrop of increasing unrest in Europe served as both a warning of what might result if some element of parliamentary reform were not granted and an unparalleled opportunity to present a more acceptable alternative. At the same time, despite his longstanding friendship with Cobden and personal loyalty, it seems likely that Walmsley had finally concluded that parliamentary reform was the key to all else, a lesson he had doubtless pondered since his ill-fated Liverpool election campaign in 1841.

That Liverpool should be seen to have exerted an influence on national politics is not surprising in view of its importance to the national economy but documented instances of provincial centres doing so are not common. This is symptomatic of the relative dearth of historiography straddling the national-provincial divide. Although histories of provincial towns are increasingly numerous, they tend not to seek out their unique contributions to national events or follow the activities of their famous sons in the metropolis and explore the influences they took with them. Equally, one has only to look at the amazingly diverse range of provincial notables with whom Cobden corresponded to realise that hidden influences abounded. This suggests

⁷¹⁵ N. C. Edsall, 'A Failed National Movement: the Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association, 1848-1854', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 49 (1976), pp. 108–31.

that there is considerable scope for applying a methodology similar to that used in the present research to seek out other provincial influences on national politics.

The legacy of the NPFRA has been more lasting than has been recognised. Although it failed in its primary goal of achieving immediate parliamentary reform, it represented a significant step along the road to the 1867 Reform Act. As recognised by Frances Gillespie and others, the NPFRA was an early and rare instance of close cooperation between elements of the middle and working classes.⁷¹⁶ The evidence presented here suggests that this cooperation was much deeper than it is usually portrayed. The fact that leading Chartists like O'Connor and Reynolds were for a time willing to support the NPFRA and appear on its platforms is a testament to Walmsley's vision and to political inclusiveness of a type that was lacking in many of his fellow Radical MPs. This aspect in particular of the NPFRA's approach merits greater attention in future from historians of both the Reform Movement and Chartism.

The other major achievements for which the NPFRA deserves greater recognition relate to the establishment of the most successful of the early building societies and the abolition of newspaper stamp duty. The National Freehold Land Society was set up as an offshoot of the NPFRA in 1849 for a specific political purpose – the creation of 40s franchises in county constituencies. In the event, the impact on electoral politics was minimal and the 1867 Reform Act removed its original purpose. However, the wider impact of this successful and well-run building society on the future direction of financial institutions was substantial. The abolition of newspaper stamp duty was equally influential on the development of cheap, mass circulation newspapers. This measure was an early part of the NPFRA's manifesto and it is no surprise that Walmsley, himself a newspaper proprietor, should have played a pivotal role in the work of the Select Committee that recommended abolition in 1851.

Liverpool

The detailed study of Liverpool's Reformers in the decades after the Napoleonic wars has provided a context for the emergence of organisations that were influential at the national level, such as the LFRA and the NPFRA. It has also improved our understanding of the actions of Radical MPs like Walmsley, who commenced their

⁷¹⁶ F. E. Gillespie, *The Political History of the English Working Classes, 1850-1867* (Chicago, 1923), p. 77.

political careers in Liverpool. Whilst it has become apparent that there would be merit in tracing aspects of Liverpool's radicalism (and "exceptionalism") back yet further to the last decades of the eighteenth century, the present research has served its purpose in showing a clear and unbroken continuity between the strands of radical thought and their advocates in the early nineteenth century and the ideas and personalities that achieved prominence in the wake of the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. Many of the issues raised were not unique to Liverpool and reflected causes of discontent that affected much of the UK. However, Liverpool's response and the importance attached to individual issues varied in accordance with local circumstances, some of which were unique to Liverpool.

As John Belchem and Kevin Moore have argued, the paternalism of Liverpool's commerce and industries and its status as a parliamentary borough, long free from aristocratic control, militated against extreme agitation on issues as diverse as parliamentary reform and economic distress.⁷¹⁷ However, it is now clear that the breadth of Liverpool's trading activities engendered opposition to trade restrictions that extended much further than the Corn Laws. Free trade was a constant demand, though it has to be noted that in some economic sectors local circumstances also led to entrenched protectionist views. An unusual feature of Liverpool's politics was that on economic issues they sometimes transcended the usual Tory-Whig divide: in the two decades when Liverpool was represented in Parliament by Canning and Huskisson there was a growing consensus on trade issues, and this brand of liberal Toryism was subsequently absorbed into the thinking of the Reformers in the 1830s. Thus the staunchly reformist newspaper *The Albion* could carry a quotation from Canning on its masthead.

Those leading the campaign for reform were almost exclusively prosperous members of the middle classes, typically merchants and educated professionals. However, the evidence of attendance at numerous large-scale public meetings indicates that the measures being demanded by the speakers attracted at the very least the interest of large numbers of the working classes and quite likely their support. Taken as a whole, Liverpool's radicalism was not mealy-mouthed but it was very different in character from that pursued by popular radicals such as Henry Hunt and hence less threatening to the authorities.

⁷¹⁷ Belchem, *Merseypride*, pp.155-76; K. Moore, 'Liverpool in the 'Heroic Age' of Popular Radicalism', *THSLC*, 138 (1989), pp. 137-57.

An unusually detailed analysis of the election addresses of the candidates at Liverpool's first municipal election in 1835 has identified the principal motivations of individual Reformers and provided a benchmark against which to reassess their performance in office between 1835 and 1841. Chief amongst their objectives were an end to corruption, the imposition of financial restraint and the promotion of civil and religious liberty, a broad concept that included not just religious freedom but also access to education for Non-Conformists and Roman Catholics.

The Reformers swiftly overhauled Liverpool's administrative machinery and, in so doing, they also reduced the cost of local government. The restructuring of policing soon followed, in large part due to the energetic actions of the political newcomer Walmsley. The early history of Liverpool's police has previously been given scant attention, which belies its importance as one of the first (and most effective) examples of the New Police. In these and other actions the Reformers consistently showed a willingness to investigate issues from first principles, assess costs and benefits and then take immediate decisive action. Much of what they implemented stood the test of time and remained unchallenged when political fortunes changed.

On social issues the Reformers were less successful. A bold (but, arguably, misjudged) attempt to open the Corporation Schools to members of all denominations provoked a furious reaction from local Tories and Church of England ministers and helped fuel the growth of sectarianism. The Reformers eventually accepted the need for improvements in the housing conditions of the poor and public health but it is argued that their ability to do so was severely limited by the division of responsibilities between the Town Council and the Parish.

It was obvious to all - well before the 1841 municipal election - that the Reformers were losing support and were about to lose office. Although the education issue was a long-running irritant and other specific factors can be advanced, the evidence suggests that a more fundamental change of mood was taking place in the Liverpool electorate. Liverpool had long been a Tory town but can be seen as having rebelled against local corruption in 1835. Once a measure of reform had been achieved, the appetite for further reforms gradually diminished and the electorate reverted to type. This process was assisted by the emergence of a new brand of local Toryism that openly exploited sectarian fears and thereby ensured its own political supremacy for decades to come.

Ousted from office, many leading Reformers concentrated their attention on the Liverpool Anti-Monopoly Association. This organisation was important, not just

because it continued to promote Liverpool's distinctive line on free trade and, in effect, was later reinvented as the LFRA but also because in its early days it commissioned highly original statistical research into the extent of poverty in one of Liverpool's districts. Such research echoed the earlier groundbreaking studies into the state of crime by Walmsley.

The issues addressed in this thesis have been selected with a view to establishing a clear perspective on the development of radicalism in Liverpool and permitting a better understanding of Liverpool's influence on national politics in the mid-nineteenth century. Taken collectively, they also fill some (but by no means all) of the many gaps in Liverpool historiography between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the 1867 Reform Act. There remains, however, need of a general history of Liverpool in this period based on modern scholarship. Such a work might follow the present research in according greater prominence to Liverpool's Reformers but, equally, it must address the parallel development of distinctive local forms of Toryism, first after the arrival of Canning in 1812 and then in the period of reconstruction after the 1832 Reform Act.

Sir Joshua Walmsley

Throughout the present narrative Walmsley has featured prominently and the evidence clearly shows that he was instrumental in shaping events in both Liverpool and London to a far greater extent than has previously been recognised (or indeed was fully evident at the start of this research). Both his activities and achievements have deserved greater attention than he has been given by successive generations of historians. Even the biography written by his son Hugh Mulleneux Walmsley does not do him full justice.⁷¹⁸ This neglect not only applies to Walmsley's political activities but also extends to his pioneering business enterprises, notably those in partnership with George Stephenson. It has not been the intention to present a full and rounded portrayal of Walmsley's life, rather to highlight those activities directly relevant to the development of radicalism in Liverpool and subsequently in London. However, Walmsley's multifaceted career as a leading politician and industrialist of the early Victorian era would certainly merit a full-length biographical study.

Walmsley's arrival on the political scene in Liverpool is shown to have postdated his success as a corn broker and industrialist. He had not been part of Liverpool's radical tradition (nor closely connected to its leading figures) and seems to have espoused the politics of reform via the liberal Toryism of Canning and Huskisson.

⁷¹⁸ H. M. Walmsley, *The Life of Sir Joshua Walmsley* (London, 1879).

Once he was elected to the Town Council in 1835 as a Reformer, he showed himself the stereotypical “man in a hurry”, possessed of boundless energy and barely disguised ambition. Within the year he had taken the lead in restructuring policing and presumed to make an unsolicited keynote speech in council extolling the Reformers’ achievements. Soon after, he created the Tradesmen’s Reform Association, which became his powerbase and underpinned his progress towards becoming mayor in 1839 and a parliamentary candidate in 1841. In the space of just a few years Walmsley had pushed the Reformers in an increasingly radical direction but at the expense of losing the support of longstanding and influential figures like William Rathbone. This was a major factor in his electoral defeat in 1841 and subsequent departure from Liverpool.

Although his political career in Liverpool ended in electoral failure, Walmsley’s legacy was considerable. He had played an important role in reforming municipal administration and policing and pioneered a very modern-looking approach to the council’s business based on statistics and value for money. On a personal level, he had learned the importance of having a well-organised political organisation as his powerbase and a supportive press to spread his message. Equally, he had twice seen that Radical candidates standing on a free trade platform could not secure electoral victory even in Liverpool.

When Walmsley returned to active politics in 1847 as MP for Leicester, he did so as a proprietor of the *Daily News* and aware that he still had the support of the influential Liverpool press. His testy exchanges with the LFRA in 1848 indicate that he was already seized of the importance of pursuing parliamentary reform. Close examination of the circumstances leading up to the foundation of the NPFRA in 1849 show that he had lost none of his ambition or appetite for decisive action. Despite Cobden’s lack of enthusiasm and the distraction of standing at the Bolton by-election, Walmsley – by dint of skilful manipulation – established an important campaigning organisation in the NPFRA and also secured for himself a powerbase that emulated the TRA of his Liverpool days. More could have been achieved if Walmsley had also succeeded in persuading fellow Radical MPs to offer greater assistance. Perhaps his greatest achievement, which well illustrates his ability as a conciliator and culture-broker, was in attracting the support of major Chartist figures for the NPFRA. Had this support been maintained over a longer period, Walmsley might well have achieved the real prominence he had long sought.

In the final evaluation, Walmsley was not a politician of the first rank. However, his achievements have been neglected and provide an important reminder to historians that the study of politicians who did not achieve consummate success can nevertheless be a fruitful endeavour and shed light on momentous issues.

APPENDIX 1

SIR JOSHUA WALMSLEY'S ELECTION ADDRESSES, 1835-1857

In the main narrative we have traced thematically the history of radicalism in Liverpool and its influence on politics at the national level. The protagonist and connecting link over several decades was seen to be Joshua Walmsley. In this appendix, Walmsley's election addresses, in both municipal and parliamentary elections, are summarised.⁷¹⁹ They provide a convenient snapshot of his thinking at regular intervals and show the development and relative prominence of key radical issues. (Appendix 2 examines Walmsley as an individual and fills a historiographical gap by providing a concise biography.)

1835: Liverpool municipal election

On 1 December 1835 Joshua Walmsley acknowledged his selection by the Reformers of Castle Street Ward as a candidate for the new Town Council by issuing his first election address to the local burgesses.⁷²⁰ As has been set out in Chapter 3, this was the beginning of a new political process with a new electorate and no established ground-rules. His audience comprised rate-payers only and, since Castle Street Ward was dominated by merchants and independent tradesmen, it was a doubly refined electorate. Walmsley's address was longer than most and, in accordance with the line adopted by most of his Reformer colleagues, he eschewed the traditional, bland profession of qualification for public office in favour of a more substantial statement. Less typically, in Walmsley's case this statement, although highlighting municipal issues after the fashion of a modern political manifesto, was essentially a bold statement of his personal principles and one that set him apart not only from his Tory opponents but also from most members of the Established Church to which he belonged throughout his life.

Walmsley advocated the "cause of Civil and Religious Liberty, believing that its extension is not only consistent with pure Christianity, but highly essential to the well-being of society". He cited the new privilege of electing municipal officers as the beneficial outcome of Parliament steadily adhering to this cause. Implicitly approving the recent removal of church patronage from the Corporation whilst

⁷¹⁹ Such addresses – in the form of a letter – were published in most of the local newspapers, irrespective of party affiliation, and were often issued also as handbills.

⁷²⁰ *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 December 1835.

affirming his own position as a “zealous Churchman”, Walmsley advanced the rather modern proposition that “the general interests of mankind are most likely to be advanced by that man (whatever form his worship may assume) whose conduct in social life has shown him to be guided by the rule of doing unto others as he would be done unto”.

Where this outspoken approach came from is easier to divine than how or why. Walmsley had long attended the leading Evangelical church in Liverpool, whose members had an outstanding record of charitable activity but not of religious tolerance, but it was clearly family and personal relationships that shaped his thinking.⁷²¹ Foremost amongst the likely influences was his sister Sarah, who at some point converted to Roman Catholicism. Then there was his long-term partner in the corn trade, George Booth, who hailed from a prominent Lancastrian family of Unitarians. No doubt this close business acquaintanceship introduced Walmsley to other Unitarians, who – unlike Booth – were politically active. Finally, business and family influences were combined in the person of Charles Binns. Binns was from the notable Lancastrian Quaker family and initially worked for George Stephenson before going on to manage their joint enterprise at Clay Cross and marry Walmsley’s eldest daughter.

Individual municipal issues were briefly enumerated: “the dispensation of equal privileges, the reduction of our local burdens, the extension of the inestimable benefits of education, and the employment of the Funds of this great and wealthy Corporation in that way which may best conduce to the improvement of the Town, and the general good”. Economical financial management, free of improper expenditure, was the war-cry of the Reformers and in later years was applied to the national economy by Liverpool’s financial reformers. Hidden in Walmsley’s words is a touch of altruism. As a freeman, he enjoyed the privileges and tax breaks accorded to that class (but in practice of benefit to a select few) that so enraged many of his fellow Reformers.

Interestingly, there is no mention of education as an aspect of civil and religious liberty or as a major issue in its own right. Yet this was to become the most contentious issue – with Walmsley to the forefront – during the whole six years the Reformers were in power.

⁷²¹ Walmsley’s church was St Andrew’s in Renshaw Street (long since demolished), whose minister the Revd. John Jones numbered many leading Tories in his congregation.

Walmsley's election pitch clearly hit the right note. He was returned top of the poll in Castle Street Ward.

1838: Liverpool municipal election

By 1838, when Walmsley came up for re-election to the Town Council, the dynamics of municipal politics had moved on and in directions that no one could have predicted. Walmsley himself, having come from nowhere, had become one of the most prominent Reformers and was about to make his first, unsuccessful attempt to attain the office of mayor. Much that was genuinely beneficial had been achieved by the Reformers but a revival in Tory fortunes was well under way. However, such was Walmsley's standing in Castle Street Ward that no-one came forward to contest the election and we are thus deprived of any election address by him.

On the basis of his next address in 1841, there is no reason to doubt that he would have stuck to his principles and stressed the importance of both civil liberty and education. In the event, he had merely to issue a short message thanking the electors for their continued confidence and offering his past conduct as a pledge for the faithful discharge of his duties in the future.⁷²² Predictably, there was no suggestion of any change of course or softening of his position.

1841: Liverpool parliamentary election

The general election in July 1841 was an event of major political significance both nationally and in Liverpool. As set out in Chapter 5, the gradual revival of Tory fortunes and the Corn Laws would both have a major bearing on the campaign but, as ever, Liverpool's particular circumstances meant that the election would be fought over a locally mediated version of the issues. In framing his election address Walmsley had to take account of the sound defeat in 1837 of two established Radicals standing on a platform that focused on the Corn Laws. Likewise he could not ignore the long-running, vehement opposition of the Tories and most ministers of the Established Church to the Reformers' educational policy.

Undeterred by history and the weakening position of the Reformers, Walmsley boldly faced up to the challenge. His election address of 10 June 1841 provided an explicit statement of his views on free trade and reaffirmed his personal

⁷²² *Liverpool Mercury*, 2 November 1838.

principles.⁷²³ The Tory press often assailed him for ambition and lack of modesty but it is noteworthy that in this in and all future election addresses he signed his name as simply “Joshua Walmsley”, omitting the title he had acquired in 1840.

The first cause to which Walmsley pledged his support was free trade, which had as its objects the “opening to the capitalist, for the exercise of his skill and enterprise, the markets of the world, and securing to the industrious masses the means of improving their physical and social condition”. With even leading Reformers discomfited by Cobden’s “total and immediate” mantra on repeal of the Corn Laws and with little agitation coming from Liverpool’s working classes, who had not shared the dire circumstances of the mill towns, Walmsley astutely chose to side-step the narrow Corn Laws debate and concentrate on the broader free trade issue. This had long been dear to the hearts of most of Liverpool’s merchants, irrespective of political affiliation, and potentially offered the prospect of some cross-party support for Walmsley, who tried to portray free trade as transcending party distinctions. In practice such thoughts were illusory, simply because Walmsley was too well known as an advanced Radical and the rest of his platform was too radical for even the most moderate Tory.

True to his actions as a councillor, Walmsley next highlighted the need for a “comprehensive and impartial system of NATIONAL EDUCATION” and advocated the “adoption of the best means of placing instruction within the reach of all”.⁷²⁴ Mindful of the furore created by the Reformers’ blunt approach of throwing the Corporation’s two elementary schools open to all denominations, he carefully avoided any mention of religion but his track-record was well known. He went on to set out what would for many years be one of his key tenets – the link between education and the extension of the franchise: “I hold that enfranchisement should steadily keep pace with increasing intelligence.” This linkage set Walmsley apart from the Chartists and their demand for universal male suffrage but it still represented a radical (and highly provocative) position, compounding the existing local controversy over education with the suggestion that its objects also included major parliamentary reform.

⁷²³ *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 June 1841.

⁷²⁴ In his address Walmsley highlighted only FREE TRADE and NATIONAL EDUCATION with block capitals.

For good measure, whilst re-affirming his attachment to the Church of England, Walmsley repeated his call for the “removal of all grounds of just complaint on the part of the Dissenter” but this was no longer the issue it had been a few years earlier. He also made passing reference to “lightening the burden of taxation”, “rendering justice accessible to all” and “enforcing a rigid system of retrenchment and economy in every department of the Government” but these were clearly viewed as minor issues when compared to free trade and education. Retrenchment had been voiced at the national level by Hume and others for decades: it had been a key part of the Reformers’ platform in the 1835 municipal election and one which they had subsequently addressed with steadfast determination. It remained a potent issue in Liverpool and resurfaced some years later, alongside free trade, in the manifesto of the LFRA.

Walmsley probably did as much as he could in what with hindsight was probably always a lost cause. His decision to quit Liverpool after a clear-cut defeat in his attempt to break into national politics is further evidence that he too now shared the view that Liverpool was unlikely ever to elect another Radical to Parliament.

1847: Leicester parliamentary election

On his return to active politics at Leicester in 1847, Walmsley was a candidate of greater substance standing in a constituency more attuned to his political message. Much had changed in the outside world (see Chapter 6) and he himself was no longer just a municipal politician with a somewhat fortuitous knighthood: he had played a central role in the railways boom and become a founder-proprietor of the *Daily News*. Locally, as part-owner of the Snibston Colliery just outside Leicester and projector of the Leicester and Swannington Railway, he was also a major employer and could boast of providing cheap coal to the town’s workers. As a constituency, the borough of Leicester was superficially similar to the northern mill-towns, with a high concentration of manufacturing and a record of Chartist agitation. In framing his electoral address, which was published on 21 July 1847, the challenge faced by Walmsley (and his equally radical colleague) was not, as it had been in Liverpool, to get a cautious, predominantly Tory-leaning electorate behind a radical agenda but rather, in the absence of any serious Tory threat, to avoid moving too far in the direction of Chartism and thereby both stepping outside his

own comfort zone and driving potential supporters in the direction of the Tories.⁷²⁵ At the same time, he could not afford to show too much reserve for fear of inviting intervention by a Chartist candidate.

The electoral address that emerged was the longest that Walmsley issued and, perhaps surprisingly, had much more in common with that for Liverpool in 1841 than his subsequent Bolton address of 1849. Once again the headline issue was free trade and the wording was almost the same. However, in the preamble of his address, Walmsley had slipped in some highly significant words. Recent political changes were to be seen as only the commencement of a policy aiming at the permanent advancement of the industrial classes and this “demands the firm and active support of the Constituencies not less than the zeal and perseverance of their Representatives”. This was not an endorsement of the direct action espoused by the Chartists but it hinted at something extra-parliamentary and suggests that, for Walmsley, the dissolution of the ACLL was not the end of the story.

This was followed by a paragraph on the importance of monetary stability and a shorter statement on the desirability of direct taxation. The next issues enumerated were education and religious liberty. Only then does Walmsley mention the franchise, using virtually the identical words from 1841 and once again linking further enfranchisement to “increasing intelligence”. The final paragraphs deal with various legal and administrative issues: the abrogation of “remnants of feudalism”, such as the Game Laws, legal administration, juvenile delinquency, the Poor Laws and municipal administration.⁷²⁶

There is something curious about the evident prioritisation of issues. By the spring of 1848 Walmsley was proclaiming the overriding precedence of parliamentary reform over free trade, and free trade as an issue had temporarily subsided following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. It is unlikely that this change of direction developed overnight. There are two possible explanations, which are not mutually exclusive. Walmsley was probably moving towards concentrating his attention on parliamentary reform but may have stuck with his former platform to keep in step with Cobden, who was to persist with free trade as the lead issue for

⁷²⁵ *Leicester Chronicle*, 24 July 1847. Quaintly, the address was penned in Liverpool, where Walmsley still had duties to discharge as a Justice of the Peace.

⁷²⁶ Walmsley was uniquely qualified to opine on the Game Laws, having received a practical education from his schoolmaster in the ways of poaching (see Appendix 2) and gone on to become tenant of the prime game estate of Ranton Abbey.

some time to come. Equally, his thinking may not have firmed up until after the election, when he would have been much more exposed to the thinking of Hume, who had long been amongst the best known advocates of parliamentary reform. On the hustings he was obliged to concede that he could not support universal suffrage. In any event, Walmsley and Leicester were well matched and he was elected with a comfortable majority over the sole Tory candidate.

1849: Bolton parliamentary by-election

Walmsley's nascent parliamentary career was rudely interrupted in 1848 when he was unseated on petition (see Chapter 6). He was fortunate to be adopted within the year as a candidate at the Bolton by-election. Bolton was another manufacturing borough with a strong radical tradition but also with a local Conservative as one of the sitting MPs. Walmsley had no connection with Bolton and his adoption was probably down to his personal standing as a businessman, the similarity of his radical politics to those of the outgoing MP, (Sir) John Bowring, and his record of support for Non-Conformists (the leading local power-broker being the Unitarian Robert Heywood). However, the tactical approach Walmsley had judged appropriate for Leicester in 1847 would clearly not be relevant for an election in 1849 in the wake of revolution in Europe, the 1847-8 financial crisis and the Chartist agitation of 1848. On 20 December 1848 Walmsley issued a totally new election address that encapsulated the thinking he would pursue for the rest of his parliamentary career.⁷²⁷

Free trade *per se* was totally excluded from the electoral address: all that survived from previous addresses was a brief mention of the "removal of every unnecessary restriction on the commerce and industry of the country". Instead, the agenda was parliamentary reform (although the actual word "reform" nowhere appeared):

I consider a House of Commons faithfully representing the great majority of the People is indispensable, and to render such House of Commons the just reflex of the public mind it is necessary that every male resident of full age, in the occupation of premises rated to the relief of the poor, should be entitled to a vote at each parliamentary election; that such vote should be taken by Ballot; that the duration of Parliament should be limited to Three Years; and that a more equal system of electoral districts, based on population and property, should be established throughout the kingdom.

⁷²⁷ *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 23 December 1848.

By way of reassurance, Walmsley added that he wished to see stability given to the throne and would seek to attain his objects “by loyal, peaceful, and constitutional means, by progressive rather than impulsive changes”. On most counts, Walmsley was putting clear water between himself and the Chartists (and his position foreshadowed that of the NPFRA that he would soon set up). This was an appeal to the middle classes and his proposed measures would not directly lead to a House of Commons “faithfully representing the great majority of the People”. He admitted as much when he declared his willingness “to become one of those organs by which the opinions of the middle classes of this country may be made known in the councils of the nation”.

On a more radical note, Walmsley repudiated the notion of “finality” with regard to change: whilst he was persuaded that his measures would give an “enduring tone to the institutions”, he envisaged that they would result in the “removal of abuses, the reduction and equalization of taxation, the extension of education, the abandonment of class legislation, and the removal of every unnecessary restriction on the commerce and industry of the country”. As he had argued to the LFRA and his Radical colleagues earlier in 1848 (see Chapter 6), parliamentary reform was the means by which free trade and all other desirable measures could be achieved and, as such, should take precedence over them in public campaigning.

Once more Walmsley judged his electorate well and was elected with a modest majority over his Tory opponent in what may be considered a marginal seat.

1852: Leicester parliamentary election

Professing a “previous ... and paramount claim” by the electors of Leicester, Walmsley abandoned Bolton in 1852 at the end of the parliamentary term and stood once more in his former seat.⁷²⁸ It does not appear that there was any falling out with his supporters in Bolton but rather a long-standing affinity to Leicester combined with a sense of unfinished business and of personal honour needing to be restored. (He may also have rated his chances of success higher in Leicester than in Bolton!) The election was symptomatic of the times, with Walmsley (and an equally radical colleague) opposed by more moderate Whigs/Liberals. The coalition of interests supporting Walmsley included an unlikely mix of Non-Conformists, Roman Catholics and Chartists. His election address, issued on 29 May 1852, was

⁷²⁸ Letter of 4 March 1852, *Daily News*, 6 March 1852.

not especially long but it was a succinct and unusually specific enumeration of his views, intended to correct the various “calumnious accusations” made against him.⁷²⁹ That said, on some issues he did not commit himself in print to quite the extent that he might.

Nationally, the issue of the moment was free trade (or, rather, whether what was happening in practice could be publically avowed and espoused); in Leicester, parliamentary reform was to the fore and Walmsley was pre-eminently qualified as president of the NPFRA, then at the peak of its activity. Over time his position had shifted significantly, such that there was little evident difference between his latest version of a property-based qualification, which included both ratepayers and tenants, and the universal suffrage of the People’s Charter. The actual wording of his electoral address seems somewhat ambiguous: “that the Electoral Right shall be co-extensive with the payment of taxes and a settled residence”. However, friend and foe alike interpreted Walmsley’s various pronouncements as meaning near-universal male suffrage. As before, Walmsley also advocated the secret ballot, triennial parliaments and equalisation of electoral districts.

On free trade, Walmsley declared himself opposed to taxes on raw materials for manufacturing or on food and to any restrictions on navigation (though the repeal of both the Corn Laws and the Navigation Acts in the previous decade had removed the most obvious causes of dissatisfaction). As before, he also advocated direct taxation and financial stringency in public expenditure.

Walmsley’s traditional espousal of religious liberty and equal treatment for all will have had greater resonance than for some years. For an avowed member of the Established Church, his unusually sympathetic line on Roman Catholicism, as evidenced by his record in the recent controversies concerning the Maynooth Grant and “Papal Aggression”, risked alienating key elements of his support. On the other hand, his championing of civil rights had achieved tangible results locally in the first appointments in Leicestershire of JPs from the ranks of the Non-Conformists. What is not clear is whether Walmsley was also publicly advocating the altogether more controversial proposition of disestablishment of the Established Church, which one of his supporters claimed he favoured. It was a natural consequence of his thinking on religious liberty and he came close to admitting it: “I hold that the Church is not benefitted by State connexion”. His pronouncement on education was more explicit.

⁷²⁹ *To the Electors of Leicester*, 29 May 1852, Broadsheets etc., M15/145.

In stating his opposition to “the inoculation by other than purely voluntary means of any particular religious creed” he was reaffirming at the national level the object of his long battle in Liverpool.

The outcome of the election was a triumph for Walmsley and his fellow Radical Richard Gardner, who defeated their Liberal opponents by a substantial margin. If one considers the content of his platform, especially on religious issues, and the degree of dissension within the broad Liberal caucus, this is even more remarkable.

1857: Leicester parliamentary election

The general election of 1857 proved an unpropitious time for the Radicals. The issue of parliamentary reform had been overtaken by the Crimean War and nationalist fervour made few concessions to those with dissenting views. In Leicester, Walmsley was also beset with local difficulties. His longstanding efforts on behalf of the framework knitters had gone beyond what was acceptable to the manufacturers, who had previously supported him. Moreover, as had happened in Liverpool in 1841, Walmsley’s advocacy of a contentious measure that offended many sincere church-goers (in this case the opening of museums on Sundays) also provided a convenient pretext for others, notably the more moderate Liberals, to assail him. Walmsley and his fellow Radical, a dominant local manufacturer, found themselves (or, more precisely, Walmsley) opposed by another local manufacturer, whose views were not that different except on the question of Sunday opening. Walmsley was aware when he assumed the mantle of his close friend Hume and accepted the presidency of the National Sunday League in 1856 that his parliamentary days were numbered and that his defeat would be attributed to his anti-Sabbatarian views.⁷³⁰

Walmsley’s electoral address, issued on 12 March 1857, was markedly different from its predecessors.⁷³¹ It lacks the usual forthright statement of his views and aspirations and conveys strongly the impression of diffidence and defensiveness. Walmsley claimed that he had contemplated not standing but had changed his mind since the “social question” that was at issue had no chance of making any progress in Parliament. He added that he was fully alive to his own shortcomings but believed he had never been found deficient in his attention to the electors’ interests in

⁷³⁰ *Free Sunday Advocate*, December 1871.

⁷³¹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 21 March 1857.

pursuing the “principles of Civil, Political, and Religious Equality”. He concluded by promising that he would “specially labor to secure the first object of my Political Life – a just system of National Representation”.

At the subsequent public meeting of supporters of the two sitting Radicals, Walmsley came out fighting and was loyally defended by his colleague.⁷³² He argued the importance of opening cultural establishments on Sundays for the working classes and went further, expressing the hope that public opinion, as expressed at the forthcoming election, would induce the government to extend the franchise and cease its opposition to the abolition of Church Rates. He declared that “he was utterly opposed to the State Church; and his opinion was that they would all be much better without it, and the Church would be much better without it too.” Walmsley seems to have carried the meeting with a strong performance and retained the support of those who had signed his requisition. However, on election-day, with 1,459 votes, he fell just short of his Radical colleague and the other local candidate (1,653 and 1,628 respectively).

Addendum

Walmsley’s political campaigns illustrate many of the vicissitudes afflicting parliamentary candidates in the nineteenth century. However, his election addresses show that he continually strove to lead opinion and over an extended period he consistently maintained an advanced (and correspondingly exposed) position on both religious liberty and the twin radical causes of free trade and parliamentary reform. The latter eventually assumed precedence as the key enabling measure for all other reform and gradually became more radical in tone (almost certainly under the influence of the Chartists).

In Liverpool in 1841 Walmsley’s views on free trade, on top of his status as a *parvenu*, were too much for the reformist establishment and his long-running pursuit of educational reform as an extension of religious liberty provided his Tory opponents with a potent weapon against him. Ultimately, a similar fate befell him in Leicester in 1857 as he gave freer rein to his controversial views on religious issues. In between there were three successful elections where his principled advocacy of advanced reform clearly responded to the wishes of the new middle classes in manufacturing boroughs.

⁷³² *Leicester Chronicle*, 21 March 1857.

APPENDIX 2

A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF SIR JOSHUA WALMSLEY, 1794-1871

It has not been the intention of this thesis to construct a detailed biography of Walmsley but rather to trace the history of radicalism in Liverpool and its influence further afield. However, Walmsley's role has been shown to be pivotal and as a prominent nineteenth century Radical he merits a short biography drawn from original sources. Previous summary accounts of his life⁷³³ have suffered from two serious drawbacks – excessive (but unavoidable) dependence on the biography written by his son Hugh Mulleneux and the scarcity of other, readily accessible information about him.⁷³⁴

Joshua Walmsley's career was typical of a self-made businessman with wider aspirations in the nineteenth century. From modest origins and without benefit of inherited capital, he built up a successful business as a merchant and broker in the corn trade and then, as an entrepreneur willing to take risks, he invested heavily in emerging industries. Having achieved financial competency while still in his thirties, he studiously developed a public profile and entered municipal politics in the post-1832 Reform Act era, becoming mayor of Liverpool and receiving a knighthood. His first attempt to enter the House of Commons failed but he subsequently served as an MP over two parliaments and carved out a prominent role within the Reform Movement. Throughout his public career he used his accumulated great wealth to support a vast number of political and social causes.

Family background

Walmsley was born in Liverpool on 29 September 1794 but there is no known record of his baptism. He readily admitted his humble origins but he and his biographer son carefully concealed the truth about his dysfunctional family. His father, John Walmsley, was a freeman and a well-known local marble-mason and builder, who owned a substantial portfolio of houses, a large plot of land in Toxteth Park with reserves of stone and, probably, a marble quarry in Kilkenny. However, in

⁷³³ J. L. Sturgis, 'Walmsley, Sir Joshua (1794–1871)', in J. O. Baylen and N. J. Gossman, (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, Vol. 2 (Brighton, 1984), pp. 531-4; C. W. Sutton, 'Walmsley, Sir Joshua (1794–1871)', rev. M. Lee, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷³⁴ See general discussion in Chapter 1.

his last years he was beset with financial troubles. He had married young but it was a childless marriage and he eventually consigned his wife to the workhouse, where she survived him. He then took up with a succession of housekeepers, by whom he had a very large number of children. Joshua and his younger sister Sarah were the only surviving children from his relationship with Elizabeth Perry.

Education

While his father prospered, Joshua spent three years from about the age of 11 at the respected academy of Charles Baron in Knowsley, just outside Liverpool (later relocated to Holt Hall near Roby). However, in about 1808 he was removed from there and despatched to one of the infamous, cut-price northern schools. This was Eden Hall Academy in Kirkby Stephen, Westmorland, run by Richard Aislabie (who combined education with commercial travelling). Life there was uncompromising but Walmsley had fond memories and acquired a liking for shooting game (poaching?). In their experience of the northern schools (and subsequently as lowly merchants' clerks) Walmsley and Cobden probably shared a bond that helped sustain their close friendship in later years despite political differences. After his father died in 1811, Walmsley stayed on at Eden Hall Academy as an usher but then had a "misunderstanding" with one of Aislabie's brothers and retreated back to Liverpool in 1813 to seek his fortune there.

Business career

With the Napoleonic Wars not quite over, finding a commercial appointment was not easy but, after a further short spell of teaching, Walmsley secured a clerkship for a period of four years from June 1814 with the respected firm of Carter and Peers, corn merchants. Having learned the trade and become the firm's travelling salesman, he declined to renew his contract and in 1818 became the junior partner in a newly established firm of corn brokers, Booth and Walmsley. George Booth was a member of the prestigious Booth family, which included several leading corn merchants and the railway pioneer Henry Booth. Their partnership lasted until 1841, when ill-health caused George to retire; in 1845 Walmsley turned the business over to his junior partners. The firm was spectacularly successful from early on, enabling Walmsley to develop other business interests from the mid-1820s. The evidence suggests that Booth and Walmsley exploited loopholes in the Corn Laws that in effect allowed duty-free importation through the Isle of Man. Although they were

primarily brokers, it is clear that at times they were also trading on their own account, taking risks and occasionally making heavy losses on their speculation.

Walmsley was one of the original subscribers for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway Company with the maximum permitted shareholding and thereafter became George Stephenson's most loyal Liverpool investor, lending his name as a proprietor to both the Warrington and Newton Railway and the Leicester and Swannington Railway before the Liverpool and Manchester Railway had even opened.⁷³⁵ The connection with Stephenson was further strengthened in 1832 when Walmsley provided most of the finance for the Snibstone Colliery Company near Leicester and in about 1839 when he became one of the founding partners of the Clay Cross Company. These were pioneering (and large scale) enterprises, which aimed to produce coal (and iron also at Clay Cross) and make it available at low prices through their proximity to railways. Walmsley also participated with Stephenson in the ill-fated 1845 survey for the proposed Royal North of Spain Railway.

Walmsley was amongst the earliest proprietors of the *Daily News*, which commenced publication in 1846, retaining his shareholding until he finally retired from active politics in 1857. This was a vital source of support for the Reform Movement but a serious drain on funds, especially in the early years, with Walmsley staying loyal when others pulled out.

Political career

Although Walmsley had voted for Canning in 1816 and approved of his successor Huskisson, in the wake of the 1832 Reform Act he emerged as a Reformer, probably seeing this as a logical continuation of their liberal Toryism. He had no noticeable political profile until he sought and gained election as a member of Liverpool's Town Council in 1835, following the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act. Thereafter his rise was meteoric. He became chairman of the Watch Committee in 1836 and was instrumental in the establishment of the Liverpool Constabulary Force. He was also a committed member of the Education Committee, which tried unsuccessfully to run the Corporation's elementary schools on a non-sectarian basis. He was elected mayor – at the second attempt – in 1839 and was knighted in 1840, having had the good fortune to present the

⁷³⁵ A full list of shareholders survives: Liverpool and Manchester Railway 1825, GB127.BR f 385.81 L1 (Manchester Archives).

congratulations of the borough to Queen Victoria on the occasion of her marriage. His personal power base was the Tradesmen's Reform Association, which he had created to galvanise support for the Reformers at grass roots level. However, by bypassing the accepted ascendancy of veteran Reformers and espousing more radical measures, he alienated key colleagues, who were unable to stomach the clear ambition of a political *parvenu*. In particular, his total support for the Anti-Corn Law League went beyond what many were comfortable with. He contested Liverpool at the 1841 general election on a free trade platform but, with no significant assistance from his nominal running-mate, Lord Palmerston, and muted support only from leading Reformers, he was soundly defeated. Disheartened, he withdrew from politics and left Liverpool soon afterwards.

Walmsley was persuaded by Cobden and others to re-enter politics in 1847 and he was returned as the MP for Leicester, where he was well known on account of his business activities. The following year he was unseated as a result of alleged bribery by his election agents but in early 1849 he returned to the House of Commons following a by-election in Bolton. In 1852 he stood for Leicester once more and represented this constituency until 1857. In this period, he and Joseph Hume were the leading advocates amongst the Radicals of parliamentary reform and in 1849 Walmsley played the major part in setting up and then, as president, running the National Parliamentary and Financial Reform Association. After an energetic start, featuring large public meetings throughout the country, the NPFRA gradually lost momentum, partly because of inadequate support from other Radical MPs and partly because of an economic upturn. The outbreak of the Crimean War finally killed it off as a meaningful pressure group. However, amongst its successes were the creation of the National Freehold Land Society, later to become the [Abbey] National Building Society, and the forging of unprecedented political cooperation between the middle classes and workers with Chartist sympathies.

In other respects Walmsley's parliamentary career was unexceptional. He was not a great orator and spoke infrequently in the House. He played a significant role in the Select Committee which recommended the abolition of newspaper stamp duty in 1851 and assiduously represented the interests of framework knitters and factory workers. In pressing for Sunday opening of the British Museum and National Gallery he assumed Hume's mantle and in 1856 he became president of the National Sunday League, retaining this office until 1869. Opposition to his principled stance on workers' rights and Sunday opening led to his defeat in the 1857 general

election. On a personal level, Walmsley's main contributions lay in his powers of organisation, always energetically applied, and in his strong desire to induce cooperation between disparate parties sharing a common interest.

Properties

The properties Walmsley lived in provide interesting sidelights on his social status and aspirations. He was born in the house his father had next to his builder's yard on the corner of Wood Street and Concert Street in central Liverpool. His father then developed a huge site on Berry Street and provided his family with a stylish Georgian mansion adjacent to his new yard, which left the young Joshua with happy childhood memories. Another wing of the development comprised the home and counting-house of a young merchant, Charles Lawrence, later mayor and chairman of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway Company. The old house and yard were made over to a local builder in payment for the brickwork. The latter's son, Samuel Holme, grew up to become a vehement and highly effective Tory opponent of Walmsley in Liverpool. Having achieved wealth and then municipal office, Walmsley marked his ascent with two personal statements. First, he acquired the town house in Mount Pleasant previously occupied by the celebrated architect (and Corporation Surveyor) John Foster. Then, not long before he became mayor, he moved to Wavertree Hall in succession to Charles Lawrence. For good measure, he also purchased the advowson of the newly built St Luke's Church, opposite his childhood home in Berry Street, which was designed by Foster and had one of Lawrence's sons as one of its ministers.

On quitting Liverpool in 1841, Walmsley took the lease on the Earl of Lichfield's extensive estate at Ranton Abbey, which was close to his business interests in the Midlands. Here he could entertain, shoot and live the life of a benevolent country squire. On entering Parliament, he moved to a large new town house at 101 Westbourne Terrace in Paddington (or "Tyburnia" as this most fashionable quarter was oddly known as), with Cobden and J. B. Smith as his near neighbours in "Radical Row". When he lost his seat in 1857, Walmsley retired to the country once more, leasing Wolverton House, a stone mansion in extensive Hampshire parkland, from the Duke of Wellington's estate. Finally, by now in frail health and seeking a mild climate, he constructed a massive country house of his own on the outskirts of Bournemouth, which he named Hume Towers in honour of his political mentor. He died on 17 November 1871 soon after taking up residence there.

Family

In 1815 Walmsley married his childhood sweetheart Adeline Mulleneux, the daughter of Hugh Mulleneux, a *nouveau riche* Liverpool distiller and rectifier, who had opposed the marriage, despite his own humble origins as a mariner and dockside victualler. Adeline's brother James was a major benefactor of the Liverpool Mechanics' Institution, a noted Reformer and a leading member of the Liverpool Financial Reform Association. Adeline outlived her husband by two years, dying in 1873. Of their children who survived to adulthood, the three daughters married well – Elizabeth to Charles Binns, George Stephenson's secretary and then manager of the Clay Cross industrial complex; Emily to the educationalist William Ballantyne Hodgson; and Adah to the banker William Williams. None of the three sons followed in their father's footsteps. The eldest, Joshua, seems to have had a chequered early career before emigrating to Natal in 1850, probably in furtherance of a colonial scheme of his father. He achieved prominence as the border agent on the Zulu frontier. Hugh Mulleneux acted out an extraordinary military career, serving with the army in India, commanding Turkish irregular cavalry in the Crimea and following the French army in Algeria and Italy. His experiences led to a series of travelogues and novels but will also have informed his father's thinking in the aftermath of both the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny. He wrote a biography of his father, published in 1879. The third son James Mulleneux was a civil engineer.

Sir Joshua's only full sister Sarah (c1796–1856) was well-educated and worked as a teacher in Liverpool, afterwards apparently becoming governess to the Walmsley children. She converted to Roman Catholicism and eventually removed to France in order to take the veil. She attained the position of Abbess of the Franciscan Convent of Ste Elisabeth in Paris and, in the period of "Papal Aggression", was in personal contact with Cardinal Wiseman. She was instrumental in the training of novices, who were to set up new religious communities in England and Ireland.⁷³⁶ Sarah's conversion was undoubtedly a major contributory reason for Walmsley's enlightened attitude to Irish Catholics in Liverpool.

⁷³⁶ I am grateful to Sr. Dr. Pauline Shaw for sharing research notes on Marie de Ste Cécile (Sarah Walmsley).

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