

Violence of the ‘lambs’

Tony Simpson

By-election fever gripped Nottingham during spring 1866. The General Election result of the preceding year was put aside and Mr Speaker issued a New Writ

‘for the electing of two Burgesses to serve in this present Parliament for the Town and County of the Town of Nottingham, in the room of Sir Robert Jukes Clifton, baronet, and Samuel Morley, Esq., whose elections have been determined to be void.’

A Parliamentary inquiry had heard telling evidence of bribery and systematic disruption of opponents’ campaigns by Sir Robert, whose statue stands alone to this day, gazing eastwards by the Toll Bridge over River Trent as it slides past Nottingham, dividing England’s North from South. Is Sir Robert looking for his ‘lambs’?



Sir Robert Clifton by Wilford Toll Bridge

On the 150th anniversary, we revisit Nottingham’s by-election of 1866 which brought Bertrand Russell’s parents to the city.

As *The Times* reported (26.3.1866), the evidence was almost solely confined to accounts ‘by the roughs or “lambs” ’ of the part they took in the disturbances prior to and at the election:

‘John Terry, tinman and brazier, was recalled and examined at considerable length. He stated that the mob broke into Paget and Morley’s committee-room, in St. Ann’s Ward, and completely gutted it. Witness was here shown two photographs, which he said were accurate representations of the committee room before and after the attack. After the hacking, the “lambs” retired to the Butchers’ Arms, and refreshed themselves with something to drink. Witness went with half-a-dozen of them to the Assembly Rooms for payment, and saw several gentlemen, one of whom paid him £28, which was to be divided among the roughs.’

‘Gutted’ appears an accurate description:



Liberal committee rooms after riot, Nottingham, 1865

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Who would be the by-election candidates for the Liberal Party this time? Step forward, somewhat reluctantly, John Russell, Viscount Amberley. Amberley, as he was known, had been defeated at Leeds in the General Election of 1865, but had given a good account of himself, particularly in relation to ‘Reform’, the burning issue of the day. Reform meant extending the suffrage, or vote, to many more men (not to women, although Lady Kate Amberley soon advocated such), but it was proposed that this be on the basis of property ownership or rent paid above a certain level, in order to exclude the burgeoning working class.

Lord John Russell, Amberley’s father, was the architect of the Reform

Act of 1832 which, in fact, made only a limited extension of the franchise to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, and householders paying a yearly rental of £10 or more. Many others were excluded. The Act also redistributed seats to the growing cities from the countryside, described by one Tory MP as 'Russell's Purge'.

In Nottingham feelings about Parliamentary Reform ran high, as Kate Amberley later indicated, when she went to see the Castle 'burned down in 1831 because the Duke of Newcastle, its proprietor, voted against the Reform Bill'.

The 1832 Act, significant though it was, excluded many men and all women from voting for their Member of Parliament. Indeed, it was not until 1928 and the Equal Franchise Act that women over 21 were able to vote, and finally obtained the same voting rights as men. In the 1830s, millions of excluded people campaigned and clamoured for the right to the vote. Industrialising cities such as Nottingham saw their populations increase rapidly with the arrival of new workers from rural areas and further afield, from Ireland, to work in the growing lace, hosiery and related textile trades. Conditions were dire, at work and at home, as more and more people crammed into Broadmarsh, Narrowmarsh and other central areas of the city. In these grim circumstances, Nottingham became a major centre of Chartist agitation and activity.

The Charter's demands included that all men have the vote in secret ballots; that Members of Parliament should be paid, and that the property qualification to become an MP should be abolished; and that there be annual elections in constituencies of equal size. Chartism's extra-Parliamentary struggle focused on fundamental reform of the Westminster Parliament, attracting the support of millions of people, particularly from the disenfranchised working class in Nottingham and elsewhere. So it was that Feargus O'Connor, leading Chartist and land reformer from County Cork in Ireland, was elected in Nottingham in 1847 as the country's first and only Chartist MP. A year later, he presided over the last great Chartist demonstration in London, after which the movement declined, although the objectives for which it campaigned remained live. O'Connor's statue, 'erected by his admirers' in 1859, now stands in a quiet and leafy corner of Nottingham's Arboretum.

It was against this background of long-term agitation for more people to have the vote that, in 1865, Lord John Russell became Prime Minister for a second time, succeeding Palmerston, who had died. Russell was much more Reform-minded than Palmerston, and he prepared a second Reform bill. Amberley, his 23-year-old eldest son, supported his father in this

cause, and sought a career in politics. So it was that the Liberal committee in Nottingham lobbied Amberley to stand as one of their two candidates in the by-election for the dual-member parliamentary borough. But Nottingham's reputation for rough politics preceded it. Initially, the Prime Minister was very reluctant, but later told his son:

'I have been reading the proceedings at Nottingham, and I think that if there is a good requisition, and a fair prospect of a quiet election, you might accept their invitation. But not if a fellow like Sir R Clifton is to stand on the Conservative side, and bring a mob of ruffians at his heels. The respectable people of the town might secure you, if they chose, against such outrages.'



Lord John Russell



Kate Amberley



Viscount Amberley

So it was that Amberley, Kate and Mr Cossham, the other Liberal candidate, set out by train to Nottingham on Monday 30 April, 11 days before the poll. First impressions did not encourage the young couple, as Kate wrote in her journal:

'... We arrived at Nottingham station at 5.55 and were met by Mr Richards and about 40 others. We got into an open carriage with a postilion in blue and drove to our Inn 'The Flying Horse', the old liberal headquarters – an old fashioned rambling inn, Miss Malpas the landlady. We had a sitting room a very low one with 5 windows, so that we could see up and down the street from one on to the market place. We had tea and went to the liberal electors meeting in the Exchange. Before we went all the Committee (150 in number) came to the Flying Horse to be introduced to Amberley and to go with him to the Exchange. There were propositions to take me in to the building a back way to avoid any people, but I was determined to go with Amberley and so I did. We walked together, 2 rows of 6 men arm in arm in front of us as a sort of guard for us, and the same behind; as we went through the street, there were groans and hisses and cheers.

Once inside the building they made way for us and we got easily on to the platform where I sat on the right of the Chairman and we were much cheered. Dr Ransome was in the chair. Amberley spoke very well indeed, very slowly and distinctly but I fear his voice did not go to the end of the hall. I liked the speech very much indeed. Mr Cossham's which was earnest and fluent was very much inferior in style and tone.

They cheered me very much. Coming away, I took A's arm and Mr Cossham's; at the door we found a body of police who surrounded us, and our own people also, and we went out so into the mob, who groaned and hissed and cheered and tried to break through the police and there was a regular scuffle and tumble and people knocked about but I stuck fast to Amberley and did not mind at all; with some difficulty a way was made for us to get into our own door and then we went up stairs and showed ourselves at the window and were cheered and hooted.

Several people came up to us, and told us that was quiet for Nottingham and that we must expect it to get much warmer as time went on. Amberley did not much like it, or the prospect of any roughness, and said he had been assured it would be a quiet election. We went to bed very sorry we had ever come here.'

Tuesday brought news that an experienced former MP, Bernal Osborne, might join the fight and split the Liberal vote. He duly arrived the next day, altering the electoral arithmetic. Kate confided to her journal that there

were ‘troops in the town now, for fear of riot at this election’. She continued:

‘The liberal party all seem in a state as BO held his meeting with Sir Robert Clifton in the chair and declared his intention of standing. They say it is impossible now to calculate chances and see how votes will split and that BO will unite with Jenkinson (the Tory candidate) and so may win. Also unlimited money is to be spent on the Tory side, which will render it a very unpleasant contest, in nature just like the last and just such a one as Amberley dislikes, so he says he will retire unless BO does.’

Political calculations in London proceeded in another direction. Lady Russell offered the young Amberley family the use of Downing Street as a home during the current session of Parliament, ‘which we liked very much’, wrote Kate. This prime offer encouraged an aspiring politician and his young wife. Intriguingly, the Prime Minister ‘rather wished Bernal Osborne to come in,’ Kate added.

On Friday, Kate found time to visit Mundella’s factory for new stockings. After the weekend’s campaigning, in Monday evening sunshine, she and her husband walked through the Market Place to the Committee Rooms. Another candidate, Falkener, was speaking in the Market Place and ‘many people came from him to groan at us, but presently a crowd assembled round us cheering, and quite drowned the groans’. The Market Place was crowded that evening as Bernal Osborne also had a meeting at the same time, with Sir Robert Clifton again presiding.

Wednesday was Nomination Day and the Amberleys were far from confident of their prospects. Kate wrote:

‘We left the Flying Horse at 9.30 with our Committee and several ladies and went to the Exchange the long way and through a crowd that groaned and cheered all the way enthusiastically ... I had on my orange shawl and bonnet; and Lady and Miss Jenkinson were in blue on the opposite side of the Meetings. The crowd was wonderfully quiet for Nottingham ... Tin plates were waved about in the crowd in derision of S G Jenkinson’s plate, which he is said to boast of. Also a baby doll was held up to Amberley, a bear and traitor for B Osborne, and a bottle of water for Cossham. It was a grand sight; the market place was full half way and tightly packed. The show of hands was greatly in favour of BO and Sir G Jenkinson. A and Cossham seemed to have a very small minority ... ’

Polling Day, Thursday 10 May, dawned fine and bright. Kate watched the Central Committee Rooms from her window in the Flying Horse, and heard the cheering whenever announcements were put up. Later in the day, she and Amberley toured the Ward Committees in a carriage. By her

account, they were

'much cheered at each but received with lots of boos and shouts of derision in the streets mixed with cries of cow-juice, pump-handle, Baby, etc and faces and jeers. As we returned across the Market Place which was crowded, the mob rushed towards us and surrounded the carriage. When we got in I went to the window to show myself and had a stick thrown at me, also some dirt that hit me on the eye. There was a great mob in the street and they fisticuffed a good deal amongst one another and attacked one woman because she had yellow ribbons in her hair ...

A and I stayed in together and the accounts of the poll kept getting worse and worse; Osborne was above Amberley at 3 and Jenkinson so near and we heard so much bribery going on, that Amberley gave up all hope and was very low about it ... At 4 a woman at the window told me Osborne and Amberley were in but we did not believe her as the returns could not be known yet, then came in a maid of the house and told us we had got in ...

Amberley went off to the Committee Rooms balcony to thank the people and came back on foot, through a hooting mob ... The Mayor called on us with his wife and many other people. Amberley was much pleased and I was for him. I am very glad he has not had the contest for nothing. Cossham is very sorry, and so are his party ...'

Bernal Osborne beat Cossham to the second seat, so the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, got his preferred ticket. Friday was the Declaration of Poll and Amberley and Kate went to be photographed at Cox, St James' Street. They were done together 'standing up'. A few weeks later, in June 1866, Lord John Russell's second reform bill was defeated by dissident Liberals and he resigned as Prime Minister. Amberley continued as Member of Parliament for Nottingham until the general election of November 1868, when he flitted, unsuccessfully, to stand in Devon. Meanwhile, Disraeli's Second Reform Act of 1867 had doubled the size of the electorate, who duly showed their gratitude by defeating the Tory Party at the 1868 election. Notwithstanding the new Act, many men and all women were still denied their vote. And corrupt elections endure to this day.

Bertrand Russell, born in 1872, was the youngest son of Kate and John Amberley.