



Labour  
Heritage

# Labour Heritage

## Bulletin Spring 2023

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## The Matchgirls Strike of 1888 By Sam Johnson, Great-Grand daughter of Sarah Chapman

### Beginnings

I discovered Sarah's involvement in the Strike by accident in September 2016, while doing some family history. I found a post on an *Ancestry* site forum, dated way back in 2003. Until that moment, I had no idea that my Great Grandmother was one of the leaders of the Matchgirls Strike. Anna Robinson, the author of the post had gone on to write her MA thesis, *Neither Hidden Nor Condescended To: Overlooking Sarah Chapman*. Dr Anna Robinson is now a friend and fellow Trustee in our Matchgirls Charity and, a Senior Lecturer at the University of East London.

Born on 31st October 1862 in Mile End, Sarah lived all her life in the East End. She was born at 26 Alfred Terrace, which is just south of the Mile End Road. By the time she was nine, Sarah and her family had moved to 2 Swan Court where she would stay until 1891. Sarah's parents were Sarah Ann Mackenzie and Samuel Chapman, who in his time worked at both

the local breweries and the docks. Sarah was the fifth of seven children and we know from Census records, she was working as a Matchmaking Machinist alongside her elder sister, Mary, and her mother, by the time she was nineteen, although she is likely to have started working there much earlier as it was common for children to go to work from the age of about thirteen.

### Factory Life

Many of the work force at Bryant and May were young, with some only six years old, and many early teenagers. They worked six-day weeks and often twelve hours a day, for very low pay. There was also an unfair fines system that was applied for petty offences such as talking, untidy workbenches, lateness, or simply for dropping matches. Some workers suffered physical abuse from the foremen, who stopped complaints reaching the management. Moreover, they had to make the matches from white phosphorus that put them at risk of developing osteonecrosis, commonly known as 'phossy jaw' and, if anyone showed a sign of the disease, they could be sacked. Some factories used red phosphorus, which wasn't dangerous but it took Bryant and May until 1901 until they stopped using white phosphorus. It wasn't until 1910 that it was made illegal in the UK.

However, the Matchgirls loved a night out, a chance to dress up and sing songs from the music halls.

*"They buy their clothes and feathers (especially the latter) by forming clubs; seven or eight of them will join together paying a shilling a week each, and*

*drawing lots to decide who shall have the money each week*". **Clara Collet, 1886**

*"Match girls come out very strong on a Saturday night, when any number of them may be found at the Paragon Music Hall in the Mile End Road, the Foresters' Music Hall in Cambridge Road, and the Sebright at Hackney. . . . They seem to know by heart the words of all the popular songs of the day, and their homeward journey . . . though musical, is decidedly noisy"*. **Montagu Williams, 1894**

*"Bryant and May have a rough set of girls. There are 2000 of them when they are busy. Rough and rowdy, but not bad morally. They fight with their fists to settle their differences, not in the factory for that is forbidden, but in the streets when they leave work in the evening. A ring is formed, they fight like men and are not interfered with by the police"*. **George Duckworth, 1897**

## Protests and Reform



There had been unrest previously but sometimes, workers and employers were on the same side, as was the case in 1871 when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Lowe, proposed a tax of ½d on a box of matches and he coined the phrase, "*Ex Luce Lucellum*" – "*out of light, a little profit*". There followed a public outcry – everyone was affected as, who didn't use matches? The management and

the factory workers protested, and the Bill was defeated in Parliament, with a public drinking fountain erected in Bow a year later to celebrate the victory.

In 1882 the Bryant and May Management reportedly deducted money from the matchgirls' pay to help fund a statue to the Prime Minister, William Gladstone. At the unveiling, the girls protested by allegedly cutting their hands and marking the statue with their own blood. The statue still stands today and Gladstone's hand is still painted red as a symbolic demonstration of solidarity.

There were several other occasions of strikes and unrest in the factory but none were successful, so what was different in 1888? It seems there was a potent mix of change in the air – the will and grit of the workers to stand up for their rights combined with the social reformers who were pushing to effect change.

## The Strike

On 15<sup>th</sup> June 1888 the Fabian Society, including the likes of George Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb, held a fateful meeting. Clementina Black spoke on the state of female labour and Henry Hyde Champion reported that Bryant and May were taking over 20% dividends yet paying their workers 'starvation wages'. He proposed a motion to boycott the purchase of Bryant and May matches, which was passed unanimously. The next day, Fabians Annie Besant and Herbert Burrows went to see some workers outside the factory gates who they readily told them about the dreadful conditions.

A week later, Annie published an article in her weekly magazine, *The Link*, called 'White Slavery in London'. It laid bare the terrible truth of what the match factory workers had to endure, day after day. The result was a threat of libel action by the factory directors, who also demanded that

their employees sign a document to say the *Link* article was untrue. They refused. There followed a few days of unrest that culminated in a dismissal that was enough to spark the flame into life.

The matchgirls wrote a touching letter to Annie Besant, which was unsigned for fear of individuals being identified. Annie didn't quite understand the implication when she first read it, however its meaning soon became clear as on 5th July, 1400 girls and women walked out on strike. The next day, a 200 strong throng of workers marched to Annie's office in Bouverie Street (just off Fleet Street) to appeal to her. "*You had spoke up for us and we weren't going back on you.*" She invited a deputation of three of them up to see her (Sarah Chapman, Mrs Mary Naulls and Mrs Mary Cummings) and, despite Annie not favouring strike action, instead favouring reform, she agreed to help them, and plans were initiated to form a Strike Committee. On the strike committee were Mary Naulls, Mary Cummings, Sarah Chapman, Alice Francis, Mary Driscoll, Jane Wakeling and Eliza Martin.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> July they had their first meeting on Mile End Waste, an open area on Mile End Road where community gatherings often took place. Harry Hobart, a Social Democratic Federation activist, suggested a Strike Fund Register be set up.

MPs started to get involved as Charles Bradlaugh raised questions in the House of Commons. Less than a week after the strike started, Annie took fifty-six girls and women to the House of Commons and a deputation of twelve met MPs Robert Cunninghame Graham and Charles Conybeare in the lobby. By this time a Strike Committee had been formed and both the London Trades Council and Toynbee Hall were involved, plus public and newspaper support was growing.

On 16<sup>th</sup> July, the London Trades Council met with the Bryant and May Directors to discuss the Matchgirls' strike demands, and it was agreed that a deputation of the Strike Committee could meet the Directors and put their case. And so it was, the next day, that the Matchgirls Strike Committee, including Sarah, met with the Bryant and May Directors. Their demands were met in full, and terms agreed in principle. The Strike Committee put the proposals to the rest of the girls, and they enthusiastically approved. It was a momentous victory for worker's rights. One of the most important strikes ever was won, and in just short of a fortnight!

### **A new union**

10 days later, the inaugural meeting of The Union of Women Match Makers took place at Stepney Meeting Hall. 12 women and girls were elected to the Committee, most of whom had been on the Strike Committee and included my Sarah, who was elected as their President. The first enrolment of union members resulted in 468 new unionists. The Union Committee consisted of Sarah Chapman, Eliza Martin, Louisa Beck, Julia Gambleton, Jane Wakeling, Jane Staines, Eliza Price, Mary Naulls, Kate Sclater, Ellen Johnson, Mary Driscoll and Alice Francis.

*"A break in the proceedings was caused by a very kind and pretty act of the girls, the presentation of a little gold brooch to Annie Besant, and of a scarf-pin each to Herbert Burrows and H. W. Hobart (unfortunately absent), as memorials of the victory-crowned struggle". The Link, August 1888.*

I am extremely proud to say that Sarah Chapman, as their President, was the first member of the new Union to represent them as a delegate. Two of only five women, Sarah and Annie Besant attended the International TUC in London in November 1888 along with sixty-nine



other union and trade council delegates at St Andrew's Hall.

Sarah also went to the 1890 TUC in Liverpool. At this conference, there were around 500 delegates but still only ten women. This must have been an incredibly exciting yet eye opening experience for her. An indication of Sarah's confidence is that she is recorded as seconding a motion in relation to the Truck Act, which related to workers having to purchase their own materials.

At the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the TUC in Manchester in 2018, Sally Hunt, the then Congress President, celebrated the Matchgirls Strike and what they had achieved in her opening address. She named Sarah Chapman, which was the first time Sarah had been acknowledged in a significant public forum and ended her speech using a match as a metaphor for the matchgirls' struggle and their unity.

### **After Bryant and May**

In 1891 Sarah left Bryant and May and married Charles Henry Dearman, a cabinet maker from Bethnal Green. They had six children, three of whom sadly pre-deceased Sarah. Charles, died in 1922 and Sarah spent her last 23 years in Bethnal Green. Unfortunately, we have few tangible links to Sarah's life apart from a few photographs. However, my Dad, Ken, recalls Sarah giving him a red train engine when he was three (about 1942) and he recalls a dark room with an aspidistra in a large pot, with antimacassars on the chairs and the evocative smell of gas from the wall mounted gas mantles when visiting Sarah.



### **The Matchgirls Memorial**



This touching story of a humble girl from Stepney in 1888 was the reason I decided to start a Matchgirls Charity to honour Sarah and her fellow workers. The Matchgirls Memorial was established in March 2019 and is dedicated to commemorating and memorialising the victorious Matchgirls Strike and raising awareness, through education and the arts, of the brave and courageous young women and girls that stood up and fought for their working rights. It is unbelievable, given the influence of this Strike in subsequent years, that there is no statue to honour the Matchgirls.

Pleasingly, an English Heritage blue plaque was unveiled in July by our Patron Anita Dobson. We ran a children's poetry competition with two local schools and the winners read their poems at the unveiling. We were also thrilled to be joined by more than a dozen Matchgirls' descendants.

We are speaking to local developers about memorial ideas, and Tower Hamlets Council is preparing an information panel

for Grove Hall Park. I am also delighted to that there is a new social housing block and community centre due to open this year, named Sarah Chapman House. We are also working with East End musicians with a view to a concert premiering a new musical composition to celebrate the victorious strike in the summer of 2023.

One day we hope to recognise each of the strike and Union Committee Members with individual commemorative plaques near their birthplace, or in the area that they lived at the time of the strike. We already have an active campaign for a plaque in Southampton where Kate Sclater was born.

On International Women's Day in 2020, funded by Unite the Union, we sent Matchgirls awareness ribbons to every MP and hundreds of Peers. Ribbons were worn during both the Commons and Lords debates and the Matchgirls were mentioned in seven speeches. In 2021, several peers mentioned the Matchgirls in their speeches and Lord Lucas read out all the names of the Matchgirls Committees. It is an aspiration to make this an annual event to recognise their contribution to labour history.

### **Matchgirls in the Arts**

In 1940, Robert Mitchell wrote a play, *The Match Girls* (London Unity Theatre). In the 1960s Bill Owen's musical, *The Matchgirls* and Joyce Adcock's *Strike a Light* were both staged in the West End. The musicals' lead characters were Kate Slater and Sarah Chapman respectively. In 2012, Lemn Sissay was commissioned to write his poem, *Spark Catchers* which, in turn inspired composer Hannah Kendall to write a piece of music by the same name, premiered at the Royal Albert Hall in August 2017. The Matchgirls made it into a film too – the Enola Holmes 2 film,

features a 'Sarah Chapman' and part of the story of the Matchgirls Strike.

### **Supporting the Memorial Fund**

If you, like us, think the Matchgirls deserve a statue for the courageous actions, please do consider a donation, or subscribe for updates on our journey to get them one:

<https://www.givey.com/thematchgirlsmemorial>

<https://www.matchgirls1888.org/>



Sarah Chapman



## **Oppositional chivalry: The Queen Caroline Affair and the emergence of working-class medievalism in England**

**By David Grocott**

### **Class relations in 19<sup>th</sup> century England**

The story of class relations in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain is abundantly traumatic.

The century that began with the French Revolution ringing in its ears and finished with the realisation that 60 per cent of working men remained unfit for military duty in the Boer War due to their enduring disastrous living conditions was a period of violence, inter-class resentment, slow progress and wide-ranging, immense upheaval.

In the space of three generations there was Paine, Peterloo, The Great Reform Act of 1832, the Abolition of Slavery, Edwin Chadwick, Chartism, cholera, the Great Stink, the birth of English Socialism, Darwinism, Dickens, the enfranchisement of working men, the Second Public Health Act and the innovation of secret ballots.

For all strata of society there was seismic disturbance.

While the working class watched their hellish, polluted poverty and subjugated ignorance improve with frustrating, glacial speed the upper classes observed with equal horror their centuries-old control slowly evaporating. Between them an increasingly educated, enlightened and aware liberal and Whiggish middle class despaired at the inequality so evidently widened by the invisible hand of capitalism.

For many despairing and nostalgic commentators on all sides the path to an improved future lay in the preindustrial past – specifically the preindustrial medieval past of a ‘Merrie England’.

For the Tories the Middle Ages were a time of reassuring, hierarchical feudalism. For the Whigs the Medieval was an epoch of well-proportioned rural communities based on personal and respectful connections between lord and peasant. For the working class the Medieval resonated with a natural, instinctive egalitarianism of Saxon democracy unsullied by the domination and control of the Norman Yoke; an England the way it was meant to be - and how it could be again.

My research looks at the way in which the radical Left in nineteenth and twentieth century England appropriated the early 19<sup>th</sup> century elitist medievalism and, having gained entry to the field, used it as a proxy environment in which to contest and assert a new mythologised English nationalism ‘from below’.

Essentially this is based on the concept that at certain points of trauma, society will seek validation and ‘recalibration’ linked to its sense of true national identity. We can see that in the nostalgia of the post Brexit world as we can in earlier traumatic national events.

One of those occasions came after the French Revolution and during the Industrial Revolution. Today we call this nineteenth century national soul-searching to seek a true national identity, medievalism. The medieval became inflected and politically exploited by all political hues as expressions of what each ideology believed Englishness could and indeed should be.

Ultimately of course the route of 19<sup>th</sup> Century English working-class medievalism ended with William Morris, ‘A Dream of John Ball’ and the idea that a golden thread connected modern socialist principles of Marx to an explicitly English, Saxon, preindustrial (indeed often pre 11<sup>th</sup> century) egalitarianism.

This however represented the apotheosis of 19<sup>th</sup> century working-class medievalism, transmuting earlier physical force Chartism and revolutionary ideology into a more politicised vision of what could be. Often this vision personified in admiration - and even cult

like worship - of 14<sup>th</sup> century radical priest John Ball. As I have said though, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was however a period of immense change – not least in the way the working class perceived the medieval and understood the past and what it meant to be English.

Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century John Ball's role as a fountainhead of egalitarian ideology was hardly mentioned in working class writing and instead there were other plebian readings of what it meant to be medieval; of what it meant to be truly English. Often these were more martial, more heavily coloured by the radical aftermath of the French revolution and focused less on a nascent socialist manifesto than towards physical force renderings of the medieval. Writing in the 1880s William Morris may have obsessed over John Ball as a medieval English proto-Marx whose words built solid philosophical foundations for social transformation but in the first half of the century Ball hardly got a look in. For the first five decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century working class renderings of the Peasants' Revolt were far more likely to fixate on Wat Tyler, 'England's Thor' who reacted to the Poll Tax not with metaphysical rhetoric but with a fatal swing of the hammer towards a tax collector's head. By charting the evolution of this plebian medievalism from lionising direct action to championing a 14<sup>th</sup> century philosophical manifesto we can see the manner in which working-class historic consciousness, self-identity and politics evolved through the 19<sup>th</sup> century from revolutionary intentions towards a coherent socialist position at the turn of the twentieth century.

One early and fascinating example of very early nineteenth century working class medievalism – revealing a more nuanced approach - came long before the crystallisation of oppositional thought when working class medievalism – not yet sure of its eventual direction - appeared to-

briefly and unsuccessfully impersonate elite medieval renderings.

The setting for this brief vignette of experimental, early working-class medievalism was the Queen Caroline Affair of 1820 and 1821.

### **Queen Caroline**

Caroline of Brunswick was cousin and wife to George IV. As Prince of Wales George had married Caroline on April 8th 1795 at The Chapel Royal, St James' Palace while so drunk he needed to be supported throughout the ceremony. Already married to Maria Fitzherbert on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1785 in a union forbidden under the terms of the Royal Marriages Act of 1772 and the 1701 Act of Settlement he found Caroline deeply unattractive and publicly questioned her hygiene. The couple spent two nights together and according to George had intercourse on three occasions. Caroline conceived a child - Princess Charlotte - who was born nine months later but the couple were already separated. Although accusations of her having another child were deemed unfounded she was publicly ridiculed in the press and it was widely believed she would have returned home to Brunswick had it not been overrun by Napoleon's forces. After the defeat of the French however, in 1814, Caroline, now forbidden by George to see her daughter, left England with a state pension to support a new life in Northern Italy. It was only six years later, in 1820, following the death of George III and the accession of her husband that Caroline returned among further accusations of infidelity with her companion and favourite Bartolomeo Pergami. While Loyalists questioned her morals and defamed her with accusations of heavy drinking and infidelity, radicals considered her treatment - at the time of the Six Articles and shortly after the brutality of Peterloo - to be emblematic of the abuse of power by the British elite. As the date for George's coronation approached, Caroline became totemic of the Radical cause.

What is fascinating is what happened next with elite and radicals of 1821 both offering competing renderings of what it meant to be medieval and, by extension to truly be English.

Figure one shows an image of Henry Dymoke who, as King's champion, was expected to attend the coronation of George in full, completely anachronistic, armour and to throw down from his mounted position the gauntlet to any would be challengers to Royal authority. George's outrageously ostentatious coronation – it cost £240,000, equivalent to £21,766,56 – was an object lesson in how medieval imagery was increasingly used by the 19<sup>th</sup> century elite to assert Hanoverian connections to the throne of England and his preference for medieval deference. Walter Scott's assessment of the impact of the pomp upon 'foreigners' was that they were 'utterly astonished and delighted to see the revival of feudal dresses and feudal grandeur when the occasion demanded it, and that in a degree of splendour which, they avowed, they had never seen parallel in Europe.'



**Figure 1: Henry Dymoke as the King's Champion at George IV's elaborate medievalist coronation in 1821. Note the anachronistic dress and gauntlet thrown down in challenge.**

The elite however was not the only group in 1821 to appropriate the chivalric as a lodestone to divine the true spirit of Englishness; working class radicals too had also mounted their white chargers – literally.

The elite however was not the only group in 1821 to appropriate the chivalric as a lodestone to divine the true spirit of Englishness; working class radicals too had also mounted their white chargers – literally.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> January 1821 the Lord Mayor of London led a procession through the streets of the city so large, so colourful and so full of people dressed in full suits of armour that it was said the Strand was impassable for several hours. Reports from the time described the procession as 'immense', 'superb' and 'ancient'.

Describing the scene, the largely Whiggish and even Radical *Morning Chronicle* wrote: "The processions of the working mechanics and industrious classes, with numerous flags and bands of music, passed Hyde Park Corner about ten o'clock. The smiths, the calico printers, the glass blowers, the carpenters and joiners, and the brass founders, marched in regular order, decorated with the appropriate emblems of their respective trades."

Among the brass founders in particular, close attention was paid to mediaeval imagery. Their number included 'A knight, accoutred cap-a-pie, scale armour, on horseback, with four attendants.' Also 'Two knights in steel armour, mounted on chargers, with six attendants.' The procession also included an 'ancient knight on horseback attired in a most superb suit of silver-plated steel cuirass armour, attended by four armed esquires.'



Figure two shows a satirised image of Cato Street conspirator and noted London radical of the period Samuel Waddington - 'Little Wad' - taking part in this event acting as the 'Rival Champion'. The satirical inclusion of a liberty cap on the lance, 'rights of man' on the shield and 'universal suffrage' on the horse's barding show that, from the artists' perspective at least, the explicit medievalism on display may have its origin in a display of chivalry for the 'wronged queen' but it had become suffused with the wider ambitions of the Radical movement. The rival champion stood to defend, in the tiltyard if necessary, Queen Caroline of course but also claims for democracy and Paineian egalitarianism.



***Figure two: Veteran radical Samuel Waddington sought to associate the egalitarian cause with the chivalric knight as an embodiment of true English virtue.***

The reference to 'Rival Champion' and the subtitle of 'Little Wadd preparing for the Royal Coronation' parodies the equally medievalist Royalist champion Henry Dymoke.

It should be noted that Samuel Waddington was a committed radical. Not only was he implicated in the Cato Street conspiracy, but after Caroline's death in August 1821 two workers were killed in the riot as her body was transported from London to Harwich. It was Waddington who led the funeral procession for those men, Richard Honey and George Francis - demonstrating his credentials as one of the leading London radical figures. Waddington was a conspirator, a vocal anti-monarchist, a bold and brazen anti-establishment protester and, by his actions on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1821, one of a growing number of plebeian medievalists.

While the procession of the Brass Founders no doubt served as a simple spectacle there was, at its core, nothing coincidental about the choice of dress. The procession was marching in chivalric defence of the honour of the wronged Queen Caroline and chose the explicit knightly attire to emphasise the valiant characteristics of the medieval and to appropriate these for the radical and working-class cause. Here was a distinct rendering of medievalism that cast the working-class protesters as 'knights errant'. If there was a personification of Englishness defending the state it was not to be Dymoke – it was to be a radical in defence of his Queen. Working class medievalism and historic consciousness was not just shown in the Queen Caroline Affair through men in suits of armour; it was also evident in repeated reference to the perceived lost 'ancient' rights of Magna Carta. Caroline's return to England following her husband's accession was of course just one year after the events of Peterloo when Henry Hunt's oration had brought on the sabres of the Yeoman cavalry and came just weeks after the Six Acts which explicitly sought to legislate against organised insurrection. George's accession was also greeted one month later by the openly rebellious Cato Street

conspiracy. The country was openly divided between those influenced by Paine and Spence and the Tory establishment and Whigs who sought more constitutional and gradual reform. These key actors however, who all wished to promulgate their own politicised view of Englishness, moved in the idiom of historic consciousness., country and people.

Figure three shows the association built between Queen Caroline and perceived inalienable rights that had existed in Medieval England. ‘Magna Charta’ was often quoted as having far greater significance as an indicator of a true and often lost form of mediaeval, true English, liberty.



**Figure three: ‘The Queen and Old England Forever’.** By early 1821 Queen Caroline was both a ‘wronged queen’ defended by working class English chivalry but also associated with ‘Magna Charta’ (sic) and emblematic of eroded medieval rights taken from ‘The People’.

By the time of the Queen Caroline Affair in 1820 - 1821 therefore Radicals effortlessly associated the plight of Caroline not only with a romanticised vision of masculine virtue - rescuing a ‘wronged’ woman but also with an awareness that her loss of rights as Queen reflected their perception of an erosion of rights as English people with a legacy at least as old as 1215.

These incursions by the working class into the mediaeval arena did not go unnoticed by the Tory loyalists who worked hard in 1821 to satirise the new found plebeian fondness for medievalism.

### **Brass Founders Procession**

The satirical, Royalist and deeply misogynistic illustration entitled ‘Taking coals to Newcastle’ (fig four) while extremely interesting for its depiction of the Brass Founders procession and their improvised medievalist armour is also fascinating for a number of other reasons. The slogan at the bottom reads: "Why look'ye Mrs Brasier!" I don't know in what quantities you sell brass "at" Como"—But when you come "from" abroad, & ask a thinking people "to believe Black is White—D . . . me but your'e a Wholesale Dealer!!!"

‘Sell your brass at Como’ references Villa d'Este, Caroline’s residence at Lake Como in northern Italy where she resided with Pergami. The implication seeks to connect Caroline, accused by George of adultery, with the rhyming slang ‘Brass Flute’ or often just ‘Brass’ meaning prostitute. This is emphasised by the banners reading ‘blow thy sounding horns’ (flutes) and another banner reading ‘Star of Como [Caroline], Brass is a job to thee.’ This helps to explain the cartoon’s title ‘Carrying Coals to Newcastle’ - the popular saying indicating taking something to its place of origin; here ‘brass’ or prostitution is, in the eyes of the author, being taken ‘home’ to Brandenburgh House. The protesting working class



**The Essex Conference on Labour History hosted by the Essex County Labour Party and Labour Heritage took place on Zoom on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> November. There were three speakers –**

**Samantha Johnson, Chair of Board of Trustees, Matchgirls Memorial and David Grocott were two of the speakers.**

The third was John McDonnell MP on his Peoples History Podcasts. <https://peoples-history.simplecast> So far there have been 10 podcasts, starting with the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, and including the English Civil War, the Chartists, the Labour Party, the Attlee Government, struggles against colonialism, the EU and free movement of peoples and global environmental movements. More in the next bulletin.

## **Mabel C. Tothill**

**By June Hannam**

*John Grigg came across this article by June Hannam in the Bristol Radical Pamphleteer published by the Bristol Radical History Group. With June's agreement he added a sentence or two about Walter Ayles who was a Bristol MP in the 1920s and for Southall in 1945 and then for Hayes and Harlington until 1953.*

Mabel Tothill, the first woman to sit on Bristol City Council, was a Quaker, a socialist and an advocate for conscientious objectors. Taking her seat in 1920, not long after she turned 50, Tothill made quite a journey – both political and geographical – from a comfortable middle-class childhood in Hull as the daughter of a factory manager.

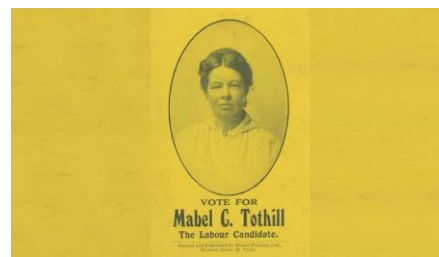
Tothill arrived in Bristol during the 1890s when still in her 20s. Here she joined a network of like-minded women, many of

them Quakers, who were keen to promote women's suffrage and expand educational opportunities. They also sought a systematic approach to tackling poverty, working with the local authority as its welfare responsibilities expanded.

But a turning point came in 1911 when Tothill became a resident of the Barton Hill University Settlement, an initiative of her Quaker friend Marian Pease. Pease was also daughter to a factory boss – one of the directors of Barton Hill's Great Western Cotton Factory – and head of the University of Bristol Day Training College for Women. While not products of it, the two women were familiar with East Bristol working-class life. The Settlement provided education and clubs for the community, trained women for social work, and was a meeting place for men and women of different classes.

## **Bristol ILP**

We don't know when Tothill joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a socialist group separate from, but affiliated to, the Labour Party itself. But it is likely her experience of Settlement work brought her into close contact with the labour movement. By 1913, Tothill had a public role in the ILP's East Bristol campaign promoting women's suffrage. The previous year, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, of which she was a member, had decided to support Labour in seats – including East Bristol – where the Liberal candidate was hostile to women's suffrage.





Tothill soon became close to Walter Ayles, the charismatic local organiser of the ILP and the candidate for East Bristol in 1914. Ayles was not only a strong backer of women's rights, but approached socialism through the prism of religion and pacifism. He was a Methodist or Congregationalist lay preacher before the first world war and became a Quaker after the war. During his campaign, Tothill developed her skills as a platform speaker and propagandist, becoming convinced that the causes of women and labour were inextricably linked – and would improve the lives of women, men and children of all classes.

After the war, the ILP put forward Tothill's name to the Labour Party for inclusion on a list of municipal candidates. With some women finally gaining the Parliamentary vote, and many more registered as local electors, she was more convinced than ever that Labour offered the greatest hope for the achievement of a better world.

The intervening years had been tough ones. After war was declared in 1914, most Bristol ILP members demanded its speedy end via a negotiated peace – an unpopular cause even before conscription was introduced in 1916.

Ayles was imprisoned as a conscientious objector, with Tothill taking the role of secretary of the Bristol Joint Advisory Committee, supporting such men who faced tribunals or jail time, and often experienced isolation and hostility.

Conscientious objectors found Mabel's help invaluable. She kept their plight in the public eye through leaflets and newspaper reports that gave detailed accounts of their hardships. She was also one of the 'Watchers' who stood outside Horfield barracks so they could be told if men were moved. She then wrote to let their families know, and visited men in prison. At the end of the war, she campaigned with

others for the release of those who were still imprisoned.

Tothill's first bid for office, for St Pauls in 1919, was unsuccessful. But a year later, when Labour's member for Easton ward was elevated to become an alderman, she was put forward to take his place and entered the council unopposed.

She was active in proposing motions on housing, unemployment, proportional representation, and the provision of public bathrooms for both sexes. In each case, Tothill emphasised how social reforms could affect women's lives. But her time as a councillor would last just 18 months, with a bid to defend her seat in November 1921 proving unsuccessful.

Much was made in the press of Tothill's pacifism, though it is hard to be sure whether this contributed to her defeat. But while she remained active within the ILP – and lived on until 1964 – she would never regain public office, despite numerous attempts during the 1920s.

## **Sir Richard Knowles – An Appreciation**

**By Richard Gorton**

Paul Dimoldenberg's assessment of the life and work of Sir Ashley Bramall (*Labour Heritage Bulletin*, Autumn 2022), brought back memories of another Labour local government knight: Sir Richard Knowles, who led Birmingham City Council between 1984 – 1993. Richard or Dick Knowles was a notable figure in local government who played a major part in Birmingham's economic and cultural recovery.

Dick Knowles was a Brummie by adoption rather than birth. Born in May 1917 in Kent, Knowles left school at the age of 14

to work in the building industry. After wartime service in the Royal Engineers, Dick Knowles became a political agent and was recruited by the Co-operative Party as one of its national organisers. First elected to Birmingham City Council in 1972, Knowles specialized in planning and rapidly became chairman of the Planning Committee. During the 1970's and early 1980's political control of Birmingham City Council alternated the Conservative and Labour parties. Throughout this period Dick Knowles was in the front rank of Birmingham politicians. When Labour won an outright majority in 1984, Knowles was confirmed as Labour Group Leader and Leader of City Council.

Dick Knowles ran a City that was going through grim economic times. Once famed for its multiplicity of trades and high wages, Birmingham's industrial base had crumbled. Unemployment, crime, social unrest, and growing poverty were features of City life. Knowles realized that to recover Birmingham had to regain its confidence and switch from an industrial to a service-led economy. Under his leadership Birmingham underwent a remarkable recovery. Major projects, such as the construction of the International Convention Centre and the Symphony Hall, were started, which transformed the City centre and brought new investment into Birmingham. Dick Knowles was a pragmatic socialist who had the ability to work with people who held political views very different from his own. He could be abrasive, but he had a mischievous sense of humour and would often tease his Conservative opponents by greeting them as "my old comrades"!

Dick Knowles would not duck or evade controversial decisions if he thought they were necessary. Determined to raise

standards in Birmingham schools, Knowles appointed Professor Tim Brighouse as Director Education. The appointment was widely criticized, but the quality of education improved. Knowles put public safety before the movement of traffic by closing the grim underpasses that ran through the City centre. Knighted in 1989 for his services to local government, Knowles stepped down as leader of the council in 1993. He served as Lord Mayor in 1994 and finally left the City Council in 2000, having been a councillor for almost 30 years.

Throughout his leadership of the council, Knowles had to contend with a Conservative government that had little sympathy for the struggling cities of the midlands and the north. Denied investment from central government, Knowles looked to Europe and the private sector to fund Birmingham's regeneration. Dick Knowles was a gifted and distinguished local government leader who presided over Birmingham's regeneration. He deserves to be remembered.

## Corrections

Every day the *Guardian* lists corrections and clarifications in a corner of its letters page. The Labour Heritage Bulletin has to do the same for its last issue. On page 19 Ashley Bramall's name was spelt Ashley Bramwell. Many thanks to Tony Chapman for pointing this out. Also on page 5 under the article 'The Central Labour College' which closed down in 1929, was a photograph not of that college but of Ruskin College, Oxford which was founded in 1899 and of course is still going strong.

**Socialist Mission – Chiswick ILP activities: Sowing the seed for election harvest** (from *Chiswick Times* 14 May 1909)

**By John Grigg**

Socialism is one of the foremost questions of the day.....the Chiswick ILP is doing its share to keep the movement before the public eye with a 3-day special Socialist Mission on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday last.

Mr J.T. Westcott opened a largely attended meeting on the front common, Turnham Green, at mid-day on Sunday on the subject of ‘Monopoly’. He laid great emphasis on the recent ‘corner’ in wheat in America by Patten. Such brutal acts should not be enacted in Christian communities.....and the new morality would remove such possibilities from our midst. He showed that monopoly privately controlled was bad, while if controlled by the people was of great benefit.

On Sunday evening, Mr J. Mylles, West London District Organiser spoke, however owing to the freezing wind, the fireside became a counter attraction, and although at the start the audience was fairly large, the cold wind gradually drove many home.

Mr Mylles returned to the attack at a big meeting at the corner of Elliott Road. ‘The only equality that socialism demanded was equality of opportunity and equal social conditions, so that the potentialities of the human mind could be developed to the utmost. Where the means of life were invested in a few lords, these could not obtain and were only possible where they were publicly owned and controlled. It was

said that competition created the best in human life, but it was strange that while the competitive idea was taught to the workers, who never had the chance of fair competition, the capitalists were always working for the development of collectivism in their business concerns – the company, the combine and the trust.

Amongst the railway companies, they were the most glaring. Yet railway workers were told they must not combine, but compete individually. How ludicrous! .....There was on foot a scheme to amalgamate three of the largest provision companies in the country. These huge combines are a menace to a well-regulated developing society. The public must either own the trust, or it would own the public.

The same theme was continued on Tuesday night by Mr W.H. Green. This meeting lasted almost 2 hours, the audience showing the keenest interest and there was a noticeable absence of disorder. Questions at all the meetings were plentiful and one of the organisers said, very welcome, being of a thoughtful and intelligent kind. ‘It may seem,’ he added, ‘that our work is not efficacious, because its development seems so slow. We have no penitent form. Our work is to sow the seed and keep the ground free from weeds. At elections, the harvest is garnered. A fortnight ago the public was surprised to read the result of the Attercliffe election (*See article below about Joseph Pointer*).

Some day, as a result of all this preparation work of a comparative few, the world will awake and read that the people have come by their own. It will surprise many, but will not surprise us. Therefore we shall continue the delivery of the message.’

## Sheffield's First Labour MP

By John Grigg

**Joseph Pointer** (12 June 1875 – 19 November 1914) was apprenticed as an engineers' patternmaker aged 15 and held most of the offices of United Patternmakers' Association.

Born in the Atterfield district of Sheffield, Pointer became a convinced socialist early in his life, and joined the Independent Labour Party. He attended Ruskin College in Oxford for six months to study Constitutional History and Sociology. On his return to Sheffield Pointer took part in a strike, and was thereafter unable to gain regular employment. He was nonetheless elected Chair of the Sheffield Trades Council, and stood unsuccessfully for Sheffield City Council in 1906 and 1907. In 1908, he was finally elected for the Brightside ward.

In 1909, J. Batty Langley, Liberal MP for Sheffield Atterfield died, and Pointer stood for the Labour Party in the ensuing by-election. With the non Labour vote divided between the Liberal candidate, and both official and unofficial Conservative candidates, Pointer achieved a narrow victory, becoming Sheffield's first Labour MP. He held the seat in both the January and December 1910 general elections which the Liberal Party did not contest.

In the House of Commons, Pointer was appointed as a junior whip. In 1912 he undertook a visit to the West Indies on behalf of the Parliamentary Labour Party to ascertain the conditions of manual labour prevailing there. Joseph died in Sheffield in 1914 aged 39.

In 1902 he married Jane Annie Tweddle and they had two daughters.



Joseph Pointer in the 1910s





## Book Reviews

### Harold Wilson by Nick Thomas-Symonds

Weidenfeld and Nicholson £25

#### Reviewed by Duncan Bowie

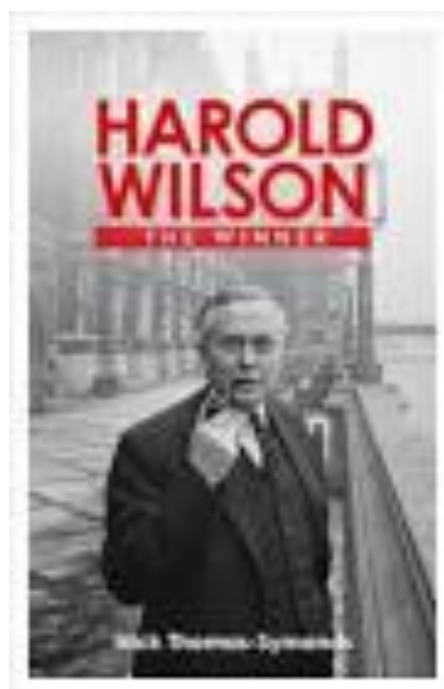
Wilson has been the subject of two previous substantive biographies – the classic study by Ben Pimlott, published in 1992 and the authorised biography by Philip Zeigler published a year later. There were also a number of contemporary studies – an early illustrated portrait by Michael Foot, a more critical study by his Trotskyite nephew, Paul Foot and Andrew Roth's characterisation of Wilson as 'Walter Mitty'. Recent years have seen a number of volumes of essays seeking to re-evaluate Wilson. Thomas-Symonds study is an attempt, and a largely successful one, to rehabilitate Wilson. Thomas-Symonds is an Oxford historian, who now sits on Labour's front bench as shadow international trade secretary, having briefly served as shadow Home Secretary. He has written biographies of Bevan and Attlee. I have always been puzzled how leading MPs find the time to write biographies and carry out the research required to say something new about a former leading politician. Wilson is now a largely forgotten figure. The new biography is subtitled '*The Winner*', which sums up Thomas-Symonds' perspective. The cover blurb by Keir Starmer – 'Puts Harold Wilson in his rightful place' is perhaps open to interpretation. Wilson won four out of five general elections, losing to the Conservatives under Heath in 1970. I remember that election – I had a poster of Wilson in my school bedroom window, which just happened to be visible from the street Wilson would have walked down from his house in Lord North Street on his

way to the House of Commons. I remember being in the front row of the crowd in Downing Street when Heath arrived at No 10, appearing in a newspaper photograph as someone just behind me threw some paint at the new Prime Minister.

What is often not acknowledged is that Wilson was on the left of the party, a follower of Nye Bevan, and defeated the right-wing trade unionist George Brown in the contest for the Labour Party leadership in 1963.

#### Eight Years as Premier

Thomas-Symonds is not the most exciting of biographers and reading the book is something of a slog, as it tracks Wilson's eight years as premier, as well as his early political career (as a member of Attlee's cabinet at only 31), his years in opposition and his retirement. Although unable due to space constraints, to present a detailed analysis of successive crises, Thomas-



Symonds nevertheless effectively demonstrates Wilson's successes – managing a cabinet of highly skilled politicians including Roy Jenkins, Jim Callaghan, Barbara Castle, Richard Crossman, Tony Crosland and Denis Healey, not short on egos; maintaining sound relations with trade unions (and reaching solemn and binding agreements with leaders such as Hugh Scanlon, Jack Jones and Joe Gormley in a context of increasing trade union militancy and power – it was the miners who brought down Heath in 1974 and returned Wilson to No 10. Wilson avoided dividing the party over Europe – the party was to split with the Social Democratic Party founded after Wilson's retirement. Wilson also kept the UK out of the Vietnam war, despite the tensions this position created with successive US presidents. Thomas-Symonds also records the numerous social reforms achieved under the Wilson regime, supported by Wilson despite his own social conservatism. Wilson was a pragmatist but, despite his academic and technocratic background, he also believed in basic socialist values, in the Beveridge tradition of believing the state had a responsibility to help the most vulnerable. One of his few polemical writings was his book *The War on World Poverty: An Appeal to the Conscience of Mankind* published in 1953. Some regarded Wilson as devious, or even 'unprincipled', but whatever criticisms one may have of his leadership style, his achievements compare with those of his successors, including those of Tony Blair, who was certainly less rooted in traditional Labour values than was Wilson.

### **The MI5 Plot**

The last couple of chapters in Thomas Symonds book shift somewhat from the chronological narrative. In one, he spends

considerable space re-examining Wilson's suspicion of the security service and the so-called plot to bring Wilson down. This story has been the subject of several books as well as a chapter in Christopher Andrews' authorised history of MI5. Another chapter focuses on Wilson's kitchen cabinet and the relationship between Wilson, Marcia Williams, Joe Haines and Bernard Donoghue, revisiting the gossip that Williams had an affair with Wilson or at least claimed to have had an affair with him. Again, there is no substantive new information here (other than a reference to No 10 being bugged – apparently by MI5 rather than by the Russians). There was a widespread belief at the time that Wilson retired because some scandal was about to emerge. Wilson had always planned to retire and he was becoming quite seriously ill. Like Thatcher, he had dementia, and the story of his final years is a sad one. I am not sure what the author was trying to prove in his final chapters and in his very odd conclusion which focuses more on Marcia Williams than it does on his nominal subject.



Marcia Williams

## **Always Red: autobiography of Len McCluskey, OR Books , 2022**

**Reviewed by Barbara Humphries**



Len McCluskey is the former leader of UNITE the Union. The first part of his autobiography describes his rise to General Secretary of the union, having worked his way through its ranks. His first full time employment however was in the Liverpool docks, where he was a shop steward in the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). He describes his philosophy of life as 'principled pragmatism'. This meant that as an officer of UNITE he put its members interests first. He was caught on TV shouting out 'rubbish' to Labour leader, Ed Miliband, who was making a speech in which he referred to irresponsible strikes by dinner ladies. He writes : I have never heard of an irresponsible strike, workers do not like going on strike. He always gave trades union support to industrial disputes if they went ahead, even if he had argued against them.

He counts himself as a supporter of nuclear disarmament even though many of his members work in the nuclear arms industry. Without plans for diversification, he says UNITE is duty bound to protect well paid jobs enjoyed by its members.

The same applies to climate change, Without the prospect of new green jobs, workers in the oil, gas and coal industries will never vote for their own redundancies.

### **Liverpool home**

Mccluskey was born into a working class community in Liverpool which shaped his whole life. He has a passionate loyalty to the city and its people. He shared their rage over the injustice dealt out to the 96 football fans who died at Hillsborough and was delighted at the 'unlawful' killing verdict against the Yorkshire police, which finally came about due to a much pressure for an independent inquiry.

As a teenager in Liverpool , McCluskey pays tribute to the Mersey sound, including the Beatles in the 1960s. He became a supporter of Liverpool football club. However the 1980s was to be a bitter decade. The Merseyside area faced large scale unemployment as local factories closed and employment in the docks contracted. He puts this down to the economic policies of Thatcher's government. But, he says, the City always fights back and he praises the work of the Labour Council which put housing for working people first and set a deficit budget. Discounting Kinnock's infamous speech at the 1985 Labour Party conference, he said that council never had the intention of making its staff redundant, and that these notices were a legal requirement. Eric Heffer left the conference platform in protest at this lie.

Mccluskey, as assistant general secretary of the TGWU played a key part in the formation of UNITE from the TGWU and AMICUS, ensuring that the democratic culture of the TGWU would prevail in the new union. At this stage he was active in the union's Broad Left.

## **From Falkirk to Finsbury Park**

Although foremost a trades unionist, Mccluskey was to play a role in the politics of the Labour Party that he had not envisaged. In 2015 Labour, in spite of high hopes of winning the General Election, lost to the Conservatives with a small majority. Ed Miliband who had defeated his elder brother to become leader of the Party, with trades union votes, had been only marginally critical of the Con-Dems Coalition and its austerity policies, saying that the government was ‘cutting too far and too fast’. On the other hand the trades unions moved leftward and there were mass demonstrations against the government. Organisations like Occupy, Britain Uncut, and the Peoples’ Assembly against Austerity sprang up. Ed Miliband resigned immediately on losing the 2015 General Election and the campaign for a new Labour leader took off.

The second part of the autobiography is about Mccluskey’s part in the affairs of the Labour Party. UNITE had seen its nominated candidate for Falkirk defeated in favour of a Blairite backed by Party HQ. The Scottish National Party went on to win the seat. The UNITE candidate, a shop steward was victimised and the factory at Grangemouth was closed. The right wing of the party wasted no time in blaming the election defeat on Ed Miliband. Now was the time to get one of their number elected. However they had not foreseen the anger in the labour movement, or the impact of Ed Miliband’s reforms for electing the party leader.

A special conference had been called to approve a new constitution. The Collins Report, opposed by most of the left who did not approve what was seen as a break in the link between the unions and the party was overwhelmingly supported. The Electoral College was replaced by one

member one vote. Affiliated unions would still have an input but on the basis of individual members registering to vote, rather than a bloc vote from the unions concerned. Lastly there was to be a third group of registered supporters who would pay three pounds to vote. In return for this, Labour MPs would get a higher threshold for a candidate to get on to the ballot paper. UNITE supported these rule changes, as a result of a deal between Mccluskey and Lord Collins. The right wing of the party assumed that it would be victory for one of their candidates although they were not sure which one. However the opposite was true and the rest is as they say, history. Mccluskey went on to become one of Jeremy Corbyn’s staunch supporters. The smaller affiliation actually gave him more power as more union funds, rather than given to the Labour Party, often criticised by his members, could now be targeted towards selective campaigns and Labour candidates.

In spite of union disappointment with New Labour and Ed Miliband, Mccluskey never considered setting up a new workers party, which he said ‘would be blown to dust like Change UK.’ His pragmatism put him at odds with activists over Brexit which he said lost Labour the 2019 election. The final chapter deals with his relationship with Keir Starmer. Starmer was not his preferred candidate but when he was elected, McCluskey offered to work with him to secure a Labour victory. This came to an end when Starmer took away the Labour whip from his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn. Mccluskey always used his negotiating skills to attempt to broker deals between antagonists in the Party. Often this was to lead to treachery on their part, showing how fleeting friendships can be in the world of politics.

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