

## POLITICS IN FAMINE-STRICKEN PRESTON

### AN EXAMINATION OF LIBERAL PARTY MANAGEMENT, 1861-65

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Read 15 September 1955

PROFESSOR NORMAN GASH has shown<sup>(1)</sup> that the Great Reform Act of 1832 altered the British political structure much less than has been generally realised. The franchise had been placed on a more rational basis but the machinery of politics outside of Parliament remained largely unchanged. This paper is an attempt to show how party organisation during the 1860s developed under such conditions and in the single instance of Preston, chosen because the papers of George Melly in the Liverpool Record Office contain over six hundred letters and circulars which related to Melly's political activity with the Preston Liberals as their prospective candidate between 1861 and 1865.

The background to the period<sup>(2)</sup> has to be kept in sight for little of it appears in the letters themselves. Preston lay in the grip of the cotton famine. By the summer of 1862 the township was housing 25,000 cotton workers, almost all of whom were receiving relief at a cost of £800 weekly met from the Poor Rates. The owners of the seventy-six mills in Preston, valued at four to five million pounds sterling, paid about £200 a week in rates, and had so far subscribed no more than £1,800 to the relief fund. The operatives had withdrawn £18,000 from their savings and in their destitution received about 1s. 5d. a head weekly from the guardians with an additional 5d. from the relief fund. Such figures speak for themselves. "Sophistry may defend but justice cannot excuse this most painful exhibition of covetousness in its worst guise."<sup>(3)</sup>

The borough had, in 1859, returned to Parliament one Whig, C. P. Grenfell, and one Tory, R. A. Cross, but the Roman Catholic vote was steadily hardening against supporters of Lord Palmerston, whose foreign policy was proving offensive to the Pope. Of the Radical interest little had been heard since Orator Hunt's unopposed return in 1832, but it must be presumed to have given its support to the Whig candidates. Despite this the Whigs were barely holding their own. The franchise had been narrowed by the Reform Act of 1832 but the voters on the old franchise list retained their

<sup>(1)</sup> N. Gash. *Politics in the age of Peel: a Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation, 1830-1850* (1953).

<sup>(2)</sup> *Vide* R. A. Arnold, *The History of the Cotton Famine* (1864), pp. 204-5.

<sup>(3)</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205.

rights during their lifetime. The total electorate steadily declined as the increase of ten pound householders failed to keep pace with the deaths of the old voters, and in 1859 stood at 2731.

This was the position when George Melly appeared on the scene in search of a seat. A wealthy, successful, Liverpool cotton broker he had been born to the purple of Liverpool society in 1832 as the nephew of William Rathbone. His father, André Melly of Geneva, had married a Greg and founded the Liverpool firm of Melly, Romilly and Co., American merchants. He himself had been educated at Rugby, had joined his father's business in 1854 and had prospered. In his autobiography, a charming, urbane, and often very witty little work,<sup>(4)</sup> he tells of his early experiences in search of a seat: "I think it was in 1859 that the idea was first mooted of my entering Parliament, by Sir William Hayter, who suddenly ordered me to give him a cheque for £2,000, leave London that night, cross to Ireland, and arriving at an obscure little fishing town in the South-West the day before the nomination, be returned by an overwhelming majority in a constituency numbering, I think, two hundred and fifty electors, and which has long since been swept away. Having the cheque in view, it appeared that this constituency had no objection to a young, unknown Unitarian. I demurred, pleading the suddenness of the invitation, which rendered it impossible to consult my wife and friends. Also I did not see my way to become a mere Government nominee, or an Irish member, or to purchase a seat in a manner so barefaced. So I hesitated and was saved, but Sir William Hayter, the great Palmerston whip, always said I had showed the white feather, and he would knock me off his list. This is how things were done in the pre-Reform days. A young flour miller, also curiously enough a Unitarian, was returned by a handsome majority the following week."<sup>(5)</sup> Which should be enough to illustrate something of Melly's amused, almost continental detachment, coupled with a real concern for moral values even in politics.

Melly, like most candidates of the period, took relatively little part in electioneering activity. In retrospect he deplored the fact that "the selection of candidates and the management of the elections, rested entirely in the hands of self-appointed committees, generally a committee of one, in whose hands the miserable candidate was a puppet. He had nothing whatever to do with the conduct of the election or the expenditure. His part was to spend his mornings in the preparation of his speeches, his evenings in the delivery of them, and to be harried every hour of the day with deputations and interviews. . . ."<sup>(6)</sup> He could rely on his Liverpool friends and relations to grace an occasional platform, but local jealousy prevented anything more on the grounds of interference; his wife was all for a good muster of broadcloth but she too realised "that there is nothing more difficult than to have to sit still and watch others working for oneself and probably see them doing what one thinks

<sup>(4)</sup> George Melly. *Revelations of Sixty Years, 1833-93* (1893).

<sup>(5)</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>(6)</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

quite mismanaging things and just to have to smile and say thank you and declare it is all right". She saw the candidate as an invalid on a sofa trying to be gracious to helpers and being scolded when he failed. There are signs of some help beyond Preston;<sup>(7)</sup> Theodore Rathbone promised to allow a free (and therefore largely Liberal) vote by the employees of the North Union Railway;<sup>(8)</sup> C. N. Ewart, the Liverpool M.P., wrote encouraging letters and acted as a valuable channel to the Government, but as for going to Preston this would be taken as a "dictation";<sup>(9)</sup> there are scarcely any letters from the sitting Whig member, Grenfell, and Brand's notes<sup>(10)</sup> are of the shortest. Everything depended on the local committee and it is now time to meet a few of them.

The cotton manufacturers formed the most influential group in the persons of John and Richard Goodair, George Miller, George and Samuel Smith, John and Joseph Haslam, Edward Hollins and William Ainsworth, most of whom were also on the Council; William and James Dobson, printers, owned the *Preston Guardian*; Cornelius Satterthwaite was a chemist and druggist, George Teale a woollen draper and hatter, William Howitt a surgeon, and Edward Ambler a printer and stationer.

A lively series of contemporary biographical sketches<sup>(11)</sup> helps to distinguish several of these men. John Goodair "is a self made man and has been the architect of his own fortune". Born in London in 1808 the son of a cloth merchant who had failed in business, he set up as a handloom cotton manufacturer at Preston in 1836 and prospered rapidly to become one of the most powerful of the Lancashire cotton masters. He owned pews in half the town's churches. He never spared himself, leading men in various enterprises and striving to resolve trade disputes in which field he was "much in demand". An energetic council member "massive, rubicund heavy eyed and shrewd" he paid no attention to his appearance but habitually dressed in a favourite shabby coat. He gained, however, the reputation of changing his political apparel rather more frequently: "Mr. Goodair is in politics not, as many suppose, a Radical. He is a Whig and sympathises none with the advanced, fire-eating party. Municipally although mainly siding with the Liberals he has never tied himself down."

Samuel Smith appears as a man of very different character. Born 1799 in Preston the son of a successful butcher and grandson of the first Methodist there, he had become connected with cotton in 1844 and developed interests in soap-boiling and candlemaking. Cool and astute he spoke with a precise unctuous evenness; such was his reverential, pious, sedate appearance that "you feel a sort of Praise-

<sup>(7)</sup> M1262, Melly Correspondence in Liverpool Record Office.

<sup>(8)</sup> M1303.

<sup>(9)</sup> M1280.

<sup>(10)</sup> Henry Bouverie William Brand, first Viscount Hampden (1814-1892), succeeded Sir William Hayter as senior Liberal whip; subsequently became Speaker in 1872.

<sup>(11)</sup> "Atticus" [A. Hewitson]. *Preston Town Council or Portraits of Local Legislators* (1870).

God Barebones sensation coming over you when viewing him silently and for the first time". He was however blessed with a dry humour on occasions.

Of similar mould came John Haslam born at Bolton in 1822. With his brother as partner he owned the Parker Street mill, burnt in 1860. Typical of a later generation of Methodists he had broken with the parent body and become a Radical. A clear, short speaker, earnest, neat, energetic-looking, he wore his coat well buttoned up above strong-heeled Wellington boots. He built a chapel at his mill, and "did not speak just to suit his customers".

William Dobson, born in 1820 and educated at Preston Grammar School, appears to have been the most cultivated member of the group. He had a reputation as a competent local historian and excellent antiquary. His corpulent form, broadly radiant features, bushy yellow-grey whiskers and reasonable manner must have eased many difficult and tense situations.

Two lawyers who worked constantly with the committee also deserve some attention. Councillor Thomas Edelston started life as a joiner but an injury forced him to abandon his trade. He joined Messrs Lodge, Harris & Sons, solicitors, as an errand boy in 1844, later became articled to the same firm in 1861, and finally qualified as a solicitor himself, a "tall, swing-onwards, stirring, knowing-featured person" resourceful in argument and powerful in declamation. William Brumfitt born in 1814 began as a barber in Old Hall Street, Liverpool, and gained through the conversation of his customers a remarkable grasp of political affairs, so much so that he gave up a good business in 1852 to become Liberal agent in Liverpool. Following the elections of the same year, he conducted petitions against the two Tory members returned and unseated them both. He retired in 1876 after twenty years as Liberal agent for Liverpool and South-West Lancashire, having made a name for himself in the registration courts opposite R. Bennett the Tory lawyer, but their protracted legal battles never impaired a deep personal friendship between them.

Finally there was Edward Ambler, the printer, of whom no sketch, whether literary or otherwise seems to have survived. There is, however, much by and about him in the Melly correspondence for he was nothing if not industrious, a born schemer who clearly enjoyed the reputation of a local *eminence grise* toiling away behind the scenes. For several years he served first Grenfell and then Melly as confidential adviser, and disliked being known as an agent except when so addressed in court. All his dealings with Melly were smothered in secrecy. Letters were received unannounced and locked in a special drawer; visits to Liverpool were never mentioned "as I have been fully aware that such letters and visits would be calculated to give 'offence' to susceptible individuals who are unable to understand my 'confidential' position".<sup>(12)</sup> He feared spies in the

<sup>(12)</sup> M1614.

Post Office and in consequence asked Melly to use printed addresses, and forgo his crest on envelopes; "as to the postman, I think I can find a suitable man and more than one if you want him; but not a Tory. If the young man I name fits the place, and I think he will, he has a pious horror of *that* party and all their doings".<sup>(13)</sup>

Quite naturally in the circumstances Ambler's various political colleagues became jealous, suspicious and finally antagonistic—and not without cause. Satterthwaite, a Catholic and a champion of the Liberals since 1847, had formed a Liberal licensed victuallers' association with Melly as patron, which in 1864 numbered 189 members as against the 60 members of the Tory counterpart. Melly, on ignoring the former and attending a dinner of the latter, received a stiff letter from Thomas Goodair: "I don't know who is your adviser at Preston but I think you are not in good hands and the sooner you get into others the better",<sup>(14)</sup> though he must have known Ambler was at the bottom of it. Matters came to a head in the autumn elections of 1864 when the Liberals under Ambler's direction appeared to be losing ground until Satterthwaite and his staff were rushed in to the weak points and saved the day. George Smith Jnr. wrote angrily: "The Mayor congratulated Mr. Sat. on his generalship in the two wards—nearly all our Liberal friends condemn Mr. A. for taking upon himself in conducting wards which he has not the ability to carry out".<sup>(15)</sup> Ambler defended his actions and disclosed a policy of compromise as part of his plan to preserve the peace of the borough at the next general election. The party was at cross purposes and not for the first time.

Ambler's secrecy may have been his undoing but he was constantly complaining that Dr. Howitt and Thomas Goodair, the men who should have led the party, simply would not take the initiative. Instead Ambler himself had to direct affairs in a manner which suited him best—by infiltration, analysis and vigilance, by winning Tory confidence in Melly as a fit colleague for Hesketh so that in July 1864 he could write, "Mr. Watson [the Tory solicitor] knows I am one of the *wire pullers*, and because we are old personal friends though political opponents he may know what we mean and so advise his party. I think that when we parted he was not so warm an anti-Mellyite as when we met". Without proper leadership at Preston Ambler could scarcely attempt more than steady activity in the wards to strengthen a compromise policy, and whatever his faults he retained Melly's confidence to the end.

Under the gaze of these men Melly appears to have served a probationary period. He probably made the first overtures early in 1861 when the Liberal Registration Society in London wrote to Preston for particulars about him<sup>(16)</sup> and urged the local Committee to join the Society. From then on he had to show what kind of support he could command before the influential Liberals in Preston were prepared to render assistance. There is evidence of other

(13) M1378.

(14) M2130.

(15) M2135.

(16) M733.

challengers including Sir P. Hesketh-Fleetwood; Melly's task after making his weight felt generally was to placate the various conflicting elements of the committee. Month succeeded month and the Preston Liberals remained uncommitted. In September 1861 Ambler wrote that the situation still remained fluid. "Sir P. Hesketh-Fleetwood has been all but selected as one of the candidates. . . . There appears some movement the strings of which are pulled in Manchester to prevent you being our member".<sup>(17)</sup> At the back of this, according to Ambler, was Baxter Langley; but the committee was growing restless at this interference from "Newells Buildings". Between November 1861 and February George Smith Jnr. warned Melly against Langley, told him to keep clear of Liberals with a bad reputation amongst the more respectable, chided him for putting open letters in the *Guardian* only and demanded that Satterthwaite and the Catholics be adequately supported; the unfortunate Melly was being severely put in his place, and already had five distinct groups among the Liberals to contend with—the Liberal Registration Society represented by T. Miller, Goodair and Ambler, the older Liberals piqued because the society had not consulted them when Hesketh-Fleetwood stood down through ill health, Satterthwaite and the Catholics, and lastly Baxter Langley, Toulmin and the temperance advocates. Langley admitted his early opposition to Melly but, on swearing fealty to the party's choice, regretted no general meeting of Liberals had endorsed the committee's decision "then there could be no more intriguing and election dodging".<sup>(18)</sup>

The internal weakness and procrastination was admitted many months later when plans for 1863 were being laid, but such wisdom after the event by Miller and Ambler cost Melly dear in the spring of 1862. Hesketh-Fleetwood did not officially retire until February; the committee sought a second candidate amongst applicants, three-quarters of whom were lawyers; they then decided against a second candidate and had to travel to London to convince Brand on this point. Not until the end of February could Melly regard himself as the one official choice despite the vast amount of work that needed to be done in winning votes. On 26 March Cross applied for the Chiltern Hundreds and Preston went to the polls a week later. Short of a miracle failure was assured, and before the introduction of the ballot this manifestation of the unexpected just did not happen. Hesketh the Tory led from the start and as his opponent wryly remarks, "I had what the Americans call 'a high old time' and what I called 'a great moral victory'. My meetings were crowded with enthusiastic thousands, and at the show of hands in the market place on nomination day I probably had twenty to one in my favour; but these men and boys had no vote and I was beaten by 1,527 to 1,014".<sup>(19)</sup>

After the poll the expense accounts began to come in, and Brumfitt's letters are full of retrenchment; on 8 April the canvassing

<sup>(17)</sup> M1241.

<sup>(18)</sup> M1235.

<sup>(19)</sup> Melly, *Recollections*, p. 23.

account was reduced by £200; canvassers were to lose subsistence money and a total saving of £500 was expected. On the following day the canvassers were paid. "It is the most disgusting and disagreeable job I have ever had. We cut them down delightfully and without giving offence I think. If we had not taken a firm stand we should not have got off for much less than £5,000 but as it is I have some hopes of bringing it near to £3,500 unless we have some very heavy public-house bills".<sup>(20)</sup> *The Guardian* had some revealing observations to make about these so called "canvassers", who were hired at five shillings a day for fourteen days before the election.<sup>(21)</sup> Payment was made as soon as the vote was recorded, and in this way the bribery laws were circumvented. In Fishwick ward two-fifths of the electorate were so hired by one side and one-fifth by the other to canvass the remaining two-fifths. A whole street was hired by the two sides presumably to canvass each other. But these five hundred or so professional voters coming early to the polls were decisive in giving the vital initial leads. The most corrupt were not the poorest people but the tradespeople and minor shopkeepers, a number of whom combined into a committee, the members of which would not vote for less than £20 a piece. Against all this the editor's anti-corruption society was powerless having limited its activities to municipal politics only. Yet even in local elections one ward had cost a candidate £400. During the autumn elections of 1861, 80,000 glasses of beer were paid for by the candidates in three weeks. But says the editorial [*Preston Guardian* 16 November 1861], "The acceptance of bribes by the middle classes is almost as general as the drinking of beer by the lower".

This, then, must be seen as the background to Brumfitt's general distaste. But there were other items; legal charges £350; public-house expenses £500<sup>(22)</sup> "the Bull Hotel excepted". But of one publican claiming £300 from the Tories, Brumfitt wrote, "I heard Goodair can square him and make him a willing witness in our favour—he always was with us before this time"; so much for honour and thieves. A rather sinister item numbered a hundred "roughs" at one shilling a time engaged by "your legal representative in St. John's ward... he must have been mad". Brumfitt insisted on paying all claims himself rather than distributing lump sums to the wards where the bosses admitted "that their accounts were made up on a scale when they were not aware that the aggregate expenses would not be so much and when they thought there was plenty of money"; an odd system of costing to say the least of it. One such person admitted that he had stocked his house with provisions and drink and dispensed them to everyone that would come in, and then gone the rounds of the public houses giving the rest away; he presented his bill for £33 and Brumfitt grudgingly paid him because of his useful connections. Upon this torrent of

<sup>(20)</sup> For further details see M1282-7.

<sup>(21)</sup> *Preston Guardian*, 19 April 1862.

<sup>(22)</sup> Public Houses held open house to about £25-£30 each.

expense an anonymous letter floats proudly alone containing "5 shillings worth of postage stamps witch [sic] you was over charged".<sup>(23)</sup>

On the whole the Liberals probably thought they had been fairly generous despite Brumfitt's paring down; in which case the following<sup>(24)</sup> would have put their £4,000 expense account in its correct perspective:

Croft St. School,  
Preston.

April 10 1862.

Sir,

The election of 1862 will ever be memorable in the annals of Preston Conservatism they (the Conservatives) having won such a glorious victory over us—the Liberals.

Such canvassing for those ten days I ne'er did behold, and in every ward almost we had the majority of promises by far. But the Conservatives' money, not their principles have got them in. Imagine the sum of £12,000 being laid down for voters alone, the canvasser's order being not to lose a vote if money would or could purchase it. No not if it came to £25. That is the way their business was done and was it not likely that your opponent would get in. When our promised voters came to our Committee Rooms expecting the money which had been promised them and when they asked for it received the cold answer "You'll get it after dinner". Was it not provoking to hear this when they were faithfully promised the night previous they should receive it first thing in the morning as soon as that they had voted? They did not like to trust us again. No they went away, and meeting their fellow voters are asked "Has ta geet the brass?" The reply "No" and asking if they had they said, "Aye, see the' mon three sov'rins". Would not this fill their hearts with gladness to both hear and see it? Yes, for they like their fellows voted for those who would pay them thinking that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, caring not who the party was, whether "Melly or Hesketh" so that they got their money. This was the case for they (the Conservatives) sent to all the voters, whether promised or not. Many, aye the majority of Hesketh's voters were satisfied with the "money" yet *dissatisfied* with the person for whom they were voting. Many were heard to say "Well after O' I'd rother voet for Melly bur they'll give us nowt or I'd voet for him", and as soon as they had received their money from, and given (nay not given), sold their vote they were still to be heard crying "Melly for ever". So Sir I think you will see plainly that if you or your men had "let fly" your money early in the morning say for example six o'clock as did H-'s party you would most certainly have got in. There was sad complaining on our side not a penny was to be had.

They went for one, old, *lame* man to vote at our booth (Brook St.) offering him his money, which was due to him for twelve days service, but when he *had* voted, he was forsaken instantaneously and had to get home as best he could. Is this Liberalism? No there was not one piece of money stirring at all. If there *was* money it was "bottled" and *still is* "bottled" for I at least can't get my fee namely a guinea which is due to me as Poll Clerk.

'Tis nothing but what one might have expected, had we known that no money would be stirring. A man who has seen twenty-two elections in Preston said to me on Thursday night last that he was sure the one that "played" with the most money would get in. His words are verified. It was nothing but natural that, a poor, half-clad, starved, clammed man with a wife and children having a vote will barter his principle for money.

Many that had *antipathy* for Hesketh voted for him on the money's account. I was surprised to find at the close of the poll that you had 1014 votes that were

(23) M. 1295.

(24) M. 1296.

truly Liberal gifts. Our town as you will be aware is in desperate low circumstances and "money" was every *poor* man's cry and motto.

Yet still I may without flattery say, that if "principle" had had to have got one in, *you* would have been *the* one for all their thoughts were centred on *you*. . . .

Your obedient servant,  
John Lockwood.'

As soon as the result of the election was known and as the means by which it had been achieved became more and more apparent, Melly's supporters clamoured louder and louder for a petition. Only Baxter Langley (who had his own reasons for opposing "Ambler & Co.") warned, "Do not be gammoned into consenting to have a *petition*. A Commission of Enquiry on the spot may be useful but a Committee in London means only a *further plunder of your purse*",<sup>(25)</sup> and the *Guardian* promptly carried the editorials already referred to. At a meeting of Melly's committee, A. J. Squarey warned members<sup>(26)</sup> that a petition would cost a minimum of £2,000; £750 was raised on the spot, but Miller and Goodair believed that if Sir George Hesketh was disqualified Melly would not be carried in a second contest. Ambler and the others reluctantly agreed but pinned their faith in better organisation. Squarey continued that Hesketh would not be allowed to recriminate unless the Liberals claimed the seat, which they would not do, and that a commission of enquiry into corrupt practices could only issue at the instance of both Houses on a report by the election committee.

Meanwhile Baxter Langley continued to tremble for Melly's purse. Counter petition, he said, would follow petition and as for bribery and corruption it was "six of one and half-a-dozen of the other"; his independent enquiry would make no reference to the seat; a purified borough would return two Liberals; "we can then blow the system to the devil and the promoters also. Messrs. Goodair and Co. *will then cease to be able to be the nominators of our members* and the people will return men of their choice".<sup>(27)</sup> That Ambler at least was trying to force the pace cannot be denied as he had everything to gain and little to lose from his own pocket in further expense; and he seems to have taken Melly, smarting with a sense of humiliation, along with him for a while. Ambler, in his account of a meeting on 12 April, makes out that Goodair and the others of "our side" were all for a petition which would vindicate the Liberals and show that under more favourable conditions they would not be the weaker party by five hundred votes; a policy of "do nothing" proposed by the rest would be an admission of minority and supporters would drift away to the stronger side. Ambler later refers to a letter in which Goodair speaks of a "cowardly abandonment" of the petition.

Melly could see through and beyond all these outward protestations. He knew there would be no petition and was shrewd enough

<sup>(25)</sup> M1247.

<sup>(26)</sup> M.1246.

<sup>(27)</sup> M1247.

to know why. He told his brother Charles that Goodair was not keen to be cross-examined, and "Miller is in love with me and wants to get me in—no one dreams of disfranchising this blazing hole—and I have sufficient power to stop the thing when and where I like". Meanwhile he is grateful for a breathing space, "sick to death" of politics and "disappointed to an extent no-one not even Sarah knows". But £4,000 has been spent, "I will hang on to the place till I see my way to it—or some better seat".

And so he wrote to Goodair, who disliked him as a Unitarian but backed him loyally, that he could spare no more money, that he was all for a petition, a view strengthened by interviews with Gladstone, Brand and the others, but as he hoped to contest the seat in future he would personally take no part in it since this would jeopardise his chances. The petition was quietly dropped.

This affair of the petition has been treated in some detail to show what a welter of cross-purposes, real and imagined motives, inter-related tensions and states bordering upon blackmail kept men in politics and kept politics in such a parlous condition. The Liberals could have had an "open and shut" case at Preston (as they very nearly had) but too much could have come to light on both sides. This was the Tories' strongest weapon, indeed the strongest weapon of all those interested in maintaining the old system for what could be gained from it in the way of money, interest and preferment. At no point in this account will the failure to raise the level of politics in this stricken town by Melly and the more idealistic Liberals appear more complete. No wonder Melly was disappointed, "a miserable unknown atheistical ignominiously defeated cock".

Apart from financial considerations the most critical factor was the attitude of the churches. Melly as a Unitarian was believed by many to be little better than an atheist, but he himself naturally rated freedom of thought very high, gave impartially to religious charities (with and without Ambler's approval) and spread his appearances judiciously amongst all sects. With Evangelicals and Dissenters he remained on good terms, the Roman Catholics quite liked him as a person, but so long as he was identified with the party of Palmerston very few could see their way to vote for him. Palmerston had offended the Pope and this cost his struggling candidates the Catholic vote where it was most needed. When Melly wrote to Richard Temple, at that time headmaster of Rugby, sounding him about Anglican support, Temple replied, "Concerning the Clerical interest at Preston or elsewhere I can only quote what the Duke of Ormond said when a client told him he had no friend at court but God and his Grace—'No two persons can less serve you there'".<sup>(28)</sup>

In addition to these general groupings for and against, certain sections were prepared to give Melly their support. Mr. Lupton at Benson and Mallets, himself a Catholic, had many Catholic friends and relations, who were also publicans with two votes apiece. Later, Ambler was to handle the bills of such publicans sympatheti-

<sup>(28)</sup> M1230.

cally as being "faithful among the faithless found". During the canvass Joseph Catteral, the election auditor, expressed himself bluntly, declaring that even the politically Liberal Catholics had said that, if they did not vote for Hesketh, they would withhold their votes from Melly and these would be joined by some Anglicans and Dissenters on religious grounds. The Catholic Mr. Chaloner when approached said he would not support Melly as a Palmerston man because in addition "he had two daughters and some money at Rome"; while nevertheless suggesting a visit to Preston by Heywood Bright, who would be quite prepared to say "he considered the Pope a very good old institution and he would be very sorry if he were given up"; a telling vignette of Melly's brother-in-law. Turner apparently was a key man where the Catholic interest was concerned. In August 1861 Ambler had praised Melly's bold denunciation of him in the South Lancashire elections, but later this was regretted. John Aspinall, the recorder of Liverpool a Roman Catholic and an ardent Mellyite, after working for him despite his official position as a Q.C. at the assizes, had to retire from the fray as a result of Catholic pressure. Aspinall regarded Turner as "a snob and . . . a fool and perhaps something more but you must get him if possible if you want Preston."<sup>(29)</sup>

He advised that if Turner could not be won Melly should "declare war" on him and oppose him with the aid of Yates and Segar, a Liberal Catholic and the county court judge. Perhaps Robert Lupton, the Catholic whom Melly was advised to win over, should have the word over this. "Whilst the present feelings actuate the Catholic body here my strong belief is it is morally impossible to obtain the return of a Liberal. You see the parties were pretty evenly balanced before and with the desertion of our party to the Conservatives, they now form a phalanx which not even the secret talisman 'gold' can break through. . . . I hope Mr. Melly will never contest Preston again except he is guaranteed the support of the leading Catholics, otherwise it is only throwing money away."<sup>(30)</sup> Yet there was one important Catholic demonstration for Melly. Ambler's letter thanking Melly for the present of a watch includes, "You are perhaps not aware that whole families amongst the Catholic working classes are in the habit of contributing weekly certain sums to the building of church spires, new churches *etc.*, which is collected by only appointed parties and entered in books, young as well as old being contributors. Since the elections I am told in confidence a very large number of these families have discontinued paying where the priests voted against *you* and to such an extent is this carried on that the collectors are thunderstruck. . . . In addition to this large numbers are withdrawing their custom from a Catholic draper who manifested his hostility to you in an open and offensive manner—the order has been passed entirely amongst Catholics 'not a penny must be spent *there*' "<sup>(31)</sup>

<sup>(29)</sup> M1307. *Further details in M1308-14.*

<sup>(30)</sup> M1326a.

<sup>(31)</sup> M1371.

The Wesleyans were all for Melly: the four ministers were full of his praise, and "the Rev. Charles Garrett who is the most popular man in this town said he would almost stand on his head if you got it but he saw the town was in the hands of the Papists".<sup>(32)</sup>

In the search for patronage and charitable effort prospective candidates at Preston were fair game. Support for relief organisations great and small could be expected, and Melly's correspondence bulges with prospectuses, circulars and reports. Usually one or two guineas would be given as requests came in, but Ambler did not approve of willy-nilly philanthropy; the more the mill operatives broke into separate relief organisations as the tape sizers and dressers did, the more the agent urged the support for the central relief fund to avoid invidious distinctions. But even he unbent when there was a little body of Liberals in distress. Many of the dressers were Liberals on the old franchise list and so were accepted; the tape sizers could also be supported for although they had no political influence they *did* publish subscription lists. While Ambler canalised the stream Melly provided the flow—to the extent of over £300 a year to charities alone.<sup>(33)</sup>

In addition to these purely financial demands a steady stream of men in search of work passed through Ambler's shop *en route* for Melly's office—if thought suitable that is. Ambler tried to vet all applicants, and unless they could prove useful party affiliations or intentions, he showed no interest. On ships, in offices, on the railway or on the docks, anywhere away from the stagnation of Preston the successful ones shouldered or left behind a moral obligation to support their patron at the polls when the time came. "The bearer Mr. John Sergeant is a good, sound Liberal Catholic voter, on the old franchise list and will be obliged if you can give him advice as to the best and cheapest way of sending off his son to America".<sup>(34)</sup> Personal obligation might outweigh other allegiances when the time came, and the canvasser would be quick with a reminder.

The party leaders too had to be rewarded, and such rewards in the magistracy and elsewhere would provide influence where it was badly needed. Edelston, the Liberal Catholic attorney and Liberal second string in the Registration Court, wished to become the solicitor to act in bankruptcies in the Preston County Court district. This required a petition supported by the government sitting Member, but Grenfell "rather more frank than agreeable was afraid this might prejudice some other interest he was concerned in". Edelston was quick to say, "There would be little or no profit attending the appointment but it *might* give a *little* position"<sup>(35)</sup> to one who had spent twenty years in the law but had been admitted solicitor only the previous year *via* clerkship. Position was all important and a reasonable reward for zealous party activity.

Efforts were also made to post Liberals to the county magistracies; in March 1863 there were ten Conservatives as against only two

(32) M1298.

(33) M1654.

(34) M1626.

(35) M1157.

Liberals. Howitt, Hollins and Goodair took their oaths, but efforts in Longton were frustrated through the coolness of the local incumbent and the total abstention of Mr. Simpson the applicant, whose son wrote, "Longton is sustained by three large breweries and contains therefore a goodly supply of beer houses and drunkards", and continued, "I consider it as rather a reflection on his character to be passed by a gentleman like Mr. Goodair whose principles are so well known in these parts that a Liberal of considerable influence in Manchester declined to exert his influence on the present occasion because he could not conscientiously recommend Mr. G. as a Magistrate".<sup>(36)</sup> But this may be just the tartness of disappointment. Both Goodair and Ambler found the support of the temperance movement an acute if well-meaning embarrassment with the Permissive Bill in the offing. The teetotallers played havoc with Melly's relations with the publicans and would not sacrifice for an instant their principles for the party's good; they made too many enemies to be rewarded.

Melly apparently helped considerably in the appointment of John Aspinall as a Q.C., and a series of agonising letters followed, in which Aspinall was torn between active gratitude and professional neutrality as recorder of Liverpool. The reward of high dignities was like retiring a man to the Lords. But in local politics a man was not elevated ostensibly for political services; he was preferred through the influence of politicians, and this could be embarrassing.

The Catholic W. F. Segar, already a county court judge, wanted the treasurership of the county courts in the Liverpool district in the gift of the treasury, to leaven the lump for "the body of attorneys here is decidedly conservative".<sup>(37)</sup> But in this case Brand could do nothing.

The case of Cornelius Satterthwaite illustrates very well the conflicting interests within the Preston Committee. He had failed in business as a druggist. Towards the end of 1862 he thought of going to India as agent of the Manchester Cotton Company<sup>(38)</sup> and requested Melly's help. Whereupon Goodair suggested that an agency should be found for his neighbour nearer home; such a powerful worker among the Catholics could ill be spared and he would then "command all the largest Mill-owners' interest and do a large business in *ordinary* times".<sup>(39)</sup> His friends reinstated him. In October 1863 he again tried for India, and Ambler seemed quite prepared for him to go. In the meantime he had also tried for a canteen in the pocket of one Mr. Budeley, a collector of such trifles, who already had five or six including Preston, and was suspected of jobbery. Negotiations were still continuing eighteen months later; Satterthwaite grew bitter, Ambler outspoken: "Mr. Smith and myself have been so long accustomed to his grumbling at everybody and everything that we pay little attention to it having undergone greater or lesser doses of it since 1857. If he is annoyed that he is

<sup>(36)</sup> M1185.<sup>(37)</sup> M1742<sup>(38)</sup> M1162.<sup>(39)</sup> M1358.

not taken into confidence it is because of his indiscretion not his Catholicism".<sup>(40)</sup>

In the microcosm of Satterthwaite's troubles can be seen the disastrous effect of being outside the inner ring of confidences and, in consequence, the extraordinary but unavailing efforts of his friends to move events in his favour with the government; he was a Catholic, he was valuable, but he was indiscreet; this was the ultimate crime in Preston politics and one felt that Melly, while still trying to keep him as an ally, had not done much to advance him. John Goodair provided £100 to help him from bankruptcy but beyond this he would not go. With so much conflicting evidence it is hard to see whether Satterthwaite was a martyr or just sorry for himself; either role was unpopular.

Finally there was Ambler himself. As a public contractor he could not seek election to the council. He asked no favours save a junior post for his nephew.<sup>(41)</sup> Perhaps the position of go-between provided its own rewards. He certainly used his position as guardian in a way which combined politics with humanity, and refused to delegate relief decisions to the relieving officer as some did. He was much in demand as chairman by the destitute who detested Dr. Howitt. He objected to direct payment of poor rates to keep men on the register solely on account of its risk, but in one instance at least he effected the same result by liberal assistance out of the poor rates themselves. But that game could not be played too often.

After the election came the Preston Guild, with Ambler taking time off from politics to superintend the redecoration of Miss Segar's house, rented for the occasion by Melly and his party for its splendid view of the procession.

In September the committee returned to business in earnest once more. Much had been learnt from the *débâcle* in April and three principles were at once laid down—an early decision on the candidate; party unity and organisation; the possibility of a compromise if the first two were effected. Miller remained apprehensive about Melly's religious convictions but could name none better, certainly not a certain Mr. German whose name had been mooted. This seemed a promising start, but a long and exhausting diversion lay across the sixteen months, November 1863 to March 1864, in the disputed election of Samuel Smith as mayor. The Liberals believing it good policy to have a Liberal chief magistrate, Smith's name was put forward and carried by one vote only. One councillor, who at first declined to vote, changed his mind, and wished to vote for C. R. Jacson of Barton Hall, the Conservative opponent. This would have made a tie and the outgoing mayor would have declared for Jacson. The town clerk, however, would not allow this delayed vote to be cast, and Samuel Smith found himself, in the eyes of some at least, unable to resign because he had not been duly elected. The case went to the courts in March. Judgment went against Smith but

<sup>(40)</sup> M1614.

<sup>(41)</sup> M1625.

meanwhile he had been elected mayor for 1864, whereupon the excitement died down. The stream of letters resulting from this affair indicate that the Liberals at last realised that their prestige was at stake. A show of strength was demanded and on the whole they came out of it fairly well.

Despite the decisions of the previous September, only by May 1863 were the doubts about Grenfell's possible claims on the seat in the event of a dissolution cleared away and Dr. Howitt and strong Grenfellites won over. Even then the meeting was unofficial and, Goodair and Miller being absent, nothing definite was decided. Already there was a feud between the two Smith families of Samuel and George. As a result, influence by Melly on their behalf in local appointments was discreetly restricted. Meanwhile an election was expected; the ward machinery began to move.

In July 1863 Ambler wrote, "I am paying a considerable amount of *quiet* attention to the registration business. I anticipate a great change in the complexion and *personnel* of the next register from various causes. Many tradesmen friends and opponents lost their qualification by being in arrear on the 20th inst."<sup>(42)</sup> The arrears were arrears of poor rates, and "by an arrangement with an official, an old and confidential friend", the names of Liberal defaulters were provided and money supplied to pay those rates, otherwise their names would drop from the register for a whole year—a wise precaution. Quietness was always essential; the enemy must be lulled into a sense of security otherwise it might take similar action—as in fact it did.

Equally, information had to be gathered to support objections and make them good, Mr. Brumfitt down in the wards providing material. Many "old franchise" recipients of relief were apparently expensive, Catholics and Tories "who have basely abandoned their principles"; they would have to be sacrificed in the drive for economy. A friendly meeting with Mr. Watson the Tory solicitor, who had declined a similar invitation the previous year but who offered it this, produced a pairing of trivial objections and their consequent withdrawal. In court later this would save money, tempers and the votes of impatient tradesmen anxious to return to business.

Ambler estimated considerable gains and in December produced a neat table showing the state of a future poll based on the new register "as compared with that of 1862 under which our last battle was fought"<sup>(43)</sup> Melly thought it optimistic and it is certainly impressive; unfortunately it was never put to the test. Ambler also sought for better organisation in the wards. Believing a general election likely in July 1864, he issued in April separate ward books and estimated the strength of helpers in each ward, deploying men from strong districts to weak. All this developed naturally from success with the register and a more accurate assessment of chances.

<sup>(42)</sup> M1637.

<sup>(43)</sup> *Vide* Appendix.

By June 1864, with still no election in sight, Mr. Richardson, a Catholic Liberal, was retained for the registration court at a fee of twelve guineas. Ambler was in hopes of getting information even more valuable than the rate books, namely "the *real rental* paid by each voter from an official quarter" though just why he does not say. Once again the official reported "a considerable number of both sides in arrear for Poor Rates". Ambler requested £10 for vote saving, stressed the uniqueness of the information and suggested reward for his informant's "trouble and risk". Melly obliged with £50 which, with money raised locally, was more than enough. Objections were lodged on all cases with any chance of being sustained; better times in Preston had seen many expensive old franchise supporters thrown off last year by the Tories now unassailable. Objections were withheld from an increasing number of Hesketh supporters promising "split votes" for Melly. The meeting with Watson went off "indifferently" this time, probably because Ambler lodged three times the number of Tory objections, and was determined "to *purge* the register of a number of decent but misguided people",<sup>(44)</sup> by methods he thought it prudent to withhold even from Melly himself. No registration money was to be spared and £50 in cash was to be taken into court to reimburse "our labouring friends" for their trouble.<sup>(45)</sup> The results were a little disappointing. Many compound objections could not be sustained; of the others, only eighteen out of thirty were successful, "the barrister (a fiery Tory we wished to be *removed*) mulcting us in 5/- for every Compound objection that failed".<sup>(46)</sup> In all, Ambler reckoned to have gained 100 votes "exclusive of new votes, amongst which class we are sure *at least* to maintain our ground".

Vigorous and constructive work on the register tended to cover up the weakness of a party still seriously divided. In March 1864 there was still doubt about the future candidate. Ambler admitted his failure to Howitt to "get the party together", but Dr. Howitt would not stir himself though disagreeing with the "delay" policy of leaving everything until the last minute for fear of revealing too much to the enemy. With this Ambler did not entirely agree; he clearly enjoyed remaining mysterious. Meanwhile the Tories, seeing that their opponents were hopeful of a compromise suggested that this might be arranged provided the Whig Grenfell was preferred to the Radical Melly. Even a few Liberals appeared to be intriguing on these lines, for clearly a compromise would annoy and exasperate the Catholics if they thought they could carry two Tories. The possibility of a compromise gained ground despite Tory opposition from the "Turner clique". The publicans too, might try to thwart this threat to their trade. Even so the final official requisition by the party was delayed until July, chiefly on account of Goodair's procrastination. "Most of the party here have a dislike to constantly beseeching him to take his proper place and lead us as he ought to do"; Melly

<sup>(44)</sup> M2022.<sup>(45)</sup> M2023.<sup>(46)</sup> M2025.

decided against a decisive acceptance so as to give more time for loosening tensions in the party.

In an interview with Watson it became clear to Ambler that a group of Tories was seriously opposed to Melly, but he pointed out that the bulk of the Liberals were determined to have him and no one else. Good terms with the baronet became the order of the day as potential voting strength appeared in the registration court. The Liberals would negotiate from strength and hatchets would be buried under the table of Mayor Smith's dinner. The "peace of the borough" had already been anticipated at the recent elections in some wards where, on being charged with throwing over the party Ambler had declared, "Ours are not always political contests for council honours and I along with Mr. Goodair, Mr. Wilcockson and the others have frequently nominated Tories as well as Liberals where both have been suitable",<sup>(47)</sup> and so avoided the bad blood of a contest.

With compromise in the air and the prospect of a Radical M.P. at last, the remainder of the year died quietly away.

Early in the new year the blow fell. Lord Derby's son the Hon. Frederick Stanley required a seat and a requisition was duly presented to him signed by upwards of two-thirds of the Preston electors; as large numbers were his tenants they could do little else but add their names to it. Ambler had reported the development, had doubted its success and had advised quiet on Melly's part, himself swearing he would fight a hundred Stanleys and pouring out his usual stream of advice to the last. Melly wrote to Mr. Gladstone to see if Lord Clarendon would use his good offices to procure Stanley's withdrawal. But Gladstone could do nothing. He wrote: "From my own experience I should say that near connection or relationship in cases where there are encountered contrasts of political party or opinion is apt rather to enhance the delicacy and even to increase the real difficulty of interference". The Gladstonian periods are familiar but the last sentence is magnificent. "It is a little like horse-dealing among friends".<sup>(48)</sup> On 13 February Melly announced his retirement as a Liberal candidate. The adventure was at an end.

There is a flavour of *Alice in Wonderland* in all this. It only needed a Stanley to appear on the scene for the whole Liberal party effort and organisation to explode overnight leaving nothing but a heap of dead correspondence to join the Melly papers. Principle yielded to interest, the carpet-bagger, Melly's own phrase, had once more to give place to the local man. But H. W. Clemesha believed that the "Radicalism of Preston was probably never very deep or very widespread . . . it was the action of the Whigs and Tories in entering into an alliance to divide the representation between them that induced the malcontents to turn to the small group of politicians who stood outside the main political parties and offered the only available alternative to them".<sup>(49)</sup> But when the ill-assorted Radical

<sup>(47)</sup> M2031.

<sup>(48)</sup> M2394.

<sup>(49)</sup> H. W. Clemesha, *A History of Preston in Amounderness* (1912). p. 280.

supporters could muster sufficient strength to tempt a candidate to try his luck, then there emerged the spectacle of an embryo party organisation groping for new strategies on the eve of the Ballot Act in an attempt to resist in some measure the old and unprincipled electoral techniques. After three years of sporadic, protracted and relatively clean campaigning, Melly and the Preston Liberals had almost "nursed" the town to a victorious compromise in the return of a Liberal rather than a Whig to accompany his Tory colleague to Westminster. For this perhaps they deserved a rather better fate than to be swept into the wilderness again.

## APPENDIX

## EDWARD AMBLER'S REPORT ON THE STRENGTH OF THE LIBERAL VOTE IN PRESTON, JANUARY 1864

No. of voters on the Register in 1862—2834—of which No. 271 did not vote.  
No. of voters on the Register in 1864—2659

175 less than in 1862.

Persons not now on Register who voted in 1862		Of 139 persons now on Register who did not vote in 1862, there are votes for			Liberal gain in Court and on Register in 1862	Liberal gain in Court and on Register in 1863	Assumed gain by splits on the last voting in 6 Wards
For Hesketh	For Melly	Hesketh	Melly	Persons who do not vote			
387	206	17	52	70	130	62	100

## SUMMARY OF PRESENT REGISTER

Voted for Hesketh in 1862 (less 387)	1139	Voted for Melly in 1862 (less 206)	808
Votes from 139 who did not vote	17	Add <i>good</i> votes from 139 who did not vote	52
New Tory votes this year	77	New Liberal votes this year	108
		Gain in Court and on Register in 1862	130
		Gain in Court in 1863	31
		Assumed gain by splits (on last voting)	100
	<u>1233</u>		<u>1229</u>

In order, to some extent, to test the accuracy of the foregoing Table and Summary, I have several times gone very carefully through Trinity Ward, with which I am more familiar perhaps than any other Ward, with the following results:—

## TRINITY WARD, 1862

Voted for Hesketh ..	315
Voted for Melly ..	200
Did not vote ..	46
Dead .. ..	12
	573

## TRINITY WARD, 1864

Votes for Hesketh	Votes for Melly	Votes for Second Tory	Politics not known	Total No. of Voters
256	237	206	77	570

I have classified the Votes as impartially as I could in the above Return, and I have no doubt, if I am spared to take part in the Election, that we can *at the least* make a return equal to the above, as I only take credit for 30 splits, and give Sir Thomas credit again for every vote (but one) he received at the last contest. I am pretty confident we can vote our share of the 77 not entered for either party. Hesketh loses 60, and you 42, of your respective voters in Trinity Ward. I assume, in the Summary, that we can obtain 100 splits from the recorded votes for Hesketh—a very moderate number, when it is considered that we shall have better organization, better Ward staffs (I feel confident we shall in Trinity), and a fair fight up to four o'clock, if a fight there be. I have little doubt Trinity will hold its own and perhaps do something more.

The only two Wards I have any fear about are St. John's and Fishwick. In St. John's we lost by 75 last election; previously the voting has been about even. There wants a few good men there. If Mr. S. Simpson, who contested (and should have won) the Ward last November, can be induced, along with some new blood lately added to the Register, to take charge of it, much good may be done. In Fishwick, the smallest Ward in the town, we were beaten by 77, in a constituency of about 280, and with all the influence of Messrs. Miller, Hollins, Wilcockson, etc., with us. In 1849 we won the Ward by 40! in this Ward especially more strength must be found from some quarter.

From St. Peter's with more effective management, we may reasonably expect a considerable majority, as our "mill" influence is very strong there, and it will no doubt be properly and effectually worked if we have our expected Commander-in-Chief.

There remains Christ Church (which gave 138 against us) and St. George's (which sent in 116 against). The former, with T.G. at the head of affairs (and with something learnt from his last St. John's Ward experience) I have little fear will do much better next time; and we must get out the new Liberal Councillor for that Ward, Mr. Sowerbutts, and his friends.

St. George's was muddled and "teetotaled" away last time. If at liberty "His Worship" must be induced to work it, his influence being great in "his own" Ward. If the Ward can be carried by storm in Municipal contests . . . [sentence incomplete].

