Contents

The development of public libraries in Southampton, 1887-1921

By Richard Preston Page 3

“The Greatest Unanimity Prevails”: Southampton during the 1926 General Strike

By Will Boisseau Page 23

“A Splendid Prospect”? Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton 1901-1914

By Roger Ottewill Page 40
Southampton Local History Forum

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The articles in the Journal are written by members of the Forum, to whom thanks are due. Contributions from members to future editions are always welcome.
Richard Preston

The development of public libraries in Southampton, 1887-1921

In this essay, I intend to trace the development of the branch structure of Southampton libraries from the adoption of the Public Libraries Act, 1855 in June 1887 to the opening of the first libraries on the eastern side of the River Itchen in October 1921. It is a theme held together by the restriction that no more than a penny rate be applied to the free library.

Impetus to adopt the Act, as part of the celebrations to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, came in late 1886 from the Council of the Hartley Institution. The Chairman of the Hartley Council, J E Le Feuvre, thought that the constitution of the proposed Free Libraries Committee would be but slightly different from that of the Hartley Council. The nucleus of the town library would be the 25,000 volumes in the Hartley Library, with the proceeds of the penny rate used to sustain a branch structure in the poorer parts of the town. The more cynical thought this was a stratagem to appropriate ratepayers’ money to prop up an ailing library. The Town Council decisively rejected the proposal. The Hartley initiative, however, was taken up by members of the Southampton Parliamentary Debating Society under its Speaker (ie chairman) Thomas Morgan. A Town meeting of ratepayers voted on 13 June 1887 for adoption of the Public Libraries Act. Representatives of the two sponsoring bodies – Surgeon-General William Maclean on behalf of the Hartley Council and Thomas Morgan for the Debating Society – proposed and seconded the crucial motion.

The composition of the Library Committee gave it an independence from the Council which a succession of committee chairman exploited to the advantage of the library. Up to 1901 the chairman was the Mayor (as he was chairman \textit{ex officio} of all Council committees), but effective power lay in the hands of the Deputy Chairman. Thereafter the committee had its own dedicated chairman. For most of the time under review, the actual chairman was not a Council member. The ordinary committee members were split between eight Corporation and seven non-Corporation nominees, the latter including in 1887 Robert Chipperfield, Thomas Morgan and, representing the Hartley Council, Surgeon-General Maclean, J E Le Feuvre and the Institution’s Executive Officer T W Shore. There was a delay of over six months before the committee first met, on 16 January 1888. This was a result of the hesitancy of the first Deputy Chairman, Timothy Falvey, to commit the Corporation to further financial adventures given the heavy potential charges following the rating of the Dock Company, a compensation claim from Tankerville Chamberlayne over the Otterbourne waterworks and opposition to the Didcot Railway Bill. It was this nervousness that had led Falvey to oppose adoption of the Libraries Act in both the Hartley Council and the Town Council and to counsel deferment of adopting the act at the June Town Meeting.

The first act of the full committee was to appoint a Sites Sub-Committee, with Thomas Morgan as chairman. Morgan advocated the classic tripartite structure of Free Reference Library, Free Lending Library and Free Newsroom. The first element seemed to be already in place. It would be little more than a change of nomenclature to make the Hartley reference library, in High Street, the town reference library. The large Hartley presence on the Library Committee would seem to guarantee a smooth
transition. This, however, is to ignore the underlying tensions between the Hartley and Corporation authorities. Negotiations broke down within weeks. The Hartley Council in March 1888 asked for an unacceptable £130 per annum as the minimum extra charge for adopting the ground floor of their museum: £50 for an Assistant Librarian’s salary, £10 to the present librarian for additional work and responsibility, £20 for a boy assistant, £15 for additional gas, £25 interest charges on the money needed to be raised to provide alternative museum accommodation and £10 for incidentals. A fraught meeting the following month in the Audit House between the full Library Committee and the Hartley representatives saw Councillor Edward Bance describe the Hartley memorandum as ‘disgraceful’. An epithet innocuous to modern ears, but sufficiently unacceptable to prompt a personal denouncement of both Bance and the committee chairman by J E Le Feuvre, Chairman of the Hartley Council, and the resignation from the Library Committee of Surgeon-General Maclean. Oil was speedily pored over the troubled waters, and Maclean retracted his resignation following a letter from the Town Clerk. Nevertheless, negotiations were effectively at an end. The Hartley Institution played no further part in the plans of the Library Committee.

The second strand in Morgan’s prototype proved equally abortive. A branch library in the northern suburb of St Denys seemed to be attainable following a resolution at the annual meeting of the Portwood Workmen’s Hall in February 1888 that their premises might be taken as a library to serve the Tything of Portswood. The hall was centrally sited, forming no.124 Adelaide Road. Although small – 37 ft 6 ins in length, 26 ft in width and 15 ft high – it was adequate for a small branch. There was an existing library of 600 books. The chairman of the hall, William James Miller, then rate collector for the district and later a Portswood Councillor, was an energetic supporter of the library movement, and he negotiated a realistic annual rent of £13 per annum with the Sites Sub Committee. The proposals, however, fell victim to a members’ revolt. The offer was withdrawn in April 1888 following a general meeting. ‘The members feel that many privileges they have enjoyed would be abolished such as a place of meeting for the Benefit Society which is doing good service. They also think the Games such as Bagatelle, Chess, Draught &c is the means of keeping many men from going elsewhere…. Several of the members expressed themselves willing to increase their subscriptions than the hall should be broken up after 25 years existence.’ (Southampton City Archives TC 26/4).

All that remained of Morgan’s original template was a library in the heart of the working class district of St Mary’s. This was met by the lease in April 1888 of the vacant St Mary’s Hall in St Mary Street. One of the newest buildings in the area, it had become an encumbrance to its owners, William and Thomas Forder, long-established wine and spirit merchants and brewers of High Street. It had been built as a Friendly Societies Hall, designed by William Borough Hill, surveyor and agent to the Forders, and built by John Crook of Northam (the original planning application is in Southampton City Archives: Building inspection plans, 29 April 1884). The hall was opened by the Mayor on 6 February 1885 with Timothy Falvey, a close friend of William Forder, amongst the guests. It held close on 400 people and was the lodge room for those friendly societies which met at the adjoining Kingsland Tavern: the highly influential ‘Princess Royal’ and ‘Hope’ Lodges of the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows, with a combined membership of over 1,000, and ‘Court Albion’ of the Ancient Order of Foresters. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers and Southampton
Secular Society also met here. This was the fourth home of the Oddfellows’ lodges, but hopes that they were now ‘settled for life’ ended the following December when the landlord of the Kingsland Tavern, George Parsons, precipitously ejected them in order to open a music hall. It is tempting to see a connection with the destruction by fire a year earlier of the Gaiety Theatre of Varieties in French Street, also owned by the Forders and being rebuilt by W B Hill. The Oddfellows turned adversity to their advantage by converting the former Primitive Methodist chapel further along St Mary Street into their own Oddfellows’ Hall, with W B Hill again as architect.

We have only tantalising glimpses of the building the Oddfellows left behind, renamed St Mary’s Palace of Varieties. Planning permission was sought in May 1886 for the insertion of a bar window and a pair of bar doors (with fanlights over) on the St Mary Street frontage. By April 1887 it seems that the hall was by now either defunct or very nearly so, for two adverts appeared in the local press, one for the lease of the Kingsland Tavern with or without the Music Hall and the second to let the Hall of Varieties alone for concert or other purposes. What is clear is that when an initial agreement was made in April 1888 for the Library Committee to lease the building for three years at £75 per annum it was vacant. The final agreement had to wait until 11 May 1888 as several Councillors, notably the estate agent Edward Bance, considered the rent to be exorbitant, exploiting the lack of alternative sites, and demanded that the committee look again for other sites. None were found. As part of the conditions, the landlords were to remove all stage fittings and to stop all communications with the tavern. Thus sanitised, the library opened on 15 January 1889 (figure 1). Negotiations on the Forders’ side had been handled by Thomas’s son-in-law Edwin King Perkins, nephew of Sir Frederick Perkins (Liberal MP for Southampton 1868-78), father of Walter Frank Perkins (Conservative MP for the New Forest 1910-22) and himself Conservative MP for Southampton 1922-29 and knighted in 1929.

The physical arrangements of the building predetermined that the short life of the library on the site was a sorry one. There was a ground floor entrance to St Mary Street, but the rooms on either side were let as shops (including for a few uncomfortable months a fried fish shop). The library departments were on the first floor. The former lodge hall served as lending library, book stack and reading room. The closed access book shelves extended on two sides of the hall, reaching from floor to ceiling. In front of the shelves, stretching the whole length of the library, was a raised platform and counter, set at a convenient height for the titles to be seen and easily accessible by the attendants. Books could be read around a single long table, with supplemental seating in the gallery. A smaller adjoining apartment was used as a
newsroom, fitted with large desks for the display of daily papers. An anteroom (possibly the former bar) became the librarian’s office. The library environment, however, was dominated by what lay directly underneath the library, behind the shops fronting St Mary Street, and in the enclosed yard directly at the rear: commercial stabling for Kingsland Tavern, replete with loose boxes and manure pit. Given a poorly-ventilated, gas-lit and frequently overcrowded library, the stench could be overwhelming, particularly in summer. For George Parker, in a semi-satirical letter to the *Hampshire Independent* in February 1891, to go to the library was ‘to read ourselves into graves and swallow one another’s filth’. In September 1893, the same newspaper remembered the unsanitary and insalubrious building ‘with feelings akin to horror’, rivalled only by the notoriously vitiated atmosphere of the police court in the Bargate. The exhibition for rather too long of a whale in the stables entered local folklore.

St Mary’s Hall was but a stopgap. It had, from the day of opening, been unable to withstand the pressures put upon it, with standing room only in the reading room and issues often of over 100 books per hour. Within four months, the committee had begun the process of finding a permanent replacement on the expiry of the lease in June 1892. The main consideration seems to have been to avoid the heartland of St Mary’s. The first two sites considered, unsuccessfully, in May/June 1889 were to the north. Colonel Edward Bance was approached about land next to the Artillery Drill Hall then being built for the First Hants Royal Garrison Artillery Volunteers in St Mary’s Road. Canon Basil Wilberforce was approached for a portion of the Antelope Cricket Ground, on glebe land belonging to St Mary’s Church near the Royal South Hants Infirmary. The first site to be actively pursued was a portion of the public lands at the bottom of Pound Tree Lane (renamed Pound Tree Road in October 1891), east of the Royal Hotel and between Vincent’s Walk and Victoria Road. It was the site of the old Houndwell Cottage. Its leading proponent was Timothy Morgan, by now not only chairman of the Sites Sub Committee but also Deputy Chairman of the full Library Committee following the death of Timothy Falvey. The great attraction was that it was a free site, obviating the need for a purchasing loan. The estimated £100 per annum thus saved on interest and redemption charges would be released to the bookfund. The choice was hugely controversial for defence of the common lands was a shibboleth to many in the town. The somewhat specious argument by supporters of the site that the library would still form part of the common lands, albeit roofed in and supplied with books and newspapers rather than covered with grass, cut little ice. Despite the opposition, application was made in November 1890 to the Local Government Board for a Provisional Order to appropriate the land and to borrow up to £6,000 for building and fittings, repayable over 60 years. Letters soliciting support were sent to the Borough MPs. It was in vain. The Board was reluctant to grant exemption from the two local acts which safeguarded that part of the common lands: the Southampton Marsh Improvement Act, 1844 and the Southampton Marsh and Markets Act, 1865. Faced with a costly and uncertain appeal to Parliament, combined with determined if irrational local feeling against appropriation, the Pound Tree Lane scheme was abandoned in February 1891.

The floodgates were now opened. A succession of speculative offers of property were made to the Library Committee. The ‘battle of the sites’ begun, easily outgunning earlier struggles over the location of the Hartley Institution, the Workhouse and the statues to Lord Palmerston and the Prince Consort. As the *Hampshire Independent*
mischievously remarked after the last shots had been fired, if all the suggestions made had been entertained, a free library would have been provided at the door of the house of almost every working man in Southampton. The problem was not the plethora of sites available. It was, as the Borough Librarian O T Hopwood told a Local Government Board enquiry in 1895, that there was in reality not a single suitable site to be had. The two sites considered in 1889 were revisited. William Borough Hill offered 17 Anglesea Place, at the top end of Above Bar Street, the former residence of W C Humphreys JP. Hill estimated that conversion would cost £1,000. Jonas Nichols recommended four houses (5, 6, 7, 8) on the north-west side of St Mark’s Road, near Six Dials, an area he himself had developed. Four houses almost opposite were offered by William Podger, a carpenter. Nichols also offered part of the Victoria Skating Rink, to the west of Above Bar, a property he had considerably enlarged four months earlier. A nearby property, with a 100-foot frontage on Ogle Road opposite the Prince of Wales’ Theatre Royal, was offered for £1,300. On the opposite side of town, the St John’s Free Chapel site in Clifford Street, on the corner of Jail Street, was recommended by Alderman Dyer. The prefabricated tin tabernacle, erected in 1873 by anti-Tracterian seceders from the Church of England, had by then been transported to the Avenue to serve as a temporary chapel for the Congregationalists worshipping there. In the far south, the ‘Fish and Kettle’ public house in French Street was entered into the lists by Councillor T P Payne. Each site was systematically rejected. The committee ruled out any building that required substantial alteration, and was unwilling to demolish sustainable housing. The sites to the west of Above Bar were considered too removed from the main seat of population. The Drill Hall site was too noisy. The chastity of the cricket ground was protected by the 1844 Marsh Act and the resolution of Canon Wilberforce to see that this was never compromised: the same concerns that prevented the Grammar School being built on the site.

Negotiations over these sites were mere skirmishes. The real battle lay between two sites at either edge of the social spectrum and which polarized the whole debate on the role of a public library in the community. On the one side stood the Kingsland market site, on the Hoglands Common Field at the south-east corner of Kingsland Place and opposite the existing library in St Mary’s Hall. To its supporters, a library was nothing unless it was firmly anchored in the most deprived areas of town, within walking distance of its targeted readers. Footfall at St Mary’s Hall library showed that demand already existed. The usual objection to appropriation of a common land site did not apply in this case, for the 1865 Marsh and Markets Act had reserved the land for use as a market. The Local Government Board had intimated its willingness to widen this to cover the building of a library. To the majority of the Library Committee, however, the site was too small, too narrow, and too tied to its immediate neighbourhood. As Councillor Gayton remarked, if built the library would simply be a barracks. Councillor Dyer suggested that the site be enlarged by the purchase of the adjoining coach factory owned by James Henry Higgs (formerly the Athenaeum Society’s rooms), but this failed to address the question of location.

At the opposite extreme stood the New Place House site. It faced West Park, at the corner of London Road and Bedford Place, and by the late 1880s offered the last major development opportunity along the northern artery of the town. The history of New Place House is traced by A G K Leonard in issue no.10 of this Journal. It enters our story in April 1889 when the Reverend Sumner Wilson sold the property to the
County of Hants Freehold Land Society. The *Building News* foresaw the relentless encroachment of neat, closely-packed red-brick terraced houses into the heart of the town. This philistine onslaught was delayed by the purchase of the site by W F G Spranger. The existing house was demolished and foundations laid for a new house to reflect Spranger’s rising influence and pretensions. It was a short reprieve. By December 1890, Spranger had moved his attention to sites further to the west and the property was sold, at a loss, to local developer Thomas John Jones. The northern part, above what is now Waterloo Terrace, was sold on to local builder Edward Sandon. The southern part was reserved for the library by the decisive intervention of Thomas Morgan after the collapse of his Pound Tree Lane scheme. He personally conducted the negotiations with the solicitors acting for Thomas Jones, obtained the site for £1,500 and achieved its ratification by a substantial majority in the Corporation. It was a significant *coup*, the culmination of over two years’ interest in the site. The previous year, Morgan had urged the radical solution that the whole of the site be purchased by the Corporation, the southern part being reserved for the library and the remainder laid down for houses and shops, the profits from which would help pay for the library.

The ‘battle of the sites’ was over by March 1891, but guerrilla tactics by opponents of the New Place House site ensured that the war continued. To these, the chosen site was a denial of the Free Library ethos to educate, improve and civilize the working classes. It was a monument to the pretensions of Morgan and his clique. The campaign to overturn the decision in favour of the Kingsland market site was orchestrated by Councillors from St Mary’s, Trinity and Northam Wards, assisted by political bodies such as the Southampton Radical Association and St Mary’s Liberal Association, and social reformers like Delmar Bicker-Caarten. A Town Meeting of March 1891 voted against the New Place House site by 161 votes to 102. The Corporation simply ignored the vote. The issue was raised at the Local Government Board enquiry later that month, but the Inspector refused to reopen the site question. This led to the Southampton Radical Association sending a deputation to London to meet the Board itself. It was still a live issue during the municipal elections of October 1891.

Against this unsettling backdrop, an open competition was held in the summer of 1891 to find an architect for the new library. It was not an easy commission. The site was an irregular, triangular piece of land. The position seemed to demand a prestigious, commanding building, but the conditions laid down by the cash-strapped Library Committee told against any outward show. Preference was to be given ‘to those designs which show the most ample and suitable accommodation for the public, combined with economy of construction both as regards first cost and annual outlay in maintenance’. Given the maximum limit of £3,500 (reduced from £4,000) put on the cost, it was inevitable that the building would be in two phases with ancillaries such as a reference library, committee room, book mending room and storeroom deferred. The building would have to be both complete in itself and capable of extension. Selection of the winning design was in the hands not of the committee but of an impartial assessor, with the designs submitted anonymously. The committee’s choice of assessor fell on William Henman, a Birmingham architect whose expertise lay in hospital design: responsible for Birmingham General Hospital and, later, the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. He had no experience of library design.
Entries came from 37 architects. To Henman, there was a clear winner. He believed that the Southsea architect Albert Edward James Guy was the only competitor to follow the outline of the site to create a truly symmetrical internal arrangement. This arrangement, with the lending library in the central line between the flanking reading and news rooms, was indeed commended in the professional press. In articles to The Builder, 1 and 8 September 1894, George Washington Browne, architect of the Edinburgh Free library, saw many elements of a model library. Annotations of the copy in Southampton Reference Library show that this praise did not go unnoticed. A very different reaction, however, greeted the exterior of the new central library (figure 2). The correspondent of The Builder (12 September 1891) inspected all 37 designs when they were exhibited in the Southampton Art Society’s rooms in Marland Place. He found Guy’s elevations ‘tame to a degree, and … treated in a style that has not hitherto been considered worthy of a name’. To Charles Privett, Liberal Councillor for Nichols Town, ‘it was more like a first-class stable or cow-shed’. The Mayor, James Lemon, was diplomatic at the opening ceremony in July 1893. ‘He had heard a little adverse criticism as regarded the outside of the building. He would not repeat what he had heard himself, because it might perhaps offend some of the most refined ears in that assembly’. The verdict of the Hampshire Independent – ‘a fine site spoiled’ – was shared by many.

The system of open competition for major projects was designed to reduce ‘jobbing’ in the award of contracts. It did not necessarily produce the best architect. No account was taken of previous work nor of the potential to rise to fresh challenges. In this wider context, Guy was an unlikely choice. His work hitherto had been confined to the Portsmouth area. It was mainly in housing schemes, such as the Eastney estate, or in small-scale projects, such as alterations in 1886 to the Victoria Wesleyan Chapel in...
Chester Road, Southsea (where he worshipped) and in 1889 a Bible Christian Sunday School in Fawcett Street, Southsea. He was to become known for his design of clubs and public houses: the Conservative Club in Albert Road (1894), the Eldon Arms in Eldon Street (1899), the Crown in Somers Road (1901) and, outside Southsea, the Magpie in Fratton Road (1901). In May 1889, he had been committed at Portsmouth County Court as a defaulting debtor, although he was financially sound during his work in Southampton. The *curriculum vitae* of architects rejected by Henman suggest that an opportunity to bring a major architect to the town was squandered. Second place went to Sidney Robert James Smith. A native of Southampton, son of former Town Councillor John Smith, he had set up an independent practice in London in 1879. Here he specialized in public architecture, both for the Lambeth Board of Guardians (his father became Chairman on moving to London) and for the parochial library authorities within the borough. The latter included Durning (opened November 1889), South Lambeth (December 1889), Streatham (April 1891) and Brixton (March 1893). Each was a benefaction from William Tate, patron of the Art Gallery on Millbank which bears his name and of which Smith was also architect. Smith’s designs for Southampton central library survive in the Special Collections Library (figure 3). Unpremiated, but the clear choice of *The Builder*, was Henry Thomas Hare. The most prolific library architect of the day, he was responsible for libraries in Hammersmith, Islington, Fulham, Wolverhampton and Harrogate. Other major public contracts included Oxford Town Hall (incorporating the central library), Stafford County Offices, University College of North Wales, Bangor, and Westminster College, Cambridge.

Relations between architect and client are often fraught. Those between Guy and the Library Committee were no exception. The sticking point was cost. Guy had repeatedly, and very specifically, given assurances that his work would come in under the figure set by the committee. Henman had given similar assurances. The building...
tenders, received in March 1892, showed just how unrealistic these were. The lowest - £5,439 by Crook and Son - was almost £2,000 over estimate. The highest - £6,713 - was almost double. The committee enforced drastic reductions in the plans: cutting the cost to a very narrow cloth in Morgan’s words. Delays in producing new plans twice led to threats of legal action against the architect, and forced the committee to extend the lease on St Mary’s Hall. The revised tender was won by the Portsmouth firm of Scammell and Dowdell, a firm who had worked extensively for Guy. They had been placed third in the original tender. This Portsmouth pairing of architect and builder was exploited politically by those who, like Councillor J E Le Feuvre, believed that Sotonians should be employed in such Corporation contracts. It was a forerunner of the unease over the Portsmouth-inspired Bevois Town Wesleyan Church, opened in 1904. To aggravate matters, the builder’s work was substandard. Within two years, the library was found not to be watertight and had to be re-roofed. Guy admitted a failure of proper supervision and paid £70 of the total cost of £220. No recompense could be sought from the builders, whose partnership was by now dissolved. Indeed, bankruptcy proceedings had been started against the firm in February 1893, whilst the library was under construction. The repairs were undertaken by the Southampton firm of A J Dyer and Sons.

The opening of the Central Library on 29 July 1893 left one element of the ‘battle of the sites’ unresolved. Inhabitants of the Northam peninsula had particularly been disadvantaged by the preference of the New Place House site over Kingsland market, adding 400 yards to their journey to a library. Thomas Morgan had given implicit pledges that Northam would be the next site for a library. The only way a bankrupt committee could honour these pledges was to use School Board property, and after strong lobbying by Morgan, Le Feuvre and H M Gilbert, a recalcitrant School Board allowed the free use of a classroom in Kent Street Infants School as an Evening Reading Room. Four yellow pine tables, ten feet long and three feet wide, were installed, together with a cupboard. A former detective, William Smith, was put in charge. Such scant fittings meant that it was a library without books, solely functioning as a newspaper reading room. Opened on 12 December 1895 it was envisaged as a one-year experiment. In the event, the reading room did not even see out the full year, closing at the end of October 1896 due to uniformly poor attendance figures. The only explanation for this abrupt ending that Morgan could offer was that ‘people liked to go where there was plenty of movement and activity, and Kent Street was quiet’.

The first fully-equipped branch library in Southampton was at Shirley, opened on 22 October 1896. It was an act of force majeure, imposed on the Library Committee by the annexation of Shirley and Freemantle the previous November. It was not the result of any long-term campaign. It is true that each candidate in the April 1887 Shirley Local Board of Health elections spoke in favour of the ultimate extension to their district of the Library Act recently adopted in Southampton. However, by the time that this would have been possible - under the Public Libraries Act, 1892 which empowered parishes to annex themselves to an adjoining district – the mood had changed. Amalgamation was now in the air, opposition to which in Shirley was taken to the very limits of Parliamentary action. Even the modicum of co-operation envisaged by the joining of library authorities was dismissed as the thin end of the wedge. The opening of the new central library added a further disincentive. It lay closer to the extra-borough districts on the western edge of the town than it did to
many areas within the town boundaries. These non-residents had unlimited access to
the reading and news rooms. O T Hopwood estimated, in evidence to the 1895 Local
Government Board annexation enquiry, that of the 1,800 daily visitors, 25% came
from Shirley and Freemantle, mainly on Thursday and Friday when the new
periodicals came in. As Balfour Browne, QC observed, ‘That is Shirley people down
to the ground’.

In this sense, the speedy establishment of a library in the ‘added areas’ was a matter
of self-preservation. The Southampton bookstock could not withstand a similar influx
of newly-enfranchised borrowers. It was equally a matter of political necessity, the
need of a grand gesture to show the benefits of the new union. Thomas Morgan
captured the spirit during the opening ceremony, in a speech which perhaps only a
bachelor could have delivered. ‘Shirley and Freemantle were regarded at the time as a
coy maiden, not wishing to be united. Well they might regard the library as a wedding
present, or, if they liked, the off-spring of the union, in which case he hoped they
would say ‘Welcome, little stranger’ (laughter)’. The site was predetermined.
Spacious new offices for the Shirley Local Board of Health had been built two years
earlier, a futile symbol of the district’s independence. On the abolition of the Board in
January 1895, the offices were transferred to the new Shirley District Council, itself
abolished the following June. They were designed, according to the Chairman of the
Board WA Kilby, to accommodate a free public library at need. The building was
centrally positioned, on land bought from the Alton hop grower Edward Dyer, with a
60-foot frontage on Shirley Road. The architect was the Board surveyor, Henry James
Weston, and the builder Frederick Osman of Four Posts. When opened in 1897, the
library was on two floors (figure 4). The former Board Room (25 feet x 30 feet) on
the first floor housed the Reading Room, with magazines and reference books to the
left of the entrance and newspaper stands to the right (Southampton City Archives
SC/LY 55). The ground
floor, away from the Shirley
Road frontage, held the
Lending Library, with
shelving for 5,600 books
and an indicator for 4,000
volumes. The two ground
floor rooms overlooking
Shirley Road were
commandeered by the
Borough Weights and
Measures Department and
the Borough Medical
Officer of Health. Vacant

Figure 4. Shirley Library. Photograph taken c1910

land at the back was used variously by the Watch, Fire Brigade and Works
Committees. Joint use caused endless procedural and financial problems, only
resolved in 1902 when the Library Committee took exclusive control of the building
with the tenant Corporation departments paying rent of £50 per annum. The Library
Committee progressively gained full possession of its empire. The Weights and
Measures Department left in 1903 when the interior rooms were re-modelled in order
to double the public area in front of the counter (figure 5). The Medical Officer of
Health left in 1914 with the introduction of ‘Open Access’ and the consequent 30-foot extension built at the rear of the library.

Figure 5. Shirley Library. Ground floor plan taken dating between the alterations of 1903 and 1914

The focus of the Library Committee now turned to the completion of the central library. Guy had reserved the limited space at the rear of the library for expansion. Within six months of opening, Hopwood called for this to be used as a reference library in order to reduce pressure on the Reading Room and to produce that most elusive of library environs, a quiet place of study. The obstacle was money. Morgan ingeniously, but unsuccessfully, tried to circumvent the penny rate restriction by an application to the Town Council to allocate money raised by sale of the mudlands to the London and South-Western Railway Company for their dock extension works to a Reference Library. It was, however, not until the enhanced rate income from the ‘added areas’ began to seep through that the committee, in spring 1901, felt sufficiently confident to approve the extension. Albert Guy was re-engaged as architect, with Dyer and Sons as builders. The events of a decade earlier were replayed. Tightening financial constraints produced the inevitable delays and reductions in specification: less thickness of concrete in the floor, less weight of iron girders to the first floor, less stonework to the front in Bedford Place, use of tiles instead of glazed bricks and cutting out the cellar. For the pared down cost of £2,200, the Reference Library was opened on 4 May 1903 by no less a celebrity than Lord Avebury, reputedly the cleverest man in England. The building, bland in the extreme, hardly merited such an eminent launch (figure 6). It was a plain structure, with a
narrow frontage and extending within inches to the houses to the north. Laurence Burgess, who came to Southampton as Deputy Librarian in 1934, remembered it as a room in which the sun never shone. The stock matched the surroundings. Much was second-hand. In desperation, the Library Committee applied for the transfer, lock and stock, of the Reference Library in the Hartley Institution, a collection many thought to be underused and neglected. As Robert Chipperfield explained, ‘there was considerable difficulty, he believed, in getting at the books because they could not be found’. This failed, as did a similarly audacious attempt in June 1912 to transfer to the Reference Library the entire collection of local books bequeathed to the Hartley Institution by Sir William Cope ten years earlier.

Figure 6. Ground floor plan of the Central Library showing the proposed Reference Library and Art Gallery. Original version by A E J Guy, dated 12th February 1902

The Reference Library was housed on the ground floor of the new building. That there was a second floor, dedicated to an Art Gallery, is testimony to the influence of Thomas Morgan over his committee. In April 1895, the committee had unexpectedly taken possession of about ninety watercolours by C F Williams, a well-respected landscape artist, notably of coastal views in the south of England, a former pupil of David Cox and a Bitterne resident for the last 25 years of his life. He died in December 1891, aged 81 years, leaving the collection to his widow. On her death four days later they passed to his sister and brother-in-law, Lucy and Alfred Fellows of Birmingham, who in turn donated the collection to the Library Committee. Morgan, an art collector himself, saw in this windfall the nucleus of a permanent free art gallery within the library. He received vocal support from such disparate elements as the Southampton Independent Labour Party, the artist Hubert Herkomer (who Morgan escorted around the collection on its arrival and who was his first choice to open the
combined Reference Library and Art Gallery) and councillors like Robert Chipperfield and H M Gilbert. The soundness of Morgan’s judgment is a matter of conjecture. On the one hand, without an existing art gallery it is doubtful that the Library Committee would have purchased the important ‘Antient Southampton’ collection of William Burrough Hill for the town in August 1910, at a cost of £695. A synopsis of this collection of 228 oil paintings, watercolours, pencil drawings and etchings is kept in the Special Collections Library. On the other hand, the gallery proved a financial incubus, drawing funds away from core library activities. It also failed to capture the public imagination. When Robert Chipperfield – member of the Library Committee *ab initio* until his resignation in 1909 – died in August 1911, he left money in his will not for the refurbishment of the library art gallery but for a wholly new art gallery. A J Hamilton, then chairman of the committee, was saddened in May 1914 to find that many of those dignitaries who used the art gallery as a robing room before the Titanic memorial service had been unaware of its existence.

Concentration on the needs of the central library and of the western suburbs was poorly received by those who lived in the north of the old borough, denied a place in the prototype branch structure by the collapse of the Portswood Workmen’s Hall scheme. Several projects were floated in the early years of the committee, concentrating on St Denys, where James Lemon warned as early as 1889 that land was quickly being taken up, and Bitterne Park, the only district east of the River Itchen to be included in the 1895 annexation. A Portswood Branch Sub-Committee was established in 1904, on which W J Miller was active. Among projects considered were renting of part of Bitterne Schools as a Reading Room (on the suggestion of Bitterne Park Ratepayers Association), purchase of land offered by the vicar of St Denys, the Reverend E Judkins, and purchase of the New Century Club at 151 Adelaide Road. Each initiative was rejected, with the proviso that as soon as finances permitted the northern suburbs would have priority.

The battle for Portswood library began in earnest in January 1911. It led to three years of, metaphorically if not quite literally, blood-letting, with local communities and local politicians at bitter odds. The first shots were fired by the now-enlarged Bitterne Park and St Denys Ratepayers Association, claiming that the 4d return tram fare between Portswood and the Central Library amounted to a library charge on their constituents. That the only solution the Library Committee (now under the Chairmanship of A J Hamilton) could offer was the use of part of the Tramways Depot on Portswood Road as a Public Reading Room suggests that a new initiative was desperately needed. This came in the approach to the Scottish-born philanthropist Andrew Carnegie for a gift of money to build a branch library; the first time the committee had sought any kind of external funding. The opening letter of 29 May 1911 was crafted to appeal to Carnegie’s sensibilities, describing Portswood and St Denys as ‘a great industrial centre’. In reply, the committee was told that grant aid would only be forthcoming if Carnegie was convinced that there were sufficient resources to maintain the library when built. There patently were no such resources. A way out of the stalemate was found following a meeting in January 1912 between Hamilton and S J Line, Liberal Councillor for St Denys, and the Chairman of the Bournemouth Library Committee and the Bournemouth Borough Librarian. It was based on the latter authority’s successful application in 1903 for £10,000 of Carnegie money to build four branch libraries. First, the amount of money asked for was reduced from £5,000 to £2,000, a sum found adequate in Bournemouth for an
acceptable branch building. Moreover, the committee now had designs for libraries which Carnegie had approved, obviating the need for expensive new architectural designs. Secondly, voluntary subscriptions had paid for the purchase of the library sites, making the expense of a commercial loan unnecessary. Thirdly, and this was on the suggestion of the Bournemouth Librarian Charles Riddle, it could be held that the Art Gallery was a more appropriate charge under the Museums and Gymnasiums Act, 1891, adopted in Southampton the previous year to finance Tudor House Museum, than under the Libraries Act.

With a new sense of purpose, the Library Committee considered two new sites. The first was in the expanding part of the district. A J Hamilton wrote to W Frank Perkins for a site on the Portswood House Estate then in the process of being broken up for development following the death of his father (Walter Perkins) in 1907. Perkins fils offered a site on Portswood Road, nearly opposite St Denys Road, for £500, with an assurance that shareholders in Withedswood Estates Limited (which company legally owned the land and to which he was surveyor) would, as individuals, set up a liberal subscription towards its purchase. Despite this virtual offer of a free site, it was rejected in March 1912 in favour of a property more accessible by inhabitants in the east of the district. A provisional contract was drawn up with the builder John Nichol for the purchase of a plot of land on the western approach to Cobden Bridge, linking the older area of St Denys with Bitterne Park, at the corner of St Denys Road and Priory Road. A subscription for the £2,000 purchase price was started and a fresh application made to Carnegie on 20 April 1912. An assurance was given that the estimated annual expenditure of £300 could easily be met once the Library Committee was relieved of its annual Art Gallery expenditure of £210. The library itself was to be a model of Springbourne branch library opened three years earlier with Carnegie money. Carnegie’s reply of 11 June was a douche of cold water. ‘You wish assurance of building before you get assurance of revenue to carry on library work. You should put the matter the other way about’. This caution was justified a few weeks later when the Town Council refused to take over the Art Gallery expenditure. The Library Committee was now in a state of moribund confusion. A draft letter to Carnegie, dated 15 November, optimistically referring to economies having been made and more flexible Borough Treasurer estimates, was never sent. Worse, the Boxing Day floods of 1912 revealed the unsuitability of a riverine location, as residents awoke to find the site under a foot of water.

The debate now came under the influence of a man who was later in his career fundamentally to alter the shape of Southampton. Sidney Kimber had been elected as Conservative Councillor for his native ward of Portswood in 1910. He refocused the debate away from the older, politically more Liberal, ward of St Denys towards his own bailiwick of Portswood, then under development through the break up of the Portswood House Estate and well positioned to service the future development of Highfield following relocation of Hartley University College. It was nothing less than a coup d’état. Using the new and overwhelming Conservative majority on the Corporation, Kimber forced his way on to the Library Committee in March 1913 by engineering two vacancies. One of these he filled himself; the other went to an ally. The opposition was incandescent at this act of realpolitik. ‘Chicanery’, ‘one of the least honourable actions done by the predominant party in the Council’, ‘the increasing scandal of packing committees’, ‘[Kimber] the bad boy of the family’ were phrases flung across the floor of the Council chamber. Councillor Line, advocate of
the Cobden Bridge site, spoke of his nemesis as having ‘shown himself to be entirely out of sympathy with the free library movement (‘No!’). Mr Kimber had no desire to come on that Committee to assist it, but rather to obstruct it. It was well known not only to the Council, but throughout the town, that in reference to the branch library he had endeavoured to throw every obstacle in the way of that library being established (‘No!’). He knew what he was saying, and he made that statement deliberately’.

Immediately on his appointment, Kimber was elected on to the Portswood Library Sites Sub-Committee. Within a few days he had forced the full committee, by the narrowest of margins, to rescind their decision in favour of Cobden Bridge and to endorse, at his suggestion, a site at the junction of St Denys Road and Osborne Road, obtainable for £300. In geographical terms, this was not much nearer to the centre of Portswood, but politically it was much nearer. Ratification at the next Town Council meeting was a formality.

‘Councillor Bonner: Is that the outcome of the new regime?
The Town Clerk: It seems like it
Councillor Hirst: The outcome of common sense
Councillor Blakeway: It is not the same thing’.

The Library Committee tried to reassert its independence, initially refusing to accept the Town Council’s rejection of the Cobden Bridge site. But by June 1913 they had yielded to the inevitable. The climbdown could not have been more embarrassing. Kimber asked the Borough Librarian, A H Davis, to read the whole Carnegie correspondence in front of the committee. How, Kimber taunted, could this correspondence be considered satisfactory? Those who read the correspondence today can but agree. Subscriptions were started for the new site in anticipation of a renewed application for Carnegie money. Hopes that the end was in sight were dashed in January 1914 on receipt of a circular letter from the Carnegie trustees (administering the fund on the founder’s death) that the fund was oversubscribed. No new application could be entertained for two years.

The carousel seemed poised to continue on its merry way. This, however, is to ignore the new mood of the committee, freed from the deadweight of satisfying an external arbiter and with a new dynamic driving force. The committee decided, at a meeting on 6 February 1914, to bring the issue to an immediate conclusion. A Sub-Sub-Committee of five, including Kimber, was appointed to reinspect the sites still on offer, viz the Withedswood Estate site and the Osborne Road/St Denys Road site. It was to report to a special meeting of the full committee on 20 February. The extraordinary events of the intervening fortnight can be reconstructed by conflating Kimber’s autobiography (Thirty-eight years of public life in Southampton, 1910-1948, published in 1949) with the minutes of the Library Committee: the two are not fully in accord. Acting on his own initiative, Kimber approached William Edward Bennett, owner of the Docks canteen and purchaser of many of the frontages on Portswood road to the north of the Palladium cinema which had come on the market consequent upon the sale of the Portswood House estate. Bennett was an old friend, now owner of the house (‘Roselands’ in Highfield) where Kimber had been born. Without telling the vendor or anyone else the reason for which he wanted the property, Kimber bought 58 feet of frontage immediately to the north of the cinema at £10 per foot frontage. He personally entered into a contract of purchase and paid the required deposit. The Sub-Sub-Committee, meeting on 19 February significantly at the Palladium, was presented with a fait accompli. The members visited the site next door in company with the
Borough Engineer and unanimously endorsed Kimber’s action. The full committee the following day equally unanimously endorsed the smaller committee’s report, agreed to apply to the Local Government Board for powers of borrowing, instructed the Town Clerk to finalize the contract and asked the Borough Engineer to prepare plans and estimate costs.

Any hopes that the building would be completed with similar expedition were quashed by an event over which not even Kimber had influence: the outbreak of war in August 1914. It was a bold decision to proceed with the work, coinciding as it did with the extension of Shirley Library, completed in March 1915. Sharp rises in the cost of raw materials, notably steel and imported timber, necessitated a supplemental loan of £842 from the Local Government Board over and above the original loan of £2,500. Labour was a constant headache. The Borough Surveyor reported in May 1915 that the workforce consisted of two labourers and two thoroughly qualified bricklayers laying concrete. Work on the impressive glass dome was delayed whilst the contractors were employed on government contracts. When opened on 25 October 1915, the library had the minimum of facilities. Hot water had to be fetched from the tram depot over the road. That it opened at all is a tribute to the efforts of the builder John Nichol (ironically the owner of the Cobden Bridge site) and the architect, the Borough Surveyor J A Crowther. They were blessed with the minimum of committee interference. Crowther quipped at the opening ceremony: ‘his instructions were that there was the land, and he was to do the best he could’ (figure 7).

The final library extensions to be begun under the penny rate limitation came as a result of the 1920 amalgamation, in which the Urban District of Itchen, the parish of Bitterne and part of the parish of South Stoneham were incorporated into Southampton. Libraries in Bitterne and Woolston were opened on successive days in October 1921. Each was on the back of earlier campaigns to establish a free library.

The first initiative in Woolston, in May 1891, was stimulated by events in Southampton. A public meeting to consider adoption of the Public Libraries Act was called by the St Mary Extra Vestry, covering Pear Tree Green and Woolston. Southampton Library committee members were conspicuous on the platform. Thomas Morgan and Thomas Shore spoke on the benefits of close co-operation. Both were Woolston residents. Shore lived in Onslow Road. Morgan lived in Oak Road, was organist and choirmaster of St Mark’s Church and, as head of the timber importing firm of Tagart Morgan & Coles based in Cross House Wharf, employed many workers from east of the Itchen. The latter offered donations of books from the borough. A room in

Figure 7. Portswood Library. Photograph taken c1975
Woolston Boys School was suggested as a site. The meeting, however, decisively voted against adoption, fearing the burden of extra rates, estimated at £65 per annum.

The new century saw the campaign pass into the hands of Itchen District Council, following the example of Gosport and Alverstoke Urban District Council which had successfully established a free library in 1901. The best way that a small authority like Itchen could see this realized was to apply for Carnegie money. The first approach was made in July 1902 by a faction led by James Martin, Chairman of Woolston and District Liberal Party, working through Tankerville Chamberlayne, owner of Western Grove and Conservative MP for Southampton. It was made a full Council issue by Peter Barnett Hayward, a fellow Liberal and leader of the anti-annexation movement in 1895. We can already see hints of the factional and personal feuding that was to bedevil the campaign. The application lay unanswered for over a year, lost in a sea of applications from similarly penurious authorities. During this waiting period, Carnegie himself spoke, at the opening of the Passmore Edwards Library in Plaistow, of the applications he had received from more than 800 communities in the English-speaking world. When finally received, in June 1913, Carnegie’s offer of £3,000 was made on two conditions. First, the site was to be given freely. This was easily met, for there was vacant Council-owned land at the side of their offices, Leigh Grange, at the corner of Portsmouth Road and Hazeleigh Avenue. The second condition proved intractable. In order to guarantee sufficient funds to run the library, Carnegie stipulated that an annual income of £175 was required. The penny rate was projected to yield £150. The shortfall of £25 was to be met by the investment income from a fund of £500. The District Council had no means to raise this from its own resources. An appeal to local property owners and principal ratepayers failed spectacularly. Five hundred letters, with subscription slips, were distributed to such grandees as Lord Radstock, Lady Longmore and the Honourable Mrs Eliot Yorke. They produced the paltry sum of £39-12s-6d, which included a Council promise of 16 guineas. The Council, on Chamberlayne’s advice, suggested to Carnegie that he might accept personal guarantees from responsible local people to make up the shortfall, pleading that Itchen was ‘a very poor District indeed and very heavily rated’ (Southampton City Archives SC/A1/8: letter of 22 July 1903). Carnegie refused to relax any of his financial conditions.

It cannot be said that this was a disaster. Even had Carnegie’s conditions been met, it is doubtful whether the Public Libraries Act would have been adopted. Harsh economic conditions, aggravated in a district dominated by the cyclical nature of shipbuilding, meant that there was little appetite for an increase in the rates. The District Council itself was divided on fault lines, defined less by political allegiance than by personal feuds. A series of three debates between September and November 1903 saw eleven amendments, often decided by a single vote, and on one occasion interrupted by the sudden death on the Council floor of James Martin, architect of the first appeal to Carnegie. Systematic opposition outside the Council was orchestrated by organized labour, driven in part by hatred of the way in which Carnegie had acquired his wealth. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Woolston Shipwrights’ Society and the Woolston Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners all supported the Southampton and District Trades and Labour Council in its resolution that a plebiscite of the district be taken. A poll would have rejected adoption of the Libraries Act.
The Carnegie deal lay on the table until January 1914, when (as we have seen in the case of Portswood) the Carnegie trustees recalled the offer as part of the general reassessment of the fund. Ironically, before the offer expired, there was a brief resurgence of the library movement. In the winter of 1912-13, Woolston and District Labour Party petitioned the District Council to adopt the 1892 Act. In a reversal of roles, every trades union in the district, with the exception of the boilermakers, supported the initiative. A deputation of four met the Council in December 1912. Despite the growing influence of Labour on the Council, a motion a month later to adopt the Act was lost.

It was not until the amalgamation of Woolston into the borough in November 1920 that a public library became more than an aspiration. The first post-war District Council election brought about a pro-amalgamation majority, with the Labour Party in the ascendancy. ‘A new King has arisen which knows not Joseph’. Negotiations were held between the respective Parliamentary Committees of Southampton Corporation and the District Council in order to avoid the unseemly wrangles of the 1895 annexation. A memorandum of agreement was drawn up on 20 February 1920 (Southampton City Archives TC 41/5/a). Item 9 was ‘a library, to be provided as soon as a suitable site is found’. Ralph Morley, one of the 1912 deputation and now an Itchen District Councillor and Vice Chairman of the Labour Party, explained. ‘If acting alone, a free library would cost the ratepayers something between a 4d and a 5d annual increase in the rates. Under amalgamation, there would be free access to the well equipped, amply stocked library of Southampton and in a short space of time a branch library would be provided’. With no money for a new build, the vacant plot at Leigh Grange was no longer an option. It became in 1929 the site for Woolston fire station. Negotiations were begun in 1920 (before amalgamation was a fact) for the purchase for £1,140 of Alston Villa, a house built in 1855 and owned by Spenser John Jeffries, manager of Lloyds Bank (Capital and Counties Bank before merger in 1918) in Bridge Street, assistant secretary of the Clausentum Lodge of Freemasons and, the previous year, honorary treasurer of the Itchen Peace Celebration Committee. The house lies at the corner of Portsmouth Road and Oak Road, slightly nearer to the floating bridge than Leigh Grange. It was clearly too small to serve the growing community of Woolston for more than a few years. Indeed, it was insufficient even to host the opening ceremony, held in the Rechabite Hall opposite. The open garden to the north of the house may have been the significant factor in its purchase, offering a site for the extension that would soon be necessary. Planning permission had been obtained in December 1909 (Southampton City Archives SC/BI/10/659) for an extension on this north side for a billiard room, with bedroom above, but this had not been implemented. The library was opened on 12 October 1921, after predictable delays in receiving loan sanction from the Ministry of Health (successor in local planning matters to the Local Government Board) and reductions in estimates. The architect for the conversion was the Borough Surveyor, J A Crowther, and the alterations were made by H W Small of Chapel Street, Bitterne, for £49, reduced from the £129 originally allocated. The new branch consisted of a lending library on the ground floor and two reading rooms (one for newspapers and one for magazines and periodicals) on the floor above. The librarian-in-charge lived on the premises. At the opening ceremony, the Mayor, Councillor Herbert Blatch, unconsciously echoed the sentiments of Thomas Morgan at Shirley 25 years earlier. ‘I sometimes wonder whether this little step is the beginning of Woolston’s greatness; it is certainly the first
fruits of the partnership with Southampton, and the credit lies with the free library to be the first in the field’.

The 1920 amalgamation brought in its train a fourth branch for Southampton: in Martin Parish Hall, Bitterne. This prominent red-brick building in Park Road had been opened as a Workmen’s Hall in October 1881, the gift of Elizabeth Adelaide Martin, eldest daughter of Admiral Thomas Martin and brother of Captain (later, through a series of promotions whilst a half-pay officer, Admiral), Thomas Hutchinson Mangles Martin. Her aim was to provide suitable accommodation to enable young men to spend their evenings away from public house influences. There was a primitive library, and boxes of books were received from the Hants Union of Workmen’s Clubs, to which the hall was affiliated. In 1898, Bitterne Parish Councillor James Brown, a leading Wesleyan, brought the issue of a free library before the Council. The 1892 Act allowed parishes to become library authorities in their own right, but this was a rarity. The mood of the parish, however, was not tested as the then owner of the hall, Mrs Thomas Hutchinson Martin, made it clear that she would refuse to let the hall to the council if the Act were passed.

Control of the hall passed to the Parish Council in 1912. It took over trusteeship on the advice of the Charity Commission, and gained outright ownership shortly afterwards on the gift of Mrs Martin. This included furniture and accoutrements, including books and the stove. It was renamed Martin Parish Hall. The nature of the new acquisition was the subject of an entertaining Parish Council meeting on 24 October. The more conservative members moved a resolution to create a reading room on the ground floor, with daily papers and games of draughts and dominoes. This was a prelude to a full library and consequent extension of the hall. On the other side were those who wanted a men’s institute, complete with billiard table. The philistines won a complete victory, leading to the establishment of a Workmen’s Club open every evening (Sunday excepted) between 6.30 and 10 pm and on Wednesday afternoon. The question of a library was deferred for a year, but was not brought up again. Councillor Bailey spoke for the majority. ‘A daily paper would not draw the men to the hall, nor would a game of dominoes. Dominoes was obsolete, the attraction at the present day was billiards’.

The 1920 amalgamation saw a more civilized outcome. Prenuptial discussions between Bitterne Parish Council and Southampton Corporation led to their own memorandum of agreement of 20 February (Southampton City Archives TC/41/5/b). The issue of a library was quickly disposed of: that a Branch Library in Martin Hall be opened twice a week, 6 to 9 pm. And so it was, opened a day before its Woolston counterpart (11 October 1921). It was a lending library alone, containing 600 volumes, all brand new and in publisher’s bindings. They were held in two stacks of portable shelving, enclosed by doors, ordered from Libraco Limited. An annual rent of £30 was paid to the Parish Council. Future improvements, such as the provision of reading tables, magazines and periodicals, were to be the responsibility of the council as trustees of the hall.

We leave this history of the early Southampton libraries at the start of a new dawn. The penny rate restriction ended in April 1920, leaving the libraries an integral part of the Corporation’s finances. The basic branch structure was in place. The buildings mentioned in this essay had a mixed fortune. St Mary’s Hall still stands although at
present (July 2009) vacant. It became in 1908 the Southampton Holiness Mission, the first branch of this charismatic religious organisation founded in Battersea in 1901. The central library in London Road became redundant in 1939 as the library moved to new quarters in the Civic Centre. The old library, partially leased to the Ordnance Survey as a map store, was destroyed in the blitz of November 1940. The site is now occupied by the solicitors Paris Smith. An extension was built on the north side of Woolston Library in 1925, and the library still operates from the same site. Bitterne Reading Room increased its opening times by one evening a week but was abandoned in 1935 on completion of Cobbett Road Library. Shirley Library, extended again in 1925, moved to Redcar Street in 1964 and into Shirley Precinct in 2005. The original building is now owned by Paul Jones Insurance Services. Portswood Library remains very much as it was when built.

Sources of Illustrations

Figure 1. Portcities Southampton no.3920. Taken when the property was occupied by the Kingsland Sports Club

Figure 2. Portcities Southampton no.1614. Undated photograph taken before the anonymous gift of an electric clock in May 1903

Figure 3. Original in Special Collections Library, Southampton Central Library

Figure 4. Portcities Southampton no.4002

Figure 5. Original in Special Collections Library, Southampton Central Library

Figure 6. Original in Special Collections Library, Southampton Central Library

Figure 7. Portcities no.3980
Will Boisseau

“The Greatest Unanimity Prevails”: Southampton during the 1926 General Strike

The 1926 General Strike remains the most significant conflict in British industrial history. Although the stoppage lasted only nine days, from the 3rd to 12th May, the debates and emotions that the strike provoked remained prominent for many years. In certain areas, Southampton not usually included among them, the bitter tensions aroused by the strike left communities divided for decades.

A study of Southampton during the stoppage offers a particularly valuable microcosm of the nation during the nine day General Strike because the city was home to many people who shared ‘the same attitudes, beliefs and interests’. This was expressed ‘through social interaction’, and promoted what one could describe as an entrenched working class atmosphere. Writing of a period some fifteen years after the strike Brad Beaven observed, with some qualifications, that ‘there is a certain tradition of local toughness, partly associated with the docks and the sea’. Indeed, it is the docks which gave Southampton its ingrained community atmosphere, and ensured that the city became a ‘trade-union stronghold’. Moreover, the feeling of ‘being governed by the fickle fancies of the shipping world’ at a time ‘when dock labour was hired and fired at will’ shaped the political outlook of large sections of Southampton’s working class. Finally, the fact that Southampton had an active and well established Labour movement by 1926 makes it ideal for assessing the actions of the Labour Party and other fraternal elements.

This article will give a brief overview of Southampton’s labour movement in its formative years, before considering certain key themes surrounding the General Strike and its effect on the city; important among these are the key details of the strike in Southampton. The article will place particular emphasis on any conflicts within the town’s labour movement that these events promoted and as such will aid subsequent research on conflicts within the labour movement at the national level. Finally, it will consider if the majority of Southampton’s workers were ‘non-political’ in 1926 but became radicalised after the strike’s failure, or perhaps the leadership’s betrayal.

I will suggest that this was the case before arguing that the militancy and enthusiasm of Southampton’s rank and file increased in the 1930s because of the events in 1926.

Background

The General Strike saw almost one and three-quarter million workers from all industries come out of work in support of over one million miners. The majority of striking workers came from vital industries such as transport, electricity, building and

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1 Southampton Strike Bulletin, No. 7, May 11th, 1926
3 B. Beaven, Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain 1850-1945, p. 219 (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Although, Beaven goes on to challenge this claim and suggests that such a stereotype, found in a Mass-Observation report, was groundless.
5 Southampton Museums Oral History Archive, (now SMOHA), C/00/34
6 D. Cairns, Southampton Working People, (Southampton: Southampton City Museums, 1990)
gas. Certainly the stoppage slowed the country down, if not brought it to a stand-still, and some even feared that the strike would escalate out of the TUC leaderships control and become a revolutionary situation. The strike itself was called in support of the one million miners ‘who had been locked out on 30th April for refusing to accept lower wages’, and worsening wage arrangements, once Baldwin’s nine month subsidy to the coal industry had “ran out”.

A coal crisis, and resultant industrial strife, was brewing for many months before 1926. In 1925, Britain’s return to the gold standard at the pre-war parity caused the price of British exports to increase, after which the mine owners were forced to respond to enlarged foreign competition by cutting ‘back the limited improvements in wages and hours’ which the miners had secured since 1921. This hardening of owners’ attitudes happened alongside a leftward shift in the Labour movement. The latter of which was caused by the feeling that Labour’s 1924 administration had failed to advance the cause of socialism. Within the industrial wing there remained a minority of syndicalist leaders, who continued to hold a belief in the possibility of direct action, potentially therefore taking the initiative. The ultimate crisis almost happened in 1925, when the owners ‘gave a month’s notice that they were terminating the National Wages Agreement’. The General Council of the TUC, unwilling to watch fellow workers receive a 25% wage cut, and still haunted by the humiliation of ‘Black Friday’, agreed to stand by the miners and place an ‘embargo on the movement of coal’ if miners’ wages were tampered with.

The trade union movement was successful on this occasion and the event became known as ‘Red Friday’. The Conservative government agreed to launch an inquiry into the coal industry and to subsidise the industry for nine months. However, the real victors were the government as the triumph split the labour movement. The Leader of the Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald, for instance, detested the ‘appearance’ of victory that, he believed, had been handed to ‘the very forces that sane, well considered’ socialists felt to be ‘probably the greatest enemy’.

Whilst these conflicts between the Labour Party and wider movement were stirring, the Tory government, which conceded the sum of £23 million on ‘Red Friday’, was ‘preparing a showdown with [the] workers’. Baldwin’s Conservative administration was well prepared for the struggle. Even in Southampton plans were put in place to ‘strengthen the police force’ in any ‘exceptional circumstances’. In contrast, the trade union movement, both nationally and locally, found themselves distinctly unprepared for the dispute. During the winter of 1925-26 most labour leaders seemed content with organisation that amounted to, in A. J. Cook’s infamous phrase, ‘an extra tin of salmon for [a few] weeks’.

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11 Ibid.; ‘Black Friday’: on 15th April 1921, the rail and transport unions felt unable to take industrial action in support of the miners. Thus breaking the ‘triple alliance’ and inadvertently causing the formation of the TUC General Council.
14 Letter to Chairman and members of the Watch Committee, 18th January, 1926, (Southampton)
As the final negotiations between the cabinet and the General Council, called to try and prevent a full-scale stoppage, disintegrated in the early hours of May 3rd 1926 one possible conflict, as Keith Laybourn suggests, was between the leaders of the movement ‘who wanted peace’ and the rank and file who were ready for action. Indeed, the former often regarded the latter as ‘the wildest Bolsheviks’. Of course, the leadership’s desire for negotiation emerged from their belief in parliamentary democracy, rather than treachery. However, it is true that leaders such as J. H. Thomas hoped for a settlement based on the miners accepting a humiliating wage reduction. The feeling that the leadership betrayed the strike before it had even begun, although sometimes unfounded, is important to the future development of rank and file politics.

When negotiations finally ended the General Council and the Labour Party undoubtedly ‘attempted to ensure an honourable performance on behalf of the miners’. However, they were never fully committed to the principles and possibilities of the strike. This produced a conflict, perhaps not realised by all parties involved at the time, between the leaders and the rank and file. The latter, although not necessarily militant, were, in Southampton and other localities, braced for what would become ‘one of the momentous moments in British Trade Union history’.

**Southampton’s Working People**

Southampton of the 1920s had depressing differences from the town a century before. As Percy Ford states in his 1934 survey of the port: Southampton once ‘owned or controlled the immediate sources of prosperity… it owned its docks’ and controlled its annual revenue. However by 1920, because of decisions made by councillors whom, Ford believes, included ‘many members who were directors, shareholders and otherwise interested in the company’, Southampton lost direct control of her principal assets. As the twentieth century approached, the town became a poor area. Companies moved to Southampton in the hope of paying lower wages, and 21 percent of residents lived below the poverty line.

One St Mary’s resident, who lived in a typical two-up, two-down, remembers living with another family and sleeping ‘with somebody’s feet on your pillow’. One must consider whether such intimate conditions contributed to a community atmosphere, and moreover if such working class commonality led to shared political objectives. Of course, not all Sotonians experienced this ‘community’ atmosphere, and one must not romanticise such appalling conditions. Nor were all residents of the town working class; the city did have a large service sector. However, 27 percent of male residents worked in transport or communication. The fact that Labour candidates only gathered 7,000 votes in the 1918 election presumably demonstrates

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17 D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 424
18 R. Jenkins, *Baldwin*, p. 98
20 Ibid., p. 113.
22 Ibid., p. 15
23 Ibid. p. 43, p. 45
24 SMOHA C/00/24
25 P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port*, p. 59
the apolitical or conservative outlook of the workers, rather than challenging traditional presumptions of the town’s class demographics. 26

Indeed, Southampton’s workers did seem deferential in political outlook. Many would go to church on Sunday in their ‘best’, even if some were short of vital clothing for the rest of the week, local news was obtained from the right-wing *Southern Daily Echo*, and the town eagerly celebrated Empire Day. 27 When one resident was asked to reveal something of life in 1926, he simply recalled ‘we ‘ad two Music Halls in Southampton…everyone was singing, shoutin’ and yelling’. 28

Despite this, signs of Southampton’s developing labour movement were beginning to reveal themselves. In 1915 the national anthem was ‘booed’ by dockworkers and, more shockingly, in 1917 the Bolshevik Revolution was welcomed by some, mainly intellectual, residents. 29 However, the bulk of residents remained unwilling to connect their living and working conditions to the political system, perhaps because both local and national newspapers encouraged a rightwing perspective. As one local remembered, almost sixty years after the strike, ‘there was nothing radical published…so therefore you were satisfied because you didn’t know any different’. 30 Whether it really was the *Echo* which kept the population docile and submissive is unlikely, but older readers remained loyal to the paper. What is clear is that in the years between the Great War and the General Strike ‘Southampton was full of poor people’, and the circumstances were ideal for the development of a militant labour movement. 31

In order accurately to assess Southampton’s role during the General Strike one must first survey the conditions for Southampton’s largest single workforce, the dockers, and consider how such conditions led to the men being ‘all out’ during the 1926 stoppage. 32 Percy Ford’s assertion that ‘the name “docker” immediately calls to mind scrambles for work, casual jobs, under employment and poverty’, could easily be a description of Southampton’s workforce, although not the company’s ‘preference men’. 33

One former dockworker remembered that the company would only take men ‘on a daily basis’ and men were ‘paid off any hour’. 34 In order to find employment men would go to the ‘labour box’ at the bottom of Southampton’s Dock Road. Every morning, another docker remembers, the employees would say ‘“I want forty men for this ship”…then there used to be fights and the whole shed used to end up…treading on one another’s hands’ when workers tried to pick up the tallies. 35 The problem was, as a unionised worker recalled, ‘we never ran out of dockers, we ran out of ships’ and

26 In fact, two Coalition Liberals won; again the Labour movement was split. One group of trade unionists considered standing an ‘Independent Workers’ Candidate’ against Labour’s official candidate, who was anti-war and in the ILP; G. P. Heaney, The Development of Labour politics in Southampton: 1890-1945, p. 151, (unpublished D.Phil: University of Southampton, 2000)
27 SMOHA C/00/14; Southampton Chamber of Commerce minutes of a meeting, 23rd March 1926, (D/com/1/12)
28 SMOHA M/00/21
29 SMOHA C/00/47; SMOHA C/00/61 (W) Indeed a ‘Friends of the Soviet Union’ group was later formed in Southampton.
30 SMOHA C/00/15
31 SMOHA C/00/08
32 Letter from Southampton Trades Council & Labour Representation Committee (Tommy Lewis), to Walter Citrine, 5 May 1926, (TUC General Strike File)
33 P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port*, p. 69; SMOHA M/00/16
34 Ibid.,
35 SMOHA M/00/52
therefore, to avoid unemployment, men would be ‘fighting like hell’ for even half a day’s labour.  

Of course, in these conditions men who were known unionists would simply not be picked for work. Some would get their children to take their dues to Dan Hillman, secretary of Southampton’s Transport and General Workers Union, for fear that they themselves would be spotted and victimised. Unions, particularly the TGWU, did organise in the town, and suggested removing the labour sheds and creating a ‘national authority…to provide a weekly minimum wage’. Perhaps by 1926 men had realised that ‘scrambling on the deck’ was not the way to better conditions. Indeed, many were prepared to try solidarity with fellow workers.

There is not one date that marks the ‘birth’ of Southampton’s labour movement. Southampton’s Amalgamated Society of Engineers formed in 1851; David Cairns suggests the date is 1880; and the Southampton Trades Council was formed in 1890, a year that saw 3,200 unionised Southampton dockers clash with troops who were called in to break a strike. In reality, as a long-time Northam resident remembered, the Labour Party did not truly have an impact on Southampton’s working class until 1918. Before then it was the Liberals who ‘did do a lot of good’ for the town’s working class, even considering standing a Lib-Lab candidate in 1890.

As Cairns notes, splits in the movement’s early history seem to be endemic. In fact, ‘divisions among Southampton’s workers were more evident than solidarity’. The ILP, Social Democratic Federation and Fabian Society were all active in the town but, distressingly, seemed more eager to oppose each other than cooperate. In 1895, for instance, the secretary of the Trades Council, standing for the Liberals, was defeated in the general election after an ILP candidate from outside the area had split the socialist vote. This was an early warning that a divided labour movement would be defeated. However, the lesson was learnt neither by local unionists nor the ‘outsider’, the young Ramsay MacDonald.

Unfortunately, most records of Southampton’s labour movement in the 1920’s have now been lost, causing any historical interpretation to be largely speculative, or rely heavily on oral evidence. Indeed, the Northam worker is probably wrong in his belief that Southampton was ‘hundred percent Labour’; there remained a high number of working-class Conservatives. However, it is true that by the 1920s Southampton’s labour movement had grown. In fact, the town boasted 11 Labour councillors and Itchen boasted 12; with 70 branches affiliated to the Trades Council, and 12,000 members of the Co-operative Society.

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36 SMOHA M/00/21
37 SMOHA C/00/34
38 P. Ford, *Work and Wealth in a Modern Port*, p. 81
39 Ibid.
41 SMOHA C/00/15
42 Ibid.; D. Cairns, *Southampton Working People*, pp. 9-10
43 Ibid., p. 27
45 SMOHA C/00/15
Despite the increasing scale of the movement there were still conflicts between Southampton’s workers. One dispute was between revolutionaries and reformers. Indeed this discord was apparent in the Seaman’s Union split of 1925, which greatly affected the town. Another was between leaders and the rank and file. This friction was epitomised by the Labour Party’s Tommy Lewis, an archetype moderate, reformer and, until 1931, MacDonaldite. Certainly, the conflict between the Labour Party and the wider movement would intensify as loyalties within Southampton’s labour movement were tested. By 1926 it was clear that Southampton would play a significant role in the upcoming industrial dispute, and to the historian it is clear that conflicts within the town both reflect and deviate from tensions at the national level.

“Southampton Going Strong!” During the nine days.

In order to understand the conflicts within the labour movement one must first comprehend events in Southampton during the nine day stoppage. One important part of the strike across different localities were the ‘Strike Committees’ or ‘Councils of Action’, whose role involved handling ‘picketing, distress, food, sport and transport’. These councils have often been romanticised by socialist historians who mistakenly believe they resembled a ‘rival workers’ government’. Certainly, historians would be pushed to see Southampton’s moderate Central Joint Strike Committee as such.

The committee comprised eight prominent local trade unionists: H. Vincent (NUR), Dan Hillman (Transport), Burden (Railway Clerks’ Association), Blanchard (Building Trades), M. Connor (Plumbers), Long (Printers), Wright (AEU) and the Trades Council’s secretary, Tommy Lewis (Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen). It is true that they played an extensive role during the nine days. For instance, 5,000 copies of a strike bulletin were printed daily. This contained news from the area and headlines from the British Worker, which was probably unable to reach Southampton. The bulletin was printed at Hobbs & Sons by volunteers from the Typographical Association. It contained news of the many demonstrations organised by the Trades Council and ILP, and attended by many thousands, on Southampton Common; alongside reports of inter-worker sports matches, and pleas to maintain the ‘spirit of calm orderliness’ that had ‘characterised the dispute in Southampton’.

As G. Phillips highlights, when the strike began Southampton was one of a few notable areas where rank and file reaction was underwhelming. Indeed, by the 4th May a small tram service was operating between Portswood and Shirley. Tommy Lewis put this down to confusion over the ‘two-wave’ strike tactic. Certainly, some

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48 D. Cairns, Southampton Working People.
50 J. Symons, The General Strike, p. 146
51 P. Taaffe, 1926 General Strike, p. 2
52 Emergency Committee: Minutes of Proceedings, Wednesday 5th May 1926
53 Letter from Southampton Trades Council & Labour Representation Committee (Tommy Lewis), to Walter Citrine, 7 May 1926, (TUC General Strike File)
55 Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 8th 1926, Hobbs & Sons described as a ‘Trade Union Printers’.
56 Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 10th 1926
58 Southampton Borough Council, minutes of proceedings, Tramways Committee, May 11th, 1926.
ship builders at Thornycroft’s stayed in work, believing that they should come out in the second week, whilst builders at Itchen Secondary School mistakenly downed their tools. However, even with this confusion 98 percent of railwaymen and 80 percent of tram workers stayed out.

Perhaps this lack of enthusiasm, if it did exist, was due to the moderate nature of the Strike Committee. After the 5th May, when the committee’s request to ‘assist in the distribution of all essential foodstuffs’ was rejected by the Town Council, the trade unionists were very much on the back foot. At another of the many meetings between the council’s own Emergency Committee and the unionists, Dan Hillman agreed to ‘abstain from taking any action’ until after the matter had been submitted to the town council. Soon, the momentum and possibility for action was lost.

One might then presume that a conflict existed between the deferential leadership and the rank and file. Indeed, the commitment of many of Southampton’s workers should not be underestimated. One docker remembers picketing ‘outside the main gates at four o’clock in the morning’ for ten shillings strike pay. Elsewhere, the ship repairers who had stayed in work felt the cold disapproval of their communities. Finally, students from Oxford University were driven in by train to work in the docks, perhaps because locals were unwilling to work as blacklegs. J. C. Masterman, the history tutor who orchestrated a party of Christ Church students to work on Southampton Docks, later admitted that ‘his behaviour was ill-advised’.

However, Southampton’s rank and file seem no more radical than their leaders. For instance, Margaret Bondfield, who travelled round the ‘South-West of England to report what had happened in London’, was impressed by the ‘great reception’ she received for the ‘message from the General Council’ from the town’s workers. Interestingly, she also reported hostilities between the transport workers and Trades Council, which she suggested was due to the workers receiving ‘contrary instructions from two different executives’. It seems that tensions were high due to the pressure of the situation, and conflicting personalities, rather than any great ideological divide.

Of course, some Southampton workers were ideologically motivated, and thousands attended meetings on the Marlands and the Common. However, one must question how many people attended these as a social occasion, or perhaps to watch the cricket and football matches afterwards, rather than for a discussion on socialism. Indeed, on the 10th of May the Marine Dept’s 3-0 victory over the Dock Traffic workers was watched by an enthusiastic crowd. Other strikers were less active still; one docker remembers that many workers would simply ‘go home and sit down sulking’, but even these men, he recalls, ‘were all out’.

59 Letter from Southampton Trades Council & Labour Representation Committee (Tommy Lewis), to Walter Citrine, 6 May 1926, (TUC General Strike File)
60 Tommy Lewis to Walter Citrine, 5 May 1926
61 County Borough of Southampton, Minutes of Proceedings of Council and Committees: 5th May 1926
62 Ibid.,
63 SMOHA C/00/37
64 Tommy Lewis to Walter Citrine, 7 May 1926
65 SMOHA C/00/37
67 M. Bondfield, A Life’s Work, p. 266, (London: Hutchinson, 1949)
68 Ibid.,
69 Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 11th 1926
70 SMOHA M/00/21
Southampton’s Mayor, Councillor Silverman, was among the town’s many citizens who were determined for life to carry on as normal during the stoppage. Indeed, the council and chamber of commerce did meet regularly during the strike. The latter, in behaviour befitting Robert Tressell’s cruellest satire, spent much of their time during the strike discussing an ‘additional reading room table…similar in design to the present [one]’. In fact, the town’s businessmen had an additional reason to bemoan the date of the strike, as 6th-13th of May was to be ‘Southampton Shopping Week’. The week of consumer activities, with its slogan ‘it pays – ALL ways – to shop in Southampton’, did still go ahead; but was, presumably, overshadowed by other events.

Finally, there was only one violent incident roused by the strike in Southampton. This satisfactory figure was partly due to John McCarmac, the acting chief constable of the town’s police force. McCarmac insisted that the police must remain neutral throughout. In fact, they were forbidden from even discussing the strike in private. Of course, the real record might not be as glowing as that offered by the police themselves. However, Southampton does not appear to have generated the same animosity to the special constables, brought in to help the town’s 208 policemen, which obviously developed in other areas. Indeed, by the 11th May the Strike Committee was hoping to arrange a football, or even billiards, match against the police.

Conflicts within the Southampton Labour Movement

The Southampton Strike Committee was formed on the 3rd of May 1926 with ‘practically all of the organised labour movement being represented’. The committee comprised various unionists and Labour Party men, no women were present on the committee, and a study of its short lifespan could lead one to conclude that there were few conflicts between the party and the wider movement in Southampton. Certainly, the leaders of the town’s Labour Party directed their energy entirely towards aiding the strike. For instance, there was no possibility of Labour councillors joining the Mayor’s own Emergency Committee.

On the 2nd May the Independent Labour Party held a meeting, attended by hundreds of workers, where Ralph Morley spoke in terms of moderation and eventual victory. This demonstrates that it still made little difference to the rank and file or the local leadership who had called the meeting. Indeed, in 1929 Morley would be Labour’s successful parliamentary candidate. On the 9th May another mass meeting, this time attended by several thousand, was held on Southampton Common. The meeting was so well attended that two stages were constructed and two speakers

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71 Minutes of a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Tuesday 11th May 1926
72 Minutes of a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, general meeting of the chamber, 4th March 1926, and Retail Trades Committee, 15th June 1926
73 Southern Daily Echo, p. 3 (5/5/1926)
74 Chief Constable’s Office, General Order, 4th May 1926, (SC/P2/3/9)
75 Annual Report of the Chief Constable for the year ending 31st December 1926 (Southampton: The Hampshire Advertiser and Echo’s Ltd, 1927); A. Durr, Who were the Guilty: General Strike in Brighton May 1926, pp. 35-36, (Sussex: Brighton Labour History Press, 1976)
76 Southampton Strike Bulletin, May 11th 1926
77 Southern Daily Echo, p. 3 (4.5.1926)
78 Southern Daily Echo, p. 3 (5.5.1926)
79 Southern Daily Echo, p. 3 (3.5.1926)
addressed the crowds simultaneously.\textsuperscript{80} Perhaps this very image symbolises the lack of conflict within the labour movement. In this instance, the priority for speakers and listeners alike was Southampton’s Board of Guardians’ deplorable decision to deny benefits to the dependents of those on strike. Both the leadership and rank and file were prepared to show moderation whilst they walked ‘along the road to victory’.\textsuperscript{81}

Of course, relations within the movement were not entirely harmonious. Not only were there ‘endemic divisions’ between men working on different trades, particularly between transport workers and the Trade Council.\textsuperscript{82} But, more interestingly, there was also a division, or certainly a fear of such a division, between the moderate Strike Committee who worked for ‘the preservation of peace and order’, and those men who hoped to ‘incite the workers to disorder’.\textsuperscript{83}

The Strike Committee’s constant assertion that they accepted ‘no responsibility whatever’ for men who preached extremism suggests that there were those in the town who did so.\textsuperscript{84} Perhaps Frederick Jordon, who was charged by the police for physically assaulting a strike breaker, was among those advocates of ‘a shorter, more direct route to socialism’.\textsuperscript{85} Interestingly, G. A. Phillips suggests that the TUC General Council’s urgency to sell the British Worker in various localities was ‘increased by the unofficial printing of labour papers’ in various towns, including Southampton.\textsuperscript{86} Although no record now exists of this paper, it is safe to assume that it was not approved by the Strike Committee and was, presumably, more radical than Southampton’s humourless Strike Bulletin.

Perhaps the paper was printed by the small Communist Party that existed in Southampton during the 1920s. However, the organisation of the town’s Communist Party branch was poor. As one future member recalled, the Communists in Southampton were very distinct from the communist movement within the docks and trade unions.\textsuperscript{87} Even with the unofficial paper, Southampton offers no evidence to support David Renton’s assertion that the CPGB was ‘the back bone of the movement’ in many provinces.\textsuperscript{88} In fact, some dockers later decided to form their own CPGB branch.\textsuperscript{89} Moreover, in many instances the Communist Party’s tactics during the strike ‘came from Moscow’.\textsuperscript{90} Perhaps Hampshire’s Communists were directed by their Comintern superiors to focus their energy on Portsmouth.

The unofficial paper remains mysterious, but it does reveal that there were conflicts between the Labour Party and the wider movement. George Tatford was a TGWU shop steward and Labour Party member who felt the brunt of this tug of war between the various factions. Speaking in the 1980s Tatford, who was considered a ‘red’ during the strike, recalled that he was ‘accused by the communists of being an enemy of the workers and by the right-wingers and the Labour Party of being a fellow

\textsuperscript{80} Southern Daily Echo, (10.5.1926)  
\textsuperscript{81} Southern Daily Echo, (11.5.1926)  
\textsuperscript{82} P. Renshaw, The General Strike, p. 217, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975)  
\textsuperscript{83} Southern Daily Echo, p.3 (4.5.1926); The Hampshire Advertiser and Independent, p.6, (8.5.1926)  
\textsuperscript{84} Southern Daily Echo, (4.5.1926)  
\textsuperscript{85} Southern Daily Echo, (5.5.1926); M. Morris, The General Strike, p. 173  
\textsuperscript{86} G. A. Phillips, The General Strike, p. 173  
\textsuperscript{87} SMOHA M/00/52  
\textsuperscript{88} J. Eden, D. Renton, The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920, p. 27 (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)  
\textsuperscript{89} SMOHA M/00/52  
\textsuperscript{90} J. Eden, D. Renton, The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920, p. 29; For an account of the reaction to the British General Strike in the Soviet Union see: M. H. Cowden, ‘Soviet and Comintern Policies toward the British General Strike of 1926’, World Politics, vol. 5, no. 4, (Jul., 1953), pp. 503-529
Despite a relative level of harmony during the nine days, Tatford’s memories reveal that the Trade Council’s claim that ‘the greatest unanimity prevails’ was anything but accurate. Of course, with any intense struggle tensions were bound to arise. One dispute must have been between more right-wing elements within the Labour Party and the movement’s revolutionary factions. Perhaps a further conflict existed between the leadership and ordinary members, but to no extent was this comparable to the national situation. Throughout the stoppage Tommy Lewis hoped to remind his comrades that ‘your power is immense – while you remain one union…bound together, there is no possibility’ of defeat. Ironically, whilst in London MacDonald and Thomas were conceding defeat, in Southampton Lewis and Hillman were assuring thousands of workers that the second wave of strikers would secure victory.

It does seem to be the case that there was little distinction between ordinary Labour Party members and rank and file trade unionists in Southampton. Both sections believed that victory was imminent if moderation was retained. It is interesting that even this moderation was not enough for Southampton’s Liberal Party, or indeed the Liberal leadership, once so encouraging of working class participation, who denounced the Strike Committee as ‘revolutionary’. Perhaps it is futile to imagine a scenario where Southampton’s leaders were in charge of the national negotiations. However, there were differences between the two groups of leaders. Lewis recognised that the strike’s defeat would mean that the workers would be ‘down for the next twenty years’. There were none of Thomas’s tears of joy when Hillman and other trade unionists were forced to sign humiliating terms with the employers. Furthermore, Southampton’s leadership remained loyal to the labour movement in 1931. In light of this one could conclude that ordinary Labour Party members, united with trade unionists, were betrayed by the leadership in London. Alternatively, one could suggest that the General Council’s actions do not constitute a callous betrayal but a realistic withdrawal on the best possible terms.

Southampton’s non-political workers

In the 1980s Southampton’s Oral History Unit conducted a survey of the town’s elderly working class. Many interviewees, if they mentioned the strike at all, simply recalled ‘all the hardship’ of the period. Indeed, rather than being remembered as a momentous political occasion the strike was said to epitomise a decade that was ‘harder than ever’. Perhaps the real concern for most people was not the London-centred conflicts but the food on their table and the roof over their heads. One resident recalled being evicted from his home during the stoppage for

91 SMOHA M/00/11
92 Southampton Strike Bulletin, No. 7, May 11th, 1926
93 Southern Dairy Echo (11.5.1926)
94 Ibid.,
96 Southern Daily Echo, (7.5.1926)
97 D. Marquand, Ramsay MacDonald, p. 440
98 SMOHA C/00/08
99 Ibid.,
failing to pay his rent. Despite this, neither of his parents, as he remembered, even contemplated blacklegging during the strike.100

There is evidence that Southampton’s working class regarded the strike as an industrial, rather than a political, conflict. For instance, on the first of May the town’s police marched through the streets in an ‘imposing procession’.101 This parade, albeit to mourn the recently deceased chief constable, was not met with the hostility that might have greeted a police demonstration in other areas.102 Moreover, during the strike Tommy Lewis’ call for workers to contribute to a political fund was largely ignored.103

Even Southampton Shopping Week was not a complete disaster. If the \textit{Hampshire Advertiser} can be believed then the beauty and ‘best babies’ competitions ‘fixed the attention of the whole town’.104 Even the \textit{Daily Echo}, which had moved away from its rightwing editorial to pursue a ‘scrupulously fair’ line printed more letters concerning the Shopping Week than the strike.105 Of course, the \textit{Echo} maintained its prejudices but it did, at least, tone down its line because it did ‘not intend to betray our trust’ among its working class readership.106 Perhaps Southampton’s working class really were prepared to visit the attractions as they remained loyal to those on strike.

On May the first 1926, only days before thousands would assemble on Southampton Common, a meagre few hundred socialists attended a Mayday rally.107 One must ask what turned the crowd of hundreds into several thousand. Perhaps countless people attended later demonstrations, and remained on strike, not because of their political beliefs but because of a sense of class loyalty. Trevor Stalland, who moved from South Wales to Southampton in 1926, remembered the ‘comradeship’ and organisation of a strike in Wales in 1921, but admitted that ‘what the issue was I wouldn’t know’.108 Perhaps a similar situation is true of Southampton; people came on strike with the community without knowing the intricate details of the dispute or problems of the economic system.

Even non-unionised workers joined the strike in Eastleigh and other areas.109 Perhaps this, and the case of Conservative Party members joining the struggle elsewhere, shows that ones ‘class loyalty proved to be greater than their party political allegiance’.110 Interestingly, in the railways and trams, workers in traditionally non-unionised jobs, for instance female cleaners, came out in large numbers whereas clerks and seniors defied their union’s orders by remaining in work.111 Certainly, the dockers seemed to accept students working in the docks, but when someone who was regarded as ‘our own people’ blacklegged then tensions invariably surfaced.112 However, there was not the same ostracization that one might

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{100} SMOHA C/00/24
\bibitem{101} \textit{Hampshire Advertiser and Independent}, p.12, (8.5.1926)
\bibitem{102} Ibid.,
\bibitem{104} \textit{Hampshire Advertiser and Independent}, (1.5.1926)
\bibitem{105} \textit{Southern Daily Echo}, (3.5.1926), (8.5.1925)
\bibitem{106} Ibid., (3.5.1926)
\bibitem{107} Ibid.,
\bibitem{108} SMOHA M/00/52
\bibitem{109} \textit{Southern Daily Echo}, p 3, (4.4.1926)
\bibitem{110} F. Westacott, \textit{Shaking the Chains: A personal and political history}, p. 51 (Derbyshire: Joe Clark, 2002)
\bibitem{111} Emergency Committee, 22\textsuperscript{nd} May, 1926
\bibitem{112} SMOHA C/00/37
\end{thebibliography}
presume occurred in mining communities; and when the strike was over there was little hostility against the ‘scab workers’ who remained in the docks.\footnote{Ibid.,}\footnote{Hampshire Advertiser and Independent, p. 4, (22.5.1926)}

It is true that in 1926 Southampton's workers were less politically aware than they were loyal to their community; although such a loyalty is itself complex and never universal. During the stoppage Reverend Arthur Boyce arranged for Southampton’s Central Hall to be at the disposal of men out of work.\footnote{G. A. Phillips, The General Strike, p. 216} Rather than demonstrating the town’s long tradition of Christian socialism, this facility is probably evidence that many strikers chose to engage in non-political recreation. One must presume that conflicts between the Labour Party and wider movement mattered little to the many ordinary workers who spent the strike in Central Hall. Perhaps G. A. Phillips is correct in his assertion that ‘the solidarity of the General Strike became more assured as one moved from South to North… [and approached] the great coalfields’.\footnote{Ibid., (22.5.1926)} To some extent Southampton fits into this pattern. However, the town’s class loyalties had never been tested to such an extent. Indeed, one must not underestimate the dedication of many Southampton workers during the strike.

Attempts have been made to downplay the nature of the strike in Southampton. *Southern Daily Echo* immediately took the line that there was complete calm and little change, whilst balancing this with reports of the strikers' meetings.\footnote{Southern Daily Echo, (2.5.1926)} In reality, men lost their lives or their limbs in the docks as unqualified men tried to work heavy machinery.\footnote{Ibid., (4.5.1926)} Certainly, the strike is made no less significant because of the relative lack of political awareness in the town.

Margaret Bondfield was said to be impressed with ‘the widespread understanding of the cause of the strike’.\footnote{M. Bondfield, A Life's Work, p. 268} Undoubtedly, this was true of some Southampton strikers, who mainly discussed local matters in their meetings. Perhaps Ralph Miliband’s claim that workers would listen with ‘polite indifference’ about the mining industry, but would greet any attack on the Government with ‘wild enthusiasm’, holds more truth than Bondfield’s optimistic assessment.\footnote{R. Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, p. 141, (London: Merlin Press, 1972)}

By 1933 the political situation had changed in Southampton. The town’s dockers ‘wouldn’t load a lorry unless the driver was in the union’.\footnote{SMOHA M/00/52} Indeed, by the late 1930s the town was bursting with leftwing political activity, but this was simply not the case in 1926. One must consider what caused so many people to become politically active. Perhaps it was the leadership’s supposed betrayal in London, or the bitter aftermath of the strike in Southampton.

*‘We trust your word as Prime Minister’*: The strike ends.

On the 12\textsuperscript{th} May 1926 the TUC General Council, supported by Labour’s national leadership, ended the strike believing that the unofficial Samuel Memorandum, which offered future reforms of the coal industry in exchange for an immediate reduction in miners’ wages ‘would be the basis for settlement’.\footnote{P. Renshaw, The General Strike, p. 224} This decision has prompted much debate among historians and activists of the time, who saw the capitulation as anything from an ability to ‘deal with the facts as they are’ to a
betrayal.\textsuperscript{123} Henry Pelling and Alastair Reid, for instance, are adamant that the failure of the General Strike was ‘inevitable’ because ‘the great bulk of public opinion’ supported Baldwin.\textsuperscript{124}

Ralph Miliband, on the other hand, argues that the rank and file were betrayed by their reformist leaders.\textsuperscript{125} Miliband is correct that many workers would have been surprised that the strike ended ‘within a matter of hours of calls for continued resistance’; indeed the second-wave of strikers were preparing to down-tools in Southampton.\textsuperscript{126} In fact, the number of strikers actually increased by 100,000 as the strike ended.\textsuperscript{127} Many people must have believed that an increasingly successful strike was betrayed by a frightened, or embarrassed, leadership, and this must have effected the actions of many people in the labour movement in the years following 1926.

The strike’s end also had an intense impact on the trade union leaders. It seems to be the case that the General Council genuinely thought, or let themselves believe, that they had reached an honourable settlement along the lines set out by Samuel. Indeed, the negotiating committee thought they had a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with the Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{128} Ernest Bevin, by many accounts, was the first to realise that the General Council had been tricked, no honourable settlement would be reached and the strikers had ‘committed suicide’.\textsuperscript{129} Thousands of members would be victimised.

‘Twelve Years of Socialist Endeavour in Southampton’.

As the news that the strike had ended reached the provinces, many workers, believing that they had been victorious, held victory celebrations.\textsuperscript{130} Clearly, this was not the case in Southampton where many would have read the Mayor’s claim that ‘Southampton will resume its normal industrial life’.\textsuperscript{131} Indeed, the day after the strike collapsed, as hungry children gathered at the dock gates asking for the remains of strikers’ sandwiches, many must have felt that normal life had already resumed.\textsuperscript{132}

It is no accident that some of those interviewed by Southampton Oral History Unit believed that the strike lasted up to three weeks.\textsuperscript{133} Simply, the strike did not end in the town. The Strike Committee remained in session to deal with victimisation, huge protests were held on Southampton Common and some workers even called for a completely renewed General Strike.\textsuperscript{134} However, it soon became clear to the leaders that the defeat was total and humiliating. The Strike Committee, and TGWU, were told that ‘no useful purpose could be served’ by meetings with employers.

\textsuperscript{123} In Bevin’s words: P. Weiler, \textit{Ernest Bevin}, p. 189, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)
\textsuperscript{124} H. Pelling, A. J. Reid, \textit{A Short History of the Labour Party}, 56
\textsuperscript{125} R. Miliband, \textit{Parliamentary Socialism}, p. 144
\textsuperscript{126} M. Foot, \textit{Aneurin Bevan}, p. 46
\textsuperscript{127} R. Miliband, \textit{Parliamentary Socialism}, p. 147
\textsuperscript{128} P. Renshaw, \textit{The General Strike}, pp. 224-225
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., Although such a realisation did not have the effect of radicalising Bevin, who later pioneered corporatism and the Mond-Turner talks: P. Weiler, \textit{Ernest Bevin}, p. 189
\textsuperscript{130} H. A. Clegg, \textit{A History of British Trade Unions}, p. 410
\textsuperscript{131} Although most Sotonians would not have heard the Mayor’s words; \textit{Hampshire Advertiser and Independent}, (15.5.1926)
\textsuperscript{132} SMOHA C/00/34
\textsuperscript{133} SMOHA C/00/37
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Southern Daily Echo}, (13.5.1926); (19.5.1926); (22.5.1926)
associations. Indeed, nine tramway workers were soon told that they could not resume work and a further 68 were never reinstated. The South Coast Engineering and Shipbuilding Employers’ Association were not alone in deciding that 1926 was the time to change their ‘working rules’. The employers’ terms, signed by a downtrodden union, stated that future disputes ‘should in the first place be referred to the management’. Even the TGWU was powerless to prevent victimisation; they ‘agreed’ that Southampton’s workers should apply individually for reinstatement. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the proud oldest union in Southampton, signed agreements that ‘dirty allowances’ would no longer be paid to men working ‘inside the crank cases of engines’. With the trade unions powerless to prevent victimisation, and Tommy Lewis’ Labour grouping striving to prevent the worst abuses on the council, it would be correct to presume that many Southampton workers turned to the Labour Party to protect their standard of living. Indeed, this is partly accurate, but many workers also increased their own rank and file actions.

Patrick Renshaw has argued that although ‘the class war may have continued in the coal districts it faded elsewhere’. However, class, or perhaps ideological, conflicts seem to have increased in Southampton. The Mayoress, for instance, was known to flaunt her wealth whilst appealing to ‘all classes of the community’ to aid her charity work. Ross McKibbin, who argues that class conflict increased after 1926, is correct that the Mayoress was unaffected by the strike partly because ‘the triumph of her class was merely a daily event’.

It is true that Labour secured a majority for the first time in Southampton’s 1926 municipal vote. Graham Heaney argues that Southampton workers voted Labour ‘as a reaction to the General Strike’. However, rather than voting Labour because of the negative memory of a failed industrial dispute perhaps many people in Southampton voted out of a newly confirmed ‘allegiance to certain working-class traditions’ and not because of any ideological position within the Labour movement.

Heaney is correct that many people involved in Southampton’s Labour movement recognised ‘that political activity probably provided the best means for furthering working class interest’. However, the situation was dissimilar from that at national level because of the activism of rank and file Labour members in defending victimised tramway men and, as Heaney recognises, because of an

135 Emergency Committee Minutes, 14th May 1926
136 Emergency Committee Minutes, 22nd May 1926
137 Letter from South Coast Engineering and Shipbuilding Employers’ Association to National Society of Painters: Southampton District Committee, 15th December 1926, (D/SES/.162)
138 SCE and SEA, Working Rules and Agreements, Southampton District, 1926
139 Agreement between Southampton and District Employers’ Association and the TGWU, May 15th, 1926, (D/Ses./3/2)
140 Agreement between SCE and SEA and Amalgamated Engineers Union, (not dated, 1926)
141 P. Renshaw, The General Strike, p. 250
142 Hampshire Advertiser and Independent, (22.5.1926)
143 Quoted in a different context from R. McKibbin, Classes and Cultures, p. 59
144 G. P. Heaney, The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton, p. 224
145 Ibid.,
147 G. P. Heaney, The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton, p. 203
Independent’ Tory-Liberal alliance on the council.\textsuperscript{148} Ultimately, there was not a simple shift ‘from industrial to political activity’.\textsuperscript{149} In reality, there was an increase in rank and file activism by ordinary party members and trade unionists and an increasing distrust of the leadership, especially after 1931.

After the failed strike national trade union membership dropped ‘by more than 500,000’ and funds dropped from £121/2 million to only £8 1/2 million.\textsuperscript{150} Indeed, at the national level it was argued that MacDonald’s reformism had been vindicated and in subsequent year’s ordinary workers looked ‘more upon the parliamentary party as the agent of their political struggle’.\textsuperscript{151} However, as one can see in Southampton, Labour was not simply regaining old votes, they were winning new ones. Perhaps this was because the party had gained the middle ground of politics, or perhaps it was an expression of the continued solidarity that emerged during 1926.

If one studies the long term trends in the Labour movement after 1926, then one notices a shift away from activity centred around the traditional leadership. One example is the Southampton Labour Choir’s endeavour to build a Labour Hall, despite opposition from local unions and Labour Party.\textsuperscript{152} Other examples are the strengthening of the Shop Stewards’ movement, which took place immediately after 1926, support for the Spanish Republic among many dockers, and famously among intellectuals at University College, and the demonstrations against the British Union of Fascists, which attracted 6,000 protestors some years later.\textsuperscript{153}

Perhaps this grassroots activity, which involved Labour Party members, was a reaction to the fall of MacDonald’s second administration. Locally, Southampton may have benefited from politically-minded workers arriving via the ‘Juvenile Transference Scheme’, ‘under which youngsters from depressed areas’ were given work in more affluent districts.\textsuperscript{154} Although the influence of this scheme was probably minimal, there is certainly evidence of coal miners from South Wales entering Southampton and boosting the local Communist Party. Indeed, the CPGB branch grew to include fifty-five members: ‘and there was always plenty going on’.\textsuperscript{155} Southampton’s Communists, directed by their national leaders, joined the local Labour Party in an effort to influence the movement.\textsuperscript{156} Southampton Trades Council, more than many other areas, followed the TUC’s demands in not supporting ‘more direct protests’, such as hunger marches.\textsuperscript{157} Perhaps conflicts within the Labour movement became more localised and less cohesive in the 1930s. Finally, with the rise of numerous left-wing groups, it is hard to believe that a ‘spirit of fatalism’

\textsuperscript{148} S. Kimber, \textit{Thirty-Eight Years of Public Life in Southampton}, pp. 220-221, (Southampton: Privately Printed, 1949)
\textsuperscript{149} G. P. Heaney, \textit{The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton}, p. 180
\textsuperscript{150} C. Farman, \textit{The General Strike}, p. 255
\textsuperscript{151} H. Pelling, A. J. Reid, \textit{A Short History of the Labour Party}, p. 57
\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Twelve Years of Socialist Endeavour in Southampton}, pp. 1-3, (Southampton: Hampshire Foodship for Spain, 1939)
\textsuperscript{153} SMOHA M/00/52; South Coast Engineering and Shipbuilding Employers’ Association, \textit{Working Rules and Agreements}, (Southampton District, 1926); For a personal assessment of the impact of the Spanish Civil War at University College, Southampton, see: C. H. Guest, (ed.), \textit{David Guest: A Scientist Fights for Freedom, A Memoir}, pp. 61-69 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1939)
\textsuperscript{154} F. Westacott, \textit{Shaking the Chains}, p. 97
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 109
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{157} G. P. Heaney, \textit{The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton}, p. 248
effected Southampton’s rank and file, as Christopher Farman believes engulfed the whole movement after 1926.\textsuperscript{158}

**Conclusion**

If a study of the General Strike in the context of the Labour Party’s first three decades proves one thing it is that the movement, as demonstrated by its major struggles, grew unevenly across different regions. Indeed, the development of Labour politics in Southampton, and therefore the town’s experience in 1926, would have been different had the Liberals adopted an ILP-candidate in 1895.\textsuperscript{159} It is important to remember that the very makeup of the Labour Party differed across regions before 1926; with various members of trade unions, ILP-ers, socialists and ‘possibly an even greater number of anti-socialists’ forming the party.\textsuperscript{160} Thus, despite Henderson and Webb’s unifying constitution in 1919 the Labour Party itself was not cohesive. Moreover, it is wrong for historians to label the leadership and rank and file as two homogenous, and conflicting, bodies.\textsuperscript{161}

A study of Southampton during the General Strike certainly reveals that ordinary workers in the town, although perhaps not active trade unionists, were unconcerned by the ideological differences between the Labour Party and the ILP. Perhaps this was because ordinary workers responded to the strike call out of a sense of class loyalty rather than due to an ideological commitment to socialism, and were therefore not interested in Labour’s internal conflicts. However, it is clear that these conflicts, predominantly between reformers and revolutionaries, were strained at every level during the General Strike. Indeed, the claim made in the *Southampton Strike Bulletin*, and expanded in the *New Statesman*, that ‘a unanimity which has never before been known’ existed during the General Strike, is largely inaccurate.\textsuperscript{162}

A study of the General Strike in Southampton also reveals that both interest in Labour politics, and thus conflicts within the movement, increased after 1926. This is partly because dissenting voices that had shown restraint in the early 1920s ‘for fear of damaging the wider Labour cause’ were less likely to hold their tongues after a major defeat.\textsuperscript{163} Indeed, it was the ILP who seemed to be moving ‘raggedly but unmistakably’ in the opposite direction to Labour’s leadership.\textsuperscript{164} Perhaps ordinary workers had been politicised during the strike and could therefore contribute to the growing debate.

As the growth in rank and file activity in Southampton reveals; radicalisation occurred after the strike’s failure, although it was often not immediate. Perhaps it took the downfall of MacDonald’s second Labour government for ordinary workers to ask if there had been a betrayal in 1926. Of course, MacDonald’s priority, shared by most party members, was to make Labour a viable – ‘moderate, efficient and reliable’ – alternative to the Conservatives.\textsuperscript{165} This strategy, which certainly appeared rewarding

\textsuperscript{158} Including Communist Party, Labour Party, Left Book Club, Young Communist League, Daily Worker Readers’ Group; C. Farman, *The General Strike*, p. 300

\textsuperscript{159} G. P. Heaney, *The Development of Labour Politics in Southampton*, p. 276

\textsuperscript{160} R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. XIV


\textsuperscript{164} D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p. 450

\textsuperscript{165} M. Worley, *Labour inside the gate*, p. 76
in 1929, and was adopted by subsequent Labour leaders, could not have been achieved had the General Strike been successful. However, many workers must have wondered why no realistic negotiation targets were set before the strike commenced, and why the stoppage ended as numbers, and arguably enthusiasm, were increasing. In Southampton, despite a notable return to work, many trade unionists hoped to prolong the strike out of a sense of solidarity with the miners that the national leadership could not comprehend. It is clear that conflicts between the Labour Party and the wider labour movement increased after 1926. Indeed, the ILP formally disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932. Relations also cooled between the Co-operative Societies and the political wing of the movement. In the aftermath of the strike’s failure many politicised workers turned neither to the Labour Party, the ILP nor to the trade unions.

In fact, as one can witness in Southampton, there was a growth in autonomous rank and file activity; often against the wishes of the district Labour Party or Trades Council. Although, Southampton Trades Council were more likely than most to stridently follow the rules of the TUC. In light of this increased activity, which took various forms across the country, it appears that there was no long term ‘spirit of fatalism’, nor did all sections of the working class sink into an ‘overwhelmingly conservative mood’ during the 1930s.166

It has been argued that the General Strike was not a watershed because TUC militancy was actually going down after 1921. Although it is true that the number and intensity of industrial disputes were falling, a regional study of the General Strike proves that the event was still a defining moment. In Southampton, it brought the working class community together, although not universally. Hundreds of the workers who protested on Southampton Common subsequently became active in rank and file movements. Thousands more, who might have felt unaffected by the struggle at the time, soon became politicised to varying degrees or voted Labour for the first time.

166 P. Renshaw, The General Strike, p. 247
Roger Ottewill

“A Splendid Prospect”? Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton 1901-1914

Introduction

Many historians regard the years leading up to the First World War as a pivotal moment for Congregationalists, as well as members of the other Free Churches, as they sought to come to terms with increased competition from secular pursuits and modes of thought.¹ Some, such as Alan Gilbert, see the period as characterised by an ultimately fatal ‘crisis of faith’.² Others, including Callum Brown, argue that the religious sensibilities of the Victorian era remained firmly entrenched and that Edwardian Britain was still essentially a ‘faith society’.³ Historians of Congregationalism also differ in their assessment of the early years of the twentieth century. Ward describes the ‘period between the middle of the nineteenth century and the First World War … [as] the golden age of Congregationalism.’⁴ By way of contrast, R. Tudur Jones labels the last decade of the nineteenth century and the Edwardian era as ‘the beginning of sorrows’.⁵

Which of these assessments best characterises Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton? What challenges did Southampton’s Congregational churches face during the Edwardian era and how did they confront them? In the words of a report from the Southampton Times and Hampshire Express on one of the churches, which was published in 1910, how far was the ‘prospect’ for Congregationalism as a whole ‘splendid’?⁶ Such questions provide the impetus for this article in which it is intended to review the standing of Southampton’s Congregational churches with respect to their spiritual and social activities and their engagement with the wider community between 1901 and 1914.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Congregationalism was well established in Southampton. With six churches, approximately 1,500 members and substantially more adherents, as well as 2,500 Sunday School Scholars, it was the largest of the Nonconformist denominations.⁷ In the main, Congregationalists, or Independents as they had previously been known, traced their roots to the so-called Great Ejection of 1662, when approximately 2000 clergy left the Established Church rather than conform to the provisions of the Act of Uniformity. Thus, Congregationalism was

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¹ Other Free Churches included Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian.
³ Callum Brown, The Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain. (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), Ch 2: 40-87
⁶ Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, November 26, 1910
⁷ Other Nonconformist Churches in Southampton at this time included Baptist, Bible Christian, Churches of Christ, Presbyterian, Primitive Methodist and Wesleyan Methodist.
characterised by its belief that ‘the spiritual vitality of the Church could only be sustained by separation from the State’. Congregational churches were self-governing and self-financing. They were also democratic to the extent that members chose their pastors and their deacons. Moreover, a high view was taken of the role of church meetings as ‘the place for gaining new life, for developing the generosity, and for organising and directing the energies of the Church.’ Such arrangements were seen as being far more in tune with Biblical principles than the hierarchical structure and ‘priestism’ of the Church of England.

During the nineteenth century, most Congregational churches subscribed to the tenets of Evangelical Nonconformity, with its emphasis on individual conversions and personal salvation. By the Edwardian era, however, pastors and members often saw their spiritual role as being tempered by a social one which incorporated making a contribution to public affairs. In other words good works motivated by a strong Christian faith were their raison d’etre.

Although formally independent, most Congregational churches in Hampshire, including the six in Southampton, were members of the Hampshire Congregational Union [HCU], which had been founded in 1781. This indicated a willingness to accept a degree of collective responsibility, especially for the weaker churches in the rural parts of the county. The Southampton churches were in the Middle District of the HCU, one of four districts into which mainland Hampshire was divided.

In the sections which follow, attention is given firstly to the origins of Southampton’s Congregational churches. This is followed by a descriptive review of the churches and their activities during the Edwardian era. In the final substantive section, the ways in which the churches reacted to, and dealt with, the challenges they faced are explored. The article concludes with a provisional assessment of the contribution of Southampton’s Congregational churches to the socio-cultural milieu of the community at large.

The Origins of Southampton’s Congregational Churches

The most historic of Southampton’s Congregation churches was Above Bar. It was founded at the time of the Great Ejection. Although records are sparse, the first pastor of what became Above Bar Congregational Church was Rev Nathaniel Robinson (1662-1696). In the early years of the church, one of its most famous members was the renown hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748). Above Bar served as the catalyst for the establishment of many other Congregational churches. As it was put in a history of the Church published in 1909, Above Bar could regard itself as ‘the Alma Mater of Congregationalism in Southampton.’ However, it was not until the

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8 *Romsey Advertiser*, June 26, 1903
10 The name was changed from ‘The Hampshire Association of Independent Ministers and Churches for the Propagating of the Gospel in the County’ in 1860
11 His father had been one of the deacons of the Church.
12 S. Stainer, *History of the Above Bar Congregational Church Southampton from 1662 to 1908* (Southampton: Southampton Times, 1909): 139
nineteenth century and the great explosion of Evangelical Nonconformity that new Independent/Congregational churches emerged. The first to do so was Albion Congregational Church, which was formally founded in 1844, by some members from Above Bar who felt that not enough was being done to meet the spiritual needs of those living in St Mary’s parish. In a souvenir brochure produced in 1899 to celebrate the golden jubilee of the buildings it then occupied, Albion’s origins were described in the following terms:

In the early part of the year 1842, some of the leading members of the Above Bar Congregational Church … began to feel dissatisfied at the very slow progress their principles as Congregationalists were making in the town; the claims of the growing parish of St Mary, especially, pressed very heavily upon them … The individuals in question, William and Robert Wakeford, William and Robert Lancaster, Joseph Knight, James Durkin, John Gray, and Samuel Parmiter, set themselves in a prayerful spirit to remedy this state of things.¹³

After two years of rather fraught negotiations, ‘about 35 members withdrew from the Above Bar Church to assist in forming the new church.’¹⁴ Albion was initially housed in the old Infirmary building suitably converted for the purposes of worship. Notwithstanding any animosity that might have been generated by this move, the Above Bar pastor was one of the preachers at the opening of the converted Infirmary in 1844. Albion moved to purpose built premises in St Mary Street in 1849.

A few years later, in 1853, Albion experienced discord of its own. This time it was the pastor, Albion’s second, Rev Joseph Wyld who precipitated the split:

He was an eloquent and flowery speaker and by his oratory attracted large congregations; very few, however, were added to the church. A lecture he delivered on “Fudge” gave rise to very strong feelings on the part of many of the members; this resulted in the withdrawal of Mr Wyld from the church, after a short pastorate. He at once commenced holding services in the Victoria rooms, to which place a large proportion of the congregation followed him. The present Kingsfield Congregational Church was the outcome of these services.¹⁵

Thus, Kingsfield, like Albion, was born of controversy, acquiring its own buildings in West Marlands in 1861.

By contrast, the birth of Northam Congregational Church seems to have been more harmonious. In the 1850s, Above Bar appointed Rev G.W. Gregg ‘to act as a Missionary for the town, and selected Northam, and established him there, by building a Chapel to carry on stated ministrations.’¹⁶ The church became an independent “cause” in 1865. Originally known as Belvidere Independent Chapel, due

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¹³ Albion Church Souvenir 1849-1899 Brochure: 5
¹⁴ Albion Church Souvenir 1849-1899 Brochure: 9
¹⁵ Albion Church Souvenir 1849-1899 Brochure: 17
¹⁶ S. Stanier, History of the Above Bar Congregational Church Southampton from 1662 to 1908 (Southampton: 1909): 96
to its location in Belvidere Terrace, Northam Congregational Church served a predominantly working class community.

In the case of Freemantle Congregational Church, which was established in 1885, the initiative again came from members of Above Bar, in particular Samuel Bartlett. As it was put in a history of the Church, it ‘began in a new growing suburb … and drew its strength essentially from the expanding middle class,’ with its first members coming from the congregations of Above Bar, Albion and Kingsfield who had moved into the neighbourhood.\(^{17}\) It was situated in a prime location on the corner of Roberts Road and Shirley Road.

Suburbanisation also prompted the foundation of Avenue Congregational Church. Located in a ‘select suburb,’ near Winn and Westwood Roads, this was an area to which many of the more affluent members from mainly Albion, described as Avenue’s ‘Mother Church’, had moved.\(^{18}\) They wanted a church closer to where they now lived. In July 1892, a house was purchased at the corner of Alma Road and The Avenue. Initially, services were held in a portable tin church moved from Clifford Street and re-erected in the garden of the house. New church buildings were opened in 1898.

The process of church planting continued into the late nineteenth century, with Above Bar establishing a church in the new suburb of Bitterne Park in 1899.\(^{19}\) In addition, Above Bar supported missions in Cross Street/Lime Street and Albion at Netley.

**Southampton’s Congregational Churches between 1901 and 1914**

As in other towns and cities, during the Edwardian era Southampton’s Congregational churches were prominent features of the built environment (see Figure 1). Above Bar was praised as 'one of the most beautiful [churches] in the district.'\(^{20}\) It had a ‘very fine suite of buildings … with excellent class-rooms and the church … [was] very well situated’.\(^{21}\) The buildings included the Watts Memorial Hall which had been opened in 1875. Above Bar was also the largest Congregational church being able to seat 1200. Albion was described in the 1880s as ‘a spacious building adorned in front with a classical pediment, in which is inserted a most useful clock.’\(^{22}\) Here the number of sittings was 1100. Kingsfield was ‘a building of red brick with stone dressing … and a plain but comfortable place of worship’, with seats for about 500.\(^{23}\) Of the suburban churches, by far the most notable was Avenue, ‘a large and handsome building’, which also gets a mention in Pevsner:-

\(^{18}\) Dora Caton, ‘Century of Change for Avenue Congregational Church’, *Hampshire*, Vol 22(8), June 1992: 40  
\(^{19}\) By 1900 there were two further Congregational churches, both situated in the urban district of Itchen, at Bitterne and Pear Tree Green. These, together with Bitterne Park, are outside the scope of this article.  
\(^{20}\) *Southampton Annual*, 1901 (Southampton: Topographical Publishing Co, 1901): 27  
\(^{21}\) *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905.  
\(^{23}\) *Southampton Annual*, 1901 (Southampton: Topographical Publishing Co, 1901): 27
Figure 1: Southampton’s Six Edwardian Congregational Churches
Rich neo-Dec; red brick with stone dressings. Short, but strong near-w tower, with small assertive shingled spire and fancy wooden open-work turret over the stairway.²⁴

It could accommodate up to 800 worshippers.

Freemantle was an exact replica of the Congregational church at Ringwood and had seats for about 550. Finally, although Northam was tucked away, it was, nonetheless, a familiar landmark to those who lived in the area. In size it was more modest having seating for approximately 400.

While buildings are important, most clergymen and many churchgoers would stress that it is people rather than bricks and mortar that make a church. Moreover, leadership is a vital ingredient in determining the effectiveness of churches, just as it is in secular organisations. Thus, members of Southampton’s Congregational churches, looked to their pastors and deacons, for direction and inspiration. The pastors who served during the Edwardian era are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Pastors of Southampton’s Congregational Churches during the Edwardian Era

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Pastor</th>
<th>Period of Pastorate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above Bar</td>
<td>Rev William Frederick Clarkson</td>
<td>1896 – 1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev George Stephen Samuel Saunders</td>
<td>1904 – 1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albion</td>
<td>Rev Henry J. Perkins</td>
<td>1895 – 1903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Ieuan Maldwyn Jones</td>
<td>1904 – 1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingsfield</td>
<td>Rev Vincett Cook</td>
<td>1890 – 1904</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Robert Ashenhurst</td>
<td>1905 – 1910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Peter Buchan</td>
<td>1912 – 1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avenue</td>
<td>Rev Arthur D. Martin</td>
<td>1894 – 1905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev George E. Startup</td>
<td>1906 – 1909</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Meredith Davies</td>
<td>1910 – 1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Henry T. Spencer</td>
<td>1913 – 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northam</td>
<td>Rev James Thompson</td>
<td>1885 – 1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Walter Cannon</td>
<td>1908 – 1909</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev Thomas Henry Harries</td>
<td>1910 – 1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freemantle</td>
<td>Rev Harry J. Howell</td>
<td>1895 – 1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rev David John Benyon</td>
<td>1902 - 1916</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen, most churches enjoyed a reasonable degree of stability, with pastors serving for most of the period. Above Bar and Albion both acquired new pastors in 1904 after fairly lengthy interregnums. In keeping with the democratic principles on which the Congregational churches operated, Rev George Saunders and Rev Ieuan Maldwyn Jones were chosen by substantial majorities of the church members. Given that they both served for relatively long periods, the members obviously made sound

choices. In each case, however, they had what, in colloquial language, would be described as a ‘difficult act to follow.’

At Above Bar, although Rev William Clarkson’s pastorate was a fairly short one, he had undoubtedly made a strong impression. As recorded in a history of the Church, at the time of his departure it was acknowledged that during his time there ‘the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ … [had] been faithfully preached … [and] in his public and private life he … [had] set … an example of consistent and gracious Christian living.’ It is also clear from further remarks that his ministry was based on what was described as the ‘Old Theology’, which would have emphasised the traditional Evangelical tenets of personal conversion and holy living.  

His successor, Rev George Saunders, was relatively experienced having previously served churches in Leicester and Whitby. In a letter from his church at Whitby, which was read at his recognition service, it was stated that ‘he preached a lofty ideal of the Christian life and character’. Not long after his arrival Rev Saunders, along with many other clergyman of all denominations, was interviewed for a series of profiles of local religious leaders which appeared in the Hampshire Independent. Thus, traces of his views on a range of issues have survived and reference is made of some of these later in the article.

At Albion, Rev Henry Perkins was, indisputably, a well loved and respected minister. When, in 1901, he was invited to pastor another church Albion members passed the following resolution:

That this meeting of the church and congregation having learned with deep regret that our dear Pastor … has under his consideration an ‘invitation’ from another church to become their Pastor, very heartily and in all sincerity, would assure him of their deep affection and entire confidence in him both as minister and Pastor, and unanimously expressed their earnest hope and prayer that he may be led to continue the great and good work that, by the blessing of God, he had been able to accomplish during the nearly six years of his pastorate at Albion.

In the event, and much to relief of the members, Rev Perkins turned down the invitation and remained at Albion for another three years.

Following Rev Perkins’ eventual departure, the pastorate passed to Rev Maldwyn Jones. On the basis of the sermons he preached on his first Sunday as pastor, he was described as having ‘a good pulpit presence … and … a remarkably fine voice’. The content of his sermons was also deemed to be ‘of great power and of much practical helpfulness’. Together with Rev George Saunders, he became one of the leaders of Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton.

26 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 17, 1904
27 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, January 5? 1901
28 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, September 10, 1904
At Kingsfield, Rev Vincett Cook was one of Southampton’s ‘elder statesmen’ amongst Congregational pastors. This was acknowledged by his inclusion in the local religious leaders’ series. After leaving Kingsfield in 1904, he remained in the area, serving as pastor of Bitterne Congregational Church. His successor, Rev Robert Ashenhurst came from a pastorate in Belfast. ‘Having done excellent work there … his leaving as … testified by the Belfast daily Press … [was] the occasion of deep concern and regret to the Belfast Church, and of very many in the Congregational body in that city.’ In his ‘impressive’ inaugural sermon which focused on encouraging the weak, he asked his congregation ‘to pray that they might that morning go forth with confidence and power, and to feel that they had been dealing with Christ.’ After five years, Rev Ashenhurst and his family moved on ‘with the sincere wishes of the people at Kingsfield for their future welfare.’ His departure was followed by a very lengthy interregnum, with his successor, Rev Peter Buchan, a student from New College, not being installed until August 1912. In the report on the warm welcome given to the new pastor, reference was made to the fact that the church had passed through ‘hard and troublesome times.’ From the available evidence it is not clear what the problems might have been, but they may have served as a deterrent to potential pastors. Nonetheless, Rev Buchan served for five productive years and as he remarked at his farewell event: ‘he bore very hearty testimony to the happy relations which had existed during his … ministry, and to the loyal support he had received.’

One church which experienced a very rapid turnover of pastors was Avenue. This was due primarily to the ill health of those appointed, rather than the tensions which could arise between the pastor, on the one hand, and deacons and members, on the other. ‘During the Summer of 1905 the Rev A.D. Martin became very unwell, and after a period of “sick leave” was compelled by illness to leave Avenue.’ His successor, the Rev George Startup had to resign after only three years ‘owing to prolonged ill-health and other difficulties.’ At this point, in the words of the Church Secretary, ‘it was thought advisable to allow a period of time to elapse before selecting another pastor.’ In due course, an extremely promising senior student from Hackney College, Meredith Davies, was chosen. As indicated in the press report of his ordination service in October 1910, by then:

[He] … had taken thirteen Sunday services with increasing power and blessing. The congregations were increasing, the offertories were increasing, the church was increasing. All the church organisations were in a healthy state, and the officers looked forward hopefully and prayerfully to a season of great spiritual prosperity.

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29 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, April 8, 1905
30 *Hampshire Independent*, May 6, 1905
31 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 3, 1910
32 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, August 31, 1912
33 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, May 16, 1917. From Southampton, Rev Buchan moved to Bolton to continue his ministerial career.
34 Dora Caton, *A Short History of the Avenue Congregational Church*, c1968: 12
35 Dora Caton, *A Short History of the Avenue Congregational Church*, c1968: 15
36 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, October 22, 1910
According to the Church historian, all the evidence suggests that Rev Meredith Davies was an ideal pastor for the Avenue. His ministry got off to an excellent start and he was ‘much loved’. Unfortunately, however, it was again to be cut short through a ‘serious illness’ which was diagnosed as tuberculosis and he had to resign in early 1912. Eventually, in Rev Henry Spencer the church secured the stability for which it had yearned, as well as someone who possessed the attributes of an effective minister. As Rev Maldwyn Jones from Albion put it in welcoming the new pastor at his recognition service, ‘he had heard Mr Spencer described as an able teacher, a capable minister, and an earnest Christian worker, and he did not think the work of any minister could be effective unless he possessed these qualifications.’

The incidence of illness amongst Avenue’s pastors, while exceptional, does reflect the stresses associated with the role and the need for a strong constitution and equable temperament to cope with the demands involved. One pastor, who appears to have exemplified these characteristics was Rev James Thompson at Northam, another of the Congregationalists interviewed for the newspaper articles on local religious leaders. A ‘large’ man in every respect, his very long pastorate, 22 years, was testament to both the high regard in which he was held and his ‘staying power’ in what was a particularly challenging location. He was also able to make his mark, to the extent that he was ‘affectionally styled “the Bishop of Northam”’. That said, he appears to have displayed considerable humility in serving as pastor. As the Hampshire Independent put it: ‘The work there [i.e. Northam] is impressed with his personality and the pastor and the church have one feature in common – they are both unostentatious.’ However, in the end, even Rev Thompson had to retire due to ‘failing health’. His replacement, Rev Walter Cannon, who had previously ‘laboured for … two years in the districts of East End and Pilley’ near Lymington, served only briefly. The arrival of Rev Thomas Harries in 1910 was greeted with enthusiasm, with his work as pastor in South Wales being ‘eulogised’ in a letter from the secretary of the South Pembrokeshire Congregational Union, which was read at his recognition service.

At Freemantle, Rev Harry Howell’s departure in 1901, again due to illness, was much regretted since his personal qualities of ‘intense spirituality and earnestness … [had] made a deep impression’ on all who came into contact with him. The new pastor, however, Rev David Benyon was to be equally well respected. Between his arrival in August and his recognition service in November, it was evident that the services of ‘a sincere and faithful pastor’ had been secured. As reported, although Rev Beynon had ‘only been in Southampton a few weeks, he … [had already] won the respect and esteem of a large circle of friends.’ The fact that he remained for many years indicates that, in this case, first impressions were vindicated.

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37 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913  
38 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 21, 1907  
39 *Hampshire Independent*, March 25, 1905  
40 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, May 9, 1908. He moved to Canada in June 1909  
41 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, February 5, 1910  
42 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, January 12, 1901. He had accepted a call to the church at Stratford.  
43 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 9, 1901
While pastors generally made the preparation of sermons and how they performed in the pulpit their priority, most recognised the need to engage in pastoral work; to participate in church events; and to contribute to other aspects of church life. As the Rev Maldwyn Jones put it at the commencement of his ministry in Southampton:

… he considered preparation for the pulpit was of chief importance, but he hoped to assist in the work of the various societies, and as he believed in recreation they would find him taking a share in the pleasures of young men. 44

What these pleasures might have been are not specified, but no doubt his audience would have known. One can assume that they included sport and possibly outlets for intellectual recreation, including debates and discussions on the issues of the day. He and a number of other pastors, including Rev George Saunders and Rev Vincett Cooke, were also in demand as visiting speakers at events organised by Congregational churches in Southampton and beyond. Thus, there was a considerable degree of collaboration between churches and amongst pastors. Moreover, with the use by the press of phrases, such as ‘eloquent preacher’ and ‘brilliant successor’, it would not be going too far to suggest that, with respect to certain pastors, there was something akin to a ‘celebrity culture’.

For Congregational churches to function harmoniously pastors also had to establish and sustain a good rapport with the deacons of their church. Deacons shared responsibility with the pastor for the well-being of the church and contributed to the administrative function, with one of their number often serving as church secretary and another as church treasurer. One of the most important roles of the diaconate (i.e. the deacons collectively) was to ensure that all aspects of church life ran smoothly during an interregnum which, as has been indicated, could last for a considerable period. They also had the major task of identifying and inviting prospective pastors to visit the church and preach and subsequently taking soundings amongst the members as to their suitability and ultimately whether or not they should be invited to pastor the church. In the case of the interregnum at Above Bar:

After the resignation of the late Minister [Rev William Clarkson], a rather long period transpired before the appointment of a successor, which continued close upon two years. Calmness and carefulness were judiciously exercised [by the deacons] during the vacancy in making inquiries and gaining information that would lead to the choice of one who would commend himself as suitable to the honoured position. The pulpit was adequately supplied during the interval with a long series of different Ministers from all parts of the country, the number reaching nearly one hundred … During the interval nothing of a special nature occurred, but all the services and organisations moved along at their accustomed pace. 45

Invitations to potential pastors, however, might be rejected, thus the deacons had to sustain the church through possible disappointments. For example, following the illness of Rev Meredith Davies at Avenue, during a 22 month interregnum ‘they were able to decide to send invitations to two good men and true … [but] those invitations

44 Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, September 4, 1904
45 S. Stanier, History of Above Bar Congregational Church from 1662 to 1908 (Southampton: Southampton Times Co, 1909).
were not accepted.’

Deacons also needed to take account of the fact that the Congregationalists’ ‘method of choosing a minister had its attendant dangers … [since] they were apt to judge the man by the sermons they heard, whereas they ought to take into account the whole considerations which governed the ministry.’

In undertaking their taxing responsibilities, the deacons clearly required the trust of the church members and the skills and attributes to undertake what were extremely important and often sensitive functions. Consequently, it would not be an exaggeration to describe them as ‘the great and the good’ of their respective congregations.

Deacons were selected from, and elected by, the membership of the church. Being a church member signified both a commitment to and an acceptance of the veracity of foundational Christian beliefs. To be added to the roll of members of a particular church it was necessary to either make a profession of faith or transfer formally from the roll of another church. For Congregational churches membership was taken very seriously and at this time was still regarded as a ‘momentous step’. Thus, the number of members is generally regarded as a fairly accurate guide to the standing of a church, at least in quantitative terms. Consequently, an indication of the relative strengths of Southampton’s six churches can be obtained from the membership data in Table 2.

Table 2: Membership of Southampton’s Congregational Churches 1901-1914

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Above Bar¹</th>
<th>Albian²</th>
<th>Kingsfield</th>
<th>Avenue</th>
<th>Northam</th>
<th>Freemantle</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>1508</td>
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<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>1558</td>
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<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>1563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>1551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>1551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>479</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>1616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>1526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>1524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>1530</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>1531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>1531</td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>1620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>1626</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>1619</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
1. Includes membership of Bitterne Park, which increased from 69 in 1901 to 140 in 1914.
2. Includes membership of Netley

⁴⁶ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913
⁴⁷ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913. These were the words of Mr Hamilton, a deacon at Avenue Congregational Church, on the occasion of Rev Spencer’s recognition in 1913.
However, the figures in the table still need to be treated with a degree of caution. They were compiled from returns made by churches to the HCU, which were not always submitted. In these instances the figures for the previous year were used. Hence, there are some years where membership appears to be stagnant. Sudden decreases in memberships were almost certainly due to the pruning of the membership roll with lapsed members being removed. This sometimes coincided with the arrival of a new pastor.

Notwithstanding the qualifications, the data in Table 2, confirm the position of Albion and Above Bar as the ‘big hitters’ of the three town centre churches during the Edwardian era, with there being a degree of ‘friendly rivalry’ between them. Alongside them, Kingsfield’s membership does not look impressive. That said, it undoubtedly had a particularly loyal and tenacious membership which sustained it during the ‘troublesome times’ mentioned earlier. Moreover, with a slight increase in membership between 1913 and 1914, there is some evidence of the positive impact of Rev Peter Buchan’s ministry.

Overall, small declines in the membership of the town centre churches were offset by growth in the suburban churches, particularly Avenue, Bitterne Park and, to a lesser extent, Freemantle. This was to be expected as the process of suburbanisation took hold.

As can be seen, there was an increase in total membership from just over 1,500 in 1901 to a little over 1,600 by the end of the period. However, when the overall increase of Southampton’s population is taken into account this represented a relative decline from approximately 2.4 per cent of the adult (18 plus) population at the time of the 1901 census to 2.0 per cent in 1911.

How far the size of a church’s membership was related to the numbers attending services is difficult to judge. There were no surveys of church attendance in Southampton during the Edwardian era of the kind sponsored by local newspapers in Basingstoke and Portsmouth. Nonetheless, it is likely that, as elsewhere, the number of non-members at services would have been substantial. This would have been the case at regular as well as special services. Many would have regarded themselves as adherents, deriving part of their personal identity from association with a particular church, but not wishing to take the critical step of becoming members.

To accommodate the needs of members and adherents, as well as serving as a means of outreach, all of the Congregational churches spawned a host of satellite organisations. The most visible and pervasive of these were the Sunday schools. Along with statistical data relating to membership, churches were required to submit details of the number of Sunday school scholars on their books. These are shown in Table 3.
Table 3: Number of Scholars Attached to Southampton’s Congregational Sunday Schools 1901-1914

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Above Bar¹</th>
<th>Albion²</th>
<th>Kingsfield</th>
<th>Avenue³</th>
<th>Northam Freemantle</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>344</td>
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<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>366</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>299</td>
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<td>1910</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>330</td>
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<td>1912</td>
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<td>1913</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
1. Includes Bitterne Park and Cross Street (to 1902) and Lime Street (1903-).
2. Includes Netley
3. Includes Portswood (from 1904)

Source: HCU Annual Reports

Reaching a peak of just over 3000 scholars in 1907 and 1908, through their Sunday schools Congregational churches had contact with just under 10 per cent of Southampton’s population aged between 5 and 17. Although all of those on the books would not have attended regularly, Sunday schools still provided the churches with one of their most important means of engaging with members of the community that might otherwise be beyond their reach. Here one particular success story was an initiative of Avenue Congregational Church, specifically in the adjacent area of Portswood. As explained in the Church history:

Our Church, as already recorded, was in a select residential neighbourhood, but not far off was, acute poverty. In 1901 a room was acquired … and an afternoon Sunday school was opened. Very rapidly numbers reached 80 and additional accommodation was taken over … The Sunday School had grown so large by Midsummer 1909 [to over 200 scholars] that the Education Committee of Southampton was approached and agreed to the use of two classrooms at Portswood Council School on Sunday afternoons.⁴⁹

Another indicator of the success of the Sunday schools in Southampton was the fact that Albion was often near the top of the league table of the percentage of Sunday School scholars attending classes, which was produced annually by the HCU. Such endeavours ensured that while learning the basics of Christianity, children were

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⁴⁹ Dora Caton, A Short history of the Avenue Congregational Church (c1968): 10-11
inducted, willingly or otherwise, into some of the language in which religious discourse was conducted. Thus, they contributed to what Callum Brown has characterised as ‘discursive Christianity’.\textsuperscript{50}

However, Congregationalists, like other denominations, found it particularly difficult to facilitate the transition of Sunday school scholars into full membership of the church. This was described in the Annual Report of the Sunday School Department of the HCU for 1907 as ‘the leakage between the School and the Church.’ In attempting to stem the haemorrhage, teachers were ‘reminded that the crown of their work … [was] to bring the children into real personal touch with Our Living Lord.’\textsuperscript{51} With a similar goal, churches also sponsored organisations and activities, which were specifically targeted at ‘young people’. These included branches of the Christian Endeavour movement, which had been founded in the USA at the beginning of the 1890s. With its emphasis on spiritual witnessing, prayer, discussion, training for public service, literary effort and social intercourse, it proved to be particular popular in the UK. In Southampton, Albion, Above Bar, Kingsfield and Avenue all had branches.

Serving a similar purpose, but with a particular socio-religious bias, were local branches of the Band of Hope, the principal temperance organisation. Temperance was a cause with which Congregationalists were particularly associated. Thus, not surprisingly, they were keen to embrace and support any initiatives dedicated to this end. It was the view of many that: ‘Even if all adult Church members … [were] not Total Abstainers all our children ought to be receiving instruction as to the evils of the drink and of the drink trade.’\textsuperscript{52}

For adults, the penumbra of satellite organisations and activities was designed to meet not only their spiritual but also their social, educational and material needs. Thus, bible classes and prayer meetings were complemented with Pleasant Sunday Afternoon gatherings and organisations, such as the Albion Guild. A particularly good example of an educational initiative of a self-help variety was Northam’s Mutual Improvement Society. During his time as pastor, Rev James Thompson was an assiduous attendee and often presided at meetings of the Society, at which all manner of topics were discussed from ‘joy’ as found in scripture to whether the tongue or the pen was the greatest power for good or evil. Material needs were addressed through organising Sick and Needy Funds and Penny Banks, as was the case at Above Bar’s Lime Street Mission,\textsuperscript{53} and soup kitchens, with that provided by Albion being especially well patronised.

In addition to their regular Sunday services, morning and evening, Sunday school classes and meetings of their satellite organisations, Congregational churches were active in organising a variety of special events. These included social gatherings, organ recitals, concerts, musical evenings, entertainments, public meetings and bazaars, some of which were themed. Of particular note, were those organised by Albion in 1900, which had an oriental theme (see Figure 2), and in April 1909, when

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{50} Callum Brown, \textit{The Death of Christian Britain} (London: Routledge, 2001): 12
\textsuperscript{51} HCU Annual Report for 1907, Hampshire Record Office (HRO) 127M94/62/52: 47
\textsuperscript{52} HCU Annual Report for 1907 HRO 127M94/62/52: 47
\textsuperscript{53} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, December 26, 1908
\end{quote}
the theme was the Indian Empire. Church events of this kind were often fully reported in the local press thereby demonstrating to the public at large that the churches were very much ‘going concerns’.

Churches were also particularly keen to celebrate anniversaries, both of their foundation and that of their Sunday school. The celebrations generated a considerable degree of enthusiasm, with special services; public meetings; musical contributions; and visiting preachers and speakers, often of some note. Of all the church anniversaries that fell during the Edwardian era, arguably the one with the greatest historical resonance and significance, especially for Congregationalists, was Above Bar’s 250th in 1912. In the words of the *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*:

‘The Nonconformist community have joyfully commemorated the Ejectment of 1662, in which the foundations of a great movement were laid, and congratulations have poured upon the Above Bar Church … which has this year celebrated its 250th anniversary’. As was customary with ‘red letter’ anniversaries, it was accompanied with fund raising and capital projects. For Above Bar, these were the completion of the Robinson Memorial Hall, King Street Mission hall and the redecoration and repair of the church itself.

To publicise their anniversaries and other special events, as well as regular services, many of the churches advertised in local newspapers (see Figure 3). Since many Congregationalists were Liberals, in Southampton the Liberal supporting *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express* was the favoured medium for this purpose.

54 The members of Freemantle Congregational Church observed their anniversary in April; Albion in September; Kingsfield and Northam in October; and Above Bar and Avenue in November.

55 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, January 4, 1913
What today would be called ‘marketing and public relations’ was also facilitated through the publication and distribution of Church magazines. The *Albion Messenger*, for example, was described as ‘an illustrated magazine for the homes of the people.’ The churches were also outward looking, to the extent that their pastors often spoke at events organised by other Congregational churches in the county. Moreover, several pastors and laymen served as office holders of the HCU. Rev Vincett Cook, for example, was Chairman for the year 1905 and Rev George Saunders was Secretary from 1909. In addition, two laymen from Southampton chaired the HCU, Mr H.C. Chaplin from Avenue in 1910 and Mr P.M Randall from Above Bar in 1914. Half yearly meetings of the HCU were hosted by Above Bar in the autumn of 1903; by Avenue, autumn 1904 and spring 1911; and by Albion, autumn 1907. These were significant occasions and received a considerable amount of publicity.

In addition, the Southampton churches played their part when it was the turn of the Middle District to organise the bazaars on which the HCU depended for raising the funds needed to support the weaker churches mainly in rural areas. These were held in Southampton in 1901, 1905 and 1910. Both the 1905 and 1910 bazaars had a floral theme. Held in the Watts Memorial Hall, the stalls in 1910 were:
... decorated with various emblems of nature. The lilac stall was managed by friends from Albion, Romsey, and Stockbridge churches, that representing gorse by friends from Freemantle, Bursledon, Hythe, Kingsfield and Pear Tree Green churches; genista by friends from Above Bar, Bitterne Park, and Northam churches; rhododendron by friends from the Avenue, Bitterne, Cadnam and Totton churches; lily of the valley, by the United churches, while the azalea stall was confined to refreshments, arranged by the Above Bar Tea Committee.56

Such a theme was somewhat anodyne, by comparison with that of the Reformation, the subject of an equivalent bazaar held in Basingstoke in 1903. Supplementing the bazaars, individual Congregationalists also contributed to the funds of the HCU.57

Not only were the Congregational churches in close communion with each other both within Southampton and beyond, but they also collaborated extensively with the other Free Churches. To this end, they were members of the Southampton Free Church Council and Southampton Evangelical Nonconformist Council, with pastors serving as office holders, and participated in events organised by these bodies. Examples included pulpit exchanges; a week of prayer held at the beginning of each year; and in May 1902, a mission at the Drill Hall led by the well known and highly regarded evangelist, Gipsy Smith.58

Thus, there are many grounds for suggesting that Congregationalism was thriving in Edwardian Southampton. All six churches aspired to be dynamic and caring, motivated by a strong desire to provide their members with, and offer others, spiritual and social sustenance whenever it was required. Congregationalism, like Christianity in general, was seen as force for good. Nevertheless, during the Edwardian era Southampton’s Congregational churches were faced with a variety of challenges arising from the changing nature of society and the questioning of Christian beliefs and morality.

Confronting the Challenges

Three challenges in particular are explored here. These relate to modes of outreach and evangelism; engagement with the working class; and involvement in public affairs or, as it was often expressed, the pursuit of the social gospel.

For most pastors and church members their core mission remained the conversion of those who were outside of the church. To put it in secular terms, their primary task was the recruitment of members. Although special evangelistic missions were still seen as having a role to play, their importance declined during the first decade of the twentieth century to be replaced by other initiatives.

56 Hampshire Independent, May 7, 1910
57 In 1907, members of Above Bar contributed £32 12s 3d; Avenue, £23 0s 3d; Albion, £19 2s 2d; Kingsfield, £5 6s 1d; Freemantle, £5 1s 7d; and Northam, £1 2s 6d.
58 A greatly loved evangelist, Rodney Smith was always known as “Gipsy” a reference to his background.
At Above Bar, Rev George Saunders introduced people’s services, which were held on the last Sunday evening of each month. In his words: ‘At these meetings the whole service is printed, and the intention is to secure the attendance of those who are not usually in attendance at a place of worship.’\(^{59}\) In addition, after the evening service on the second Sunday of the month he held a ‘social hour’ for young men and women. These continued throughout his ministry.

When asked about ‘the alleged falling off of attendances at places of worship’ during the interview for the local religious leaders’ series, Rev Saunders expressed the view that:

> Speaking generally, I think the mind of the nation, as a whole, is not averse to religion. It is decidedly averse to dogma, but not to the religion of Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Gospel, and as revealed in the lives of his disciples. While this gives us cause for great thankfulness, at the same time it is a trumpet call to the Church to brace herself together in order to meet this apparent need. Men need Christ, they need the truth and the life which Christ only can give, and it will be to the peril of the churches if they do not seize this opportunity and rise to the greatness of the occasion. Men are not, in the main, unbelievers, and are ready to acknowledge the claims of Christ.\(^{60}\)

This may have been an overly optimistic stance, since the churches clearly felt the need to supplement outreach through their services and the preaching of the Word with other activities. To this end, many of their satellite organisations and church events and activities were seen as making a potential contribution to recruitment as well as retention. How effective this was is difficult to assess, but membership data suggest that the churches had probably reached a plateau as far as their reach was concerned.

A second challenge was the perceived bias of the churches towards the middle class and their failure to engage effectively with members of the working class. This is certainly the view of historians, such as E.R. Wickham and Kenneth Inglis.\(^{61}\) However, more recent studies have shown that in the words of Hugh Mcleod, earlier historians had made ‘exaggerated claims for the extent of working class alienation from the churches and from religion in general.’\(^{62}\) That said, social class was a particular issue for Congregationalists because as the *Hampshire Independent* put it in a question to Rev Saunders: ‘Is it correct that members of Congregational Churches are drawn almost entirely from the middle classes? I think that is the prevalent impression.’ In responding, the Above Bar pastor, argued that Congregationalism had ‘a message for all classes’ and that missions, such as one in Leeds, showed ‘ emphatically that Congregationalism reaches all sections of society.’\(^{63}\)

\(^{59}\) *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905  
\(^{60}\) *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905  
\(^{63}\) *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905
In dealing with this issue, he could have drawn on an example that was closer to home, namely Northam Congregational Church. In reply to a similar question, Rev James Thompson, response was summarised as follows:

… Northam Congregational Church is attended exclusively by the working classes. Mr Thompson is proud of this fact. There are no “kid gloves” congregations in Northam. The deacons, as well as the members are working men. As Mr Thompson has thus been nineteen years in touch with the members, he knows a good deal about them, and it will be extremely pleasing to religious workers to learn that no lugubrious fears or opinions have been born from his … experience of Christianity among the working classes. “Complaints have been made that the working classes don’t attend public worship,” he said, when questioned upon the subject, “but they do in Northam”. 64

However, being located in relatively poor area meant that money was an ongoing concern and in 1907 Northam had to approach the HCU for financial assistance. This was an unusual step for an urban church and it was taken for the following reasons:

We beg to inform you with deep regret of the resignation of our beloved pastor, the Rev J. Thompson, who closed his ministry on December 31st, and who for the last 22 years has bravely held the Pastorate at Northam, the cause of his resignation being failing health and the financial burden connected with carrying on the work of the Church … The absence of Mr Thompson’s personality will entail a great financial loss to the Church, and we therefore ask for a Grant to help us in our time of need, and hope that with the settlement of a new Pastor the Church will go forward as in the past. 65

Thereafter, Northam received an annual grant of £25. One consequence of this grant aid is that it is possible to monitor what subsequently happened in quantitative terms from the data supplied in the reports which the church was required to submit annually to the HCU (see Table 4).

Table 4: Northam Congregational Church, Various Data 1907-1913

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Grant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>£164</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>£150</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>£195</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>£190</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>£229</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>£198</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>£317</td>
<td>£25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HCU Annual Reports various years

64 Hampshire Independent, March 25, 1905
65 HCU Annual Report for 1907 HRO 127M94/62/52: 31
Although Northam clearly struggled to retain and recruit members, nonetheless its performance in an ‘inner city’ area was noteworthy, especially in terms of generating income and halting the decline in attendance. Following the installation of Rev Thomas Harries there was a concerted effort to engage with the community. As reported:

Excellent work is being carried on here under difficult conditions. 1,000 copies of a little leaflet, “The People’s Friend,” are distributed in the neighbourhood every month. Extensive repairs calling for a heavy financial outlay have been accomplished, and the cost has been met through the generous assistance of several friends.66

Moreover, as the figures in Table 3 illustrate, Northam’s Sunday school was particularly successful gaining scholars in the years just prior to the First World War. The example of Northam shows that with vigorous leadership and a hardworking membership, it was possible for a church serving a working class community to, at least, hold its own. However, it was perhaps ‘the exception that proved the rule’ that, in the main, working class adults were far less likely to attend church than middle class.

A final challenge was the extent to which the church should concern itself with public affairs and political issues. There were some who felt that by embracing what had become known in theological terms as the social gospel, ‘an attempt to change human beings by transforming their environment rather than touching their hearts’, the church would lose sight of its primary mission, namely the conversion of individuals.67 Many Congregationalists, while attracted to the cause of social action, still acknowledged the claims of the personal gospel. For them, the priority was to get the balance right.

This felt need to blend the traditional Evangelical message of personal salvation with a political awareness, or the individualism of the nineteenth century with the emerging collectivism of the twentieth, can be seen in the remarks of Rev George Saunders at the time of his accession to the pastorate of Above Bar. After making clear that his preaching would have an authentic ‘Evangelical note’, which included the proclamation that Jesus Christ ‘saves man from sin, through the power of His Cross,’ he went on to say that:

It is by the application of the teaching of Jesus to the manifold life of today that we shall find the solution of all the problems which are pressing so heavily upon us. Hence you will not expect me to be silent in reference to the great social, political and national questions which affect for good or ill the welfare of our town and country.68

In his interview for the local religious leaders’ series, he went a little further:

68 S. Stainer, History of Above Bar Congregational Church from 1662 to 1908 (Southampton: Southampton Times Co, 1909).
I have spoken on Liberal platforms. I think a minister should be granted the liberty which any other individual enjoys. I do not believe in the introduction of party politics into the pulpit, but I think the pulpit should state very clearly great principles and should not be afraid to apply them to every department of national life.  

Like Rev George Saunders, Rev Maldwyn Jones also felt it appropriate for pastors to express an opinion on contemporary issues. In his first Sunday evening sermon at Albion, he commented:

I shall deem it my privilege to view the problems agitating the national and social life of today in the light of the principles of … [the] Gospel [of Christ].

Similarly, at his ordination service, Rev Meredith Davies expressed his belief in both the ‘redemptive Gospel … which grappled with sin in its stronghold, in the will and moral life of man’ and the social gospel. The latter required ‘the Church … to affirm the broad principles of the Kingdom [of God] in relation to the dominant tendencies and problems of the age.’

At a more personal level, in reply to a question posed during his interview for the local religious leader’s series: ‘Do you think social work should go hand in hand with purely religious work?’ Rev Vincett Cook observed:

Why not? Social work is religious work. Our great founder, Jesus Christ, fed the hungry, as well as preached his evangel. Indeed, the relief of physical distress was part of that evangel, and elimination here means mutilation.

Thus, it could be said that many of Southampton’s Congregational pastors, if not all, subscribed to the view that religion, on the one hand, and politics and social issues, on the other should not be kept in watertight compartments. That said, it still left open the question of how best to harmonise the two. Clearly churches could, and did, pursue social goals, such as the amelioration of poverty through self-help initiatives; temperance; and Sunday observance. Moreover, pastors were prepared to speak out on matters of public concern when moved to do so. But how much further should they go in pursuing political and social goals?

Some Congregationalists believed that in forwarding the social gospel it was necessary to take an active part in public affairs by serving on public bodies. At least one pastor, Rev Spencer, had done so prior to coming to Southampton. As he commented on the occasion of his public recognition:

He knew what it was to be a member of the Education Committee and of the Board of Guardians and to serve the town in various ways. But the Avenue

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69 Hampshire Independent, March 1905
70 Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, September 10, 1904
71 Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, October 22, 1910
72 Hampshire Independent, April 15, 1905
and the mission at Portswood must come first. When these had been attended to, whatever time he had to spare would be given to the town and district.\textsuperscript{73}

However, from the available evidence, it seems to have been relatively rare for Southampton’s Congregational pastors to serve on public bodies.

Insofar as a church had a high profile in the public realm, this was more often through the activities of deacons than pastors. A number served on the borough council, with by far the most high profile being Colonel Edward Bance. He was a Liberal councillor from 1874 to 1889 and then served on the aldermanic bench until 1913. He was also mayor in 1890, 1904 and 1910. On the occasion of his being appointed mayor for the second time in 1904, a civic service was held at Avenue Congregational Church, where he was senior deacon, thereby symbolising the fusion of the civic and the sacred. At his funeral in 1925, the pastor of Avenue Congregational Church, who was still Rev Henry Spencer, praised him as someone:

… who did very much more than his share of the business of the town. Who gave great intelligence, devoted zeal and unstinted labour to its development and government, who became an acknowledged leader in two of its important churches [at Albion, prior to moving to Avenue], and one who, moreover, was not absorbed in those multifarious activities to the detriment of the sanctity of home life nor the amenities of wide and deep friendship.\textsuperscript{74}

He went on to highlight ‘the example he set of generous and sacrificial giving’ to the Church’ and his regular attendance at Sunday services and in his closing words echoed St Paul: ‘Edward Bance, farewell: Thou has fought the good fight, hast finished the course, and kept the faith.’\textsuperscript{75}

A second example of a Congregationalist who devoted his long life ‘unselfishly to many good works’ was John Atlee Hunt.\textsuperscript{76} At the time of his death in December 1906, he was senior deacon of Albion Congregational Church and for many years he had been superintendent of the Sunday School and choir master. In the public sphere, ‘his zeal for educational progress was well known’ and he was the last chairman of Southampton School Board, which was disbanded in 1903 under the provision of the Education Act 1902.\textsuperscript{77} He then served as a co-opted member of the Educational Committee, of which he was Vice-Chairman. In summarising John Hunt’s public service, Rev Maldwyn Jones observed that: ‘When a Christian man dies, the community is the poorer’.\textsuperscript{78} This clearly encapsulates the view that, for motivated individuals, it was possible to rise to the challenge of fusing faith with good works through service in the public realm. John Hunt and Edward Bance both embodied the principle of Christian service and can be seen as exponents of at least one strand of the social gospel.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, July 19, 1913
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, July 11, 1925
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, July 11, 1925
  \item \textsuperscript{76} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, December 21, 1906
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, December 21, 1906
  \item \textsuperscript{78} Southampton Times and Hampshire Express, December 21, 1906
\end{itemize}
With respect to the challenges as a whole it could be argued that they ‘kept the churches on their toes’. Indeed it was Rev Peter Buchan’s belief that ‘difficulties had a mission in life.’ However, pursuit of this mission required not only tenacity and flexibility but also an acute awareness that the distinctive Christian, and indeed Congregationalist, message could easily be compromised and undermined by too close an association with the secular world.

**Conclusion**

Overall, Congregational churches, along with those of other denominations, made a spirited contribution to Southampton’s socio-political culture during the Edwardian era. Their presence and influence were felt not only by their members and adherents, but also the wider community, to an extent that is difficult to envisage today. Thus, it would not be going too far to suggest that various strands of Congregationalism were woven into the fabric of Southampton’s social life in the first decade of the twentieth century. Of these strands, three in particular resonated with the temper of Edwardian society.

The first strand was that of service. At a time when the role of public bodies in meeting need was relatively limited, Congregational churches symbolised the Victorian ethos of philanthropic and charitable endeavour and self-help on which much provision still depended. As they increasingly saw their mission in holistic terms, they were keen to create opportunities for meeting a wide range of needs in ways illustrated earlier in the article. The theme of service was to the fore in the remarks made by Rev Meredith Davies at the anniversary of the Avenue Congregational Church in 1910: ‘They were entering another year of service, and he thought they were doing so with a certain amount of confidence and joy.’

A second strand was earnestness, a further legacy of the Victorian era. Congregationalists personified a serious mindedness when it came to addressing the issues of the day. This was seen most clearly in the promotion of the social gospel. As Rev William Miles, pastor of Buckland Congregational Church, Portsmouth, observed, when speaking at Kingsfield’s 54th anniversary gathering in 1907: ‘the Word of God had a message applicable to all the social evils and problems of our times.’ Indeed, he went as far as describing himself as a ‘Socialist in so much and so far as the New Testament was Socialistic’. Expressed somewhat differently, practising Christians should cultivate their social consciences and promote a collectivist response to the gross inequalities evident in Southampton and the nation as a whole.

A third strand was what can best be described as enthusiasm and joyfulness. This was reflected in the extensive use of the word ‘hearty’ to characterise the approach of the Churches to their worship, the events they organised and the welcomes they extended. With its connotations of whole heartedness and sense of commitment,

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79 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, August 31, 1912
80 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 26, 1910
81 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 3, 1907
82 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 3, 1907
Congregationalists were keen to refute suggestions that they were mean spirited or narrow minded. As Jeffrey Cox has observed, although they, like other Nonconformists, still had a reputation for being somewhat puritanical and austere, particularly on account of their support for causes, such as temperance and Sunday observance, they did know how to enjoy themselves and communicate this to others through their socials and bazaars. Simple pleasures they may have been, but at the time they demonstrated the willingness of Congregationalist to embrace many different forms of contemporary entertainment, from concerts to conjuring and from drama to competitions. Indeed, by the Edwardian era, entertainment was an important feature of Congregational life.

How then might Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton be portrayed? Did it epitomise a ‘faith in crisis’ or did it bear testimony to the hallmarks of a ‘faith society’? Can it be seen as a ‘golden age’ or was there a sense of impending sorrow? Was the prospect for Congregationalism ‘splendid’? Arguably the situation was too complex to be summarised in a phrase or two. There were both positive and negative aspects. The Churches still had a high profile and their pastors were generally respected, although there were signs that this respect was being eroded. For example, at Rev Henry Spencer’s recognition service in 1913, reference was made to the fact that: ‘They were living in days in which there was very little respect for the official position of minister.’ This was qualified, however, with the observation that ‘while respect for the cloth had passed away the respect for the man, the true, earnest Christian worker, was deeper than ever.’ Thus, ‘high profile’ Congregational ministers and indeed lay people could be seen as role models of Christian living and service that others wished to emulate. They had the ability and inner confidence to inspire and the right combination of seriousness and enthusiasm to make a difference.

That said, while the three strands of service, earnestness and heartiness and their associated values, which have been highlighted in this section, reinforced the notion of a faith society, they carried with them dangers for the Churches. Put another way, they ran the risk of sacrificing faith on the altar of accommodation with secular society. Although the motives for engaging with the wider community and redefining what was meant by religion were generally sound, the perils were not sufficiently understood. ‘Crisis’ might be too strong a word to use, but as the distinctive character and role of the Churches was eroded, so their raison d’etre and ultimately their very existence were put at risk. The competition from other agencies and organisations which could pursue secular agendas more single-mindedly ultimately proved irresistible and as a result the longer term prospect for Congregationalism was far from ‘splendid’.

Postscript

What then became of Southampton’s Congregational churches and what traces of them remain today? With respect to their physical presence, the buildings of four churches have been completely destroyed. Kingsfield was demolished in 1936 ‘to

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84 *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913
make way for a new road linking the Civic Centre with Western Esplanade."\textsuperscript{85} Above Bar, Albion and Northam were all destroyed by enemy action in late 1940. Freemantle was also bombed, but was subsequently rebuilt and reopened in June 1950.\textsuperscript{86}

To some extent physical destruction was emblematic of the decline of Congregationalism in terms of membership and contribution to the spiritual and social life of Southampton. The first church to close was Kingsfield. In August 1919, the headline ‘Church for Sale: Sad Destiny for a House of Good Works’ appeared over an item in the \textit{Southampton Times and Hampshire Express}. This was a reference to the fact that having shut its doors in April, the buildings were no longer required by the Congregationalists. As the paper went on to point out:

Kingsfield Church worked for over half a century. The town’s growth caused it to be left in the backwash, and it is very sad that it had to give up the struggle.\textsuperscript{87}

Approximately fifteen years later, in 1935, even the mighty Albion Congregational Church ‘gave up the struggle’ due to falling membership. The borough council turned down the opportunity to purchase the premises and they were subsequently used as a ‘provision warehouse’ and for ‘various kinds of bacon curing’.\textsuperscript{88} This was a sad fate for a building which had been home to the largest of Southampton’s Congregational churches.

Following the destruction of its premises, the congregation of Above Bar joined with that of St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Brunswick Place, thereby foreshadowing the merger of the Congregational Church with the Presbyterian Church of England, at national level, in 1972, to create the United Reformed Church (URC). When St Andrew’s Church was closed in 1986, it joined with the Avenue URC, where it continues to this day as Avenue St Andrew’s URC.

In terms of memberships, not surprisingly the numbers belonging to Avenue St Andrew’s URC and Freemantle URC are very small, by comparison with the Edwardian era. In 2008, Avenue St Andrew’s reported 140 members, an average congregation at the main Sunday service of 95 and 23 children and young people aged 26 and under associated with the life of the church. The equivalent figures for Freemantle URC were 35, 18 and 1 respectively.\textsuperscript{89} To complete the picture, the Isaac Watts Memorial URC, situated on Winchester Road, which had opened in 1932 had 61 members, average congregations of 45 and 3 children. Although these churches, have far fewer members they continue to embody some, at least, of the values espoused by Congregationalism in its Edwardian heyday.

\textsuperscript{86} Charles Barrett, \textit{Freemantle URC Southampton 1885-1985} (1986):
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Southampton Times and Hampshire Express}, August 28, 1919
\textsuperscript{88} County Borough of Southampton, \textit{Minutes and Proceedings of Council and Committees} 1936-37: 719.
\textsuperscript{89} Figures from \textit{The United Reformed Church 2009 Year Book} (London: United Reformed Church, 2009)
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