

# THE ELECTIONS TO THE FIRST GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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The Local Government Act of 1888 broke the tradition and pattern of county government that had developed over the previous 400 years whereby the unpaid Justice of the Peace, qualified by his land holding and oath taking, had slowly become the principal agent of local government. At the start of the nineteenth century there were 113 in Gloucestershire, 30 of whom were clergymen, about the national average. Some were aristocrats and actively served in the Quarter Sessions, held four times a year at the newly-built Shire Hall. Well known landed families like the Berkeleys, the Bathursts from Cirencester and Lydney and the Somersets (Beauforts) at Badminton House joined with other justices in trade and manufacture like the famous prison reformer Sir George Onisipherous Paul in levying, collecting and spending the county rate. Most of the rate went on law and order and much less on main roads and repairing the county's bridges. Justices dispensed petty justice from their homes and in petty sessional courts, and criminal justice at the Quarter Session Courts.

Several developments in the 19th century came to erode the prime position of the justices and led to a call for reform in county government. First, the increasing numbers able to vote at Parliamentary elections, with the extension of the franchise between 1832 and 1884, and to share in municipal government at Gloucester, Tewkesbury and later at Cheltenham gave them a taste of power, often encouraged by beer and money — but no share in county government. The second major development in the half century before reform was the opportunity for leading local men to participate in public life by being elected to such bodies as the Poor Law Unions, the Highway Boards and Sanitary Districts. This deprived the justices of their exclusive control of local affairs. Finally, the growing influence of central government in legislation which affected the county led to the appointment of salaried professionals to serve the justices in Quarter Sessions — the county surveyor, the county architect, the county analyst and the chief constable, who all gave professional advice to the amateurs. And after 1871 the District Auditor verified the justices' accounts.

## THE ELECTIONS, JANUARY 1889

Under the Local Government Act, passed by a Conservative government, Gloucestershire was divided into 53 electoral divisions which were to return 60 councillors, Cheltenham returning six and St George, Bristol three. All who had a parliamentary vote — about 60,000 men — and borough council voters — about 68,000 including some women — made up the 128,938 registered voters<sup>1</sup>. Candidates for the new County Council had to come from those qualified to vote or peers with land in the county.

The elections of January 1889 resulted in 35 justices (often called magistrates) being elected, 24 of them unopposed. These included Sir John Dorington, the Chairman of the old Quarter Sessions since 1878 and Tory MP for Tewkesbury, Earl Bathurst, Baron Fitzhardinge from Berkeley and Lord Moreton. Others like the Freeman-Mitfords at Moreton-in-Marsh defeated

rival candidates. Only three magisterial councillors were not closely identified with the landed interest — George Witts, grandson of Revd F E Witts and a civil engineer from near Cheltenham, Handel Cosham, a distinguished Liberal MP and colliery owner from near Bristol and Revd G Drinkwater Bourne at Chipping Campden.

There were 25 non-magistrates elected. These were the new blood. Six called themselves 'gentlemen' or 'gentlemen farmers'; two came from Cheltenham, one from Nailsworth and the others from the rural divisions of Dymock, Pucklechurch and Chipping Sodbury. Farmers represented Badminton (where the Duke of Beaufort was elected for Monmouthshire), Bourton-on-the-Water and Wotton, near Gloucester where Thomas Friday continued a long family tradition of public service — and corn milling.



Robert Aston Lister  
County Councillor from Dursley

#### OTHER ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Some candidates were elected with manufacturing and trading interests. A paper manufacturer, a book maker, a chemical manufacturer, a draper and a stone merchant all represented divisions near or in Bristol, men whom the Tory Dorington would not have seen as 'fit and proper persons' to share in county government?<sup>2</sup>

Another coherent group of interests may be seen in the Liberal newcomers from the Forest of Dean. James Kear, a grocer, was elected for Cinderford (the scene of a serious riot in 1874 when a Tory MP was elected for the Forest area); George Rowlinson, a Baptist layman and the miners' agent from Drybrook and Revd Sydney Elsom, an ex-miner and the Baptist minister from Yorkley who represented West Dean. Another newcomer was Richard Beaumont Thomas, an entrepreneur in Lydbrook and South Wales of the well-known company of R B Thomas. He was president of the local Radical Association, a leader of Llanelli Temperance League and a friend of the ostracized Sir Charles Dilke, the famous Liberal politician. Thus these new councillors shared pronounced convictions and interests often in marked contrast to the traditional Tory and Anglican leanings of the old Quarter Sessions.

Other new men were elected. Joseph Lenthall, a Methodist layman, encourager of the agricultural workers' trade union and outfitter to the county police, was elected Liberal for Central Cheltenham. James Kimmins, a corn merchant, represented the Liberals at Stonehouse while Robert Lister, the engineering genius at Dursley (who quickly came into conflict with Dorington in the debates of the new council) was elected for the town of his family's adoption<sup>3</sup>. In fact Lister, Kimmins and Elsom were all returned at each triennial election from 1889 to 1910 — quite a record. Kimmins went on to serve on the County Education Committee from 1921 to 1930<sup>4</sup>.

#### DORINGTON'S INFLUENCE

Dorington had feared that the elections would lead to the end of the primacy of the landed interest but there is no doubt that the first Council was Tory. However, Dorington had two cards up his sleeve which he played with consummate skill to strengthen the Tories' political hold.

Dorington wanted the 20 aldermen allowed under the Act for Gloucestershire to be chosen from *outside* the Council rather than from among its elected members. Either procedure was legal under the Act. The standard Liberal view in opposition to this was voiced by Handel Cosham but to no avail. Without a vote recorded in the Minutes the aldermen were chosen as Dorington wished. This device was adopted in only six other counties — Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, Middlesex, Norfolk, Oxfordshire and Somerset. From a list of 38 names 12 magistrates and eight non-magistrates were selected. The magistrates included the Lord Lieutenant, the Right Honourable Earl Ducie of Tortworth, and Sir William Marling of Stroud. Among the others were Thomas Bailey, one of Fitzhardinge's tenant farmers, and William Friday, Chairman of Gloucester Highway Board. Thus the total Council of elected councillors and aldermen comprised 47 justices out of a total of 80<sup>5</sup>.

The second card that Dorington played was quite singular in all County Councils in 1889. He aimed to perpetuate the position and power of the old guard from the Quarter Sessions by having 80 of them on the Standing Joint Committee to control the police, matched by the 60 councillors and 20 aldermen. A small committee of seven magistrates to deal with this recommended (quite naturally) in favour of this move. Thus Gloucestershire had a S.J.C. of 160 nominal members, a ludicrous number, (The real number was 143 because 17 justices were County Councillors.) The average for all 58 County Councils in 1889 was 26. In fact only 60-80 attended regularly and solved what would have been an accommodation problem at the Shire Hall<sup>6</sup>.

Dorington, elected first Chairman of the new County Council in 1889, and serving until 1908, thus played a unique role in trying to stem the tide of democracy in Gloucestershire.

#### SOURCES

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2. The concept of 'fit and proper persons' is well illustrated by E P Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons. Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government*, 1973, p.308.
3. *Gloucester Journal* 12, 19 Jan, 11 May 1889, 22 June 1907, 24 Feb 1917.
4. There were seven magistrates returned at each election 1889-1910. Kelly's Directories, G.C.C. Attendance Book CC/M 1B/1, G.R.O. *The Citizen* 18 April 1936, *Stroud News and Gloucester County Advertiser* 24 April 1936, George F Timpson, *Kings and Commoners. Studies in British Idealism*, Cheltenham, 1936, pp.164-6.
5. *G.J.*, 12, 26 Jan 1889. *The Times*, 19 Jan 1889, J L Lee *Social Leaders and Public Persons. A Study of County Government in Cheshire since 1888*, Oxford, 1963, p.228.
6. Q.S.M.B., Q/SM 3/14 Trinity, 1888; Epiphany, 1890, CS J/M 1/1 5 April 1890, J P D Dunbabin, Expectations of the new County Councils and their realisation, *The Historical Journal*, vol.III,3, 1965, pp.357-376 at pp.373-4. *G.J.* 12 April 1890, J R Somers Vine, ed., *The County Councils and Municipal Corporations Companion and Diary 1892*.



Sir John Dorington  
*Sporting Gazette and Agricultural Journal* 9 Mar 1889  
(from Gloucestershire Collection)