

BATH POLITICS

Bath politics in the early years of the twentieth century (an extract from The Train and Other Ghosts by Arnold Ridley).

During my school years I became mildly interested in politics.

My personal recollections of the General Elections of those days are confined to Bath where, under the Parliamentary system of those times, each elector could register two votes and two members were sent to the House of Commons.

Most of the ‘middle class’ population of Bath — overwhelmingly teetotal and nonconformist — sported the red-and-yellow rosettes of the Liberal Party, while the ‘true blue’ Tories came from opposite ends of the social scale — the property-owner, manufacturer and big business men, and others of the ‘lower orders’ violently opposed to the introduction of the Liberal-sponsored Licensing Act which sought to reduce the number of public houses and restrict the hours for the sale of alcohol.

Nonconformist ministers had no hesitation in preaching politics from their pulpits and my father caused some stir when, after the 1906 Liberal triumph, he got up and walked out of a Bath chapel, to which he had been taken by my mother, because the preacher had thanked God that ‘the reign of tyranny and damnation was over and God’s people were returned to power’.

Election nights were nights of excitement indeed! Bath possessed two evening newspapers: the *Bath Herald*, printed on pink paper and supporting the Liberal Party, and the *Bath Chronicle*, printed on pale green paper, supporting the Tories. During elections, each erected a screen on which the election results were thrown by lantern

slides from behind. The *Herald's* screen was at their offices in Northgate Street and the *Chronicle's* screen, hardly a quarter of a mile away, was outside the Constitutional Club in Princes Buildings at the top of Milsom Street. The waiting crowds were divided in much the same way as partisans at a local football match, each side in front of its own screen. As was to be expected, there was a certain amount of 'rough-housing' between skirmishers on the fringes but I don't remember anyone being arrested or taken to hospital.

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