

Harold Wilson: A Constituency MP

by

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Foreword

While this piece of work is an attempt to cast more light on Harold Wilson as a constituency MP, my view is from the perspective of someone growing up in his shadow, for although I only met Harold Wilson once, he had a profound effect on my life. And, because of that, a profound effect on those close to me.

I cannot remember exactly how old I was when I met him, only that I was still in short trousers and standing next to my mother in the hall of our council house. He must have been canvassing and I've since described that encounter as meeting the poshest man I'd ever met, which probably says more about my own family circumstances and social circle. However, I do remember, along with other accounts I have since read about him, that even to my already sharpened instincts he seemed like a 'nice man'. And so he seemed to the people of Huyton who took a Yorkshireman to heart and voted him in with a solid and stable majority at every election until he retired.

These reflections, therefore, are not from remembering Wilson as an MP. I had already moved 'away', by the time I was old enough to vote, gravitating to the spiritual heartland of Liverpool itself. These reflections come from remembering that the Prime Minister, who was on television nearly every day, was actually the bloke who represented the area where I was born, raised and shaped. He was, if not a role model, then the first significant example of what we may now term civic and neighbourhood pride. But back then it was simply being inspired by someone who walked the same streets. Breathed the same air. And came from 'round here'.

The next time our paths crossed I didn't meet him, but he came as Prime Minister as well as local MP, to officially open my school, St Kevin's in Kirkby in the mid-1960's. No matter that I was then in the Sixth Form, having spent the first six years of my comprehensive school education negotiating a building site, not quite appreciating at the time that I was a part of Wilson's ideas to bring about social change and equality through education. By the time he came to unveil the school plaque, I was studying A-Level Economics and remember him being entangled in the industrial turmoil that seemed to be engulfing the country.

Turmoil that his own pre-election 'white heat of technology speech' to the 1963 Party Conference had predicted. I remember it being debated repeatedly in tutorials, again not appreciating that it would become one of the most referred to speeches in political social history. From the bloke who opened our school, no less. In that speech he said two things that have stayed with me throughout life. The first was about the need to embrace technological change:

"It is no good trying to comfort ourselves with the thought that automation need not happen here; that it is going to create so many problems that we should perhaps put our heads in the sand and let it pass us by... If we try to abstract from the automotive age, the only result will be that Britain will become a stagnant backwater..."

The second, was when he also talked about the need for greater skills and a much better education system:

"We simply cannot as a nation afford to neglect the educational development of a single boy or girl. We cannot afford to cut off three quarters or more of our children from virtually any chance of higher education."

Those sentiments are as true today as they were then. As they were in the late 19th Century when the principle of state education was established. And it was an ideal the Party returned to in the 1990's under the banner, and later mantra, '*education, education, education*', because despite the zeal, rhetoric and struggle of the 1960's the great social revolution never actually happened. Despite all the resources that were aimed at the comprehensive system they were never enough, nor could they ever be. St Kevin's, hailed as the national Catholic flagship, had the best of everything. It had the best teachers, the best buildings and the best equipment. Unfortunately, through the accident of geography, it didn't have what is really necessary to bring about real social change: sustained support.

Children's local social conditions are equally, if not more important, than the school they go to. If '*education, education, education*,' is the mantra for social change, then it needs to be matched with the housing cliché of '*location, location, location*'. In St Kevin's case, set within a declining economic area, it simply ran out of steam. It closed in the 1980's and where this flagship for educational advancement and social equality once stood, there are now houses.

This was well understood at the time, but Wilson, like many Prime Ministers before and after, a few I have had the opportunity to meet, discovered that winning an election is not enough. There are the inconveniences of democracy to be negotiated. The traditions, customs and legalities, to say nothing of vested interest and political ambition and intrigue. Above it all though, is the fear of the unknown. Too much time spent fretting about what may be lost, rather than focusing on what can be gained.

As a consequence of this, much has been written about Wilson being a Machiavellian or manipulative politician, but the pragmatic view is that he clearly understood that to bring about change you need to hold power. But when in power, one of the greatest inconveniences of democracy is the need for consensus and that, inevitably, means progress is slow. And one policy alone can never provide a magic bullet.

With the obvious benefit of hindsight, Wilson's next impact on my own life was after I had left St Kevin's and started life as a Trainee Quantity Surveyor, achieving exactly what he had intended. Stepping up from the working class into a middle class profession. But it was the work I became engaged in, rather than the career itself, which owed more to him. I started work on adapting primary schools as part of the Wilson Government's Educational Priority Areas programme. This was aimed at trying to improve the conditions within schools in economically deprived areas, on the basis that better surroundings would compensate for what children lacked at home. However, that too contained the same fatal design flaw as the comprehensive school. While the deal was right, the mechanism was wrong and the resources were inadequate. What was, and is still needed, are not nice new toilets, a trendy café to eat lunch or indeed a whole new school, but the social and economic stability that comes through regular employment. And through that, both the self-esteem of belonging to a wider community, to say nothing of the tax revenues that are needed to underpin sustainable investment in education reform.

Harold Wilson knew this. In that same white heat of technology speech, he set out the challenge facing Britain: modernise or perish. This was an uncomfortable message for many in the Party and the Trades Unions, given

that the social, cultural, political and, increasingly, employment opportunities lay in the movement's history. That history was tied to the 'old' heavy industries of coal, steel, car manufacturing, electrical and white goods. Yet these were the very industries under the combined threat of Japan, Germany and new technology. By the 1960's it was clear to Wilson, no doubt through being drafted into the war time civil service and then at the Board of Trade, that having learned the lesson of not helping Germany recover from the First World war and therefore allowing it to become the crucible of fascist extremism, Britain had been contributing to the rebuilding programmes in both Germany and Japan, at the expense of its own redevelopment. While Germany and Japan were rebuilding from scratch and investing in new electronic technology, Britain was stuck in the past, trying to patch up its ageing manufacturing base that had survived the war.

His belief in the power of new technology went beyond manufacturing, to television and more particularly to harnessing its power for education. Many have said, as he did himself, that the Open University was one of his greatest achievements. To allow people to improve their education and attain university degrees from home was not just a powerful social intervention, but it also embedded the idea that no matter what happened to you through formal schooling, there was always another opportunity. A second chance. It is why in all my television programmes I returned time and time again to the issue of dyslexia and illiteracy. As Wilson himself said, we cannot afford to lose the intellectual capability of even one child,

This, also with the benefit of hindsight, is probably the greatest impact that man who stood in our hall all those years ago had on me. Give people

opportunities and they will take them. Arguments over what state education should deliver have been raging since the first Education Act in 1870. No doubt they always will. Potential develops at different rates depending upon circumstances. But we must always strive, as Wilson did, not to cut off anyone from the benefits of higher education. We must also modernise or perish. Change is inevitable and you can either run away from it, or understand it, then acquire the skills that are necessary and meet it head on.

That is what I took from my time growing up in the shadow of the only Prime Minister since Gladstone to win four elections. Some of it I didn't appreciate until later, but his political philosophy affected me and then, later, my family and all those people who worked with me on Grange Hill, Brookside and Hollyoaks. All those people who were employed by the power of an idea and who have gone on to build careers and businesses elsewhere. And that is an example of how politicians can have more influence through example and soft power, than any number of structured but under-resourced reforms.

Wilson tried to move both the country and the Labour movement on. He tried through education reform, as he tried through industrial relations reform. He tried to prepare people to accept that change was coming and be prepared to face it. With hindsight, everyone should have listened, but the realities of life are that it is very difficult, perhaps almost impossible, to bring about the sort of cultural shift Wilson outlined in his 1963 speech, within the lifetime of one or two Parliaments. There are always, too many 'traditional views' to counter, to say nothing of competing ideologies. Having to pull a consensus together always leads to compromise.

This work helps shed more light not only on the man himself, but also his great legacy. A legacy that was, in part, shaped by the time he held power and the challenges he faced, the greatest being to manage, perhaps even manipulate, both the party and the mechanism of state through one of the most turbulent periods of Britain's social and economic history. In doing so, he also formed the link between an older, more patrician and more deferential Britain, and the newer, more vibrant Britain of the swinging sixties forced upon us all by new electronic technology that sent cultural shock waves round the world.

He may not have realised some of his own personal ideals but, like the Open University, much of his legacy still exists through the soft power of inspiring others and creating the opportunities for them to develop. He also epitomised the essence of soft power. Influencing and inspiring people in unknown ways, like this particular constituent. Many modern politicians could look back at Harold Wilson's career and learn a lot. History will serve him well.

by

Phil Redmond CBE

1. Introduction

The purpose of this piece of work is to examine Harold Wilson's life as a constituency MP. For most of his parliamentary career he was the MP for Huyton – although, as will be demonstrated, purely associating him with Huyton can be misleading as the constituency changed significantly during his time as the MP for the area and included other communities that were significant in their own right. While he represented the area, there were demographic changes and slum clearance programmes which re-housed significant numbers of Liverpool residents into the constituency and consequently changed its political character, particularly in terms of the Labour Party and these changes affected Harold Wilson's role as a constituency MP.

Similarly, the process of establishing new industries and creating employment opportunities for a growing number of constituents presented real challenges which would, inevitably, have absorbed Harold Wilson's prodigious energy and time.

The role of a constituency MP had changed significantly since the 19th Century when, in most cases, parliamentary constituencies were ships of convenience. Indeed, since Harold Wilson's time, the role has changed even more. It is, therefore, important to identify his particular role and how he performed it by the standards of his time. This work attempts to do that. It also looks at the local political landscape in the constituency during his time, particularly in terms of the Labour Party members with whom Harold Wilson associated. The hope is that profiling some of those concerned will add both colour and illumination to the local political context of his time as the MP for Huyton.

One further aspect of Harold Wilson's role as an MP for the area that cannot be ignored, is the fact that between 1945 and 1976 (when he stood down from

front-line politics) he was one of the dominant political leaders – at times the dominant leader – in British politics. Did that make him a less effective local MP? Or did the advantages that went with his influences outweigh any restraints of time and availability in the local context?

It is to be acknowledged that this work is written from a partisan perspective. Having grown up in Huyton, I first became politically active when Harold Wilson was our local MP and I am an unashamedly admirer of Harold Wilson. Nevertheless, in examining his time as our local MP, I have tried to use the sources available in such a way as to allow them to speak for themselves. Where criticisms have been made, I have tried to ensure that they are properly aired.

Finally, I would like to thank those who have contributed to this piece of work, without whom, it would not have been possible.

Special thanks go to the Archive Resource for Knowsley team (the ARK), particularly Lin Rice, who have been generous to a fault in guiding us through their outstanding sound archive about Harold Wilson. Thanks are due also to Geoff Kneale, Jim Keight and Bill Brennan for helpfully agreeing to be interviewed about their recollections, the results of which have added light and shade to the existing archive.

I am also indebted to the House of Commons library for allowing me to use their maps and, as ever, for providing information of high quality and detail in their customary impartial manner.

I am grateful, also, to Phil Redmond for his ‘Huyton Lad’ foreword.

Finally, thanks are due to my staff, Jayne Aston, Kate Brady, Julie Howarth, Jonathan Woods and Aimee Wright for their enthusiastic help in turning the

mass of material available into something which will provide some illumination for those interested in Harold Wilson's time as our local MP.

Any omissions, errors or flawed recollections are, however, entirely my own.

2. Harold Wilson & Huyton

Harold Wilson was, for most of his parliamentary career, associated with Huyton and, indeed, that was the name given to the constituency he represented for much of his time as an MP. As is often the case with constituency names, however, it can be misleading.

Harold's original constituency was, in fact, Ormskirk in Lancashire but even that was a name that did not properly reflect the political geography of that constituency. The Ormskirk constituency was first established following a Boundary Commission Review which took place in 1885¹.

¹ Uberoi, Elise Dr., 'Harold Wilson's constituencies,' House of Commons Library, 25.08.15



Map 1. Ormskirk constituency 1885

Source: Uberoi, Elise, Dr., 'Harold Wilson's constituencies,' House of Commons Library, 25.08.15.

In addition to the Lancashire town of Ormskirk (now part of the West Lancashire constituency), the constituency established by that review also

consisted of Knowsley (essentially the estate of the Earl of Derby and what is now thought of as Knowsley Village), Kirkby and Croxteth Hall and Country Park (the ancestral home of the Molyneux family, the Earls of Sefton²), part of the town of Prescott, Longview, Woolfall Heath and Fincham (all part of what was Huyton-with-Roby). The remainder of Huyton-with-Roby was part of the Widnes constituency to the South of the Ormskirk constituency.

Although the town of Prescott was of long-standing, most of the other parts of Huyton-with-Roby were largely undeveloped, consisting of agricultural land and such buildings as existed were largely associated with agricultural activities of the time. This was equally true of Kirkby. Prescott is believed to be Anglo-Saxon in origin, with the name 'Prescota-cot' meaning a 'priest cottage'. The earliest mention of Prescott in any surviving records appears in the Pipe Rolls of 1178³.

The town has long been celebrated for the manufacture of clocks, watches and pottery, and its importance is reflected in it being included in the 14th century Gough Map of Britain, donated to the Bodleian Library by Richard Gough, an 18th century collector of maps⁴.

The eighteenth century brought considerable changes to the town. Increased prosperity followed and there was a rapid rise in population from an estimated 700 in the 1690's to 3645 in 1801⁵.

² Visit Liverpool website accessed online via <http://www.visitliverpool.com/things-to-do/croxteth-hall-and-country-park-p7413> on 07.04.16

³ Prescott Museum, 'Origins of Prescott'. Accessed online via: <http://www.prescotmuseum.org.uk/pdf/Origins-of-Prescot.pdf> on 07.04.16

⁴ Knowsley Local History: It's People and Heritage', Knowsley Council. Accessed online via http://history.knowsley.gov.uk/information/print_text.msql?name=Prescot&ref=ptorigins on 07.04.16

⁵ Knowsley Local History: It's People and Heritage', Knowsley Council. Accessed online via http://history.knowsley.gov.uk/information/print_text.msql?name=Prescot&ref=ptorigins on 07.04.16

Population growth continued during the nineteenth century with the census for 1851 revealing that nearly a quarter of the population was born in Ireland, a legacy of the famine which had driven many to emigrate⁶.

The Court Leet (which had established the principals of local self-government) was replaced in 1867 with the creation of the Prescot Local Government Board, which, in turn, became the Prescot Urban District Council after further re-organisation in 1895⁷.

A further Boundary Commission Review which took place in 1917 (and was implemented in 1918), transferred all of Prescot and Huyton-with-Roby into the Widnes constituency. From that same review, Kirkby remained in the Ormskirk constituency, as did Croxteth Park and parts of West Derby which, at that time, remained beyond the Liverpool City Boundary. The boundary between the Ormskirk and Widnes constituencies in 1918 was what is now known as the East Lancashire Road.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



Ormskirk constituency - 1918

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Map 2.
Ormskirk constituency 1918.
Source: Uberoi, Elise Dr., 'Harold Wilson's constituencies,' House of Commons Library, 25.05.15

Harold Wilson represented the Ormskirk constituency between 1945 and 1950, following which he became the MP for Huyton. The new Huyton constituency was established from a further boundary review, by now on a statutory basis, following legislation passed by parliament in the 1940s (House of Commons redistribution of seats - 1944 and 1949).

Initially implemented in 1945, the legislation provided for periodic reviews of constituency boundaries, whereas previously they had been carried out on an ad hoc basis.

The new Huyton constituency created in 1950, was made up of the Urban Districts of Huyton-with-Roby and Prescott, together with the parishes of Eccleston, Kirkby, Knowsley and Windle and the Rural District of Whiston.



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Map 3. Ormskirk constituency 1950

Source: Uberoi, Elise Dr., 'Harold Wilson's constituencies,' House of Commons Library, 25.05.15

Other than minor adjustments to realign parliamentary constituency boundaries, the Huyton constituency remained in existence until Harold Wilson retired as an MP in 1983.

In the inter-war years, Huyton had undergone significant demographic change as Liverpool Corporation built new Council housing as part of its slum clearance programme outside its own boundaries. Consequently, North Huyton was transformed from a sparsely populated agricultural area to an urban working class community, made up of former Liverpool residents living in modern homes built to a fairly high standard. Interestingly, Liverpool Corporation developed a significant number of new council homes in this period stretching from Dovecot, within the Liverpool City Council Boundary, in a continuous eastward ribbon through to Longview in Huyton-with-Roby. To this day, therefore, it is difficult - other than through local authority signage - to identify the boundary between Liverpool and North Huyton as the house designs are identical.

The new Huyton constituency again, however, was something of a misnomer. Even in 1950, although all of the areas it incorporated were within the County of Lancashire, they were widely diverse. For example, Prescot was a long-established market town with a distinctive character of its own. In the 19th Century and earlier, it had developed as a centre for the manufacture of clocks and watches and, in the 20th Century, the cable manufacturing company British Insulated Callender's Cables (BICC), emerged as the predominant employer in Prescot and many surrounding areas, at its peak employing some 10,000 people.

The parish of Kirkby had, during World War II, developed into a major munitions manufacturing area and, subsequently, home to a growing number of manufacturing companies such as Kraft Foods, AC Delco, Birdseye and Hygena. In 1950, Kirkby was on the cusp of becoming an urban area with plans from Liverpool Corporation to, again, develop significant new Council estates

outside its own borders as part of the ongoing slum clearance programmes which had started between 1918 – 1945.

Similarly, the rural parishes of Whiston, Eccleston, Knowsley and Windle would, during the period that Harold Wilson was their MP, become substantially altered, with a slew of new developments. In some cases this transformation was from rural to semi-rural/suburban and predominantly owner-occupied areas, as in the cases of Eccleston and Windle (both now part of St Helens) and Knowsley Village was to become a mixed semi-rural area with both new Council homes and some up-market owner-occupied homes, developed around the existing village homes and farm buildings which were part of the Earl of Derby's Estate.

It should be noted that it is not uncommon for constituency names to be based on the major town in the constituency and, as the most populous area in the constituency, the name Huyton was not, in 1950, anomalous in that context. It would, nevertheless, be misleading to assume that Huyton alone was the area Harold Wilson was associated with even in 1950. Moreover, as this piece of work will demonstrate, the different communities in different but important ways, were significant and important to Harold Wilson's life as a constituency MP.

3. Arthur Smith

From the 1964 General Election, Harold Wilson's constituency agent was Arthur Smith. Once described by The Guardian as 'an attractive Pickwickian character', Arthur Smith was a former miner and had served during the Second World War in both the RAF and the Army.

Labour Party agents, particularly in the case of nationally high profile MPs such as Harold Wilson, are effectively - as the name suggests - the person who represents the MP in his absence. In legal terms, a candidate's agent is responsible for the conduct of the election campaign, taking responsibilities for securing the required ten signatures⁸ to formally nominate the candidate (including the lodging of the deposit required), organising canvassing, the design, production and circulation of election leaflets and addresses, the candidate's programme in the constituency during the election and overall control of the campaign in the constituency.

In many respects, Arthur Smith was the local eyes and ears of the MP; not so much as substitute but, rather, a first port of contact for any constituent, firm or group in the community seeking some sort of help or support.

Arthur Smith was not, however, purely a functionary. Prior to becoming Harold Wilson's agent – a full-time position paid for out of Labour Party funds – he had been a Labour activist, holding various offices within the Labour Party and, as an elected Councillor, at one stage the leader of Whiston Rural Council District Council.

In a series of interviews recorded in 1977, he gave illuminating and colourful insights into his role.

⁸ Representation of the People Act, 1948, 1948 c. 65. Accessed online via http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1948/65/pdfs/ukpga_19480065_en.pdf on 07.04.16

The first general election in which he acted as Harold Wilson's agent was in 1964. At that time, Harold Wilson, as Leader of the Labour Party, was widely expected to become the first Labour Prime Minister since Clement Atlee (1945-1951). Inevitably, therefore, the Huyton constituency attracted a great deal of interest from the national and international media.

Because he was expected to become Prime Minister, there were also security implications which, quite properly, meant that the police force took an interest in his personal security. Early in the campaign, Special Branch made contact with Arthur Smith to discuss their concerns about Harold Wilson's security on the occasions he would be campaigning in Huyton. As Leader of the Party, Harold Wilson's programme during the election campaign would range right across the country. In practice, this meant that he would actually be present in the constituency on three or four occasions.

As it became apparent that Special Branch involvement would be a significant part of the campaign, Arthur Smith realised that there was a positive advantage to be had from such attention. The visible impact of police outriders and a retinue of plain clothes Special Branch protection officers was, he realised, a good way of creating a prime ministerial impression in the constituency, enhancing Harold Wilson's image locally into the bargain. His response was to talk up his own concerns, as Harold Wilson's agent, about his candidate's security. Citing shadowy Rhodesian people⁹ who had been spotted locally or had made veiled threats, he succeeded in convincing the police that their concerns about the security of the Leader of The Opposition were more

⁹ At the end of 1963, Southern Rhodesia, a self-governing British dependency, governing on the basis of apartheid and white majority rule, requested independence. The Rhodesian Front political party were met with refusal by the then Conservative government. In 1964, Ian Smith, taking over negotiations for the Rhodesian Front from Winston Field, ruled out accepting Britain's preconditions for independence and proceeded to assume sovereignty without British consent. Harold Wilson warned that this would be seen as a treasonous act.

than well-founded, ensuring that the prime ministerial entourage became an essential fixture during the candidate's time spent in the constituency.

I well remember as a schoolboy in Huyton at the time, the razzmatazz in Huyton of the packs of media, complete with TV cameras, notebooks and all of the paraphernalia of broadcasters conspicuously evident for the duration of the campaign, usefully creating a buzz for the candidate.

Arthur Smith realised that, handled properly, this was potentially a positive asset to his candidate's reputation, creating a strong sense of the importance of Harold Wilson and their vote. An American television reporter, Arthur Smith records, had been sent to Huyton to cover the campaign from the vantage point of Harold Wilson's constituency. The reporter, for the duration of the campaign, became a regular visitor to Arthur Smith at the Labour campaign headquarters, during the course of which Arthur Smith became the grateful recipient of his large cigars. On one of his visits, the reporter suggested filming a piece in a local pub, interviewing voters. Arthur Smith welcomed the idea, although privately harbouring some doubts about what well lubricated voters might actually say in front of a television camera. After some thought, he suggested a particular pub on an evening that he knew was likely to be quiet. On the appointed evening, he arranged for fifteen Labour Party members to patronise the pub concerned, five of whom were briefed to pretend to be Tories, in order to seemingly create a sense of balance.

In his recorded interview, Arthur Smith recounts how Harold Wilson would, during the local campaign, conduct public meetings. Unthinkable by today's standards, very little effort was made to vet those attending a public meeting with the potential Prime Minister. On one such occasion during the 1964 general election, there was a public meeting held in Huyton. The agent,

although not drawing up a list of invitees did, nevertheless, take the precaution of recruiting the voluntary services of, as he put it, some “rough characters”, as an insurance against any potential disruption of the meeting. As he stood in the meeting hall watching people arrive, he spotted an unfamiliar man with a conspicuous “bulge” underneath his overcoat. Suspecting that the said bulge might be a loud hailer, to be used to drown out Harold Wilson, Arthur instructed the “rough characters” to accompany the man off the premises. Enthusiastic allies, they unceremoniously removed the poor man, “bulge” and all, by means of dumping him on the car park. Sensing that he had by this time got the message, the agent approached the man, politely enquiring about the “bulge”. It transpired that the man was a massive Harold Wilson fan and had brought with him a portable tape recorder (this was in the days before much more discrete technology) which he had brought to record the stirring words of his hero. Oh dear!

I personally recollect, during the 1970 general election, attending an eve of poll rally which was open to any member of the public who wanted to attend. The format of the event was that the Prime Minister would make a short speech and then take questions from the audience. The Chair of the meeting was the Chair of Huyton Constituency Party, George Rodgers (later himself to become the MP for Chorley). The only concession to micro-managing the event, was that questions would be taken in groups of three. First up, was an angry looking man who asked:

“Mr Wilson, you said in 1966 that they would abolish the grammar schools over your dead body and now it is in your manifesto – what have you got to say about that?”

Wilson responded to the two subsequent questions and concluded, looking straight at the angry grammar school supporter, and repeating the question to

him, said *“As regards you my friend, you’re showing a morbid curiosity with my corpse”*.

I thus witnessed, at first hand, Harold Wilson’s well merited reputation for quick-witted responses, albeit within a format that enabled at least some thinking time.

3. The Politics of Harold Wilson's Constituency

Huyton, following the Second World War, was an uneasy amalgam consisting of a Lancashire town which, in the inter-war years and thereafter was augmented by a new population of slum clearance residents from Liverpool, who occupied newly built council property, mainly in the north of the town. Later, new council estates were built in the 1950s and 60s in south Huyton by the then Huyton Urban District Council.

Kirkby, by contrast, emerged as a substantial town in its own right during the 1950s and 60s as Liverpool City Council continued its slum clearance programme outside the city boundaries. Originally little more than a rural hamlet, it acquired a munitions industry complex during the Second World War, following which new factories and council housing were developed.

When describing Kirkby, Geoff Kneale says:

"Kirkby was five farms, Kirkby village, where it is now was five shops and the railway station, a small telephone exchange, a UAX and telephone box, and that was in 1951" (Interview 23/09/15) 4:27:00 Kneale

Meanwhile, areas like Eccleston and Prescott, although expanding in terms of population, were already established communities, distinctly Lancashire in character and remaining more or less intact.

The demographic changes, particularly in Huyton and Kirkby, had an impact on the political make-up of the area. As Harold Wilson himself put it, the new former Liverpool residents in Huyton were "green" as distinct from "orange" (Roman Catholic rather than Protestant) and, consequently, more likely (he believed) to vote Labour. Wilson believed that (in Liverpool):

"Religion is deep-rooted. Basically, the Catholics are Labour...similarly, the Orangemen are Tories". (LS/TAP/80) 1:04:50 Wilson

Liverpool politics, up until as late as the 1970s, was influenced by longstanding sectarian divisions which were reflected in its politics. In a doctoral thesis by Keith Roberts, titled “The rise and fall of Liverpool sectarianism”, Peter Kilfoyle, former Labour MP for Liverpool Walton, recounts Harold Wilson’s views on sectarianism:

“Harold Wilson was very, very much aware [of sectarianism] having represented Huyton and Kirkby [1950-1983], because remember, particularly when he represented those areas, many of those people had only recently moved out from the city centre. So it still will have been raw with them the sectarianism. So he was very, very well aware of that”¹⁰.

When describing the appointment of David Sheppard as the Church of England Bishop of Liverpool in 1975, Keith Roberts said:

“[...] he was made aware of the ‘long history of sectarian suspicion’, ‘bitterness’, and the ‘violence which lay behind the religious divide in the city.’ Such was the divide that as late as 1968 the Prime Minister Harold Wilson, a Merseyside MP, opposed the invitation of royalty to the consecration of the Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral, as the ‘relationships between Protestants and Catholics, though they had calmed down, were too fragile to risk a royal presence at such a public Roman Catholic event.”¹¹

Former Labour MP for Bootle, Joe Benton backed up this viewpoint:

“We did have sectarianism in Bootle, but it wasn’t the breakdown of communities [that changed things], it was enlightenment. At one time if you were Orange you could be ninety per cent certain that you were Conservative as well. Later on I started noticing a lot more cross fertilisation. People from Protestant areas started voting Labour ... people became a lot more politically aware through education, enlightenment, but mostly through the Labour movement. Trade Unions played a massive role in that.”¹²

¹⁰ Roberts, K.D., The rise and fall of Liverpool sectarianism: An investigation into the decline of sectarian antagonism on Merseyside. (April 2015). Page 241. Accessed online via http://repository.liv.ac.uk/2010280/3/RobertsKei_April2015_2010280.pdf on 08.04.16

¹¹ Ibid. Page 250.

¹² Ibid. Page 244.

To some extent, therefore, an extension of Liverpool politics was played out on the new council estates in North Huyton and Kirkby. In practice, this meant that they were both Labour and predominantly Roman Catholic.

When commentating on sectarianism, Andrew Holden suggested that Harold Wilson's social conservatism might have been a function of his concern that the electorate would not approve of such measures and, consequently, an "...electoral harvest that might be reaped particularly in areas like his own constituency of Huyton with a large Catholic vote¹³".

Politically, these changes were significant for Harold Wilson as a local MP in several ways. First, there was a firmer and more reliable Labour vote which he could rely on. For a leading national politician, a strong constituency base is a very important asset – although Harold Wilson was acknowledged as a good constituency MP, during general elections he was required to campaign right across the country and, consequently, time in the constituency for campaigning was correspondingly more limited.

The increasingly industrial character of the constituency was also a good fit. As a Keynesian socialist, his belief in the benefits of state planning and harnessing the modern "white hot heat of technology," very much reflected the sort of economic model that was at the core of his political beliefs.

As a youthful former President of the Board of Trade, he was also well placed to help with attracting new industrial investment into the area. Reminiscing, Geoff Kneale said:

"One of the things that Wilson was famous for was industrial. He was a great believer, create factories, give people places to work...he actually arranged for many of the big firms to get grants to come here"
(Interview 23/09/15) 23:29:00 Kneale

¹³ Dorey, P. 2016. Social and Sexual Liberalisation. In: Crines, A.S. and Hickson, K. Harold Wilson The Unprincipled Prime Minister? Reappraising Harold Wilson. London: Biteback, Ch. 11, p170.

His understanding of the grant system and extensive knowledge of Whitehall meant that he could play a critical role in attracting new industrial investment. One example of this was bringing the Ford Motor Company to Halewood, which, although not in his constituency, brought well-paid jobs for many of his constituents.

Wilson Road, the main route through Huyton Industrial Estate is named after Harold Wilson. It once featured large factory sites such as Huntley & Palmers biscuits, Plessey and Princess Foods, employing a large workforce. It still houses many industrial units but on a smaller scale¹⁴.

In the 1950's Kirkby Industrial Estate was established and steadily expanded to become one of the largest in the country. By 1971 the estate employed over 25,000 people¹⁵. Kirkby's post-war population of around 3,000 people increased to over 50,000 by 1961, and a whole infrastructure emerged to support the influx of such large numbers. By 1971, some 194,600 lived within the Borough's present boundary.¹⁶

In addition to new industrial investment and jobs, the provision of new public services, particularly schools, was important to the area. Because of the increasingly Roman Catholic profile of the area, new school provision was not straightforward. Although the need for new schools was obvious, for Roman Catholics – particularly on the part of the clergy and Catholic leadership – great store was set by having maintained schools that provided a Catholic education.

¹⁴ Knowsley Local History: It's People and Heritage. 'Huyton towntrail'. Accessed online via http://history.knowsley.gov.uk/information/print_text.msql?name=Huyton&ref=hutrail on 08.04.16

¹⁵ Knowsley Metropolitan Borough: An Introduction: History, Geography, Population and Economy. Accessed online via <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:SUbw7LgWhBUJ:knowsleyknowledge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Knowsley-Metropolitan-Borough-overview.docx+&cd=7&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk> on 08.04.16

¹⁶ Ibid.

This meant that Harold Wilson was expected to lobby central government for capital expenditure on new schools, a good number of which would be maintained schools.

Moreover, the grant that maintained schools were entitled to receive towards their costs from central government was inevitably important to the Catholic Church, since all expenditure not covered by the grant had to be found by the church. To fulfil his obligation to his “green” (RC) constituents, he worked closely with the local catholic clergy on such issues.

The underlying and potentially sectarian nature of the politics of the area could, on occasion, be a source of political controversy. Recalling an incident at a Remembrance Day event, John Maguire retold the story of his own refusal to participate in a non-Catholic service:

“I am a practising Roman Catholic, and at that time it was not possible for a Roman Catholic to participate in a non-Catholic service...I refused to take part in a non-Catholic service at the Cenotaph in Huyton. I stressed the fact that if they wanted to arrange a joint service, that would be possible. The result was that I went and worshipped on my own, placed a wreath and went to my own service afterwards. What made it difficult for me is that the two Roman Catholic Chairmen before me had accepted the situation and taken part”. (LSCD09) 41:50:00 John Maguire

This stance did not go down well with other elected members. Seth Powell was unhappy with John’s stance:

“There was one blot on his year in office (Maguire’s), and that was standing at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. He refused, from what I remember, point blank to stand there because the Vicar of Huyton was taking the service, he wanted a Roman Catholic Priest there...it was an embarrassment to many of the Roman Catholic Councillors there”. (LSCD24) 47:10:00 Seth Powell

Bob Foulkes, when recalling the event, said:

“Johnny (Maguire) was always an independent kind of man. Blunt in his approach, no messing”. (LSCD48) 41:40:00 Bob Foulkes

I would not want to overstate the case, however, as it would be unfair to characterise the Labour party in the area at that time as divided along religious lines. For the most part, pretty much all members worked harmoniously and shared a common set of principles about politics – they were progressive in terms of economic policy and the need for good public services and socially conservative on issues such as same sex relationships and abortion. In many ways, Harold Wilson shared that outlook or at least respected it. When asked about socialism, Arthur Smith argued that:

“A socialist should care. He should care more about the inadequate, the poor, than the people who are able to care for themselves [...] I can’t see how anyone who is a Christian cannot be a socialist”. (LSCD08) 24:45/26:20 Arthur Smith

When asked to elaborate about what system of government, he admired most, Arthur Smith said:

“The Swedish system of Social Democracy. There seems to be a great deal of fairness and justice there”. (LSCD08) 23:00 Arthur Smith

Jim Keight countered that he admired the New Zealand system:

“Because it [New Zealand] gets us close to the socialist principles as I would have followed and it’s not socialism where everything is owned by the state. I believe (unclear) things should be owned by the state. The roads, the rails, things like that, should be owned by the state and Government run by the state”. (Interview 01/10/15) Jim Keight 32:17

Bill Brennan (discussing his views on socialism) said:

“There are too many people wanting the profits. You still have industrialists, entrepreneurs and people trying to make money and invest it”. (Interview 2 of 2) Bill Brennan 1:34

Labour members in the Huyton constituency were, therefore, part of the mainstream of Labour politics at that time. They believed that the state had an important role in economic planning and promoting better public services. However, in general, they were not impressed with the Soviet Union because of its undemocratic politics and the personal restrictions on liberty that accompanied communism in practice. Asked, for example, to name a country which most reflected their ideals, Sweden was the most common response as the model they would want the UK to emulate. Paradoxically, however, there was, at the same time, a sense with Labour members that the Communist Party was, for all its acknowledged faults, part of the same ideological family. In trade unions, for example, in which many Labour members played active roles as either lay or full-time representatives, cooperation between Labour members and members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was commonplace. Prominent Labour members in Huyton such as Mick O'Hare, a full-time Transport & General Workers Union officer, and, later, Labour County Councillor, talked in terms of the Labour family – in which he included Communist Party members – as “our world.”

Huyton at that time did have a fairly active branch of the CPGB, led by a local park-keeper, Sam Leyland, and they would periodically field candidates in local elections. Although they never came close to actually winning a seat on the Council, Labour members were resentful at them standing for seats on the Council, fearful that they would poach Labour votes.

Another connection with the CPGB, following the Soviet Union's eventual intervention in the Second World War – having originally and cynically entered into a Nazi-Soviet pact with Germany - was the post war sentiment of “No enemies to the left.” For Labour members of that generation, there was a

residual, if not to support at least to tolerate former allies who had heroically played such a decisive part in that conflict. The extent of that tolerance varied a great deal between individual members. But, although not natural cold war warriors, it could not be said they were entirely indistinct from the CPGB. Some had an ambivalent attitude towards the Soviet Union; others, particularly Roman Catholics, were often hostile towards that flawed example of socialism in action; and some were effectively fellow travellers. Prominent Labour members were often well-read and, although a university education in Huyton at that time was rare, they had often attended Workers' Education Association (WEA) Sunday classes in Progress Hall, the assembly rooms above the Coop shop in North Huyton.

Arthur Smith attended the WEA and said it was of great benefit to him, contending that:

*"Any political reasoning I got is basically through the WEA" (LSCD06)
54:20 Arthur Smith*

As with any political party, Labour was the home of a wide spectrum of political outlooks, no less in the Huyton constituency than anywhere else: there was a strong strain of muscular populism on some social issues such as homosexuality and reproductive issues amongst some members; others, particularly from more middle class parts of the constituency such as Ecclestone, were more liberal and internationalist in outlook and those on the left, such as Jimmy Harbourne, an avid student of Maoism, had quite distinctive views. Despite that broad spectrum, however, the Labour Party was not an Ideological battleground, at least not until the Trotskyist sect, Militant, which had spilled over from the conflicts raging in Liverpool, emerged after Harold Wilson's retirement as the local MP.

The Labour Party in Huyton was, therefore, made up of a group of people who, although usually holding strong principles, could be characterised as pragmatic in the sense that they understood the relationship between winning power through public support and putting their principles into practice. To that end, they carried out the organisational tasks to win council seats and ensure Harold Wilson's parliamentary re-election.

People like Arthur Smith, Bob Foulkes and George Rodgers, although each with their own set of beliefs, raised the funds, organised the canvassing and ensured that the party was administratively well run – at times, it could even border on the mildly absurd. Arthur Smith recalled that, when he first achieved the status of being a delegate to the Constituency Labour Party in the early 60's, the main topic of debate was whether to reimburse the then party agent, Arthur Waite, for 6 shillings, for a new bike chain.

Older party members were fairly tolerant of younger activists, such as those of us at the time in the Young Socialists (YS), when at times our political reach exceeded our grasp. With a friendly hand on the shoulder, people like Arthur Smith, George Rodgers and John King, would take us to one side and patiently explain why, on one occasion in my own case, it was not necessary to lead an occupation of the rent office in order to bring about a change of policy on eviction for rent arrears. (As a result of the advice they gave, we did manage to bring about a more kindly policy without recourse to such colourful action). Holding power in local government, as many of the senior activists did at the time, often carried with it quite onerous and controversial responsibilities and this was certainly the case in Huyton and Kirkby. Two very different examples serve to illustrate the point.

Legislation enacted by the Heath Government, the Housing Finance Act 1972, caused enormous controversy within the Labour Party nationally and locally. Some Labour Councils, such as Clay Cross in Derbyshire, vowed not to implement the requirements of the Act. In Huyton and Kirkby there was vigorous debates about whether to refuse to carry out the required 50p per week rent increases and, in the 1972 local elections, local manifestos pledged the Party to defying the Heath Government on the issue by refusing to put up rents.

Following the election, the Huyton Council Clerk, Donald Wildgoose, issued a warning to councillors that failure to comply with the law on this matter would render councillors liable to being personally surcharged and disqualified from holding public office (as indeed did happen to the Clay Cross Labour Councillors).

For Labour councillors, in Huyton and elsewhere, this posed a stark dilemma: failure to comply, would place councillors' family finances at risk and make them ineligible to continue in public office; implementing the legislation would involve reneging on an undertaking made to the electorate – a classic rock and hard place choice.

For several fraught weeks the debate locally became increasingly intense, carrying the potential to seriously split the Party. Eventually, one of the longstanding Huyton councillors, Peter Longworth, came up with a typically pragmatic solution: all of the Labour councillors would resign their seats and re-contest them in the by-elections that would result. The approach had the merit of seeking a fresh mandate to comply with the law whilst, simultaneously, not subjecting councillors to surcharge and disqualification from public office. The consequent by-elections were not easy, with the CPGB

spearheading opposition to Labour's approach at extremely lively public meetings. In the event, however, all of the Labour Councillors were re-elected and, by the time they had resumed office and control of the Council, the Tories, who had by default taken temporary control of the Council, had already implemented the required rent increases.

Although it was not Labour's finest hour locally, at least it had the effect of avoiding a damaging split in the party. The architect of the approach, Peter Longworth, was the manager of one of the party's Labour Clubs and shared the premises with Harold Wilson's agent, Arthur Smith, who also had his office there. Almost certainly, Harold Wilson, although not directly influencing the approach taken, would have been involved in the political discussions behind the scenes. Other Labour Councils which, like Huyton, initially declared that they were not going to increase rents, then had to climb down, without seeking a mandate from the electorate, once the full extent of the penalties on individual Councillors became clear. Liverpool City Council and, to a lesser extent, Kirkby, were quite badly divided on the issue, the echoes of which emerged in the 1980s when the question arose of whether or not to illegally refuse to set a rate as required, setting up a collision with the Thatcher Government, which resulted in the Councillors being surcharged and disqualified from holding public office.

In Kirkby, those who had proposed continuing resistance to rent increases were seen – not always accurately – as being on the far left and divisions simmered beneath the surface for several years after the event. It also led to a rent strike by a number of Kirkby tenants, which left many with serious rent arrears which, in some cases, took a long time to clear.

Harold Wilson, as Geoff Kneale makes clear in his interview, was a close confidante of the Council Leader in Kirkby, Dave Tempest and, again, would almost certainly have informally known about the decision taken to implement the rent increases in Kirkby without recourse to resignations and by-elections. Whether he had a decisive input into the different approaches adopted by the two Councils is a matter for speculation. No evidence appears to have survived as to what advice he might privately have given. My own guess – and as such it is entirely speculation – is that his position as a constitutional politician would, as was Labour's position nationally at the time, have favoured approaches that stayed within the law and, in pursuit of that principle, he would have had a fair amount of influence on those in key positions. The Huyton approach particularly has a Wilsonian feel about it.

Dave Tempest, the long-time leader of Kirkby Council, was a powerful and at times controversial figure in the politics of the town. On the credit side, together with close allies like Bill Marshall, Frank Lawson and Geoff, and his wife, the late Frances Kneale, he had a mission to turn the collection of council estates that made up Kirkby, predominantly built by Liverpool City Council with little thought about the need for shops, services and leisure facilities, into a thriving modern town in the 1970's by building up the services and amenities needed.

Dave Tempest, together with other key Labour figures in the town, would regularly meet Harold Wilson for a drink, after his advice surgery on a Friday evening. Those occasions, although nominally convivial social events, Geoff Kneale has pointed out provided the opportunity to enlist Harold Wilson's support for many of the major developments they planned for the town. On his periodic visits to London, moreover, Dave Tempest would meet with Harold

Wilson in 10 Downing Street during his time as Prime Minister or the House of Commons.

Whether, as in Huyton, it was attracting now industrial investment or Government support for new schools or services, Harold Wilson was the link between Westminster and Whitehall and Kirkby Council. Of course, such a relationship between a Member of Parliament and a local Council – particularly when they both represent the same party – has always been a natural and sensible way to conduct important business and advance important projects. In Harold Wilson's case, however, his support was inevitably even more useful, given his experience of high office, Leadership of the Labour Party and intimate knowledge of Westminster and Whitehall. He was able to both advise and act as a discrete advocate on behalf of the advances and ambitions of the area and its civic leadership.

In pursuing his ambitions for Kirkby, however, Dave Tempest cut a controversial figure and, more so, following allegations about the awarding of a contract to develop a ski slope in the town in The Liverpool Free Press. He was convicted of corruption charges in a high profile court action, for which he served a prison sentence. Those who knew Dave Tempest are, in some cases, still supportive of him. Geoff Kneale, for example, maintains that he was effectively 'set up'. He is also critical of Harold Wilson for not helping Dave Tempest to establish his innocence. My own experience and memories of Dave Tempest are more mixed. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the ski slope saga, he did build a town. Although my own contact with him was limited and towards the end of his political career, I found him quite overpowering with a larger-than-life presence. It is probable that his forceful personality was, for much of his political career, necessary in order to get things done – building a

town from scratch is no mean achievement. The problem was most likely that, in constantly pushing at the boundaries of what was possible, he lost sight of the boundaries a little too much.

The recollections recorded at the time of those leading the Labour Party locally who knew and worked with Harold Wilson reveal one or two personal gripes. For example, several felt that they should have been awarded some honour for their services.

In terms of ideology and beliefs, Labour members locally were broadly in the mainstream which, by the time he took on the leadership of the Labour Party, was very much the political ground which Harold Wilson occupied. The social conservatism with which some members identified was, to be fair, fairly typical of the wider population at that time, although decidedly reactionary by today's standards. Harold Wilson may not have been as socially liberal as, for example Roy Jenkins, justifiably credited with major reforms on divorce, homosexuality and abortion, but, equally, was not demonstrably reactionary. His general approach was, if less liberal, nevertheless, one of tolerance and he did not make it a point of disagreement between himself and Labour members locally; it was more likely a reflection of his respect for the room for difference of opinion in the Labour Party.

One potential cause of conflict for labour locally was the 1975 referendum on whether the UK should remain in the Common Market. Nationally, it was a divisive issue for Labour. Some cabinet ministers, such as Peter Shore, saw membership as an unwelcome break with commonwealth trade and the relationship with the U.S. Others, particularly Tony Benn, argued that the founding document of the common market, the Treaty of Rome, was an insurmountable barrier to the establishment of a more socialist Britain. Much

of the so-called moderate wing of the party, led by Roy Jenkins, was passionately pro-European and saw it in idealistic terms as a future guarantee against the sort of European divisions that had already led to two hugely damaging European wars in the twentieth century.

Harold Wilson, in holding the ring between the different factions in the Labour Party, and by means of an in-out referendum, managed to keep the party more or less together (a model which David Cameron unsuccessfully tried to emulate). Using the renegotiation he carried out on the UK's contribution, he managed to secure a rebate. The UK rebate was introduced in 1984 (partly as a result of the proportion of the EU budget being spent on the common agricultural policy, which does not benefit Britain as much as other EU countries). With overwhelming support from business and trade union leaders, the 'yes' campaign won the referendum emphatically, with 67% of people voting to stay in 1975.

Harold Wilson, although in favour of remaining in the Common Market, was not prominent in leading the referendum 'yes' campaign, largely leaving it to those who had been more consistently in favour, including Labour Cabinet Ministers (cabinet collective responsibilities having been temporarily suspended) together with pro-European Tories such as Ted Heath and Liberals. Locally, the Labour Party pretty much followed Harold Wilson on this. Although quite low key, many of the prominent party members were enthusiastically pro-European. Sean Hughes, later to succeed Harold Wilson as MP for the area in 1983 when he retired, and Jim Keight, later to become the Leader of Knowsley Council, were both strongly pro-European. Many others, although not so passionate, gave at least tacit support.

Those of us who followed the Tony Benn position – mainly in the Young Socialists (YS) - allied ourselves to the ‘Huyton Says No’ campaign which, although strenuously campaigning for our corner, made very little impact on the local electorate.

Surprisingly perhaps, there were few if any recriminations, against us. This may well have been as a result of our campaign being woefully ineffective, but my recollection is that we were tolerated and not seen as being too far beyond the pale.

Such toleration was perhaps justified in that the ‘Huyton Says No’ campaign – a motley collection of leftish young Labour Members, the Huyton CPGB and two Tories who ran a ballroom academy – might correctly have been judged to be unthreatening. In the event, relationships between us and the rest of the party were not noticeably changed by the experience. Certainly, for our part, we were never anti – Harold Wilson in the way in which we conducted our opposition.

4. Labour Party Finances

Funding the activities of a political party locally is always a struggle but, without the resources to organise and contest elections, it is impossible to make an impact.

The Huyton Labour Party employing Arthur Smith as a full-time Agent for Harold Wilson together with secretarial support from the redoubtable Frances Bailey, placed an additional burden on its finances. Salaries and the cost of providing a car (by the 1970's we had moved on from worrying about the cost of Arthur Waits' bike chain) represented a considerable financial challenge. As is still the case in the modern Labour Party, the basic income of Constituency Labour Parties was from membership subscriptions and affiliations income from trade unions and socialist societies (such as the Fabian Society and the Cooperative Party), augmented by local fundraising (ranging from jumble sales and raffles to fundraising socials and dinners).

In Huyton and Kirkby, there were also Labour Clubs which provided not only members (in most cases, to be a member of the Labour Club it was also necessary to join the Labour Party) but, in addition, donations towards elections costs and income from some of the amenities provided to those who patronised the clubs. In some of the five clubs which operated in Huyton, for example, the proceeds of the fruit machines was treated as Labour Party income.

Full-time party agents, and Arthur Smith was no exception, were also expected to help raise their own salaries. Arthur Smith's main contribution was through a Tote, essentially, a weekly lottery with a proportion of the money collected paid out as cash prizes. Maintaining a Tote, although financially worthwhile,

was time consuming as the money had to be collected and prize money paid out to winners.

In the early 1960's, when the Party locally had fallen into debt, Arthur Smith had persuaded some better off party members and trade union branches to donate regular small sums on a standing order on the basis that the party's MP was an important national figure. As he noted some years later, this had one unforeseen advantage: people moved in and out of the area, but often forgot to cancel their standing orders, so the income stream continued, often unnoticed by the donors.

Taken together, the various sources of income at that time amounted to tens of thousands of pounds annually and the party was well funded.

Unfortunately, as tastes and habits changed, Labour clubs became less fashionable and by the 1980's, one-by-one they had to be closed as they became a drain on, rather than source, of party income.

It is easy in looking back to forget that, as well as the bigger sources of income, there were often smaller donations from individual supporters, which represented a significant sacrifice on their part.

Jimmy Donnelly, who was responsible for the public toilets at Liverpool Lime Street station, was a great supporter of Harold Wilson. So much so that, when Harold travelled to the constituency by train, Jimmy would make sure that the public toilets were gleaming on the off-chance that his hero might want to use the facilities. Being unaware of this act of respect, it is, I suspect, unlikely that Harold Wilson would have actually taken advantage of the facilities.

Over and above his attention to Harold Wilson's ablutions, Jimmy would save up both his holiday entitlement and loose change. When an election was called

he would turn up at the Labour Party Headquarters with a plastic bag full of cash and, having booked his annual leave, offer his voluntary services to help get Harold Wilson re-elected. To those of us who knew of his generosity, he was quietly admired – but, as he was a modest man, for the most part, his efforts were unsung.

5. The Tories in Huyton

The Huyton constituency was not, at that time, however, a Tory-free zone. In Huyton itself, the Urban District Council always had at least a quarter of its members as either Conservatives or Ratepayers – on occasions, usually when Labour was low in the polls nationally, they did have control of the council.

The Huyton Tories were quite a colourful group. Their leader, Bill Peters, used to describe himself as pro-monarchy, pro-hanging and as he once put it to me “..... if it is not a hanging offence they should have a kick up the a***.”

During the second 1974 election, having previously had Tory candidates cutting their teeth against Harold Wilson in preparation for a more winnable seat next time, Bill Peters put himself forward as the Tory candidate to challenge Harold Wilson.

Although a fluent and forceful speaker, he did find the high profile task of opposing Harold Wilson challenging, not realising the media attention that accompanied the role. But, in his own distinctive way, he coped. I recall representing Harold Wilson at a debate at the local Teacher Training College, C.F. Mott, during the election, along with Bill Peters and the other candidates contesting the election. It was quite clear that the students attending the debate were predominately Labour or, in some cases, further to the left. Bill Peters' speech was short and to the point; he declared his patriotism; loyalty to the Queen and the flag and support for hanging and corporal punishment. The Students' Union President who chaired the meeting, taken aback at the forthright way in which Bill Peters expressed his views, summed up by venturing to suggest that the Conservative candidate would, he was sure, be prepared to answer questions about his views. Bill Peters, at that point

declined the invitation on the equally forceful grounds that he had no wish to do so, as he did not want the votes of “Marxist, Trotskyist and Maoist students.” Having so declared, with some ceremony, he walked out of the meeting.

Yet another colourful local Tory, Harry Swainbank, was a Liverpool businessman – proprietor of a former cinema building, the Rialto in Liverpool 8, he sold second-hand furniture and had many of the trappings of wealth.

Reputedly a war hero, he, too, was forthright in his opinions and would probably have struggled in the modern political world with the boundaries applied to public life.

One of Harry Swainbank’s favourite stories involved an encyclopaedia salesman calling at his home and informing him that encyclopaedias he was selling were recommended by the Education Authorities. The potential purchaser expressed an interest in buying some but, as he had an urgent appointment to attend, asked the salesman to call back later. By the time he returned, Harry Swainbank had set up a concealed tape recorder and asked the salesman to confirm that the encyclopaedias were recommended by the Education Authority, which he was only too happy to do, sensing that a sale to be about to be closed.

Harry Swainbank revealed that he was a member of the Education Authority and had checked out the claim which was, inevitably, untrue. The salesman, by now in a panic, asked if he would accept a free set. Without hesitation he did and, as far as he was concerned, that was the end of the matter.

Other prominent local Tories were the owners of a ballroom dancing academy, a foreman French polisher and a tug-boat captain. Later in the 1970’s, a new

younger group of Tories emerged who were Thatcherite owners of local businesses but, as the Tory presence in the area slowly collapsed, they made little impact.

The Liberals (pre the SDP and Liberal Democrats) had some support, particularly in Kirkby following the ski slope affair, but only later emerged as a marginally more serious opposition following the collapse of the Tory vote in the area.