

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### LOCAL POLITICS

Taunton's reputation for rebelliousness may date from the Middle Ages. In 1409—10 a conspiracy led by former MPs was said to have involved 400 men and later in the century heretical books may have been circulating.<sup>1</sup> Although Taunton became embroiled in disputes like the Wars of the Roses between 1451 and 1471 because faction leaders seized the castle or passed through the town recruiting it is not clear what side if any the townspeople took.<sup>2</sup> However, Cornish rebels in 1497 reputedly murdered the provost of Penryn in the market place and at least 130 people were fined for supporting the Warbeck rebellion later that year. Whether they were actively involved or wished to pacify Henry VII who visited Taunton to deal with Perkin Warbeck is not clear. Warbeck was in the town two nights and he and his followers were possibly housed and fed by townsmen, which would be enough to incur a penalty. Some of the town's merchants were fined up to £100 and the royal coffers benefited by over £680.<sup>3</sup>

There was unrest in 1528 in Taunton and Bridgwater preventing the assizes being held and again in 1536 when some men were hanged. Anger against the attacks on religious houses probably caused the latter as well as high grain prices.<sup>4</sup> A century large numbers of people had stopped attending church, not helped by both churches being neglected in that period, and others fell under the influence of radical preachers like George Newton in the 1630s. Religious divisions were a major driver in local politics for the rest of the century and probably divided town and country.<sup>5</sup> In 1628 Lord Poulett was said to have encouraged the

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<sup>1</sup> Below, this section; *Bp Stafford reg* [31] pp. 267—8; TNA, C1/44/224.

<sup>2</sup> Bishops Hull, landownership.

<sup>3</sup> *Cal. SP Milan* 1385—1618, p. 328; VCH Som. II, 193; E. Chisholm Batten, 'Henry VII in Som.', *PSANHS* XXV (1879), 63—71; A.J. Howard, *Fines Imposed...in 1497* (Pinner, 1980), 1—2, 4, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *L&P Hen. VIII*, IV (2), p. 1830, VIII, pp. 15, 296—7, XII (1), p. 549; SHC, T/ph/win 1535—6.

<sup>5</sup> Above, rel. hist.

billeting of soldiers on townspeople who had voiced support for Sir Robert Phelips in the county election.<sup>6</sup>

In 1627 the town got its first municipal charter, which gave political power to a larger number of local men than the manorial borough had done. The first mayor was Andrew Henley (d. 1630), whose grandson and namesake was later raised to the Baronetage.<sup>7</sup> Wealthy lawyer Roger Hill, accused in 1629 of scandalising justices and being an evil example, became mayor in 1633 and later a parliamentary supporter.<sup>8</sup> Most mayors came from prominent trading families and several men served more than once.<sup>9</sup>

Problems in the cloth trade in the 1620s also led to festering resentment at Crown demands for money.<sup>10</sup> The ship money assessment of £100 in 1635 was by far the highest in the county. The argument raged for several years with the mayor claiming Taunton was just a town of shopkeepers and other towns saying Taunton was rich. The authorities admitted it was easier to get the money from Taunton than the country areas 'who pay their money slowly'.<sup>11</sup> Laudian changes in the church led many townspeople to turn against both the established church and royal government.<sup>12</sup>

By the time the Civil War broke out there was already unrest. A man who complained of unlawful imprisonment by justices of the peace following a riot was awarded £14 in damages and costs in 1642.<sup>13</sup> Most councillors and leading men soon committed themselves to the parliamentary cause, the castle became the focus for sieges and the town suffered physical and economic damage by forces from both sides. Tradesmen and workers neglected their work to fight and courts, trade and markets were disrupted. Considerable damage over

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<sup>6</sup> D. Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford, 1987), 127.

<sup>7</sup> SHC, DD/X/HUNT/6/1; *VCH Som.* VIII, 99.

<sup>8</sup> T.G. Barnes, *Som. Assize Orders 1629—40*, p. 7; above, landownership.

<sup>9</sup> SHC, DD/TRANS/1/92.

<sup>10</sup> *Cal. SP. Dom.* 1619—23, 156; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1604—1629*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *Cal. SP Dom.* 1635, pp. 495, 515; 1635—6, p. 279; 1637, pp. 81, 504; 1636—7, pp. 374, 501, 535—6.

<sup>12</sup> SHC, DD/SP/367; A. J. Webb and S. Berry, *Som. Loyalties on the Eve of the Civil War* (Taunton, 2022), 8, 12, 55—6, 93, 102, 123—6.

<sup>13</sup> TNA, KB27/1676, m.755: [www.waalt.uh.edu/index.php/KB27](http://www.waalt.uh.edu/index.php/KB27) accessed May 2021.

about three years from 1642 to 1645 left many townsmen dead or injured, hungry, homeless, and workless. The Royalists were blamed for the war and the townspeople's support for Parliament was strengthened by the aid they subsequently received.<sup>14</sup>

The end of the war did not put an end to unrest as many townspeople did not like the new government either. There were complaints about billeting in 1644, riots against the excise in 1647 and fatal encounters with troops in the town in 1648 when many residents petitioned for the imposition of godly reformation. In 1649 a group of Levellers was in prison in Taunton but may not have been local. The mayor was removed for disloyalty to the Commonwealth in 1650 and 35 men were imprisoned in 1655, possibly for supporting Penruddock's rising.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear if any of the 30 'worth hanging' or 'young fellows' best transported were Taunton men.<sup>16</sup> A Taunton merchant was repaid £150 used to ship recruits from Minehead to Ireland in 1651 and the town was charged £21 towards maintaining the army in 1654.<sup>17</sup> Men were prosecuted for expressing Royalist sympathies and for extreme anti-clerical views in the 1650s.<sup>18</sup> In 1657 a disgruntled parliamentarian who got only £5 compensation claimed relief funds had been improperly used although the authorities said 700 people had shared £12,000. Another wanted 'Royalist money' he had discovered.<sup>19</sup> Men clamouring for a free parliament rioted in 1659 and there was trouble with unpaid soldiers quartered in the town.<sup>20</sup> In 1660 there were fears of insurrection and William Strode of Street was imprisoned in Taunton for objecting to taxation without parliament and the raising of soldiers in the town.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Above, soc. hist.; *Cal. SP. Dom.* 1644—5, pp. 83, 107, 113—15, 124, 196, 433, 459, 476, 479, 483, 491—3, 508, 526, 595, 602, 617, 621.

<sup>15</sup> Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, 230, 234n.; Cockburn, *Somerset Assize Orders*, 18, 22, 69; *HMC, Leyburne-Popham C 9471* (1899), 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Cal. SP. Dom.* 1655, pp. 98—9.

<sup>17</sup> *Cal. SP. Dom.* 1651—2, p. 391; SHC, D/P/tru/23/20.

<sup>18</sup> SHC, Q/SR/82/191—2.

<sup>19</sup> *Cal. SP. Dom.* 1657—8, p. 21; 1658—9, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum*, 191—2.

<sup>21</sup> *HMC, Leyburne-Popham C 9471* (1899), 157—8.

By 1660 colonels of militias at Taunton were ordered to disband them and place their arms in the castle although Francis Barret wanted arms to lead men against the ‘royals’.<sup>22</sup> In 1662 the ‘factious town’ required the presence of soldiers to suppress violence and ‘Rebellious Spirits’, militia leaders were arrested for plotting to raise a force to rouse London and the king ordered the demolition of the castle but fortunately it was being used to imprison rebels.<sup>23</sup> In 1663 a Presbyterian rising was feared, violent incidents involved soldiers especially on 11 May and a robbery at the castle exchequer in 1664 was said to have been to raise money for a rising, possibly engineered by Richard Bovett, who was later hanged as a leader of the 1685 rebellion, and there were minor political disturbances.<sup>24</sup>

Those allegiances caused the loss of the municipal charter in 1660 and delayed its return until 1677, although approved in 1676. The king had to approve the appointment of recorder.<sup>25</sup> The lifting of the siege on 11 May 1645 was celebrated for the rest of the century with religious services and bonfires on the streets, which often led to fighting including a riot in 1683.<sup>26</sup> Religious dissent played an important part in local politics and the diocesan bishop was advised not to stay in Taunton in 1671.<sup>27</sup> Concern for the succession to the throne and the earl of Shaftesbury’s support for the duke of Monmouth led to unrest, conspiracies and fear of rebellion. Monmouth’s supporters actively enlisted support from 1680 led by Taunton M.P John Trenchard, although he left the county before the 1685 rebellion. The authorities feared a Taunton connection with the Rye House plot in 1680 and with Colonel Owen in 1683 as disaffected gentry were said to control the militia. Goldsmith Thomas Dare, an early supporter of Monmouth, was tried for sedition, fled to Amsterdam and was removed from the

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<sup>22</sup> *Cal. SP Dom.* 1659—60, pp. 379, 381; 166—1, p. 424.

<sup>23</sup> SHC, DD/PH/222/63; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1661—2, pp. 424—5, 434, 443, 448—9, 511.

<sup>24</sup> SHC, Q/SR/106/59, 111/94; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1663—4, pp. 116, 296, 624, 666—7; 1664—5, pp. 35, 544; 1682, pp. 208—9; D. Stevens, *War and Peace in West Somerset 1620—1670* (Minehead, 1988), 102—4.

<sup>25</sup> *Cal. SP Dom.* 1675—6, pp. 39; 1677—8, 260—1; 1690—1, 186.

<sup>26</sup> *Cal. Cttee for Compounding* I, p. 221; SHC, Q/SR/103/14, 105/5; *Cal. SP. Dom.* Jan.—June 1683, 250, 257, 266, 272, 278; Jul.—Sep. 1683, 130, 183—4, 192, 289, 338, 357—8; above, rel. hist., nonconf.

<sup>27</sup> Above, rel. hist.

borough council.<sup>28</sup> A 'club' of disaffected people led by John Trenchard reputedly met at the Red Lion inn run by William Savage and at Thomas William's coffee house preparing for the death of 'Harry', the conspirators' name for Charles II. In 1683 suspect houses were searched for weapons without success although a shopkeeper was said to have bought two cwt of gunpowder, other men had bought muskets and some spoke of support for Monmouth.<sup>29</sup> The Mayor Stephen Timewell got the oath of allegiance taken and closed the meeting houses but at the cost of damage to his business. He was said to have broken up a conventicle of 2,000 on Easter Sunday, organised a loyal address to the king in July 1683 and promoted a seemingly successful loyal celebration in September.<sup>30</sup>

Anti-government and religious sentiment and the unhappy legacy of the Civil War clearly played a part in the 1685 Monmouth rebellion yet for the mass of its supporters it was not a republican movement but an attempt to replace one absolute monarch with another of a different religious persuasion. This was evident in the episode of the 'Maids of Taunton', a procession of two schoolmistresses and 40 girls, mostly daughters of wealthy Monmouth supporters, who presented a 'JR' banner to the duke of Monmouth. Many townspeople came out to support the duke in June 1685 although the mayor and many others came under duress. The 'royal' faction prevailed and when he was proclaimed king in the town several hundred men joined Monmouth.<sup>31</sup> At least 393 men from Taunton were later implicated in the rebellion, mostly cloth workers and small craftsmen. The 'maids' were exempted from the pardon but were later allowed to compound for c. £2,000, although one of the teachers died of smallpox in prison at Dorchester. Of the men at least 14 were hanged and 30 were shipped

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<sup>28</sup> SHC, A/EGL/1; DD/WY/14/53; *VCH Som.* II, 221—2; R. Dunning, *The Monmouth Rebellion* (Wimborne, 1984), 14—20; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1680—1, 211, 352, 514—15; Jul—Sep 1683, 61, 278, 289, 321, 332, 355—7; above, econ. hist.

<sup>29</sup> *Cal. SP Dom.* 1682, 159; Jul.—Sep. 1683, 9, 16, 19, 61, 73, 75—7, 82, 99, 119—20, 192, 203, 212—13, 228, 278, 355—7.

<sup>30</sup> *Lond. Gaz.* (23 Jul. 1683), 1—2; *Cal. SP. Dom.* Jan—June 1683, 212, Jul.—Sep. 1683, 278—9, 358, 398;; above, rel. hist., nonconf.

<sup>31</sup> SHC, DD/BLM/25/1/14; D/P/tau.ja/2/1/8; D/P/tau.m/2/1/32; *VCH Som.* II, 221—2; Dunning, *Monmouth Rebellion*, 51—60; above soc. hist., military hist.

to the West Indies mainly to Barbados or Jamaica while a few escaped to Holland.<sup>32</sup> Sir Charles Lyttelton said the county roads resembled a meat shambles and blamed the government for the violence but thought unrepentant traitors deserved little pity.<sup>33</sup> In 1686—7 a large number of rebels were pardoned but clothworkers who had gone abroad had to return with their goods to benefit.<sup>34</sup> However, many townspeople were loyal royalists, the manor court received lists of rebels and one man had kept a pierced Caroline gold coin as an heirloom in his desk for his grandson.<sup>35</sup> Sir William Portman MP for Taunton was said to have gone to see William of Orange in 1688 but the Bloody Assize held by Judge Jeffreys and the barbarous executions probably made townspeople wary of open support for William who avoided Taunton on his march to London.<sup>36</sup>

By the 18th century with established dissenting congregations and a protestant monarchy politics mainly centred on the parliamentary elections although there were risings caused by high corn prices in 1710, 1772 and as late as 1847,<sup>37</sup> and a possible Jacobite riot in 1714 on Coronation day.<sup>38</sup> By the later 18th century after the decline in the economy the council was predominantly a small Anglican and conservative club.<sup>39</sup> Members were controlled by powerful men like bankers John Morland and Benjamin Hammet, possibly the reason why vacancies were not filled and the corporation lost its charter.<sup>40</sup> Popular politics included the celebration of the release of John Wilks with a song, possibly composed locally, on 14 Apr. 1770.<sup>41</sup> John Grey, a crippled woolcomber, executed 22 July 1780 for joining the

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<sup>32</sup> W. Wigfield, *The Monmouth Rebels*, xvii, 216—220; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1686—7, 35, 63—4, 202, 226; SHC, DD/BLM/25/1/14.

<sup>33</sup> *Correspondence of the family of Hatton 1601—1704*, II (Camden Soc. NS. XXIII), 60.

<sup>34</sup> e.g. *Cal. SP. Dom.* 1686, pp. 155, 202, 261, 279, 440; 1687—9, p. 234.

<sup>35</sup> SHC, DD/SP/18/61; TNA, PROB 11/555/325.

<sup>36</sup> *Correspondence of the family of Hatton*, II, 106; *VCH Som.* II, 221—2; Dunning, *Monmouth Rebellion*, 51—60.

<sup>37</sup> SHC, Q/SR/261/9; DPS/ilm/7/25; DD/SAS/C909a/6; *SDNQ*, XXI, 148; *Taunton Courier*, 19 May 1847: BNA accessed 12 Sep. 2017.

<sup>38</sup> *Cal. SP Dom.* 1714—9, pp. 10, 197.

<sup>39</sup> *Hist. Parl: Commons 1754—1790*: accessed 17 Oct. 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Oldfield, *Hist. Boroughs of Gt Britain* (1792), 449—50.

<sup>41</sup> SHC, A/CSC/1/3. Thanks to Tony Woolrich of Bridgwater Museum for info.

Gordon riots but may not have gone to London for that purpose as he was said to be insane.<sup>42</sup> Few townsmen joined the Revolution Society in 1789, which celebrated the English revolution of 1688—9 and the French Revolution, but people still remembered verses to celebrate the raising of the siege on 11 May, now Somerset Day, a local man published a poem in praise of the duke of Monmouth in the 1850s and in 1898 Jeboult wrote an operetta 'In the Days of the Siege'.<sup>43</sup> The existence of the potwalloper vote was credited with preventing serious electoral disturbances in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the town seems to have generally welcomed the passing of the 1832 Reform Act. A procession of tradesmen with their tools was followed by a dinner on the Parade similar to the 1814 peace celebrations.<sup>44</sup> Anti-slavery probably also crossed the party divide. The Taunton and West Somerset Anti-Slavery Society met between 1825 and 1839 and delegates lobbied MPs presenting a petition with over 7,000 signatures. There was also a Ladies Anti-Slavery Institution.<sup>45</sup>

In the 19th century the town was usually polarised between Anglican Conservatives and Nonconformist Liberals. The Revd James Cottle, vicar of St Mary was said to have angered many of his congregation by voting Liberal.<sup>46</sup> Scurrilous handbills continued to circulate alongside candidates' addresses at elections.<sup>47</sup> Before the growth of the labour movement working men often voted Liberal, a local Liberal paper was established in 1868 and in 1872 there was a Taunton Working Men's Liberal Association.<sup>48</sup> By the early 20th century there were several social clubs based on party allegiance.<sup>49</sup> In 1873 Rhoda Garelt came to campaign for women's suffrage.<sup>50</sup> In 1913 the women's suffrage pilgrimage passed

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<sup>42</sup> *Bath Chronicle*, 18 & 27 July 1780; *Taunton Courier*, 25 Apr. 1959; BNA accessed 11 July 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Above, soc. hist.; Toulmin, *Hist. of Taunton*, rev. Savage, 423.SHC, A/CTP/15/9; DD/SAS/M1401/1/2. In the early 21st century 11 May was chosen as Somerset Day.

<sup>44</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C2402/51; D/X/BRO/2/97; Goldsworthy, *Recollections of Old Taunton*, 43; below, Parl. Representation.

<sup>45</sup> SHC, A/CXD/1; *Taunton Courier*, 127 July 1825, 28 Apr, 1832; BNA accessed, 24 Jan. 2022.

<sup>46</sup> SHC, PAM 426, pp. 37.

<sup>47</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/160.

<sup>48</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 1 Nov. 1871; BNA accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Above, soc. hist. community life.

<sup>50</sup> SHC, PAM 427, p. 14.

through Taunton where they were supported by councillor and factory owner Henry Van Trump. The majority of people who came to hear them were favourable and many women signed their support.<sup>51</sup>

Attitudes to the monarchy changed and royal celebrations were especially well commemorated in the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1897 Taunton was said to be one of the foremost towns in England for loyalty to the Royal family, probably an exaggeration but the Diamond Jubilee was enthusiastically celebrated.<sup>52</sup> The 1928 pageant, on the site of the later County Hall, has been claimed as an attempt to bolster support for the established order and the rural elite having been promoted by country gentleman Major Cely-Trevilian. Although said to be both anti-urban and yet to boost Taunton's position as the county town, some of the pageant's scenes might be said to favour rebelliousness.<sup>53</sup>

In the early 20th century and later, uncontested municipal elections were common, sitting councillors were rarely defeated and most sat as Independents.<sup>54</sup> Until the later 20th century female councillors were rare and despite the extension of the suffrage half the electorate failed to vote in local elections although general election turnout was c. 80 per cent.<sup>55</sup> The three main parties had active local branches by the 1920s but an attempt to set up a branch of the British Union of Fascists in Tancred Street in 1934 was apparently unsuccessful.<sup>56</sup> In 1945 nearly 21,500 votes were cast in the local elections more than twice the pre-war turnout.<sup>57</sup> After the Second World War peace groups proliferated. The Taunton Peace Fellowship was active in the early 1950s, the Taunton Committee of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, active by 1958, took part in the 1962 Aldermaston march and Taunton

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<sup>51</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 16 July 1913: BNA accessed 12 Sep. 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Above, soc. hist.; SHC, DD/TBL/42/9/4 (*Taunton Mail*, 23 Sep. 1897).

<sup>53</sup> SHC, A/BCJ/2; A/BDK/1; A/CLC/1; A/DIF/98; M. Woods, 'Performing power: local politics and the Taunton pageant of 1928', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 25 (1), (1999); 57—74.

<sup>54</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 4 Nov. 1908, 5 Nov. 1913, 14 May 1960: BNA accessed 24 Aug. 2022.

<sup>55</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 4 Nov. 1925, 3/ Nov. 1945, 2 May 1959: BNA accessed 24 Aug. 2022.

<sup>56</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 31 Jan. 1934: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022;

<sup>57</sup> SHC, A/DQO/404/12/1.

had a branch of the United Nations Association between 1962 and 1977.<sup>58</sup> The Taunton Communist Party had 40 members in 1961 who took part in the 1968 Aldermaston march.<sup>59</sup> Growing support for Labour after the war created a borough council that was two thirds Independent and one third Labour. Wards in the east and north-east of the town were Labour strongholds, the local party had c. 1,000 members and in 1961 Labour became the largest group on the council.<sup>60</sup> However, property-owning businessmen continued to dominate the council through the 1950s and 1960s especially the planning committee and although councillors withdrew while their projects were being discussed decisions usually favoured developers. The committee was antagonistic to the scheduling of historic buildings and to requests that new building should be sympathetic to the character of the town and in 1959 wanted plans to demolish part of Hammet Street withheld from the public. The two decades saw the loss of many historic buildings and unsympathetic replacements and only in the 1970s did public pressure secure the protection of parts of Fore and High Streets.<sup>61</sup>

By 1965 only 6,600 people voted in the local elections, partly because in three wards there was only one candidate.<sup>62</sup> The decline in manufacturing in the later 20th century probably reduced the support for Labour and the rise of party politics in local government resulted in fewer Independent councillors. Political protests continued by groups including the Taunton Deane and Priorswood Anti Poll Tax Unions in 1989 and Extinction Rebellion in the early 21st century.<sup>63</sup> Changes in boundaries and the inclusion of a substantial rural area within both the parliamentary constituency and the district council favoured the Conservative party but the parliamentary seat and control of the council regularly swung between

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<sup>58</sup> SHC, DD/TCM/16/84; 17/2—3; *Taunton Courier*, 10 Jan. 1958, 10 Jan. 1959, 20 Apr., 24 Nov. 1962: BNA accessed 22 Aug 2022.

<sup>59</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 15 Nov. 1947: 28 Oct. 1961: BNA accessed 22 Aug. 2022; SHC, D/B/bw/3/25/3, p. 235; DD/TCM/1/18; [www.gettyimages.co.uk](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk) (Aldermaston march); accessed 2 Aug. 2022.

<sup>60</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 3 Nov. 1945, 8 Nov 1947, 24 Jan. 1959, 25 Nov. 1960: BNA accessed 24 Aug. 2022.

<sup>61</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/3/37/1—3.

<sup>62</sup> SHC, A/DQO/404/12/1.

<sup>63</sup> SHC, DD/X/DEH/10.

Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.<sup>64</sup> In 2002 the town was divided between eight wards with one covering most of the central area reflecting the shift in population.<sup>65</sup>

## PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION

John Russell and William Leffatt represented the borough at the Council at Northampton in 1273.<sup>66</sup> It is not known if Taunton sent representatives to the 1295 parliament but it failed to send anyone in 1305 although members went in 1307. Given the distance to Westminster it was probably not a popular role and in 1319 the town again declined to send representatives.<sup>67</sup> In 1361 a council or regional parliament of the south-western counties met at Taunton to discuss defence.<sup>68</sup>

Local gentry were preferred representatives, probably because they had more power and influence, and merchant members like Richard Polruel in 1337 were uncommon.<sup>69</sup>

William Portman and William Marchaunt who had property in the town and were probably from former mercantile families, were chosen several times in the late 14th century but by the early 15th century some MPs were the bishop of Winchester's servants or tenants in Hampshire and Southwark with no local connections. That may have provoked former MPs and sons of MPs John Northmore, Robert Coulling, Andrew Damarle and Thomas Osbern to attack the toll collectors as representatives of the bishop, presumably at the 1409 fair. They were said to have induced 400 townsmen to support them taking an oath and livery cap. That came to nothing but local official Thomas Bacot became MP although he seems to have been unpopular. Thereafter for a while members of the Portman and Marchaunt families were returned. The returns from 1407 onwards stated that the whole community had assented to

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<sup>64</sup> Below, Parl. Rep.

<sup>65</sup> SHC. A/DQO/404/12/2.

<sup>66</sup> SHC, DD/PH/216/79.

<sup>67</sup> Toulmin, *Hist. Taunton*, rev. Savage, 289; *VCH Som.* II, 184.

<sup>68</sup> *Cal. Close* 1360—4, 96—7.

<sup>69</sup> F.H. Dickinson, *Kirby's Quest etc*, 274; *Cal. Close*, 1337—9, p. 114.

the choice of members and were signed by several burgesses although that does not mean that there had been no undue influence by the bishop's officers.<sup>70</sup> Only residents of the borough, the urban area of St Mary's parish within the town gates, were eligible to vote. Presumably all male householders in the borough had the right to vote, the origin of the later potwalloper vote.<sup>71</sup> The most prominent MP in the early 16th-century was Thomas Cromwell in 1529 elected with another William Portman, re-elected in 1536. John Norris MP 1554 was the bishop's clerk at Taunton castle and Valentine Dale in 1558 was probably the bishop's protégé.<sup>72</sup>

Later in the later 16th century MPs included county landowners Edmund Hody in 1575, Alexander Pym in 1584, Matthew Horner in 1585 and Edward Hext in 1597 and 1604, Taunton merchants Robert Hill in 1571 and Thomas Fisher in 1589 and schoolmaster John Bond in 1601 and 1604. Episcopal influence was evident again in the election of John Goldwell 1584—8, son-in-law of Bishop Goldwell, and Francis Bacon in 1586.<sup>73</sup> but apart from George Browne keeper of the castle and later borough recorder, 17th-century MPs ceased to be episcopal protégés. Most were country gentlemen but merchant Lewis Pope was elected in 1621 with Thomas Brereton, descendent of merchant Robert Hill.<sup>74</sup> Sir William Portman lost his seat in 1644 for attending the king and his namesake in 1661 was the last of that family to represent the town.<sup>75</sup>

During the interregnum Taunton continued to elect two members of Parliament

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<sup>70</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1386—1421; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020; *Hist. Parl. Commons*, 1439—1509, 12, 24—5, 257, 537.

<sup>71</sup> Below, this section.

<sup>72</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1509—1558; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>73</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1558—1603; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020; ODNB, s.v. Francis Bacon: accessed 12 Apr. 2018.

<sup>74</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1604—1629; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>75</sup> *Close R.* 1377—81, 254; *VCH Som.* II, 232; *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1660—1690; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020; above, landownership.

although other Somerset boroughs had only one.<sup>76</sup> In 1660 Thomas Gorges and William Wyndham retained their seats. National politics and party allegiances played an increasingly important part in elections assisted by the temporary loss of the charter and purges of the corporation in the 1680s.<sup>77</sup> Sergemaker John Hucker, who was executed for fighting for Monmouth, blamed his sentence on his election campaign against the Crown candidate in 1681.<sup>78</sup> Election violence increased from 1689 when a gang armed with cudgels congregated at the Three Cups and launched an attack on the Angel where their Whig rivals had gathered.<sup>79</sup> However, Edward Clarke (1690—1710) proved a hard-working MP, dealt with copious correspondence, promoted the Tone navigation and helped deal with problems caused by the military in the town in the 1690s.<sup>80</sup> No dominant family controlled the borough for any length of time and the bishop of Winchester became reluctant to be drawn into local politics and elections although he might express a private opinion.<sup>81</sup>

Copious bribes of drink were given to voters especially around the market place where the hustings were erected and the right to vote was increasingly challenged. The first officially disputed election was in 1714 when the mayor's returning officer was accused of allowing unqualified Tory voters to vote.<sup>82</sup> It was claimed men moved into houses in the borough temporarily, took bribes to keep themselves off poor relief or charity that would disqualify them and that 500 voters should be disqualified including minors. In August 1715 the election was negated and the losing candidates were declared elected.<sup>83</sup> Virtually every candidate bribed in the 18th century and the voters expected it as their due despite an opera,

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<sup>76</sup> J.S. Cockburn, *Som. Assize Orders*, 73—4.

<sup>77</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1660—1690*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>78</sup> *Cal. SP Dom.* 1682, 97; Toulmin, *Hist. Taunton*, rev. Savage, 313.

<sup>79</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1660—1690*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>80</sup> SHC, DD/SF/13/2; above, soc. hist., military.

<sup>81</sup> SHC, DD/DP/43/4.

<sup>82</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1715—1754*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1754](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1754), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Toulmin, *Hist. Taunton*, rev. Savage, 317—23.

*The Downfall of Bribery*, produced in 1733 lauding the honest men of Taunton. Thousands of pounds were expended on bribes and expenses and the government contributed similar amounts from secret service funds.<sup>84</sup> In 1754 and 1768 candidates had china plates made commemorating their victory to be used at election dinners and taken home by the diners.<sup>85</sup>

One of the most violent elections was in 1754 when John Halliday died weeks after being elected. Bribes, much from government funds, secured the seat for Robert Maxwell, later Viscount Fareham but in a 13-day poll more than 700 voters were disqualified. Two people were reportedly killed in the drink-fuelled rioting that followed and the serge industry was damaged as weeks of work were lost and orders not fulfilled. The chief subscriber to the new Market House was Nathaniel Webb MP, reputedly using money he saved in bribes not required in the uncontested 1768 elections as opposition candidates did not secure sufficient funding. Webb's father and brother had property in Taunton but the family's main estate was in Montserrat, West Indies, where they had slave plantations. Nathaniel held Taunton until 1775 but does not appear to have spoken in Parliament.<sup>86</sup> John Halliday of Yard, MP 1774—84, spent most of his life in London where he founded a bank but never spoke in the House. John Roberts, mayor in 1774, was elected with Halliday in 1780 but became too ill to attend debates and died in 1782.<sup>87</sup>

To secure a favourable candidate and preserve the peace in 1781 it was proposed that the government should give bribes at a rate of £500 for woollen manufacturers, £300 for silk manufacturers and 29s. to each of 250 poor voters to secure the election of Benjamin Hammet.<sup>88</sup> Sir Benjamin Hammet, MP 1782—96, best known for his creation of Hammet

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<sup>84</sup> SHC, DD/X/BUSH/12; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1754—1790*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790), s.v. Taunton; accessed 17 Oct. 2019.

<sup>85</sup> *PSANHS*, LXXXIII (1937), 72—3.

<sup>86</sup> Toulmin, *Hist. Taunton*, rev. Savage, 572; above, econ. hist., mkt.; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1754—1790*; accessed 17 Oct. 2019.

<sup>87</sup> SHC, DD/X/MDT/393, p. 13; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1754—1790*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790), s.v. Roberts, Taunton; accessed 17 Oct. 2019.

<sup>88</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1754—1790*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790), s.v. Taunton; accessed 17 Oct. 2019.

Street in the 1780s, was born in Taunton. Often castigated as an uneducated parvenu his father Joseph was probably a prosperous clothier and Benjamin was educated at the local grammar school. He was followed in the seat by his son John Hammet.<sup>89</sup> For some of those years the other seat was held by Alexander Popham who chaired Quarter Sessions and was concerned to reform Wilton gaol.<sup>90</sup> Both Hammet and Popham had the support of the Market House Trustees and were elected unopposed in 1784.<sup>91</sup> The final years of the corporation were marked by electoral violence and disputed results. Complaints of threats, intimidation, bribery and corruption at Taunton elections resulted in long proceedings in Parliament and heavy expenses for all candidates.<sup>92</sup>

The bailiffs and constables of the manorial borough acted as returning officers except between 1627 and 1792 when the mayor was the returning officer, although sometimes the bailiffs and constables made a rival return. In 1803 Parliament decided the bailiffs of the borough were the only returning officers, as enacted c. 1445, after a dispute over the legality of including the portreeves in an electoral return in 1802.<sup>93</sup> The Taunton electorate were known as potwallers, potwallopers or potwalloners, that is men who could prepare their own food whether they were lodgers or householders. Parties in elections tried to reduce their number. A petition in 1715 claimed they had risen to c. 1,000 and at least 337 were disqualified for living outside the borough, being apprentices or receiving charity. The House of Commons declared potwallers dependent on charity were entitled to vote provided they received none within a year of the election. The matter was raised again in 1774—5 amid charges of bribery and corruption and c. 200 voters were rejected for having received alms,

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<sup>89</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1790—1820*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820), s.v. Ben.Hammet: accessed 10 Nov. 2020; M. McDermott, *Sir Benjamin Hammet 1736—1800* (Taunton, 2017), frontispiece, 4, 18—19, 56—66.

<sup>90</sup> ODNB, s.v. Alexander Popham 1729—1810: accessed 12 Apr. 2018; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1790—1820*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>91</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1754—1790*: accessed 17 Oct. 2019.

<sup>92</sup> *Cal. SP Dom. 1722—5*, p. 25; West Sussex RO, PHA/10,956.

<sup>93</sup> SHC, DD/CH/74/6; PAM 428, [23]; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1790—1820*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020; Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. Savage, 305—6, 327, 340—58.

being Chelsea pensioners, too young, non-resident or having no hearth. Bribes, often large sums, were asked for rather than offered.<sup>94</sup> The number of voters fell substantially during the 18<sup>th</sup> century although that partly matched the fall in population.<sup>95</sup>

In the 1796 election up to £200 a week was reportedly spent openly on ‘tallies’ for 250 people followed by suppers to prevent desertion. Voter independence was partly compromised in the late 18th century by the property buying tactics of Sir Benjamin Hammet and John Morland, the latter buying Portman family town property. His agent Robert Beadon denied inducing tenants to vote although admitted to what would today be called emotional blackmail. Beadon later worked for John Hammet who faced a bribery petition in 1806—7.<sup>96</sup> The Lethbridge family and Alexander Baring, later Lord Ashburton and MP 1806—20, invested in cottage property in the town, including the back courts ironically often called ‘colleges’, in order to control the vote and were not above threatening and evicting their tenants. Sir Thomas Buckler Lethbridge was said to have evicted 13 tenants in the 1810s for not voting for his brother-in-law Henry Powell Collins.<sup>97</sup> He bought several back courts from the Hammets including Giles College off Shuttern.<sup>98</sup> In 1818 a potential buyer of Lethbridge property wanted to know how many voters occupied it and how the return of a member was secured. Another had been told that the rental was £800 and the asking price was £20,000.<sup>99</sup> In 1825 Lethbridge had raised his price to £25,000 and included a piece of land for 200 houses to add to the 130 votes he claimed to control.<sup>100</sup> The property was bought by Edward Bainbridge who having secured the seat sold it on.<sup>101</sup> Many men were prepared to live in poor housing within the borough to keep their vote, which encouraged the construction of more

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<sup>94</sup> *VCH Som.* II, 237; SHC, DD/SF/13/2/84; DD/SAS/C795/TN/22, 159/4.

<sup>95</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1715—1754; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1754](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1754), s.v. Taunton; *Hist. Parl. Commons* 1790—1820; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>96</sup> SHC, DD/DP/60/6; DD/X/RON/1; DD/X/WLM/3.

<sup>97</sup> SHC, PAM 426, pp. 3, 50; PAM 427, pp. 2—3.

<sup>98</sup> SHC, A/AKV/1/1—8.

<sup>99</sup> SHC, A/ARW/2/1.

<sup>100</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C2402/22.

<sup>101</sup> SHC, A/AKV/1/1—8.

back courts. Some landlords might control votes although given the large number of both landlords and voters it is doubtful if any individual amassed enough property to affect the result of an election. By the early 19th-century candidates were often backed by local business and professional men including dissenters whose support may have been more important than that of landowners.<sup>102</sup> Wealthier people increasingly lived outside the borough thereby losing their vote, which skewed the nature of the electorate.<sup>103</sup>

Dubious practices continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and a petition unseated Sir William Burroughs in 1818. Legal proceedings were usually followed by triumphant processions, dinners and free drink at the expense of the victors. Taunton had three political factions: the blues were Tories, the buffs were Whigs and the greens were Radicals. The last two were usually in alliance and favoured electoral reform and most of the leading men of the town allied with them. In 1815 the Somerset and Taunton Pitt Club was founded and in 1830 the buffs instigated a Taunton Loyal Political Union to further reform while remaining loyal to the government.<sup>104</sup> In 1820 the election lasted for 14 days, only 631 of c. 962 voters were allowed to vote, and it is said to have cost the candidates c. £25,000.<sup>105</sup> Men were disqualified for being under age, sharing rooms, being Catholics or Jews, having a child in the workhouse, being a tax collector, having convictions or because their houses including one of the ‘colleges’ were declared outside the borough or straddled the boundary.<sup>106</sup> At the same date the town showed huge support for Queen Caroline and at least two loyal addresses gained thousands of signatures. Several petitions for and against Catholic emancipation, against slavery, for the protection of the silk trade and against the land tax assessment followed

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<sup>102</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1790—1820*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.; above, rel. hist., nonconf.

<sup>103</sup> Above, intro.

<sup>104</sup> Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. Savage, 362—3, 595; SHC, PAM 426, pp. 3, 50.

<sup>105</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1820—1832*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020; Toulmin, *History of Taunton*, rev. Savage, 363—5.

<sup>106</sup> SHC, D/P/tau.m/23/29; DD/HC/6/1/3.

showing some confidence in democratic government.<sup>107</sup> In 1826, when six candidates stood, free drink and dinners on ‘tally tickets’ reputedly caused election disturbances. James Savage published an election manual, which was subsequently kept up by election agents as late as 1841, including lists of innkeepers for beer bribery.<sup>108</sup> Throughout the 1820s libellous handbills attacked people who switched party allegiance and Catholics.<sup>109</sup> Elections booths under the Market House arcades remained a focus for violence.<sup>110</sup>

The turbulence of the 1826 election probably helped to secure the election of Henry Labouchere, nephew of Alexander Baring and later a major local landowner. The other seat was hotly contested and the successful candidate Edward Bainbridge, a London banker, spent a large sum defending an action for bribery, ironically much of it on ‘treating’ the witnesses to a trip to London including dinners and theatre seats. Both MPs and many townspeople supported electoral reform with some even wanting universal male suffrage and a secret ballot. The inhabitants of St James parish and other excluded townsmen wanted the parliamentary borough extended. Although there was much distress at the loss of the first Reform Bill there does not appear to have been any rioting.<sup>111</sup> In 1831 several meetings promoted parliamentary reform at one of which Sydney Smith made his noted speech comparing the anti-reform lobby to a Mrs Partington trying to sweep back the sea with a mop.<sup>112</sup> By then over half the town’s population lay outside the medieval borough boundary and was deprived of the vote.<sup>113</sup> Following the Reform Act the potwallers retained their votes for life paying 1s. to register. There were said to be 574 in 1834, probably almost as many as

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<sup>107</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C2402/52; *Hist. Parl. Commons 1820—1832*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>108</sup> SHC, T/PH/up/1; *Taunton Courier*, 2 June 1826: BNA accessed June 2021.

<sup>109</sup> SHC, A/EMQ/1/2/1.

<sup>110</sup> Goldsworthy, *Recollections of Old Taunton*, 38.

<sup>111</sup> *Hist. Parl. Commons 1820—1832*; [historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832](http://historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832), s.v. Taunton: accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>112</sup> P. Virgin, *Sydney Smith* (1994), 237—9.

<sup>113</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C1540/1/3, 236.

£10 occupiers on the new franchise, declining to 54 in 1866 and five by 1881.<sup>114</sup> The last was Tom Lock who died in 1904 although after voting in 1900 he was struck off the register.<sup>115</sup> Although their franchise was said to improve electoral standards and avoid riots, potwallers expected to be paid and attended election agents with baskets to receive bribes of tea, tobacco and coal. They objected to the 1842 Act against indirect bribery and in 1850 petitioned for their traditional 'privileges'.<sup>116</sup>

Although former MP Lord Ashburton's acquisition of property was intended to further the Conservative cause, he supported Henry Labouchere, the buff or Liberal member for the borough from 1830—59. Benjamin Disraeli failed to unseat him in 1835 despite a flattering address to the voters. Edward William Cox, himself later a parliamentary candidate, successfully portrayed him as anti-nonconformist.<sup>117</sup> With Edward Bainbridge, Labouchere was returned unopposed in the 1830s. Although Bainbridge gave it up for the Chiltern Hundreds in 1842 and Conservative candidates gained the second seat in the 1850s, Labouchere survived until he entered the House of Lords in 1859. He managed to avoid the bribery scandals that engulfed his colleagues of both parties. When he was raised to the peerage as Lord Taunton, Labouchere vowed never to set foot in the town again deploring its lack of electoral probity, although Taunton was not unique in that respect even in Somerset.<sup>118</sup>

With the development of strong party allegiances Taunton usually adhered to the Liberal Party but by the mid 19th century both Liberals and Conservatives held the seat. Petitions continued to be submitted for bribery, usually drink, and in 1853 the election of the

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<sup>114</sup> *Taunton Courier* 16 May 1866, 30 Nov. 1881: BNA accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>115</sup> *Taunton Courier* 3 Feb 1904: BNA accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

<sup>116</sup> SHC, PAM 426, pp. 31, 36, 41—2, 51.

<sup>117</sup> SHC, A/EMQ/1/2/1; ODNB, sv. Henry Labouchere: accessed 12 Apr. 2018; R. E. Foster, 'Peel, Disraeli and the 1835 Taunton by-election', *PSANHS*, CXXVI (1982), 111—18.

<sup>118</sup> SHC, PAM 426, pp.4, 9, 25, 43—4, 51; A/EMQ/1/2/3; *VCH.Som.* II, 239.

Conservative Arthur Mills was overturned although he was returned subsequently.<sup>119</sup> As late as the 1860s libellous and satirical broadsides and verse were printed and distributed at elections.<sup>120</sup> Polling was still by open vote at four booths in the market house arcades.<sup>121</sup> Support for a secret ballot increased from the 1850s and when it was finally introduced in 1872 Taunton was used to demonstrate its working with the sealed boxes being escorted to the count by the police.<sup>122</sup> The franchise was extended to all householders and lodgers paying more than £10 a year but in some years fewer than 800 votes were cast.<sup>123</sup> One of the few local candidates was wealthy lawyer Edward William Cox, son of Taunton metal founder William Charles Cox and editor of the *Law Times*. He was elected for the Conservatives in 1868 after the boundary was extended but was unseated on appeal for bribery after a four-day election and moved to Hendon, Middlesex.<sup>124</sup> Conservative candidate Sir Alfred Slade, who opposed the 1870 Education Bill and the private ballot, alleged corruption when defeated by the Liberal Solicitor General, Sir Henry James. He complained the secret ballot prevented him discovering who had not voted for him as promised but it was found that he had bribed men to make false accusations and had to pay the £10,000 cost of the trial.<sup>125</sup>

The Liberal party waned locally and in 1880 Conservative Sir William Palliser, an Irish army engineer, obtained slightly more votes than Sir Henry James. From 1885 when the constituency was reduced to one member until 1945 when it elected its only Labour M. P., Taunton was held by the Conservatives and sometimes the Liberals provided no candidate. The number of votes cast rose to over 2,000 although that was only ten per cent of the population by 1900.<sup>126</sup> From 1887 Taunton was divided into six polling districts.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C795/TN/1 (8); DD/DP/19/1.

<sup>120</sup> VCH Office, Ambra books cat, no. 180.

<sup>121</sup> SHC, DD/SAS/C2548/9.

<sup>122</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 10 Feb. 1858, 4 Mar. 1859, 6 Sep. 1865, 17 July 1872: BNA, accessed 10 Nov. 2020; SHC, A/DIF/44.

<sup>123</sup> SHC, PAM 427, p. 13; A/EMQ/1/2/3..

<sup>124</sup> ODNB, s.v. Edw. Cox: accessed 12 Apr. 2018; SHC, PAM 427, p. 3.

<sup>125</sup> SHC, PAM 427, p. 14

<sup>126</sup> *VCH Som.* II, 239; ODNB, s.v. Wm. Palliser: accessed 12 Apr. 2018; SHC, A/EMQ/1/2/3..

In 1905 a small Labour society was begun in Taunton by Frank Walters but the idea of running a labour candidate was considered 'a mad folly'.<sup>128</sup> However, in 1909 the first labour candidate stood, supported by Margaret Bondfield, Keir Hardie and Ramsey Macdonald, and secured about a third of the votes.<sup>129</sup> The Taunton Labour Party was founded in 1918 when *c.* 4,000 men marched from Rowbarton to support the Labour candidate. Engine driver Benjamin Pearse and his wife Florence were leading members. By the late 1940s the local party had nearly 7,000 members and a separate Priory Ward party was in existence in the 1950s.<sup>130</sup>

The increase in the suffrage and the amalgamation of the Taunton borough constituency with Wellington and part of Exmoor in 1918 raised the electorate from 3,921 in 1912 to 28,833 of whom a third were women. From 1928 when all men and women over 21 had the right to vote the electorate increased to 39,926. In the later 20th century voter turnout increased to *c.* 80 per cent in the 1970s and 1990s compared with 60 per cent in 1918 although it later declined especially for European and local elections. Most polling in the early 21st century was carried out in school buildings or by post.<sup>131</sup>

The Wellington MP Col. Fortescue Boles took the newly enlarged seat as a coalition candidate in 1918 but gave it up in 1921 to Arthur Boscawen who won the by-election after Mrs Lloyd George visited the area speaking at rallies.<sup>132</sup> The Liberal party revived winning the seat in 1922 and 1923, partly because the Labour party had financial problems and got only nine per cent of the vote in 1924 compared with nearly 40 per cent in 1921. However, the Liberals declined again in the 1930s allowing the Labour party to increase its share of the

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<sup>127</sup> SHC, D/B/ta/2/2/2 (1887).

<sup>128</sup> Labour History Archive, LP/LRC/20/251—2, 28/420.

<sup>129</sup> SHC, PAM 236, pp. 1—2.

<sup>130</sup> SHC, A/BMG cat.; DD/TLP cat.; PAM 236, pp. 10;.

<sup>131</sup> SHC, T/PH/rea/1 (1918); PAM 236, pp. 4—5, 7; D/DC/tau.d/2/2/20 (10 Nov.).

<sup>132</sup> SHC, T/PH/rea (1918, 1921); DD/X/ADS.

vote.<sup>133</sup> Andrew Hamilton Gault held the seat for the Conservative and Unionist Party from 1924 to 1934. He donated several playing fields including one still named after him in Taunton as is Hamilton Road.<sup>134</sup> His successor Edward Wickham in 1945 visited Buchenwald concentration camp.<sup>135</sup> In 1945 Taunton elected its first Labour MP Victor Collins but in 1950 Winston Churchill visited Taunton and Collins lost his seat by a narrow margin. In 1956 leading Labour politicians campaigned in Taunton in vain and the Liberal party enjoyed a revival.<sup>136</sup> From 1956 to 1987 the seat was held by the Conservative Edward du Cann, Taunton's longest serving MP since Henry Labouchere. He was chairman of the 1922 Committee from 1978 to 1984.<sup>137</sup>

The shift from Labour to Liberal among non-Conservative voters possibly reflected the change from blue collar to white collar employment. The late 20th and early 21st century saw the Taunton seat, officially known as Taunton Deane since 2010, alternate between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats including Jeremy Browne, Liberal Democrat, 2005—15 and Rebecca Pow, Conservative, from 2015.<sup>138</sup> While Britain was in the European Union Taunton formed part of the South West constituency for the European Parliament.

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<sup>133</sup> SHC, PAM 236, pp. 4, 7—9, 13—15.

<sup>134</sup> SHC, A/BRP/1/1—6; above, soc. hist.

<sup>135</sup> F. Hebditch, *Som. in the Second World War* (Tiverton, 2006, p. 73.

<sup>136</sup> SHC, PAM 236, pp. 4, 7—9, 13—15.

<sup>137</sup> SHC, A/EMQ.

<sup>138</sup> SHC, PAM 236, pp. 8—9, 11—15, 17; A/DQO/365/18/13; above, econ. hist.