

Boundary Review and the Organization and Identity of the Peterborough Divisional Labour Party

Abstract: The subdivision of larger territories into electoral districts is designed to enable representation for district populations in the national legislative body. This article establishes that spatial-type reforms such as the redrawing of electoral district boundaries can have profound and long-lasting, but often overlooked, organizational and ideational effects on local parties. The effects of constituency redrawing (i.e., the 1917-1918 Boundary Commission and Review) are examined via a case study of the interwar Peterborough Divisional Labour Party in relation to three areas: 1) the structural organization of the local party, 2) the selection and retention of parliamentary candidates and party organizers, and 3) the local framing of national policy. The analysis argues that the boundary review and its creation of an enlarged parliamentary constituency consisting of Peterborough and the Soke of Peterborough produced political and organizational challenges that the party never fully resolved. Labour attempted but struggled to represent the interests of all the area's constituents – even the electoral victory of 1929 demonstrates the effects of campaign dynamism rather than rural breakthrough. It is important that parties consider these potential impacts when deciding how to respond to spatial-institutional change.

Introduction

Boundary changes have greatly affected the organizational and ideological development of political parties. However, this has been overlooked in the theoretical literature. This has had the effect of limiting our understanding of the multiple factors informing national and sub-national party development. Similarly, local party studies have failed to engage directly with the impact of such reforms, instead giving space to a range of other factors. This article addresses these oversights by demonstrating that in the creation of a large and diverse constituency in Peterborough, consisting of an urban and large rural area, Labour attempted

but struggled to represent the interests of all the area's constituents – even the electoral victory of 1929 demonstrates the effects of campaign dynamism rather than rural breakthrough.

Firstly, it examines the background to electoral boundary revision, with a particular focus on the 1917-1918 Boundary Commission and Review as well as the structural evolution of the Labour Party. The impact of the Boundary Commission and Review and spatial dimensions of Labour's 1918 Constitution have long taken a backseat or been ignored altogether. Secondly, the effects of these reforms were pronounced in the case of inter-war Peterborough and the development of the Peterborough DLP. The case study section opens with a social geography of Peterborough, addressing the foundations, social, economic and political, that the local Labour Party was built upon.

The young party had to navigate a challenging environment, operating in an enlarged constituency consisting of urban pockets and large swathes of rural space and countryside (i.e. the local hinterland). One of the key challenges was the sustainability of local branch parties, particularly as one moved away from the "centre" (i.e. local heartland) in the City of Peterborough. This had the effect of confirming the predominance of the city, with trickle-down effects on where the Peterborough DLP could most reliably gather support. The selection (and retention) of prospective parliamentary candidates and local organizers also illustrated the lasting impact of the Boundary Review. The *framing* of national party programmes also demonstrated the enduring influence of the redrawn constituency boundaries. The message that did get across showed a party caught in a spatial bipolarity between the local heartland and hinterland.

This story draws upon a wide range of material. The minutes of the Peterborough DLP (1918 to 1939) were coded to draw out party positions and their histories as they pertained to questions of organisation and ideology. Deepening the context and understanding of party decision-making was made possible by supplementing the above material with a range of

contemporaneous documents, including local and national newspapers,¹ parliamentary papers, as well as insights from the wider Labour Party literature and works of local history.

Redrawing Constituency Boundaries

Before addressing the Boundary Commission and Review 1917-1918 in detail, a nod to wider contextual factors is helpful. Two such factors are noted. First, the Representation of the People Act 1918 provided universal suffrage for men aged over twenty-one, as well as women aged thirty and over. This meant a sizeable expansion of the electorate which, following the Act, stood at some twenty-one million; many of these were working class which, by definition, the Labour Party sought after. In this context, the party recognized the necessity of revamping its existing structure so as to take advantage of the new circumstances. The Act also cut party spending limits. This was a bonus for a financially cautious party, enabling Labour to put more candidates into the electoral field.² Second, 1918 also witnessed the introduction of a Labour Constitution which included a plan to form local Labour parties in every constituency.

Labour organization prior to the 1918 Constitution was a scattered patchwork. The Constitution's main author, Arthur Henderson, laid out the proposal for a nationwide network of local parties in *The Aims of Labour*:

It [the new Constitution] contemplates the creation of a *national* democratic party, founded upon the organised working-class movement, and open to every worker who labours by hand or brain...the Labour Party will be transformed...from a federation of societies, national and local, into a *nation-wide political organisation with branches in every parliamentary constituency*. [I]n order that the party may *more*

¹ For these I am indebted to the *Peterborough Archives* and the online *British Newspaper Archive*.

² Chris Wrigley, 'The Labour Party and the Impact of the 1918 Reform Act', *The Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust 2018*, (2018), 64-80.

faithfully reflect constituency opinion it is also proposed to create in every constituency something more than the existing trades council or local Labour Party. [My italics]³

While little appreciated, the Labour Constitution, a reform with baked-in spatial implications, combined with the redrawing of boundaries to inform local party decision-making throughout the inter-war period, a point we shall return to in the discussion of the Peterborough DLP.

The literature on boundary reform does not lay much emphasis on the impact of such changes on local party's organizational arrangements and ideological dispositions. The gaze of writing has been focused on various technical aspects of boundary reform, such as ensuring equal constituency sizes. Others have been concerned with the winnability of upcoming elections in light of changes to a division's physical extent – that is winnability from a national party point of view. Elsewhere, it is about the conservation of community identities as paramount when drawing up or proposing new or revised boundaries. The voices heard, those expressing their agreement or disagreement with a proposed changed, are often national or parliamentary level.⁴

Like those before it, the 1917 Boundary Commission was set up to consider the redistribution of parliamentary seats. However, it was to be different in important ways to previous Commissions. Pre-1918 reforms were *ad hoc* with much involvement from politicians

³ Henderson, *The Aims of Labour* (London: Headley Bros, Publishers, 1917), 21-22.

⁴ For example, see Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter, 'MPs' Responses to a Proposed New Constituency Map: Electoral Prospects, Community Ties and Party Organisation', *Journal of Legislative Studies* (2014), 360-79; D. Rossiter, R. Johnston and C. Pattie, 'Representing People and Representing Places: Community, Continuity and the Current Redistribution of Parliamentary Constituencies in the UK', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66 (2013), 856-86; Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie and David Rossiter, "'Somewhat more disruptive than we had in mind': The Boundary Commission for England's 2011 Proposed Redistribution of Parliamentary Constituencies', *The Political Quarterly*, 83 (2012), 44-59; and Colin Rallings, Ron Johnson and Michael Thrasher, 'Changing the Boundaries but Keeping the Disproportionality: The Electoral Impact of the Fifth Periodical Reviews by the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions for England and Wales', *The Political Quarterly*, 79 (2008), 80-90.

of the day.⁵ From 1918, the redistributions were to be conducted by independent Commissions.⁶ The commissioners were instructed to keep the number of seats at their current level. However, in terms of population per constituency, the seats were to be distributed more equitably, save for areas like the City of London. The Commissions, there were three (England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland), used Ordnance Survey maps to draw up provisional boundaries; these were then advertised in local newspapers. Wherever possible, existing administrative boundaries were used to determine boundaries.⁷ In order to fulfil their duties appropriately, it was acknowledged that it would be necessary to hold ‘a large number’ of Local Inquiries to ascertain the views of those who were interested. In total, 120 inquiries were held, covering 465 constituencies. The commissioners commented that their provisional recommendations ‘proved acceptable’ in the ‘great majority of cases’.⁸ However, the commissioners were compelled to add ‘thirty-one more territorial members’.⁹ Despite the adding of members, several smaller boroughs, including Peterborough, actually lost representation.¹⁰ Furthermore, and despite the Local Inquiries, there remained, according to Butler, ‘laments about the damage to historic traditions’.¹¹ The response in Peterborough would go beyond laments.

The Peterborough Division was greatly expanded beyond the confines of the City of Peterborough and even the Administrative County of the Soke of Peterborough in time for the 1918 General Election. Rather than the City of Peterborough that returned members to

⁵ D.J. Rossiter, R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the UK's map of parliamentary constituencies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 1-44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44 & 51.

⁷ Report of the Boundary Commission (England & Wales) Vol. I. Report and Appendices (1917), 14. See, in particular, Instructions 2-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁹ David Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain since 1918* (Westport, 1986).

¹⁰ Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie, *The Boundary Commissions*, 57.

¹¹ Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain*, 5-7.

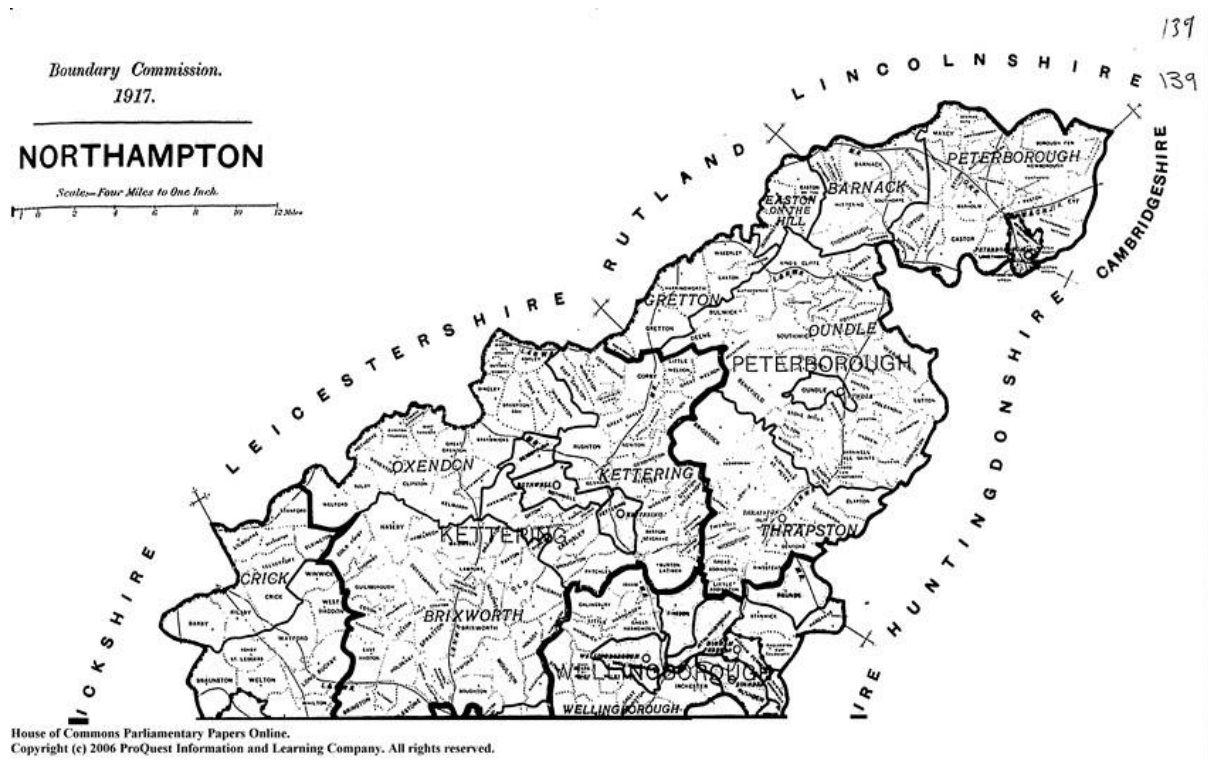
parliament as far back as the 1540s, from 1918 the new division would be of mixed character taking in the city as well as vast areas of rural space. Map 1 illustrates the extent of the new division. Accordingly, the Peterborough parliamentary division would consist of:

...the Administrative County of the Soke of Peterborough, the Rural Districts of Easton-on-the-Hill and Gretton, the part of the Rural District of Oundle which is within the Administrative County of Northampton, that part of the Rural District of Thrapston which is within the Administrative County of Northampton and is not included in the Wellingborough Division, and the Urban District of Oundle.¹²

Unlike before 1918, parties, particularly those newly established, working out of Peterborough would have to decide how to organize in the historic market towns of Thrapston and Oundle, not to mention the surrounding rural space. To achieve electoral success, they would need to forge an identity and define what Labour meant in this part of the world.

¹² Report of the Boundary Commission (England & Wales) Vol. II (1917), 138.

Map 1. Boundary Commission 1917 – Northampton (including Peterborough division)¹³



Of a City, Towns and Villages: A Social Geography of Peterborough

Peterborough is an English city north of London and set at the crossroads of the East Midlands and East Anglia and, more contentiously, the north and south of England. Surrounding the original town is the historic region of the Soke of Peterborough which was part of the historic county of Northamptonshire. The remainder of the future Peterborough Division was to the west and south of the City and Soke, taking in an area stretching in the west to Gretton and southwards to Thrapston.

The divisional boundaries in place from 1918 (see below) contained areas, industries and voters that the Peterborough DLP could, with work, draw into its orbit. One sector from which the party would draw support and leading members was transportation, namely the railways and associated industries. It is not an understatement to say that Peterborough was

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

transformed by the introduction of the railways in the 1850s. According to Samuel Sidney, and by an ‘accident of situation’ in an otherwise ‘dull and inhospitable city’, ‘greatness was thrust upon [Peterborough] in a most extraordinary manner...[It] is one of the centres from which radiates three lines to London’.¹⁴ Writing of the 1885 to 1910 period, Pelling emphasized the economic centrality of the railways. The most important non-agricultural industry in a vaguely defined ‘Central Region’, of which Peterborough was classified a part, was ‘long-distance transport’.¹⁵ Those who worked on the railways resided in the New England area of the city. Additionally, engineering was responsible for the employment of a significant number of Peterborough workers; the long-time Peterborough DLP secretary, John Mansfield, was an engineer by profession. Census records further emphasized the importance of the railways and engineering industries in Peterborough. The 1921 Census listed 3,157 metal workers alongside 2,931 working in ‘transportation and communication’, the largest two workforces in Peterborough.¹⁶

However, and taking into account the redrawing of the constituency, Peterborough was not a sprawling urban metropolis. Those working in ‘agriculture’ (2,138) also made up a considerable portion of the local workforce.¹⁷ According to Kinnear, 21% of Peterborough’s male population was engaged in agriculture.¹⁸ One of the Soke’s most famous sons, the poet John Clare, was born in Helpston (also Helpstone) to the north-west of Peterborough and wrote with reference to and great affection for the countryside, rural life, fauna, and flora that surrounded him. In 1820, Clare published a collection of poetry entitled *Poems Descriptive of*

¹⁴ D. Brandon and J. Knight, *Peterborough Past: The City & the Soke* (Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 2001), 38.

¹⁵ Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* (London, 1967), 106.

¹⁶ Census 1921. The Census 1921 occupational figures cover the Soke of Peterborough, including Peterborough Municipal Borough, Peterborough Rural District and Barnack Rural District.

¹⁷ Census 1921.

¹⁸ Michael Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey since 1885* (London: Batsford, 1981), 119-121.

Rural Life and Scenery.¹⁹ Geographically close to Peterborough (approximately eight miles) but a world away in terms of social and economic structure, other areas of the Soke shared a closer resemblance to Helpston than the City of Peterborough.

As with North Northamptonshire, the bulk of which would be welded onto the City of Peterborough creating a much-expanded constituency. Society and politics in Northamptonshire were changing in the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods. The redistributions of the 1880s helped to alter the balance between agriculture and industry.²⁰ The rise of the boot and shoe trade helped to transform towns such as Northampton and Rushden, representing a move away from the centrality of stately homes, rural and farming communities.²¹ However, the dynamics in Northampton and Rushden were not mirrored in historic market towns such as Oundle and Thrapston. North Northamptonshire, with its focal point in Oundle, would remain a safe Conservative seat. In the six General Elections between 1885 and December 1910, the Conservatives won on every occasion except for a Liberal-Labour victory in 1906 (see Chart 1). The return of Conservatives in the division has been partly put down to the influence of landlords and their hostility towards a Liberal party that they saw as becoming increasingly radical; this was a feature of rural divisions across Northamptonshire.²²

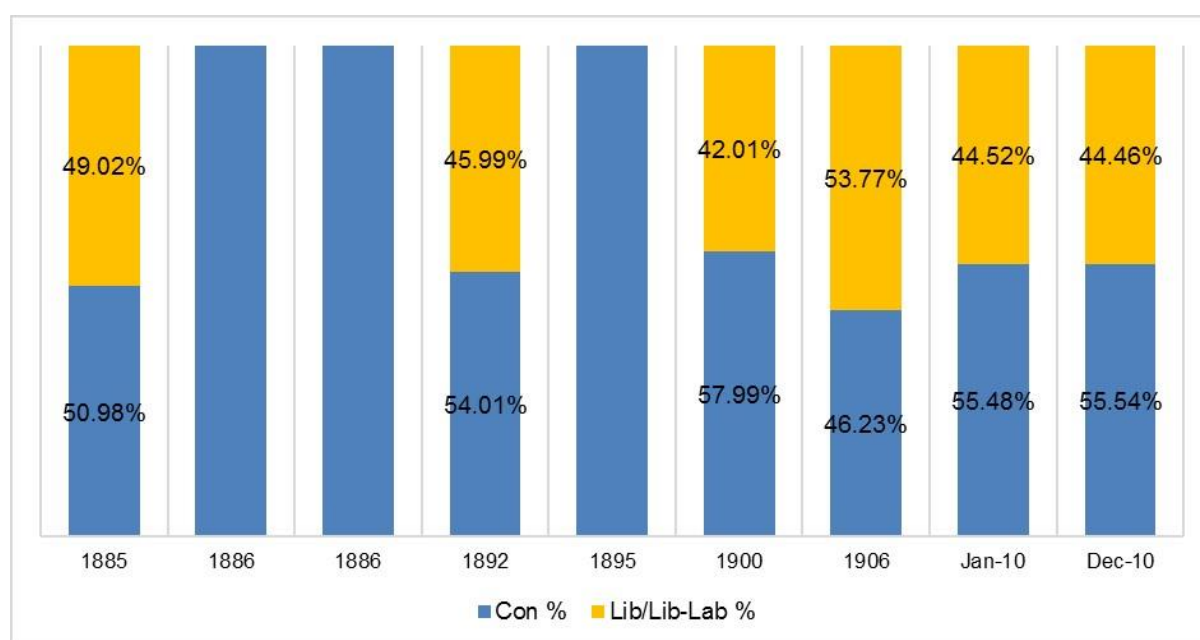
¹⁹ John Clare, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (London, 1820).

²⁰ Janet Howarth, "Politics and Society in Late Victorian Northamptonshire," *Northamptonshire Past & Present*, 4, no.5 (1970/71): 269-274.

²¹ John Adams, "Politics in Late Victorian and Edwardian Northamptonshire," *Northamptonshire Past & Present*, 61 (2008): 77-85.

²² Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, 122 & 124.

Chart 1. Vote shares in North Northamptonshire, 1885 – Dec. 1910²³



The raw material of the future Peterborough DLP did not mirror those areas often considered as major centres of organized and industrialized labour. The local landscape was dominated neither by mines nor industrial conurbations packed with textiles factories. The complexions of the City, the Soke and the remainder of North Northamptonshire were ones of contrasts, instead of a single preponderant industry there was transportation, engineering, among others, on one side, and a sizeable agricultural sector and large swathes of rural land and countryside on the other. The party tried to work in these conditions by making serious efforts to organize in urban *and* rural areas, albeit with mixed success.

Let's Party! Or Not, 1918-1926

We turn now to the impact of the Boundary Review on the local party structure and organization of the Peterborough DLP. The birthday of the Peterborough DLP was 12 October 1918. Prior to this date the strength of independent political labour in the area was limited.

²³ The two elections of 1886 and 1895 were unopposed returns for the Conservative Brownlow Cecil.

Laybourn noted that a local branch of the ILP was formed in 1905 but quickly disappeared. A branch of the British Socialist Party, present around 1912, suffered a similar fate. It was left to the Peterborough Trades & Labour Council (PTLC) to incubate local political labour, affiliating to the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1901. However, due to financial difficulties, the PTLC had to withdraw from the LRC in 1905.²⁴ From 1906 to 1918, the Peterborough labour movement was quiet, though prospects for the party were altered by the introduction of the Representation of the People Act 1918 and the Labour Constitution.²⁵ From the moment that the Peterborough DLP was formed by delegates of the Peterborough Labour Party and Thrapston and District Trades and Labour Council (TLC), there was a noticeable uptick in political labour activity and organization. The geographical parameters of this new activity and organization, as the presence of the Thrapston and District TLC at the formation meeting demonstrated, was defined by the redrawn divisional boundaries.

It would be incorrect to assume that the countryside was perceived as unimportant by Labour. There is some debate as to whether the party needed rural areas to secure a majority. One suggestion is that Labour was impressed by the sheer extent of countryside, justifying pursuit of votes there.²⁶ Between 1926 and 1939 Labour held or planned to hold a series of campaigns to win over rural areas. Additionally, the party programme, *For Socialism and Peace*, stated the desire to secure majorities ‘of those who labour by hand or brain in the industrial centres, in the suburban areas, and in the countryside’.²⁷ Through the Labour lens the new Peterborough division was deemed to be rural, campaigns to this effect being held there in 1927, 1935, 1937, and 1939.

²⁴ Letter from PTLC secretary to Ramsay MacDonald on decision to withdraw from the LRC. 15 December 1905. LRC 28/405. Labour History Archive and Study Centre.

²⁵ Keith Laybourn, ‘The Peterborough Labour Movement, 1900-1951’, 1982, 1-4.

²⁶ Claire Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8-14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Beneath the Peterborough DLP were a number of branch/local parties. Despite the challenges of organizing across a geographically and industrially diverse territory, the activists of the Peterborough DLP were determined to give Labour the best chance of securing as much support as possible. Instead of giving up on those areas further removed from the city, Labour would get into all the cracks and crevices. The objective to expand the spatial reach of the party was indicative of the identity it wished to forge locally, that of a party that was as relevant to workers outside as it was to those inside the City of Peterborough. Alongside the Peterborough Local Labour Party, correspondence from the General Committee in March 1919 provides evidence of where local parties existed at this time. There was a party in Thrapston in the far south of the Northants side of the division, as well as one in Helpston (of John Clare fame), Ringstead, Titchmarsh, Walton and Woodford; there was also agreement to set up a local party in Gretton, and a request to give attention to the formation of another branch in Harringworth.²⁸

The party's appeal to the materialist concerns of agricultural workers was evident a few months later when the local Labour candidate for 1918, John Mansfield, addressed the Northamptonshire Agricultural and Rural Workers' Council. A summary of the address went as follows:

The land was the source of all wealth, and as *the agricultural industry was the most important industry in the world*, the claims of the agricultural worker should be considered before the claims of the workers in any other industry. [My italics]²⁹

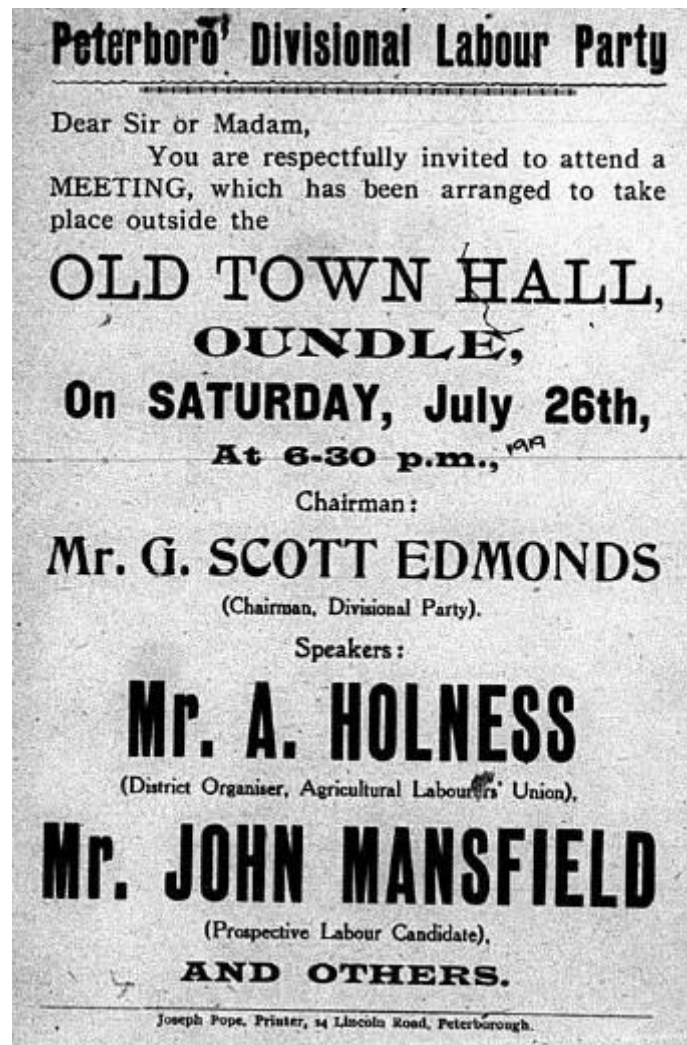
The tone and topic of Mansfield's address was, no doubt, shaped by the audience, but it did show an attempt to appeal to the diversity of the constituency. Similarly, at a meeting organized by the Peterborough DLP at the Old Town Hall, Oundle, the keynote speaker was the district

²⁸ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 31 May 1919. Peterborough Archives.

²⁹ *Northampton Daily Echo*, 3 May 1919.

organizer of the Agricultural Labourers' Union (ALU) (Image 1).³⁰ If the Peterborough division were a blank canvas and the Divisional party an artist, the plan, in theory, was to paint it with as much red as possible, ideally right to the edges.

Image 1. Leaflet for a meeting of the Peterborough DLP, 26 July 1919.



However, plans and reality do not always align in harmony as the party discovered. Initially, some of the reports from the branches made for positive reading. The Gretton party claimed sixty-five members in 1919 and there were reports from the Woodford and Brigstock

³⁰ Peterborough DLP Archives. Parliamentary Elections. Peterborough Archives.

branches of ‘steady progress’.³¹ That said, in the case of Brigstock this progress followed the party’s reformation. By April 1920, the Woodford Local Labour Party had to be reformed, something which the General Committee resolved to get done, though operations remained ‘temporarily suspended’ until at least October 1920. Furthermore, in January 1923 there was expressed a desire to ‘form a local party there’, suggestive of recurring difficulties.³² Elsewhere, the local party in Walton was facing difficulties when, in July 1921, it was unable to secure a meeting of either its committee or members. The Woodford and Walton parties appeared to be on an upward trend by April 1923 when it was reported that both were ‘going well’.³³ It is testament to the local Labour activists that they did not give up on establishing and reforming parties, even though the stop-start experience must have been disheartening.

But as the fortunes of one location gave the appearance of growth and sustainability it was the turn of others to get caught in the cycle of formation-decay-reformation. Next it was the turn of Ringstead and Thrapston. Despite an event in April 1923 for the reformation of the Ringstead party being well attended, it was reported that ‘the party at present cannot be reformed because of unemployment etc.’.³⁴ Unemployment was not unique to Ringstead, but if support was already thin on the ground, mirrored by a limited pool from which to draw affiliation fees, the inability to reform the party at that time becomes more understandable. The Thrapston party underwent its own reformation. A series of open-air meetings were held there between 4 and 8 June 1923. These proved a success despite the challenges posed by the size of the constituency and travel arrangements. It was reported that ‘...as a result of the effort the parties at Ringstead [15 June] and Thrapston [31 June] have been reformed’.³⁵

³¹ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 31 May 1919.

³² *Ibid.*, 29 January 1923.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1923.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 July 1923.

In the same year there was a somewhat cryptic series of reports and resolutions regarding Helpston. Signs there were ‘encouraging’ but, more worryingly, reports went onto state that ‘our [the Divisional Committee’s] attention is needed there’. Meanwhile, there was no party in formation at Titchmarsh and no recent activity at Thrapston.³⁶ The shaky foundations of the Eye and Gretton parties were exposed in July 1923, though there was no mention of party collapse only the need for attention.³⁷ The Peterborough DLP tried to appeal across the division, but it was becoming increasingly clear that it was difficult to build any sort of organizational momentum in many areas of the constituency.

The open-air meetings in June 1923 were not one-of-a-kind ventures from the city to rural areas. Reports fed back to meetings of the party’s Divisional Committee, as well as discussions at the meetings themselves, demonstrated a keenness to organize and embed Labour. Alongside the open-air meetings were garden fetes and summer rallies, often organized with the help of sympathetic individuals in the branch areas, including religious figures happy to lend church grounds to the support of Labour.³⁸ As such, the willingness was there to represent constituency wide. However, the reality of organizing across a vast area and up against local Conservatives who tended to receive solid support,³⁹ proved a real challenge as the experience of stop-start local/branch Labour Party (re)formation demonstrated.

Organizational efforts during these years illustrates how the Boundary Review framed the thinking of Peterborough DLP decision-makers from 1918 to 1926. The product, albeit not entirely successful, was a party that at least aimed to position itself as representative of urban *and* the rural electors in the Division. However, situational experience acted to guide the party towards a particular disposition. The next section takes up this story.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1923.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 July 1923.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 August 1923, 31 May 1924 and 16 May 1926.

³⁹ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 7 June 1929.

To the City! The Predominance of Peterborough

The earliest meetings of the Peterborough DLP give the impression that multiple centres of organization might have emerged. The conference that agreed to the formation of the DLP was attended by delegates from the Peterborough Labour Party and Thrapston and District TLC, five each. The meeting itself took place in Oundle, another area previously contained within the North Northamptonshire division.⁴⁰ This critical moment in the formation of the Peterborough DLP intimated at the multiple geographical pivots of the party, with the bulk of the division captured between two centres, one in the City of Peterborough and the other encompassing Oundle and Thrapston.

Any centre-periphery tensions or power struggles between the city and Oundle or Thrapston were if not non-existent then well concealed. The conference agreed that Oundle would be the temporary venue for future meetings concerned with the formation of a divisional party. Additionally, a member from Thrapston was appointed as Party Secretary *pro tem* by unanimous decision. Discussions on who should be chair and secretary on a more permanent basis, and where they ought to hail from, were put on hold for a future meeting. A month later, at a meeting of the General Committee in Peterborough, E.M. Pask (Peterborough) was appointed Party Secretary *pro tem*.⁴¹ There was still much fluidity at this point.

The redrawing of the boundaries framed the shape of the Peterborough DLP's committees. A spatial balance of representation soon developed. This was evident in the composition of the Divisional and Executive committees of the party. The first set of such elections for these committees took place in January 1919. The presidency of the DLP went to a Peterborough man, while the vice-presidents represented Helpston, Thrapston and Woodford.

⁴⁰ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 12 October 1918.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 29 November 1918.

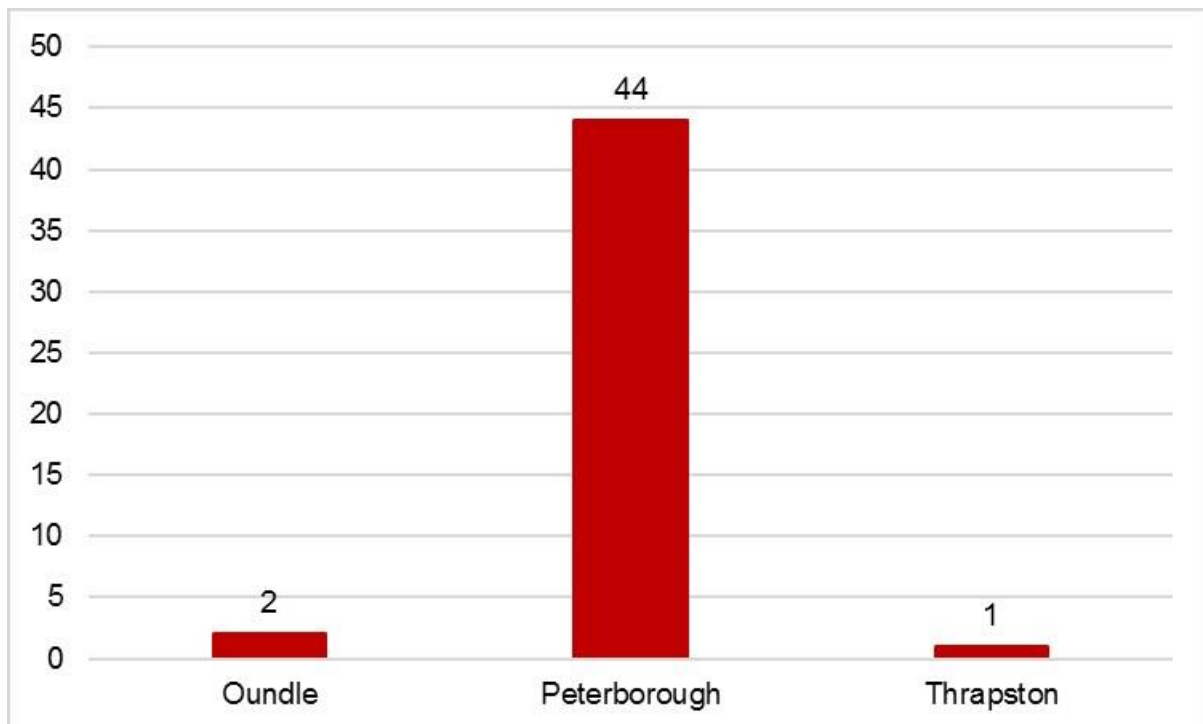
The post of Treasurer went to J.C. Lemmy (Peterborough) and that of Financial Secretary to J. Gray (Titchmarsh); E.M. Pask continued as Party Secretary. Nominations for the Executive Committee give an indication of the emerging spatial balance of power and support for the notion of two centres, one in Peterborough and the other in Thrapston. This reflected the spatial origins of the party. Alongside the officers already mentioned, there were eleven members elected for the Executive Committee; five represented Thrapston, four Peterborough, one from Ringstead, and the remaining one from Woodford.⁴²

However, the stop-start experience of party (re)formation suggested another pattern emerging. The areas affected, including Woodford and Brigstock, were some geographic distance from the nominal centre of the City of Peterborough. The Peterborough Local Labour Party, alongside the Peterborough DLP itself, did not share the struggle of periodic party (re)formation. Instead, the City of Peterborough early on demonstrated an organizational gravitational pull. Chart 2 illustrates this starkly. Of forty-seven meetings⁴³ organized and held by the DLP from 1918 to 1926, forty-four took place at central locations in Peterborough.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 18 January 1919.

⁴³ Meetings covered include Annual General Meetings, Conferences, Divisional Committee Meetings, Executive Committee Meetings, Finance Committee Meetings, General Committee Meetings, Local Labour Party and Divisional Party Meetings, Propaganda Committee Meetings, Provisional Committee Meetings, Special Meetings.

Chart 2. Location of Peterborough DLP “Events”, 1918-1926



The predominance of the city was also reflected in later appointments to the key offices in the party. In 1923, W. Jones was elected President, while the position of vice-president went to Sarah Donaldson, also representing the city. Mansfield took the secretaryship and Digby that of Treasury and Financial Secretary. The lone non-Peterborough officer was J.C. Atkin of Walton who occupied the other vice-president spot; though the Executive Committee selections better reflected the diversity of spaces covered by the division and party, including representatives from Thrapston, Woodford, Titchmarsh as well as Peterborough.⁴⁴

Additionally, the City of Peterborough, as if confirming the notion that the countryside was not for Labour, was the main vote-puller for the party. Compared to surrounding rural areas, Peterborough had a larger pool of eligible voters from which to potentially gain support. Furthermore, reports from the 1929 General Election, an election in which the Peterborough DLP returned a Labour member to parliament for the first time, and after the party had

⁴⁴ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 7 April 1923.

appointed a full-time local party organizer whose credentials included ‘considerable experience in rural areas’,⁴⁵ indicated that the Conservative vote continued to hold up in the countryside.⁴⁶

Therefore, despite local Labour activists’ best efforts to present a constituency-wide appeal, areas beyond the city appeared stubbornly resistant to the party’s charms. That the party positioned itself to offer a broad appeal is understandable given the composition of the constituency following the boundary review. Practical experience produced a shift towards the city which became increasingly embedded over time.

An Unpromising Disposition: Candidate Selection and Retention, 1918-1939

In relation to the General Election of 1918, it has been argued that the Labour Party had no difficulty in finding candidates.⁴⁷ However, the Peterborough DLP experienced the recurring problem of first finding and then retaining prospective parliamentary candidates, as well as reticence on the part of some to put their names forward. The party first tried to secure the services of F.O. Roberts. However, he did not jump at the opportunity to represent the division. Roberts was also being courted by the West Bromwich Labour Party and made it clear that it was his preferred option. The young party also failed to secure the services of two other potential matches, both of whom were said to have been ‘fixed up’ in other constituencies.⁴⁸ This may have been a case of asking the question too late, though subsequent experiences suggest something more than bad timing. By the end of November 1918, the party remained without a candidate to put into the field against the Liberals and Conservatives. The General Committee, as they would on future occasions, requested that John Mansfield stand as the local Labour candidate. Mansfield was happy to fulfil this request so long as he received the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 August 1926.

⁴⁶ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 7 June 1929.

⁴⁷ Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 106.

⁴⁸ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 12 October 1918.

endorsement of affiliates and individual members, which he subsequently did. In what may have been an indication of the contentedness with their candidate on the part of the party, Mansfield was accepted as candidate for the 1922 General Election; on this occasion no other names were thrown into the hat for consideration.⁴⁹

However, if ensuing events were anything to go by, the party would have made efforts to find a candidate who had the means, whether personal or institutional, to help finance a campaign. There was often the spectre of financial difficulty hanging over the party. A 1923 report into the party's finances concluded that in order to ease the strain of campaigning the party should look for a candidate 'financed by an organisation'. Not all members were in favour of this, encouraging instead a deeper exploration of possible alternatives. The investigation got the party no further and it was resolved to contact Egerton Wake, the national organizer, for a full discussion of the issue.⁵⁰ In the minds of activists, the ideal situation would be if Mansfield were to secure financial backing from his trade union, the ASE. That Mansfield secured the candidacy was no doubt testament to his local popularity, but at the same time there were not queues of potential candidates outside the party's offices.

Aligning with Laybourn's argument, the constituency was unattractive to several suitors.⁵¹ Following his interview with the Peterborough DLP in 1923, Egerton Wake gave two names to the party of individuals that might be interested in standing as Labour candidates in the division: Captain Bennett and H. Nixon. Both soon declined the nomination. With parliament dissolved and the election of 6 December 1923 imminent, the need to select a candidate became urgent. The general tone of the meeting that selected the candidate was concern. Resolving the issue meant pursuing a familiar course of action – selecting Mansfield.

⁴⁹ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 24 October 1922.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Laybourn, 'The Peterborough Labour Movement', 1.

Despite the challenges of securing a candidate for 1923 optimism remained. Soon after a third second place finish the party were adamant to put up a candidate whenever the next election might be; local parties were asked to submit their nominations within six weeks.⁵²

It looked like the Peterborough DLP, through sheer determination, would break the tendency that had developed as a result of earlier exercises in candidate recruitment. Initially, there were a couple of nominations for any upcoming election, promising signs when compared to 1918, 1922 and 1923. This included George Ridley of the Railway Clerks Association (RCA), who received nominations from the Peterborough Local Labour Party, two branches of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the local National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) Women's Guild. The other name put forward was, predictably, that of John Mansfield, with support from a couple of local Labour parties as well as the Helpston branch of the NUR and ALU. Unfortunately, the executive of the RCA declined the authorisation of Ridley's candidature for the division. It looked like the party was back to square one. However, soon more names started coming through. Following the recommendation of Egerton Wake, the Peterborough DLP approached a Mr Fraser and Colonel Osborne; these were soon joined by Captain W.G. Hall. Compared to earlier searches, the party was relatively inundated with potential suitors. In addition to those mentioned, Mr Dobbie (NUR), W.H. Hutchinson (AEU), Mr Bellamy (NUR) and Montagu Lyms were invited to attend a divisional meeting.⁵³ However, the same old problems soon reared their unwelcome heads, starting with Fraser's decision not to stand at Peterborough.

The party now returned to familiar territory and asked John Mansfield to stand. However, from 1923 onwards Mansfield became increasingly reticent about standing. In March 1924, Mansfield argued that in order to obtain a 'real and effective organisation', and secure

⁵² Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 15 December 1923.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11 October 1924.

increased funds for the party, that an alternative candidate be selected. However, Mansfield once again stood as candidate for Peterborough at the 1924 General Election. His decision was largely governed by the circumstances rather than enthusiasm to stand. By 11 October 1924 the party still did not have a candidate and looked unlikely to secure one in time. Recognizing the ‘emergency’, Mansfield agreed to stand once again. In 1925, reticence turned into refusal. The Divisional Committee asked for a final time if Mansfield would reconsider his decision not to stand, he replied that he would not.⁵⁴

The party’s fortunes took an upturn in 1926 when they appointed Frank Horrabin as the Labour candidate. He had a close affiliation with the area having been raised nearby. He and his wife Winifred also came with years of experience campaigning for the socialist cause. They put this know-how to good use in building the party’s organization and propaganda, contributing to the Peterborough DLP’s only inter-war General Election victory in 1929, serving until 1931 where he was one among many Labour politicians to lose their seat.

The entry of the Horrabin family onto the local political scene was of considerable significance. However, the general experience of the party is perhaps captured by the views of two local candidates, one Conservative (1918) the other Labour (1938). Henry Lygon, who contested Peterborough unsuccessfully for the Conservatives in December 1910, and who was adopted as the party’s candidate for the next General Election (1918), submitted his resignation. According to a report, his resignation was motivated by two related factors. Firstly, his wish to focus more on his work for the London County Council and that such work would be rendered near impossible alongside giving sufficient attention to ‘a large and mainly rural constituency...some parts of which were not readily accessible’.⁵⁵ The report went on to state that Lygon was of the opinion that the new Reform Bill had made a constituency so large as to

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 March 1925.

⁵⁵ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 12 January 1918.

‘impose upon any candidate a physical and financial burden he could not undertake’.⁵⁶ There were also personal considerations behind Lygon’s decision. However, it is without doubt that the spatial changes to the constituency influenced his resignation.

In 1938, the then Labour candidate Ernest Davies regretfully submitted his letter of resignation. The precise details of the letter are unknown, but the planned communication to the press was telling: ‘That we communicate to the press that Mr Davies desires a larger organisation involving a greater expenditure than the Division can afford’.⁵⁷ This summarised two endemic and related problems for the Peterborough DLP: establishing and embedding an organization that reached into every pocket of the division, and securing the finance to make this possible. The challenges of campaigning in a large constituency further exposed the financial difficulties faced by the party, which were compounded by the inability to secure a candidate funded by another organization, such as a trade union, compounded further still by the uninviting electoral prospects apparently on offer to Labour in the expanded Peterborough Division. The party got stuck in a rut due to this combination of factors. From this developed a habit – to plump for Mansfield in desperation or when there were signs the search was getting nowhere. Though, as the appointment and electoral success of Frank Horrabin showed, there was always the hope of a prospective candidate willing and able to take on considerable financial burden.⁵⁸

The effects of the Boundary Review were felt on more than the appointment of candidates, extending to the search for a party organizer. The party’s search for a local organizer was several years old before they settled on a suitable appointment in 1926; mention of the need for a full-time organizer first entered the minutes in July 1923, rearing its head at

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 January 1918.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 February 1938.

⁵⁸ Peterborough DLP Archives. Miscellaneous – Balance Sheet, 1929.

regular intervals.⁵⁹ Much of the initial discussion centred on the question of financing an organizer. Including a resolution at the 1925 Annual General Meeting (AGM) to send a circular to all branches asking what financial contribution they were able to commit.⁶⁰ At this stage, no consideration was given to the requirements, skills or past experience of any potential suitor. The appointment of Frank Horrabin as candidate sparked enthusiasm in the search for an organizer, with the issue quickly rising to the top of the agenda. At his inaugural AGM, Horrabin urged those present to ‘immediately advertis[e]’ for an organizer.⁶¹

Three candidates were interviewed for the position. Of crucial significance is what was noted about the three men and what this tells us about the thought process and organizational priorities of the Peterborough DLP’s Divisional Committee. Mr Riley, a former agent for Frank Hodges in the Lichfield Division and now unemployed due to Hodges’ withdrawal as candidate, was a schoolteacher by trade. He helped Hodges win the Lichfield seat in 1923, but it was lost in 1924. His past experience in managing party finances would undoubtedly have been to the benefit of the Peterborough DLP. The second candidate, Mr Parker, came with experience from the Northwich Division in Cheshire. Currently unemployed but a trained weaver by profession, he had experience of editing a local labour movement newsletter, as well as some close election results but no victories. In terms of communicating the party message there was a case for Parker to be given the position.⁶²

However, it was the third potential candidate who was ultimately successful. His previous experience combined with the wider context of the formative years of the Peterborough DLP’s developed help to explain why this was so. R.A. (Robert) Watson was

⁵⁹ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 7 July 1923. Peterborough Archives. Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 3 May 1924; 10 May 1924; 31 May 1924; 22 November 1924; 8 February 1925; 25 April 1925 and 17 April 1926. Peterborough Archives.

⁶⁰ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 25 July 1925.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17 April 1926.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 21 August 1926.

previously the agent for Noel Buxton and George Edwards. His availability arose at this time due to Edwards' withdrawal as candidate for rural South Norfolk. As this suggests Watson had 'considerable experience in rural areas' and was a member of the ALU.⁶³ The mixed composition of the Peterborough Division following the alterations to the boundaries was something the party was fully aware of, producing mixed organizational and electoral results. The appointment of Watson can be read as part of a further effort to engage with and appeal to voters across the entirety of the Division.

Policy Framing and Campaigning, 1918-1939

Activists within the Peterborough DLP were conscious of the geographical extent and diversity of the Peterborough Division. This was evident in statements (mentioned above) by John Mansfield to agricultural workers as well as the appointment of R.A. Watson as the local party organizer owing to his experience of working in rural areas. This gave the impression of a party keen to demonstrate how it represented workers from all sectors. The thinking of party activists was no doubt influenced by the redrawn boundaries and the electorate and occupational groups now encompassed within the Division. However, the framing of party policy during election campaigns illustrated where the expertise of activists rested and perhaps expectations of where the party was likely to get votes.

Such expectations would have been shaped by the strength of the local Conservatives. Aside from Henry Lygon, the Conservatives were seemingly undeterred by the new boundaries which took in North Northamptonshire, a Conservative-leaning area. The party had reasons to be optimistic. As we saw, the pre-1918 Northern Division of Northamptonshire, consisting of the Petty Sessional Division (PSD) of Kettering, Oundle PSD, the Soke of Peterborough, the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 21 August 1926.

part of Stamford Metropolitan Borough in Northants and Thrapston PSD,⁶⁴ regularly returned Conservatives (see Chart 1).

With the addition of the old North Northamptonshire division to Peterborough came a shift to a more orthodox brand of conservatism⁶⁵ and rural patriotism, echoing findings elsewhere.⁶⁶ Criticizing Free Trade, one Conservative candidate asked trade unionists why ‘Germany and other European countries’ should benefit and recover through free access to British markets.⁶⁷ Peterborough’s spatial acquisitions also brought Henry Brassey to the new division. With him came him all his experience and rapport with the electorate of North Northants, as well as experience of organizing in a largely rural constituency.⁶⁸ That Brassey was a major in the British army meant that his patriotic credentials were credible. In 1918, he found local patriotism at fever pitch and ran a campaign that promised to “stick it to the Hun”. He achieved applause from an audience when he expressed his opinion about Germans in general: ‘I have never liked the Germans, I hate them more to-day than ever, and I think the less we have of them in this country after the war the better. (Loud applause).’⁶⁹ A fortnight later he wrote of sending ‘the Huns who are here back to their crime-saturated fatherland’.⁷⁰ In 1923, Brassey played on a similar theme. These views resonated with the local electorate as illustrated by Brassey’s victories in 1918, 1922, 1923 and 1924 (see Table 1).

⁶⁴ Frederic A. Youngs, Jr., *Guide to the Local Administrative Units of England: Volume II: Northern England* (London, 1991), 828-829.

⁶⁵ Keith Laybourn, ‘The Peterborough Labour Movement.’

⁶⁶ Nicholas Mansfield, ‘Farmworkers and Local Conservatism in South West Shropshire, 1916-23’, in: Stuart Ball and Ian Holliday (eds), *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 36-57.

⁶⁷ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 23 November 1923.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 August 1918.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 November 1918.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 December 1918.

Table 1. General Election results for Peterborough, 1918-1935⁷¹

Election	Candidate	Party	Votes	%
1918	H.L.C. BRASSEY	COALITION CONSERVATIVE	9,516	44.1
	J. Mansfield	Labour	8,832	41.0
	T.I. Slater	Liberal	3,214	14.9
1922	H.L.C. BRASSEY	CONSERVATIVE	13,560	47.5
	J. Mansfield	Labour	8,668	30.4
	G. Nicholls	Liberal	6,290	22.1
1923	H.L.C. BRASSEY	CONSERVATIVE	11,634	43.4
	J. Mansfield	Labour	8,177	30.5
	D. Boyle	Liberal	7,014	26.1
1924	H.L.C. BRASSEY	CONSERVATIVE	14,195	50.4
	J. Mansfield	Labour	9,180	32.6
	D. Boyle	Liberal	4,786	17.0
1929	J.F. HERRABIN	LABOUR	14,743	39.2
	H.L.C. Brassey	Conservative	14,218	37.7
	J.W.F. Hill	Liberal	8,704	23.1
1931	LORD BURGHLEY	CONSERVATIVE	26,640	65.2
	J.F. Horrabin	Labour	14,206	34.8
1935	LORD BURGHLEY	CONSERVATIVE	22,677	56.6
	E.A.J. Davies	Labour	17,373	43.4

The parliamentary Labour Party assumed the role of forming electoral policy, however, there was a small opening for local candidates to ‘depart only slightly’ from official policy.⁷² Not much but enough to get an insight into if and how the Peterborough DLP articulated a localised party identity through its framing of national policy. On his nomination as the candidate for Peterborough in the 1918 General Election, John Mansfield stated that he accepted in full the programme of the Labour Party (i.e. *Labour and the New Social Order*). There was support for Mansfield and his viewpoint across the division. The divisional meeting that endorsed him saw a reported 800 members attending. Support for Mansfield went beyond the confines of the city. Endorsements came from members of the Executive Committee and from affiliated trade unions, such as the Thrapston branch of the NUR.⁷³ The longevity of his

⁷¹ F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1945* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1977).

⁷² McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, 100.

⁷³ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 5 February 1919.

time as Party Secretary, then Honorary Party Secretary, point towards his popularity and industriousness even in challenging circumstances. As well as being an important figure in the overall direction of the party, Mansfield played a frontline role in framing the 1918 Labour Manifesto and *Labour and the New Social Order* to the local electorate.

Mansfield wrote his own election leaflet for the 1922 General Election. The leaflet, as to be expected, was critical of the Coalition Government, and referenced ‘unprecedented’ unemployment, ‘unfair’ taxation and industrial unrest. The mining and agricultural industries were said to be in a ‘state of despair’, while the judgement of the Coalition was brought into question by events in the Near East that, while ultimately averted, could have resulted in conflict with Turkey. On trade and unemployment, Mansfield described how the policy of wage reduction to lower the cost of production was ‘economically unsound’ as it only touched the fringes of the problem. The real problem was the chaotic condition of foreign exchanges. Referring to his own industry, engineering, in Peterborough, he pointed out that 50% of products from factories in the area were, in normal times, transported to Russia, the Balkan States and elsewhere. This assemblage of information convinced Mansfield that focusing on the wage question was a ‘futility’ that failed to address the bigger issues: ‘This is an international question and can only be solved on international lines’.⁷⁴ The leaflet crossed scales, international to local. When the local was specifically referenced it was through the lens of the Peterborough engineer, a familiar one for Mansfield.

In terms of content, the Peterborough DLP’s 1923 campaign was consistent with the issues raised by the national Labour Party. The emphasis was on the material concerns of the electorate. Tariff Reform and Free Trade were seen as *the* issues for this election. Tariffs were not a remedy for unemployment, but there was an ‘urgent need’ to restore foreign trade and secure recovery after WWI. During the local campaign Mansfield pledged his support for a

⁷⁴ Peterborough DLP Archives. Parliamentary Elections.

programme of ‘necessitous work’, involving the development of electricity supply, transport facilities, land drainage and reclamation. In agriculture, Mansfield and the party were consistent with earlier appeals in advocating the restoration of the Wages Boards. Additionally, the party favoured an international conference to deal with world trade and, relatedly, a ‘graduated war debt redemption tax’ on all individual fortunes to relieve taxation in other directions.⁷⁵ There was no tailoring of party policy to reflect local conditions.

When published election material did take on a more localistic flavour the balance was in favour of City of Peterborough-based industries. The challenge of presenting a balanced message in a mixed constituency was not unique to Peterborough.⁷⁶ The reference to engineering in the 1918 local manifesto has already been mentioned. This urban lean, more specifically a lean towards railway-associated industries, was perhaps to be expected. Party Secretary John Mansfield was an engineer by trade, and, given the local importance of the railways as a source of employment, representations from amongst the railway workers was to be expected. George Palmer was one such example. He was elected to the Town Council as representative for the city’s North Ward in 1918, he worked as a railway express driver for London North Eastern Railway.⁷⁷ Another was John Benstead, who held various positions in the Peterborough DLP, including vice-president and president. He, too, worked on the railways and would eventually become NUR General Secretary, holding this position from 1943-1947.⁷⁸ A 1927 document listing the directors of the Peterborough Labour Club Ltd. is also indicative. Of the nine directors, eight were either engineers or held railway-related employment; the remaining director was a fruit retailer.⁷⁹ These industries were centred on the City of

⁷⁵ *The Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 23 November 1923.

⁷⁶ Duncan Tanner, ‘The Pattern of Labour Politics, 1918-1939’, in: D. Tanner, C. Williams and D. Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 125-126.

⁷⁷ *Peterborough Citizen*, 20 June 1933.

⁷⁸ *Peterborough Citizen*, 31 October 1939.

⁷⁹ Peterborough DLP Archives. Miscellaneous.

Peterborough. This can be coupled alongside what we have already seen in terms of the predominance of the city with regards to committee and other meetings. The picture begins to develop of an *urban* Labour Party, whilst the urban leanings of election material become more understandable.

Nevertheless, the party still tried to appeal across the length and breadth of the division, urban and rural. In the space of three days Mansfield visited New England, Woodston, and Dogsthorpe, all centrally located, as well as Newark, Werrington, Barnack, Helpston, and Peakirk, which were further from the city centre.⁸⁰ In 1919, Mansfield struck a more confident note with regard to Labour in the rural areas of the division. According to the *Standard*: 'He [Mansfield] felt he could go round in many villages now without the feeling that he was amongst strangers. They were definitely linked with the Labour Party'.⁸¹ However, analysing the 1918 vote from the information available, the *Standard* pointed out that Labour's strongholds were to be found in the 'north end of the town' of Peterborough and parts of Thrapston district. The 'north end of town' coincides with the New England area, home to many of the division's railway workers. However, even in Peterborough it was said that the result for Brassey, the Conservative candidate, was better than expected.⁸² Translating the organizational endeavours of the Mansfield era into electoral success would require the campaigning *nous* of a skilled propagandist.

The dynamism of Peterborough DLP activity between 1926 and 1931 owes much to the efforts of the local candidate and organizer, Frank Horrabin and Robert Watson, respectively. A renowned cartoonist, cartographer and Marxist, Horrabin also made his name as an itinerant speaker, this was especially so during the times before and during the 1926

⁸⁰ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 23 November 1923.

⁸¹ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 4 January 1919.

⁸² *Ibid.*

General Strike.⁸³ Horrabin would draw on all of these skills throughout his involvement with the Peterborough DLP. Within months of their arrival there was a spate of organizational activity in the form of meetings and divisional rallies. In October and November 1926, Horrabin was to travel the Division giving addresses at Brigstock, Eye, Glapthorne, Helpston, Oundle, numerous ward meetings in Peterborough, Ringstead, Walton, Werrington and Woodford.⁸⁴ Watson and Horrabin were keen to extend this tour elsewhere in the constituency to Barnack, Glington, Gretton, Harringworth, Newborough, Thrapston and Wittering. Reproducing this list of place names serves the purpose of demonstrating the intent of the party to appeal across the whole division, to be a truly divisional party. This was further illustrated in the request to the National Executive to have Peterborough included in their list of rural constituencies for Labour's Rural Campaign.⁸⁵

Horrabin, like Mansfield, explicitly endorsed the national Labour Party programme.⁸⁶ He was aware of and felt the filtration of national scale issues into the division by reaffirming that Labour was not financed from abroad, a reference to the 'Zinoviev Letter'. He was also careful to base his appeal in local place. Of the workers 'by hand and brain' that Labour proclaimed to stand for it was 'railwaymen, farm and factory workers' that were listed first, followed by shop keepers, shop assistants and 'the rest'.⁸⁷ Therefore, there was some spatial-type reform-induced tuning. There was a nod to agricultural workers in Horrabin's eponymously titled "Election Special" which reproduced materials from *Labour and the Nation*, the national party programme.⁸⁸ This combined with the speaking schedule raised

⁸³ Letter from Frank to Winifred Horrabin, 10 May 1926. Papers and Publications relating to Winifred and Frank Horrabin. UDX 283/1. Hull History Centre.

⁸⁴ Peterborough DLP Minute Book 1918-1951. 9 October 1926.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 December 1926.

⁸⁶ Peterborough DLP Archives. Parliamentary Elections – 1929 Election Programme - Horrabin.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Peterborough DLP Archives. Parliamentary Elections – Horrabin's Election Special.

levels of optimism. Horrabin and Watson were positive about rural support. Watson recalled addresses in rural areas given by Horrabin: ‘He [Horrabin] has had big audiences...and enjoyed a fine one at Alwalton on Sunday in the rain!’.⁸⁹ Meanwhile Horrabin himself gave the impression of confidence when he suggested that “perhaps the village that most needed waking up to-day was the biggest village of all – Peterborough”. (Hear, hear).⁹⁰ However, local newspaper reports indicated that it was Peterborough that came through for the party whilst the Conservatives held the villages and rural areas.⁹¹ Horrabin’s success in 1929 (see Table 1) was not due to a rural breakthrough but an enthusiastic and well-financed campaign push that bore its ripest fruit in Peterborough’s urban areas. Unfortunately for Labour and Horrabin, a budget crisis and splits within the party resulted in huge seat losses with Peterborough being one seat easily (re-)captured by the Conservatives.

Less material has survived covering the campaign efforts of Ernest Davies who was the prospective parliamentary candidate for the Peterborough DLP from 1935 to 1938. However, it is worth re-emphasizing a point made earlier regarding Davies’ resignation. The reason given for his resignation was a desire for a larger organization. The difficulties experienced by the Peterborough DLP in relation to campaigning in a predominantly rural areas confirm findings from elsewhere.⁹² There were, for instance, similarities with the experience of some parties in rural and semi-rural areas of Wales. In Pembrokeshire, it was down to a handful of activists to get the Labour message out across a sprawling constituency.⁹³ Therefore, it is plausible to see Davies’ decision as a long-term effect of the redrawing of constituency boundaries that took place in 1917/18. The situation in inter-war period was one of redrawn and expanded

⁸⁹ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 17 May 1929.

⁹⁰ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 17 May 1929.

⁹¹ *Peterborough and Hunts Standard*, 7 June 1929.

⁹² McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, 151-156.

⁹³ Tanner, ‘The Pattern of Labour Politics, 1918-1939,’ 113-139.

constituency boundaries. Activists within the Peterborough DLP actively sought to position the party as one that represented the whole constituency. However, election campaign content illustrates how, on multiple occasions over time, lip-service only was paid to agricultural workers.

Conclusion

By examining various positions the Peterborough DLP and its members took on questions of organizational structure; candidate and organizer selection and retention; as well as election campaigning and policy framing, alongside wider institutional and historical factors internal and external to the Labour Party, this article demonstrated the enduring influence of the Boundary Commission and Review 1917-1918 on party decision-making and the shaping of local party identity.

In the context of expanded constituency boundaries, local Labour activists had a decision to make. The engineers and railway-workers that headed the party positioned it as one reflecting the *whole* division rather than a section of it. This aligned with Labour's aspirations to be a party of hand and brain workers and to better reflect constituency opinion. This aim was enunciated in the 1918 Constitution. Peterborough activists took this and set out to forge a local identity, sense of belonging and place, which found expression in areas such as organizer recruitment. However, realities on the ground often inhibited such aspirations as the record of early candidate retention illustrated, and policy framing biases detracted from the more universal message they wanted to portray.

Even today, and despite a shift to online campaigning, constituency-based parties remain the face of the party that electorates see at hustings and on doorsteps. They play a crucial role in portraying national party policy in a way that appeals to voters. The case of the Peterborough DLP showed the judgments and biases activists came to and presented to voters.