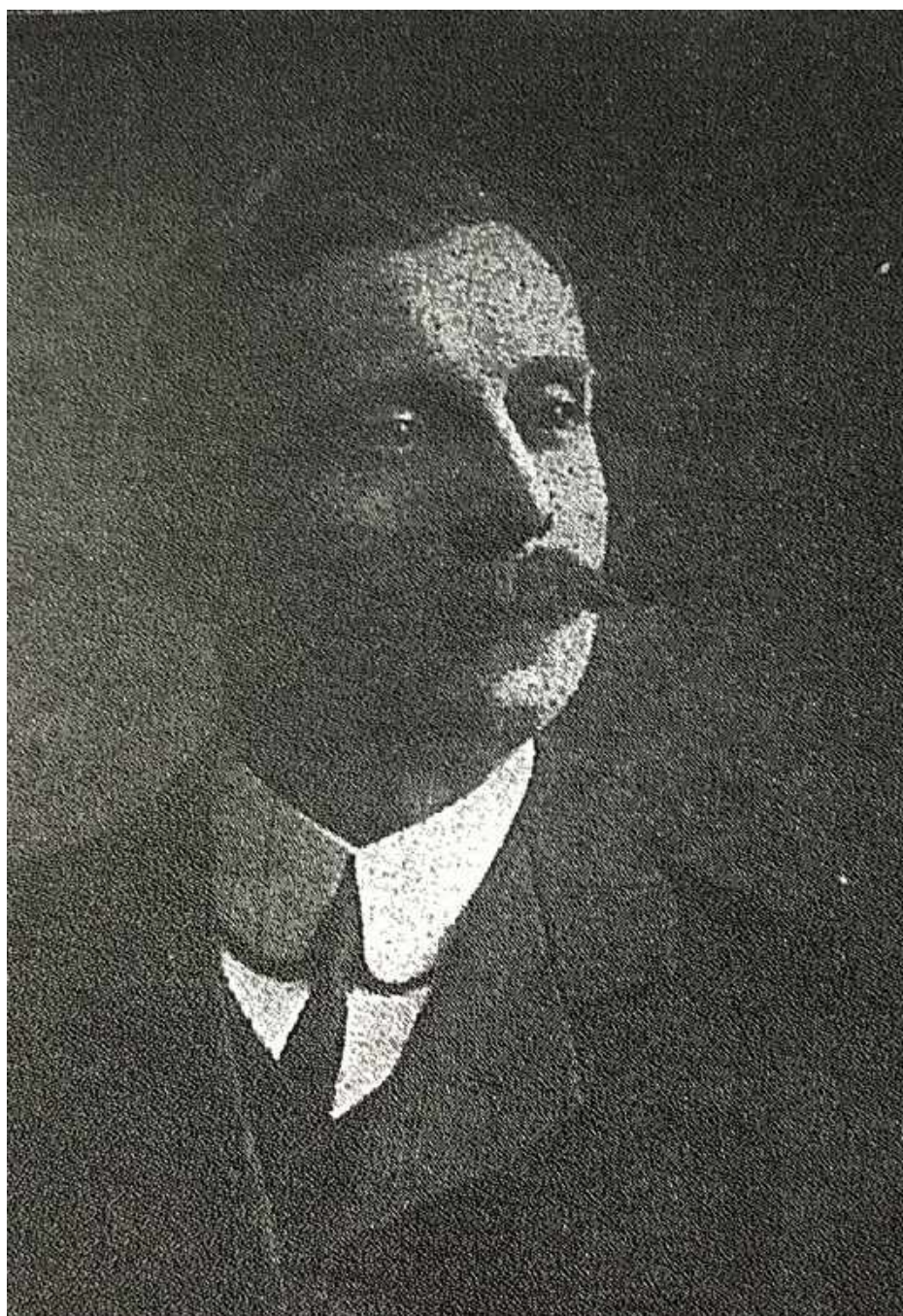


Wigan man stands for women!

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We are very pleased to be able to publish this piece of 'lost' history which brings to light the Wigan man, Thorley Smith (1873-1940), who was the first Parliamentary candidate to stand on a women's suffrage ticket. Supported by the working women of Wigan as well as Emmeline Pankhurst and other big names of the suffrage movement he ran an impressive campaign, as author Tom Walsh, also a Wigan man, notes: 'He Served his Generation Faithfully'.



Thorley Smith. Image courtesy of Tom Walsh

In the 1900's Wigan to many, particularly in the Metropolis, would be seen as a political backwater. How very wrong the 'chattering classes' were to make that assumption. The north of England was a hotbed of discontent, in the forefront of the struggle for women's suffrage. After all it was in Emmeline Pankhurst's Manchester home in 1903 that the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed. To the astonishment of the establishment Wigan was at the forefront of the rebellion, paving the way for women's enfranchisement. Wigan's result in the 1906 general election proves this in no uncertain manner – sending what I'm sure would be a collective shiver down the backs of the political elite of the time.

Hubert Sweeny was selected in 1904 [1] to stand for Wigan as the parliamentary candidate on a 'Votes for Women' platform, incidentally Thorley Smith backed his campaign enthusiastically. A committee of the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage, the Lancashire and Cheshire Women's Textile and other Workers Representation Committee, a group of mainly working class suffragists were amongst those who chose to support a Women's Suffrage candidate in Wigan. Much of the work to publicise Sweeny's candidature was undertaken by a group of suffragist working women, especially by the women-led Wigan and District Weaver, Winders, Reelers and Beamers Association. Sweeny also received the support from the women of the town in general. Encouragement was also to come from all corners of the country and from many leaders of the suffrage movement in its different guises.

Mrs Pankhurst (WSPU) addressed a public meeting on 27th January 1904, and moved a resolution.

Extracts from the report read that she hoped that the worthy example being set by the constituency of Wigan would very soon be followed by other constituencies throughout the country. She further went on to say that she wanted the men of Wigan to set such an example to the whole country that when their grandchildren looked back at the time when women were not enfranchised, the men of Wigan would feel proud of what their fathers had done. [2] This would not be Mrs Pankhurst's last visit to the town. She would later visit Wigan to support Thorley Smith after he took up the cudgel on the surprise withdrawal of Sweeny in late 1905, leaving little time to choose a replacement. Thorley Smith was chosen as the new candidate on 2nd January 1906 just a few weeks before the poll. Smith threw himself into the battle with great commitment and vigour, addressing up to three meetings each day.

The reason given as to Sweeny's late withdrawal from the fray was that that he would lose his livelihood as a headteacher if he stood. There is possibly more than a grain of truth in that assertion.

Remember that most local authorities adopted the policy that on marriage a woman teacher must leave the profession, with the now unbelievable diktat; no questions, no debate, no exceptions. It is unlikely that Sweeny's employers would have been supporters of women's rights either, at the ballot box or the work place. They may have looked unfavourably at his involvement at what many would have seen as the 'rabble rousers' of the day. The nagging doubt I have with this synopsis is that he must have known the likely consequences that would ensue when he accepted the nomination in the first place. I can't help but wonder if he didn't have the stomach for the fight. Either way more than a century later we are in the realms of

supposition and on balance I think it's reasonable to accept the motivation given regarding his employment concerns.

Whatever the reason, Thorley Smith was a more than adequate replacement and it could be argued this was a better outcome given his local connections, I subscribe wholeheartedly with that conjecture. It may seem very parochial but I think Sweeny's southern accent would not have 'cut the mustard' in Wigan, especially in the days before the wireless and other mass spoken communications. This was at a time when accents could vary enormously from village to village. Many would find his accent baffling and bewildering; not to mention his problem with the northern 'lingo'. In Wigan this 'lingo' was often spoken broadly and could seem like a foreign language to the unaccustomed ear!

Not everyone was pleased with Smith's decision to stand on a suffrage ticket, including his colleagues in the local Labour Party who refused to back his candidature. Although they had been happy to support Hubert Sweeny's 'tilt'. This must have been a hammer blow. But, being the brave man he was, Smith was determined to carry on without their blessing. He was later made an Alderman (1932) so any animosity must have disappeared with the passage of time!

Nationally, it was a different matter. A few years ago, fortunately and quite by chance, I came across a letter from Keir Hardie sent to his agent and published in *The Wigan Observer* during the campaign.

This is the transcript of the letter verbatim.

Dear Sir – it is now quite certain I shall not be able to get to Wigan before the election, as I shall need to be in my constituency where the election takes place on the 18th. I regret this, as I feel the presence in the House of Commons of a member able to devote his special attention to the claims of women for political enfranchisement would be of great help, and I heartily commend Mr. Thorley Smith's candidature to the electors of Wigan – Yours faithfully J. Keir Hardie [3]

This letter must have more than made up for his disappointment at being abandoned by the party locally and must have acted as a great incentive to carry the banner of universal suffrage; knowing that he was far from alone in the labour movement. He was a Labour member of Wigan Council so it must have been difficult for him to work with the local party after ignoring their urging not to stand, however he was clearly a man who put conscience before party, a rare commodity in politics.

During the fortnight Women's Suffrage campaign over eighty meetings were held in Wigan.[4] Due to lack of funds the campaign was fought on a shoestring with most political meetings held in the open. [5] Thorley Smith's 'doughty henchwomen' the Wigan working weavers addressed four meetings each day at factory gates, on street corners, at the gas works and tram sheds – anywhere they could find a male voter. Thorley Smith supported by visiting women speakers held two or three open-air meetings each evening – remember this was in the depths of winter. His election campaign reflected his Labour leanings. He promised to support and campaign for all current organised Labour platforms whilst at the same time giving Women's Suffrage his first priority.

Thorley Smith claimed to be the first to stand on a purely Women's Suffrage platform in his 1926 election address (below), in which he published a letter from Sarah Reddish dated March 1906. To date I have found nothing to contradict his assertion; Mrs Pankhurst's remarks mentioned earlier also seem to lend credence to his claim.

AN APPEAL TO THE LADY VOTERS

For services rendered during the 1906 General Election on behalf of the Franchise for Women.

Lancashire and Cheshire

Women Textile and Other Workers' Representation Committee.

Head Office: Trades & Labour Council, 5, John Dalton St., Manchester.

March 1st, 1906.

Dear Mr. Thorley Smith,

The above-named Committee at a meeting recently held in Manchester, asked me to convey to you their very sincere thanks for the services you have rendered on their behalf by your candidature in the Wigan Parliamentary Election. It is a pleasure to tell you that the Committee were unanimous in their expression of appreciation, and in this they recognised your perception of and devotion to principle. We were glad of your help as a practical working man and a known and tried trade unionist. It is true that you, and we, were subjected to adverse criticism by some whom we should very reasonably have expected to be working with us. We were working women on the political path, not lying helpless, but very active, and they "passed us by on the other side."

You accepted this candidature on behalf of this body of working women, because you perceived that their cause included all that you and your trade union were working for, and the same principle exactly—political action to gain representation on independent lines.

You stood for an accepted principle but *alone* in the sense of unusual conditions. It has hitherto been men's privilege to select candidates for Parliament, but in this case woman formed the active body. You did well and we are grateful. Our cause was good—for all workers, men and women,—and it is gratifying that so many Wigan voters saw that it was good.

You polled well, remembering that there were two opponents and very little time for the whole campaign. The fight has done good in having converted many from indifference to seeing the importance and the necessity of the working woman's claim.

Please give our thanks also to Mrs. Smith for the part she took. She was bright, and brave, and true through it all. I believe she quietly spoke a word of cheer to you when she realized that the result was less than complete success.

I am, on behalf of the Committee,
yours sincerely,

SARAH REDDISH, *Treasurer.*

If this meets with your approval, kindly show your appreciation by recording your vote for the Pioneers who secured the vote which you now enjoy.

Yours truly,

THORLEY SMITH.

Printed and Published by E. Sidebotham, at 31, Millgate, Wigan.

Thorley Smith election address, 1926, citing the 1906 election as a reason for women to vote for him.

Image courtesy of Tom Walsh

On election day Thorley Smith was seen accompanied by six political 'amazons' who 'amazed the natives' as they drove through Wigan in a carriage pulled by four horses with two women out-riders, the leaders and individuals of various women's groups active in Wigan. In the carriage were Mrs Pankhurst, Eva Gore-Booth, Esther Roper, Selina Cooper, Sarah Reddish and Dora Monettefiore. [6] What a stir this must have caused and I'm sure did no harm to his candidature, quite the opposite I would have thought.

The result of the election was:

- Sir Francis Powell (Conservative) 3,573
- votes Thorley Smith (Women's
- Suffrage) 2,205 votes William Woods
- (Liberal) 1,900 votes

Thorley Smith secured almost 29% of the vote, pushing the Liberal into third place. The result was all the more remarkable when viewed in context of the national result. The Liberals, led by Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman, won a landslide majority at the election. The Conservatives, led by Arthur Balfour, lost more than half their seats, including Balfour's own seat in Manchester East and leaving them with their lowest ever number of seats.

The election saw a 5.4% swing from the Conservative Party to the Liberal Party, the largest ever seen at the time. However, if only looking at seats contested in both 1900 and 1906 the Conservative vote fell by 11.6%. This resulted in the 1906 general election being dubbed the 'Liberal landslide', and is ranked alongside the 1931, 1945, 1983 and 1997 general elections as the largest landslide election victories.[7] On these figures, without Thorley Smith the Liberals could have reasonably expected to take Wigan. The Wigan result must have sent shock waves through the establishment, and I'm sure gave them food for thought at the very least! The astonishment didn't stop at London, *The Wigan Examiner* exclaimed 'We cannot believe there are 2,205 suffragists among Wigan voters.' [8]

The Wigan result also compares favourably with the second man to put his head above the parapet, Bertrand Russell, an academic, member of the aristocracy and cheer leader for the chattering classes, who stood as Suffragist in the Wimbledon 1907 by-election where he received a respectable 25% of the vote, albeit against a single Conservative candidate. I think it's not unreasonable to assume that Thorley Smith's Wigan result the previous year must at the very least have given his notion to stand encouragement. Wimbledon's local paper *The Guardian* in an article published on 3rd May 2013 claimed that Russell and Wimbledon had made history on 7th May 1907 by being the first constituency to field a candidate on a suffragist ticket; those accolades properly belong to Thorley Smith and Wigan.



Thorley Smith's gravestone. Image courtesy of Tom Walsh

I recently located Thorley Smith's grave in Wigan Cemetery, to my chagrin the headstone was in an appalling condition. He himself was a Monumental Mason. Oh, the irony of it! After highlighting this in *The Wigan Observer* a local business has offered to fund a replacement. Wigan Council has also indicated that they are minded to celebrate his life by placing a plaque in his memory on the Town Hall. The plaque is to be erected in 2018, a year with special significance the centenary of the first giant step to universal suffrage that was finally achieved in 1928. I am proud that Wigan, Thorley Smith and my forebears played no small part in achieving that with much overdue validity.

Thorley Smith can be summed up by those who knew him best, his family, on his gravestone they chose the epitaph: 'He served his Generation Faithfully'. What a wonderful tribute to a brave and principled man.

Tom Walsh, Wigan.

I count myself among the grandchildren of whom Mrs Pankhurst spoke (paragraph 3) when she said we would look back with pride on what our forebears did in the struggle for women's suffrage. I wholeheartedly concur with her sentiment !

A very special thank you to Alex Miller, Yvonne Eckersley and Rita Fell, Wigan Archives and Local Studies.

References

[1] Wigan Observer, 6th Jan, 1904

[2] Wigan Observer, 27th Jan, 1904

[3] Wigan Observer, Jan, 1906

[4] Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*

[5] Appeal Esther Roper, Working Class Movement Library, Salford

[6] Wigan Examiner, 20th Jan, 1906

[7] BBC News – Programmes – BBC Parliament – 1906: The Liberal landslide

[8] Wigan Examiner, 20th Jan, 1906