

Reviews

which she was persistent and right, was not mentioned.

Common themes throughout the book include modernising the House of Commons, various criticism of the appalling term 'Blair's Babes' used to describe the Labour MPs elected in 1997, and the many ways the political agenda has been changed by these women. Back in 1997, nobody really spoke about mental health and the idea of state-funded childcare was nowhere, yet now both are mainstream. Women like Wera Hobhouse and Maria Miller have changed the law on upskirt-ing and revenge porn. Jess Phillips's

sombre annual reading of the women who have been killed as a result of domestic abuse shows that there is so much more to do.

This volume and its predecessor are great for research purposes or simply to dip in and out of to find out about the diverse achievements of our women MPs. You can only scratch the surface in a book of this size, and it provides a good platform to find out more.

Caron Lindsay is editor of Liberal Democrat Voice and a member of the Federal Board. She joined the SDP on her 16th birthday in 1983

the Habermasian notion of the public sphere to our understanding of how titles were used in Preston. One strength of his work is its ability to recreate a palpable sense of how the newspaper was read in Preston by its 'walking tour' approach to locations in the town where newspapers would have been accessible. By piecing together evidence from a variety of archival material, including oral history recordings and diaries, Hobbs not only tells us who read the local newspapers being published in Preston, but where those papers were read – and how that changes in the period of study. The focus on locations is purposeful because 'the places of newspaper reading ... are concrete evidence of the importance of newspapers, including local newspapers, in people's lives; they were willing to rent, repurpose and even erect purpose-built structures where newspapers could be produced, bought, read and discussed' (p. 68). Thus we see increasingly grand locations for reading local newspapers spring up in a growing Preston alongside increasingly grand locations for the newspapers themselves, particularly after the abolition of compulsory Stamp Duty in 1855. This process also emphasises how communal newspaper reading was in the 1850s because newspapers were expensive and cost the equivalent of an hour's wage for a working man; Hobbs compares the

The local press and Victorian culture

Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855–1900* (Open Book Publishers, 2018)

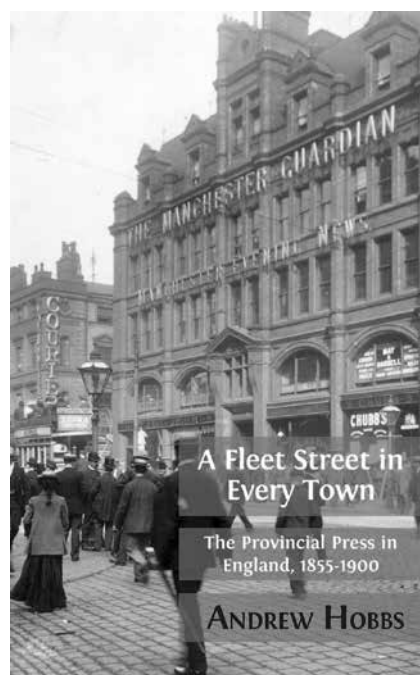
Review by Rachel Matthews

IT IS PERHAPS not surprising that the decline in the reach and scope of the local newspaper in recent years has sparked a resurgent interest in this section of the media, which has been so often passed over in favour of studies of the so-called 'national press'. This makes studies of the local newspaper comparatively rare, and studies of the local newspaper reader, such as this, even rarer. Hobbs's *A Fleet Street in every Town* is, therefore, a welcome addition to the literature on the local newspaper.

This work is ambitious in scope and aspiration, making claims, as it does, to the centrality of the local press to Victorian culture. This is the local newspaper as 'multi-dimensional; a material, cultural, economic and social phenomenon; it places newspapers in their most significant context, and it brings out the centrality of the newspapers to the nineteenth century reading experience' (p. 34.) Focusing on the case study of Preston, Lancashire, this book begins to reclaim the place of the local newspaper in the political and cultural lives of everyday people. While local titles have been too easily

dismissed as unimportant by scholars of the press, Hobbs is persuasive in the case he makes for the aggregate influence of the local newspaper, their ability to inform 'vibrant, argumentative' (p. 23) political participation at a local and national level and their role in creating a sense of place and local identity. Indeed, it is doubtful that the national press, as it is understood today, existed in Victorian England, with London papers circulating in the capital and south-east more than across the country as a whole. In doing so, Hobbs draws on an increasingly popular notion of a media 'ecosystem' to outline how the local newspaper fitted into the overall flow of news and information in Victorian England and to demonstrate its centrality to those flows.

His analysis shifts from the study of national politics as 'done' by powerful people, to concentrate on the significance of local debate in the construction of the national political agenda, by focusing on the reading and making of newspapers on a local level. In doing so, Hobbs makes claim for the continued relevance of



process with the way in which audiences might gather at the cinema to recapture the shared experience of local newspaper consumption.

Of course, this sharing also brought the opportunity to discuss and debate the content of the local newspaper, and Hobbs introduces the idea of Stanley Fish's 'interpretive communities' (pp. 27–29), which bring together readers and writers to create a shared understanding, to differentiate between the most active readers who contributed most to meaning making in relation to the local newspaper, perhaps extending

to writing letters, responding to issues in a title and also in competitor newspapers. In doing so these newspapers were part of the 'conversation' within Preston; the 'speakers' included the local newspapers, their readers and even the wider newspaper ecosystem. Significantly, also, part of this interpretive community was Anthony Hewitson, journalist for the *Preston Guardian* and later owner and editor of the *Preston Chronicle*, whose diaries are analysed in the course of this study. The period is one in which local newspapers were often owned and run for

political purpose and both Conservative and Liberal owners would offer financial backing for titles.¹ Hewitson, while not from Preston, was embedded in the community to the extent that his 'emotional geography' (p. 180) was centred on the town. He was also active in both local and constituency politics for the Liberal Party and he was among those Liberal owners of the press who perceived part of their role to be ensuring the availability of useful information to as many people as possible. These owners tended to include more coverage of parliamentary affairs

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the researchers listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information, please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Sir Robert Torrens (1812–84)

I am looking for the papers of Sir Robert Torrens, who was elected to Parliament for the Borough of Cambridge in 1868, representing the Liberal Party. He lived for many years in South Australia, where he developed the land titles system that still bears his name. He moved to England in the 1860s, where he remained until his death (1884). Most of his papers from his 'Australian' period are held in Adelaide (South Australia). But I have been unable to find any repository of his 'UK' papers. Torrens was confident of his place in history, and (in my view) would have ensured that his UK papers and correspondence were preserved for posterity. Yet, despite considerable efforts, I have been unable to find them. *Peter Butt, Emeritus Professor of Law, University of Sydney; peter.butt@sydney.edu.au.*

Russell Johnston, 1932–2008

Scottish Liberal politics was dominated for over thirty years (1965–95 and beyond) by two figures: David Steel and Russell Johnston. Of the former, much has been written; of the latter, surprisingly little. I am therefore researching with a view to writing a biography of Russell. If any readers can help – with records, other written material or reminiscences – please let me know, either by email or post. *Sir Graham Watson, sirgrahamwatson@gmail.com; 9/3 Merchiston Park, Edinburgh EH10 4PW.*

The life of Professor Reginald W. Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans' Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.*

Emlyn Hooson and the Welsh Liberal Party, 1962–79

The thesis will assess Hooson's influence on the Welsh Liberal Party during this period by paying particular attention to the organisation, policy process and electoral record under his leadership. PhD research at Cardiff University. *Nick Alderton; aldertonnk@cardiff.ac.uk.*

The emergence of the 'public service ethos'

Aims to analyse how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a 'liberal culture' in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors, education authorities, prison warders and the police. *Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

Liberal song and the Glee Club

Aiming to set out the history of Liberal song from its origins to the days of the Liberal Revue and Liberator Songbook. Looking to complete a song archive, the history of the early, informal conference Glee Clubs in the 1960s and 1970s, and all things related. *Gareth Epps; garethepps@gmail.com.*

Anarchism and Liberalism 1880–1980

Some anarchists were successfully influential in liberal networks, starting with many New Liberal networks around the beginning of the 20th Century. My thesis focuses on this earlier period but I am interested in anarchist influences on liberalism throughout the twentieth century. If any readers can help with informing me of their own personal experiences of anarchist ideas or works in liberal networks or relevant historical information they might have I would greatly appreciate it. *Shaun Pitt; shaunjpitt@gmail.com.*

The 1992 general election

The general election of 1992 was the first contested by the Liberal Democrats, who had been formed from the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP just four years before. The new party entered the contest buoyed by parliamentary by-election victories, impressive local election results in 1991, and the high popularity of their leader, Paddy Ashdown.

The party fought an effective campaign, but the election result was disappointing: the Liberal Democrats finished with fewer seats and a lower share of the vote than the Liberal-SDP Alliance had achieved in 1987, and the Conservatives unexpectedly won a fourth term in office. Compared to the dark days of the post-merger period, however, when the party had come a distant fourth in the Euro elections in 1989, perhaps the result was not so bad.

Thirty years on, join **Alison Holmes** (1992 General Election campaign co-ordinator for the Liberal Democrats) and **Dennis Kavanagh** (Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of Liverpool and co-author of *The British General Election of 1992*) to discuss the 1992 general election and its significance. Chair: **Lord Don Foster** (first elected as MP for Bath in the 1992 election).

7.00pm, Monday 31 January (following the Liberal Democrat History Group AGM at 6.30pm)
Online meeting, on Zoom: register via the History Group website at www.liberalhistory.org.uk

and to donate more copies of their titles to public reading rooms. Hobbs argues that, far from being ‘banal’, Hewitson’s paper was ‘self-consciously three things at once – a commercial, cultural and political product’ (p. 212).

Hobbs maintains that the second half of the nineteenth century represents a ‘golden age’ (p. 382) for the local newspaper, able to thrive in an environment free from the compulsory Stamp Duty, but before an era of wide-spread consolidation in the newspaper market made it increasingly difficult for owner-editors like Hewitson to operate. The utility of Hobbs’s work is the way in which his forensic analysis locates titles in their wider cultural context and so begins to demand a broader understanding of the role of local newspapers in communities beyond simple conveyer of information. Yet this palpable connection with the community of Preston is possibly also the main weakness of *A Fleet Street in Every Town*; in this instance, Hobbs’s own ‘emotional geography’ seems largely centred on

Preston, working as he did in the town as a local reporter, albeit more than a century later than the period of study. There is no doubt that this insight has generated Hobbs’s granular approach to the Victorian local newspaper market, but the suggestion of a ‘golden age’ also implies that the writer is succumbing to nostalgia. He himself admits that ‘I now realise that I experienced Victorian local journalism myself, when I started work as a reporter in 1984, because later, when I began to study it, so much was already familiar to me’; but perhaps what Hobbs has done is to find the continuities between local newspaper practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What if this was extended to the twenty-first century? The utility of history to the vexed question of the future of the local newspaper is its ability to tell us what changes, and what stays the same, thereby extrapolating understandings which may be obscured. If Hobbs could reflect more on this issue, then his work would be more readily applicable to arguments for the significance

of the local newspaper in contemporary England.

Dr Rachel Matthews is a historian of the local newspaper in England, with a specific focus on the utility of that approach to contemporary understandings of the industry. She is author of The History of the Provincial Press in England, published by Bloomsbury Academic. She is also a former local newspaper journalist. She is currently Associate Head of School – Research at Coventry University. <https://pureportal.coventry.ac.uk/en/persons/rachel-matthews>

1 In this volume, Hobbs disagrees with my own interpretation of the local newspaper as a primarily commercial product, citing political subsidy as one reason to oppose this reading. However, he also outlines the significance of advertising to the overall business model of Victorian local news and ephemerality of the market, marked as it was by the comings – and, significantly, goings – of unprofitable titles. He also agrees that political allegiance was itself part of the economic success of the local newspaper.