

A QUAKER IN LOCAL POLITICS: WILLIAM GRAVESON OF HERTFORD, 1862 – 1939

William Graveson was the eldest son of Samuel Watson Ward Graveson, who was at the time of William's birth part owner of the draper's shop in Hertford which is still, in 1993, known as "Graveson's". William's grandmother on his mother's side came from a well-known Quaker family, the Hoylands, but she had "married out", as Quaker parlance had it, i.e., had married in an Anglican church,¹ and may even have been "disowned" (expelled from the Society of Friends) for doing so. She retained Quaker links however – three of her children were educated at the Friends' school at Sibford, whose records show that the family was badly off. Perhaps this is why six of Samuel's ten siblings died before they were three years old – though one lived to be ninety.²

When Samuel Watson Ward Graveson came to work in the drapery shop at the age of 24 it had been owned since 1793 by the Pollard family. The deeds show that the property was leasehold, and it was lucky for the Pollards and the Gravesons that the premises were not owned, as so much property in Hertford since the 1815 to 1832 period had been, by the Marquess of Salisbury.³ Both families were active liberals in politics, and would have been ruthlessly evicted by the Tory marquess for daring to vote according to their convictions at parliamentary elections. Part of the premises had at one time been a pub, "The Labour in Vain", and William Graveson later joked that he hoped it was not an appropriate name for his business!⁴

Shortly after arriving in Hertford Samuel Graveson joined the Society of Friends – reference was made to his Quaker forebears – and soon married Emma Salter, from a family whose Quaker connections went back to the seventeenth century.⁵ William was born "over the shop", and his first school was the charming building, now Hertford museum, with its big garden, only 200 yards away.⁶ Its headmaster later took over Hertford grammar school, which dated from James I's reign, and William moved on to that school.⁷ But at the age of 11 he went to Ackworth, the Quaker boarding school in Yorkshire, where he stayed, as children usually did, for four years.⁸ William must have been glad of his relationship to two extended Quaker families, the Hoylands and the Salters. Although Ackworth was a school for both boys and girls, the

sexes were strictly segregated, and only youngsters who were related to one another were allowed to meet and talk on the "flags", the recreation area in front of the school. Frederick Andrews, headmaster from 1877 to 1920, joining a group of pupils there one day, said to a girl, 'I am sure, Emmie, thou art no relation of George'. But Emmie had her answer pat. 'Alice's uncle married my aunt, and Bertram is her cousin, and Kathleen is Bertram's; and George's brother is going to marry Kathleen's sister, so we *are* all relations.'⁹ School life must have encouraged genealogical research. It was at Ackworth that William Graveson first developed his life-long interest in flowering plants; he spoke and wrote often in later life on the flora of Hertfordshire, and his book on British wild flowers ran to a second edition.¹⁰

At 15, Graveson was at home again in Hertford, but only for some 18 months; in 1879 he was apprenticed up north in Darlington, to a Quaker draper and silk mercer.¹¹ He must have enjoyed his time there; in 1927 he took the elegant Assembly Rooms in Hertford's Shire Hall to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his becoming an apprentice, and invited not only his family and friends, but the staff of the Graveson shop.¹² Among his guests was his friend and fellow-assistant from his Darlington days, Stephen Gravely, now like Graveson, a pillar of the Society of Friends in the town where he was in business, Lincoln.¹³ It was at Darlington that Graveson first took an active part in the Adult School movement, another life-long interest of his, and one which continues to enjoy much Quaker support. Graveson's three brothers were also closely involved in Adult School activity.¹⁴

His apprenticeship finished, Graveson, now 21 years old, moved back to Hertford in June 1883. His father had died at the early age of 43, while William was still a boarder at Ackworth, and his mother, the former Emma Salter, one presumes, had been running the draper's shop in co-operation with her late husband's partner, Isaac Robinson.¹⁵ But the main responsibility on the Graveson side now devolved on William, the eldest son.

From his vantage point in Hertford market square, a few yards from the Shire Hall, Graveson had watched that hub of the town's political activity with a keen eye. As a boy of six he had seen the torchlight procession that accompanied Baron Dimsdale's victory at the parliamentary election of 1868,¹⁶ and Graveson never lost his interest in politics. Within 15 months of his return home from the north, he was secretary of the town's Liberal party,¹⁷ and he at once galvanised it into action. Liberalism had been in the doldrums in Hertford; for 16 or 17 years the Tories had dominated the town council, and for six the Liberals had not even put forward a candidate.¹⁸ If a man was known to be a

Liberal, his entrance to public life was barred. Candidates for the office of town councillor were chosen by “scheming wire-pullers” – the words are Graveson’s own – who met at the Green Dragon Inn.¹⁹ Edward Manser, an able and articulate Quaker miller, who in happier times for the liberals had been mayor of the town, put the situation even more succinctly – Hertford had been governed for years by a Tory caucus, made possible by money and beer.²⁰ At the notorious and well-documented December 1832 Hertford election, beer, accompanied by bread and onions, had flowed freely at a town pub for those who promised to vote Tory, and like inducements were available every Tuesday at “Rat’s Castle”, a disused corn-store.²¹ No doubt similar hospitality was dispensed at later Hertford elections. But the Liberal government, borne down at the 1874 general election by “a torrent of gin and beer”, as Gladstone tersely put it, passed in 1883 the Corrupt Practices Act; it made such overt forms of bribery impossible – the cards were not now stacked so high against the Liberals. The Marquess of Salisbury and Baron Dimsdale had still to be reckoned with, but the Liberals now could plead more persuasively to the voters, as they did in the leaflets Graveson distributed throughout the town, to “Give the Liberals a chance”.²² The Tory caucus at the Green Dragon nominally the committee of the conservative working men’s club, (though Manser said they were not working men at all), taking notice of the Corrupt Practices Act, hastily dissolved itself.²³

The election for seats on the town council always took place in November, and it was already October when the Liberals, whose election colour was golden yellow, decided to try to establish some “yellow sands”, as Graveson put it, in the sea of Tory blue. He was the Liberal election agent, and 20 years later he remembered the excitement of that time – the electioneering, the canvassing and re-canvassing of the voters, the floods of oratory, and himself watching with beating heart as the 3½ hours of counting votes went on at the Shire Hall.²⁴ Against all the odds the Liberal candidates, among whom was Graveson’s own business partner, the gentle Isaac Robinson, won all four seats!

One might have expected this 1884 victory to have whetted Graveson’s own appetite for civic office, and that he would himself stand for election as a town councillor, but it was 12 years before he did so. One must conclude that he simply could not afford the time for regular local government work – he had to concentrate his attention on the family drapery business. His partner Isaac Robinson was, as we have seen, one of the four Liberals elected in 1884, and was to be mayor in 1895, and probably the shop could not allow both of its managers to devote much of their time to municipal duties. It behoves us to

remember how long shop hours were in those days. According to G.R. Durrant, a Tory and a shop-keeper in Hertford himself, shop assistants in 1890 were working a 70-hour week; he moved an amendment at a debate that year in favour of limiting the assistants' hours to 66 a week!²⁵ As late as 1918 shops were open on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8.45 a.m. to 7 p.m., on Thursdays they closed at 1 p.m., on Fridays at 8, and on Saturdays at 9 p.m.²⁶ It was a working week of 58½ hours. It is true that most of Graveson's staff lived on the premises. There was a dining room, a hall (later the directors' boardroom), a kitchen, and several bedrooms upstairs, and here lived, as William's brother Samuel remembered, their parents, the seven children, two women assistants and two men assistants.²⁷ Samuel also remembered that the men's clothing department gave off a pervading odour of rank corduroy trousers and smocks – a reminder of the agricultural labourers garb which would be a large part of Graveson's stock at that time.

But if running the shop left Graveson no time for taking civic office, he made time for the Adult School, and for local Quaker activities. As soon as he returned from Darlington he asked the Monthly Meeting for permission to use the Small Meeting House at Hertford for Adult School meetings.²⁸ It is hard to believe now, but in fact at that time most children left school at ten years of age, and the Adult Schools supplemented this meagre ration of education with a broad and everchanging curriculum on Sunday afternoons. The Hertford one, after a very slow start, with only two students²⁹, soon established itself, and lasted for some 60 years. Evening weekday sessions would not have been well-supported; the local Quaker Monthly Meeting minutes for 1888 sadly record that although Sunday meetings for worship were well attended by Friends, hardly any men who were engaged in business came to mid-week religious meetings,³⁰ and in view of the shop hours just described, one cannot be surprised.

Graveson's record of service to the local Society of Friends was a notable one; he was assistant clerk (that is, chairman/secretary) of the Monthly Meeting, the local area group, from 1889 to 1893, and clerk for the following 13 years.³¹ The Monthly Meeting was actively involved in peace work, through the distribution of literature and arranging public gatherings³², at this time there was much emphasis on arbitration as an alternative to war and social reforms were very much on the Quaker agenda too. Graveson himself was a delegate to a conference on allotments, and to another on Housing for the poor.³³ Housing continued to be in the forefront of his interests all his life.

Not until he was 34 years old did Graveson seek election to the borough council, in 1896. His opponent was a local brewer who was also

an officer in the Volunteers. Graveson cheerfully admitted that it was perhaps audacious for him, peaceful and non-combative Quaker as he was, *and* a teetotaler to boot, to put up for election against such a rival, but he pointed out that as the town council was not a licensing authority for public houses, his views on alcohol-drinking were not relevant. On the other hand, the town *did* have a great deal to do with water – in fact the town's water-supply, and its cost, had been a burning topic in Hertford for 40 years and more,³⁴ as Graveson well knew – and so a teetotaler like himself, of course an expert on water, would be a useful member of the town council!³⁵ Incidentally Hertford's citizens at that time do seem to have possessed an incredible thirst for alcoholic beverages; there were 37 public houses, many of them only a few yards from one another, in or near the centre of that town of only 8,500 people.³⁶ The brewer defeated Graveson, who continued however to take part in local politics,³⁷ and in 1901 he was rewarded by being returned at a by-election in All Saints ward with a handsome majority.³⁸ He had been nominated by men from both political parties, and by *ten* women! Women already had the vote of course for local councils, but Graveson was not in favour of allowing them to vote for parliament. He argued that year at a local debating society meeting that women had no organisational powers, and in any case they had not themselves asked for the vote. As a local poet put it,

But Graveson rose, in solemn state,
To urge his serious fear,
That these proposals soon would take
Our women from their sphere.³⁹

He took this same line on other occasions during this period – rather unusually for a Quaker.

Graveson's career as a county councillor began in 1913, and continued until his death in 1939. He did not have to defend his seat after his first election until February 1919; during World War I normal voting arrangements were suspended. When the challenge came it was from an unexpected quarter – the Independent M.P. for East Hertfordshire, Noel Pemberton Billing.⁴⁰ Billing, a wealthy mid-lander, owned among other things, a virulently anti-Jewish newspaper and a torpedo-shaped sports car complete with a loud-speaker. He was well-known to the general public chiefly as the successful defendant in a sensational libel case.⁴¹ During the war, at a political meeting in his constituency, Billing had advocated the mass bombing of German cities from the air, in order to bring the war to a speedy conclusion. (He himself owned aircraft factories, one of which produced the famous

“Spitfire” of World War II. Graveson, who was present at the meeting, roundly denounced such “saturation bombing”, and Billing did not forget. When, three months after the armistice, the county council elections were announced, Billing challenged Graveson for his seat.⁴² The M.P. was a formidable opponent; he was said to be as rich as Croesus, he was a most articulate speaker, and he had established his local credentials by buying a large house in Hertford.⁴³ From this vantage point he had looked with a critical eye on the slums of the town, and he described them as worse than those in Whitechapel.⁴⁴ He launched a vehement attack on Graveson as a pacifist and a teetotaler.⁴⁵

Graveson rose to the challenge with relish and good humour. We Quakers, he declared, ‘may be looked upon by Pemberton Billing as pacifists, but he will find we can fight as well as pray when we have a just cause to contend for’. He admitted to hating war and loving peace, and he rejoiced that William Penn’s vision of a world without war was at last being realised in the League of Nations. Both he and his son *were* pacifists, he frankly declared; his son had joined the Friends’ Ambulance Unit, in which he had served without a penny piece of pay, and he had been bombarded on land at Dunkirk, and torpedoed at sea in the Mediterranean. He confessed he was a prohibitionist, he chose his own drink, but he allowed others to do the same. On public occasions his lemonade helped to pay for other people’s champagne! He urged the M.P. to live up to the associations of his Christian name, and sent him a copy of Graveson’s own book, *The Joys of the Open Air*.

This was all very well, but Graveson knew he was up against ‘a man of great abilities’,⁴⁶ and moreover that he would have to match Billing’s flair for publicity if he was to win. He devised a flag with his own party colours, blue, yellow and white – Billing’s rather surprisingly was red – he canvassed the voters vigorously, he flooded the town with posters, so Billing himself said, and he distributed widely a striking cartoon of his rival, depicted in a balloon (of hot air of course).⁴⁷ Graveson was full of confidence that he would win, and he did, by 672 votes to 624, though his victory speech from the balcony of the Shire Hall could not be heard because of the tumult raised by Billing’s supporters. He and his pacifist son laughed together as they chatted over the election later that evening.⁴⁸

William Graveson went on to play an important part, too long to recount here, in county council affairs, particularly in education, for 20 years, and ended his career as the council’s vice-chairman. But this work was only a part of the achievements of this many-sided man, who wrote books on wild flowers and on Charles Lamb, and long articles for the

Quaker magazine, was a justice of the peace for Hertford, a loyal supporter of the Adult School and other local organisations, and kept the accounts for his thriving business right up to his death.⁴⁹ His widow made extracts from the many letters of condolence which she received,⁵⁰ and it seems fitting to end with a few of these tributes. A telegram from Charles Holden, the distinguished architect of London University Senate House buildings, and of 50 London Underground stations, 'Grieved for our loss. Proud to have had the honour of his friendship.' Reginald Hine, a fellow Quaker and a fine amateur local historian, wrote, 'He was always a great encourager of my books, and it was due to just a few like him that I persisted, year after year, in a task that at first seemed hopeless. A genial, dear man, full of friendliness, full of the love of learning, a lover of flowers and birds no less than of men and women, and above all, a great lover of Hertfordshire.'

A. Neave Brayshaw, another well-known writer, in his letter to Gulielma Graveson, spoke of her husband as 'The Quaker citizen at his best.' And Miss Cadmore, a former housekeeper at the Graveson shop, and one of the firm's pensioners, sympathised with the widow in her time of sorrow, 'A sorrow I join in, for indeed I have lost my best friend in the world'.

Violet A. Rowe

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Graveson family papers (hereinafter cited as G), in the custody of Mrs. Jenny Graveson of Reading, Berks, the wife of William Graveson's grandson. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation of her invaluable assistance in making the family archive, and her genealogical knowledge of related families, available to me.
- ² Sibford school records, quoted in the typescript "Dictionary of Quaker Biography" (henceforward DQB) in Friends House, London, under Michael Tyson Graveson, 1840-1930. "Father does nothing for the family" is the Sibford comment.
- ³ Copies of the shop premises, deeds. G. For the marquess, see the author's 'The Quaker Presence in Hertford in the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, LV (1987), 88 *et seq.*
- ⁴ *Hertfordshire Mercury*, (henceforward *HM.*) 17 Nov. 1906.
- ⁵ The Graveson family tree, researched by Mrs. Jenny Graveson.
- ⁶ *HM.* 7 Mar. 1914.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ackworth School List, 1779-1879*, 1879, 200.
- ⁹ E.V. Faulds and E. Milligan, *So Numerous a Family*, 1979, 17.
- ¹⁰ *British Wild Flowers*, 2nd ed. 1919.
- ¹¹ Shewell's, 5, High Row. *Ex inf.* Thomas Eden, who kindly investigated for me the membership books of Friends at Darlington. Shewell's premises are still part of a (much larger) drapery store. See also the *Draper's Record*, 10 Nov. 1906. (Interview with William Graveson during his year as mayor of Hertford).

- ¹² *HM.* 24 Oct. 1927.
- ¹³ *DQB.* art. *sub.* Stephen Gravely, 1857-1945.
- ¹⁴ *One and All.* (Adult School magazine), Dec. 1906.
- ¹⁵ S.W.W. Graveson's will (copy in G) shows that he left his property to his wife. She may of course have been a sleeping partner, and one's only authority for concluding otherwise is a photograph of her in G., which shows her good-humoured and at ease looking out from under her Victorian bonnet with shrewd eyes.
- ¹⁶ *HM.* 20 Apr. 1907.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* 18 Oct. 1884.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* 11 Oct. 1884.
- ¹⁹ *HM.* 29 Oct. 1891.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* 18 Oct. 1884.
- ²¹ *Parliamentary Papers* ix, 1833 (449).
- ²² Handbill at Hertford Museum.
- ²³ As note 18.
- ²⁴ *HM.* 17 Nov. 1906.
- ²⁵ *HM.* 10 Jan. 1891. Durrant owned a photographer's business at Old Cross, Hertford.
- ²⁶ Memoir by one of Messrs. Graveson's shop assistants in the Graveson archive (henceforward GS) until recently on the shop premises.
- ²⁷ Recollections of William's brother Samuel. *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Herts. CRO.Q 135.
- ²⁹ Diary of Graveson's future father-in-law, Daniel Peirson, for 1883.G.
- ³⁰ See note 28.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.* For his stress on the housing question, as of "utmost importance" see his letter to electors, on his nomination for a county council seat, *HM.* 11 Nov. 1901.
- ³⁴ For the town water controversy, see J.G. Pettman, 'The Sanitary Struggle in Hertford, 1831-1875', B.Ed. Dissertation, Wall Hall College, 1979. The *Report* by the inspector, William Ranger, despatched by Edwin Chadwick's Board of Health to investigate Hertford's sanitary condition is instructively different from the same inspector's report on Ware. *Report to the General Board of Health ... by William Ranger, 1850.*
- ³⁵ *HM.* 19 Sept. 1896.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.* 17 Nov. 1906. Census returns for 1890 and 1900.
- ³⁷ *HM.* 11 Oct. 1890.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* 11 Nov. 1901.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* 5 Mar. 1891.
- ⁴⁰ For Billing see G.R. Searle, *Corruption in British Politics 1895-1930*, 256 *et. seq.*, *Hertfordshire Countryside*, xxviii, 1933; M.Kette, *Salmone's Last Veil*, 1977.
- ⁴¹ Maude Allan, prominent actress and friend of Prime Minister Asquith's wife, had been accused by Billing of lesbianism, and unsuccessfully sued Billing for libel.
- ⁴² The contest can be followed in the *Hertfordshire Record* and the *Hertfordshire Mercury* of Feb. and Mar. 1919.
- ⁴³ His house was no. 11, Farquhar Street, Bengoe.
- ⁴⁴ *HM.* 8 Mar. 1919.
- ⁴⁵ As note 42.
- ⁴⁶ Graveson's own words. *Hertfordshire Record*, 8 Mar. 1919. They are borne out by the record of Billing's speeches, and by his business achievements.

⁴⁷ Copy in G.

⁴⁸ Graveson family recollection.

⁴⁹ *HM.* 4 Aug. 1939.

⁵⁰ G.