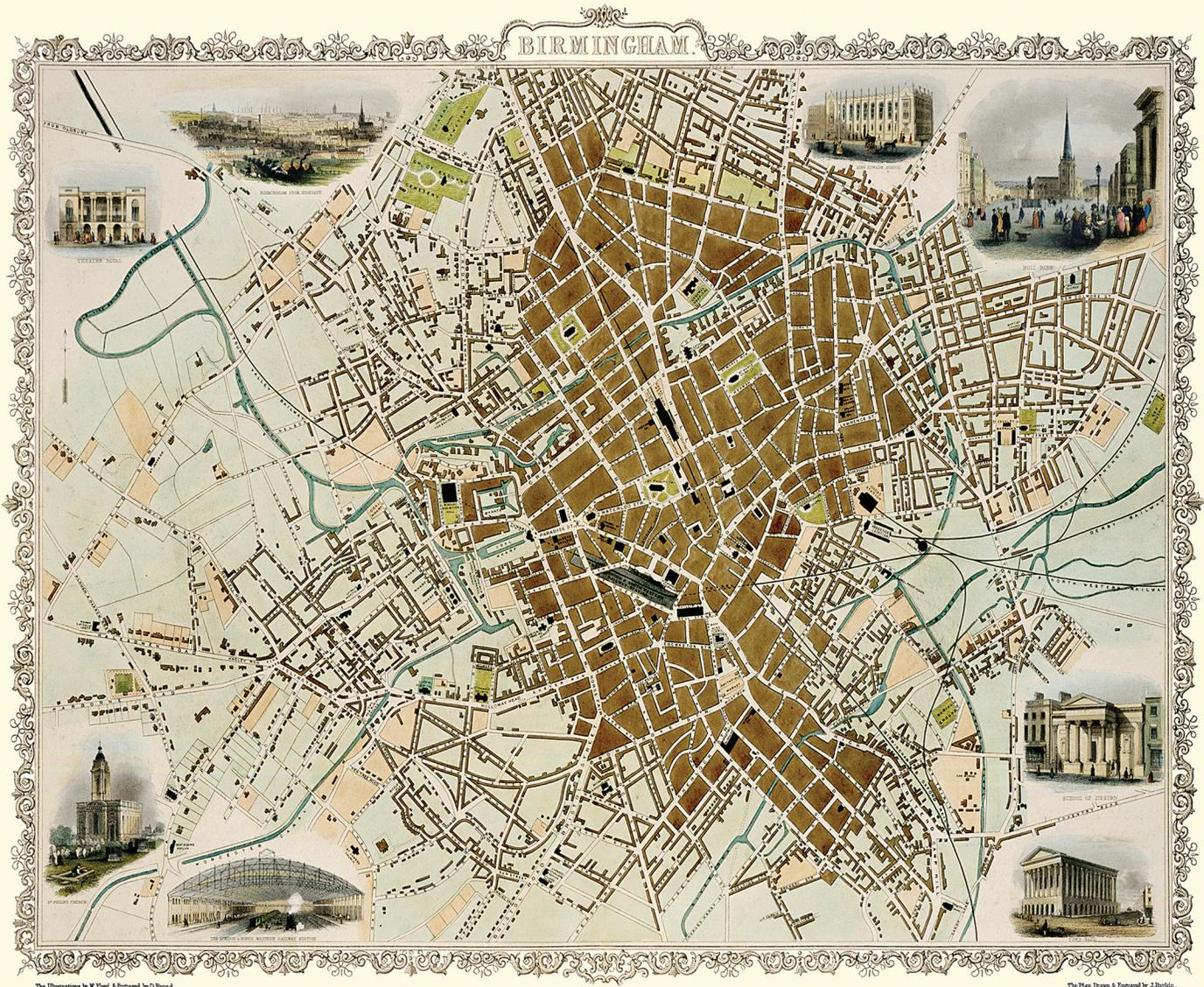


'MADE IN BIRMINGHAM'

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN'S EARLY POLITICAL CAREER

Roger Ward

During the late autumn of 1854 a young man arrived in Birmingham on the train from London and took a cab to his 'digs' in Frederick Street on the edge of the Calthorpe Estate in Edgbaston and less than a mile away from the offices of Nettlefold and Chamberlain in Broad Street. There he would spend many long hours in the years that followed. The young man was eighteen-year-old Joseph Chamberlain and, as it proved, he and Birmingham were made for each other.



1850s Birmingham was the still-expanding industrial, commercial and cultural hub of the Midlands, as John Tallis's 1851 plan illustrates.

At the time when Chamberlain arrived to represent his father's investment in his uncle's screw manufacturing business, Britain was in the first year of a three-year-long war with Russia, fought mainly in the Crimea but also in the Baltic. Already that autumn there had been three major battles: the Alma on 20 September, which gave its name to more than a score of Birmingham streets and terraces, Balaclava on 25 October and Inkerman on 5 November, clearing the way for the bloody and exhausting siege of the Russian fortress of Sevastopol.

Birmingham was living up to its sobriquet 'the workshop of the world'. Some twenty gun-makers had received government contracts and orders arrived by every post for swords, water-bottles, buttons, badges and insignia and a thousand other accoutrements of war. Factories and workshops were operating day and night and Birmingham's network of canals was choked with narrow boats bringing in the necessary raw materials. In this dynamic climate Nettlefold and Chamberlain prospered and Chamberlain came to be recognised as one of the town's shrewdest entrepreneurs.

Unitarian Birmingham

There was another sense in which Birmingham and Chamberlain were made for each other. The Chamberlain family were Unitarians who could trace their ancestry back to 1662, to the clergy ejected from their livings by Charles II for refusing to adhere to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Denying the Trinity, the Unitarians were the most extreme of the Dissenting sects, regarded even by other Dissenters as beyond the pale. Decades of persecution excluded them from state employment, the professions and the universities and inclined them to commerce and industry in which they flourished.

In spite of the fate of Joseph Priestley, the Unitarian Minister driven out of Birmingham for his support for the French Revolution in 1791, Birmingham had long been a congenial home for Unitarians and Nonconformists of all kinds, both because of its economic dynamism and because of



Before Chamberlain was even born, Thomas Attwood and his Birmingham Political Union had already established a legacy of radical and liberal reform in Birmingham.

The Meeting of the Unions on Newhall Hill, Birmingham, 16 May 1832, Haydon, Benjamin Robert (1786-1846)
© Birmingham Museums Trust

its open, unincorporated structures – 'a town without a shackle', as William Hutton described it.

The Unitarians were a small community, only 3.7 per cent of the church attenders recorded in the Religious Census of 1851, but they were close-knit and inter-related. When Joe came to dwell in Birmingham he could be sure of a welcome at the New Meeting from not only the Nettlefolds but also the Martineaus, Russells, Oslers and Beales. Like the Quakers, the Unitarians represented quality rather than quantity, an entrepreneurial and social elite. Among Joe's neighbours in Edgbaston were important Quaker families such as the Sturges and the Cadburys. His identity as a Unitarian was to be a key factor in his social and political life. When he was elected to Parliament in 1876, it was as a militant Nonconformist that he would be identified. Unitarianism was the most rational of the Dissenting denominations, translating easily into political radicalism. Hostile to the Established Church, excluded from Parliament, sceptical even of monarchy, Unitarians were by nature reformers.

Radical Birmingham

Birmingham was a town with strong radical credentials. Unrepresented in Parliament and led by Thomas Attwood, the Birmingham Political Union (BPU) had been in the vanguard of the struggle for Parliamentary reform leading to the Great Reform Bill of 1832, its key role acknowledged by recent historians of these events such as Edward Pearce and Antonia Fraser. 'King Tom' was granted the Freedom of the City of London and returned to Birmingham a hero, to become, with Joshua Scholefield, the town's first MP.

The success of the BPU shaped Birmingham's political tradition. Those who followed Attwood into Parliament, Joshua and William Scholefield, George Frederick Muntz and his brother Philip Henry Muntz, were all veterans of the BPU, which went on to campaign successfully for the incorporation of the town in 1838. When the first municipal elections were held on Boxing Day 1838, all forty-eight elected Councillors were Radicals or Liberals, notwithstanding the fact that Tories had contested each and every ward. From 1832 to 1886 all Birmingham MPs were Radical/Liberal and all were dedicated to Parliamentary reform, with the solitary exception of Richard Spooner from 1844-1847, who was elected as a result of a schism at the time in the Radical camp.



Courtesy Birmingham Museums Trust

Whilst their views differed significantly over foreign policy, John Bright was Chamberlain's early inspiration on matters of domestic reform.

Attwood left another legacy, though one which remained submerged until revived many years later by Chamberlain. Attwood was a currency faddist who wrote many pamphlets and campaigned hard for a managed currency to replace one based on gold, a 'heresy' endorsed by Birmingham's early MPs. Chamberlain was able to claim, when he launched his assault on free trade in 1903, that Birmingham had never really adhered to 'the Manchester School' of Political Economy but had always had its own school, better adapted to an industrial economy.

Nationalist Birmingham

Perhaps not surprisingly the Crimean War was popular in Birmingham, with the obvious exception of the Quakers. Perhaps its most enthusiastic supporter was the charismatic George Dawson, minister of the non-credal Church of the Saviour in Edward Street, and one of the most eloquent preachers of his day. Dawson had long espoused the cause of Europe's oppressed nationalities and had been instrumental in bringing Louis Kossuth, leader of the Hungarian uprising against Austrian rule in 1848, to Birmingham where he received a hero's welcome. Nicholas I's Russia was, to men like Dawson, the chief oppressor of Europe's national minorities.

Chamberlain did not attend Dawson's Church, though many of his friends did, but totally shared his views. Garvin, Chamberlain's official biographer, wrote that 'the Chamberlains were not supporters of Cobden and Bright, but were Palmerstonian like the majority of the advanced middle classes'. Joe Chamberlain he described as 'a nationalist Englishman to the backbone'. Palmerston, who became Prime Minister in 1855, was popularly regarded as a robust champion of Britain's interests and a sympathiser with Liberal causes abroad.

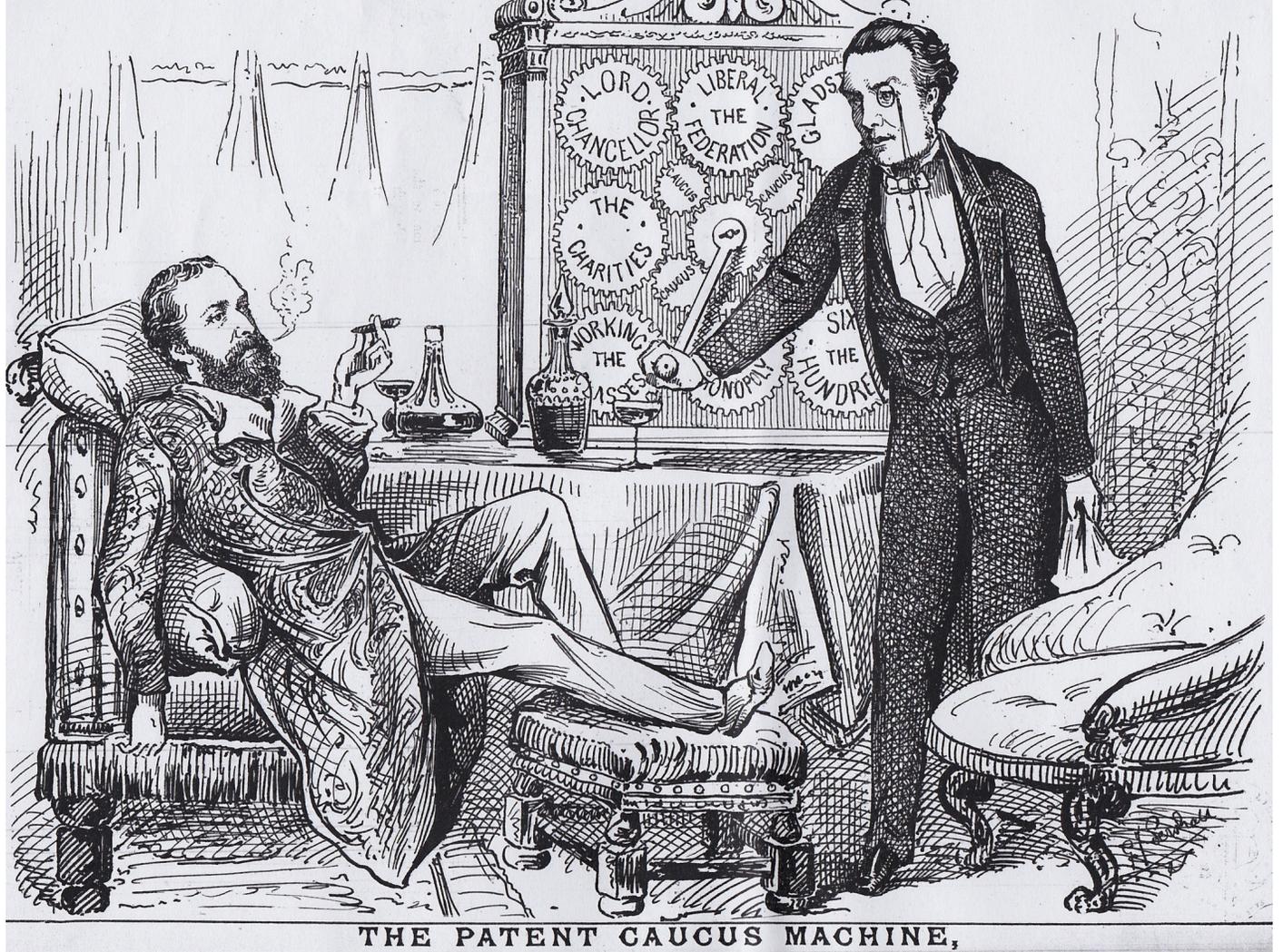
John Bright and Chamberlain

It was as a Palmerstonian that the young Chamberlain first asserted himself in politics. Given the general popularity of the Crimean War it was somewhat surprising that when a vacancy occurred in the representation of Birmingham on the death of Scholefield in 1857, the town should have turned to John Bright as a replacement. Bright had been an eloquent critic of the war and was opposed to British intervention in Continental affairs in general and had recently lost his seat in Manchester, where he had been heavily defeated and burned in effigy.

The initiative in recruiting Bright was taken by Quakers. Thomas Lloyd was chairman of the electoral committee and Joseph Sturge hurried north to consult with the Bright family. Bright, who was recuperating in Scotland from a nervous breakdown, agreed to stand and was returned unopposed in August 1857. The only concession he made to his critics was a pledge not to oppose the re-establishment of British rule in India, challenged at the time by the Mutiny.

With controversies over the war subsiding, it was domestic issues that dominated the agenda and soon Bright was generating popular enthusiasm with his determination to lead a renewed agitation for Parliamentary reform. On this matter Chamberlain had no reservations. He later claimed never to have missed a Bright speech in Birmingham and would therefore have been present on the first occasion in October 1858 on which Bright addressed a packed Town Hall and called for a renewed drive for reform. But he remained opposed to Bright's views on foreign policy.

Bright was a friend of George Dixon, a rising entrepreneur and Liberal politician, and he was entertained at a dinner at Dixon's house, 'The Dales' in Augustus Road, Edgbaston, together with a group of invited guests which included Chamberlain. The young man boldly challenged Bright's view that Gibraltar should be returned to Spain, a challenge that Bright took in good part. A year later, in the General Election of 1859, Bright was opposed by Thomas Dyke Acland, a Liberal-Conservative, who had lost his seat in East Somerset for his support of Peel in 1846. Acland had the support of a number of Liberals including, according to Bright's biographer G.M. Trevelyan, Joe Chamberlain.



Chamberlain demonstrates the influence and efficiency of the Birmingham Liberal Association political organisation, or 'Caucus', to an approving Prince of Wales. *The Dart*, 1879.

Courtesy Birmingham & Midland Institute.

In the years that followed Chamberlain's admiration for Bright grew. He would have been present at the massive Reform demonstration at Brookfields on 27 August 1866 and he rejoiced at the achievement of the Second Reform Act in 1867, for which much of the popular credit went to Bright. As his political ambitions grew he recognised how much he had to learn from one of the great orators and one of the shrewdest politicians of the age, even though he remained conscious of differences in their views and outlook.

Early Interest in Politics

Chamberlain's interest in politics was signified within weeks of his arrival in Birmingham by his membership of the Edgbaston Debating Society where, at monthly meetings in the Hen and Chickens Inn in New Street, some of the brightest young men in Birmingham debated issues of current interest. There he honed his forensic skills which were initially less than impressive, his speeches 'reeking of the lamp' according to Garvin. He became secretary and later President of the Society and looked back with nostalgia in later years at the forum in which he made many friends who would in time be supporters, even disciples.

In 1859, at a time of tension with Napoleon III's France, he wrote to the Lord Lieutenant of the county offering to raise a Volunteer Rifle Brigade, an offer that was rejected. Although his reputation steadily grew, he remained on the periphery of party politics.

His name was not included in the list of ten who convoked a meeting in the Town Hall in February 1865 which led to the foundation of the Birmingham Liberal Association, the famous 'caucus', the brainchild of the

architect and surveyor, William Harris. Nor was it among the twenty-one names of those who formed the BLA's first committee, though he was a member from the start. Nor was he instrumental in the re-founding of the caucus in 1868, to meet the new conditions created by Disraeli's Reform Act of 1867.

The new and pioneering organisation, of which he would later become the leader, proved its mettle in the General Election of 1868, the 'Vote-as-You're Told' election, in which Bright, Muntz and Dixon were returned to Parliament and two Tories were dumped at the bottom of the poll.

Community Action

In these years Chamberlain's civic spirit found expression less in party politics than in community action, following the strong tradition established by the Nonconformist churches. As a youth of sixteen he had taught Sunday school at the chapel in Carter Lane where his family worshipped and he resumed this activity soon after arriving in Birmingham. At the New Meeting and later at the new Church of the Messiah in Broad Street, Chamberlain taught Sunday school and evening classes and he organised educational and welfare activities for his firm's employees in a Working Men's Institute at Smethwick.

More than any other issue it was his sense of the vital need for improved education which drew him into politics. The Nonconformist elite was also noted for its philanthropy, its support not only of schools but of hospitals, a variety of welfare institutions and cultural endeavours. The Chamberlains did not lag behind, both Joe and his father, who moved his family to Birmingham in 1862, were generous benefactors as their wealth expanded.

'The Civic Gospel'

In the 1860s Dawson, the Congregationalist minister Dr. Robert Dale and the new Unitarian minister Henry Crosskey all preached 'the civic gospel'. They urged the successful members of their flocks to take up public positions, as Town Councillors and Guardians of the Poor. Their aim was civic improvement, their enemies were the 'Economists', the *petit bourgeois* Town Councillors whose influence had prevented large expenditures on public utilities and services.

One by one they induced some of the most successful and innovative entrepreneurs to stand for the Council, steadily transforming its social composition. Undoubtedly Joe would have been in their sights. By the mid-1860s the firm of Nettlefold and Chamberlain had established a near monopoly of screw-manufacturing in the West Midlands and was building an impressive export trade. Profits accumulated.

Joe was able to move his family from a villa in the Harborne Road to 'Southbourne' in Augustus Road where he was a near neighbour to George Dixon, mayor in 1866, MP in 1867, who took every occasion to coax Joe into the mainstream of Liberal politics. An influential member of the Chamber of Commerce, together with Dixon a director of Lloyd's Bank and one of its largest shareholders, Joe Chamberlain was too important to be ignored. However, it was less 'the civic gospel' than his 'blazing interest in education' that drew him at last into political activity.

The National Education League

Reformers had anticipated that the Second Reform Act would be followed by a radical extension of the role of the state in the provision of education, a role hitherto filled by voluntary organisations. In the oft-quoted words of Robert Lowe, 'we must educate our masters'. George Dixon, who was to dedicate his life to the cause, took the initiative in Birmingham. On 13 March 1867 he convened a meeting at 'The Dales' which resulted in the formation of the Birmingham Education Society.

Among the twenty-one men who formed the Provisional Committee, Anglicans as well as Nonconformists, was Joe Chamberlain. The Society solicited subscriptions which would be used to pay the school fees of children of parents unable to afford

them and also to provide funds to enlarge schools to accommodate the expected influx. The energetic researches of Jesse Collings, close friend and travelling companion of Joe, exposed the desperate state of education in the town.

In spite of the valiant work of the Society, its leaders soon perceived that private philanthropy was not enough and that only action by the state could tackle the problem. This was an important perception for Radicals like Chamberlain who were soon parting company from the *laissez-faire* beliefs of the older generation such as John Bright.

As Parliament debated the possible shape of reform, Dixon again took the lead. In January 1869 he founded the National Education League (NEL), its manifesto demanding a free, universal, secular and compulsory system of education. Twelve Birmingham men were numbered among the subscribers, Joe and Joe senior headed the list with contributions of £1,000 each.

While Dixon became the Parliamentary spokesman of the NEL, Chamberlain became chairman of the executive committee, his name becoming nationally known as new branches were formed and agitation spread. As James Dixon commented in his recent biography of his ancestor, 'the perception began to grow that Chamberlain ran the organisation'.

Thrusting Ambition

Relations between the moderate and emollient Dixon and the abrasive Chamberlain were never going to be easy. Dixon was far from the last man to find Chamberlain's thrusting ambition and unrelenting activism uncomfortable.

Chamberlain's appetite grew with the feeding. On 15 June 1869 he delivered his first speech in the Town Hall in support of the Liberal government's Bill to disestablish the Irish Church. In October 1869, at the same venue, he moved the principal resolution at the first annual meeting of the NEL. Soon he began to extend his range beyond Birmingham.

Late in 1869 William Harris, father of the caucus, came calling. Would Joe stand for the Town Council in the November municipal elections? Joe was duly returned for St. Paul's ward, the beginning of his illustrious municipal career. ●

Professor Roger Ward is working on a study of the three Chamberlains which he hopes to publish during 2014.

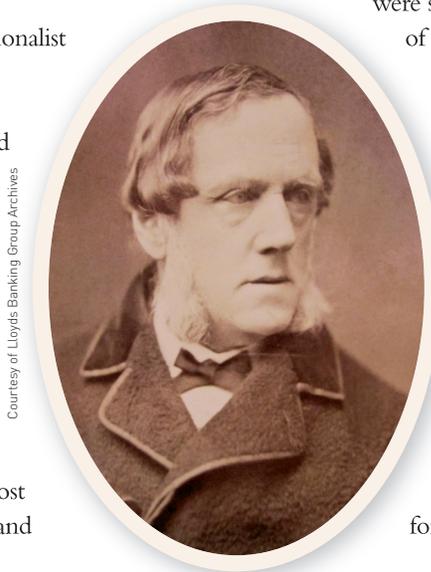
Further Reading

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E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-Century Urban Government* (Edward Arnold, 1973).

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Courtesy of Lloyds Banking Group Archives

George Dixon was one of a number of reformers whom, despite sharing similar ideals, Chamberlain's manner both alienated and eclipsed. c.1865.