

Greenwich Labour Party (1920-1987):

A Brief Introduction
to the
Microfilm Edition of
Greenwich Labour Party Records

by
Fred Lindop
School of Humanities
The University of Greenwich

Microform Academic Publishers

Greenwich Labour Party (1920-1987):

**A Brief Introduction
to the
Microfilm Edition of
Greenwich Labour Party Records**

by
Fred Lindop
School of Humanities
The University of Greenwich

Microform Academic Publishers
East Ardsley, Wakefield WF3 2AT,
West Yorkshire, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1924 825700 Fax: (0)1924 871005
Email: info@microform.co.uk
www.microform.co.uk

© Fred Lindop, 1998

THE GREENWICH LABOUR PARTY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Greenwich and the Greenwich Constituency

Greenwich at the end of the twentieth century is inseparably linked in public discourse with the tourist image: the royal palace, the naval college and (perhaps) the Millennium Dome. In more everyday terms, Greenwich, with its Georgian and Victorian middle class housing around the royal park rising above 'historic Greenwich', its theatre and antique market and shops is identified with the successful middle classes making money in the city, property and the culture industries. But this 'historic' and middle class Greenwich is – and was – only a part of historical Greenwich as defined by administrative and political boundaries and social and political history.¹

By the early twentieth century, the districts of Greenwich borough which lay along the Thames to the east and west of the 'historic' area were heavily industrialised – part of the belt of factories, wharves and warehouses which stretched from Southwark through to Woolwich. Within the industrial district were densely populated areas of poor housing. Further back from the river to the east towards Woolwich lay rapidly expanding areas of better quality working class and middle class housing, which included, from 1918 onwards, considerable amounts of public housing on the slopes of Charlton. *The New Survey of London* (1932) placed the borough of Greenwich in the middle of various indices of poverty/wealth and sickness/health, but within the borough there was a diversity of economic and social conditions. Some of the heaviest overcrowding and highest incidences of illness in London was in St. Nicholas ward (bordering on Deptford); and some of the lowest death rates in London were in Kidbrook and Blackheath, together with below average rates in the rapidly growing middle class districts and more prosperous working class districts of central Greenwich and Charlton.² The population of the borough peaked in the early 1930s and within this there was a shift of population after 1918 away from the riverside districts towards the healthier hilly areas of Charlton and Kidbrook. A movement which continued at a slower rate in the post-1945 years, accompanied by an overall decline in population.³

Working class Greenwich in the later nineteenth and first two thirds of the twentieth century was dominated by large engineering works (including electrical engineering), and the vast site of the South Metropolitan Gas Company on the Greenwich peninsula, where the Millennium Dome now stands. To a considerable extent Greenwich shared the characteristics of neighbouring Woolwich, though it is interesting to note that family sizes were rather larger than in Woolwich, perhaps due to the greater amount of work available to women in Greenwich.⁴ Engineering workers were by far the largest grouping in its diverse workforce, with smaller numbers employed in building, transport, chemicals, food, furniture, clothing and other industries, and by the borough council.⁵ This pattern held until the 1960s, when the process of industrial relocation away from inner London industrial districts, which had begun in the 1930s, accelerated. In the two decades from 1965 to 1985, most of the engineering works, which lined the Woolwich road closed and the pattern of employment shifted radically. The gentrification of rundown former middle class and artisan areas around Greenwich Park also began, so that although the area as a whole remained predominantly working class, the middle class elements constituted a larger proportion of the population.⁶

The Development of the Local Party

Although William Ewart Gladstone sat in the House of Commons for Greenwich (which then stretched from Deptford to Plumstead) from 1868 to 1880, after the reform of 1884-85 the new, smaller, single member constituency was held by the Conservatives until 1945. Except for 1906-10 when it fell in the Liberal landslide, and 1923/24 and 1929-31, when it was briefly held by Labour.

The constituency was socially mixed; it had a much larger middle class element than either of the neighbouring seats of Woolwich and Deptford.⁷ Although the Deptford and Greenwich Trades Council established a Labour Representative Association in 1900 and a branch of the Independent Labour Party was founded in 1906 (as part of a more general growth of the ILP in the first flush of enthusiasm which followed Labour's electoral success in 1906), Labour in Greenwich did not contest the parliamentary seat until 1918. Nor did it follow the example of Woolwich in setting up an individual membership organisation until the national reorganisation, which followed from the 1918 party conference. In local elections, likewise, the Labour Party was relatively slow to develop compared with Woolwich and Deptford.⁸ But within a few years of 1918 the local party was firmly established and grew steadily (with brief interruptions following the debacle of the second minority Labour Government in 1931 and in 1936-37): membership was over 1,500 in 1927 and over 3,200 in 1938.⁹ There was a thriving ward organisation and increasing numbers of affiliations from unions and co-operative bodies.¹⁰ In 1936 Greenwich Labour Party, by then one of the largest local parties in the country, purchased a substantial terrace house for its headquarters.

Labour first contested the constituency in 1918, and won in 1923 with Edward Palmer (who was sponsored by the Insurance Agents Union). The seat was lost, as were many newly won seats, in the 'Zinoviev letter' general election of 1924. Palmer won it back in 1929, but was swept away in the National Government landslide in 1931. The party came close to regaining the seat in 1935 and won in the Labour landslide of 1945 with sixty-five per cent of the votes. Labour then held the seat continuously for forty-two years, until it lost a by-election to the Social Democratic Party in 1987 (it was retaken by Labour in 1992).¹¹ Labour won more than fifty per cent of votes cast at every election between 1950 and 1979, though the trend was clearly downwards. The re-emergence of a substantial Liberal vote in the 1970s probably owed much to the changing social composition of the constituency as well as to the general process of 'political realignment' which sociologists have identified in the last two to three decades. This parliamentary record broadly paralleled the party's record in local government – it won control in the widespread swing to Labour in 1919, but lost control in 1922. It regained control in 1932 and thereafter was the largest party on the council.

The Politics of Greenwich Labour Party

In 1918, the newly formed Greenwich Labour Party recruited several of its leading officials from the disintegrating Liberal Party, and its parliamentary candidate also had a Liberal past. But by the mid-1920s, the majority of active members tended to have left-wing sympathies. The earliest surviving document, an accounts book for the years 1920-27, records expenses for delegates to the conference of the National Left Wing Movement in 1926, as well as purchases of literature from the Communist bookshop (July 1926 – probably related to the recent General Strike) and the Miners' Union. The Party also took copies of the ILP paper *Forward* and *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*. It welcomed the second minority Labour government but took an increasingly critical attitude to Chancellor Philip Snowden's orthodox financial policy and economic proposals long before MacDonald's formation of the National Government. Greenwich wanted the Government to 'institute a national plan of work' and called for the 'socialisation' of a list of key industries (including the banks).¹² The general election which followed the formation of the National Government and the national split in the Labour Party was fiercely contested in Greenwich. A local Labour Party public meeting was broken up by a gang of National Government supporters and the General Council made plans to defend future meetings.¹³

The support for left-wing politics and co-operation with Communist-led organisations continued throughout the 1930s. From 1932 the Party used its recently regained control of the borough

Labour was now solidly in control of the borough council, many of the activists were largely engaged in council activities, and most of the time of the party and its representative bodies was devoted to local and council-related issues. Housing was a far more frequent subject of debate than international issues in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The sensitivity of the party to its working class constituency is indicated by the large number of resolutions from wards and affiliated bodies in early 1954 opposing the decision to collect council rents fortnightly rather than weekly. While the rent increases in 1956 produced a flurry of meetings, with the party leadership clearly very worried about the electoral consequences.²¹

Greenwich continued to identify itself with left-wing policies; it responded to the austere policies of the Attlee government by calling for strong controls over prices and profits, an increase in subsidies on imported food and a levy on all capital over ten thousand pounds. The strong commitment to international issues continued. In 1953, for example, the General Council opposed the execution of the Rosenberg's and overthrow of the Jagan government in British Guiana (by the British government); while opposition to German re-armament was a recurring theme throughout the middle years of the decade.²² But the prevailing anti-communism of the period clearly had an influence. There was no discussion of the Korean War until February 1953, when a resolution for British withdrawal was discussed but not voted on. Later in the decade Greenwich actively supported the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

From the mid-1950s, the Greenwich Labour Party went into a long term decline in membership and levels of activity. Membership declined by over seventy-five per cent between 1954 and the mid-1980s.²³ The records show an almost continuous concern with the inactivity of wards and other party organisations, interspersed with very brief periods of resurgent confidence (early-mid 1960s, early 1970s). The decline was clearly part of a national trend, although the specific economic and social circumstances of the locality were recognised – the decline in manufacturing, the growth of service and financial sector employment and an increase in commuting, which resulted in a continuous fall in the number of affiliated bodies and a shift towards public sector union predominance.²⁴

Reports in the late 1960s and early 1970s constantly refer to the Labour Party being 'remote in recent years from the people it should represent'.²⁵ The catastrophic collapse of membership between 1965 and 1970 was identified as a direct consequence of the unpopularity of the Wilson government's economic policies (though the secretary in February 1968 attributed much of this to 'the fact that the electorate in general and party members are not aware of the positive achievements of the Labour Government'.²⁶ The heightened political atmosphere created by the election in 1970 of an aggressively anti-union Tory government and the widespread resistance to it, resulted in a temporary reversal of the downward trend. But the election of a Labour government in a situation of economic and social crisis, pursuing the same policies of wage controls and cuts in government spending, led to further loss of morale and an even sharper decline in membership in the late 1970s. Throughout these years, Greenwich Labour Party held on to its left traditions. With, for example, support for the campaign for wider democracy in elections of party leaders in the early 1980s, for the revived CND, for the 1984-85 miners' strike and for the Wapping printers' dispute. But the internal life of the Party continued to decline. The national trend towards an increasingly professional middle class membership was reflected in the situation where the largest and most active ward in the constituency was the only one which Labour never won. Political demoralisation was deepened by the shattering blow of the loss of the parliamentary seat in a by-election just before the 1987 General Election. The bitterness in the constituency party was greatly increased by the

national leadership's failure to defend the Labour candidate, a woman who was the reselected ex-Greater London County councillor for the area, against a vindictive media attack on her politics and morality.²⁷

The Documents

The material collected here covers the period from 1920 to 1987. Most of the documents relate to activity at the constituency party level, though these contain many insights into activities in lower level organisations. The only ward documents available are the Minute Books of Central Ward for 1952-1961 and Marsh Ward for 1961-66. The principle documents of interest are the minutes of the General Council, continuous from 1927 to June 1958 and 1964 to 1986/7; Executive Committee minutes and reports for 1936-1958 and 1963-1986/7; Finance Committee minutes and other financial material from 1920 through to the 1980s; and some Annual Reports from 1937 onwards. The gap in General Council minutes between 1959 and 1962 seems unlikely to be filled; enquiries with the current MP for Woolwich, who was secretary-agent of Greenwich for much of the 1960s, and with surviving longstanding members have not unearthed any additional material.

Notes

1. From 1888 to 1964, Greenwich constituency was contiguous with the Metropolitan Borough of Greenwich. In 1964, the metropolitan borough was merged with the borough of Woolwich to form the London Borough of Greenwich – Greenwich became one of three constituencies within the new borough.
2. *New Survey of London of London Life and Labour, Volume III: Survey of Social Conditions, (1) the Eastern Area* (London, 1932), pp.377-80; *Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health to the Metropolitan Borough of Greenwich* (MOH), 1921-1962 (Greenwich Local History Library).
3. The population of the borough was: 95,977 in 1911; 100,493 in 1921; 100,924 in 1931; 89,846 in 1951; 85,546 in 1961.
4. *New Survey of London*, pp.46-7.
5. Great Britain, General Register Office *Census of Population* 1921, 1951, 1971: J.H. Forshaw and P. Abercrombie, *County of London Plan, Prepared for the London County Council* (1943): MOH Reports.
6. *Census*, 1971, 1991.
7. P. Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: the Struggle for London 1885-1914* (1967), appendix B.
8. According to Thompson, there were occasional Labour candidates in local elections from 1894, with one success in 1909 and another in a by-election in 1910. There was no parliamentary contest – an attempt was made to put forward a candidate in 1906, but it was stopped by Liberal non-co-operation.
9. Greenwich Labour Party Annual Reports.
10. Union affiliations reflected the local economy, with several Amalgamated Society of Engineers branches and other smaller craft unions in engineering, building, woodworking and printing, with road and rail transport workers, council workers and some small white collar unions. Annual Reports, 1939, 1953.
11. The seat was won in 1945 by Joseph Reeves, secretary of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society's education committee, who replaced Palmer as candidate in 1932. Reeves retired in 1959 and was replaced by Richard (later Lord) Marsh, who resigned in 1971 when Edward Heath appointed him Chairman of British Rail. Guy Barnett won the seat in the by-election and held it until his death in 1987. Rosie Barnes held the seat for the SDP until 1992 when Nick Raynsford regained the seat for Labour.
12. General Council (GC) minutes, June 1931.
13. GC minutes, September 1931.
14. GC minutes, March 1933, June 1933, November 1936, March 1937.
15. GC minutes, August 1936.
16. Executive Committee (EC) minutes, 1936-39 passim.
17. EC minutes, January 1940; GC minutes July 1940.
18. GC minutes, January 1940; October 1941; July 1944 to January 1945.
19. Annual Report (AR) 1947, 1953.
20. AR 1949.

21. GC minutes, January 1954; EC minutes, November 1956.

22. GC minutes, February 1953; December 1953; February 1954.

23. Membership figures from Annual Reports: 4,469 in 1953; 3,675 in 1956; 2,495 in 1964; 1,730 in 1966; 1,206 in 1969; 2,052 in 1972; 1,410 in 1975; 'below 1,000' in 1977; 750 in 1980; 'around 1,050' in 1985; 1,016 in 1987.

24. A comparison of Annual Reports from the early 1950s and the 1980s shows clearly both the overall decline of affiliated bodies and the shift towards public sector and white unions within that smaller group.

25. AR 1971.

26. AR 1967.

27. The loss of the seat had a more direct material effect on the local party – the loss of the £2,000 a year subsidy, which Guy Barnett MP had paid to the party.

Appendix: Greenwich Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1987

Election	Electors	Candidate	Party	Votes	%
1918	43,756	I.H. Benn	Co C	14,576	69.3
		J. Bermingham	Lab	<u>6,471</u>	<u>30.7</u>
				8,105	38.6
1922	46,005	G.H. Hume	C	16,934	60.9
		E.T. Palmer	Lab	<u>10,860</u>	<u>39.1</u>
				6,074	21.8
1923	46,741	E.T. Palmer	Lab	12,314	42.7
		G.H. Hume	C	10,746	37.2
		C.G.L. du Cann	L	<u>5,806</u>	<u>20.1</u>
				1,568	5.5
1924	47,716	Sir G.H. Hume	C	18,473	51.5
		E.T. Palmer	Lab	<u>17,409</u>	<u>48.5</u>
				1,064	3.0
1929	62,342	E.T. Palmer	Lab	20,328	46.3
		Sir G.H. Hume	C	16,710	38.1
		W.P. Campbell	L	<u>6,870</u>	<u>15.6</u>
				3,618	8.2
1931	63,385	Sir G.H. Hume	C	29,278	65.0
		E.T. Palmer	Lab	13,722	30.5
		Mrs. K. Duncan	Com	<u>2,024</u>	<u>4.5</u>
				15,556	34.5
1935	63,292	Sir G.H. Hume	C	22,526	52.4
		J. Reeves	Lab/Co-op	<u>20,436</u>	<u>47.6</u>
				2,090	4.8
1945	48,163	J. Reeves	Lab	22,078	65.6
		A.W.S. Agar	C	<u>11,580</u>	<u>34.4</u>
				10,498	31.2
1950	61,198	J. Reeves	Lab	29,379	57.8
		R.D. Gilbey	C	18,255	44.8
		L.M. Dale	L	<u>3,148</u>	<u>6.2</u>
				11,124	13.0
1951	62,042	J. Reeves	Lab	30,326	60.4
		W.H. Bishop	C	<u>19,898</u>	<u>39.6</u>
				10,428	20.8

Election	Electors	Candidate	Party	Votes	%
1955	61,314	J. Reeves	Lab	26,423	58.8
		W.F. Rhodes	C	<u>18,484</u>	<u>41.2</u>
				7,939	17.6
1959	60,561	R.W. Marsh	Lab	25,204	56.2
		J.R. Holmes	C	<u>19,679</u>	<u>43.8</u>
				5,525	12.4
1964	56,742	R.W. Marsh	Lab	22,814	56.2
		J.S. Gummer	C	12,592	31.0
		M.P.D. Ellman	L	<u>5,205</u>	<u>12.8</u>
				10,222	25.2
1966	55,477	R.W. Marsh	Lab	24,359	64.9
		J.S. Gummer	C	<u>13,200</u>	<u>35.1</u>
				11,159	29.8
1970	57,195	Rt.Hon. R.W. Marsh	Lab	20,804	55.7
		J.S. Thom	C	13,195	35.4
		Mrs. P.M. Wylan	L	<u>3,319</u>	<u>8.9</u>
				7,609	20.3
1971 By-election		N.G. Barnett	Lab	14,671	66.7
		J.S. Thom	C	6,150	28.0
		R.S. Mallone	Ind	792	3.6
		R. Simmerson	Ind	285	1.3
		D. Davies	Ind	<u>89</u>	<u>0.4</u>
				8,521	38.7
1974 (Feb)	52,390	N.G. Barnett	Lab	20,164	51.3
		Mrs. S.M.T. Harold	C	11,294	28.7
		A.J.D. Wilson	L	<u>7,855</u>	<u>20.0</u>
				8,870	22.6
1974 (Oct)	52,847	N.G. Barnett	Lab	19,155	55.5
		Mrs. S.M.T. Harold	C	9,249	26.8
		A.J.D. Wilson	L	5,834	16.9
		D. Green	Ind	<u>254</u>	<u>0.7</u>
				9,906	28.7
1979	51,519	N.G. Barnett	Lab	18,975	52.1
		N. Saroop	C	12,133	33.3
		G. Knight	L	3,870	10.6
		Mrs. H. Steven	NF	951	2.6
		R.S. Mallone	Ind	<u>460</u>	<u>1.3</u>
				6,842	18.8

Election	Electors	Candidate	Party	Votes	%
1983	51,586	N.G. Barnett	Lab	13,361	38.2
		A.J. Rolfe	C	12,150	34.8
		T. Ford	SDP	8,783	25.1
		I.B. Dell	BNP	259	0.7
		R.S. Mallone	Ind	242	0.7
		Miss F. Hook	Com	<u>149</u>	<u>0.4</u>
				1,211	3.5
1987 By-election	50,482	Mrs. R.S. Barnes	SDP	18,287	53.0
		Mrs. D.F.M. Wood	Lab	11,676	33.8
		J.G.C. Antcliffe	C	3,852	11.2
		G.J.E. Bell	Grn	264	0.7
		M.G. Hardee	Ind	124	0.4
		I.B. Bell	BNP	116	0.3
		J.A. Pearce	NF	103	0.3
		K. Marshall	Ind	<u>91</u>	<u>0.3</u>
				6,611	19.2
1987	50,830	Mrs. R.S. Barnes	SDP	15,149	40.6
		Mrs. D.F.M. Wood	Lab	13,008	34.9
		J.G.C. Antcliffe	C	8,695	23.3
		Miss J. Thomas	Grn	346	0.9
		R.S. Mallone	Ind	59	0.2
		Mrs. P. Clinton	Com	<u>58</u>	<u>0.2</u>
				2,141	5.7
1992	47,789	W.R.N. Raynsford	Lab	14,630	41.0
		Mrs. R.S. Barnes	Ind.SDP	13,273	37.2
		Mrs. A. McNair	C	6,960	19.5
		R. McCracken	Grn	483	1.4
		R.S. Mallone	Ind	147	0.4
		M.G. Hardee	Ind	103	0.3
		J. Small	NLP	<u>70</u>	<u>0.2</u>
				1,357	3.8

Greenwich Labour Party Records, 1920-1987

Reel Contents Listing

- Reel 1 General Council Minute Book, 23rd April 1927-19th Jan 1933
- General Council Minute Book, 16th Feb 1933-24th June 1937
- General Council Minute Book, 29th July 1937-28th April 1949
 [with Annual Reports for 1937-40, 1945-47]
- Reel 2 General Council Minute Book, 5th Feb 1949-26th June 1958
 [with Annual Reports for 1948-54, 1956]
- General Council Minutes (loose-leaf), 1964-1980/1
- Reel 3 Finance Committee Minute Book, 8th Dec 1927-19th Jan 1939
- Finance Committee Minute Book, 16th Feb 1939-15th May 1958
- Finance Committee Minutes (loose-leaf), 1959-1977
- Executive Committee Minute Book, 21st May 1936-12th June 1958
- Reel 4 Executive Committee Minutes (loose-leaf), 1963-1981
- General Council & Executive Committee Minutes (loose-leaf), 1982-1986/7
- Reel 5 Central Ward Minute Book, 19th Nov 1952-7th July 1954
- Central Ward Minute Book, 14th July 1954-9th March 1955
- Central Ward Minute Book, 20th April 1955-22nd Nov 1955
- Central Ward Minute Book, 28th Nov 1955-15th Oct 1957
- Central Ward Minute Book, 26th Nov 1957-14th Jan 1959
- Central Ward Minute Book, 20th Jan 1959-18th July 1961
- Marsh Ward Minute Book, 27th Nov 1961-16th Nov 1966
- Social Committee Minute book, 1980-1981

Reel 5 (cont.) Minutes (loose-leaf) of Working Party Meetings of the 1381 Committee
[re celebrations of the 600th Anniversary of the Peasants Revolt of 1381],
Aug 1980-July 1981

Annual Reports, 1961, 1964, 1967, 1969-73, 1975-78, 1981, 1983-87
[see Reels 1 & 2 for earlier ARs bound with GC Minutes]

Reel 6 Accounts Book (Income & Expenditure), 1920-1927

Accounts Book (Income & Expenditure), 1966-1971

Accounts Book (Income & Expenditure), 1971-1973

Accounts Book (Income & Expenditure), 1973-1974/5

Accounts Book (General), 1966-1971

Accounts Book (General), 1972-1974

Cash Book, 1965-1967

Cash Book, 1967-1969

Reel 7 Cash Book, 1969-1971

Cash Book, 1971-1974

Cash Book, 1977-1981

Meetings Attendance Register, 1962-1970

Meetings Attendance Register, 1970-1974

Meetings Attendance Register, 1974-1977/8

Meetings Attendance Register, 1978-1982

Reel 8 Meetings Attendance Lists, 1986-1987

Pamphlets/Papers:

Report of Greenwich Borough Council Labour Group, 1949-1953

Practical Illustrations of Election Committee Rooms by Alan J. Herbert, July
1951

Greenwich Labour Party Rules and Constitution with Standing Orders, 1954

A Guide for Women's Sections, 1965

Reel 8 (cont.) How the Labour Party Works, June 1971

A New Economic Policy for the Labour Party by John Mills, 1972

Women and the Labour Party, 1972

Labour Cares for Greenwich, Keep Greenwich Labour, Greenwich Borough
Council Elections, May 1978

Greenwich Labour Party Constitution and Standing Orders, Jan. 1979

Greenwich Labour Party: The Case for a Strategy, Oct. 1980

The Membership, Jan 1981

Greenwich Labour Party Members Handbook, 1981

Labour Party Young Socialists, where the Action is!!!, n.d.

<https://microform.digital> - International Digital Scanning & Archiving Services