

Researching the Grass Roots: The Records of Constituency Level Political Parties in Five British Counties, 1918–40

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Modern British political history continues to fascinate academics, students and, indeed, general readers alike. Although seen as ‘unfashionable’ by some, it continues nevertheless to be popular. Courses on modern British political history still attract huge numbers of undergraduates. Considerable numbers of postgraduates embark annually on doctoral research on topics in the area, and most of them complete important theses. Publishers continue to bring out books on aspects of the subject in large number, and some sell very well indeed. Yet for all this activity, some areas, and some source bases, remain considerably under-utilised. One such set of sources is the local-level records of political parties.

One reason for this neglect is the sheer difficulty of ascertaining what is available, and what its value as a research resource might be (see also below). It would not be true to say, of course, that there have been no earlier attempts to guide intrepid researchers through the thickets. In the 1970s, Chris Cook embarked on the project that ultimately resulted in the six-volume *Sources in Modern British Political History*. Volume 1 of that work included entries for the political parties and offered a brief listing of the records of local parties where these had been found to exist. It would be fair to say that at least one of the authors of this article might never have been alerted to the value of such records had it not been for the Cook guide.

Nonetheless, it was inevitable that in such an ambitious project as Cook’s there

would be little detail as to the precise nature of the records listed; its status as a largely postal survey was problematic; and in any case, the bulk of the work was done in the early 1970s, and even the sixth supplementary volume is now approaching its twentieth anniversary. Of course, there are other ways of locating local party records, most notably through the website of the Historical Manuscripts Commission and its ARCHON project (<http://www.hmc.gov.uk/archon/archonportal/archonportal.htm>). But again, all but the most experienced researchers are likely to find the limited information available there of little use in itself. The National Archives' 'Access to Archives' Project ('A2A'), also available online (<http://www.a2a.org.uk/>) will eventually offer considerable assistance to the would-be researcher: indeed, some archives are already providing full listings of their holdings of local party records through this website. Even so, we still felt, as three researchers with considerable experience in using this type of record, that there was scope for a more qualitative approach to the records.

As such, this article is based on the findings of a research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust to locate, consult and analyse the records of constituency level political parties in five British counties – Devon, Durham, Leicestershire, Midlothian-Peebles and Monmouthshire. The objective was to utilise a much underused resource base in order to help understand and compare the experiences of Conservative, Labour and Liberal party members within their own localities during the period 1918–40. To this effect, county archives and constituency party offices were contacted and then visited to establish the extent of local party material

available to researchers, the archival findings of which will be discussed below. In addition, the records were utilised to produce a series of articles examining local party structures, activity and character, assessing similarities and differences across the three major parties.¹ As was expected, the local records consulted offered a fascinating glimpse of life at Britain's political grass roots. Not only did they prove a fruitful (if widely scattered) resource, but they suggested that our understanding of British political and social development over the twentieth century will be incomplete without reference to the emerging mass parties that became a feature of the interwar period.

The five counties were chosen for their broadly representative character. First, they included both urban centres and rural areas. Second, in terms of social background, the counties included divisions dominated by a single industry (coal mining), mixed industrial areas, farming communities, suburban, and middle class constituencies. Third, they offered different 'mixes' of party strength and weakness. As table 1 helps to demonstrate, Labour established itself as a powerful force in Durham and Monmouthshire during the interwar period, but proved to be extremely weak in Devon and made notable but only partial progress in Midlothian-Peebles and Leicestershire. The Conservatives recorded regular successes in Leicestershire, Devon and Midlothian-Peebles, while achieving relatively fewer if still significant electoral victories in Monmouthshire and Durham. The Liberals, meanwhile, remained a viable presence in parts of all five counties, particularly Devon, though

¹ For example, S. Ball, A. Thorpe, and M. Worley, 'Elections, Leaflets and Whist Drives: Constituency Party Members in Five British Counties between the Wars' in M. Worley (Ed.), *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918-45* (London, 2005).

the party experienced a general fall in support over the period and regions as a whole. Of course, such data cannot reveal the true extent of inter-party rivalries and social-political dynamics within each and every constituency, but it will hopefully demonstrate a general pattern of support.

Table 1: The Distribution of Parliamentary Seats over the Five Counties, 1918–39²

	Devon	Durham	Leicestershire	Midlothian	Monmouth	Total
Constituencies	11	17 ³	7	8	6	49
Elec. Contests	81	133	52	34	47	347
Conservative	59 (72.8%)	38 (28.6%)	29 (55.8%)	3 (8.8%)	15 (31.9%)	144 (41.5%)
Labour	1 (1.25%)	70 (52.6%)	8 (15.4%)	15 (44.1%)	31 (66%)	125 (36.1%)
Liberal ⁴	20 (24.7%)	24 (18%)	13 (25%)	16 (47.1%)	1 (2.1%)	74 (21.3%)
Other	1 ⁵ (1.25%)	1 ⁶ (0.8%)	2 ⁷ (3.8%)	0	0	4 (1.1%)

The following article will be divided into three sections. The first will briefly outline the extent to which constituency party records have been widely neglected by historians. Section two will then detail the potential value of local party material, before section three presents the overall findings of the research project, revealing the scope of constituency party archives available to researchers in the five counties covered.

I. The Neglect of Local Party Archives

Traditionally, historians of British political parties have focused on the politics, policies and experiences of the respective national party centres. This is not

² The figures relate to the general elections of 1918, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1929, 1931 and 1935, as well as by-elections as and when they occurred.

³ Sunderland was a two-member constituency.

⁴ The figures include, Asquithian, Lloyd George and independent Liberals.

⁵ In 1929, the Exeter Conservative Association chose an alternative candidate to stand against the sitting Conservative MP Sir R. H. S. D. L. Newman. In response, Newman stood (and won) as an independent.

⁶ James Ramsay MacDonald was elected as the National Labour Party member for Seaham in 1931.

⁷ J. F. Green was elected as the member of Leicester West in 1918 as Coalition candidate for the National Democratic Party. In the same constituency, H. G. Nicholson won in 1935 as a National Labour Party candidate.

surprising: the cut and thrust of the political mainstream has always been most dramatically expressed on the national and parliamentary stage, while the lives of those party leaders and statesmen who have helped shape British, European and global history retain an obvious appeal to those whose job entails explaining the development of the world in which we live. That said, such a concentration on 'high politics' has arguably led to the neglect of a key factor in the history of British political development and social interaction; that is, the emergence (or intended cultivation) of mass membership constituency parties at a local and regional level. These began to develop after the Second and Third Reform Acts, and by the end of the nineteenth century had become the principal institutionalised form of political activity. By 1900, the Liberal and Conservative parties had at least some form of local organisation in almost every constituency, and the membership could be considerable in districts where a party was strong. However, it was the massive extension of the franchise to the majority of the population in the 1918 Reform Act which gave a new impetus and importance to mass party membership. All three of Britain's principal parties recognised the need to develop an active, loyal and extensive membership base in the years following the Great War, and the histories of all three can be said to have been shaped or at least affected by the activities, attitudes and aspirations of their wider memberships.

Of course, the subsequent neglect of local party records as a historical resource is by no means inevitable or total. Most obviously, historians of the Conservative Party have on occasion utilised local party material to notable effect, although this has generally been the case in only a few works and for particular purposes. The

pioneer was John Ramsden, whose study of the years between 1902 and 1940 used records relating to some 75 constituencies, primarily to outline the organisational development of the party.⁸ Stuart Ball, too, consulted the minutes of over 120 constituency parties in his investigation into the tensions between leaders and followers that existed during the period 1929–31.⁹ Moreover, Ball has discussed the nature of these records in a previous article for *Archives* (1996), using them to survey further the development and functions of local Conservative Associations in a recent collaborative history of the party during the twentieth century.¹⁰

However, much remains to be done in exploring the local dimension of Conservative political activity during an era in which it played a significant part in the party's wider electoral success.

With regard to the Labour Party, local party archives have also been used sparingly. Most commonly, they have helped to inform local or regional studies of the party in specific areas, including Mike Savage's seminal analysis of the working class in Preston and Sam Davies' history of the Labour Party in Liverpool.¹¹ Nevertheless,

8 J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902–40* (London 1978).

9 S. Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: the Crisis of 1929–31* (New Haven & London 1988).

10 S. Ball, 'National Politics and Local History: The Regional and Local Archives of the Conservative Party 1867–1945', *Archives*, Vol XXII No. 94 (1996); S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism and the Evolution of the Party Organisation', in Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford 1994). See also N. J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators 1935–40* (London, 1997), which used a range of local records for the specific aspects of foreign and defence policy, and N. McCrillis, *The British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage: Popular Conservatism 1918–29* (Ohio 1998), which used a small sample only.

11 M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987). See also M. Savage, 'The Rise of the Labour Party in Local Perspective', *The Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, Vol. 10 No. 1 (1990). Other local studies that have utilised local party archives include S. Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900–39* (Keele, 1996); C. M. M. MacDonald, *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland. Paisley Politics, 1885–1924* (East Lothian, 2000); J. Reynolds and K. Laybourn, *Labour Heartland: A History of the Labour Party in West Yorkshire*

these and other studies are obviously focused upon very specific (normally industrial) geographical areas in which they consider primarily political realignments within a particular town or region. As such, they contain little in the way of membership detail, concentrating more on party achievements than members' experience. Equally, whilst the above (along with other local studies) are important as individual works, their varied topics and approaches make it impossible to construct a broad and coherent national picture over the long term. At the same time, local archives have only occasionally contributed to nationwide studies of the Labour Party, and there is certainly nothing comparable to Duncan Tanner's *Political Change and the Labour Party* for the period after 1918. So, for example, Ross McKibbin's classic account of the party's early development consulted just two local party minute books and relied overwhelmingly on the records of head office.¹² As with the Conservatives, local party minutes have sometimes been used to discuss a specific question – usually the reasons for the rise of Labour and the decline of the Liberal Party between the wars – or for a very specific purpose, as with Neil Riddell's monograph on the second Labour government.¹³ Yet, even here, the resort to local party material tends to prove the exception rather than the rule.¹⁴

During the Interwar Years, 1918–39 (Bradford, 1987). See also the contributions to *Manchester Region History Review* (Vol. 14, 2000).

12 D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–18* (Cambridge, 1990); R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1900–24* (Oxford, 1974).

13 N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government, 1929–31* (Manchester, 1999).

14 Matthew Worley is currently writing a history of the Labour Party between the wars – *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars* – due to be published by I. B. Tauris in 2005. This is to be a history of the party at all levels and draws on a large number of local party archives.

The Liberals remain perhaps the most under-examined party at a grass roots level. The extensive debates about the reasons for the party's decline during the early twentieth century have not been reflected in serious empirical work on the remaining records of the party at any level other than that of the private papers of Liberal politicians and intellectuals. Such perspectives, while obviously of value, tend to mask the importance of organisational and financial factors in Liberal decline. Even where such sources are noticed, they are scarcely used. Thus, although Richard Grayson's recent – and well-received – book on the Liberal Party included a chapter on 'Liberal Activists', this was only six pages long and used very few party records.¹⁵ Some local studies do exist¹⁶, but scholars have been slow to use the significant resources available to offer a fuller picture of the Liberal Party during this period.

Finally, if the use of local party records for single-party studies has been all too rare, then for inter-party and comparative studies it has been virtually non-existent. Only Andrew Thorpe's study of the 1931 general election ranged widely in this way, drawing on the records of 46 Conservative Associations, 38 Borough and Constituency Labour Parties and 12 Liberal Associations to gauge grass roots reaction to politics in the period 1929–31.¹⁷ Otherwise, historians have continually avoided resorting to local party archives in their analyses of Britain's wider social-political development. Consequently, the experiences and activities of those who

15 R. S. Grayson, *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement, 1919–39* (London, 2001).

16 G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South West Britain since 1918* (Exeter, 2000); M. Dawson, 'Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall 1910–31: The Old-time Religion', *Historical Journal*, 38, 2 (1995); B. M. Doyle, 'Urban Liberalism and the 'Lost Generation': Politics and Middle Class Culture in Norwich 1900–35', *Historical Journal*, 38, 3 (1995).

17 A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Oxford, 1991).

comprised and maintained Britain's democratic foundations have been widely ignored.

Why is this? As Stuart Ball has suggested previously, logistical and financial factors form part of the problem.¹⁸ The scattered nature of such deposits makes any survey of local party material costly and time-consuming.¹⁹ Understandably, historians have tended to work primarily from the well-maintained personal papers of leading politicians or from the principal central archives of the parties – for the Conservatives at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; for Labour at the Labour History and Archive Centre in Manchester, and for the Liberals, in a far less concentrated form, at the University of Bristol and the London School of Economics. It has also often been presumed that local party records are of minor historical interest, in that they are deemed to be overwhelmingly administrative, parochial, or both.

Reference to the local press or correspondence with the national/central party organisation has generally been regarded as an adequate substitute for attention to local party archive material. Yet, as will be argued below, the records of constituency parties deposited in county archives or retained in divisional party offices are in fact a substantial and instructive historical resource, demonstrating – amongst other things – the extent and character of party activity, the social composition and structure of local political organisation, the priorities and (pre-

18 S. Ball, 'National Politics and Local History', pp. 27–28.

19 In addition to the records covered here, some personal papers held outside of the respective counties contain material to constituency party organisations. For example, the Middleton Papers at Ruskin College, Oxford, include Lucy Middleton's correspondence as prospective parliamentary candidate for Plymouth Sutton with her constituency agent, and various other records such as a financial statement for the Divisional Labour Party for 1939 (see Ruskin College Archives, MID 62/5, for the financial statement).

)conceptions of political activists 'on the ground', and something of the complex interaction between political organisations and the local communities in which they were situated. Local party archives offer much with regard to certain concerns of 'high politics', providing detail of the relationship between party leaders and the people that they represented and upon which their position was, to an extent, based. They shed light upon the inner workings of politics, of the relations of the centre to the localities, and the patterns of authority, hierarchy, deference and control within the institution.

From a historical perspective, certain other factors have contributed to a general reluctance on the part of historians to use constituency party records as a principal resource. For example, local party records are rarely complete, usually comprising minute books or material relating to specific periods, party committees or election contests. In some instances, there are sequences of minute books which cover long and continuous periods of time, and these allow the researcher to construct a relatively accurate knowledge of a party's general development. However, many other party archives contain only minor branch records or a few scattered pieces of documentation (the odd annual report or election leaflet). Many minute books include gaps, particularly during wartime (both 1914–18 and 1939–45), while single volumes can begin or cut off in apparent historical limbo. Even more commonly, constituency party records have been lost altogether. The reasons for this are varied. The majority of constituency party papers have been mislaid, destroyed or, more rarely, remain in private hands unbeknown to researchers, archivists or even contemporary party members. Over the course of the project, rumours abounded

as to papers locked in lofts, garages or the back rooms of ageing councillors! The impact of the Second World War, during which many local Conservative associations almost ceased to function, led much important material to be lost, damaged or given with patriotic fervour to the wartime salvage drives. During the war, too, record offices were subject to bombing raids, as in Exeter. Beyond this, changes to constituency boundaries and the relocation of party offices often coincided with the disposal of 'old' party papers along with other 'unneeded' items. Moving premises required the clearing of unwanted 'junk' from long-neglected basements and cupboards, which often included the old minute books and papers. For the non-historian, outdated, battered and dusty minute books from the 1920s and 1930s may simply be taking up space and appear of little practical use. More often than not, this led to complete disposal rather than a deposit in the county archive.²⁰ Given the great variations in their holdings, it may also be surmised that some county and other public record offices appear to have been keener than others to encourage the deposit of local party records. Moreover, in terms of comparative inter-party study, the existence of extensive records for one party is hardly ever complemented with an analogous set of documents for its rivals. Records mainly survive from the areas where a party has been or is strong, and hence the geographical pattern is congruent rather than overlapping. However, although incomplete, the examination of a number of local party resources will provide a clear picture of organisational patterns and political activity. If rarely providing the sole means for a comparative approach to a specific constituency or

²⁰ For more on this, see S. Ball, 'National Politics and Local History', pp. 36–40.

locality, then local party archives are invaluable to those who wish to develop a history of local political and social activity over a wider area.

It was partly in response to the assumptions noted above that the research project here outlined was conceived. To assess the extent to which local political archives could help our understanding of Britain's social-political development, it was decided to systematically locate and evaluate material held within the five designated counties. Our findings are outlined below.

II. The Value of Local Party Archives

Once attention is given to the papers of a constituency party or association, it soon becomes clear that an extremely rich historical source is available to the historian. Such papers come in a variety of forms, ranging from central constituency party minute books, annual party meetings and reports, sub-committee minute books, papers relating to women's and youth sections, to local (ward) party sections, to party finances, to municipal, by-election and general election contests, newspaper cuttings and, in some cases, personal papers. As such, each resource presents the historian with an array of information, the combined affect of which is to offer a fuller understanding of local party structures and an insight into the activities and priorities of party members, officers and candidates. In order to discuss the importance of such material, however, it is necessary first to briefly outline the general structure of local political organisation in the interwar period.

For the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties, the structure of constituency organisation could vary from any 'model' envisaged by the respective party centre.

Accordingly, the following descriptions should be regarded more as a guide to the general features of party organisation than a blueprint applicable across the five counties covered (or Britain overall). Over the interwar period as a whole, Labour undoubtedly emerged as the most centralised and disciplined of the three parties. Divisional Labour Parties saw themselves as an integral part of the national organisation, although they retained a degree of autonomy within a somewhat loosely defined political and organisational paradigm. By contrast, Liberal Associations tended to zealously safeguard their 'independence' (both political and organisational), though sometimes to the detriment of political consistency or coherency. Between the two, Conservative Associations similarly protected their freedom of action but appeared more integrated into a national organisation defined by a specific sense of purpose, or 'cause'. Given this, the principle of a local Conservative Association's autonomy remained firmly entrenched.

Taken generally, Conservative and Liberal associations had developed in tandem following the second reform act of 1867. Come the interwar period, they remained voluntary, self-financing organisations headed by committed activists organised in an executive committee or council appointed at an annual general meeting. Most associations had a president, with the Conservatives tending also to appoint a chairman. The presidency was normally an honorary position within a Conservative Association, granted to a local dignitary or former parliamentary member for the constituency. The president of a divisional Liberal Association was more akin to the position of Tory chairman, thereby serving as the party officer charged with running the association between election contests. Alongside these

dignitaries, most Conservative and Liberal Associations were further officiated by a varying number of vice-presidents, a treasurer, secretary, and appointed men and (in most cases from the early 1920s) women representative of local branches and sections. As associations grew in size, so many association committees/councils appointed a smaller executive or general management committee to maintain party organisation. Linked to this, a series of sub-committees were sometimes established to oversee the association finances, social events, education, literature and so on. Accordingly, much of the wider association work was undertaken by an 'autonomous periphery' of local branches, women's sections and, in the case of the Conservatives, the Junior Imperial League.²¹ Finally, the appointment of a full-time party agent responsible for registration work and the administration of the association's electoral affairs was generally aspired to.

Prior to 1918, the Labour Party was organised as a federation of affiliated trade unions and socialist societies with no provision for individual members. This changed with the adoption of a new party constitution in 1918, instigating the formation of constituency (divisional) parties to which trade unions, individuals and socialist, Co-operative and professional societies could each subscribe.

Authority lay with the general committee, which elected an executive to oversee the day-to-day business of the divisional party that comprised a chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer, secretary and representatives of the local party branches, unions, women's sections and societies affiliated to the constituency party. Such a structure was then reproduced at a local ward level, with various sub-committees

²¹ S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism and the Evolution of Party Organisation', p. 272.

appointed to direct areas of particular interest such as socials, finance, literature and education. In many instances, trades councils initially formed the basis for this arrangement.²² As this would suggest, affiliated trade union members often made up the bulk of the paper membership, and trade union officials tended to dominate the party leadership in a number of places. That said, parties based in localities with a more 'mixed' or less industrial economy were not necessarily so dependent on a particular union for their financial or organisational support, with inter-union tensions sometimes becoming apparent, or with the influence of the ILP and certain middle class members being more readily evident. In addition to the central constituency organisation, Labour encouraged its divisions to form women's sections from 1918 and Labour Leagues of Youth from the mid-1920s. In accord with the other parties, the appointment of an organiser or agent was aspired to, either on a part or (preferably) full time basis.

As the above description implies, the most important or informative constituency records tend to relate to the meetings of a party or association executive or general committee/council. These are normally compiled in hardback stationary books with meetings recorded in chronological order, although the condition of such books, and the detail contained within them, varies from party to party and constituency to constituency. Some deposits, such as the minute book for the Plymouth Sutton Division Conservative and Unionist Association (1938–71), are badly damaged.²³ Generally, however, those books that have survived are still

²² Labour Party, *Party Organisation* (London, 1936 edition).

²³ Minutes of the Plymouth Sutton Division Conservative and Unionist Association, 1938–71 (West Devon Record Office).

solidly bound and easy to access – only the handwriting of the divisional secretary can then obstruct the researcher’s task.²⁴ That said, readability is affected by the fading of ink with age, and there are particular problems with photocopying – both the physical condition of the binding, and the frequent use of blue ink which is difficult to copy (especially if faint). Conversely, typed minutes and newspaper reports are sometimes glued into minute books, a practice that has served to damage several deposits while at the same time making them easier to read.²⁵

For all three parties, a similar pattern of entry is apparent. The date, nature and place of a meeting are recorded first, often followed by a list of those present and a recording of apologies for absence. From such detail, it is possible to note the size and composition of a party committee, particularly in terms of gender. With regard to Conservative and Liberal associations, personal titles (Lord, Sir, Captain etc) help determine the social composition of the party hierarchy, while the stated affiliation of Labour Party officers (trade union, ILP, individual member) may enable the historian to assess the distribution of power and influence within a respective division. In many cases, such information is followed by details of correspondence, before the main points of business are then outlined in varying degrees of detail.²⁶ In keeping with the appointed role of the party or association executive, administrative, organisational and financial matters clearly took up the bulk of a constituency organisation’s time. Beyond this, sub-committee or ward

24 For example, Minutes of the Darlington Labour Party, 1922–45 (Durham Record Office).

25 For one example, see Minutes of the Totnes Division Liberal Association, 1924–39 (Totnes Liberal Association).

26 For examples relating to each party, see Minutes of the Tiverton Division Liberal Association, 1925–70; Minutes of the Newport Labour Party (LSE and University of Wales Swansea); Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 1892–63 (Leicestershire Record Office).

reports are generally registered rather than described, although reference to financial reports can sometimes offer detail as to the size and sources of party income.

In terms of what might be termed actual politics, discussions within the executive or general committee were rarely minuted. Resolutions supporting the respective organisation's national centre are common if intermittent, while resolutions urging the party centre to take up a certain cause or concern are similarly evident.²⁷ Intra-party criticism is unusual, particularly within Conservative associations, although the divided nature of the Liberal Party between 1916–22 served to produce varying recorded perspectives across the party.²⁸ For Labour, inter-union tensions, disputes with left minorities and disagreements between divisional parties and Labour council groups are occasionally recorded, but are generally conducted within a context of wider party loyalty.²⁹ The serious divisions of 1931–32 obviously impacted on Labour, but the vast majority of members remained committed to the party and its leadership. Accordingly, disputes with communists, the ILP or left wing members are rarely referred to across the five counties covered.

Obviously, in relation to all three parties, there were instances where the general and executive committees did discuss important matters of the day. The most

²⁷ For instance, see the resolution in support of the Labour government in Minutes of the Loughborough Borough Labour Party, 28 January 1931 (Leicestershire Record Office).

²⁸ This is particularly evident in minutes relating to Liberal organisation in Leicestershire and Edinburgh. See the J. M. Hogge Collection and the Minutes of the Scottish Liberal Federation housed at the National Library of Scotland, and the Harborough Division Liberal Association Minutes (1885–53) and Leicestershire Liberal Association Minutes (1903–23) deposited at the Leicestershire Record Office.

²⁹ Minutes of the Darlington Labour Party, 11 April 1923 (Durham Record Office); Minutes of the Newport Labour Party, 2 December 1920, 15 March 1935 and 10 February 1936 (LSE).

common topics of debate were the peace settlements immediately after the war, the General Strike of 1926, safeguarding duties and the introduction of tariffs in 1927–32, the future of India in 1931–35, foreign and defence policy in the later 1930s, and unemployment and economic issues throughout both decades.³⁰ However, the intricacies of a particular discussion are often summarised, and not infrequently the minute-taker simply notes that a ‘discussion ensued’. Frequently, the parliamentary member, candidate or party secretary would be minuted as reporting on such matters to the wider party.³¹ Taken generally, therefore, disagreement and party in-fighting appear to have been more likely rooted in personal, organisational or financial concerns than political.³²

More positively, constituency minutes contain much on the adoption and activities of prospective or sitting parliamentary candidates, recording their selection, their reports back to the divisional organisation, and their visits to and within their respective constituency.³³ For the Labour Party, a considerable amount of central executive attention was evidently given to local election candidates and campaigns, with regular reference to those appointed to contest municipal elections and

30 For some examples, see Minutes of the Edinburgh North Conservative Association (Edinburgh City Archive); Minutes of the Newport Labour Party (LSE); Minutes of the Stockton Constitutional Organisation Minutes, 1891–40 (Durham Record Office); Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association (Darlington Conservative Association).

31 Minutes of the Bedwellty Labour Party (Gwent Record Office); Minutes of the Edinburgh North Conservative Association (Edinburgh City Archive); Plymouth Sutton Conservative and Unionist Association Minutes, 1938–71 (West Devon Record Office).

32 For details, see S. Ball, A. Thorpe, and M. Worley, ‘Elections, Leaflets and Whist Drives’.

33 Some examples include Minutes of the Torquay Liberal Association, 1913–40 (Torbay Liberal Democrat Office); Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association (Darlington Conservative Association); Minutes of the Peebles and South Midlothian Labour Party, 1919–26 (National Library of Scotland).

methods of canvassing.³⁴ The Conservatives had no formal involvement in local government elections in many rural areas and small towns, but in the medium and larger boroughs – where contests on party lines pre-dated the emergence of the Labour Party – the association played a role in selecting or endorsing council candidates and in arbitrating disputes.

Significantly, constituency party minute books regularly came to include details of meetings beyond that of the executive or general committee. Most commonly, annual meetings are recorded, thereby allowing the historian to document the means by which party officers were (s)elected and the composition of party or association office holding. Annual meeting minutes can also, on occasion, provide membership and financial details, while the accompanying annual reports generally reveal much about a party or association's activity over the preceding twelve months. Moreover, the reports and minutes relating to the various sub-committees established by a constituency organisation offer a glimpse into wider party or association life. The two most common entries relate to finance committees and social committees.³⁵ The first of these tend to outline the financial concerns that preoccupied parties of all persuasions, as well as the means by which members sought to raise income. The social committees, meanwhile, which were also set up in many cases to conceive of ways to bolster the party or association coffers, tell the historian much about an organisation's extra-political activity. Whist drives,

³⁴ For example, Minutes of the Loughborough Labour Party, 28 March 1930; Minutes of the Shepshed Local Labour Party, 1937–51 (Leicestershire Record Office).

³⁵ Minutes of the Torquay Liberal Association Finance Committee, 1913–40 (Torbay Liberal Democrat Office); Minutes of the Harborough Division Conservative Association, 1933–53 (Leicestershire Record Office).

bazaars, fetes, dances and household socials were regularly held across the parties, all of which – with the associated division of labour between male and female members – shed important light on just what it meant to be a constituency party member in interwar Britain.³⁶ Finally, executive minute books sometimes include lists of members or subscribers compiled at the back of book (occasionally with addresses). As such, minute books were in many cases utilised to record more than their initial title implies, suggesting that a careful reading of the party or association minutes can reveal far more than simply the administrative tasks of the party officers.

On occasion, finance and sub-committee details are maintained in separate minute books.³⁷ These, again, vary in detail, although facts relating to party accounts have an obvious interest to political historians. Unfortunately, written financial records often appear erratically or incompletely, suggesting that the balance sheets included with most divisional parties or association's printed annual reports offer a more fruitful line of research.³⁸ Receipts and cashbooks tend also to be of very limited value.³⁹ Of greater interest are the minute books of sub-committees or party auxiliary organisations. Thus, records relating to the Socialist League (Gateshead), or to the Labour Advisory Committees (the trade unionist organisation which in

36 Minutes of the Harborough Division Liberal Association, 1910–37 (Leicestershire Record Office); Minutes of the Newport Labour Party (LSE); Minutes of the South Edinburgh Liberal Association, 1930–56 (National Library of Scotland).

37 Darlington Conservative Association Annual General Meeting Minute Book, 1929–39 (Darlington Conservative Association); Monmouth Unionist Association Finance Committee and Accounts Sub-Committee Minutes, 1928–47 (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth).

38 Houghton-le-Spring Labour Party, *Annual Report and Balance Sheet*, 1918–38 (Durham Record Office). The Durham archive contains several annual reports for the various divisional parties in the county.

39 Newport Labour Party Cash Books, 1935–55 (LSE); North (and West) Edinburgh Unionist Association cash books, 1899–47 (Edinburgh City Archive).

the 1920s all Conservative associations were strongly encouraged to form) occasionally survive, thereby allowing access into lesser-known (or under-examined) corners of a party or association experience.⁴⁰ Similarly, the minute books of local (ward) Labour Parties, Conservative and Liberal Associations provide an important window upon rank-and-file members' priorities, attitudes and activities.⁴¹ Again, these vary in their scope, but generally record (for all three parties) the often extensive social activities organised by local political organisations during the 1920s and 1930s, methods of canvassing support and fund-raising, and further patterns of office holding. As with the central constituency records, detail of political discussion is rare, although adopted resolutions and points of discussion help to delineate local party focuses throughout the interwar period.

Two further elements were subordinate to the central constituency officers and executive, with representation upon the latter: the women's and youth sections.⁴²

40 Minutes of the Gateshead Branch of the Socialist League, 1932–36 (Tyne and Wear Archive, Newcastle); Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association Labour Advisory Committee, 1933–39 (Darlington Conservative Association); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Unionist Labour Advisory Committee, 1925–34 (Durham Record Office); Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association Labour Advisory Committee, 1930–39 (Leicestershire Record Office).

41 Some examples include, Minutes of the Hebburn Labour Party and Trades Council, 1924–34 (Durham Record Office); Minutes of the Dalkeith Local Labour Party, 1935–51 (National Library of Scotland); Minutes of the Storer Ward Labour Party, 1932–52; Minutes of the Market Harborough Conservative Association, 1926–55 (Leicestershire Record Office); Minutes of the West (North) Edinburgh St. Andrew's Ward Unionist Association, 1913–62 (Edinburgh City Archive).

42 Minutes of the Torquay Conservative Association Women's Committee, 1925–37 (Torquay Conservative Association); Minutes of the Monmouth Women's Unionist Association Minutes, 1929–73 (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth); Minutes of the South Edinburgh Liberal Women's Association, 1924–58 (National Library of Scotland); Minutes of the Loughborough Constituency Labour Party Women's Section, 1924–48; Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association Women's Branch Minutes, 1925–36 (Leicestershire Record Office); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Unionist Women's Section, 1923–38; Minutes of the Bishop Auckland Women's Section of the Labour Party, 1932–70; Minutes of the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council, 1920–37; Minutes of the Sedgfield Division Federation of Women's Sections, 1934–45 (Durham Record Office). For youth sections, see Minutes of the

These generally had a two-tier structure of their own, with a central ‘executive’ or ‘advisory’ committee and a network of local branches. Crucially, a number of women’s section minute books have survived, especially Labour and Conservative (see below), and these are in many cases detailed and revealing. Conservative women’s sections were generally far larger than their Labour equivalents, tending also to participate in and initiate a wider array of activities. In all cases, however, a considerable amount of a women section’s time was preoccupied with organising local, constituency and sometimes regional social activities, much detail of which is recorded in the respective minute books. Less publicly, activities within the various sections could vary, although an array of topics and activities were evidently undertaken. To this effect, women’s section minute books often record topics discussed by members and talks given by speakers, as well as detailing the more usual recreational activities of bazaars, whist, tea and singing. For this reason, deposits relevant to interwar women’s sections provide an invaluable record for both political and social historians, revealing aspects of the ‘separate spheres’ that existed within political (and other) organisations, and providing a source against which to test prior assumptions as to the role of women within political parties in interwar Britain.

Surviving youth section minute books are less common and tend to cover shorter durations of time, indicating the often ephemeral nature of such organisations.

Where such resources do exist – as with the Stockton and Harborough branches of

the Junior Imperial League, or the Newport Labour Party's Labour League of Youth – they provide another important insight into the social-political activities and attitudes of local members.⁴³ Taken generally, youth sections were seen by the 'parent' party as supportive and educational organisations, with much time given to socials, dances and outings, as well as to (less popular) essay competitions, speakers and lectures. As with the women's section minute books, therefore, youth section records are predominantly concerned with ordering the schedule of locally held events and entertainments, with political discussion being rare or carefully channelled. At the same, in both youth section and constituency party minutes, generational tensions can sometimes be discerned.

Divisional party records can include far more than minute books. Printed annual reports and balance sheets are often contained within local archives, sometimes covering an extensive period of time. Where this is the case, the historian has access to further patterns of office holding, financial detail and reports of general activity that can be compared both across and within respective constituency parties.⁴⁴

Election material, too, both parliamentary and municipal, is available in many archive deposits, providing the historian with a means to compare local, regional and national priorities, language, imagery and candidature.⁴⁵ Far less common are examples of local party newspapers, although these can offer a fruitful snapshot of a

43 Ibid; Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Junior Imperial League, 1923–25 (Durham Record Office).

44 See footnote 38. Also, Newport Labour Party, *Annual Reports and Balance Sheet*, 1922–32 and 1934–35 (Newport Reference Library); Edinburgh and District Trades and Labour Council, *Annual Report and Balance Sheet*, 1921–51 (LSE).

45 The Durham Record Office and the Tyne and Wear Archives Service in Newcastle house extensive election material relevant to all three parties. See section three for an overview of available election material.

party's and a locality's principal concerns and preoccupations. Similarly, brochures for party events, such as galas, dinners, social and bazaars, collections of newspaper cuttings, and personal papers of lesser known MPs or party office holders have survived, albeit in a scattered and generally irregular form.⁴⁶ These can vary dramatically in usefulness, although their worth can of course depend – to a degree at least – on the researcher's own agenda. Generally, such 'miscellaneous material' is of supplementary value, offering scraps of information of contrasting use.

Overall, the records of Britain's constituency level political parties offer a valuable if occasionally frustrating resource for the historian. Such records are rarely complete; they can be inconsistent in terms of their content, scattered widely across the country, and not always revealing with regard to 'high' political events. At the same time, such records provide much information with regard to the structure and composition of local political organisation, the social and electoral activities of party members, relations between men and women and between generations within the three parties, and in relation to the political priorities and assumptions of those who maintained and informed Britain's democratic base. In so doing, the utilisation of such local material will help historians to complement and supplement their understanding of Britain's social, political and cultural development between the wars (and after), offering a fresh perspective on the

⁴⁶ Some examples include Sedgefield Conservative and Unionist Association, *Grand National Bazaar*, 22–23 March 1935; *Darlington Labour News*, May 1923 (Durham Record Office); Copies of *Monmouthshire Opinion*, 1925–28 and 1936–37 (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth and Gwent Record Office); Loughborough Labour Party Scrapbook, 1937–39 (Leicester Record Office); George Mathers' Papers; J. M. Hogge Collection (National Library of Scotland).

events of the 1920s and 1930s, and revealing a glimpse into the everyday lives of party members and the communities in which they were based.

III. Local Party Archives in Five British Counties

The scattered and irregular nature of constituency party archives was certainly borne out in the research project. Over the 49 constituencies covered in the five counties, material relating to 24 Conservative, 23 Labour and ten Liberal constituency parties was found. More significantly, the extent of such material varied widely, with some of it consisting only of odd annual reports or election material. Extensive records of relatively few parties were located; minute books varied in their detail and the length of period covered. As table 2 suggests, archives relating to the Liberal Party were limited, while papers relevant to both the Conservative and the Labour Party were widely available but in no way comprehensive of any county as a whole:

Table 2: Extant Constituency Organisation Records in Five British Counties, 1918–40

	Devon	Durham	Leicester	Midlothian	Monmouth	Total
Constituencies	11	17	7	8	6	49
Conservative	6	10	4	3	1	24
Labour	0	13	1	6	3	23
Liberal	4	2	2	2	0	10

Even so, the vast majority of material uncovered proved to be extremely revealing in terms of the project's principal objective – that is, to gather information relating to the structures, activities and experiences of party members in the interwar period. Indeed, even those limited deposits mentioned above helped to shed important light on the extent and sources of party finances (annual reports and balance sheets), political priorities, assumptions and language (election material).

In the following tables (tables 3 to 15), the scope of the constituency party archives are outlined, with the various 'types' relating to central constituency minute books (executive committee/council, general committee, financial committee etc), women's section minute books, youth section minute books (Junior Imperial League, Labour League of Youth), local or ward association minute books and papers, election material, annual reports and miscellaneous papers (newspaper cuttings, scrapbooks, personal papers and local party publications). For reasons of simplicity, local (ward) women's and youth branch minutes have been included under the headings of 'women' or 'youth'; the 'local' heading refers simply to the branch executive or financial committees. In keeping with the wider project, the tables refer only to party material relevant to the period 1918–40.

Of the three principal parties, Conservative Association records proved to be the most extensive, both in terms of substance and distribution. Once broken down, however, Conservative deposits obviously varied across the five counties. In Devon, the material relating to the Torquay Conservative Association is by far the most extensive, comprising several executive and 'women's committee' minute books covering much of the interwar period. By contrast, the minute books for the two Plymouth Conservative Associations (Drake and Sutton) are limited in terms of timescale, while the Sutton book is severally water damaged. The scattered local material proved to be limited in terms of detail and interest, although the Ilsington Conservative Association women's branch minutes cover an extensive time-period and, though irregular, offer a clear insight into the branch's activity.

Table 3: Conservative Party Papers in Devon

	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc.
Barnstaple Ply.	X ⁴⁸			X ⁴⁷			
Drake Ply.	X ⁴⁹						
Sutton Tiverton				X ⁵⁰	X ⁵¹		X ⁵²
Torquay	X ⁵³	X ⁵⁴					
Totnes		X ⁵⁵					

The most important Durham-based material relating to the Conservative Party can be found in the papers of the Darlington Conservative Association and the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation. The first of these contain extensive constituency papers for the association executive, women's section, financial committee, general purposes committee, annual meetings and labour advisory committee, although these are currently still in the keeping of the Darlington Conservative Association itself. Significantly, Darlington Labour Party material has also survived, thereby providing a rare opportunity to compare party resources, activities and experiences within the same constituency. The papers of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation are held at the Durham Record Office and are similarly wide-ranging. Its main committee minutes are extremely detailed and span over five books (1891–40), while its women's section

47 Mortehoe and Woolacombe Branch Accounts, 1932–32; Mortehoe and Woolacombe branch letters and correspondence, 1939–40 (North Devon Record Office, Tuly Street, Barnstaple, EX31 1EL).

48 Plymouth Drake Conservative and Unionist Association Minutes, 1915–25 (West Devon Record Office, Unit 3, Clare Place, Plymouth, PL4 0JE).

49 Plymouth Sutton Conservative and Unionist Association Minutes, 1938–71 (West Devon Record Office).

50 Woolacombe Papers, Sparkwell branch, 1919–25 (West Devon Record Office).

51 Located at the Devon Record Office, Castle Street, Exeter, Devon, EX4 3PU.

52 Tiverton Conservative association correspondence, 1919–23 (West Devon Record Office).

53 The minute books currently remain in the hands of the Torquay Conservative Association.

54 Torquay Conservative Association Women's Committee Minutes, 1925–37. This minute book also remains in the hands of the Torquay Conservative Association.

55 Ilington Women's Unionist Association Minutes, 1923–68 (Devon Record Office).

(four books) and Junior Imperial League (two books) are also well covered. In addition, minutes to the association's labour advisory committee, bazaar committee and men's branch have survived and are of considerable value. Beyond this, however, as table 4 demonstrates, Conservative material in Durham comprises mainly election leaflets.

Table 4: Conservative Party Papers in Durham

	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc.
Barnard C					X ⁵⁶		
Blaydon					X ⁵⁷		
Chester-le					X ⁵⁸		
Darlington	X ⁵⁹	X ⁶⁰					
Durham ⁶¹							
Gateshead					X ⁶²		
Hartlepool					X ⁶³		
Jarrow					X ⁶⁴		
Sedgefield							X ⁶⁵
Stockton	X ⁶⁶	X ⁶⁷	X ⁶⁸				X ⁶⁹

56 Located at the Durham County Record Office, County Hall, Durham, DH1 5UL. The material comprises election leaflets for Lieutenant Colonel Cuthbert Headlam, 1931 and 1935.

57 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises one 1924 general election leaflet for G. Denson.

58 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises one 1924 general election leaflet for Michael Dodds McCarthy.

59 The constituency records for the Darlington Conservative Association are extensive. They comprise Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association, 1923–30; Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association Financial Committee, 1929–40; Darlington Conservative Association Annual General Meeting Minute Book, 1929–39; Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association Labour Advisory Committee, 1933–39; Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association General Purposes Committee, 1929–39. The Darlington Conservative Association currently holds the deposit.

60 Minutes of the Darlington Conservative association Women's Advisory Committee, 1929–39 (Darlington Conservative Association).

61 Minutes for the Durham County Conservative Committee (1919–23) can be found in the minute book of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation, 1919–1923 (Durham County Record Office).

62 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises one 1924 general election leaflet for H. Philipson.

63 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises one 1924 general election leaflet for Sir W. H. Sugden.

64 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises one 1923 general election leaflet for John Lindsley.

65 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises a 26-page programme of the Grand National Bazaar held by the Sedgefield Conservative Association on 22–23 March 1923.

66 Held in the Durham County Record Office, the Stockton records include, Minutes of the Stockton Constitutional Organisation Minutes, 1891–40 (5 books); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Unionist Labour Advisory Committee, 1925–34; Stockton

Sunderland					X ⁷⁰		
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Conservative Party research is perhaps better served in Leicestershire, where there are at least some central minutes for all four of the county divisions, although nothing survives for the city organisation. The Leicestershire Record Office contains a number of valuable deposits, particularly with regard to the Harborough Conservative Association, while the Melton Conservative and Unionist Association continues to hold on to its own extensive records. Both resources are full of rich detail concerning party activities, attitudes and experiences. Harborough, in particular, offers a fascinating insight into relations between men and women within a Conservative Association where its female members outnumbered and proved far more active than their male counterparts. Although less wide-ranging, the surviving records for the Loughborough and the Bosworth Conservative associations are also significant, with the former covering a considerable period of time and the latter offering detailed minutes for both a divisional and a local women's branch.

Table 5: Conservative Party Papers in Leicestershire

Bosworth	Minutes X ⁷¹	Women X ⁷²	Youth	Local	Annual	Misc.
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and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Bazaar Committee Minutes, 1928–29; Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Unionist, Men's Branch Minutes, 1934–46.

67 Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Women's Section, 1923–38 (Durham County Record Office). These are deposited in four separate minute books.

68 Stockton and Thornaby Junior Imperial League Minutes, 1923–25; Stockton and Thornaby Junior Imperial League Minutes, 1937 (Durham Record Office).

69 The Durham Record Office also includes a collection of newspaper cutting relevant to the Stockton Constitutional Organisation, covering 1890–23

70 Located at the Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Blandford House, Blandford Square, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 4JA, the deposit comprises several general election leaflets covering the period 1923–31.

71 Minutes of the Bosworth Conservative Association Finance and Executive Committee, 1937–39 (Leicestershire Record Office, Long Street, Wigston, Leicester, LE18 2AH).

Harborough	X ⁷³	X ⁷⁴	X ⁷⁵	X ⁷⁶		
Loughborough	X ⁷⁷					X ⁷⁸
Melton	X ⁷⁹	X ⁸⁰				

North of the border, in Midlothian-Peebles, a number of papers relating to Unionist organisations in Edinburgh survive. Taken as a whole, these cover a broad range of Conservative activity, including minute books for divisional, local, women's and junior sections of the party. The deposits, located at the Edinburgh City Archive and via the Edinburgh South, West and Central Conservative Associations, cover the complete interwar period, although the researcher must take note of the boundary and political changes that cut across the three divisions listed below in table 6. Reorganisation meant that some minute books begin in one constituency only to change mid-way through; furthermore, the minute books for East Edinburgh Unionist Association begin as the minute books for the East Edinburgh Liberal Unionist Association in 1898.

Table 6: Conservative Party Papers in Midlothian-Peebles

	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc.
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72 Bosworth Women's Unionist Association, 1918–25; Hinckley and District Women's Conservative and Unionist Association, 1911–39 (Leicestershire Record Office).

73 Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 1892–63 (four books); Harborough Conservative Association Financial Records, 1899–39; Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association Labour Advisory Committee, 1930–39 (Leicestershire Record Office).

74 Harborough Conservative Association Women's Branch Minutes, 1925–36 (two books); Oadby Women's Conservative Association, 1930–46 (Leicestershire Record Office).

75 Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association Junior Imperial League, 1929–39 (two books); Minutes of the Market Harborough Junior Imperial League, 1931–37 (Leicestershire Record Office).

76 Minutes of the Market Harborough Conservative Association, 1926–55 (Leicestershire Record Office).

77 Minutes of the Loughborough Conservative and Unionist Association, 1928–55 (Leicestershire Record Office).

78 Loughborough Conservative Club subscribers' list (Leicestershire Record Office).

79 Minutes of the Melton Conservative and Unionist Association, 1923–46 (Leicester Conservative Association). A copy is also held by Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester.

80 Minutes of the Melton Women's Conservative and Unionist Association, 1925–47 (Leicester Conservative Association). A copy is also held by Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester.

Edin. N	X ⁸¹	X ⁸²	X ⁸³	X ⁸⁴			X ⁸⁵
Edin. E	X ⁸⁶		X ⁸⁷				
Edin. W	X ⁸⁸						

With regard to our final county, Monmouthshire, an extensive resource is available at the National Library of Wales, comprising a vast catalogue of papers relating to the Monmouth Unionist Association (previously the South Monmouthshire Conservative Association). In an area where the Conservatives were generally weak, this is an important deposit, although it proves to be the only one relevant to the county as a whole. Clearly, party papers are more likely to be found in areas of respective political and organisational strength, hence the large and most fruitful Conservative Association deposits in places such as Leicestershire and Devon.

Table 7: Conservative Party Papers in Monmouthshire

Monmouth	Minutes X ⁸⁹	Women X ⁹⁰	Youth	Local	Election X ⁹¹	Annual X ⁹²	Misc. X ⁹³
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81 Minutes of the West (North) Edinburgh Unionist Association Executive Council, 1913–28; Minutes of the North Edinburgh Unionist Association Executive Council, 1928–39; North (and West) Edinburgh Unionist Association cash books, 1899–47; Minutes of the North Edinburgh Unionist Workers' League, 1933–39 (Edinburgh City Archive, City Chambers, High Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1VJ).

82 Minutes of the North Edinburgh Women's Committee Minutes, 1925–56 (Edinburgh City Archive). This deposit comprises two minute books.

83 Minutes of the North Edinburgh Junior Unionist Association, 1936–39 (Edinburgh City Archive). This deposit is collected in three minute books.

84 Minutes of the West (North) Edinburgh St. Andrew's Ward Unionist Association, 1913–62 (Edinburgh City Archive).

85 A collection of newspaper cutting relating to the North Edinburgh Conservative Association are kept at the Edinburgh City Archive.

86 Minutes of the East Edinburgh (Liberal Unionist) and Unionist Association Executive, 1898–1918 (Edinburgh Central Conservative Association); Minutes of the East Edinburgh Unionist Association Executive, 1932–48 (Edinburgh South Conservative Association).

87 Minutes of the East Edinburgh Junior Imperial League, 1930–32 (Edinburgh South Conservative Association).

88 Minutes of the West Edinburgh Unionist Association, 1928– (Edinburgh West Conservative Association). For further details, see S. Ball, 'A Summary List of the Regional and local Records of the Conservative Party, 1867–47', available from Dr. Ball at the University of Leicester.

89 Minutes of the Monmouth Unionist Association (previously South Monmouthshire Conservative Association), 1903–34; Monmouth Unionist Association Minutes, 1934–70; Minutes of the Monmouth Unionist Association Finance Committee and Accounts Sub-Committee, 1928–47 (National Library of Wales, Welsh Political Archive, Aberystwyth, Wales, SY23 3BU).

Indeed, this is similarly the case with regard to the Labour Party. In such a Labour ‘desert’ as Devon, absolutely no constituency party material was uncovered, there being no deposits at the three county record offices and only negative responses coming from the existing constituency party branches. Conversely, the Labour stronghold of Durham not surprisingly provides the historian with an array of Labour Party (and associated trade union) material. Throughout much of the county, Labour functioned through the lodges of the dominant Durham Miners’ Association (DMA), meaning that constituency organisations were often rudimentary and individual party membership low. Even so, extremely detailed archival sources exist for divisional Labour Parties in Darlington, South Shields and, more sporadically, Seaham. Somewhat ironically, too, given the masculine character of the miner-dominated labour movement throughout the region, notable Labour women’s section minutes exist for Bishop Auckland, Durham, Seaham, Spennymoor and Sedgfield. As such, historians examining Labour activity in Durham will obviously focus much of their attention on the DMA. That said, those Labour Party records that do exist, including numerous annual reports for a

90 Minutes of the Monmouth Women’s Unionist Association, 1929–73; Minutes of the Magor and District Women’s Branch, 1924–52; Minutes of the Llandenny and Llansoy District Women’s Branch, 1932–47 (National Library of Wales).

91 Located at the Gwent Record Office County Record Office, County Hall, Cwmbran, NP44 2XH. The deposit comprises one 1934 by-election leaflet for Major Jack Herbert.

92 The National Library of Wales contains printed annual reports for the Monmouth Unionist Association (previously South Monmouthshire Conservative Association), 1903–34; and the Monmouth Unionist Association, 1935–69 (incomplete).

93 The miscellaneous papers relating to the Monmouth Conservative Association housed at the National Library of Wales include editions of Monmouthshire Opinion (some editions also held at the Gwent record Office), lists of shareholders to Caerleon Unionist Hall Limited and various pieces of association memorabilia.

variety of divisional parties, contain important financial and personnel information.

Table 8: Labour Party Papers in Durham

	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc.
Barnard C						X ⁹⁴	
Bishop A		X ⁹⁵					
Blaydon						X ⁹⁶	
Darlington	X ⁹⁷					X ⁹⁸	X ⁹⁹
Durham		X ¹⁰⁰					X ¹⁰¹
Gateshead							X ¹⁰²
Houghton					X ¹⁰³	X ¹⁰⁴	
Jarrow				X ¹⁰⁵	X ¹⁰⁶		
Seaham		X ¹⁰⁷			X ¹⁰⁸		X ¹⁰⁹
Sedgefield		X ¹¹⁰				X ¹¹¹	X ¹¹²

94 Barnard Castle Labour Party Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1931 (Durham Record Office).

95 Minutes of the Bishop Auckland Women's Section of the Labour Party, 1932–70 (Durham Record Office).

96 Blaydon Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1919, 1920 and 1936 (Durham Record Office).

97 Minutes of the Darlington Labour Party Minutes, 1922–45 (Durham Record Office). The Darlington Labour Party minutes are compiled in five books.

98 Darlington Labour Party Annual Report and Balance Sheet for the year ending 31 March 1922 (Durham Record Office).

99 One copy of Darlington Labour News (May 1923) can be viewed at the Durham Record Office.

100 Minutes of the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Minutes, 1920–37 (three books); Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council Annual Conference Reports, 1925 and 1927–38 (Durham Record Office). The Women's Advisory Council material obviously relates to Durham County rather than simply Durham constituency.

101 There is a great deal of Durham Labour Party material kept amongst the extensive Shotton Papers housed at the Durham Record Office. Generally, however, the Shotton Papers are primarily concerned with the affairs of the DMA.

102 Minutes of the Gateshead Branch of the Socialist League, 1932–36 (The Tyne and Wear Archive).

103 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises one 1929 general election leaflet for R. Richardson.

104 Houghton-le-Spring Labour Party Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1918–38 (Durham Record Office). Though extensive, these do not form a complete collection of annual reports.

105 Minutes of the Hebburn Labour Party and Trades Council, 1924–34 (Durham Record Office). These are compiled in two minute books.

106 The election material relates to James Wigham, a municipal candidate in 1928, and to Ellen Wilkinson's campaigns in 1931 and 1935.

107 Minutes of the Seaham Labour Party Women's Section, 1938–45 (Durham Record Office).

108 The election material relates to Sidney Webb (1923) and to Ramsay MacDonald (1929 and as a 'National Labour Party' candidate in 1931).

109 Included amongst the miscellaneous material relating to the Seaham constituency are various Labour newssheets (Seaham Harbour News, The Seaham Elector, and The Socialist), as well as correspondence relating to Sidney Webb and Ramsay MacDonald.

110 Minutes of the Sedgefield Division Federation of Women's Sections Minutes, 1934–45 (Durham Record Office).

111 Sedgefield Labour Party Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1920, 1926 and 1929 (Durham Record Office).

S. Shields ¹¹³ Spennymoor Sunderland	X	X ¹¹⁴			X X ¹¹⁶	X X ¹¹⁵ X ¹¹⁷	X
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Disappointingly, the bulk of Leicestershire Labour Party papers remain either lost or, as ‘rumoured’, in private hands. As such, only material relating to the Loughborough Labour Party is at present available to historians, although some of this continues to be closed to public access without permission from the existing Loughborough Labour Party. What is available makes for fascinating reading, including constituency, borough and local party papers, women’s section minutes, and financial material. The sources are predominantly based in the 1930s.

Table 9: Labour Party Papers in Leicestershire

Loughborough	Minutes X ¹¹⁸	Women X ¹¹⁹	Youth	Local X ¹²⁰	Election	Annual	Misc X
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112 Also deposited at the Durham Record Office is a copy of the Sedgefield Labour Sentinel (Volume one, Number one, 1937).

113 The South Shields Labour Party minutes comprise part of the ‘Origins and Development of the Labour Party in Britain at a Local Level’ microfilm series kept at the London School of Economics Library. The executive and general committee minutes comprise most of the first three of five microfilm reels. They form a continuous set of minutes, beginning 14 February 1912 through to 1945. The interwar period minutes make up seven books, revealing extensive detail about the party’s activities, personnel and finances. Reels four and five of the deposit includes party correspondence, annual reports and financial detail.

114 Minutes of the Crook Labour Party Women’s Section, 1927–34 (Durham Record Office).

115 Spennymoor Labour Party Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1924 and 1937 (Durham Record Office).

116 Sunderland Trades Council and Labour Party Annual Report and Balance Sheet for the year ending 31 April 1920 (Durham Record Office).

117 The election material is located at the Tyne and Wear Archive and comprises Sunderland Labour Party leaflets for the 1929 general election

118 Minutes of the Loughborough Constituency Labour Party, 1936–71; Loughborough Constituency Labour Party Accounts, 1915–51; Minutes of Loughborough Borough Labour Party Minutes, 1930–45; Loughborough Borough Labour Party Group and Liaison Committee Minutes, 1937–46 (Leicestershire Record Office). The borough party minute books comprise five volumes.

119 Minutes of the Loughborough Constituency Labour Party Women’s Section, 1924–48; Loughborough Constituency Labour Party Women’s Section Account Book, 1935–48 (Leicestershire Record Office). The women’s section minutes are compiled in five minutes, some of which are only available as photocopies.

120 Minutes of the Storer Ward Labour Party, 1932–52 (two books); Minutes of the Shephed Local Labour Party, 1937–51 (Leicestershire Record Office).

Constituency Labour Party deposits for Midlothian-Peebles are varied in both type and substance. On the one hand, extensive material relating to the Edinburgh Trades Council and Labour Party forms part of the ‘Origins and Development of the Labour Party in Britain at a Local Level’ microfilm series. Comprising eighteen reels and containing trades council documents dating back to 1859, Edinburgh forms one of the largest deposits. Of this, six reels document the period from 1920 until 1951, incorporating annual reports and details of Labour Party officers throughout the city. On the other hand, material relating to specific constituency Labour Parties is scarce for both Edinburgh and Leith (which was also affiliated to the Edinburgh Trades Council.). Beyond Edinburgh, a single minute book for the miner-dominated Peebles and South Midlothian Labour Party provides a most valuable and insightful resource, despite spanning only the years between 1919 and 1926.

Table 10: Labour Party Papers in Midlothian-Peebles

	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc.
Edinburgh ¹²¹	X					X	X
Edin. W							X ¹²²
Edin. S	X ¹²³				X ¹²⁴		
Leith				X ¹²⁵			
Midloth. N				X ¹²⁶			
Peebles &	X ¹²⁷						

121 The vast bulk of material relating to the Edinburgh Trades Council and Labour Party is contained on the ‘Origins and Development of the Labour Party in Britain at a Local Level’ microfilm series kept at the London School of Economics Library. The National Library of Scotland also contains correspondence between the Edinburgh ILP and Edinburgh Labour Party during 1917–18.

122 The George Mathers papers are collected at the National Library of Scotland. Mathers was MP for West Edinburgh in 1929–31, before going on to be the member for Linlithgowshire (1935–50) and West Lothian (1950–51).

123 Edinburgh South Labour Party Accounts, 1922–30 (National Library of Scotland).

124 Located at the National Library of Scotland, the deposit comprises one 1929 general election leaflet for Arthur Woodburn.

125 Minutes of the Leith Divisional Labour Party South Ward Committee, 1939–53 (National Library of Scotland).

126 Minutes of the Dalkeith Local Labour Party, 1935–51 (National Library of Scotland).

Midloth. S							
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Predictably, two of the three archives relating to Monmouthshire Labour parties are among the most extensive of our survey. In particular, the Newport Labour Party archive, kept at the University of Wales Swansea and forming part of the aforementioned ‘Origins and Development of the Labour Party’ series, is one of the most extensive constituency party resources known to exist. Full executive and general committee minute books survive for the interwar period, numerous sub-committee material is available, and an almost complete run of printed annual reports are deposited at Newport Reference Library. Additionally, Labour League of Youth minutes and relatively detailed financial records are accessible, although no papers appear to have survived for the large and influential women’s section formed in the town.

Though by no means as comprehensive, the smaller Bedwelty Labour Party archive located at the Gwent Record Office also covers the entire interwar period. As in Durham, however, many Labour Parties in Monmouthshire – including Aneurin Bevan’s Ebbw Vale – effectively functioned out of the miners’ lodges, meaning that (non-union) constituency material is rarer than would be perhaps expected given Labour’s domination of the region.

Table 11: Labour Party Papers in Monmouthshire

Bedwelty Monmouth	Minutes X ¹²⁸	Women	Youth	Local X ¹²⁹	Election	Annual	Misc.
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127 Minutes of the Peebles and South Midlothian Divisional Labour Party, 1919–26 (National Library of Scotland).

128 Minutes of the Bedwelty Divisional Labour Party Executive Committee, 1918–54 (Gwent Record Office).

Newport ¹³⁰	X		X	X	X	X ¹³¹	X
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Predictably, too, given the party's general decline over the interwar period, Liberal Party deposits across all five counties proved to be less common, with none registered in Monmouthshire and only limited election material located in Durham.

Table 12: Liberal Party Papers in Durham

Houghton Sunderland	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election X ¹³² X ¹³³	Annual	Misc.
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Elsewhere, particularly Devon where the party retained a considerable degree of support, more useful material was uncovered, suggesting that although Liberal Party constituency papers are relatively rare, those papers that do exist may be of invaluable use to historians of both the party and Britain's changing social-political landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. Minute books relating to the Tiverton, Torquay and Totnes Liberal associations were uncovered; two of these

129 Minutes of the Chepstow and District Labour Party Executive Committee, 1932–46 (Gwent Record Office).

130 The Newport Labour Party records include Minutes of the Newport Labour Party Executive and General Committee, 1912–77; Miscellaneous Sub-Committee Minutes, 1933–39; Minutes of the Malpas Ward Committee, 1937–47; Minutes of the Christchurch Local Labour Party, 1925–1933; Minutes of the Crindau Ward Committee, 1932–39; Minutes of the Young People's Labour League, 1928–31; Minutes of the Labour League of Youth, 1934–36; Minutes of the Newport Labour Party Finance Committee, 1935–41; Newport Labour Party Municipal Election Manifesto 1919; Minutes of Council of Action, August–September 1920; General and Committee Meetings Attendance, 1916–20; Register of Members, 1925; Register of Individual Members, 1927. These can be viewed at either the London School of Economics or University of Wales Library, Singleton Park, Swansea, Wales, SA2 8PP.

131 Newport Labour Party Annual Reports and Balance Sheets, 1922–32, 1934–35 (Newport Reference Library John Frost Square, Newport, Wales, NP20 1PA. The library also holds copies Newport Labour Searchlight (incomplete holdings, 1923–25), and The Newport Citizen (incomplete holdings, 1938–54).

132 Located at the Durham County Record Office, the deposit comprises 1924 and 1929 general election leaflets for A. C. Curry and T. E. Wing respectively.

133 Located at the Tyne and Wear Archive, the deposit comprises general and by-election material relating to contests in 1920, 1924 and 1929.

collections currently reside within existing constituency Liberal Democrat offices, but are available on request. All of them shed light on the difficulties experienced by the Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s, documenting discussions within the party as to its relationship with Lloyd George and the coalition, towards electoral agreements with Conservatives, party finances, and in response to difficulties in securing parliamentary candidates.

Table 13: Liberal Party Papers in Devon

	Minutes	Women	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc.
Barnstaple		X ¹³⁴					
Tiverton	X ¹³⁵						
Torquay	X ¹³⁶						
Totnes	X ¹³⁷						

In Leicestershire, surviving Liberal Party material again proved unusual. Those deposits available, however, are of considerable worth. The Harborough Liberal Association minute books, the three volumes of which cover the years 1885 to 1953, offer a telling glimpse of a Liberal organisation struggling to come to grips with a changing interwar world. Indeed, such records can be compared with the minutes of the Leicestershire Liberal Association as examples of the divergent views evident across the party in the years immediately after the Great War. The minutes of the Leicester Liberal Committee, meanwhile, date from 1928 and concentrate more on social activity.

Table 14: Liberal Party Papers in Leicestershire

134 Minutes of the Morteheo and Woolacombe Women's Liberal Association, 1897–23; Morteheo and Woolacombe Women's Liberal Association Accounts, 1897–1970 (North Devon Record Office).

135 Minutes of the Tiverton Division Liberal Association Executive, 1925–62 (Devon Record Office). The deposit includes two books.

136 Minutes of the Torquay Liberal Association, 1913–40 (Torbay Liberal Democrat Office).

137 Minutes of the Totnes Division Liberal Association, 1924–39 (Totnes Liberal Association). The deposit includes two minute books.

Harborough Leicester	Minutes X ¹³⁸ X ¹³⁹	Women	Youth	Local	Elections	Annual	Misc. X ¹⁴⁰
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Finally, the two Liberal resources located in Midlothian-Peebles both relate to Edinburgh. One, the papers of J. M. Hogge, are of limited use for the interwar period, although newspaper cuttings included within the papers again detail the extent of the divisions within the wider Liberal Party following the Great War. Of greater interest, however, is the deposit for Edinburgh South Liberal Association. Though comprising just two minutes books – one for the central association and one for the women’s section – they are both relatively detailed. In particular, the women’s section minutes help demonstrate the extent to which individuals could continue to breathe life into political organisations at a local level.

Table 15: Liberal Party Papers in Midlothian-Peebles

Edin. E Edin. S	Minutes X ¹⁴²	Women X ¹⁴³	Youth	Local	Election	Annual	Misc. X ¹⁴¹
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IV. Conclusion

Clearly, as the preceding account has suggested, the extent to which constituency party papers have survived varies from region to region and from party to party. But although the existence of such a resource is erratic, divisional and local party

138 Minutes of the Harborough Division Liberal Association, 1885–53 (Leicestershire Record Office).

139 Leicestershire Liberal Association Minutes, 1903–23; Leicester Liberal Committee Minutes, 1928–62 (Leicestershire Record Office). The former obviously relate to the regional association rather than a particular Leicester constituency.

140 The Leicestershire Record Office also contains miscellaneous material relating to the Leicester and County Liberal Club.

141 J. M. Hogge Collection (National Library of Scotland).

142 Minutes of the South Edinburgh Liberal Association Annual and Executive Committee, 1930–56 (National Library of Scotland).

143 Minutes of the South Edinburgh Liberal Women’s Association, 1924–58 (National Library of Scotland).

records can prove of considerable use and interest to local historians and those concerned with British society and politics as a whole. The papers that do survive offer significant detail on the composition of local political elites, on the structures of interwar political organisations, on the priorities and assumptions of political activists, and on the social habits and activities of party members. Most significantly, constituency party papers provide a snapshot of Britain's mainstream political parties as they adapted to the extended franchise of 1918 and 1928 and the changing social-political circumstances that followed in the wake of the Great War. More generally, the minutes of constituency organisations and their respective women's sections present an insight into gender relations within political parties (and society generally). Via a close examination of these varied historical documents, we can gain a glimpse of social attitudes and configurations, leisure patterns and class relations. In purely political terms, the papers of Britain's constituency political parties allow us to gauge rank-and-file attitudes within the various parties. In so doing, a fuller examination of these rich but underused resources will add significantly to our understanding of Britain's social-political development over the twentieth century.

But it is not just historians who need to recognise the value of these records. Local party records may lack the glamour of some archives' holdings, and will never excite the amount of use that comes the way of parish registers and other staples of family and local history. But they should not, for those reasons, be despised by archivists. Of course, most archivists do not need to be told that these records are valuable: many have an excellent knowledge of their holdings in the area, and have

catalogued them in great detail. Even so, there are some archivists who need to be more alive to the value of these papers sufficiently to welcome them when they are offered for deposit, and indeed be keen enough on them actively to search them out in order to ensure their survival. They must, so far as resources allow, ensure that, once deposited, they are catalogued and made available for research. And, finally, they must also try to ensure that onerous restrictions are not placed on access, or that, where they are, they are regularly reviewed (it seems to me ludicrous, for example, that the records of the cabinet are freely available to any researcher at the PRO after 30 years, but that the express written permission of some local parties is still required to see their records from as long ago as the of the 1920s). If this article excites archivists as well as historians to the permanent value of these somewhat neglected records, then it will have more than served its purpose.