

Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in Second World War Britain

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Abstract

The reconstruction of past trends in party membership can be fraught, especially when parties themselves kept no aggregate records. This was the case with the British Conservative party prior to 1946. The aggregate figures never existed, and the data that would be required to construct no longer exist in the extent that would be required. Nonetheless, this article argues that it is methodologically possible to offer more detailed analysis than hitherto, by analysing local as well as national-level Conservative sources, triangulating with the national-level Labour party statistics, and taking insights taken from more explicitly political science literature. The paper's substantive argument is that although Conservative membership fell after 1939, it did not collapse; that it recovered somewhat from early 1943 onwards; and that that recovery then afforded the party a base from which it was able to build its membership with spectacular success after 1945.

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Reconstructing Conservative Party Membership in Second World War Britain

Explaining the fluctuations in party membership figures is a fraught business at the best of times. Even with apparently good runs of statistics, problems arise. For example, the Labour party's individual membership figures have always been regarded as somewhat suspect, especially from 1956 when constituency Labour parties (CLPs) were forced to affiliate on a membership of at least 800, and still more from 1963 when that figure was raised to 1,000, at which point, in theory, an actual membership of zero would have been recorded as 618,000.¹ Furthermore, membership figures are routinely used as a thermometer to test political parties' health. Rising Labour party membership in the mid-1990s was routinely used to suggest that Tony Blair was the saviour of the Labour party; a decade later, falling membership was used to show that he was its nemesis.² Similarly, analyses of the Conservative party in the post-war period made much of its buoyant membership, whereas those wishing to prove the party's problems in more recent times have been able to use falling membership with impunity. But to take this view presupposes that membership fluctuates for political reasons: and this is far from being the whole story.

Things are bad enough where we have sets of statistics that we can readily access, however problematic. They become still worse, though, where national-level figures records simply do not and did not exist. This was an issue I had to face in researching and writing my latest book, *Parties at War*. The book is an attempt to compare the fates of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal parties between 1939 and 1945, with particular focus on their organization at all levels.³ One of the key starting points for the book is the notion, much propagated after the war by leading Conservatives, that Labour's organization had held up much better in wartime due to the fact that whereas Conservative organizers had gone off to fight, Labour organizers had often been in reserved occupations and so able to stay at home and plan for victory at the post-war general election. For the Conservative MP Quintin Hogg, writing in 1945, 'whilst some of the poor derided Tories were fighting the enemy' Labour and its allies were 'sowing discord in the ranks at home behind our backs and attacking our

sincerity and personal honour'.⁴ The wartime premier, Winston Churchill, for his part, argued in 1952 that, whereas Conservative agents had gone off to fight, the 'core' of the Labour party's constituency-level personnel was in reserved occupations, and so exempt from military service; and that once Britain's 'mortal danger had passed' they had become increasingly partisan in pushing Labour's interests forward. 'Thus on the one side there had been a complete effacement of party activities, while on the other they ran forward unresisted.' This, he concluded, was 'not a reproach, but a fact'.⁵ In fact, as the book shows, this view was not wholly without foundation, but it was a gross over-simplification and, in particular, underestimated both the extent to which the war affected Labour and the degree to which Conservative activity at the grassroots continued in wartime. It was, in that sense, a political myth constructed and sustained to allow the Conservatives to pull back together after a bruising electoral defeat and to avoid recriminations about the years down to 1945 which might have torn the party apart: and, in that sense, it was the essential basis for the party's rapid post-war recovery.

Arriving at this conclusion involved a wider look than usual at the parties. Chapters did not just, or even mainly, focus on what was happening at the top of the parties. Although Churchill and Attlee come into the story, it could not be told solely with reference to them. Instead, after a chapter on national-level party management, which looks at the relationship between leaders and national officials, attention turns very much to the local level, with chapters on agents, activities, finance and, of course, membership. In respect of the last of these, there is a simple question to be asked – what happened to party membership during the war? And this, in turn, raises some interesting methodological questions.

Where the Labour party was concerned, we do at least have national aggregate figures. They are not ideal, for reasons that have been alluded to above and which will be discussed further below, but they do exist. For the Conservatives, however, there is no such luxury. There are (and were) no national aggregate figures for Conservative party membership during the Second World War. Indeed, none were ever compiled before 1946 (when party membership was put at 911,000), and even after that date the 'data on

membership over time [were] very limited'.⁶ Furthermore, there was no single definition of what constituted membership. Where party membership is discussed at all for the period before 1946, it is usually on a rather speculative basis, to say the least.

It might seem, therefore, that attempting to reconstruct Conservative party membership would be much easier said than done. However, a portfolio of methodologies can take us a long way. The first of these is archival research. The obvious place to start was the national-level records of the party in the Conservative Party Archive (CPA) at Oxford. As stated above, no aggregate national-level figures were compiled, and even the most fanatical archive-searcher will not find what is simply not there. However, the papers of party headquarters at Central Office and the voluntary side of the party, the National Union, offer clear indications of the mood of headquarters regarding the overall shape and trajectory of party membership. We get some clear ideas about the state of the party from what national-level officials were saying to each other, to the party's leaders, and to those lower down the party hierarchy. Similarly, regional-level records reveal something about the state of the party and its membership. The records of the party's area organizations – almost all held in the CPA – are surprisingly full and offer insights, although the extent of detail varies. Here again, though, we are dealing more with qualitative than quantitative evidence – hard figures are very thin on the ground before 1945.

It is with the constituency-level records that concrete figures start to emerge. Such records have traditionally been despised by historians and political scientists alike. This tendency has hardly been discouraged within British academia by the 'international' language of the RAE, which has often appeared to make the very use of the word 'local' the equivalent of a career death wish. And, indeed, the scope for antiquarianism is very well entrenched, with low-analysis, high-description narratives of this or that constituency party organization a kind of paradigm of what serious history and/or political science should not be. Nonetheless, to see local party records only in this light is to ignore the potential that they present when consulted together in very large numbers.

Parties at War endeavours to do this. Extensive use has been made of the minutes, reports and other papers of around 100 Conservative constituency associations (CAs) and 100 constituency Labour parties. Liberal records are thinner on the ground, given that the decline of the party meant that organizations tended to come and go and that there were disjunctures which saw secretaries leaving and records being lost, but even here it has been possible to use the records of about 30 constituency Liberal associations (LAs). The Conservative records represent almost 20% of constituency associations at the time. It is not a 'scientific' sample, but it does cover a wide range of associations in urban, suburban and rural areas, in Conservative and non-Conservative seats, from all over Britain. It offers some real detail, quantitative as well as qualitative, from which it is possible to extrapolate broader conclusions, in the light of other evidence.

Secondly, the extensive nature of the Labour party's membership figures for the war years offers other possibilities. Labour published annual returns, in its annual conference reports, of its individual membership, divided by constituency and by gender within each constituency. These figures are far from unproblematic, as stated above. Even so, the minimum membership at 240 did not have the distorting effect that the later level of 1,000 had; the published figures do indicate broad trends plausibly enough (see table 1). Basically, Labour membership was on a plateau but falling slightly in the years immediately prior to the war. It then fell in 1940, and still more in 1941. The fall to 1942 was slighter, but still appreciable, reaching a nadir of 218,783 as against a pre-war figure of 408,844. From 1943, it recovered, slowly at first and then more strongly, to reach 487,047 in 1945. It was to exceed a million in 1952 and 1953, but would never do so again.

1. Labour party membership, 1935-45

Year	Individual	Affiliated Membership		Total
		Trade Union	Socialist Societies etc.	
1935	419,311	1,912,924	45,280	2,377,515

1936	430,694	1,968,538	45,125	2,444,357
1937	447,150	2,037,071	43,451	2,527,672
1938	428,826	2,158,076	43,384	2,630,286
1939	408,844	2,214,070	40,153	2,663,067
1940	304,124	2,226,575	40,464	2,571,163
1941	226,622	2,230,728	28,108	2,485,458
1942	218,783	2,206,209	28,940	2,453,932
1943	235,501	2,237,307	30,432	2,503,240
1944	265,763	2,375,381	31,701	2,672,845
1945	487,047	2,510,369	41,281	3,038,697

Source: Labour party, *Report of Annual Conference, 1946*

If these fluctuations were all due to political events within the Labour party, then they would be of limited relevance to this discussion. But it is clear from the evidence that many of them were caused by objective factors outside the realm of Labour politics. These included air raids and other forms of enemy action, longer working hours, population movement, the remoteness (and later the proximity) of elections, a lack of recruitment activity (and its subsequent increase), and so on. These factors all applied, to some extent, to all parties. Furthermore, the qualitative evidence in the records the Labour party at national, regional and local level, as well as the papers of politicians, backs up the quantitative data. We can therefore use the Labour party to help us understand what might have been happening to the Conservative party's membership, reasonably safe in the knowledge that the similar qualitative data for the Conservatives (which we have) would be reflected in the quantitative data (if we had it).

The final tool at our disposal in reconstructing Conservative party membership is political science: hard work in the archives and poring over the statistics in the Labour party's annual reports needs to be complemented by a more theoretical understanding. Political

science literature on parties has little to say about the war period itself. For example, Robert McKenzie's classic work *British Political Parties* (1955) discussed the interwar period and the period after 1945, but leapt pretty neatly over the period in between, in part at least because it was aberrant and so of little apparent relevance to the models that McKenzie was building. More recent analyses of political parties, though in many ways excellent, have little to say about membership and participation in the exceptional conditions of war.⁷ However, the most superficial reading of good political science literature is a stern warning against simplistic views of why party membership fluctuates. Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd have demonstrated that people join parties for a whole range of reasons. Their 'general-incentives theory' identifies five factors that play a significant role in the decision to join parties: 'selective and collective incentives, altruistic motives, affective or expressive attachments to the party, and social norms, or a desire to conform to the wishes of other people'.⁸ In other words, decisions to become, remain, or cease to be party members were and are rarely straightforward. Although they show that policy failure is one strong motivation to people to become less active within a party or even to leave it, such decisions were and are far from being exclusively political, or simply reducible to narrow issues of policy approval or disapproval.⁹ This work offers considerable insight into the reasons for participation or the lack of it, even though its methodological focus on existing members tends to mean that its conclusions about existing members tend to be firmer than those for people who have left. Even so, and taken as part of an interdisciplinary approach, it does help us towards a clearer understanding of Conservative party membership in wartime. It warns us immediately against taking the simplistic view that, if the party's membership fell, it was primarily due to widespread political disillusionment with or even antipathy towards the party from its erstwhile members.

Therefore we can use empirical research on Conservative records, political science approaches to membership, and the better datasets afforded to us by Labour to build up a much fuller picture of Conservative party membership in wartime than we have ever had before.

The overall trajectory of Conservative party membership in the later 1930s is difficult to discern: in Glasgow, for example, membership in the Bridgeton constituency was falling, but that in the city as a whole rising impressively, in April 1939.¹⁰ Some associations were indeed reporting falling membership in early 1939, but the overall pattern among the associations whose records have been consulted for this study was upwards, and it does not seem unreasonable to assume that, by and large, Conservative party membership was steady and perhaps even increasing during 1939, in anticipation of the general election that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was planning for October 1939.¹¹

It is important to note that the Conservatives were certainly no less of a mass-membership party than Labour when was put paid to such plans that September. Constituency Labour parties with 1,000 members were seen as doing very well; those with 2,000 or more were regarded as exceptional. Compare that with the following Conservative figures for 1938 or 1939, taken from constituency association records. Birmingham Unionist association (UA), covering 11 of the 12 constituencies in the city, had 35,000 members in March 1939, and Chelmsford CA (Essex) 3,000.¹² Newbury women's CA (Berkshire) had between 7,000 and 8,000 members; Maidstone women's branch (Kent) had almost 6,000, and the association's Luncheon Club, with 250 members, was larger than some constituency Labour parties.¹³ Louth women's CA (Lincolnshire) had over 4,300 members.¹⁴ In Harold Macmillan's Stockton constituency (Co. Durham) there were 570 men members and around 400 women.¹⁵

Others were less fortunate: Mid-Bedfordshire, for example, had only 304 paid-up members in 1939.¹⁶ But they could always try a membership drive: in March 1939, Honiton CA (Devon) was awarded the Western Area Challenge Cup for recruiting no fewer than 1,078 new members in 1938.¹⁷ That July, Epsom CA (Surrey) used 340 voluntary canvassers to recruit 1,120 new members.¹⁸ Not all members were active, of course. In the Eltham Ward of West Woolwich, for example, a women's membership of 810 produced an average attendance at meetings of just 90.¹⁹ But this was no different from Labour's experience. And even a passive membership, so long as it was large, was increasingly being seen as an asset, if only

by ensuring a broader, and so more reliable, income base than had often been the case hitherto.²⁰

One way of securing such a broad membership base was to introduce the ‘book system’, whereby collectors called regularly on members and recorded their subscriptions in a book. Such a system allowed the party to recruit among the less well off, who found small weekly payments easier than large quarterly or annual ones. This system, though far from universal, was spreading in the later 1930s, often producing good, and sometimes excellent, results.²¹ In Salisbury (Wiltshire), it was instrumental in the increase in the CA’s membership by almost 300 in the year to April 1939.²²

Once war broke out, however, it is clear that membership fell. Initially, this was a slow process. Many associations continued to try to collect subscriptions, following the advice that eventually emanated from Conservative Central Office.²³ Some, like Monmouth, justified this explicitly on the grounds that failure to collect during the Great War had led to severe organizational problems.²⁴ Some agreed to seek a reduced amount, to try and ensure that people remained members.²⁵ In Glasgow, membership was ‘well maintained’ to the end of October, but it then began to fall.²⁶ Evacuation areas were particularly hard hit, losing women members especially.²⁷ Underlying pessimism could be seen in the November 1939 decision of York CA to order printed membership cards without a date on them, so that they could be used for more than one year if membership fell.²⁸ Efforts to chase lapsed members began to meet a poor response.²⁹ In some areas, collection was severely curtailed, or ceased altogether.³⁰

Some associations, like Monmouth, kept their membership better than others.³¹ In Harborough (Leicestershire), it was noted that all branches of the senior organization remained intact and that ‘in most cases membership ha[d] been maintained’.³² But the overall trend was downwards by spring 1940. In Cornwall, all five CAs found that the war was having a ‘detrimental’ effect.³³ Military service took its toll.³⁴ Significantly, the recruitment trophies customarily awarded by associations to their branches had mostly been suspended by the spring of 1940.³⁵ As the war intensified, so did the decline.

This decline was not primarily due to politics. It may well be that some people left the party in disgust at the failure of Chamberlain to prevent the war, or because they opposed the war altogether, or, later, because they could not stomach Winston Churchill as party leader; but there is little, if any, hard evidence of such actions.

The main reasons appear to have been societal and organizational. As the chairman of Ealing CA was to put it in 1942, the ‘main’ reason for the fall in membership there had been the fact that there was now ‘no-one’ to collect subscriptions: ‘People would not come to the office to pay them but waited to be called upon’.³⁶ Indeed, the party’s Wessex area council found that ‘[w]here a real effort [was] made to collect subscriptions the response [was] satisfactory’.³⁷ The Blunsdon ward of Swindon had had a thriving association before the war, with 155 members in 1939, but it effectively collapsed in the spring of 1940 – not due to any mass desertion, but simply because collectors could no longer be found. The lapsed members were probably no less Conservative than they had been when paying their subscriptions, and remained ready to return to the party once its organization began to revive in 1944-45.³⁸

Population movements and, as 1940 wore on, the effects of enemy action were also significant. By August 1940, the secretary of Lambeth Norwood CA was reporting that ‘a great many resignations and removals’ had affected the overall membership level; later, bombing led to fatalities, as well as wholesale evacuation and removal, further affecting membership, although ‘subscriptions ha[d] been coming in splendidly’ from the remaining members.³⁹ For most CAs, these downward trends continued into 1941.⁴⁰ As with Labour, associations in the southern and eastern coastal areas ‘suffered much from the evacuation of members’.⁴¹ Hopes that area offices could be used as ‘clearing houses’ to keep track of such people were not fulfilled, any more than were Labour hopes of an efficient transfer system of members between CLPs.

A useful microcosm of the reasons for membership lapses can be seen in a detailed contemporary analysis of the position in the south London constituency of Clapham. Clapham CA had had 3,736 members at the end of 1939, but the figure fell in 1940, and when it declined by a further 1,356 between February and December 1941, concerned officials

decided to define the reasons why people had ceased to be members (see Table 2). Their findings demonstrated the extent to which societal, rather than political, reasons led people to abandon party membership. Only 7 out of 1,356 – 0.5 per cent – cited political objections, namely the inactivity of the association and the MP.⁴² Overwhelmingly, it was issues like air raids and evacuation that were responsible, a view supported by evidence from other cities.⁴³ There was some change in Clapham in 1942, when the war was going badly. Then, there were reports of male members, in particular, being ‘critical of political matters’.⁴⁴ Even at this stage, however, the bulk of the membership remained loyal, and associations which actively sought subscriptions tended to find that they came in satisfactorily.⁴⁵

2. Reasons given for ceasing membership of Clapham CA, 1941

Reason given	Number	Percent
Temporary evacuations, residential and business	507	37.4
Moved away	472	34.8
Bombed out and house demolished	246	18.1
Inability to afford subscription due to increased taxation, increased cost of living, illness, other calls and/or appeals, National Savings, and so on	66	4.9
Deceased	58	4.3
Refusal to continue supporting Conservative cause	7	0.5
Total	1356	100.0

Source: British Library of Political and Economic Science, Clapham CA papers, microfilm 548, finance committee 4 Dec. 1941.

This fact led some associations to seek new members via recruitment drives at a relatively early stage of the war. In the first half of 1941, Manchester enrolled 90 new members.⁴⁶ Torquay CA (Devon) enrolled 350 new members, and Chertsey (Surrey) women's CA 200, in 1942 alone.⁴⁷ Although the overall membership fell in Glasgow in 1940, that in the constituencies of Gorbals, Partick and St Rollox actually increased.⁴⁸ In addition, from late 1941 onwards some associations were trying to contact and retrieve lapsed members, sometimes – as in West Dorset – with positive results.⁴⁹ As early as June 1941, there were reports of branches of the party's youth movement, the Junior Imperial League, being re-established, albeit usually with very small memberships, and by 1942 there was increasing emphasis on the need to appeal to youth, in part because of concerns that young people were being drawn into bodies run by 'Pacifists and conscientious objectors', as one London Conservative put it in September 1942.⁵⁰ But for most CAs, 1940, 1941, and 1942 were years of falling membership figures.⁵¹

The military and domestic events of the winter of 1942-43 stimulated greater effort, however. The British victory at El Alamein in October 1942 and the long Soviet resistance at Stalingrad, culminating in victory in February 1943, suggested that the war would be won and reminded Conservatives of the finite nature of the war. At the same time, the publication of the Beveridge report on social insurance and allied services in December 1942, and its great popularity and rapid assimilation by the Labour party as a blueprint for a post-war welfare state, suggested that post-war party politics would remain strongly contested. Poor results in by-elections from early 1942 onwards were a further stimulus.⁵² A new tone of exhortation began to appear in the comments of some local officials to their parties' annual meetings in the spring of 1943.⁵³ Some associations continued to do little more than bemoan their falling membership.⁵⁴ But others did something about it, and the book scheme was revived in a number of places, like Bradford and West Dorset, with positive results.⁵⁵ By June 1943, the Scottish western divisional council was reporting 'a quickening of interest in a largely increased membership', the figure having increased by a quarter in the last year, and the improvement continued over the following year as well.⁵⁶ Salisbury CA, meanwhile, recruited

‘ever increasing’ numbers of new members.⁵⁷ Some associations began to develop new lines of approach: Ealing, for example, held a ‘very successful’ recruitment lunch, attended by the MP and forty local businessmen and non-political ‘local personalities’.⁵⁸ Some associations were shocked into action by a realization of how low their membership roll had fallen.⁵⁹

In April 1944, Central Office staff decided to issue a recruitment leaflet, although the fact that they only updated a pre-war publication did not suggest a very wholehearted approach.⁶⁰ The book system for collecting small subscriptions continued to spread, with some positive results, although in some areas major obstacles to collecting remained, and some associations were advertizing for members in the local press.⁶¹ There were some impressive results: Northampton CA recruited 102 new members in 1944 (and a further 118 in 1945), for example.⁶² The relaunch of the youth movement as the Young Conservatives (YCs) in autumn 1944 was also significant. In Birmingham, a press advertisement in late 1944 attracted 300 applications for YC membership, and 200 people attended the inaugural meeting.⁶³ In Ealing, the launch was delayed by the flying bomb and rocket attacks that began in the spring of 1944, but ultimately took place at a cocktail party with the local MP in January 1945.⁶⁴ Many CAs were following suit by early 1945.⁶⁵ Some were much slower to act, and were to do little until after the end of the war.⁶⁶ But a sound start had been made in many places, nevertheless.

By early 1945, recruitment was proceeding very healthily in a number of areas.⁶⁷ That February, Maidstone CA printed 4,000 notices for its annual meeting, which indicated the size of its membership.⁶⁸ In some places, paid collectors were engaged.⁶⁹ In areas where the association was only just coming back to life after a period of dormancy, of course, one of the first tasks, even before recruitment could begin, was the time-consuming one of checking the old membership list and seeing how far it remained accurate.⁷⁰ Press advertisements invited former members to come forward; they also showed a wider public that the association was reviving.⁷¹ Another way of showing the party to the wider population was to collect and disseminate information on the war record of local party members, as in Gravesend, where

branches were asked to compile a list of members lost or bereaved by enemy action, and any other particularly noteworthy items, such as ‘decorations to members or their relatives’.⁷²

Recruitment continued up to that July’s general election, and continued as a by-product of the campaign.⁷³ The Conservatives suffered a huge defeat in that election as Labour swept to power to form its first majority government under Clement Attlee. But that very defeat produced a huge fillip to Conservative membership recruitment. Faced with the reality of a ‘socialist’ government, many lapsed members returned, and new ones came in for the first time.⁷⁴ Renewed emphasis was placed on the value of a broadly-based membership of small subscribers. The launch of a national membership drive, ‘Operation Knocker’, in 1946 had a dramatic impact.⁷⁵ By the end of that year, the 24 CAs in Middlesex had a combined membership of 49,544, including Harrow West with 6,700 members and Uxbridge with 6,219.⁷⁶ In Guildford (Surrey), membership rose from 3,000 in early 1946 to 10,717 in March 1947.⁷⁷ These were halcyon days for party recruitment, when 106 new members could be made in the small town of Chandlers Ford (Winchester constituency, Hampshire) in a single week’s campaigning in 1947, or when a single member of Reigate CA (Surrey), Stakhanovite in technique if not politics, could enrol a thousand members in the 18 months to May 1948.⁷⁸ An important point to consider here is the fact that local Conservative associations and their members were well networked with other voluntary organizations, like sports clubs, chambers of commerce, masonic lodges, and the like. This meant that lapsed members might have been relatively easy to approach *en masse* once associations began seriously to revive, because they were relatively easy to find in those other local organizations.⁷⁹ Overall party membership totalled 911,000 in early 1946; by 1947 it stood at 1.2 million, by June 1948 2.2 million, and by 1953 it had reached an all-time high of just over 2.8 million.⁸⁰

In the aftermath of defeat there was also much comment about the need for qualitative change. Here, there were to be areas of failure. In particular, efforts to increase the party’s working class membership met mixed results at best.⁸¹ There was greater success in changing the membership’s age profile. The party had aged in wartime; defeat at the general election, and a particular perception that the party had failed to win the support of younger

voters, made the issue still more acute.⁸² Rejuvenation had begun before the end of the war, but it was undoubtedly accelerated by the general election defeat. In particular, the Young Conservatives expanded impressively through the remainder of 1945 and beyond.⁸³ By December 1945, for example, there were 25 YC branches in the south-eastern area; by March 1946 the Eastern area had 31; and by May 1946 even the weak Northern area had 16.⁸⁴ In the midlands, Warwick and Leamington CA had four 'flourishing' YC branches by mid-1946, and others were in the process of formation.⁸⁵

Conservative party membership endured many vicissitudes during the war. However, it did not collapse. Where associations continued to emphasize the need for people to pay subscriptions, and were prepared to go to the effort of collecting them, people were usually willing to maintain their membership. War service, population movements, and the like obviously played a major role in interrupting patterns of party membership. And yet the core of the party remained, ready to resume full activity in 1945. Some constituency associations began to try to recruit members from about 1943 onwards, although others were much slower, and overall the process was very ragged. But although it was only really in 1946 that the party's constituency organizations were firing on all cylinders where recruitment was concerned, the extent of the efforts made before then should not be underestimated.

Overall, then, local party records, used sensitively and as part of a wider approach, offer us an important route into a deeper understanding of Conservative party membership in wartime. There is, furthermore, no need to believe that the techniques used in this paper could not be used for other periods of the party's history where membership is at present obscure. In the study of party membership and activism, therefore, we should not despise local archival records, and used sensitively they can tell us a great deal. However, they do have their limitations. To a large extent we are at the mercy of what long-dead secretaries thought was worth recording, or what their successors thought was worth keeping or depositing in a local record office. The sources themselves are not always easy to access, at least in large numbers – there is no single archive to visit, nor even a small number – they are scattered all over Britain. It may be that it would only ever have been in the context of a much larger project,

like *Parties at War*, that even this level of insight could have been provided. And, finally, we need to note the ultimate limitations of this technique of historic reconstruction: namely that it can offer no solution to the problem of what the overall aggregate figures actually were. There, for the period before 1946, it is hard to believe we will ever get beyond educated guesses.

¹ D. Tanner, 'Labour and its membership', in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *Labour's First Century*, CUP, 2000, p. 250. There were 630 constituencies, of which 12 were in Northern Ireland, where Labour did not organize as such.

² See e.g. P. Mandelson and R. Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?*, Faber, 1996, p. 219; P. Wintour and S. Hall, 'Labour membership halved', *The Guardian*, 3 Aug. 2004.

³ A. Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organization in Second World War Britain* OUP, forthcoming, 2009.

⁴ Q. Hogg, *The Left was Never Right*, Faber, 1945, pp. 7, 11-14, 15.

⁵ W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War, volume 5: Closing the Ring*, Cassell, 1952, p. 509.

⁶ S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism and the evolution of the party organisation', in A. Seldon and S. Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900*, OUP, 1996, p. 290; P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, OUP, 1994, p. 17.

⁷ R. McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, Heinemann, 1955; and see e.g. A. Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, OUP, 1996.

⁸ Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, *True Blues*, pp. 227-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 233.

¹⁰ National Library of Scotland, Glasgow Bridgeton UA papers, Acc. 10424/50, general committee 6 Apr. 1939; *ibid.*, Glasgow UA papers, Acc. 10424/74, general committee 29 May 1939.

¹¹ For falling membership see e.g. Norfolk Record Office [RO], East Norfolk CA papers, SO 92/1, joint executive committee 3 June 1939; but for rising membership see e.g. Staffordshire RO, Stafford CA papers, D1289/1/3, finance committee 16 Jan. 1939; Leicestershire RO, Harborough CA papers, DE 1170/4, 45th annual report, for year to 31 Mar. 1939; Surrey History Centre, Reigate CA papers, 353/3/1/1, annual report to special meeting 6 May 1940;

Suffolk RO, Ipswich CA papers, GK 401/1/1, annual report, 1938-9, to annual general meeting 6 Mar. 1939; National Library of Wales, Newport CA records 1, annual report of the women's section, for 1940, to annual meeting 17 Mar. 1939; West Yorkshire Archives (Leeds), Yorkshire Conservative area council papers, WYL 1856/1/3, annual report to annual meeting 17 Feb. 1940.

¹² Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham CA papers, uncat., management committee 10 Mar. 1939; Essex RO, Chelmsford CA papers, D/Z 96/13, annual general meeting 23 Feb. 1939.

¹³ Berkshire RO, Newbury CA papers, D/EX 409/53, *Official Yearbook and Blotter* (Newbury, 1938), 5; Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone CA papers, U1634/A3/1/2, annual meeting 27 Mar. 1939.

¹⁴ Lincolnshire Archives, Heneage papers, HNC 2/48, Louth CA, annual report for 1938, to annual general meeting 23 Mar. 1939;

¹⁵ Durham RO, Stockton CA papers, D/X 322/5, executive committee 30 Nov. 1938, 16 May 1939.

¹⁶ Bedfordshire and Luton Archives, Mid-Bedfordshire CA papers, Z 145/98, annual report for 1939, n.d. [1940].

¹⁷ Bodleian Library, Western Conservative area council papers, ARE 11/1/1, annual report 1938, to annual meeting 31 Mar. 1939.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, South-East Conservative area council papers, ARE 9/11/4, finance committee 5 July 1939.

¹⁹ Greenwich Heritage Centre, Woolwich West CA papers, WCUA 13, women's central committee annual report for 1938, to annual general meeting 23 Feb. 1939.

²⁰ See e.g. Lancashire RO, Blackpool CA papers, PLC 5/1/3, annual report to annual general meeting 31 Mar. 1939; Flintshire RO, Flint CA papers, D/DM/307/4, annual meeting 6 May 1939.

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- ²¹ See e.g. Centre for Kentish Studies, Gravesend CA papers, U1795/AD1/4, finance committee 18 July 1939; Worcestershire RO, Bewdley CA papers, BA 956/8, special sub-committee on finance, 25 July 1939; Cornwall RO, Penryn and Falmouth CA papers, DDX 551/10, annual report 1938, to annual general meeting 3 Dec. 1938; Norfolk RO, Norwich CA papers, SO 122/4, annual report, 1938.
- ²² Wiltshire and Swindon RO, Salisbury CA papers, 2639/1, annual general meeting 22 Apr. 1939.
- ²³ See e.g. London Metropolitan Archives, Ealing CA papers, Acc. 1338/2, executive committee 30 Sep. 1939; Lancashire RO, Fylde CA papers, DDX 1202/1/1, emergency committee 3 Oct. 1939.
- ²⁴ National Library of Wales, Monmouth CA records 10, finance and general purposes committee 6 Sep. 1939.
- ²⁵ See e.g. Newbury CA papers, D/EX 409/3, finance and general purposes committee 18 Sep. 1939.
- ²⁶ Glasgow UA papers, Acc. 10424/74, general committee 23 Nov. 1939, 13 Mar. 1940.
- ²⁷ See e.g. Southampton Archives, Southampton CA papers, D/STC/1/4, Shirley ward women's branch, report for 1939, n.d. [1940].
- ²⁸ York City Archives, York CA papers, 156/22, executive committee 28 Nov. 1939.
- ²⁹ Chelmsford CA papers, D/Z 96/7, ways and means sub committee, 11 Dec. 1939, 12 Feb. 1940.
- ³⁰ See e.g. Hertfordshire Archives, Watford CA papers, D/EX 901/3-11, collection books of Rickmansworth branch, 1923-43.
- ³¹ Monmouth CA records 10, finance and general purposes committee 6 Mar. 1940.
- ³² Harborough CA papers, DE 1170/4, 46th annual report, for year to 31 Mar. 1940.
- ³³ Western Conservative area council papers, ARE 11/7/3, Cornwall provincial division, annual report to annual meeting 20 Mar. 1940.

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- ³⁴ See e.g. Flint CA, papers, D/DM/307/4, annual general meeting 6 Apr. 1940; Liverpool RO, Liverpool CA papers, 329/CON/1/3/1, Liverpool Constitutional association, 'Hon. Treasurer's report for the year 1943'; Fylde CA papers, DDX 1202/1/1, annual report 1943, to annual general meeting 25 Mar. 1943.
- ³⁵ See e.g. Salisbury CA papers, 2639/1, annual general meeting 27 Apr. 1940.
- ³⁶ Ealing CA papers, Acc. 1338/2, executive committee 15 Oct. 1942.
- ³⁷ Bodleian Library, Wessex Conservative area council papers, ARE 10/1/3, annual report to annual meeting 7 May 1941.
- ³⁸ Wiltshire and Swindon RO, Swindon CA papers, 2509/12, Blunsdon ward annual general meeting 16 Feb. 1939, 4 March 1940.
- ³⁹ Lambeth Archives, Lambeth Norwood CA papers, IV/166/1/16, annual report 1940-1 to annual general meeting 15 Mar. 1941, emergency committee 15 Aug. 1940.
- ⁴⁰ Norwich CA papers, SO 122/4, annual report for 1941, to annual general meeting 15 Apr. 1942.
- ⁴¹ Wessex Conservative area council papers, ARE 10/1/3, annual report to annual meeting 27 May 1942.
- ⁴² British Library of Political and Economic Science, Clapham CA papers, BLPES film 548, finance committee 4 Dec. 1941.
- ⁴³ See e.g. Sheffield Archives, Sheffield Central CA papers, LD 2104, finance committee 27 Feb. 1942.
- ⁴⁴ Clapham CA papers, BLPES film 548, finance and executive committee 29 May 1942.
- ⁴⁵ See e.g. Maidstone CA papers, U1634/A3/1/2, emergency sub committee 9 Jan. 1942; Glasgow UA papers, Acc. 10424/75, general committee 23 Feb. 1942; Newport CA records 1, annual report 1941, to annual general meeting 20 Mar. 1942.
- ⁴⁶ Liverpool RO, Lord Derby papers, 920DER(17)/16/4, T. H. Hewlett (Manchester CUA) to Earl of Derby, 14 July 1941.

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- ⁴⁷ *Conservative Agents' Journal*, July 1943; South East Conservative area council papers, ARE 9/11/4, executive committee 2 Nov. 1943.
- ⁴⁸ Glasgow UA papers, Acc. 10424/74, general committee 24 Feb. 1941.
- ⁴⁹ See e.g. Dorset RO, Dorset West CA papers, D399/4/1, finance committee 1 Sep. 1941; D399/3/2, war emergency executive committee 12 Dec. 1941.
- ⁵⁰ Lambeth Norwood CA papers, IV/166/1/16, emergency committee 20 June 1941, 25 Sep. 1942; Salisbury CA papers, 2639/1, annual general meeting 8 Aug. 1942; Lancashire RO, Middleton and Prestwich CA papers, PLC 1/3, finance and general purposes committee 28 June 1941.
- ⁵¹ See e.g. Gwynedd RO, Merionethshire CA papers, Z/M/4018/2, annual meeting 10 Feb. 1941.
- ⁵² Wiltshire and Swindon RO, Chippenham CA papers, 2436/2, annual general meeting 20 Nov. 1943.
- ⁵³ See e.g. Bolton Archives, Bolton CA papers, FDC/3/9, women's CA annual report 1942-3, to annual meeting 2 Apr. 1943.
- ⁵⁴ E.g. Norwich CA papers, SO 122/4, finance and general purposes committee 14 Apr. 1943; Newbury CA papers, D/EX 409/3, finance and general purposes committee 25 Nov. 1943.
- ⁵⁵ *Conservative Agents' Journal*, Jan. 1945; Dorset West CA papers, D399/4/1, finance committee 15 May 1943.
- ⁵⁶ National Library of Scotland, Scottish UA papers, Acc. 10424/27(viii), western divisional council, annual report 1943, 1 July 1943; annual report 1944, 1 July 1944.
- ⁵⁷ Salisbury CA papers, 2639/1, annual general meeting 5 June 1943.
- ⁵⁸ Ealing CA papers, Acc. 1338/2, executive committee 8 June, 19 Oct. 1943.
- ⁵⁹ See e.g. Hertfordshire Archives, Hertford CA papers, Acc. 3258, Bishops Stortford CA committee meeting 4 May 1944.
- ⁶⁰ Bodleian Library, CCO 500/1/12, 'Report of the staff conference, 2 and 3 April 1944', 12 Apr. 1944.

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- ⁶¹ See e.g. Suffolk RO, Bury St Edmunds CA papers, GK 501/1/2, finance and organization committee 29 Apr., 1 Sep., 20 Dec. 1944; for problems, see e.g. British Library of Political and Economic Science, Kennington CA papers, Coll. Misc. 463/3, CA special committee meeting 15 Jan. 1944; for press, see e.g. West Sussex RO, Chichester CA papers, CO/1CH/Add. MS. 12088, organization sub committee 4 Dec. 1944.
- ⁶² Northamptonshire RO, Northampton CA papers, NCCA/29, annual report 1945, 25 Mar. 1946.
- ⁶³ Birmingham CA papers, uncat., management committee 25 Jan. 1945.
- ⁶⁴ Ealing CA papers, Acc. 1338/2, executive committee 13 Jan., 28 Apr., 'July', 3 Oct., 17 Nov. 1944, 8 Feb. 1945; 1338/7, junior branch, inaugural meeting 29 Jan. 1945.
- ⁶⁵ See e.g. Norwich CA papers, SO 122/4, finance and general purposes committee 5 Feb. 1945; Western Conservative area council papers, ARE 11/1/1, annual meeting 9 Feb. 1945 (re Bristol); Tyne and Wear Archives, Tynemouth CA papers, Acc. 1633/2, executive committee 23 Feb. 1945.
- ⁶⁶ See e.g. Northampton CA papers, NCCA/18, administrative committee 16 July 1945; Gravesend CA papers, U1795/AD1/4, executive committee 4 May 1945.
- ⁶⁷ See e.g. Lambeth Norwood CA papers, IV/166/1/16, emergency committee 11 Dec. 1944.
- ⁶⁸ Maidstone CA papers, U1634/A3/1/3, special emergency sub-committee 17 Feb. 1945.
- ⁶⁹ Ealing CA papers, Acc. 1338/2, executive committee 8 Feb. 1945.
- ⁷⁰ See e.g. Cornwall RO, Bodmin CA papers, DDX 385/1, executive committee 16 Sep. 1944; Newbury CA papers, D/EX 409/20, memorandum, 'General election 1945', n.d. [Aug. 1945].
- ⁷¹ See e.g. Gravesend CA papers, U1795/AD1/4, executive committee 23 Mar. 1945.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, U1795/AD5/1, women's advisory committee 11 May 1945.
- ⁷³ See e.g. Dorset West CA papers, D399/4/1, finance committee 14 Apr. 1945.
- ⁷⁴ See e.g. Tynemouth CA papers, Acc. 1633/2, special executive committee 3 Aug. 1945.
- ⁷⁵ M. Pinto-Duschinsky, *British Political Finance, 1830-1980*, AEIPPR, 1981, p. 132.

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- ⁷⁶ Bodleian Library, Essex and Middlesex Conservative area council papers, ARE 8/1/3, finance and general purposes committee 6 Aug. 1947.
- ⁷⁷ Surrey History Centre, Guildford CA papers, 3960/7/2, annual report, 1946-7, 31 Mar. 1947.
- ⁷⁸ Hampshire RO, Winchester CA papers, 73M86W/52, women's branch, annual report 1947, Mar. 1948; Reigate CA papers, 353/3/1/3, annual report, 1947 to annual meeting 11 May 1948.
- ⁷⁹ R. I. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, OUP, pp. 87, 96.
- ⁸⁰ Pinto-Duschinsky, *British Political Finance*, p. 185.
- ⁸¹ Wessex Conservative area council papers, ARE 10/25/4, Wessex area Conservative Agents' Association meeting 26 Sep. 1945; Dorset West CA papers, D399/3/2, war emergency executive committee 19 Nov. 1945.
- ⁸² See e.g. Bolton CA papers, FDC/1/9, election committee 27 July 1945; Yorkshire Conservative area council papers, WYL 1856/1/3, council meeting 22 Sep. 1945; Oxfordshire RO, Henley CA papers, S. Oxon Con. II/1, finance and general purposes committee 5 Nov. 1945.
- ⁸³ See e.g. Lambeth Norwood CA papers, IV/166/1/16, executive committee 27 July 1945; Ipswich CA papers, GK 401/1/1, executive committee 11 Jan. 1946; Sheffield Archives, Sheffield Park CA papers, LD 2116, executive committee 12 Oct. 1945; St Andrews University Library, Kirkcaldy Burghs UA papers, MS 36676/1, circular, Sep. 1947.
- ⁸⁴ South-East Conservative area council papers, ARE 9/1/3, executive committee 4 Dec. 1945; Bodleian Library, Eastern Conservative area council papers, ARE 7/1/8, finance committee 13 Mar. 1946; *ibid.*, Northern Conservative area council papers, NRO 3303/7, annual meeting 4 May 1946.
- ⁸⁵ Warwickshire RO, Warwick and Leamington CA papers, CR 1392, annual general meeting 1 June 1946.