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Labour Heritage

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Councillor George Haley of Brentford

I came across George Haley in copies of the 'Chiswick Times' and 'Middlesex Chronicle'. In 1983 I wrote an account of his election campaigns and lodged copies with Labour Heritage and Hounslow Borough Library. The rest of the data covering his activities as a Brentford Councillor stayed in folders on a shelf for twenty years until his great grand daughter, Wendy Martin, as part of her family history research contacted the library. They sent her my 1983 account and she got in touch with me through the Brentford & Chiswick History Society. Both of us now have a fuller picture of George Haley.

In 1899 George Haley stood for the first time as a Labour candidate for Brentford District Council. He was a working class Roman Catholic born in 1860, probably in Dublin, who organised charity work for the poor and was secretary of the local Gas Workers Union. He lost but stood again every year until 1905 when he finally won at the 8th attempt in a by-election. The 1901 census shows him living at 68, Lateward Road, Brentford with his wife Hannah and daughter Lizzie aged 15. Several other addresses appear on the ballot paper during the seven years he stood for the Council and his description on the ballot paper was either 'labourer' or 'navvy'. He worked in the building trade and presumably was employed at the Gas Works at some stage. At one time he set up business as a

greengrocer selling wares from a horse and cart, and, after having too much to drink in the evenings, would be placed in the cart and the horse would take him home.

Brentford was a busy town with the Brentford docks where the Grand Union Canal joined the Thames, the gas works, the fruit and vegetable market, the soap works and several other factories. Housing conditions for the working people were appalling and the workhouse (now West Middlesex hospital) was full. The town had a District Council of 12 members, a third of whom retired each year. The district was not divided into wards and the whole of the area elected 4 councillors annually.

In 1899 George Haley, 'Labourer', campaigned for the Council to adopt the Housing of the Working Classes Act. The Middlesex Chronicle reported that it was a very quiet election. He came 7th with 377 votes - 125 short of gaining a place on the council.

For the 1900 election he asked the Council for permission to hold a meeting in St Pauls recreation ground and when this was refused he held it near the fire station instead. A procession led by a brass band marched to the meeting where members of the London Trade Society spoke. Despite this, his vote was down on the previous year.

In 1901 only 5 candidates stood for the 4 places and although he polled his highest vote yet - 467, he was still a long way behind the winning candidates. But he was becoming well known in the town as a constant critic of the Council. He was shouted down

after the count and could not make a speech.

Throughout these years he was the only working-class candidate. Party labels were not allowed on the ballot paper so the candidates were described by their occupation and all George's opponents were shopkeepers, businessmen or professional men. Several were prominent local Liberals or Conservatives and some were backed by the Brentford Tradesmen and Ratepayers' Association.

In 1902 he came 6th out of 8 candidates and in 1903, when he lost by only 15 votes, his campaign called for the appointment of a sanitary inspector in Brentford. He had become a thorn in the flesh of Brentford Council and wrote so many letters on housing and health matters that one councillor suggested they needed an extra clerk to deal with the Haley correspondence.

At the 1904 election he held a big meeting in front of the Magistrates Court but his vote was down again. Reports in the 'Chiswick Times' indicate he had a disturbing way of addressing public meetings and he attacked his opponents loudly and vigorously, frequently accusing councillors of corruption and jobbery. On the Sunday before the 1905 election he was the sole speaker at a meeting in the morning and in the evening he held another meeting addressed by Mr Piggot of the Ealing Independent Labour Party, Mr J. Osborn from the National Democratic League and Mr F. Kennedy of the National Builders' Labourers Union. The Countess of Warwick sent her good wishes.

He had recently been prominent in the South Ealing Relief Committee which gave shoes and other essentials to the area's poor. Institutions such as these were the final barrier between the unemployed and the workhouse.

George knew that if he lost the election in April there would be another opportunity within a month at a by-election to fill a vacancy caused by the death of a sitting councillor.

He concentrated his attacks on the weakest of the five other candidates, a Mr Hughes who was an engineer at the Beldam factory. It is not known if Mr. Hughes treated his workers badly - but George said that he did. When the votes were counted and recounted George had failed by one vote and he had beaten Hughes into 6th place. He had a lot of support outside the Town Hall and his speech was effectively his first in the imminent by-election campaign.

"In a month's time there will be another election and I shall be there. If I fail at that attempt I shall be here again next year. I am prepared to fight as long as there is breath in my body and I will win! (prolonged cheers). I believe the public have sufficient confidence in me. I have fed hundreds of children. I have found shoes for 200 children and stopped several people from starving. Until you get a Labour representative on your Council you will always live like dogs!" This was greeted with applause, uproar and the sound of barking dogs. *"Let me tell you I am proud to think I have stopped the sweater from the Beldam Foundry from getting in. That to me is a victory."*

That last remark ensured that Mr. Hughes was greeted with boos and hisses when he tried to speak. He saw it would be hopeless to attempt to get a hearing and retired from the platform - and from local politics for ever.

The by-election was held on Monday May 15 1905. George campaigned for jobs for the unemployed, for workmen's houses, and against the Tramway Company for neglecting