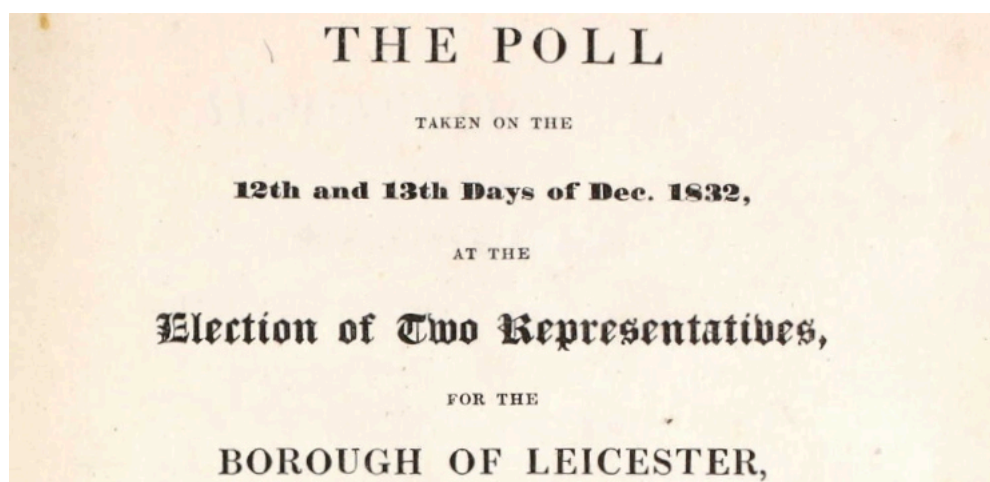


Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker pores over poll books to discover the politics of his ancestors, the Cave family of St Mary's

'Never discuss politics or religion' advises the old adage; and as we've seen from the Brexit vote, politics has the potential to divide families and finish friendships. So I feel somewhat intrusive as I work my way through poll books, trying to piece together the voting patterns of my ancestors, four generations of the Cave family from 1800-1865.



On the face of it, the Caves were unremarkable – framework knitters and loom hands, living amongst the courtyards and side streets of St Mary's parish – but by virtue of them being freemen of Leicester, and therefore having the right to vote, I'm hoping to get an insight into their political thinking. But surely a person's vote should be between them and their conscience, not a matter for public scrutiny? Remarkably, prior to the introduction of secret ballots in 1872, individual electors' votes were published as a matter of public record, and there was scope for all manner of interference from family, employers or landlords.

Were my ancestors Tories or Whigs, I wonder? I trawl through 15 or so poll books – variously available at Leicestershire Records Office, and online at Ancestry and Find My Past – and try to seek out patterns. Along the way, I encounter tales of excessive election expenses, sleazy tactics and 'fake news'. The techniques and technology may have changed over the past 200 years, but in many ways the controversies are still familiar today.

1800: Vote for Manners!

Two Jarvis Caves – senior and junior, father and son – arrive at Leicester Guildhall in December 1800. After battling their way through the hubbub of campaigners and cronies, they step inside. The mayor is on hand, along with a couple of militia men, and the bailiff is poised behind a large oak table ready to record their votes. Two candidates are standing in this by-election to fill "the vacancy occasioned by the death of Lord Rancliffe": Thomas Babington is the

Corporation candidate and generally favoured by property owners, whilst John Manners has characterised this election as a “contest between the rich and the poor, the oppressors and the oppressed.”



The Caves, who work as framework knitters in Horsepool (Oxford) Street, have experienced tough times of late – “the year 1800 was a season of scarcity” according to contemporary reports – and so it’s perhaps not surprising that they both cast their vote in favour of Manners. “On the whole, only the most left-wing voted for Manners,” writes RW Greaves in the Victoria County History, and yet the election results were relatively close. Polling runs for fifteen days – the longest period then allowed by law – and at its close, 2990 eligible residents have voted.

“Mr Babington had a majority of 154, with a respectable body of his friends unpolled,” records the poll book. Thomas Babington goes on to represent Leicester in Parliament from 1800-1818, alongside incumbent Samuel Smith. Despite being an anti-slavery campaigner, Babington was less sensitive to the needs of his constituents, especially hosiery workers’ precarious livelihoods. It’s an election result that probably left the Caves feeling jaded.

1826: Vote for Hastings and Cave!

Before long, change is afoot. “At the beginning of the nineteenth century,” Siobhan Begley writes in *The Story of Leicester*, “the corporation of Leicester was still solidly Tory and Anglican. However, a sign of future change came at the 1818 General Election, when one of the Leicester candidates returned was Thomas Pares, a liberal local banker who favoured Parliamentary reform. The reaction of the corporation was both defensive and corrupt. In the years running up to the next General Election in 1826 they made hundreds of their political sympathisers honorary freemen of Leicester, a status that carried with it the right to vote.”

It's against this background that the two Jarvis Caves head out to cast their votes in June 1826. This time, they're also joined by the next generation in the family, Jarvis junior's eldest son – James Cave – who has been made a freeman a few weeks earlier. The Caves were genuine freemen, a privilege passed by patrimony from father to son since 1754, unlike the recent honorary appointments. "Not one of the eight hundred [honorary freemen] is a resident!" fumes poll book publisher, Albert Cockshaw and "A vast proportion have no connection or... common sympathy with the town."

"A very large amount of corporation money was set aside to use for election purposes," continues Siobhan Begley "and a secret committee was set up to plot tactics, in which bribery played an important part. These tactics succeeded, and the corporation managed to get two Tories returned." Whether it was the effect of nifty campaigning, monetary bribes, or a genuine political affinity, all three Caves voted for the Corporation favourites this time round – Sir Charles Abney Hastings (a staunch High Tory) and Robert Otway Cave (a Liberal Tory) – who romped home ahead of the Whigs, William Evans and Thomas Denman.

The Corporation celebrated this 'signal and glorious victory, most decisive and complete' with a grand dinner, but soon after they were quarrelling with Robert Otway Cave over the apportionment of election expenses; it plunged the Corporation into serious debt, and left a bitter taste. An episode of 'fake news' followed, reported in the Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser, 18 July 1826:

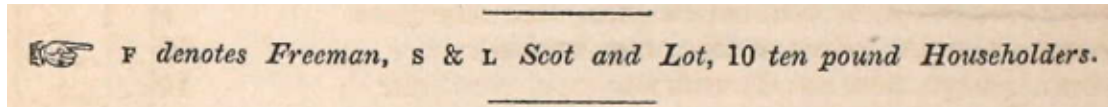
REPORTED DEATH OF OTWAY CAVE, ESQ.—
It was currently reported in Nottingham on Thursday, that Mr. Otway Cave, lately returned one of the Members for Leicester, died on Wednesday morning. It is with pleasure we are able to state for the information of Mr. Cave's friends, that he was in good health yesterday morning, and taking his usual recreation on horseback.

Unlike the Corporation, my relatives seem to have been enamoured with their new MP, Robert Otway Cave. Though no relation at all – and worlds apart in terms of social class – James Cave decides to name his next-born son John Otway Cave. It marks the introduction of the middle name Otway into the family, a tradition that has continued down through five generations. Robert Otway Cave had ceased to be the MP by the time baby John appeared in 1834 so, who knows, it might simply be that his parents liked the aristocratic sound of the name rather than evidence an unwavering political allegiance.

1832-5: Split Votes, a Split Family?

The Great Reform Act of 1832 was intended to reduce corruption in the electoral system and provide a fairer political representation. As well as freemen, forty-shilling freeholders, and those paying 'scot and lot' (a type of

municipal tax), the franchise was extended to men who occupied a house valued at over £10. These reforms made it more difficult for elections to be rigged, and in 1832 Leicester returned two radical candidates to Parliament: William Evans and Wynn Ellis. The days of the Tory Corporation were now numbered.



During this somewhat turbulent period, the poll books reveal a divergence of voting patterns within the Cave family. Jarvis Cave senior – now aged 80, living in Infirmary Square – sticks with the Tories. His son and grandsons, on the other hand, vote for the radicals: Evans and Ellis. Dots in the 1832 poll book show Jarvis Cave senior isolated from the others; maybe there were heated debates around the kitchen table, in a similar vein to Brexit arguments over recent years.

RESIDENT VOTERS.

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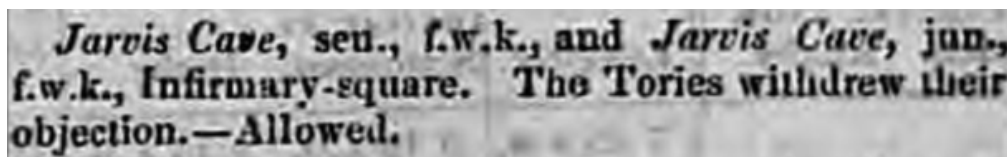
Name.	Residence.	Occupation.	E.	EL	L.
Cave, Jarvis, sen.	Infirmary square,	framework-knitter			..
Cave, Jarvis, sen.	Welford road,	framework-knitter	..	..
Cave, Jarvis, jun.	London road,	framework-knitter	..	..
Cave, John,	Denman street,	framework-knitter	..	..
Cave, John, jun.	Barkby lane,	framework-knitter	..	..
Cave, William,	Welford road,	framework-knitter	..	..

1837 onwards: Vote for Reform! Vote Liberal!

“Elections continued as before, or if anything with more noise, greater vigour and violence, and less scruple. The system of open voting remained in force and with it the traditional methods of influencing electors by intimidation, treating, and open bribery, so that elections continued to require a generous expenditure of hard drink and hard cash.” (RH Evans, Victoria County History)

Despite the Great Reform Act of 1832, the Cave family could well have hoped for further reforms. Siobhan Begley picks up the narrative again: “In Leicester the desperate situation of hosiery workers drove local Chartism. The 1830s had been a decade of hardship, in which record numbers had sought poor relief, and in 1838 the charter was published... [proposing] six changes to the electoral system: votes for all men over the age of 21, the end of the property qualification for voting, equal size of constituencies, payment for MPs, annual parliaments and the secret ballot.” It took years for these changes to come to pass, but the groundswell of opinion helped to bring about a shift in candidates and policies.

With close-run elections – and majorities of often only a hundred or so votes – the political parties regularly scrutinised individual voters' eligibility. In October 1840 a newspaper snippet reveals the two Jarvis Caves, senior and junior, being challenged by the Tories, though their objection was later withdrawn, and in September 1842 Jarvis Cave senior was “expunged” from the vote after a challenge from the Liberals.



Jarvis Cave, sen., f.w.k., and Jarvis Cave, jun., f.w.k., Infirmary-square. The Tories withdrew their objection.—Allowed.

From 1837, for the next thirty years or so, votes cast by Cave family members are broadly in line with one another. They favour the more radical Whig (or later, Liberal) candidates, most of whom were successfully elected:

- 1837: Samuel Duckworth and John Easthope
- 1839: Wynn Ellis (to supersede Duckworth)
- 1847 and 1852: Sir Joshua Walmsley and Richard Gardner
- 1857: John Dove Harris (with only James Cave voting for John Biggs)
- 1859: John Dove Harris and Joseph William Noble
- 1861: John Dove Harris
- 1865: John Dove Harris and Peter Alfred Taylor

This shift in my ancestors' voting patterns, from Tories to Liberals, is broadly in tune with the rest of Leicester; from the mid-nineteenth century the Liberals were firmly in the ascendant and the Tories barely got a look in, save for the election of William Unwin Heygate in 1861-2.

Over the past two centuries, election billboards and marketplace hustings may have been trumped by social media and television debates. Yet much is also familiar, with the poll books' statistical tables showing the machinations of each election: how individual wards voted, how 'plumpers' tactically skewed the expected vote, how the votes accumulated every half hour throughout the poll. Poll books are a gold mine for psephologists and family historians alike. Dip in, and see if you can get a glimpse of your ancestors' political lives.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter [@auntiemabel.org](https://twitter.com/auntiemabel.org)