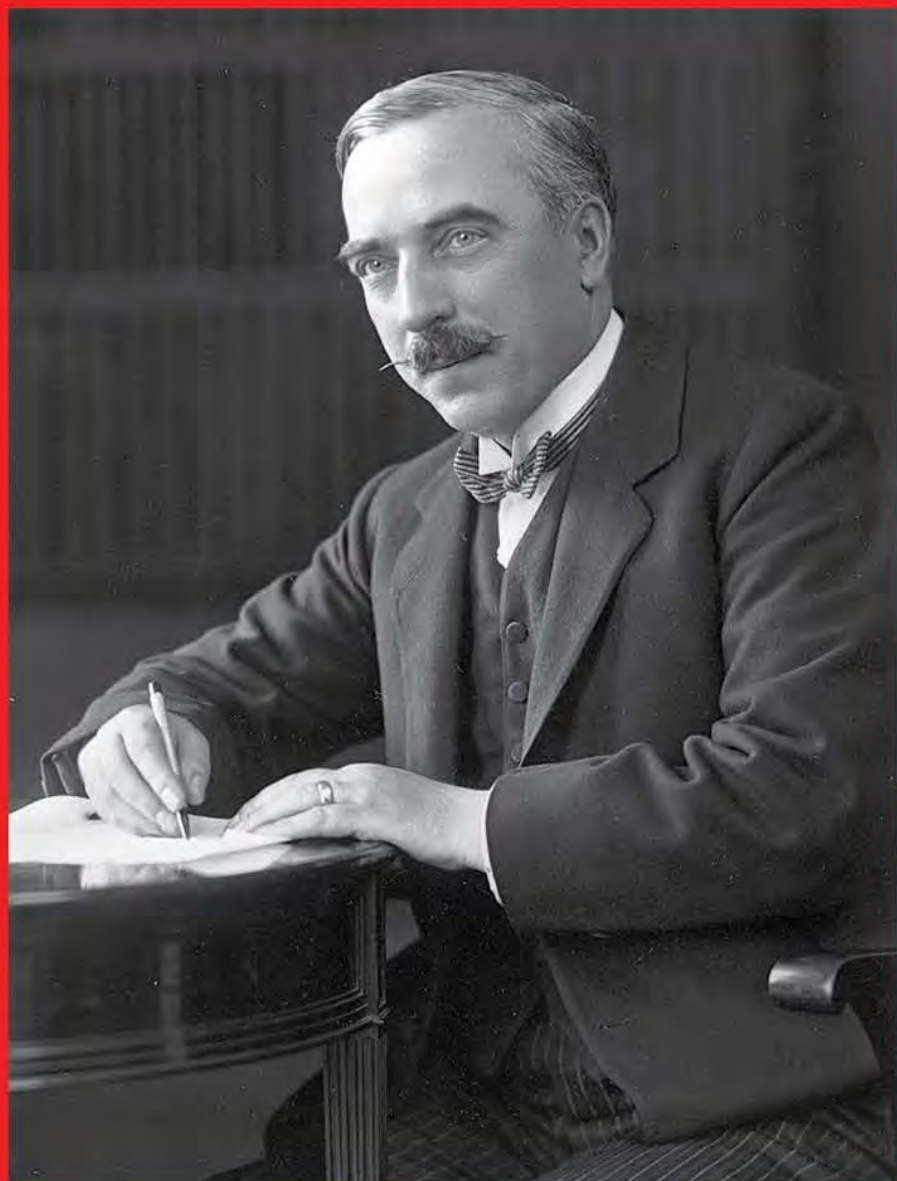


# George Roberts MP

A LIFE THAT 'DID DIFFERENT'



Frank Meeres

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by  
Frank Meeres



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# Introduction

George Roberts is one of Norfolk's most fascinating characters. Born in Chedgrave in 1868, the son of a shoemaker, he became the first Labour party Member of Parliament in East Anglia. He rose to become the party's Chief Whip and was one of the very small number of Labour MPs to serve in wartime Governments under David Lloyd George. He rose to become a cabinet minister and a privy councillor, serving in vital roles as Minister of Labour and then as Minister of Food.

After the war, disillusioned with the Labour Party, he stood for Norwich as an Independent candidate - and won! He then finished his journey to the right, becoming a Conservative MP!

George Roberts was always fiercely independent, making his own mind up on the great issues of the day and speaking out: he was never afraid of offending anyone. A little man, he was a big figure in local and national life in the first quarter of the twentieth century. He deserves to be far better known. This book brings to life the dramatic story of 'Georgie' Roberts.

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*George Roberts as a statesman and politician: a portrait from his personal archive. It is possibly from a number of photographs taken at Versailles in 1919.*

## I

# 'What Mr Roberts would do if he had the power': George Roberts and the beginnings of Labour

Throughout his political career, Roberts was to lay stress on his background as that of the farm labourer. This appears to have been a slight exaggeration on his part. His father and grandfather were actually craftsmen – village shoemakers. In any case the family moved into Norwich when he was very young, so he can have had no personal memory of growing up in rural poverty. However, he was quite correct to claim a humble status for his family: his father could not sign the registration entry of George's birth, making his mark instead.

Roberts was born in the Norfolk village of Chedgrave on 27 July 1868. His father was George Henry Roberts, butcher and shoemaker, his mother Ann, formerly Larkman, a housemaid in the neighbouring village of Hardley. The couple married in Chedgrave church on Christmas Day 1867. Roberts was therefore conceived out of wedlock. This was much more of a stigma at that time than it is today, although not an insuperable one: two leading Labour politicians who appear in this book, Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, were illegitimate. However, Roberts covered up his background by a simple lie, and one that was never exposed in his lifetime. He always gave his date of birth as 27 July 1869 and this is the date given in all his obituaries and articles of biography.

Roberts was baptised at nearby Thurton on 15 May 1870. His mother was again pregnant and gave birth to a girl, Rebecca, three months later. Soon after this, Roberts' father decided to set up as a shoemaker in Norwich. At the time of the 1871 census (April) the family were living in Armes Street, off the Dereham Road: Roberts was two, his sister just nine months old.

In later life Roberts sometimes said that he was one of a family of eight or nine – by the age of twelve, he claimed, he was the sole survivor. This claim was most dramatically told in *Lloyd's Sunday News* in 1919: 'Just over fifty years ago a delicate boy was born in a rural labourer's cottage in the Norfolk village

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of Chedgrave. Seven brothers and sisters followed but all, except the first born, died in very early childhood. By the time the boy was twelve he was the only child left to his struggling parents, and he lived despite the doctor's prophecies that he must soon follow the other children to their churchyard resting place.'

Certainly Rebecca died in 1877 at the age of seven: she was buried in the common grave at the Earlham Road cemetery in Norwich just two days before Christmas. By the time of the 1881 census the family were living at Eagle Walk in Heigham, and George Roberts was the only child in the family, when he was indeed twelve years old. There does not seem to be time for the births and deaths of seven other children, so Roberts was perhaps exercising poetic licence on this point. Apart from George and Rebecca, no other children of the family were baptised or buried in the 1870s in Thurton or the neighbouring villages of Chedgrave, Langley or Hardley, and there are no other family burials in the Earlham Road cemetery. In his marriage announcement in 1895, Roberts is described as 'only son of G. H. Roberts'. Perhaps the, admittedly tragic, death of a baby sister, became the subject of some political spin over the years.

There was some very bad housing in the centre of Norwich at this time, families crowded together in tenements grouped around a yard with often a single water pump and a single privy. From the 1820s onwards, new housing was going up in Lakenham, especially the Peafield estate: these houses may have been new but they were still pretty appalling. The school that Roberts attended served this area, but Eagle Walk is slightly further out of the city, separated from Peafield by the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. Most of the houses in the Walk have gone but a few still survive, small but, in that key word of Victorian England, 'respectable'. The cottages were built in the 1850s, just before the days of mains water and sewerage: bringing up a family here cannot have been easy.

Roberts went to school at the time of a revolution in education. Before 1870 the only schools in Norwich for poor children were supplied by various charitable bodies. Most of these were tied in with either Anglican or Nonconformist churches in the city. However, in 1870 elected School Boards were set up with the avowed intention of providing elementary education for every child for the first time.

According to his own account, Roberts' parents were concerned for his health in the city, and he spent most of his early childhood at Loddon, very near his birthplace: presumably he was looked after by relatives, probably by his uncle Henry (his father's brother), who was also a shoemaker and lived at a part of Loddon known as Gravel Pits. Henry had several children, including one boy, Sylvanus, who was two years older than Roberts. Roberts said later that he went to the village school for a few years, and then came back to live with his parents

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Roberts as a child between two adults — Ernest Wild the Conservative candidate and Louis Tillett the Liberal candidate.

in Norwich. However, although Sylvanus did attend the school from June 1869 to November 1871, there is no record in the admission register of George Henry Roberts having been admitted. Perhaps he attended occasionally and informally with his cousin, but was never formally admitted as a pupil. In a speech in Parliament in 1915, he said that, because of his poor health, he was sent to stay with relatives in the Norfolk countryside on several occasions and attended local village schools. Typically, he could not resist asserting his own cleverness: on one such occasion he shared a bedroom with a local lad who was very keen on botany and had a book on the subject. Roberts was able to help him with the longer words in the book!

Roberts certainly went to the nearest elementary school, St Stephen's school in St Stephen's Square. This was a National school, built in 1865 to serve the many children in this rapidly-expanding part of the city. The school records survive, and, at last we are on firm ground. His uncle also moved into Norwich, with his family, living at Grove Place. Sylvanus was admitted to St Stephen's school, in January 1873, working through the first four standards (grades) and leaving in



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1879 at the age of thirteen. George Henry Roberts followed him, being admitted to the school in April 1874, when he was five years nine months old (so any school days at Loddon or elsewhere must have been in the Infants' class).

The school had very few resources. A report of March 1875, while Roberts was a young pupil, said that 'the supply of Reading Books is quite insufficient and the Desks are very bad. The offices need attention'. Staffing was poor as well: 'E J Walker and M Lee have passed an unsatisfactory examination. Should they be required to complete the Staff and fail to the same extent next year the Grant will have to be reduced by £20 and thenceforth by £40 for every year at the end of which a similar Failure is repeated'. By November the situation had improved and the threat to cut the grant was not repeated. This report said 'the year's work has been difficult and there is some improvement, but both discipline and instruction in the School are below the proper standard'. Standards appear to have improved during the years in which Roberts was a pupil, but there were still problems. In 1880 the head teacher noted high levels of absenteeism, and also of noise – not from the pupils but from the pupil-teachers! Elizabeth Grix, the 5<sup>th</sup> year pupil-teacher was a particular offender: perhaps she passed this trait on to the pupil who was to become the school's most distinguished old-boy!

Roberts recalled much later that he was 'a small delicate child whom his parents had little hope of rearing to manhood'. However, he did well at school, passing through all six standards between 1875 and 1880. He became a monitor at the age of eleven, thus earning a few pence a week. Some thirty-five years later, he recalled his schooldays in a speech in Parliament:

Unfortunately the conditions and the position in which I was brought up did not enable my parents to place me in a high-class school. I had to attend a non-provided school, and when I reached the age of eleven the schoolmaster informed me that it was impossible, owing to lack of facilities in that school, to advance me any further. Therefore I was immediately appointed a monitor, and it then became my duty to take charge occasionally of very large classes. I am in a position to know, therefore, how utterly impossible it is, even with the necessary qualifications, to impart any knowledge to the number of people congregated in these classes. In my case, having charge of eighty or ninety children, I found I was simply compelled to devote the whole of my time to maintaining order.

Religion does not seem to have played a major role in Roberts' life: it is never mentioned in his speeches, and he was always in favour of a secular education. However, he sang in the choir at Christ Church, Eaton, while he was at school,

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and used to go out singing on Christmas Eve.

As was normal at that time, his years of education were short by later standards: he left school on 6 April 1882, at the age of thirteen: apparently, he had hopes of becoming a teacher but his ill-health prevented it. A bright boy like Roberts might hope to become an apprentice, but for this money was needed for the premium. In his *Lloyd's Sunday News* article he painted a vivid picture of his father 'working night and day in his little one-roomed cobbler's shop in order that he might save ten pounds for my premium.' However Roberts was fortunate; he won an apprenticeship premium in the printing industry (he does not give any details as to how he did this). Most people have heard of the Norwich printing firm of Jarrold's, but there were also many smaller firms engaged in printing within the city. Roberts was fortunate enough to be given an opportunity in one of these, becoming an apprentice at J. C. Pentney, a printing firm in St Benedict's. He later recalled that his first wage was just 1s. 6d. a week and that the 'printing done by the firm consisted mainly of printing chemist's labels'. While an apprentice he attended evening classes at higher grade and technical schools.

During his apprenticeship, Roberts took up music, learning how to play wind instruments. Again according to his own account, he became so proficient that he was offered a musical career: 'My father, however, was very apprehensive of the temptations to which, he believed, musicians were subjected, and advised me to continue at the printing case.' So, after completing his apprenticeship, he worked as a printer in London between 1889 and 1892. In the latter year, he returned to Norwich, becoming foreman of the printing works at Coleman and Co, the soft drinks manufacturers (not to be confused with Colman's the Norwich mustard business). Roberts soon became a leading trade union man in the city. He was a member of the printers' union, which was called the Typographical Association. He said later that he had founded the Norwich branch, and certainly he soon became its President and secretary. In 1898 he was elected President of the Norwich Trades Council.

This appears to have been in something of a decline during this period. Steven Cherry notes that it was dominated by Liberals, and also that the number of trade unionists affiliated fell from 2,667 in 1899 to 1,200 in 1903. Its campaigns do not seem to have been particularly effective. One was to attempt to persuade the City Council to refrain from paying its road menders less than the standard rate. In 1901, it was involved in a dispute about the dismissal by engineering firm Boulton and Paul of workers because they belonged to a union. The Trades Council offered to act as mediator but the firm declined. In the same year, three men were dismissed by the local Tramways Company, again because they belonged to a union. The Trades Council failed to persuade the Company to give the men their

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