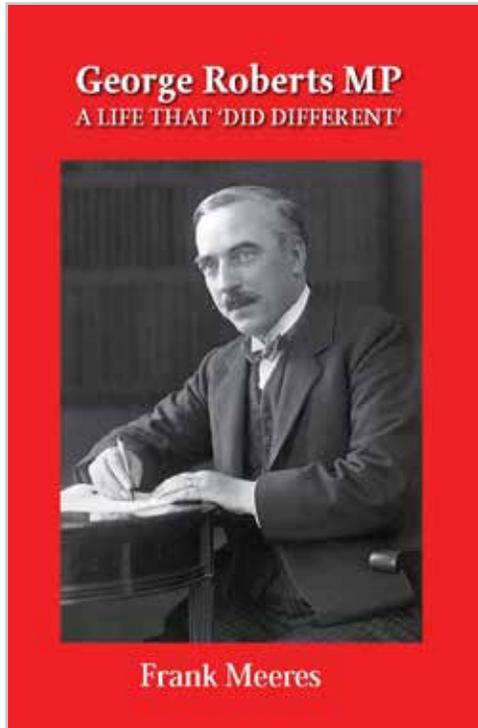


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Roberts at war: Norwich Tank Week, 1918.

Roberts in 1919 speaks about the Victory Loan scheme outside Norwich Guildhall.



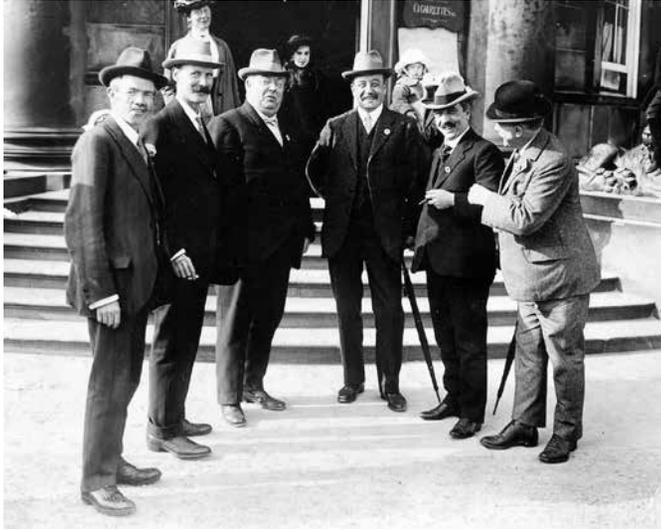
Poppyland Publishing is pleased to announce *George Roberts MP: A Life that 'Did Different'* by Frank Meeres.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of radical ideas about democracy and social organisation. Electoral reform in the late 19th century had begun the change from influence based on wealth, privilege and land ownership, to that of productivity and the concept of universal suffrage. It was a new form of progressive politics fuelled by the ballot box.

George Roberts was to become an important and controversial figure in both local and national politics in the early 20th century. An outstanding orator and maverick, he not only gained recognition and respect, but also engendered suspicion and contempt among his contemporaries, opposing, and often voting against, his party's policy even when Chief Whip. His practical ideals clashed with many eventually leading to a split with the party he had joined in order to improve the lot of the working class. His disillusionment with the Labour party and its leadership became so fervent that in the 1920s he eventually joined the Conservatives:

"We used to protest against the power exerted by feudal and other interests, but in many instances there could be no greater tyranny than those that have manoeuvred into the leadership against others who have ventured to claim reasonable liberty of thought and actions. The new Labour party ... deprives men of the means whereby they have earned their livelihood if they dare to take an independent line such as they believe to be in the interests of the community."

This book, published on the 125th anniversary of the formation of the Independent Labour Party in Norwich, provides an opportunity for those in the 21st century to reassess his significance both locally and nationally in a turbulent era where political ideals and expediency often required those involved to take different courses.



*Roberts as statesman and politician:
undated and unidentified images from
his personal archive. Some are probably
taken in Versailles, 1919.*



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 20th century. He deserves to be far better known. This book brings to life the dramatic story of 'Georgie' Roberts.

About the author

Among Frank Meeres' many contributions to Norfolk's heritage is a series of titles on significant figures in Norfolk and national politics, including *Dorothy Jewson, Suffragette and Socialist* and *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives* for Poppyland Publishing. The author studied at King's College, University of London and his subsequent work at the Norfolk Record Office gives him a deep knowledge of the wonderful resources available there. This is put to good use to tell George Roberts' story.



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'Democracy is doomed unless England is victorious': George Roberts, the War and after, 1914-1922

The Labour Party could be reasonably satisfied with its progress in Norwich by 1914. It had one MP, four city councillors and seven Guardians (these figures include three people who were both councillors and Guardians). The First World War was to change everything, including the relationship between the Party and its Member of Parliament.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 took people by surprise. Most people in England were in favour of it, especially after Germany invaded Belgium – the defence of 'gallant little Belgium' was a very popular rallying call. The Labour Party was split by the war. Its leader, Ramsay MacDonald, and members of one of its constituent parts, the Independent Labour Party, declared themselves against the war. However, most of the members of the Labour Party were in favour of the war, including George Roberts. In fact he played a key role in the final decision, as noted in *The Times* some years later:

The story of the critical conferences of the Labour Party in the opening days of the war has never yet been published. When it is made known it will be found that Mr Roberts, at the start, stood almost alone in maintaining that it was the duty of Britain to enter the war on the side of France and Belgium. It was the greatest fight of his life, and he had the supreme satisfaction, after battling for long with his back to the wall, of seeing Mr Ramsay MacDonald and his pacifist friends driven out of the counsels of his party until the debt of honour for which he had contended had been paid in full.⁵²

MacDonald resigned as leader of the Party and was replaced by Arthur Henderson. Broadly speaking, the division was between the trade unionists who were in favour of the war, and the members of the Independent Labour Party who opposed it. Several people like Roberts were in both camps, and, like him, they

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almost all came out in favour of the war. The majority of Labour MPs, including Roberts, favoured a Government request for a war credit of £100 million, and were even happy to help in the recruiting campaign. The I.L.P. opposed both these actions.

By coincidence, the I.L.P. held its annual conference in Norwich in 1915. The two main speakers were Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald. Because of its anti-war stance, most Norwich meeting-places refused to stage the Conference. In the end a Primitive Methodist minister, Rev Storr, allowed them to use the schoolroom attached to his chapel in Queen's Road. The chairman of the Norwich Reception Committee was Herbert Witard and the treasurer was Annie Reeves. The Committee included Ernest Cornwell, later to serve a prison sentence for refusing to join up after conscription was introduced in 1916.

The I.L.P. conference issued a statement in April 1915: 'In each of the countries at war, the Militarist Jingoës declare that they will not rest content short of smashing and dismembering enemy countries. Even if such a policy, instead of setting at defiance the clearest lesson of history, were just and expedient, nine months of war under modern conditions have demonstrated that the possibility of attaining this result is exceedingly remote. But so long as this fear of dismemberment and crushing humiliation holds a nation in thrall, it will go on fighting to the last ounce of resistance and the last drop of blood'. Keir Hardie had been blunter: he said that the war consisted of 20 million working men trying to kill each other. The Conference passed a motion expressing its strong disapproval of Labour Party men taking part in recruiting campaigns and speaking on pro-war platforms. This was passed overwhelmingly, by a vote of 243 in favour, with just nine against. Roberts was in a tiny minority within the I.L.P., but in the Labour Party as a whole he was in the majority.

Roberts gave a speech at the 1915 T.U.C. explaining his reasons for his support of the war. Once again it was his own mind he had made up. He said that because he had been at first very much concerned about domestic matters, he had allowed the party and union leaders to make their decisions on foreign affairs. However, he and others had now looked at the matter themselves:

Much as we regret it we have come to the conclusion that Germany meant war, that she had long planned it, and that she resorted to every device to create it, although perhaps not in the exact form in which it had ensued. She hoped for our neutrality. The hope was inspired in her breast that she might take her enemies one by one, because she would then find her purpose assured. After she had disposed of her other enemies then she would start upon her greater task – war with this country and the absorption of the British Empire.⁵³

'DEMOCRACY IS DOOMED UNLESS ENGLAND IS VICTORIOUS'

Roberts told the T.U.C., '... if there is murdering, maiming and a large number of killed, 96% of the wounded will be of our class. And, friends, we ought to honour these men'. He went on to describe his own experience: 'now, friends, if you want to know what war is, I have travelled 2,000 miles in France and Flanders, and I have seen the destruction of towns and villages. I have seen the spots where entire villages have been wiped out – where every man, woman and child has been killed. And let me tell you cynics that the German soldiers bayoneted the baby boys under the orders of their officers in order that they might never grow to manhood to avenge their parents' cold-blooded murder. I have seen them wait until the people were sitting down to meals, and then take pleasure in throwing a bomb to destroy the whole family circle. I have seen disembowelled bodies in a heap'.

To combat the anti-war views of the I.L.P., a pro-war Labour group, the Socialist National Defence Committee was formed in April 1915. Roberts was one of its founders. Others included George Barnes and the writer H. G. Wells. It was committed to 'ideals of liberty and democracy which have united free Britain, independent Belgium and Republican France'. After the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 the group called for the internment of Germans living in Britain. In 1916 the group was re-formed as the British Workers' League (B.W.L.). By the spring of 1917 it claimed to have 154 branches. Eleven of the 38 Labour Members of Parliament were at one time members, though some subsequently dropped out. Martin Pugh sums up: 'Militantly hostile to Asquithian Liberalism, conscientious objectors and German imports, the B.W.L. aligned itself with the fight-to-a-finish school.'⁵⁴ The group had contacts with pro-war Conservatives and there was even talk of a joint Tory-Socialist joint programme after the war. However, as war-weariness increased, many of the working class looked once more to the consistently anti-war stance of the I.L.P.

Low resigned as the 'other' Norwich MP due to ill health in January 1915. He wrote to Roberts: 'One of the greatest pleasures in representing Norwich has been having you as a colleague. We worked together well and I trust this spirit may long continue between those who sit for the old City irrespective of Party'. He was replaced by another Liberal, Edward Hilton Young, who was elected unopposed. He, too, got on well with Roberts over the ensuing years.

In January 1915, a Parliamentary Committee was formed to examine the conditions in which German prisoners of war and interned aliens were being held in Britain. Roberts was the Labour Party representative, and, as always, threw himself into his new role. He visited about twenty different camps between February and April, in England, Scotland and Ireland. These varied enormously in size and scope. Two of the largest were on the Isle of Man, where 5,000 interned

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aliens were held in huts at Knockaloe, near Peel, and a further 2,500 at a holiday camp in Douglas. Other camps holding between 1,800 and 2,000 prisoners were at Dorchester, Dorset (an old artillery barracks), Queensferry near Chester (a former engineering works), Leigh in Lancashire and Handforth in Cheshire. Several ships were also used, including three off Southend each holding about 1,500 men. Other institutions, especially those for officers, were much smaller. There were 100 Army and Navy officers at Donington Hall, 102, with 52 soldier-servants (themselves also prisoners of war) at Helpport near Maidenhead, and 200 civilian prisoners at Lofthouse Park, Wakefield. The most dramatic moment in the inspections occurred at Helpport, where the committee members were shown an escape passage that the prisoners had dug under a wall near the lavatories.

Roberts and the other members of the commission looked at conditions for themselves, and also heard complaints from the prisoners. Their criticisms were mainly relatively minor, the worst camp being Shrewsbury, where the sanitary arrangements were found to be 'very primitive'. Roberts himself wrote a letter, on House of Commons notepaper, urging that the situation be remedied; otherwise, he concluded, 'the Camp is excellently organised and administered'. The reports refer to camps several times as 'concentration camps', a term first used in the Boer War and one which had not yet acquired the full horror it was to have later in the century.

The only other serious concerns were at Handforth, an old dye works. Some prisoners shared double beds, which had led, according to the Commission, to 'immoral practices': these beds should be replaced with single ones. There was another issue at Handforth: there were about twenty to thirty Jews among the prisoners and there were no facilities there for catering for a Jewish diet. The complaints made by the prisoners themselves were also relatively trivial, mainly concerning the monotony of the food. One complaint was of the inadequacy of the butter supply, another that visitors were only allowed to talk for half an hour with a prisoner. This last complaint was at Wakefield where the civilian prisoners were visited by family and friends. Most of the military and naval prisoners would not have had anyone to visit them.

The final camp visited, on 30 April, was a rather different one, holding alien sailors and firemen. This was at Eastcote, Northamptonshire, in a house which had been bought by the British Sailors' and Firemen's Union, and fitted up at a cost to them of £10,000. It was not a prisoner-of-war camp, the prisoners being put on their honour not to escape. If they did try they would be sent to a military camp.⁵⁵

On 25 February 1915, there was a debate in Parliament about allowing children in country districts to leave school before the statutory leaving age of thirteen to

'DEMOCRACY IS DOOMED UNLESS ENGLAND IS VICTORIOUS'

work on the land. Roberts spoke at length, vigorously opposing the proposal. He made his usual references to his agricultural background: 'I happen to be one of those born in a small agricultural village who still maintain a pretty intimate interest with conditions there prevailing ... I am myself of agricultural descent, and therefore I am not likely to hold or acknowledge that there is a law that dooms a child born of rural parents to a less finely convoluted brain than a child born in town'. He cited the case of a relative who lived in the country who as a young man had been forced to go out poaching to raise money for botany books. Despite his lack of formal education, he had done very well on emigrating: '... this all goes to emphasise the fact that there be much genius latent among the agricultural population, and much talent which, if released, will redound to the benefit of the country as a whole'.

Henry Chaplin, MP for Wimbledon, and a former President of the Board of Agriculture, showered Roberts with, perhaps sardonic, praise – and then went on to disagree totally with his views. In his tribute, he praised Roberts for 'the progress which the Hon Gentleman has made from a lowly beginning in a cottage until he has been able, by his latent genius, to raise himself to the proud and responsible position which he now occupies as a representative of labour in this House ... I congratulate him on the possession of those qualities which have enabled him to reach his present position'. In fact, Roberts was about to rise to further heights.

By the spring of 1915, many people were becoming dissatisfied with the conduct of the war. The Liberal government, under its rather alcoholic leader Asquith, was thought to be insufficiently dynamic to win the war. In May 1915, he was forced to bring Conservative and Labour Party members into a coalition government. Arthur Henderson, the leader of the Labour Party, came into the Cabinet. Two other Labour MPs came into the Government in lesser positions. These junior ministers included Roberts, who was appointed a Junior Lord of the Treasury. (The third Labour man to join the government was William Brace, who was not one of the original 29 that formed the Parliamentary Labour Party: he had been elected as a 'Lib-Lab' and only moved into the Labour Party later).

Just nine years after its foundation, the Parliamentary Labour Party had members in the Government, and Roberts was one of them! A Liberal MP, William Wedgwood Benn, wrote him a letter of congratulation, but also issued a warning: 'I hope you are keeping well and not overworking – which always seemed to me your danger'.

Roberts was certainly not about to slow down. He did valuable work for the Government as a pro-war trade unionist. He was involved in the negotiations that ended the South Wales miners' strike in July 1915. He and Arthur Henderson, as

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