

Atcher

Chapter One: Preparing for Politics

My father and mother were both born and brought up in Leeds. I was born at Walthamstow, a suburb of London, when my father was working for the Inland Revenue nearby, on October 25, 1900.

His father seems to have been the son of a farm worker near Huntingdon, and managed to get trained as a teacher (presumably at a Church of England college) early in the expansion of schools which followed the Education Acts of 1870 - 1880. He got a headship very young and was employed all his working life in Church of England schools in Leeds.

My father, his eldest child, went to Leeds Modern School, a secondary school with the Education Authority founded to supplement the elitist local Grammar School, and by all accounts was a brilliant scholar. He left at sixteen to go into the Civil Service as a boy clerk, and managed thanks to evening study to become a "Tax Surveyor" and later an "Inspector of Taxes".

My mother's father was a younger son from a small farm near Ripon. He was soundly educated in the "three R's" at the choir school attached to Ripon Cathedral, and then went into Leeds as an apprentice to the grocery trade. In his twenties he managed to open his own shop in Armley. Then, foreseeing after a few years the growth of the competition from the Co-operative Society, he turned to speculative house-building, having grasped the social fact that better-paid workers, such as foremen or policemen could afford to rent soundly-built small houses and would be reliable payers. He got the initial finance from a local building society on the strength of his good name.

I knew him only as an irascible old man, but in youth he had the outlook of a Gladstonian Liberal. One of my mother's early memories was being taken by him to hear Gladstone speak in the open air in Town Hall Square, and being lifted up to see the great man. Like many other Liberals, he was to go over to the Conservatives as he grew older. He hated the brewers who financed the Conservative Party from the profits of what, as a teetotaler, he saw as fuddling the workers, but he still preferred them to the Independent Labour Party, of whom he spoke as "they low-lived Socialists", who undermined individual enterprise.

My mother was the youngest of her parents' three surviving children. Their first child, a boy, died at birth. He was followed (to her father's disappointment, I was told) by no more sons, but by "only" three daughters. My mother told me, in her old age, that her mother had known about contraception, though she doubted whether her father ever guessed!

James Prest wanted these daughters to be self-supporting, and the eldest, Irene, was trained as a teacher at the Church of England college at Ripon. She put up a tough and successful struggle against her father's Victorian authoritarianism. Genetically my elder so, Peter, took after her; both were small in size and impossible to put down.