

Charles Gibbs

Victorian Confectioner and Champion of the Working Man

by Gerald B Gibbs

In 1897 the *West Bromwich and Oldbury Chronicle* ran a series of articles on Local Leaders who were considered to be “shaping the destinies, or making the history, of the town.” On August 13th the subject was Mr. Charles Gibbs, a confectioner by trade and a reformer by conviction, who had become President of West Bromwich Trades Council. That man was my great grandfather and I was inspired by the article to write a more detailed account of his life and times. For those times saw both the best and the worst consequences of the Industrial Revolution. On the darker side, workers were often exploited with inhumanely long working hours in unsafe or insanitary conditions. This led to the formation of Trades Unions and Trades Councils to fight for workers’ rights. And the cost of food and other essentials of daily life could be priced at a level clearly disproportionate when compared with the average wage. From that, the Co-operative Movement was born. It was in both of these areas that Charles made his major contribution, not only to the history of the town but also to the pursuit of reform throughout the West Midlands.

Charles Gibbs was born in Leatherhead, Surrey, in August 1843. He was the second son of William Shaw Gibbs, a coach trimmer, and his wife Isabella, daughter of a London coach smith. Times were hard. Charles lost his father to peritonitis when he was only 13 and in the previous three years he had seen two young sisters and a baby brother all die at home from illnesses that would probably be readily treatable today. He was taught to read and write at Church schools but, with little education, started work in Dorking as a Baker’s apprentice when just 14. There he had to work with several other bakers in a cramped room, from 4 o’clock in the morning until 7 o’clock at night. Conditions were appalling; the room was home to the w.c. and the board used for kneading the dough actually covered the toilet!

By the time he was twenty, Charles had decided to improve his prospects by becoming qualified as a confectioner. To this end, he moved to London and for a while studied under the famous chef Charles Elme Francatelli, who at one time had been chef to the Royal family and later chef de cuisine for seven years at the Reform Club in London. Between 1863 and 1870, Francatelli managed the St. James Hotel in Berkeley Street and that is presumably the place where master and pupil worked together.

At around that time and undoubtedly influenced by his early experiences, Charles Gibbs joined the newly formed Associated Operative Bakers’ and Confectioners’ Union. For the rest of his life he worked hard for the Trades Union movement, endeavouring to improve the lot of the working man.

During the time in London Charles met 21 year-old Emily Adlington, daughter of the proprietor of a Kent Hotel. They were married at Shoreditch Parish Church in 1868, when their place of residence was given as Shoreditch. The couple obviously moved around in London as their first child was born in Wood Green and the second in Islington. Emily played a major role in running the family home as their family grew

and Charles' responsibilities increased in both his chosen profession and his Union activities.

There is an apocryphal story that Charles Gibbs played cricket with the famous cricketer W. G. Grace in his early years. An article prepared for the *Dictionary of Labour Biographies* refers to Grace as a "childhood playmate". This cannot be true because the cricketer was not born until 1848. By the time W.G. was 9, Charles was working a fifteen-hour day as a Baker's apprentice in Surrey. And Grace, from an upper middle class family, spent all of his early years with them in the Bristol area. However, he was in London for Gentleman versus Players matches in the 1860s, and it is possible that he met Charles Gibbs then, perhaps even at Francatelli's Hotel. My father told me that Charles had played cricket with W. G. Grace "as a young man".

According to the *Chronicle* article, Charles began working for a wholesale confectioner in Mortlake, Surrey, around 1872. There, his foreman introduced him to "The Forum" at Fleet Street, where men of progressive views gathered nightly to discuss their ideas. Charles had to walk six miles to the meetings. He also played an active part in demonstrations for better working conditions, including one involving 10,000 workers in Hyde Park.

Charles continued to work as a confectioner as he and his family moved around England. By 1873, records show them living in Ipswich, Suffolk. There they had three more children.

Their next two children were born in Liverpool in 1880 and 1881, and the 1881 census shows the family living in that city. Therefore a statement in the *Chronicle* that Charles moved to West Bromwich in 1880 is incorrect. The move is more likely to have been in 1882 or 1883; the family had certainly moved there by 1884 when their next child was born. Three more children followed.

Charles remained in West Bromwich for the remainder of his life and most of what we know about his Trades Union activities is from those years. The *Chronicle* reported that in 1885 Charles became an active member of the Birmingham Trades Council and also Secretary of the Birmingham and District Operative Bakers' and Confectioners' Union. It is likely that his involvement with these organisations started as soon as he arrived in West Bromwich, the latter Union being founded in 1883. When it joined the Amalgamated Union in 1893, its registered address was the address of Charles' home and that remained the case well into the first decade of the 1900s.

In order to understand Charles' motivation for the furtherance of what were then termed "progressive" views, one needs to consider the background of the working man at the time he entered employment. It was only just being recognised that workers should have the right to vote in parliamentary elections and to form their own Trades Unions. Factory Acts to limit working hours to a reasonable length and to ensure tolerable working conditions were being forced through parliament against considerable opposition, with employers continuing to resist their implementation even after they were statute. And the Acts did not apply to Charles' own profession, where anyone could set up a bakery and require journeymen bakers to work up to 15 hours a day in appalling and often insanitary conditions. A Fabian tract published in

1900 reveals that these conditions were still quite common in London and other major towns and cities some 40 years on, bakehouses often being sited in damp cellars prone to occasional flooding. Such insanitary conditions were highlighted in a report published in 1895 by Dr. Waldo, Medical Officer for Health for Southwark. Charles Gibbs acted as a consultant on the working conditions.

Despite his heavy involvement in Union activities, Charles maintained the highest standards in his own work. He was Head Confectioner at the Couse Bakery in West Bromwich and, in 1889, he received the only certificate of merit issued in the district by the National Association of Bakers and Confectioners. He was subsequently elected to be one of their judges at the Bakers' Exhibition in London. Charles Gibbs inventiveness was evidenced by an 1892 patent application for an improved design of baking oven submitted jointly with Charles Couse, the manager and eventual owner of the West Bromwich Bakery.

The *Birmingham Daily Post* for January 2nd 1890 carried a report of a parade and a meeting of journeymen bakers in Birmingham. This was organised to celebrate a concession obtained by their Union and to promote Union activities, Charles Gibbs being a speaker. Although the procession did not start until 7.30 p.m., many union members were unable to join it then as they had not finished work despite starting at 4.00 a.m. The newspaper published a list of local employers who had agreed to the Union's request for a more humane working day, ten and a half hours excluding meal times. The aforementioned Charles Couse was first on the list. Cheers greeted another announcement at the meeting. Birmingham Corporation, under pressure from the Trades Council, had agreed not to give any more contracts for bread making to unfair employers.

The 1891 census shows Charles and Emily living at 53 Pitt Street, West Bromwich, with 10 of their 11 children still in the family home. Their ages ranged from 1 year to 18 years and only two were of working age. Bearing in mind the absence of modern appliances to ease the domestic workload, this would not have been an easy time for Emily. And though it has been remarked that Charles must have been relatively well off as a leading confectioner, one can see that supporting such a large family required considerable financial resources, leaving no room for extravagance.

In July 1891, Charles Gibbs chaired a meeting in Wolverhampton where the excessive working hours of local journeymen bakers was again discussed. It was agreed that a Wolverhampton branch of the Bakers' Union should be set up. The following year, Charles helped to establish a West Bromwich Trades Council and was elected President. In that role he worked tirelessly to improve the lot of the workers of the town.

Despite frequent requests, Charles Gibbs never sought political office, though for most of his life he was a radical supporter of the Liberal Party. Becoming dissatisfied with the progress made by that party, he joined the newly formed Independent Labour Party around 1894 and continued to promote that party in the West Midlands.

According to the *Chronicle* biographer, Charles was "a firm believer in the folly and blunder of international warfare", and held "the proud position of being the only West Bromwich working man member of the Peace Arbitration league". The latter appears

to be The Workmen's Peace Association, founded by William Cremer in 1870, which subsequently became the International Arbitration League. The main objective of the association was to call on Governments to resolve disputes by arbitration rather than conflict, a model that had worked well in labour disputes.

In 1896 the West Bromwich Trades Council added to Charles Gibbs' work for the community by nominating him for a seat on the local School Board, a position he occupied until the Board was disbanded under the Education Act of 1902.

It is also unsurprising that Charles, with his passionate desire to improve the lives of the working class, became an advocate of the Co-operative Movement. This had greatly expanded over his lifetime, with local Co-operative Societies being formed to provide their members and the general public with the essentials of life at a fair price, members also sharing in any profits from the enterprise. The Rule Book for the West Bromwich Co-operative Society shows that it was registered in 1900. It lists eight members of the managing committee including Charles Gibbs, who by then was at his final home, 117 Beeches Road.

There were still eight of their children living with Charles and Emily in Beeches Road at the time of the 1901 census. I suspect that Charles owned the property. Family correspondence shows that he named it Surrey Villa, presumably as a reminder of his Surrey origins. In 1904 the family suffered a sad bereavement when one of their sons died there, of heart disease and a stroke, at only 24 years of age.

In his later years, Charles increasingly suffered health problems associated with diabetes. He died at home from complications of that disease in July 1909, when not quite 66 years of age. He had remained active until around 6 months before his death.

On the 13th of August 1909, 12 years to the day after its biographical article, the *Chronicle* published a report of a meeting of West Bromwich Trades Council. Expressing regret at the death of Charles Gibbs, the Chairman said he "should like to move that a record be entered on the minutes of their appreciation of the work that Mr. Gibbs had done in the formation of a Council, and of the work he had done in connection with the trades union movement, not only in that district, but throughout the country."

It seems fitting also to quote here the conclusion of the 1897 article, written by someone who did not share Charles' political persuasion:

"Of Mr. Gibbs absolute honesty in advocating Trades Union principles, none who know him can have the slightest doubt, because, I believe, it is an admitted fact that as an individual he can command better terms as an employee than any which could be won for him by any organisation, however powerful. In his own business he enjoys the reputation of ranking as one of the highest. But realising his duty to his weaker and less fortunate fellow workers, he throws himself ardently and enthusiastically into any and every effort to brighten and better the conditions of their daily toil."

Sources:

1. Personal family papers and recollections.
2. The President of West Bromwich Trades Council: Mr. Charles Gibbs, biographical article in *The West Bromwich and Oldbury Chronicle*, Friday August 13, 1897.
3. Family Birth, Marriage, and Death certificates from 1837 onwards.
4. Census returns for Gibbs and related families: 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, and 1901.
5. Charles Elme Francatelli (1805 – 1876), on-line biographical account www.thecooksguide.com/articles/francatelli.html
6. *Dictionary of Labour Biographies Vol 2*, Archive of draft documents for Charles Gibbs (1843-1909), Doc. Ref. U DLB/2/41, held by Hull History Centre.
7. Note on Birmingham and Midland District of the Amalgamated Union of Operative Bakers and Confectioners of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in the *Historical Directory of Trade Unions*, Volume 5, by Arthur Marsh and John B. Stanford.
8. Municipal Bakehouses, *Fabian Tract No. 94*, October 1900.
9. The Reform Acts, www.victorianweb.org/history/hist2.html
10. Factory Legislation 1802 - 1878, www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/factmine/factleg.htm
11. Charles Couse - baker, confectioner and oven pioneer! Published: 17/07/2008 in the *Black Country Bugle*.
12. Demonstration of Journeymen Bakers, *The Birmingham Daily Post*, Thursday January, 1890.
13. Work and Wages: Wolverhampton Bakers, *The Birmingham Daily Post*, Wednesday July 29, 1891.
14. On-line article on the International Arbitration League: [en-wikipedia.org/wiki/International Arbitration League](http://en-wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Arbitration_League).
15. *West Bromwich Co-operative Society Rule Book*, copy held by London School of Economics and Political Science, COLL MISC 359, published on line.
16. West Bromwich Trades Council: The late Mr. Charles Gibbs, report in *The West Bromwich and Oldbury Chronicle*, Friday August 13th 1909.