

Transcript with factual corrections shown in italics

The West Bromwich and Oldbury Chronicle

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The President of West Bromwich Trades Council

MR. CHARLES GIBBS

The spirit and intention with which I commenced these articles on Local Leaders was with the desire to give to readers of the "Chronicle" a fair and impartial account of all those who are in any way shaping the destinies, or making the history of, our town. In the doing of this, it has, of course, been necessary to deal with men of differing thought and creed alike, in the social, religious and political sphere. To rightly succeed in this endeavour, it was essential to remember that truth is many sided, and though men may hold what I should personally consider erroneous doctrines, they might nevertheless be serving their day and generation wisely and well. For after all it is well to recognise that creed matters nothing; that the conduct and character of the man is the one safe rule whereby to measure his usefulness to his fellow men. Hence I have endeavoured in writing these articles to forget all personal and political bias, and have tried, in so far as in me lies, to judge every man of whom I have written as he appears to his friends at his best, rather than as he appears to his enemies at his worst. Still, it has constantly happened that I have had to deal with men whose political and social opinions I hold to be anything but conducive to the best interests of humanity. Nevertheless I have endeavoured, and I trust not unsuccessfully, to treat them with all fairness, and strict justice. These thoughts are prompted by the fact that this week's sketch, Mr. Charles Gibbs, is a gentleman with whose political and social views I am in direct conflict. Still, Mr. Gibbs has won for himself a foremost place amongst the workers of the town, and by his persistent efforts to ameliorate the lot of his fellow workers, fairly earned a place in this series.

Mr. Gibbs was born in Dorking (*actually Leatherhead, near Dorking*), Surrey, on August 12th 1843. On Wednesday last he completed his 54th year.

He was educated, or rather as he himself puts it, partly educated, at Church Schools, for, added Mr. Gibbs, reading and writing were about the only educational privileges such schools gave. When about 14 years of age, he commenced to learn the business of a baker, and the vivid picture he draws of the terrible conditions under which bakers then worked is one which now seems incredible and yet is, I am assured, true in every detail. He had, though only a lad, to work from four in the morning until seven o'clock at night in a bakehouse, the insanitary condition of which was horrible, but was by no means an isolated instance. One example of the then existing state of affairs may be given. Space in the bakery in which he worked was so confined that he and others had to work in the room where the w.c. was situated, and the board upon which the dough was made covered the closet. It was at that time no uncommon thing for bread to be made in cellars, where the water penetrated during the spring tides to such an extent that the men had to stand in tubs to keep themselves dry. Fortunately, however, this state of things has to a very large extent been abolished, and bread-making is now conducted upon scientific methods, and in the main under perfectly sanitary conditions. When about twenty years of age Mr. Gibbs, realising that his prospects of healthier and more profitable employment lay in becoming proficient in

the confectionary department of his trade, determined to qualify himself for such a position. To this end he became the pupil of Franc Atella (*recording or typographical error; this should be the surname of the chef Charles Elme Francatelli*), who was for seven years the famous chef to the Reform Club. About the same time he joined the Associated Operative Bakers' and Confectioners' Union, and has ever since taken an active and prominent part in the endeavour to forward the best interests of trades unionism. In 1872 he took part in the agitation, which was then proceeding, against night work, in that year taking part in the big demonstration which was held in Hyde Park, when there were 10,000 present to protest against such practices. It is worthy of remark that at that demonstration Mr. Gibbs made a resolution that he would never again undertake night work. This resolution he has faithfully adhered to, and has never again worked at night. About that time Mr. Gibbs was working for a wholesale confectioner at Mortlake, Surrey, and his foreman, who was a man of progressive views, persuaded him to join "The Forum" at Fleet Street, where there were always gathered men of advanced thought, and where progressive views of the most enlightened character were nightly expressed. To attend this, young Gibbs had to walk six miles, but he had his reward in having implanted in his mind the germs of those progressive theories to which he gives his adherence today.

He has for many years taken a great interest in the sanitation of bakehouses, and has been a frequent contributor for various organs on the question. And as evidence of the fact that he is held as an expert on the question, I might mention that Dr. Waldo (medical officer of health for Southwark), who, some of my readers may remember, conducted an energetic and successful agitation against insanitary bakehouses, consulted him as to some of the insanitary conditions under which bakehouses were conducted, and so pleased was the doctor with the facts which Mr. Gibbs submitted to him that he wrote a very warm letter of thanks, and expressed himself as deeply obliged by the information which Mr. Gibbs was able to supply.

After working in London, and all the large centres throughout England, Mr. Gibbs came to West Bromwich in 1880 (*actually sometime between 1881 and 1884*), and by quiet unostentatious work soon won for himself a large amount of respect amongst the workers of the town and district, and at the same time won the confidence and respect of the employers for the absolutely fearless stand he took upon all labour problems, a respect which he still retains, as evidenced by the fact that in 1889 he gained the only certificate of merit issued in the district by the National Association of Bakers and Confectioners, and that a year or two afterwards he was elected one of the judges at the Bakers' Exhibition held in London.

In 1885 he joined the Birmingham Trades Council, the membership of which he still retains. He was this year nominated for presidency of the Council, but for private reasons declined to stand. About five years ago the late Mr. W. Ince, in conjunction with Mr. Gibbs and other local leaders, succeeded in forming the West Bromwich Trades Council, and of this Mr. Gibbs was elected president and has remained in that office ever since. Under his presidency the Trades Council has performed much useful work, securing for many workers of the town better conditions of employment, alike in the hours of labour and the rate of wages. Indeed, in spite of some blunders which the Trades Council has admittedly made, it is undoubtedly a potent power for good, and a position of president of such a body is no unworthy honour.

Although Mr. Gibbs is an ardent fighter, and indeed seems to enjoy a right royal row, he is nevertheless a firm believer in the folly and blunder of international warfare, and holds the proud position of being the only West Bromwich working man member of the Peace Arbitration league.

In politics, Mr. Gibbs was for many years a firm and consistent Radical, and gave loyal support to Alderman Blades and Mr. T. Lee Roberts in their respective contests. But about three years ago becoming dissatisfied with what he holds to be the tardy progress made by the Liberal Party, and what he alleges to be the unsatisfactory way in which they fulfilled their election pledges, he decided to join the Independent Labour Party, and has since allied himself with the Party whose chief aim seems to be to make it impossible for the Liberal Party to win or retain seats at any election. Whether this negative and in the end self-destructive policy is one worthy of as shrewd and commonsense a character as Mr. Gibbs is a matter, of course, for his own decision. Personally, I hold it as the one mistake of his career.

In addition to his other public work, Mr. Gibbs is secretary of the Birmingham District Associated Operative Bakers' and Confectioners' Union. He has often been urged to fight for a seat on the Town Council, but has hitherto declined to be so persuaded. There is, however, I believe, a possibility of his decision being overruled in the near future.

In 1896, Mr. Gibbs was nominated by the Trades Council for a seat on the School Board, and by their labours on his behalf, aided by the Hill Top Democratic Club, together with the influence which he had honourably earned amongst the workers of the town, he was successfully returned.

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.

Transcribed by Gerald B Gibbs, great grandson of Charles Gibbs, as part of a family history research project.