

# ALBERT PELL 1820-1907

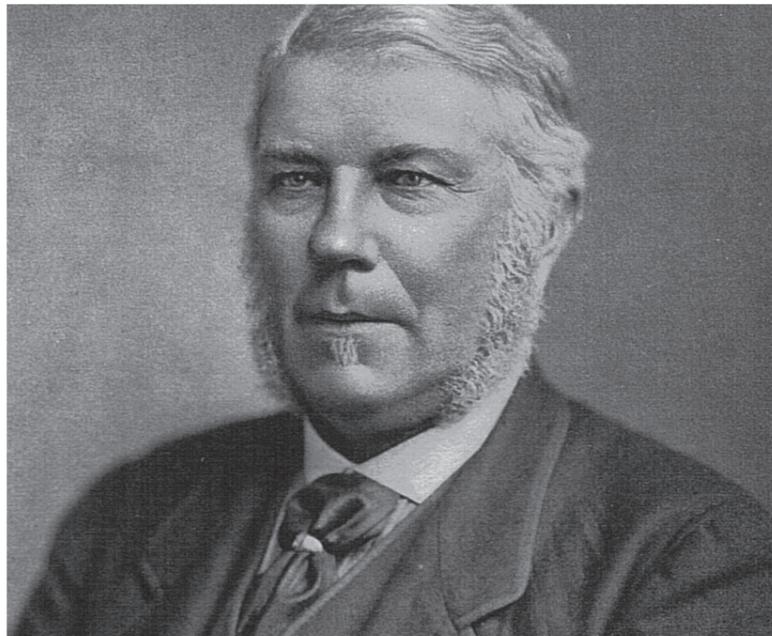
## MP FOR SOUTH LEICESTERSHIRE 1868-1885

By Peter Jones



Albert Pell contested the parliamentary by-election as a Conservative for South Leicestershire in 1867 but he was defeated by the Liberal Thomas Tertius Paget. However, after Disraeli's land mark reform of parliament that same year Pell contested the seat again in 1868. This time he was successful and he continued to represent the South Leicestershire constituency until 1885 when he retired from parliamentary politics.

I am not going to provide a detailed biography. That can easily be obtained via the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as well as The Reminiscences of Albert Pell edited Thomas Mackay in 1908. Rather I want to examine Pell as an ideal type, as a representative of a particular social group, moving in a particular social and political world; but recognizing at the same time though that he came into politics at a moment of dramatic change that witnessed the 1867 Reform Act and the 1872 Ballot Act. It was also a time that saw the growth of a more distinctly modern party organization as well as new approaches to the electorate. Additionally, it might be useful to comment on his conduct as an MP in view of current dismay about MPs today.



ALBERT PELL IN LATER YEARS FROM  
T. MACKAY, *REMINISCENCES OF ALBERT PELL* (1908)

Pell came from a gentry background. He had been born in Bloomsbury in London in 1820 and his father had been a lawyer. Pell was educated at Rugby where the famous Thomas Arnold was the headmaster. Arnold's distinctive brand of 'muscular Christianity' was intentionally character forming and Arnold's school was to become one of the nine great public schools that prepared young boys to become part of a national elite. Arnold was emphatic as to the purpose of Rugby: 'What we must look here is first religious and moral principles; secondly, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly intellectual ability'. Later in 1864 the Royal Commission that reported on the nine great public schools asserted

that these schools provided 'a system of discipline for boys, the excellence of which has been universally recognized, and which is admitted to have been most important in its effects on national character and social life'. Indeed the Commissioners claimed that these schools provided the 'qualities on which the [English] pride themselves most – for their capacity to govern others and control themselves'. This was the world in which Pell moved as a young boy. He progressed from Rugby to Cambridge and was subsequently admitted to the Inner Temple. However, he soon abandoned a career in law and began to pursue a life as a farmer being distinctly passionate on matters of agricultural improvement and efficiency. His life as an English country gentleman and active member of the gentry was undoubtedly assisted by what we might call a strategic marriage.

In 1846 he married his cousin, Elizabeth Halford, the daughter of Sir Henry Halford of Wistow Hall. Sir Henry was a leading Tory magnate in Leicestershire politics along with the Duke of Rutland. Pell had already displayed a keen interest in county affairs. His outlook was paternalistic although he was attracted to the efficiency arguments of the utilitarians who sought to control poor law expenditure. He was also interested in agricultural improvement and a range of issues connected to the land but he also had properties in the East End of London where he showed a keen interest and compassion for his tenants. Following his marriage to Elizabeth Halford he secured a farm and small estate at Hazelbech in Northamptonshire which he rented from Sir Charles Isham of Lamport. Isham and Pell had attended Rugby together.

Pell began to make his way in Leicestershire politics from the 1850s. He had already been elected as Poor Law Guardian for the Brixworth Union from 1853 and in 1865 he led a vigorous campaign to deal with the matter of cattle plague being an advocate of the distinctly unpopular solution of the compulsory slaughter of infected animals. He displayed ingenuity and resilience and was subsequently instrumental in the foundation of the Chamber of Agriculture. With these kinds of credentials he was to become an ideal candidate for a rural parliamentary constituency. In the eighteenth century the gentry had represented the county in parliament as knights of the shire, acted as magistrates and sometimes even as high sheriffs. They were often place men put forward by the leading aristocrats. By the second half of the eighteenth century county representation was almost completely dominated by country gentlemen. However, between 1830 and the 1850s this predominance began to break up so much so that the Liberal newspaper, the Leicester Chronicle, could gloat in 1857:

*'It is reproach on the freeholders of Leicestershire . . . that they cannot select two independent gentlemen without going on for them to Belvoir Castle or Gopsall Hall. We wonder the gentry have not sufficient pride and spirit to choose from among themselves candidates for county representation.'*

This was clearly a snipe that the Tories had been forced to go out of county to find a potential candidate. After 1832 the county had been split into two divisions; and it is the Southern Division with which we are concerned. Each Division sent two MPs to Westminster and the Southern Division was initially dominated by Sir Henry Halford who had represented it between 1832 and 1857 and also by Charles Packe from 1832 until his death in 1867. It was Packe's death that precipitated the crisis for the Tories and it illustrates the paucity of available talent. Further, a member of the gentry with sufficient financial resources to contest an election also needed to be found. The political class spent their own money at this time.

Pell was secured as the Tory candidate by his father-in-law, Sir Henry Halford, who remained the prime mover in the Southern Division. Additionally, Pell had the support of Sir Arthur Hazlerigg of Noseley Hall. So although Pell was not a member of the Leicestershire gentry he was what we might call connected outsider. Nomination was one thing but would he be acceptable to the electors of South Leicestershire? He had sufficient means. He would spend £2324 fighting the 1867 by election. This was not as much as his rival, Thomas Tertius Paget, who expended £3513. Although Pell lost the by-election in 1867 he was to bounce back in 1868 and hold on to his seat until he retired in 1885.

The by-election of 1867 and the general election of 1868 encapsulate in microcosm the changes afoot. They preceded secret ballot which was not introduced until 1872; and they were classic contests between gentry old money and commercial new money. Paget was a banker who had links with the Pares banking family. Paget had acquired the accoutrements of gentry status – Humberstone Hall as well as substantial land holdings, some 1300 acres, in Lubenham. The elections also indicate the growing importance of party organization, registration and knowing the voters. In his autobiography Pell claims that his support would come from tenant farmers, graziers, butchers, cattle dealers and market interests of the of Market Harborough and Lutterworth. Paget’s urban business connections meant that he would dominate the Leicester, Hinckley and Ibstock voters. In fact six out ten votes were cast by townsmen of one sort or another. Pell moved easily in world of the small towns – markets, inns, public houses and railway carriages. At this time there was a growing debate about the matter of ‘treating’ the voters. This often entailed the provision of drinks and refreshments. Pell’s experience though was perhaps rather different and he complained that he had difficulty in keeping-up with the number of invitations that he received: “How devoutly I wished that the prohibition of treating the voter had been extended by law so as to forbid treating the candidate’. He was advised though that ‘it was impolitic and ungracious to refuse the liquor altogether’. Pell reckoned that he travelled 350 miles and made 35 speeches. Pell’s assessment of the sources of his voting support can be borne out by an analysis of the Poll Books. The defeat of 1867 prompted Pell and the political elite of Market Harborough to challenge the registration of many of the out voters who had supported Paget. However, it was also a financial struggle for Pell. In fact, he was forced to sell-off some of his farms to raise funds as he was aware that ‘my wealthy opponent would punish my pocket as often as the opportunity occurred’.

**1867 By-Election**

| Polling District     | Paget Votes | Pell Votes |
|----------------------|-------------|------------|
| Hallaton             | 34          | 130        |
| Hinckley             | 251         | 203        |
| Ibstock              | 125         | 98         |
| Leicester Borough    | 1,160       | 504        |
| Leicester out voters | 268         | 382        |
| Lutterworth          | 148         | 302        |
| Market Bosworth      | 71          | 230        |
| Market Harborough    | 162         | 234        |
| Narborough           | 83          | 180        |
| Total                | 2,302       | 2,263      |

**Votes for Pell in Market Harborough District**

| Nobility Gentry | Clergy | Professionals | Dealers Publicans | Farmers Graziers | Crafts | Mfrs | Others e.g land agents | Unknown |
|-----------------|--------|---------------|-------------------|------------------|--------|------|------------------------|---------|
| 20              | 8      | 19            | 44                | 68               | 37     | 3    | 13                     | 26      |

Tables constructed from *Poll Book of the County Election 1867*  
Record Office Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, QS61/2/9

Pell continued to serve South Leicestershire until 1885. Increasingly though, declining health and insufficient money, despite the constraints placed on election expenses by the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 forced him in to retirement. He had nevertheless done much good work sitting on the Royal Commission on Agriculture, promoting scientific approaches to agricultural problems, successfully securing an amendment to government legislation on rate relief. It was probably his most noteworthy speech:

*‘Now one thing that made it more easy to assail the rate payer than the tax payer was that the latter was represented on the Ministerial benches by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose policy must be one of economy, and whose duty it was to see that public money was not wasted or misused ...*

*Suppose that a man in passing down a street was pinned to the ground by a falling bale of goods, and that other persons – the honourable Members for South Northumberland, or Great Grimsby, or South Norfolk, or Barnstaple for instance – instead of hastening to render the miserable man assistance, proceeded to deliver a lecture on the law of gravitation [laughter] – and to point out the impossibility of giving any relief until some great scheme for packing bales on vans had been settled by the authorities of the town [Laughter] This is not a laughing matter ....’*

A. Pell, House of Commons Debates  
28 March 1884 volume 2, 1023-1105.

This was a direct challenge to the Gladstonian style of obfuscation and demonstrated that he was an able debater. Despite this plucky challenge he was representative of a dying breed of MPs dependent on the patronage of aristocrats and other landed magnates. Perhaps it was Walter Long, a leading Conservative with a gentry background, who survived until after the First World War who summed-up Pell and his like most accurately:

*‘The House of Commons in 1880 was the last to contain the “Country Gentlemen Party,” as it had existed for many decades.... The average country gentleman entered the House of Commons in much the same way as I did, performing what he regarded as his duty, without any particular ambition to do more than serve his county and his country and the agricultural interests to the best of his ability. As a rule he made few speeches and did not desire to take part in the debate. He was content to be present in the afternoon ... to record his vote if there was a division, but otherwise take no part in the proceedings, except as a member of the various committees which ... do a great deal of the work of Parliament.’*

Walter Long, Memories (1923)

Pell continued to live at Hazelbech and he continued to promote the interests of agriculture through education and writing. He became a member of the council of the Royal Agricultural Society and promoted the teaching of agriculture at Cambridge. His contests with Paget were vigorous and exemplified the decline of an older system of authority and allegiance in the face of new commercial and increasingly urban interests.