

# Chapter FOUR

## Sounding Brass

The Life of Captain Sir William Brass, Bart (1886-1945)<sup>1</sup>

Steve Ragnall



William Brass, Baron Chattisham  
by Bassano Ltd  
whole-plate glass negative, 16 April 1929  
Given by Bassano & Vandyk Studios, 1974  
Photographs Collection  
NPG x124522

© National Portrait Gallery, London

### Election

The Clitheroe Advertiser and Times of Friday June 11th, 1937, contained its usual mishmash of news articles and adverts. It reminded us that we could see the film “And so they were Married” starring Mary Astor and Melvyn Douglas at the Grand, “Anthony Average” at the King Lane Picture Hall, or “Klondike Annie” starring Mae West and Victor McLagan at the Palladium on Waterloo Road.

Wellgate Motors were selling new Vauxhall “12” and “14” motorcars for £195 or, for the more discerning, a “25” for £298. Redmayne & Read of 8 Market Place were advertising flannel trousers for 18/11 whilst next door W.D.Cunliffe’s reminded people that they sold

### ***LUSCIOUS TINNED FRUITS (Every Leading Brand In Stock)***

Clitheroe were standing 4th in the Ribblesdale Cricket League. The letters page contained missives complaining about “Fascist Theories” by someone signing themselves “Anti-Fascist”, EP wrote about “Catholics and Communism”, and Scrutator deplored “The Bombing of Guernica” in the Spanish Civil War, although these polemics were leavened by

the reminder to “Look after your Dogs” from the Secretary of the Tail-Waggers Club, who was concerned about the hot weather.

The town’s MP cropped up twice in the editorials: He had presented the prizes at the Inter school Sports Day at Chatburn Rd Cricket Ground for the 2nd year running, having donated 2 of the 4 Victor Ludorum cups. He congratulated J.Christison for winning the 100 yard Senior boys race, reminding the crowd that he himself had won the 100 yard race whilst at Eton. Alma Nixon was victor of the Senior Girls 80 yard race and the Egg & Spoon race was won by the steady hand of F. Alston. The MP had brought a cine camera with him and took several films of the competitions, mainly in colour.

More importantly, however, the main editorial of that issue was headed:

### ***Sir Wm. Brass’s Coronation Gifts***

#### ***TO CLITHEROE***

***Turret from Westminster  
to be set in New Rose Garden.***

The Turret or Pinnacle had already been erected in the Castle grounds but Sir William also undertook to finance the building of “a rose garden and surrounding walls” . It will be, he said, “a permanent memento of the crowning of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth” and, at the same time, give concrete expression to Sir William’s affection for the old borough he represents at Westminster.

After the formal ceremony of passing the pinnacle to the Corporation, he was entertained to dinner by the Town Council and, later that evening, presented with a silver tray “as a token of esteem, appreciation of his services and generosity to Clitheroe”.

In his speech, Sir William gave some details of the pinnacle; “The sandstone on which the turret is formed has not weathered well in London and much of the masonry of the Houses of Parliament has been replaced during recent years. Several turrets have had to receive attention but the one in the castle grounds is the only complete turret removed and sold”. He further stated that the stone had been specially treated and is now expected to last for generations.<sup>2</sup>

Sir William Brass (he was knighted in 1929) arrived in Clitheroe approximately 12 months before fighting the 1922 General Election as the Conservative and Unionist Party candidate. This was the first General Election since the end of the 1st WW and the coalition of Liberals and Conservatives led by David Lloyd George had now come to an end. The Liberal Party were themselves split and would not even put up a candidate in Clitheroe, which had been a Labour seat since 1902. Here, then, it would be a two horse race, Labour v Conservative, and with that 20



The plaques on the base of the pinnacle.

[RMS]

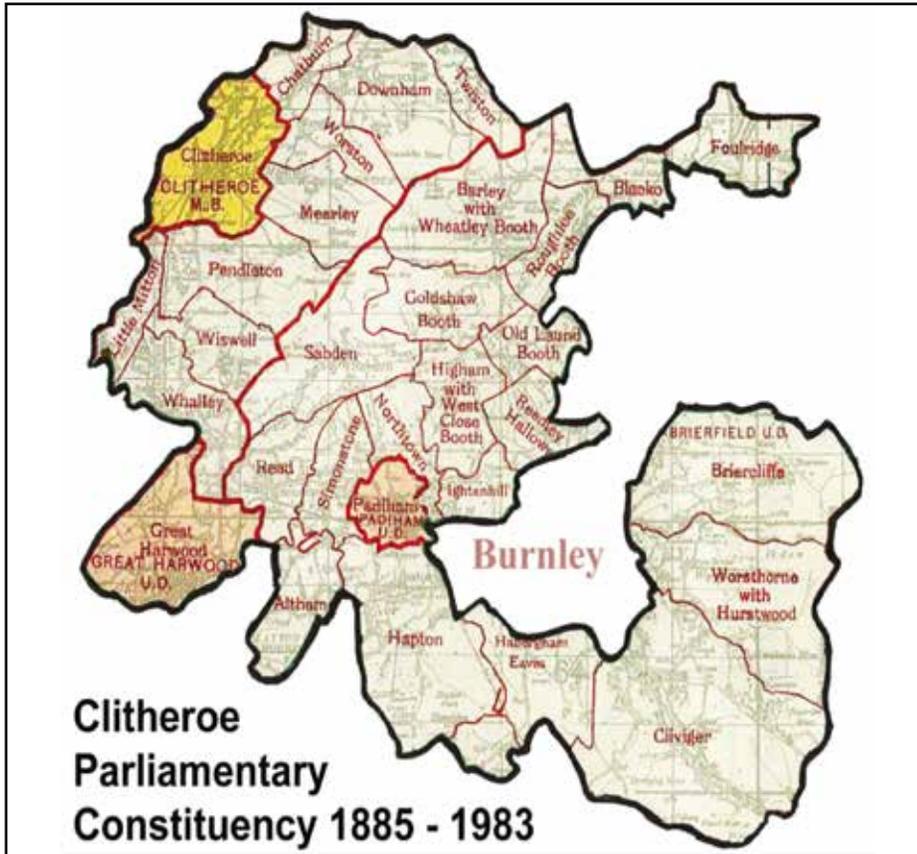
year history, Labour were judged most likely to win.

The parliamentary constituency of Clitheroe was substantially different from the constituency of Ribble Valley that replaced it in 1983. Whereas Ribble Valley is a rural and semi-rural area, Clitheroe constituency was much more urban and industrial, encompassing as it did the towns of Great Harwood, Padiham and Briercliffe, and almost surrounding Burnley. As cotton mills and collieries were the mainstay of local industry, Labour seemed the dominant party.

Despite canvassing around the constituency in his open topped Rolls-Royce with a Kate Greenaway doll on the tonneau cover as a mascot, Brass’s eloquence, bonhomie<sup>3</sup> AND the assistance of local Liberals swung things his way. There was a huge turnout: 84.4% of the total electorate of 33,394 had voted.

At 1.30 am on the morning of 16th November 1922, Returning Officer William Self Weekes gave the result:

**Votes for:**  
**Alfred Davies (Lab) 12,911**  
**William Brass (Con) 15,586**



declaring Brass the winner with a majority of 2,675. Supporters carried him from the count at St James's School to The Conservative Club in Triumph.

The new Prime Minister, Bonar Law, recognized this stunning victory by asking Captain Brass to move the address in reply to the King's Speech as his maiden speech in the House, a singular honour.

The victory would be the start of a 23-year term as Parliamentary representative for the constituency, Brass winning a total of 6 general elections before standing down in 1945. In 1924 he won despite being out of the country at the time. After standing down in 1945, the constituency fell to Harry Randall in the subsequent Labour landslide.

### Early Life

William Brass, known to friends and colleagues as "Billy" had been a good choice for the Clitheroe Constituency. At the age of 36 he was tall, good looking, well spoken and approachable. He had an interesting war record and had gone to Cambridge University. He had business interests and was wealthy.

Born on 11th February 1886 into a well-heeled family at "Abbotsleigh" Church Road Upper Norwood, SE London, he was named William for his father and grandfather, both of whom had been well-established builders, contractors and property owners in London. Grandfather Brass died in 1888, when William was just 2 years old, leaving a substantial trust. Father Brass was, by then, a full partner in the business. In due course William would become one of the trustees of his grandfather's Trust.

In 1899, William, age 13, was sent to Eton College. He is on record as having won the Public Schools 100 yard race in 1904, his last year at the school.<sup>4</sup>

By this time his family had moved to 27 Brunswick Terrace, Hove, a large regency mansion on the sea-front. The 1901 Census record shows they employed a butler, cook and two housemaids.

From Eton, William entered Trinity College, Cambridge as a “Pensioner” (a fee paying student) in 1904. Although he matriculated (i.e. was officially entered into the register of the University) in his first year there and served 3 years, he took no exams and didn’t graduate. This was not uncommon at this time. A member of the Boat Club, he was an athletics blue but didn’t quite hit the form he’s shown at Eton, coming 2nd in the 100 yards race against Oxford.<sup>5</sup>

On leaving Cambridge in mid 1907 he joined the Surrey Yeomanry, which had become part of the Territorial Force in 1908, the mounting tensions in Europe already bringing the threat of war ever nearer. He was gazetted 2nd Lieutenant in 1912. He said that he had joined the Yeomanry “some years before the war and in consequence of a knee injury transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in 1915”.<sup>6</sup> He gained his flying certificate as 2nd Lt William Brass on 15th September 1915, at Birmingham Military School in a Maurice Farman biplane. The records then show that he was placed in 8 Reserve Aeroplane Squadron in Netheravon, Wiltshire on completion of his training. He applied to the Kite Balloon Section in early 1916<sup>7</sup> and passed for the section after making a parachute jump from a balloon.<sup>8</sup> He served on the Somme, Egypt and Italy.<sup>9</sup> A comment made in Parliament indicates that at some point he was flying as a submarine spotter in the Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup>

William was given a temporary Captaincy in the Balloon Training Wing on 2nd March 1917 and later posted to Italy. The CAT biography states that: “In the course of a voyage from Marseilles to Alexandria, a vessel in which Captain Brass was a passenger struck a mine and sank in 4

minutes... he was picked up by a Japanese destroyer”.<sup>11</sup>

Brass re-embarked for Egypt in September 1917 but the records are then unclear until we find him promoted to Captain at the end of September 1918 and transferred to the Air Force Technical College to lecture on aeronautics. His service record then clearly states “transferred to Unemployed list 8.1.19”.

William’s father died in 1913 and his mother the following year. Income from the William Brass Will Trust, begun by his grandfather and containing a large number of London property, now provided William with a sizeable annual income. This reached a peak of £60,000 each by 1931, equivalent to over £2 million today.<sup>12</sup> Besides being a trustee of his grandfather’s Will Trust, he was a Director of Guardian Assurance Company and Chairman of St John’s Hospital, Lewisham.



WW1 Kite Balloon of the type which Sir William and his Corp would be familiar with towards the end of the war.



Maurice Farnham Shorthorn Bi-Plane

[Canada Aviation and Space Museum]

During his time in Parliament, William lived in a “set” or bachelor apartment in the Albany, off Piccadilly, London. This was almost across from the famous Fortnum & Mason emporium. We can imagine his faithful Butler or “Gentleman’s Gentleman”, Taylor Shiers, using the store. Brass was also a client of nearby men’s outfitters, Alfred Dunhill of Jermyn Street, ensuring he was always well dressed, and he frequently dined at Quaglino’s brasserie, still a hang-out for the rich and famous, just off the same street. He remained a bachelor throughout his life, though was seldom without a glamorous “girlfriend” by his side.<sup>13</sup>

At some point in the early 1930’s he purchased a country property in the small village of Chattisham, Suffolk, just a few miles from Hintlesham Hall, home of his friends, the Ryan family. During WWII, he opened the hall to soldiers, sailors and airmen from the Dominions as a “home from home” when they were on leave. At one point, 3 sailors from the nearby Holbrook Naval School lived permanently in the attic.<sup>14</sup>

His main interests throughout his life were cars, travel and aeronautics, all three of which continued into his political life. At various times he owned a Rolls Royce Silver Ghost sports tourer, a Bentley with a blind in the back that rose to say “Thank you” to motorists who gave way to him, and a Lagonda. His friend Lord Denham said that he drove rather like Toad of The Wind in the Willows and was proud of the fact that he was antagonizing the police by driving very fast. There are indications from his comments in Parliament that he frequently visited Paris and quite possibly took his own car. He travelled to South Africa on at least 2 occasions as part of a Parliamentary delegation (1924 & 5),

visited all the British Dominions on a round-the-world trip (1927/8) and, at a time when long-distance passenger flight was in its infancy, he flew to Wadi Halfa in Sudan in 1932. In 1938 he travelled through France and holidayed in Algiers.<sup>15</sup>

## Parliament & Politics

William was given the position of Parliamentary Private Secretary to Health Minister Neville Chamberlain within a month of entering Parliament in 1922. He would go on to hold the same post for Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Colonies and Dominions, in 1927, and in the Second World War was PPS to John Moore-Brabazon, Minister of Transport and subsequently Minister of Aircraft Production. This would indicate that he was held in some regard by colleagues and the Conservative party of the day which would rather contradict a comment by Sir Arthur Coningham that he was ‘a cheery fellow, but lacking in grey cells’.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear from Hansard, the Parliamentary record, that Brass spent considerable time in the House of Commons when it was sitting. Although he made few major speeches, he is constantly quoted raising questions on proposed legislation and also bringing problems and queries to the Government’s attention. That he was a good constituency MP comes out from his constant consideration of the plight of the Cotton industry. He first sought to marry this to his commitment for increased trade with the British colonies and dominions to improve the availability of raw cotton, promoting its production in the within Africa and thus to reduce or remove our reliance on American cotton. This was ultimately a failure, as there other structural problems within the Lancashire

cotton industry, but he was also involved in its rationalization, in the hope of retaining as many jobs as possible within his constituency. When Brass was elected there were 13 spinning and weaving mills in Clitheroe itself; only three were left by the time had retired from the seat.

This industrial decline was exacerbated by the Great Depression of the early 1930's and there was much unemployment in this area. William was greatly concerned that such of those who were eligible for Unemployment Benefit could claim it easily. In the case of the small village of Sabden, for instance, he arranged for payments to be made in the village instead of claimants being forced to walk into Padiham. Under the National Insurance Act of 1911, benefit was only paid after a very strict means test. Like today, it also required the claimant to be prepared to take any job offered at the Unemployment Exchange but this was causing problems. In Clitheroe, women were being offered jobs as maids and cleaners in Manchester and other towns at distance from their homes - this despite there being large numbers of unemployed in those towns and commuting being impossible. When such an offer was made and rejected by the claimant, their dole was stopped for several weeks. It was nothing more than a ploy to avoid benefit payment. Brass exposed this in Parliament and the practice was curtailed.

Regarding vehicles and traffic he campaigned against police speed traps; for compulsory driving tests (they were not brought in until 1934); for an written part of the test (this wasn't brought in until 1996); for pedestrian crossings; of the necessity of developing dipping headlights; he brought a bill forward to require rear

reflectors to be fitted on all cycles; and asked why, under the present Metropolitan Police Regulations, no car fitted with brakes on all four wheels could be licensed as a taxicab on London's streets? In many of these issues he quoted his experience of how Paris had developed comprehensive systems for road management that put ours to shame.

He was equally involved in aircraft development and took part in a test flight of the airship R101 that confirmed his feelings that it was unsafe (it had lurched violently, catapulting him and some fellow MPs out of their chairs and almost crashed) and a white elephant. He used his wartime experience in balloons to show how this vast airship (at 731 ft long it was the world's largest flying craft at the time) would fail in its intended purpose of opening a regular air route to India and back and that development of heavier-than-air craft was necessary for the future. The R101 crashed in Northern France on its maiden voyage in 1930 with the loss of 46 people, at which time it had completed only 200 of its intended 5,000 mile trip. It was the death knell of Britain's airship industry.

As part of the Parliamentary delegation visiting British colonies and dominions in 1927/8, another of William's interests came to the fore. His love of movie photography gave him the opportunity of making a film of the trip, which was shown to MPs on his return and taken on tour around various constituencies, causing much interest. A copy of the film now rests in the British Film Institute's archives – very appropriate when you consider that he subsequently became Chairman of the BFI in 1939.



R101

## King & Country

William Brass was very much a monarchist. His maiden speech in the House on 23rd November 1922 was to give the address in reply to the King's Speech, a singular honour for a new member and, as previously mentioned, he was knighted by King George V in 1929 for political services to the Crown and country. When the King and Queen visited Westminster Hall to receive the loyal addresses from both Houses of Parliament, he financed the creation of an expensive leather bound book to be presented as a souvenir to all present, as no official body would pay for it. We don't know his feelings about the 1936 abdication crisis, but his commitment to King George VI can be seen in the giving of the Pinnacle to Clitheroe. And the wording of the plaque attached to its base:

In July 1945, William Brass was elevated to the House of Lords, taking the title Lord Chattisham of Clitheroe. He had little time to enjoy this honour, dying of acute appendicitis and cardiac failure in a London nursing home just a month later. As he had no heir, the Baronetcy died with him.

[References appear overleaf]

*Whitehall, July 24, 1945.*

**The KING has been pleased, by Letters Patent under the Great Seal of the Realm, bearing date the 13th instant, to confer the dignity of a Barony of the United Kingdom upon Sir William Brass, Knight, and the heirs male of his body lawfully begotten, by the name, style and title of BARON CHATTISHAM, of Clitheroe in the County Palatine of Lancaster.**



*“This Turret originally formed part of the parapet of the Houses of Parliament (erected 1840-1854) and was presented to the Borough of Clitheroe by Captain Sir William Brass MP, by whose generosity the surrounding garden also was constructed, in commemoration of the Coronation of HM King George VI, 12th May, 1937.”*

## References:

1. Within Parliament one of William's nicknames was "Sounding Brass" according to one of his oldest friends from his university days, the 1st Lord Denham. He went on to say that "Billy Brass fitted the mould of politicians who are very influential but never want to be near the front bench; who would much rather work and stay brilliant behind the scenes and not be tied down".
2. Clitheroe Advertiser and Times Friday 11/6/1937.
3. CAT 10/11/1922 quoted the Chair of meeting at the Co-operative Hall that Brass had "unassuming ways and a gentle manner".
4. Information given in email reply to query from oeaonline@etoncollege.org.
5. Information given in email reply to query from js10027@cam.ac.uk.
6. CAT Friday 3/11/1922.
7. TNA AIR/76/52 (much is indecipherable).
8. Balloon observers were the first airmen to use parachutes. They were too bulky to be carried in the airplanes of the time.
9. CAT Friday 3/11/1922.
10. Hansard, March 1923: "I have been up over the Mediterranean and have tried to find submarines, and I found that it was a very difficult thing to do".
11. CAT Friday 3/11/1922.
12. LMA ref GB 0074 CLC/421.
13. Machin, Julian. Adrian Ryan: Rather a Rum Life. Sansom & Co 2009, ISBN 978-1-906593-23-0.
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*
16. Quoted in Coningham's biography. He met William in Wadi Halfa in 1932.