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### Abraham Abraham: a forgotten politician of mid-nineteenth century Southampton

This brief political biography is a study in unfulfilled potential. It draws inspiration from the discussion of Abraham's rise and fall by Professor Tony Kushner in *Anglo-Jewry since 1066: place, locality and memory*, published by Manchester University Press in 2009. Abraham's father, Moses Abraham, was London born but practised as an optician in Frome. Abraham was born here c.1799. He moved to Southampton, with his wife Esther and three youngest children, in 1826. This may be connected to the dissolution of a partnership between Moses and Abraham Abraham, silversmiths and watchmakers of Frome, gazetted on 12 February 1827. Southampton was not entirely virgin territory for the family. An unmarried uncle, Elhahan Davids, had been in partnership here in the early 1820s with Jonah Davids as a jeweller and toyman. The partnership ended on Jonah's death, aged 39 years, in December 1822. Elhahan, now described as late of Southampton, became bankrupt in February 1824. His petition was heard at the Audit House.



Figure 1. Engraving of the High Street with St Lawrence's Church and the Star Hotel, 1830s

Abraham embodied that resourceful and enterprising breed of new immigrants who were to transform the social and political structure of the town. He leased premises from the shipbuilder Edward Rubie in the commercial heart of the town at 147 High Street. They form part of those foreshortened buildings shown opposite the partially-rebuilt St Lawrence's Church in figure 1. Abraham had supported the restoration of the near-derelict church, so long a blight on the High Street. He set up as a jeweller, silversmith, goldsmith, watch and clock maker and optician. Abraham told a parliamentary enquiry in 1842 that as a highly respectable tradesman he was doing business to the amount of £20,000 a year (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 9 July 1842). A web of financial services supplemented the core business. A

bullion office and a foreign coin exchange shared the same secure premises. Abraham frequently acted as a discounter of bills and an assignee of bankrupt's estates. He was agent to the Globe Insurance Company and the Freemason's and General Life Assurance Society. A licensed navy agent (appointed April 1828) he was authorized to collect prize money due to lower deck seamen. He was the first Southampton agent of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, first recorded in July 1838 when the line was trading as the Peninsular Steam Navigation Company. Richard Andrews told fellow councillors in November 1842 that Abraham "was perhaps more connected with the commercial prosperity of the town than any one" (*Hampshire Independent*, 12 November 1842). From such a source this is impressive testimony. Social acceptance came early to Abraham. Within a year of his first coming into Southampton – in 1827 – he was admitted to the Royal Gloucester Lodge of Freemasons. He proceeded to treasurer of the lodge in 1836 and to worshipful master in 1838. This put Abraham at the heart of one of the most influential political pressure groups in the town, a body which counted at least one half of the corporators as brethren. He also held office in the wider Freemasonry family as Provincial Grand Junior Warden in the Province of Hampshire.

Abraham had political aspirations. He was a Conservative – "a strong partisan" according to Henry Buchan (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 9 July 1842). He was active in both the South Division of Hampshire (a signatory in September 1832 to a memorial in support of the ultra Tory John Fleming of Stoneham Park) and the borough. Surviving poll books suggest that he had a record of Conservative voting broken only twice. In January 1830 he was unpolled but formed part of a strategic reserve who had promised support to the Tory James Barlow Hoy. In December 1832, following the example of many colleagues, he split between Hoy and the Whig John Story Penleaze. His role in the 1841 borough election is discussed later. Abraham's own ambitions lay in Southampton Town Council. He stood for his home ward of St Lawrence in December 1835, the first direct election for town councillors under the Municipal Reform Act. It was a ward in which he had political capital, appointed ward beadle by the Common Council in December 1829 and elected ward assessor (responsible for the purity of the election registers) in May 1836. However, the balance of party power was with the Liberals and Abraham was defeated. Election to the council had to wait until November 1838 when he was returned for the neighbouring ward of St Michael. He defeated the radical Thomas Dymott by 46 votes to 37. St Michael's was a three-member constituency, one councillor retiring by rotation each year. Abraham stood two further elections before leaving the council in November 1847 after serving three full terms.

Abraham was Britain's first Jewish councillor (Tony Kushner, *op cit*, p.152). A significant event in retrospect but one which contemporaries in the town allowed to pass without public comment. One possible difficulty proved no obstacle at all. Councillors were required to take a qualifying oath "upon the true Faith of a Christian". This Abraham could not in conscience take. His unsigned declaration (Southampton City Archives SC 3/9/2) is reproduced as figure 2. Similar void entries exist for his subsequent elections to municipal office and for his first re-election as councillor. The relevant clause in the original 1828 legislation (An Act for repealing so much of several Acts as imposes the necessity of receiving the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as Qualification for certain Offices and Employments) was preserved under the 1835 Municipal Reform Act. It was in effect unenforceable. Deselection was dependant on an action in the Court of Queen's Bench provided – to quote the Mayor Joseph Lobb on Abraham's election as senior bailiff – "any gentleman had the extraordinary taste to apply for the same" (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 14 November 1840). The requirement was annulled in 1845. Abraham himself was prepared to witness the Christian oaths taken by fellow

councillors (see Southampton City Archives SC 3/9/2, November 1839, for a series of declarations endorsed by Abraham and Joseph Rankin Stebbing). The secular oath demanded on first election was taken by Abraham without reservation (Southampton City Archives SC 3/9/1). Reaction focused on the apparent incongruity of Abraham's political affiliation. A Jew elected by a party which invariably voted against Jewish emancipation was the world turned upside down. John Wheeler, editor of the *Hampshire Independent* and sometime political reporter on the *Morning Chronicle*, claimed the victory for the Liberals. "They [the Jews] are too scattered, too powerless for harm, if harm were in them; and yet when the Bill for their emancipation is annually brought into Parliament see how the Inglises, the Chandoses, the Flemings, and the Dottins rush forward to defeat it ... Nothing binds a man so firmly as his religious interests ... and therefore it is that we hail the return of Mr Abraham, satisfied that it is another link snapped from the iron chain of Bigotry and Persecution" (*Hampshire Independent*, 3 November 1838). A subsequent letter (*ditto*, 17 November) strove to clear the reputation of Rous Dottin, one of the borough Tory MPs and – with a residence at Bugle Hall – a neighbour and customer of Abraham. Dottin, it was claimed, was the first to appear at the Audit House to vote for Abraham.

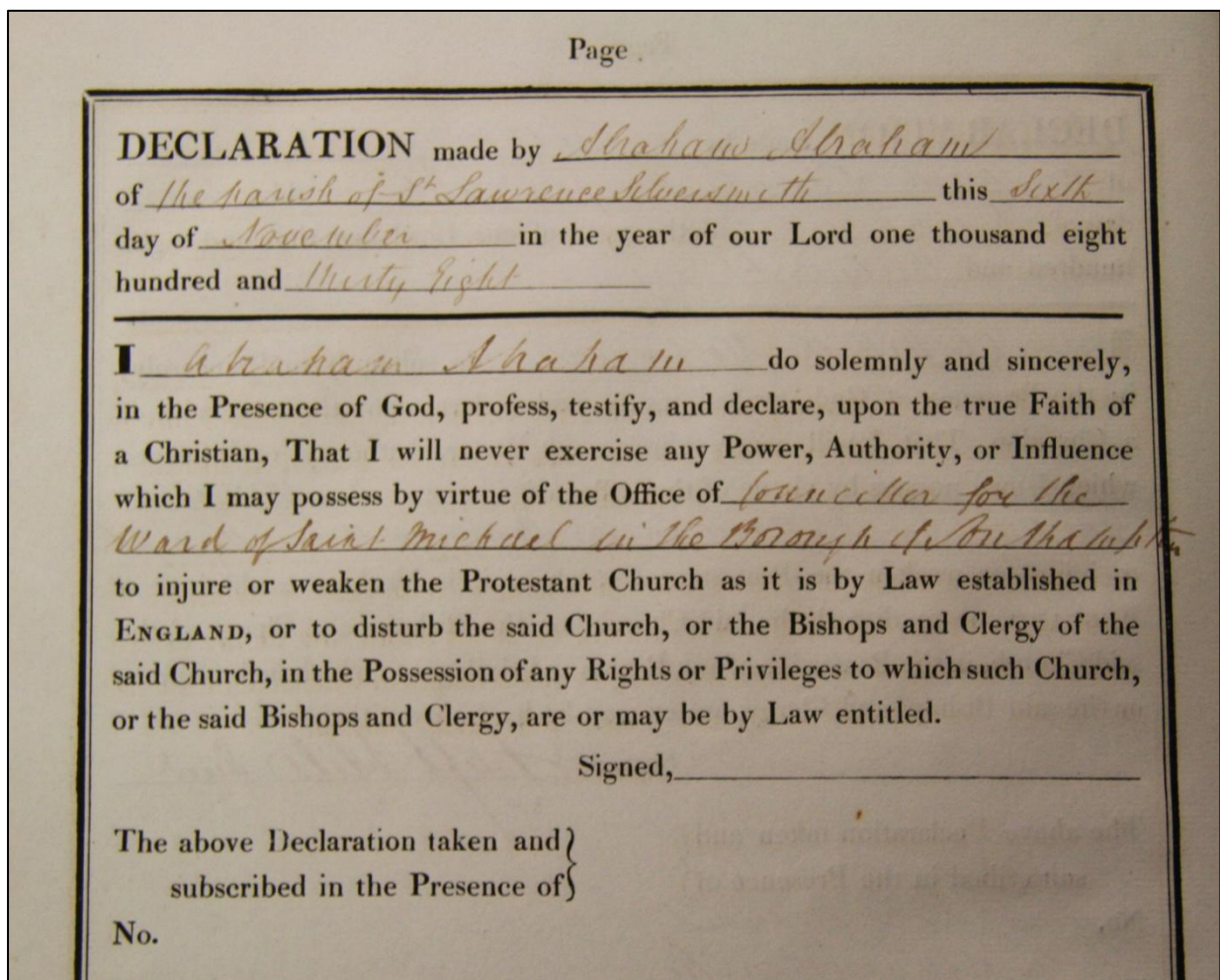


Figure 2. Southampton City Archives SC 3/9/2

The 1841 election was a more conventional party affair. Amidst a welter of lost seats, St Michael's was the only ward in which the Liberals made anything like a stand. They put up Ebenezer Williams, auctioneer by profession, Congregationalist by religion and, in the politically warped world of the *Hampshire Advertiser* (23 October 1841), "one of the smallest

of all small men”. It was a contest *a outrance*. The first Liberal objective was a majority at the poll. Supporters with dual qualifications were urged to reserve their vote for St Michael’s. The poll was to be artificially prolonged through keeping back a handful of voters each hour. Canvassing on both sides was exhaustive and unscrupulous. An alleged specimen of Tory canvassing was published in the *Hampshire Independent*, 6 November 1841:

“Mrs H [wife of a voter]: Law, sir, my husband always votes in favour of Church and State; and they tell me you are a Jew.

Canvasser: My good woman, I can assure you that I am no longer a Jew, but am a good Christian; I never shut my shop on Saturdays, and I regularly attend All Saint’s Church with my wife and family; and I, moreover, am a staunch supporter of Church and State.”

This is matched by a spoof address “to the worthy and enlightened burgesses of St Michael” from Ebenezer Williams published in the *Hampshire Advertiser*, 30 October 1841. It is reproduced below (figure 3).

**ADDRESS TO THE WORTHY AND ENLIGHTENED  
BURGESSES OF ST. MICHAEL,**

Still anxious to give the vile Tories a tesser,  
And for mischief made up, here’s your friend Ebenezer,  
Yes, forward he comes, of your suffrages sure,  
To cleanse from your ward all that’s foul and impure!  
And, trusting to honor and honesty true,  
You’ll return a good Christian in place of a Jew!  
This hint, my good neighbours, most plainly denotes,  
That humbly I purpose to canvass your votes;  
Tho’ by this plain question I’m constantly floor’d,  
“What pretensions have you to the Councillors’ Board?”  
To be sure that’s a puzzler which augurs defeat,  
And awkward it is by a Jew to be beat;  
Though such is the lot that is waiting, I fear,  
Him who craves your kind suffrage—the poor Auctioneer,  
But *nil desperandum*, I do not despair,  
Tho’ the hopes I once cherish’d have vanish’d in air;  
For though the dark Hebrew, the Jeweller Jew,  
Should beat me in numbers by twenty to two,  
I still have a scheme, as decisive as plain,  
To prevent him from sitting in Council again.  
When you know what it is you’ll allow it is famous—  
In three months I’ll oust him by *special mandamus*!!  
And when I have sent my opponent to pot  
Ebenezer you’ll own understands what is what.  
So now worthy neighbours no longer I’ll trouble you,  
But subscribe myself, your’s most sincerely, E. W.

Figure 3. *Hampshire Advertiser*, 30 October 1841

The spectre of disbarment was raised as a “second resource”. Failure to fulfil the full legal requirements of qualification would be challenged by *mandamus* in the Court of Queen’s Bench: an action according to the *Hampshire Advertiser* to be financed by the Southampton Reform Protection Association. Jacob Jacob, editor of the *Hampshire Independent* and himself (although an Anglican) the target of antisemitic slurs on account of his name, was characteristically provocative: “We think a shrewd Jew as fit a *Councillor* as a silly Christian, but the Tories think otherwise, and Mr Abraham cannot

complain if we insist on his swallowing the dose his political friends have prescribed for him” (*Hampshire Independent*, 23 October 1841). Abraham was elected by 61 votes to 42. The absence of any subsequent legal appeal shows the baselessness of the threat. There were no such pyrotechnics during the November 1845 election. With the Tories ascendant nationally and locally, Abraham was returned without even the pretence of an opposition.



Abraham was a strong ward councillor. He was diligent and conscientious. Joseph Lankester thought him “with the exception of Mr George Brown, who has left the Council, ...the most hardworking member of that body” (*Hampshire Independent*, 12 November 1842). He was near the top of the list of attendees in all but the last two years. He was an active committee man. The first council meeting he attended saw his election to the Highway Rate and Watch Committees. The Finance Committee and the Lease Committee were added to the portfolio in November 1840 and November 1844 respectively. He was soon chair of the Finance Committee, responsible for setting the borough rate and for regulating the work of the council’s finance officers. Appointment as mayor’s auditor in March 1841 increased his grip on the monetary affairs of the council. Similarly robust was his work as an *ex officio* member of the Improvement Board, the Pier and Harbour Board (often acting as chairman) and the Board of Waterworks. He was relentless in pursuit of the interests of his adopted ward, fighting for an equitable share of resources under the Southampton Improvement Act and endeavouring to preserve its economic well-being in the face of the monopolistic Southampton Dock Company. All this was underpinned by the St Michael’s Conservative Association, the pioneer in exclusively ward-based political organizations in the town. He was chairman in 1839 and president in 1840 and 1842.

Abraham was, with Joseph Rankin Stebbing (1809-74), the pick of the new intake of councillors in 1838. He had accelerated preferment as senior bailiff (1840-1) and sheriff (1841-2). Elements of the Liberal opposition put his name forward for municipal office in 1839, 1842 and 1843. In November 1839 his protagonists were James Whitchurch and John Traffles Tucker. They forced a vote for the election of sheriff, which was lost by 22 votes to three with two abstentions. The Tories put this down to mischief-making. However, Liberal support for Abraham in the following two elections in which he was successfully appointed to office suggests that there was genuine cross-party support for a man so clearly fitted to represent the town. The seconder of Abraham’s nomination as senior bailiff in November 1840 was Joseph Lankester, member of an important dynasty of iron founders, political radical, Congregationalist and himself mayor in 1852. The following February he was to move, with Abraham’s support, a council motion to petition the House of Commons to end Jewish municipal disabilities. The seconder of this petition, J T Tucker, openly endorsed Abraham’s unanimous election as sheriff in November 1841. He lauded Abraham as a man of independent spirit. The same Liberal faction proposed Abraham as mayor in November 1842.

1842 was a year of crisis for the mayoralty. There was no clear successor to the retiring mayor Peter Dickson. The office was, in the words of Richard Andrews, “hawked around the town” (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 12 November 1842). There was talk of legal penalties for defaulters. Four alleged refuseniks were exposed by the Liberal *Morning Chronicle*, 11 November 1842: Colonel Henderson, J R Stebbing, William Hooke Steere and Joseph Lobb. The nominee ultimately to emerge was Edward Mayes, a draper and mercer in the High Street and junior bailiff in 1839-40 (proposed by Abraham). It was rumoured that he was promised a council grant of £200 as remuneration for his time and expense in serving office (*The Globe*, 10 November 1842). Mayes was a very different kind of man to Peter Dickson who, as Master of Ceremonies – “*maître de danse de notre village*” to the *Hampshire Independent* – represented the old guard of the spa period. Joseph Lankester and Dr Francis Cooper (the latter at his first council meeting) counter-proposed Abraham. There was clearly a political edge to the nomination. Earlier in the session they had moved an amendment calling for the council to refuse its customary vote of thanks to the late mayor in condemnation of his political partisanship. This is reproduced in A Temple Patterson, *A selection from the Southampton Corporation journal, 1815-35 and Borough Council minutes*,

1835-47, 1965, pp 115-16. Richard Andrews, also in his first council meeting, spoke strongly in favour of the nomination. Mayes was elected by 19 votes to five with one abstention. It became part of Liberal party folklore that Tory failure to nominate Abraham was a racial slur. "He ought to have been Mayor, but the Conservative party, to which he was attached, thought they must draw the line at the office of Sheriff, and declined to confer upon him an honour to which he was fully entitled on the score of public service": *The Southern Reformer*, 21 August 1880, article on Henry Abraham). The truth is perhaps impossible to divine. Richard Andrews, a Congregationalist for whom freedom of conscience was a political axiom, gives some credence to the allegation: he "could not understand why he [Abraham] was thrown overboard, unless it was from a want of toleration on the part of some gentlemen in the council (hear, hear)" (*Hampshire Independent*, 12 November 1842). The nomination of 1842 is however a false hare. Abraham was by law and by the convention of the times ineligible to stand as mayor whilst still holding the office of sheriff, even if the overlap would be only a matter of minutes. No such sequential appointment had been made since 1487. It was not until November 1848, on the appointment of Richard Andrews as mayor, that a precedent of immediate succession was set. It became the norm in the twentieth century. To reinforce the normality of the 1842 protocol only two sheriffs who had held office since the passing of the Municipal Reform Act went on to become mayor: Thomas Griffiths (sheriff 1837; mayor 1844) and J R Stebbing (sheriff 1840; mayor 1867). Dr Cooper commended Abraham for mayor again in November 1843 as "justly entitled from previous services" to serve. Abraham declined and the nomination was dropped.

The 1841 general election cast a toxic shadow over the mayoral proceedings of 1842. The election was corrupt even by the undemanding standards of Southampton politics. It can be followed in A Temple Patterson, *A history of Southampton 1700-1914*, volume 2, 1971, pp 35-46. Abraham's shop in the High Street – strategically situated opposite the respective party headquarters at the Dolphin (Tory) and the Star (Whig) - was a major artery for Tory corruption. A Liberal petition against the Tory return, citing gross bribery and treating, was heard before a House of Commons Select Committee in May 1842. Abraham's name was barely mentioned, even though as one of the returning officers he was responsible for the conduct of the election. A second enquiry was held in June/July. Abraham was now at the centre of the investigation, his pivotal role exposed by the turncoat John Wren (see *Report from the Select Committee on the Southampton town election inquiry: with the minutes of evidence*, House of Commons, 1842). This coincided with a lawsuit initiated by Abraham for the payment of an unpaid bill of £653 4s 2d owed to the proprietors of the Star by the defeated Liberal candidates Captain Charles Mangles and Edward John Hutchins. He was acting as the assignee of the estates of the now bankrupt John Longman Shepherd and John Drew. It was probably not initially a political action. Shepherd had a previous financial involvement with Abraham in the assignment of bankrupt's estates and both were members of the Royal Gloucester Lodge of Freemasons. Nevertheless the action soon took on a political hue as the subsequent hearing in the Court of Exchequer in London revealed a trail of Liberal corruption to match, perhaps even to exceed, that of the Tories. A local attempt at compromise only heightened the political antipathy. James Sharp, acting for Mangles and Hutchins, offered £300 to settle all demands. It was accompanied, according to Abraham under cross-examination, by an unveiled threat: "At your peril refuse this offer, or abide by the consequences". Abraham instructed his solicitor "to proceed to trial and to get all or none" (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 9 July 1842). The contrast with events in the town council four months later is stark. It suggests that for many the worlds of election politics and town governance were far apart.

Abraham left the council in November 1847 at the end of his third term. It was, to judge from an aside in the *Hampshire Advertiser*, 30 October 1847, a personal and not a political decision: “Circumstances with which we can have nothing to do induce his retirement”. It may be that he was a victim of the railway mania then sweeping the nation. He was a provisional director of the Direct London and Exeter Railway Company, the Kilrush, Kilkee and Belfast Railway Company and the Southampton, Petersfield and London Direct Railway Company. In each prospectus he is reassuringly described as Southampton town councillor. The appointments date from September or October 1845. All three speculations failed. That of the Direct London and Exeter Railway was the most spectacular with shareholders attempting to recover an estimated £30,000 to £40,000 deposited with the directors and never returned. Abraham’s role is unclear although, elected to the committee of management in February 1846, it cannot have been unsubstantial. The company was wound up in 1851 with the original promoter (David Elwin Colombine) and the company secretary (Robert M’Intire Renwick) financially ruined. Abraham was a London director of the Kilrush, Kilkee and Belfast Railway, at times taking the chair at committee meetings. He was chairman of the meeting in October 1845 that appointed \_ Hopper, a young man educated for the church but tempted by the excitement of things secular, London secretary. A prelude to a bizarre case before Hampshire Assizes in July 1846 in which Hopper, now out of work, took a personal action against Abraham for non-payment of wages. The full £100 claimed was awarded as compensation. To add to his joint-stock misfortunes, Abraham probably lost money on the abortive Manchester and Southampton Railway. He had subscribed for shares valued at £800 in July 1846. The timing of Abraham’s railway adventures corresponds with a falling off in his council attendances: 11 attendances between November 1844 and November 1845 (bettered only by Henry Wooldridge), four between November 1845 and November 1846 and two between November 1846 and October 1847 (with only Edward Hunt below him).

Abraham left his adopted town in the mid-1840s. 1846 is the date given in his obituary (*Hampshire Independent*, 6 April 1887). This is clearly a turning point in his life, the year in which he gave power of attorney to his eldest son (18 May) and in which he quit the jewellery business (8 June). But it is hard to reconcile with a last council attendance on 2 October 1847. Abraham spent the next forty years in exile on the continent – twice the length of time that he lived in Southampton. It is a period lost in obscurity. A corporation lease dated 8 March 1851 describes Abraham as “of Brussels in the Kingdom of Belgium” (Southampton City Archives SC 4/3/1737). This has to be set against the statement in his obituary that he “left Southampton with his family and since resided in Paris”. It is here that he died, on 31 March 1887, aged 88 years, at 7 Rue Blanche. He survived his eldest son by six years. Administration was granted 14 years later on 19 July 1901, his effects valued at £155.3s.9d. Probate was granted to his widow Julie Astruc (Astrue as given in the probate document is presumably a mistranscription as a Marie Henri Astruc is recorded at 7 Rue Blanche in 1878). This suggests that Abraham remarried. It also raises a possible, unproven connection with the family of Elie-Aristide Astruc (1831-1905), a powerful figure in Parisian Jewry who became chief rabbi of Belgium in 1866.

The Abraham family retained a strong footprint in Southampton. Abraham continued, according to his obituary, to make “occasional [visits] for brief periods”. He attended the consecration of the Jewish synagogue in Albion Place, of which he was a trustee, in May 1865 (assuming he is the A Abraham recorded in the newspapers). His name remained on the burgess lists until 1868 and he was said (*Hampshire Independent*, 6 April 1887) to be one of the last voters in the town to hold the pre-1832 scot and lot qualification. His uncle Elhahan Davids returned to Southampton in the mid/late 1830s. He ran a jeweller’s shop at 149 High

Street, two doors above the Abrahams. Elhahan was elected a guardian of the poor for the parish of St Lawrence in April 1841. Both uncle and nephew were Tories and both were office holders in the Southampton Hebrew Congregation: Elhahan treasurer and secretary, Abraham president (1842). Abraham's eldest son Henry (1824-81) succeeded to the family business at 147 High Street in June 1846. Five years later his great uncle moved in with the family, still recorded *chez* Henry in the 1861 census as 'assistant jeweller'. Henry and his descendants continued as jewellers and silversmiths at 147 High Street until the early 1930s: an occupancy of over a century. In politics Henry was a mirror to his father. He was part of the radical coterie led by Richard Andrews that controlled Southampton politics in the early/mid 1850s. He served as mayor in 1876-7. Abraham's youngest daughter Evelina married Frederick Perkins, then a young wine merchant, in December 1847. She died on the first anniversary of the wedding, aged only 21 years. Frederick Perkins was to become a seminal figure in Southampton Liberalism: mayor 1859-60, 1861-2, 1862-3, 1868-9 and 1869-70; knighted 1873; borough MP 1874-80. Their son, Arthur Frederick Perkins, was christened five days before his mother's death. A Gentleman Cadet at Sandhurst Military College, he was commissioned into the Ceylon Rifle Regiment. He later served in the territorials, retiring as colonel of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Volunteer Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment.