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‘The Office Boy’s Triumph’: Deceit and Display in early Twentieth-Century

Wolverhampton

Insofar as the ‘Varley affair’ of 1917 is remembered today, it is the preserve of local historians and those interested in the development of local government.¹ There is only one extended study. In the edited volume *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780-1950*, that John Smith and James Moore published in 2007, Smith contributed a chapter on the affair which he entitled ‘“Ingenious and Daring”: The Wolverhampton Council Fraud 1905-17’.² He begins by setting out the key points of what happened.

The case in question concerned Jesse Varley, accountant clerk to Wolverhampton education committee who between 1905 and 1917 defrauded the Corporation of a total of £84,335 (about £5 million in today’s values). His crime eventually came to light when an office boy reported his suspicions to the town clerk. Varley was arrested, tried and found guilty of larceny, falsification of accounts and forgery: he was sentenced to five years’ penal servitude.³

There was an element of serendipity, it must be said, in Varley’s downfall. Although those working in his office had harboured their suspicions about him for some years, it was apparently only when one of them, Osmond Richards, decided to check how much teachers at his old school were taking home that he discovered payments (supposedly) being made to

¹ For the former, see Frank Sharman, ‘The Defalcations of Jesse Varley’ (Paper presented to Wolverhampton Local History Forum, 2015); Jeremy Walters, *My Father’s Wolverhampton 1905-1931* (Wolverhampton: Jeremy Walters, 2015); and Steve Gordos, ‘Wolverhampton Accountant Fiddled Local Authority’, www.blackcountrybugle.co.uk/Accountant-clerk-fiddled... [January 2016]. For the latter, see G.W. Jones, *Borough Politics: A Study of the Wolverhampton Town Council, 1888-1964* (London, 1969), 234-6.

² John Smith, ‘“Ingenious and Daring”: The Wolverhampton Council Fraud 1905-17’, in James Moore and John Smith (eds.), *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780-1950* (London, 2007). For a recent overview, see Matthew Hollow, *Rogue Banking: A History of Financial Fraud in Interwar Britain* (London, 2015).

³ Smith, ‘Ingenious and Daring’, 113.

members of staff whom he knew had never existed.⁴ The uncovering of the ‘Varley affair’, trumpeted the *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, was ‘The Office Boy’s Triumph’.⁵ In fact, as we shall see, Richards worked as a ‘Junior Clerk’ (or ‘Junior Assistant’) rather than as an ‘Office Boy’. The misunderstanding presumably arose either because local journalists knew a good headline when they saw one or because junior staff in the Education Department were sometimes referred to collectively – and dismissively – as ‘the office boys’.⁶

It was not a sophisticated fraud. But it was highly profitable: taking advantage of the fact that Wolverhampton’s teachers and lecturers were paid in cash rather than by cheque, ‘Varley subverted the system by inventing great numbers of false employees for whom he drew salaries, provided signatures and kept the money.’⁷ It transpired eventually that he managed to defraud the Council of more than £84,000, the sums escalating from £2,530 in 1905-6 to a peak ten years later of almost £14,300.⁸ These, of course, were enormous amounts by early twentieth-century standards. This was a time, it must be remembered, when lawyers and doctors probably earned in the region of £250 a year, a time when it was possible to purchase a ‘villa’ in one of the better suburbs of Wolverhampton for as little as £450.⁹

The ease with which Varley was able to deceive his employers meant that the repercussions of the affair proved, as might be expected, to be both profound and far-reaching.¹⁰ Smith shows, for instance, that the case damaged not just the reputation of Varley and his family but also that of the council, its staff, its officers and its elected members. It had

⁴ Sharman, ‘Defalcations’, 6.

⁵ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 11 July 1917.

⁶ Sir Harry Haward, *The London County Council from Within: Forty Years’ Official Recollections* (London, 1932), 413.

⁷ Smith, ‘Ingenious and Daring’, 118.

⁸ *Report of Sir Harry Haward (Comptroller of the London County Council) to the Rt. Hon. W. Hayes Fisher P.C., M.P. (President of the Local Government Board)* (Wolverhampton, 1917), 5.

⁹ G.J. Barnsby, *A History of Housing in Wolverhampton 1750-1975* (Wolverhampton, 1976), 45.

¹⁰ Jones, *Borough Politics*, 235-6. The case was widely reported. For instance, *Manchester Evening News*, 14 March 1917; *Sheffield Independent*, 22 March 1917; *Times*, 22 March 1917; *Daily Record*, 23 May 1917; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 24 May 1917; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 July 1917; *Birmingham Mail*, 6 November 1917.

repercussions too for the status and standing of the council's printers and binders and the government appointed district auditors, all of whom failed to uncover Varley's wrongdoings.¹¹ Indeed, as Smith shows, the affair led to substantial changes to the ways in which council finances were managed and monitored. The President of the Local Government Board appointed Sir Harry Haward, the Comptroller of London County Council, to enquire into the affair and then to chair a committee to recommend changes to the duties of district auditors not just in Wolverhampton but across the whole of the country.¹² 'The importance of the Varley affair for the financial control of local government', concludes Smith, 'cannot be overemphasised.'¹³

It is an intriguing case. How was it that Jesse Varley was able to continue his fraud for ten years and more? What, if anything, does the 'Varley affair' tell us about early twentieth-clerical work, about the lives that clerical workers led both while they were in the office and while they were at home or socialising with family and friends?

The 'Varley affair' tells us a good deal. It suggests that there were two major reasons (aside from his superiors' lack of supervision) that Varley was able to carry on undetected for so long: the secrecy with which he conducted his fraud; and the openness with which he spent the money he made from it. The hierarchal organisation of Wolverhampton's Education Committee office meant that Varley (and his Chief Assistant) were able to pursue their criminal activities with minimum fear of exposure. The scale of the spending that Varley was able to fund from his fraudulent activities meant, paradoxically, that his middle-class peers were less, rather than more, likely to regard him with suspicion.

Control and conformity

¹¹ Smith, 'Ingenious and Daring', esp. 125-7.

¹² Smith, 'Ingenious and Daring', 129-30. See Haward, *Report*.

¹³ Smith, 'Ingenious and Daring', 130.

We still do not know a great deal about the history of office work.¹⁴ Indeed, there is a curious imbalance at the heart of the literature: although (or perhaps because) historians have shown less interest in clerical work than in most other forms of paid employment, they remain divided over two key aspects of this branch of the late Victorian and Edwardian labour market. They disagree, sometimes very strongly, about the impact that mechanisation and a large influx of female staff had upon on (male) clerks' earnings and status. Whereas some argue that this was a period that saw clerical work deskilled, routinised and feminised (to the detriment of male employees), other stress rather that it provided new opportunities for working-class and lower middle-class women to make significant economic, social and cultural advances.¹⁵

These are difficult issues. None of us are disinterested observers. Perhaps, as Peter Bailey points out, we should look not just to clerical workers' practices but to our own predilections: 'putting the boot in on the lower middle class has long been the intellectual's blood sport, an exorcism, so we are told, of the guilty secret so many of us share as closet petit bourgeois denying our own class origins.'¹⁶

Whatever their class backgrounds, whatever their views on the earnings and status of late Victorian and Edwardian clerks, all seem agreed that office work was characterised by a stifling combination, outwardly at least, of control and conformity.¹⁷ Even scholars like

¹⁴ David Kynaston, *The City of London*, vol. II, *Golden Years 1890-1914* (London, 1995), 34-5. For useful introductions, see Michael Heller, 'Work, Income and Stability: The Late Victorian and Edwardian London Male Clerk Revisited', *Business History*, 50 (2008), 253-5; Andrew Seltzer, 'The Impact of Female Employment on Male Wages and Careers: Evidence from the English Banking Industry, 1890-1941', *Economic History Review*, 66 (2013).

¹⁵ 'Pessimistic' studies include Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester, 1976); R. Crompton and G. Jones, *White-Collar Proletariat: Deskilling and Gender in Clerical Work* (London, 1984); Peter Bailey, 'White Collars, Gray Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited', *Journal of British Studies*, 38 (1999). Those taking a more 'optimistic' view include Meta Zimmeck, 'Jobs for the Girls: The Expansion of Clerical Work for Women, 1850-1914', in Angela John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford, 1986); Heller, *Work, Income and Stability*'.

¹⁶ Bailey, 'White Collars', 274. Also Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London, 1990), 97-8.

¹⁷ See, for example, John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London, 1992).

Michael Heller who challenge the deleterious effects of mechanisation and female labour claim only that such views are ‘based on a false nostalgia of clerks in the early and mid-nineteenth century which idealised their work and status, and a reversal in selective portrayal in the twentieth century which emphasised the drudgery of clerical work, but neglected to address its more skilled aspects.’ His conclusion is unequivocal: ‘routine and mechanical duties were a constant feature of clerical work.’¹⁸

Nor have historians done much to challenge contemporary views of office workers’ status and standing, or contemporary criticisms of the ways in which they spent the money they earned. Bailey, for example, explains how it was said that, ‘Off duty, single young men of the class compensated for the grayness of their working lives with displays of peacock masculinity’.¹⁹ He gives other examples: ‘As suburban housewives, women of the class allegedly led their husbands by the nose in buying up the apparatus of respectability – “our new cottage piano (on the three year system), manufactured by W.Bilkson,” reported Pooter proudly.’²⁰ It remains frustratingly difficult to shake oneself free from the fact that ‘throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras clerks were satirised in literature and the popular press for their lack of authority and independence in both the public sphere of work and the private sphere of the home.’²¹

John Smith, the historian of Varley’s fraud, takes the argument a stage further. In fact, he places the culture of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century clerical work at the very centre of his analysis. It was the atmosphere of the office in which Varley worked, he believes, that goes a good way to explaining the fact that he was able to get away with his deceptions for so long.

Varley rendered any examination of his work as difficult as possible; he operated

¹⁸ Heller, ‘Work’, 254.

¹⁹ Bailey, ‘White Collars’, 281.

²⁰ Bailey, ‘White Collars’, 286.

²¹ Geoffrey D. Spurr, ‘The London YMCA: A Haven of Masculine Self-Improvement and Socialisation for the Late Victorian and Edwardian Clerk’, *Canadian Journal of History*, 37 (2002), 278.

under conditions of obsessive secrecy and openly resented any external interference with his work. The education committee did not discourage this attitude. In the stultifying atmosphere of deference and privacy which pervaded the council office, Varley's extreme reticence was not regarded as unusual. Junior staff sometimes suspected that Varley was engaged in some degree of fraud but it was several years before their fears were reported to a higher authority.²²

It is certainly true that the way in which Wolverhampton's Education Committee office was organised appeared to be characterised by control and conformity. It was hierarchal, with 'rigid boundaries between the grades or types of work'.²³ Although the office contained fewer than ten staff at the beginning of 1917, they were ranked according to five different levels of seniority – and ascribed at least eight different job titles. Varley, the 'Accountant Clerk' in charge of the office, was afforded considerable responsibility: he 'was in sole charge of the Education Accounts and Estimates, and conducted all the operations of certification, payment and book-keeping relating to the salaries and wages of teachers and others'.²⁴

Jesse Varley was supported in his work by a 'Chief Assistant' (John Leigh/Leeming Gillett) and by a 'Second Assistant' known also as the 'Senior Clerk' (George Stacey Hayles). There were also four male 'Junior Clerks' who were referred to sometimes as 'Junior Assistants' (W.A. Cresswell, C.P. Thomas, Archibald Steward Tomlins and Osmond Victor Richard, the employee who reported his suspicions and so exposed the entire fraud). The remaining staff consisted of two female 'Temporary Assistants' (Ethel Burton and Edith Lucy Farman) who had been taken on to replace male clerks who were away on war service,

²² Smith, 'Ingenious and Daring', 119.

²³ Zimmeck, 'Jobs for the Girls', 160.

²⁴ Haward, *Report*, 19. Also *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 16 May, 11 July, 5 December 1917.

together with an ‘Office Boy’ (whose name we do not know) who, according to the *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, uncovered Varley’s wrongdoing.²⁵

Grade, gender and age divisions were mutually reinforcing. It was the male staff (with the exception of the Office Boy) who occupied the higher grades, the female staff who found themselves towards the bottom. It was the older male staff (with the exception of the Office Boy) who occupied the higher grades: this was a time, it must be remembered, when middle age was associated more than today – and more than one might imagine – with steadiness, reliability and respectability.²⁶ Thus at the beginning of 1917, the Accountant Clerk was forty-six years old, his Chief Assistant thirty-six, and the Second Assistant/Senior Clerk thirty-three. The others in the office, the two Junior Clerks/Junior Assistants and the one Temporary Assistant whose ages we know, were much younger, all three of them in (or barely out of) their late teens.²⁷ It does not need a great deal of insight to conclude that a hierarchy that bottoms out with the designation Office Boy was predicated upon a well understood set of age-based assumptions.

These grade, gender and age divisions were reflected in – and reinforced by – the reward system that the Council operated. The ‘Officials’ and the ‘Junior Staff’ were paid, as might be expected, in diametrically different ways. Varley received a monthly salary, whereas the Junior Clerks, along (tellingly) with the cleaners and caretakers, were required to sign in every Friday in order to collect their wages in cash.²⁸ Varley was also paid a great deal more than anybody else in the office. In 1903-4, just before he embarked upon his decade and more of deception, Varley’s salary was £145 a year, while the Junior Clerks were

²⁵ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 4, 11 April 1917; Haward, *Report*, 22, 28-9.

²⁶ John Benson, *Prime Time: A History of the Middle-Aged in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 1997), 63-4.

²⁷ Census of England and Wales, 1911, RG14/PN/17013; RG14/PN/17056; RG14/PN/17088.

²⁸ Wolverhampton Archives, ED-2/1-2, Education Department, Salary Receipt Book, 1903, nos. 49-52, 505-8.

paid between £46 and £78 and the Office Boy less than £20.²⁹ Fifteen years later, the gap had widened still further. Despite the payment of a war bonus to some Junior Staff and the introduction of gratuities for Junior Clerks taking on the work of Senior Clerks who were away on active service, Varley's salary had risen to £325, whereas that of the next best paid member of the office, Gillett the Senior Clerk, had been increased only to £140.³⁰ It was a reward system which supports all that is commonly said about the hierarchal, divisive nature of early twentieth-century clerical work.

There is also evidence to support what Smith says about the culture of privacy pertaining in Wolverhampton Education Committee's office.³¹ There is no disputing his claim, cited above, that, 'Varley rendered any examination of his work as difficult as possible; he operated under conditions of obsessive secrecy and openly resented any external interference with his work.'³² Varley had his own office, his own safe which he kept locked and – unknown to his superiors – a box of rubber stamps bearing the facsimile signatures of, for example, the Secretary of the Education Committee (to whom Varley was nominally responsible) and the Principal of Wolverhampton Science and Technical School (whose staff Varley's office was responsible for paying).³³

Varley also ensured, so far as he could, that only Gillett, his Chief Assistant (who knew of the fraud), or one of the Junior Staff (who was unlikely to detect what was going on) were involved at crucial stages of his deceptions. He deputed his Chief Assistant, accompanied only by the Hall Keeper or the Mayor's Sergeant, to visit the bank to cash the

²⁹ Receipt Book, 1903, receipts, nos. 49-52, 505-8.

³⁰ Wolverhampton Archives, Corporation of Wolverhampton, *Council Minutes and Reports*, 1915-16, 593; 1916-17, 47; 1917-18, 513, 781.

³¹ See, more broadly, David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998* (Oxford, 1999); Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London, 2013); Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013).

³² Smith, 'Ingenious and Daring', 16.

³³ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 28 March 1917; Haward, *Report*, 18-19

cheque for the salaries that the Department was responsible for paying.³⁴ When it was time to prepare the monthly salary statements, he made sure that that this was done not, as might be expected, by the Second Assistant/Senior Clerk who was in charge of the salary books, ‘but by Varley himself or a junior clerk at his discretion’.³⁵ When it was time for the District Auditor to check the Education Office’s accounts, Varley saw to it that was he who attended the audit, allowing only one of the Junior Staff to accompany him into the audit room.³⁶

Concealment in full view

The secrecy with which Jesse Varley conducted his fraud was matched – paradoxically – by the openness with which he spent the money he made from it. It was this openness, this concealment in full view, that apparently persuaded those with whom he came into contact to accept him for what he claimed to be, for what he seemed to be: a hard-working public servant whose wife had had come into money. Deciding to carry on working, he was taking the opportunity, it seemed, to spend the family’s new found wealth both on enjoying some of the good things in life and on consolidating its standing and respectability.

Difficult to acquire, and only too easy to lose, respectability, we have been told time and time again, was of fundamental importance to the late Victorian and Edwardian middle class (not to mention a substantial section of the working class).³⁷ Whatever the caveats that have been entered in recent years by scholars such as Mike Huggins, respectability’s great importance has never been dislodged.³⁸ ‘Respectability was vital, not superficial’, conclude Simon Gunn and Rachel Bell of the late nineteenth-century middle classes: ‘Without

³⁴ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 4 April 1917.

³⁵ *Haward Report*, 23. Also *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 4 April 1917.

³⁶ *Haward, Report*, 29.

³⁷ For example, Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London, 1977), 302; Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-70* (London, 1979), 284; F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900* (London, 1988).

³⁸ See, for example, M.J. Huggins, ‘More Sinful Pleasures?: Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Classes in Victorian England’, *Journal of Social History*, Spring (2,000), 585; M. Huggins, ‘Culture, Class and Respectability: Racing and the English Middle Classes in the Nineteenth Century’, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 11 (1994), 26.

respectability you could not get credit, your son might not get the right sort of career opening and your daughter might not be able to marry into a well-to-do family.³⁹

Varley did everything he could to avoid such eventualities. Claiming that his wife was an Irish heiress with substantial investments in local industry, he embarked on what can fairly be described as a spending spree.⁴⁰ Some of his outgoings, it is true, would be known only to the bankers and solicitors, the architects and surveyors, auctioneers and valuers, estate agents and insurance brokers with whom his dealings brought him into contact.⁴¹ But a great deal of his spending was much, much more visible. He had a holiday home just outside Llandudno; he dressed, in the few photographs of him that survive, soberly, respectably and expensively.⁴² He was known, to his superiors at least, to be a director of several local firms, including the Efandem Company, an electrical manufacturer employing nearly 500 people in the town. Indeed, the Council granted Varley leave of absence so that he could appear for the company in a case that was being tried in London.⁴³

Varley and his family moved into a series of larger, more expensive, more opulent homes. In 1904, just before he embarked upon his fraud, he had a house built in the better, west side of the town (which cost him £3,500, and he was able to let subsequently for £76 a year).⁴⁴ Less than ten years later, he purchased 'Elmsdale', which was described as a 'grandly-situated FAMILY RESIDENCE, with beautiful Grounds'. Set in over eleven acres in Whitwick, three miles to the west of Wolverhampton, the house was built, it was explained, 'of local stone with stone facings and ornamental parapets and gables, in the

³⁹ Simon Gunn and Rachel Bell, *Middle Classes; Their Rise and Sprawl* (London, 2002), xx. See too John Benson, *The Wolverhampton Tragedy: Death and the 'Respectable' Mr Lawrence* (Lancaster, 2009), 8-9, 136-9.

⁴⁰ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 11 July 1917, 5 December 1917; Haward, *London County Council*, 412.

⁴¹ See Wolverhampton Archives, DB-44/11/8/11, Correspondence re the Bankruptcy of Jesse Varley.

⁴² www.homepage.ntlworld.com/rmg.varley/Family_page.html [January 2016].

⁴³ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 14 March, 5 December 1917. For details of the case, see *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22 July, 22 November 1916.

⁴⁴ DB-44/11/8/11, Bankruptcy Act, 1914, Re Jesse Varley. [??]

Elizabethan style of architecture'. Boasting five bedrooms, a morning room, a drawing room, a dining room, a library and a billiard room, servants' quarters and outbuildings, it contained too a tennis court, grottos, rose gardens and three summer houses. 'The stone-built Lodge abutting on the Bridgnorth Road', concluded the agent marketing it after Varley's downfall, 'is of a similar class to the Residence itself, and provides ample accommodation for the occupation of a man-servant.'⁴⁵

Visitors to 'Elmsdale', including some of the councillors supposedly managing Varley, could hardly fail to note the jewellery his wife wore, the eighteen-piece Rockingham dinner service the family ate off, its thirty-eight piece Noritake Japanese tea service or its ninety-six piece Royal Minton tea and coffee service. Favoured male visitors would certainly notice items like the 'wine-cistern in the form of a fully-rigged Spanish galleon, and consisting of 233 ounces of silver' which 'formed the centre-piece in an apartment in which Varley had been wont to entertain his male guests, additional patriotic inspiration being imparted by the presence on one of the walls of a picture entitled "the toast is Britain."⁴⁶

Wolverhampton was a small town, and it is doubtful if news of Varley's spending and lifestyle remained confined to his immediate circle for very long. Moreover, much of his expenditure was highly visible. He subscribed to local charities, and joined the Freemasons – an organisation which, it has been pointed out, enabled members and their families to 'prove their status in the community, mark their progress, and, above all, demonstrate their

⁴⁵ Wolverhampton Archives, D-NAJ/4/17, Nock and Joseland, Sales Particulars, Elmsdale, 1917. Also D-NAJ/F/6, Sales Particulars, Freehold Properties, 1906. Converted now into flats, the house was described recently by a local estate agent as 'an exclusive period mansion known as Elmsdale Hall occupying probably one of the finest positions and enjoying a choice location and set well back from the road.' *Wolverhampton Magazine*, May 2016.

⁴⁶ In 1914, three years before Varley's crimes were uncovered, he had insured his household effects for £6,900, a sum including £3,000 worth of jewellery, some of which was in his wife's name. *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 18 July, 5 December 1917. See Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850-1910* (Manchester, 2010).

respectability'.⁴⁷ Indeed, by the time Varley's fraud was uncovered in 1917, he had purchased, *inter alia*, three highly desirable motor cars that could hardly fail to attract attention: a Hillman, a 16/20 self-starter Sunbeam with cabriolet body, and a 16/20 self-starter, five-seater Wolseley tourer which had been built in 1912.⁴⁸ The Wolseley brand was particularly well thought of: 'As in previous years', observed the *Automotive Journal* admiringly when the tourer appeared, 'quality is the chief characteristic of all the products of this Company'.⁴⁹

Such spending reinforced Varley's claim to respectability. Indeed, so well known – and well regarded – did he become that just a few years before his wrongdoing was uncovered, he was approached by the West Wolverhampton Liberal Association with a view to standing against the sitting Conservative M.P., Alfred Bird. 'It is understood, however, that he has declined,' reported the *Birmingham Evening Despatch* with due deference, 'as he is not desirous of entering public life at the present time.'⁵⁰

Suspicion, speculation and respectability

For ten years and more, Jesse Varley's combination of watchful secrecy while at work and extravagant spending when with family, friends and acquaintances served him extremely well. Whatever those on the Council whose job it was to supervise him might claim in the wake of his arrest and prosecution, they clearly had no idea what he was doing.⁵¹ It was not

⁴⁷ www.mywesleyanmethodists.org.uk/page/wesleyan_historic_roll-volume_21, Birmingham and Shrewsbury District, 648 [October 2016]; United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 419/277-8, St. Peter's Lodge, Wolverhampton; Roger Burt, 'Freemasonry and Business Networking during the Victorian Period', *Economic History Review*, lv1 (2003), 666. Also *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 3 August 1914.

⁴⁸ The cars sold for £960 when his effects were auctioned in July 1917. *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 18 July 1917. Also 5 December; *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 17 July 1917; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17 July 1917.

⁴⁹ *Automotive Journal*, 2 November, 1912.

⁵⁰ *Birmingham Evening Despatch*, 14 January 1914. See David Gardiner, 'The Structure, Organisation and Electoral Performance of the Conservative Party in Wolverhampton 1918-1939' (university of Wolverhampton, MPhil thesis, 1994), 35-9.

⁵¹ This was less unusual than one might think: see, for example, Kynaston, *Golden Years*, 362-3.

until eight or nine months or so after Varley's fraud was uncovered that the suspicions of those in positions of authority began to be reported in the local press.⁵²

Nevertheless, it was more difficult than one might imagine for Varley to keep his fraud a secret. The 'deference and privacy' of early twentieth-century office life are easily exaggerated: what seemed like deference and privacy might co-exist with, and conceal, suspicion and speculation. So although there were obviously enormous differences between the eighteenth-century countryside and the early twentieth-century Black Country, one should not forget E.P. Thompson's classic injunction, that 'The same man who touches his forelock to the squire by day – and who goes down to history as an example of deference – may kill his sheep, snare his pheasants or poison his dogs at night.'⁵³

It is the argument here that while there was certainly a rigid hierarchy operating in Wolverhampton's Education Department, privacy was in short supply, and secrets difficult to keep. It will be suggested that the same clerks who no doubt did as they were told while Varley was in the office, talked about him and speculated as to what he might be up to when left to their own devices. If it is true that keeping a secret, like keeping a servant, was one way of defining the middle class, it seems that those working under Varley were prepared to risk the threat to their class identity for the satisfactions of knowing what was going on.⁵⁴

Even Sir Harry Haward did not find it easy to find out how much, how soon, those in the Education Department office knew about what Varley was up to. But he was in no doubt that they knew a great deal more than they were ready to admit. He noted, for instance, that Osmond Richards, the Junior Clerk/Assistant who disclosed the fraud in 1917, had harboured his suspicions even before he volunteered for army service three years before.⁵⁵ Even fifteen years after he conducted his enquiry, Haward did not speculate – and no conclusion is now

⁵² *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 December 1917.

⁵³ E.P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture,' *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 399.

⁵⁴ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, xiv. Cf. Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk: A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-Class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (London, 1995).

⁵⁵ Haward, *London County Council*, 413.

possible – as to the possible balance of indignation and calculation, of civic duty and self-interest that decided Richards to report his misgivings to the Town Clerk.⁵⁶

Haward also distanced himself from the evidence given to him by George Hayles, the Senior Clerk. He chose his words carefully: the Senior Clerk's 'somewhat onerous work left him little time to concern himself with matters outside his immediate duties, and while clearly not satisfied with the discipline and generally loose manner in which the work of the office was carried on, no suspicions as to frauds appear to have been aroused in his mind.'⁵⁷ Indeed, Haward was openly disbelieving when confronted with some of the other denials he heard: 'There is no doubt in my mind that matters connected with Varley's malpractices were the subject of conversation among the junior members of the staff'.⁵⁸

One of Varley's colleagues most definitely knew what was going on. Although Haward felt unable to decide whether Varley's Chief Assistant, John Leigh/Leeming Gillett, was in on the fraud from the beginning or began blackmailing his superior once he found out what was going on, he was in no doubt that both were involved.⁵⁹ It seems likely in fact that Gillett discovered what Varley was doing some time during 1910 or 1911, and then set about either blackmailing him or operating the fraud in collaboration with him.⁶⁰ Whichever it was, and whatever the relationship that developed between Varley and his Chief Assistant, Gillett, it seems, managed to make just over £3,000 before Richards reported his suspicions early in 1917.⁶¹ Whatever the relationship that developed between Varley and his Chief Assistant, Haward's report placed the blame squarely upon Varley:

without collusion it would have been impossible to carry out such a daring and long

⁵⁶ Perhaps he felt guilty about keeping a secret, perhaps he was emboldened by local gossip, perhaps his war service had given him a new perspective on what was right and wrong, perhaps it fell to him to act as the go-between in the Junior Staff's dealings with their superiors.

⁵⁷ Haward, *Report*, 30.

⁵⁸ Haward, *Report*, 30.

⁵⁹ Haward, *Report*, 29. Also *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 11 July 1917.

⁶⁰ *Express and Star*, 24 July 1917; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 July 1917.

⁶¹ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 23 May 1917.

continued system of fraud. His accomplice was his chief assistant, who a few days before the arrest fell in front of or under a train at Wednesbury Station; the verdict of the Coroner's Jury was 'accidental death,' but Varley declared that it was suicide and that his assistant had some £3,000 of the stolen money. Even so, Varley must for years have been like a man sitting on a volcano.⁶²

It is possible, to pursue the analogy, that it was Gillett, rather than Varley, who was the catalyst that caused the volcano to erupt. It is possible, though it cannot be proved, that it was Gillett's spending, rather than Varley's, that provoked the gossip and innuendo that led, directly or indirectly, to their joint downfall. It was not that Gillett's spending was on anything like the same scale as Varley's, it was that his spending was regarded, by some at least of those in positions of local power and authority, as morally suspect. If this was the case, it suggests, as might be expected, that respect and respectability depended not just on who was doing the spending but on what the spending was being used for. Approval was granted and/or withdrawn according to a seemingly well understood set of assumptions about the class character and respectability of consumption choices.⁶³

Gillett, noted the local press in the immediate aftermath of his death, was 'well known in Wolverhampton'.⁶⁴ The way in which one interprets this comment will depend, in large part, upon the associations – the respectability – that one ascribes to the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theatre.⁶⁵ Although the amateur dramatic group with which Gillett was involved, the Wolverhampton Amateur Comedy Operatic Society, was thoroughly

⁶² Haward, *London County Council*, 413-4. See *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 16 January 1917.

⁶³ John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (Harlow, 1994), 205. Also T. Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (London, 1991), 7; Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*; Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁶⁴ *Express and Star*, 17 January 1917.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, D. Pye, 'Irreproachable Women and Patient Workers: The Memoirs of Victorian Leading Ladies', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 45 (2003).

respectable, the same cannot necessarily be said of one of its professional counterparts, the provincial touring company, with which he also had connections.⁶⁶

Gillett was active for several years in the Wolverhampton Amateur Comedy Operatic Society, becoming a committee member and later its honorary secretary.⁶⁷ A large and flourishing organisation, the Society's list of president and vice-presidents, with the town's mayor, the vicar of the town's Collegiate Church and three local MPs to the fore, reads like a roll call of Wolverhampton worthies.⁶⁸ Nor could the shows the Society staged, often for charity, have been more conventional and reassuring. Its February 1916 offering of Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Pirates of Penzance' ran, for example, for six nights (with a Saturday matinee) at the town's premier venue the Grand Theatre, and boasted a 'Full Chorus & Augmented Orchestra of over 70 Performers'.⁶⁹

There was always something risqué – and more – about the professional theatre.⁷⁰ Inevitably then, Gillett's links with this branch of the entertainment industry put one in mind of Bailey's claim that single, young clerks 'compensated for the grayness of their working lives with displays of peacock masculinity'.⁷¹ However, Gillett was married, not single, and he and his wife had two young children. Inevitably, one might think, his close friendship with J. Newton Cowling, the manager of the nearby Wednesbury Hippodrome, was likely to lead to comment and speculation.⁷² It was a friendship that took Gillett away from home, and brought him into contact with the world of provincial, touring theatre. As well as managing the Hippodrome, Cowling ran a touring company which appeared at venues around the

⁶⁶ See John Lowerson, *Amateur Operatics: A Social and Cultural History* (Manchester, 2005).

⁶⁷ Wolverhampton Archives, D-GRA/D/82, Grand Theatre posters, 5 December 1910, 12 February 1912, 7 February 1916.

⁶⁸ Grand Theatre poster, 12 February 1912.

⁶⁹ Grand Theatre poster, 7 February 1916.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Peter Bailey, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes, 1986); Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁷¹ Bailey, 'White Collars', 281.

⁷² See Paul Adrian Fantom, 'Community, Patriotism and the Working Class in the First World War: The Home Front in Wednesbury, 1914-1918' (University of Birmingham, PhD thesis, 2015).

country: his production of the ‘domestic drama’, ‘The Collier’s Lass’, ran for a week, for instance, at the Theatre Royal, Leeds during the summer of 1914.⁷³ Cowling’s friendship with Gillett also involved him entertaining Varley’s Assistant at his home, and introducing him to the proprietors – and perhaps the actors – of the touring companies that were visiting the Hippodrome.⁷⁴

For many years, it must be said, there was nothing about Gillett’s spending to arouse suspicion (which confirms, of course, that he probably discovered what Varley was doing only relatively late in the day).⁷⁵ His domestic circumstances, in 1911 at least, were about as far removed from Varley’s as it was possible to imagine. Whereas Varley’s home (from 1913 onwards) was ‘Elmsdale’, the five-bedroom mansion set in eleven landscaped acres in prestigious Whitwick to the west of Wolverhampton, Gillett was living in a modest, three-bedroom, semi-detached house not far from the centre of town.⁷⁶ Even before he moved into ‘Elmsdale’, Varley employed two live-in members of staff. Gillett and his wife enjoyed no such help.⁷⁷

Eventually however, Gillett’s spending did begin to attract attention. It is difficult to reconstruct who knew what, and when they knew it, because, as was seen above, rumours concerning his behaviour only appeared in the local press a year or more after the events they purported to describe. That said, the rumours were all of a piece. It was striking, claimed one councillor, that Gillett seemed to be spending at the rate of £1,000 a year, although he could not be earning more than about about £100.⁷⁸ It was noticeable, reported another, that Varley’s Assistant was obviously living above his means: ‘I don’t know how the fellow does

⁷³ www.leodis.net/playbills/item.asp?ri=20031023_60142154 [July 2016].

⁷⁴ *Express and Star*, 20 January 1917.

⁷⁵ *Express and Star*, 16 January 1917.

⁷⁶ Census of England and Wales, 1911, RG14/369/21. By the time of his death, he had moved to a larger, but still semi-detached, house. *Express and Star*, 16 January 1917.

⁷⁷ Census of England and Wales, 1911, RG14/369/21; RG/14/369/11.

⁷⁸ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 December 1917.

it'.⁷⁹ Some members of the local business community seemed to have been just as bemused by the scale of Varley's spending. 'It was a rotten shame Varley should go on for fourteen years', complained one. 'If he had a clerk receiving Varley's salary, and living at the rate of £3,000 a year he should say "Get another job."'”⁸⁰

Such concerns were compounded by the fact that the town's civic leaders – and no doubt many of the town's business people – expected council staff (especially those like Gillett who were married with two young children) to conduct themselves in a respectable fashion. The gossip escalated. One councillor claimed, for instance, to have a client who had told him that his manager was spending a lot of his free time with Gillett at the theatre and similarly undesirable places. Another reported that the Deputy Mayor had warned that he had a friend who had told him that Gillett always seemed to be at the theatre or the picture house whenever he was there.⁸¹

The net was closing. The chairman of the Education Committee, Alderman Johnson, claimed that when he got wind of the rumours concerning Gillett's behaviour in December 1916, he immediately discussed the matter with Varley. The two exchanged suggestions as to what they might do to resolve the situation. Varley, of course, knew what was going on; Johnson did not. 'Unless Gillett alters', Varley assured him, 'I am afraid I shall not recommend him to succeed me'.

'Will you tell Gillett from me,' Alderman Johnson said to Varley, 'that I am exceedingly annoyed, and I think he should be ashamed of himself, as a married man, and if I hear another word with regard to such things I will call the Education Committee together without delay. He will then be dealt with by them.'⁸²

⁷⁹ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 December 1917.

⁸⁰ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 18 July 1917.

⁸¹ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 December 1917.

⁸² *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 December 1917.

Gillett, of course, was never dealt with by the Education Committee or by anybody else, because he died, seemingly by his own hand, as soon as Varley's crimes became public knowledge. It is impossible to attribute cause and effect with any certainty in the uncovering of the 'Varley affair'. However, it seems likely that it was Gillett's discovery of the fraud, his exploitation of the situation, and the subsequent change in – and/or escalation of – his spending habits that helped lead to Varley's downfall – and to his own premature death. Whereas Varley's spending on houses, expensive jewellery and the latest motor cars was consistent with local middle-class notions of prosperity and respectability, Gillett's much more modest spending on visits to theatres, picture houses and the like most certainly was not.⁸³

Conclusion

What then does the 'Varley affair' tell us about early twentieth-century office work? What, if anything, does it tell us about early twentieth-century Wolverhampton? It suggests, most obviously, that offices were not necessarily the secretive, tightly controlled, rigorously compartmentalised work places that we have been led to believe. It suggests too that even office workers – given enough money – could gain respect and acceptance if that was what they aspired to. Provided that they did not indulge in what the local middle class regarded as improper behaviour, it was possible for even a senior/middle ranking council employee to secure a solid and respected standing in early twentieth-century Wolverhampton society.

It was Jesse Varley's mixture of deceit and display that enabled him to continue undetected for so long. His combination of almost obsessive secrecy at work with almost compulsive ostentation in his private life disarmed suspicion and persuaded those around him that he was what he seemed to be: a respectable, hardworking, well off and generous pillar of

⁸³ See David Cox, 'Public and Private Perceptions of Victorian Respectability: The Life and Times of a "Gentleman Lag"', *Prison Service Journal* (forthcoming). I am grateful to David Cox for allowing me to see the article in advance of publication.

the community. Many of Wolverhampton's middle class, I have suggested before, seemed to set particular store by material success, a stance which meant that respect, respectability and social acceptance were more readily attainable than is often imagined.⁸⁴

The 'Varley affair' may not have been 'the office boy's triumph', but it was a victory for one member at least of the 'Junior Staff' who worked in the office that Varley ran. It deserves to be better known than it is: aside from the repercussions it had at the time, it enables us to shed much needed light both upon the realities of office work and the complexities of middle-class respectability in one early twentieth-century Midland town.

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⁸⁴ John Benson, 'Drink, Death and Bankruptcy: Retailing and Respectability in Late Victorian and Edwardian England', *Midland History*, 32 (2007), 140.