

Thomas Wright Hill

Last week I reflected on how Rowland Hill stamped his mark, if you'll excuse the pun, on our history. The reputation of the great postal reformer, whose Penny Black transformed communication in Victorian England, has rather overshadowed the other members of his family. Many were significant figures in their own right, no more so than Rowland's father, Thomas Wright Hill.

One was inspector of prisons, another a reformer of the criminal law, and another a campaigner for currency reform.

Thomas Hill's is a name few will automatically recognise, and yet, just last year, one of his inventions was on everyone's lips, even if they did not have a clue how it worked. More of that anon.

Thomas Wright Hill was born in Kidderminster in 1763. He began his working life as a brassfounder in Birmingham, but soon found himself attracted to more intellectual pursuits. Thomas opened a private school known as Hill Top (quite a smart name, if you think about it), first in Lionel Street, then in Gough Street. There was one more move to the Hagley Road, where the school was re-named Hazelwood.

Hazelwood, with a radical curriculum that incorporated science and modern languages, and involved the pupils themselves in the management of the school, was successful enough to spawn a branch school at Bruce Castle in Tottenham. The latter, run by his sons, continued after Hazelwood closed. It was at Tottenham that Thomas died in 1851.

Outside of his teaching work Thomas Hill also carried on a correspondence with a number of the scientific pioneers of the age, including Charles Babbage, often called the father of the computer, and the chemist and preacher, Joseph Priestley.

Hill's political instincts were just as radical as his school, and both he and his sons were active in the Reform agitations in Birmingham in the second and third decades of the 19th Century. Widening the franchise was the cause celebre of the day.

Much of that campaigning - in the absence of anything resembling parliamentary or municipal democracy - took place in debating societies, book clubs and other associations. And it was in this spirit that Thomas Hill and his son Rowland founded the Society for Literary and Scientific Improvement in Birmingham in October 1819. If democracy was ever to be fully embraced in towns such as Birmingham, then it was required the marked improvement in the education and culture of all classes. Like Hazelwood itself, the society served to bridge the increasingly wide divide between science and the arts.

The Society for Literary and Scientific Improvement had much in common with other organisations of the time, including the Mechanics Institutes, but in one respect it was seriously ahead of its time, and that (surprisingly enough) was in how it selected its committee.

Hill explained his novel method of election in the society's by-laws. Each member of the society was to be given a ticket or ballot paper on which to write the name of anyone they wished to see elected. Any member receiving five votes was declared elected. Any votes above that number were to be returned to the members, who could then choose a second candidate, and thus process continued until the whole of the committee was filled.

If all of this doesn't yet ring a bell, let me take you back to the (failed) referendum on proportional representation, a key part of the Coalition Agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010. One of the reasons the referendum failed to garner much popular support was confusion as to which of the many forms of PR should be introduced.

The kind of proportional representation favoured by Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems was what is called STV or "single transferrable vote", exactly the system Thomas Wright Hill had come up with almost 200 years ago. Political theorists still refer to it as the "Wright system", whether it is right or not.

No doubt the idea will return at some later point. After all, STV is the electoral system of choice in many countries already, including elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish local government, and parliamentary elections in the Republic of Ireland, Australia and India. Many student unions use it as well, and it is form of proportional representation advocated by the Electoral Reform Association.

It may well be that Hill's form of STV originally developed in the school elections at Hazelwood. It is believed that the boys stood next to their preferred candidate, but quickly realised that some candidates had more supporters than they needed to get elected. So they peeled off to stand next to another candidate instead. A perfect example of STV in action.

If STV was indeed in use at Hazelwood, then its advantages were just the same as are claimed for it today. STV doesn't involve complicated maths (always a plus point in schools), and is relatively easy to understand. Its beauty is its simplicity.

As for Thomas Hill, as well as for the Lib Dems, STV's merit was and is that it helps to give an electoral voice to minorities, what Hill called "a fair representation (as near as can be) of all the classes".

We might add that, in the very limited democracy of 19th-century Britain, the minority was, in fact, the majority.