

James Gribble

“An outstanding figure in the life of Northampton”

By John Buckell & Russ Hickman

James Gribble (12 January 1868 – 14 August 1934)



Gribble worked as a bootmaker from the age of twelve, following in his father's trade. He served in the army for eight years from 1885, then returned to bootmaking in Northampton. He became active in the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) and joined the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). In 1897 he launched a local SDF newspaper, the *Pioneer*, copies of which are held in Northampton's Central Library and in the archives at 97 Charles Street.

In 1902, Gribble took a full-time organisers' post with NUBSO, and he also served on the union's executive. He declined an offer of a post worth £500 to £1,000 a year, opting to continue working for the town's shoemakers within NUBSO. In 1903 he was elected to Northampton Town Council, but the following year was involved in a physical disagreement in the council chamber and served a month in prison. Despite this, he was elected as a local Poor Law Guardian and served several further terms on the town council.

In 1904, Gribble founded the Pioneer Boot Works to raise money for the SDF and worked as its manager from 1905 until 1914. The building still stands in Clare Street (Eaton House). In 1905 he became President of the SDF and stood as an SDF parliamentary candidate in Northampton twice, 1906 and 1910.

Gribble supported British involvement in WW1, creating the Northampton Allied War Fund and serving on the local appeals tribunal. This became the Hospital Convalescent Fund, an early form of health insurance. From 1923, he served as a magistrate.

The Raunds March

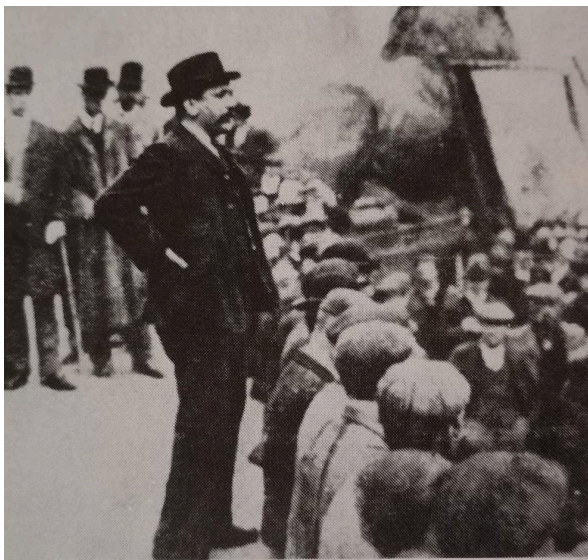
The story revolves around the manufacture of footwear for the British Army. Depending on demand for boots, workers' wages fluctuated considerably causing local unrest and strike action. The Boer War from 1899 to 1902 briefly created favourable conditions and wages for the industry. However, after the end of the Boer War, demand fell, competition increased, and boot and shoe-making factories and cooperatives regularly undercut each other to secure fewer and fewer contracts. The War Office took advantage of the falling prices, paying less for its contracts than the rate negotiated by the unions. The workers went on strike, but the War Office held firm. Soon the strike was broken with the employees returning to work no better than before the strike. This led to local councillor James Gribble, an ex-military man dubbed 'General Gribble' organising a march of 115 men representing a regular army unit to highlight the plight of the shoe-workers. The marchers comprised a Paymaster, Billetmaster, Commissariat-General, five companies with respective sergeants, a marching band of eleven men and an advance cycle corps of three. Gribble's intention was to present their case to the War Office.

As the march progressed, it became increasingly successful in capturing the media and public attention. Crowds turned out in force to cheer on the marchers on their way to the capital as they passed through Rushden, Bedford,

Luton, Harpenden, St. Albans and Watford.

Although the marchers were prevented from marching to the Houses of Parliament, a crowd of c. 10,000 assembled to greet them in Hyde Park. On the following day a demonstration was held in Trafalgar Square with Keir Hardie speaking on the workers behalf to the assembled crowd.

Gribble attempted to raise the shoe-workers' case in the House of Commons but was ejected from the building following an impatient outburst, which attracted national



'General' Gribble in Trafalgar Square

media coverage nonetheless. The men marched all the way back to Raunds, stopping off in Northampton where a large crowd assembled in the market square to greet them. When they reached Raunds, a crowd of 5,000 gathered at the Square to welcome home the marchers, a crowd that was larger than the town's population at that time.

The impact of the Raunds March remains a matter of debate; however it did successfully raise awareness of the plight of the boot and shoe-workers both nationally and internationally, ultimately leading to negotiations between the War Office and unions that resulted in the setting up of the Board of Conciliation and Arbitration, which helped reduce future price fluctuations.

Following his death in 1934, he was described by Mercury and Herald (Obit. 12.8.1934) as an "outstanding figure in the life of Northampton,"