

# The Northampton Pioneer

By **John Buckell**

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The Democratic Federation was founded in London in 1884 by the Marxist Henry Hindman. In 1884 the name was changed to Social Democratic Federation (SDF). It was the first socialist party in Britain. Two years later a branch was founded in Northampton with an estimated membership of around 10.

The branch began to grow. In July 1897 it claimed a membership of 200, of which 20 were women. That year the national SDF held its Annual Conference in the town. Numbers had more than doubled to 560 by 1905, and the Northampton branch had begun to establish branches in the wider county.

In the meantime, it also had begun to publish its own four-page newspaper, the Northampton Socialist. This became the monthly Northampton Pioneer in 1906. By 1905 the party had its own printing works in a furniture store in Henry Street, owned by a leading member, C. J. Scott and sales had grown to 5,000. The Midland Pioneer, organ of the Midland Socialist Council, was also published there.

In 1912 the SDF became part of the British Socialist Party and, after a break between 1910 and 1913, the paper became the Socialist Pioneer. The paper ceased publication in the summer of 1917, by which time the Northampton branch had become part of Northampton Labour Party, which it had co-founded with the local Independent Labour Party (ILP) and Northampton Trades Council. A number of bound volumes of the paper were donated to Northampton Central Library and can be read there on microfiche. There are also two bound volumes kept in the 97 Charles Street Archives.

Two other projects of Northampton SDF were the Socialist Club and the Pioneer Boot Works. The Socialist Club began in the Twentieth Century Club in Bailiff Street in 1895. Later, the branch established its own building in Newland. In 1904 James Gribble set up the Pioneer Boot Co-op in Wellingborough Road.

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Boots were produced independently by SDF members and sold to members nationwide to raise central funds for the SDF. In 1905 the Boot Co-op moved to Clare Street and became a manufacturing concern. In the first year £175 was raised, and by 1916 the total amounted to 2,339 with £1,036 having been paid in dividends to SDF branches. The co-op closed in 1924 with creditors paid in full and all subscribers reimbursed.

Although nominally Marxist, in practice Northampton SDF/BSP concentrated on democratic elections to local bodies, the Town Council, and on two occasions (1906 and 1910) to Parliament. Its first councillor was elected in 1902, rising to 6 in 1912. This is roughly in line with the local Labour Party's later record. Between 1914 and 1924 Labour's highest number of sitting councillors was 7 in 1919. Of course, this included former SDF members. The first socialist (Labour) MP for Northampton, Margaret Bondfield, was elected in 1923.