

**THE POLITICAL HISTORY. — BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION OF LONG-STANDING ORIGIN — THE " MAN IN THE MOON "DISTRIBUTING " SAMPLES OF TEA — THE NUMBERING OF THE CONSTITUENCY — ELECTION PETITIONS — BLOTS — TRANSMITTING NEWS IN OLDEN TIMES — ELECTION DETAILS — THE TOWN DISFRANCHISED.**

FOR some reasons it might be wished that Bridgwater had no political record to be chronicled, but to complete a true and impartial history it is obviously impossible to be silent under this head.

The political record of Bridgwater anterior to a couple of decades ago is unfortunately a dark one, though we may take this early opportunity of saying that to-day probably a purer electoral division does not exist. For over two centuries Bridgwater had the unenviable character of being almost as corrupt a borough as could be. Election petitions are recorded as early as November 4th, 1692, between which date and 1868 (when the borough was disfranchised) there were numerous other petitions and several trials. The state of electoral morality never seemed to vary ; whether in the old times when the areas of place and population were narrow, and the constituency small, or when all those conditions were extended under new Acts of Parliament, the proportion of local corruption appears to have been the same. Three- fourths of the actual constituency were from father to son hopelessly addicted to the taking or seeking of bribes, while of the remainder perhaps the largest portion were guilty of the giving or negotiating of bribes. It is not the province of an historian to excuse any state of affairs, but it may here be pointed out that in later days at least, the practice was traditional, handed down from father to son, and engaged in without a due regard to the extent of the offence. Voters claimed their bribes as their common right; a right founded not so much upon contract as upon ancient precedent and general practice. Bribery has not inaptly been described as a chronic disease of the place, each political party being tainted with the malady to about an equal degree. Rank and station appeared to make no difference—the needy were not more corrupt than the well-to-do, nor the latter less prone to corruption. The possessors of thousands of pounds have been known to stand out for the " regulation " bribe (usually .£10) with as much energetic cupidity as the humble cordwainer or

"brickie."

As stated above, the usual bribe for a vote was £10, but on numerous occasions, especially when a close poll was anticipated, or when an existing majority for one candidate spurred the other side, the bribe reached immense proportions. At an election held in 1835 Mr. Broadwood (of piano fame) and Mr. Leader opposed each other, the former giving £40 per vote and Mr. Leader £50—or, as the pun then went, Broadwood's piano-forties were eclipsed by Leader's piano-fifties. Mr. Leader is stated to have spent between £8,000 and £10,000. Mr. Broadwood admitted having spent over £2,000, but it is thought he spent considerably more than that; the other candidate, Mr. Martin, spent about the same as Mr. Broadwood. The constituency then numbered 400 voters, and the election cost between £20,000 and £30,000 !

At one election a voter was heard to boast of his selling his pig to a candidate for a hundred guineas, and being allowed to eat it himself ; while another sold his parrot for the same sum, and the candidate never claimed his purchase.\*

A writer in *The Spectator* in 1831 tells of a local blacksmith who charged fifty guineas for shoeing a horse . belonging to one of the candidates; but the other candidate wanting two shoes for his horse the honest blacksmith charged him one hundred guineas, and (of course) gave him his vote!

Occasionally at elections certain electors polled on " purity " principles, but they were rare exceptions; some voted (presumably according to their consciences) either Liberal or Tory, but there was always the great body of " balance men " who hung round the hustings on the Cornhill, or were planted at various public-houses waiting to sell themselves to the highest bidder. A Parliamentary election without a contest was in direct opposition to local traditions, and would have been regarded as a calamity. Various pretexts were adopted as occasion arose to prevent any walkover of the kind indicated ; and a flagrant instance of this occurred in 1837, at the first election during the reign of Queen Victoria. The Conservative candidates were Mr. Henry Broadwood and Mr. Philip Courtenay, whilst the Liberal candidates were Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Sir Thomas B. Lethbridge, who came forward on the written requisition of a majority of registered electors and their

solemn promises of support. The following grotesque result was a sufficient proof of the reason for bringing about the contest: — Broadwood, 280; Courtenay, 278; Lethbridge, 5; Sheridan, 2.

Referring to an election which took place in August, 1754, "*Bubb Doddington*" writes thus in his diary — *All this trouble and vexation and expense flows from a set of low, worthless fellows; who finding they shall not be bribed without opposition, have prevailed on Lord Egmont to lend his name, to whom they will give one vote, that they may sell the other. . . . Spent these three days in an infamous and disagreeable compliance with the low habits of venal wretches.* — This election cost Mr. Doddington £3,400, and he at the same time lost his seat, after representing Bridgwater in several Parliaments. The above extract was given in *Notes and Queries*, January 1, 1870, and it was suggested as to Hogarth's series of pictures, "*The Election*," as Bubb Doddington is represented therein, that the series probably referred to Bridgwater.

Although giving and receiving bribes was engaged in with so much openness, the practice was reduced almost to a science. . . A mysterious stranger was introduced. into the town, known as "*the man in the moon*," who located himself at one of the public-houses of the party, and "*received visitors*" in a darkened room. In exchange for cards bearing a private mark, he, in solemn silence, distributed "*cartridges*" or "*samples of tea*" — i. e., rolls of money — amongst those voters' who had "*qualified*" for possession of the card mentioned. Sometimes it happened that the payment for votes commenced a fortnight before the polling day, and it is, therefore, no matter for surprise that in numerous instances bribes were received by voters from both parties ! Indeed at the general election of 1859, about 500 of these "*balance men*," who had received £10 each for their votes from the Conservatives previous to the polling, were seized upon by the Liberals on the morning of the election and given £10 each, marched up to the hustings, and their votes recorded for the Liberal candidates!

Bridgwater was created a Parliamentary borough by King Edward I. in 1296, when Johannes de la Weye and Walterus Jacob were returned, who in 1298 were replaced by Johannes de Sydenham and Willielmus Jacob. Before the passing of the Reform Act of 1832 (2 and 3 Will. IV., c. 76) the elective franchise was vested in the "*burgesses*" of the place. It

was always exercised by those burgesses except upon one solitary occasion in very ancient times, when the return is said to have been made "*by deputation*," in the Shire Court of Somerset. After a poll held in March, 1768, a "*case*" was laid before Parliament, and referred to a committee, as to the "*exclusive right*" claimed by the capital burgesses to elect Members of Parliament in the town. The "*capital burgesses*" had apparently endeavoured to stop the "*scot and lot*" voters from polling, and claimed exclusive right. It was decided that the claim (which was characterized as "*a glaring anachronism*") had no foundation in charters, usage, or in any resolution of the House of Commons, and it was therefore promptly disallowed. The House was also required to define the meaning of the term "*burgesses*," and they determined that the inhabitants of the eastern and western divisions of the parish of Bridgwater had no right to vote ; but it was in that division of the parish which is commonly called the borough, paying scot and lot within the said division, and in them only. In early days, therefore, the election of a Member of Parliament was vested in a very small proportion of the inhabitants. The constituency was greatly increased by the Reform Act, and still further by the Representation of the People Act, 1867, when the increase was from about 700 to 1,500 (including 30 of the old scot and lot voters).

As before stated, an election petition from the borough was tried in 1692 ; a second was heard in March, 1781 ; a third in March, 1803 ; and a fourth in March, 1808. We take up the general political history of the borough from the commencement of the present century. On the 26th June, 1804, Mr. Jeffreys Allen resigned, and Mr. John Hugglestone was returned in his place. May 5, 1807, Mr. George Pocock and William Thornton (Tory) were elected, the latter of whom (afterwards known as Mr. Astell, and who became a director of the East India Company) sat for the borough for 25 years. "*During his reign*," it is said, "*the people of Bridgwater had a good share of the good things of India. It was enough to say to him, 'I am a Bridgwater man,' and he would do anything for you.*" Mr. Pocock was his colleague in his first three Parliaments — May, 1807, October, 1812, and June, 1818. At the next election, March, 1820, consequent upon the death of George III., a coalition was formed between the Tories and the old Whigs, and Col. Charles K. Kemeys Tynte (the elder) was returned in the place of Mr.

Pocock. A similar coalition occurred at the elections in June, 1826, and July, 1830.

At the time of the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act, in 1829, General Sir Colin Campbell' was brought forward by the Tories to oppose Col. Tynte, who had voted for the Bill. Sir Colin stood the poll for some time, but eventually withdrew from the contest, on the ground that a coalition existed between the other two candidates—Tynte and Astell.

At the general election which ensued upon the passing of the Reform Act, in 1832, Colonel Tynte and Mr. William Tayleur were returned together in the Liberal interest, Messrs. Chattey and Twiss being the Conservative candidates. The political extinction of Mr. Astell was celebrated by a highly indecent and blasphemous burlesque of the Burial Service of the Church of England, in which a well-known bribery agent officiated in full canonical attire. A more serious outrage, upon a literary gentleman of some distinction in the Tory party, Mr. John Bowen, editor of the *Bridgwater Alfred* newspaper, who narrowly escaped with his life, earned for the election great notoriety. It occurred thus:— A man named Cooze, or Gooze (who is said to have been afterwards instrumental in getting Mr. Westropp unseated), was passing by Mr. Bowen's house in Friarn-street, and interfered with, or was subjected to interference by some "watchers," i.e., men appointed to watch certain voters in times of election. A fight ensued, which soon brought numbers from the low public-houses of Bridgwater, and Mr. Bowen, who was that evening acting as chairman at a large meeting at the King's Arms, was sent for, some of the rioters having got into his house and engaged in drinking and smoking. He endeavoured to quell the disturbance, but was struck a terrific blow across the face and eyes which covered him with blood. He was carried off insensible, and remained in a dangerous condition for a long time. Meanwhile the riot progressed. The road leading to the house and the street was crowded, and sticks, stones and bricks "flew about pretty lively," to use the words of an eye-witness. An idea gained currency that Mr. Astell was hiding in the house, and the riot grew to such proportions that the inmates fled. Many persons were armed with bludgeons, and not a few were disguised. The Riot Act was read by the Mayor, but with little effect at first, but the riot afterwards subsided. Five of the party

were tried at Taunton for conspiracy, but acquitted upon a point of law, and 37 were summoned, and committed for trial at Wells, before Judge Hobhouse. The case lasted to the second day, when the jury, contrary to the evidence, and to the surprise of all, returned a verdict of Not Guilty. It is said that they were bribed, and that it cost £500 to do it. It afterwards transpired that at the conclusion of the day's proceedings the jury and some of the prisoners "had a jolly nice supper" together, while some of them actually shared the same beds! The whole batch was defended by Mr. Serjeant Kinglake. The acquittal caused great surprise to the judge and some of the prisoners themselves, a few of whom were observed in the box with tears in their eyes, "expecting to be sent to Botany Bay," to quote an expression of one of them. The Chairman said he thought it was a monstrous decision.

On the 16th May, 1837, a bye-election took place with reference to which an incident occurred which deserves record. The vacancy was caused by Mr. Leader having resigned his seat in order to contest Westminster against Sir Francis Burdett, where however, he was beaten. Mr. Henry Broadwood was brought forward by the Conservatives, and the Liberal candidate was Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan (formerly M.P. for Dorchester). The Liberals were in power, but the Conservatives were trying their utmost to oust them, as seat after seat at the bye-elections had been lost to the former. The balance of parties in the Lower House was now almost even, hence the "eyes of England" were upon Bridgwater to an extent very unusual in those mail-coach days. The result of the election was considered of such importance that the editor of the *Times*, with a spirit of enterprise then unique in journalism, made arrangement for the news to be transmitted to them in a way far more expeditious than would have happened in the usual course of things. The electric telegraph had not then been dreamt of, though the railway to London was a creation of the near future. With the view to publishing the result of the election on the following day the editor of the *Times* chartered 15 horses, one of each was stationed at the end of every ten miles on the road to London.

The voting proceeded during the day in the usual manner, bribery being general, and fighting and drunkenness being the order of the day. As the clock of St. Mary's tower

chimed four a paper containing the numbers, showing that Mr. Broadwood was the chosen representative of the ancient borough, was handed, amid tremendous cheers and groans, to a man waiting on horseback outside the hustings. Both animal and rider were decorated with blue favours. Before the last stroke of the hour the dense crowd parted, the horse (a fast trotter belonging to Col. Tynte) shot off at a rapid pace, and the electors, both Whig and Tory, proceeded to wind up the day's proceedings in the usual fashion. Fighting—a very popular means in Bridgwater of relieving pent-up political feeling—was resumed, and much of the money spent in bribery found its way into the tills of the numerous public-houses in the town.

The horse was ridden to the Piper's Inn, Ashcott, the distance being accomplished in half an hour. Here a second horse and rider were waiting, and the message was taken on to a third, and so on, the instructions to each being speed beyond all things, until the *Times* Office, London, was reached. Next morning the result of the election occupied a conspicuous place in the *Times* :—

“BRIDGWATER ELECTION.

*By Express.*

STATE OF THE POLL.

BROADWOOD ...	279
Sheridan .....	221
Majority ... ..	58

*“ This defeat is considered to be of the greatest importance. It is right to state that there has seldom been an election conducted with such perfect good humour and with less of personality.”*

The following short leaderette was also given:— *“ We have to record another triumph of the good cause. The contest at Bridgwater has terminated by the return of the Conservative member, Mr. Broadwood. The majority is as much as 58. We have to-day time only to point attention to the gratifying result.”* The election was referred to at greater length the following day, when it was remarked *“that the slave of Radicalism has been chased from the borough.”*

Of course the good people of Bridgwater had no immediate opportunity of learning how the experiment had proceeded, and much interest circled round the anticipation of the next copy of the *Times*. The usual knot of politicians who were in the habit of waiting on the Town Bridge for the mail-

coach which brought letters and newspapers (a procedure which gave name to the Bridgwater Conservative Association and Bridge Committee) was the next evening swollen into an eager and expectant crowd. As the time drew near when the coach became due the excitement was intensified, and numbers went through Eastover to meet it. Soon the post-boy's horn was heard in the distance, and in a few minutes the four-horse mail dashed up and stopped on the bridge. Eager hands pulled open the pages of the *Times*, and *“ Yes! it's in !”* was the cry. True enough, the result of the Bridgwater election was given as above in all the honours of big type, and the *Times* established for itself a local reputation which long existed.

A petition was afterwards presented against the return of Mr. Broadwood, no less than one hundred and fifty-three acts of bribery being stated against him, and the seat was claimed by the other candidate. In a letter dated *“House of Commons,”* 5th June, 1837, signed by Mr. Broadwood himself and communicated to Mr. Speaker on the following day, he declared it was not his intention to defend his election or return. Whether Mr. Sheridan would have been admitted to the seat thus abandoned is not known, for the death of King William IV., and the accession of Queen Victoria brought about a Dissolution.

The next election was held on the 26th July in the same year (1837), when, as we have before stated in this chapter, the candidates who had come forward at the request of the Liberal party (Mr. Sheridan and Sir T. B. Lethbridge) received only two and five votes respectively, Messrs. Broadwood and Courtenay (C), being elected by 280 and 278. Three election petitions were presented on the 1st of December, 1837 ; one charged bribery and corruption against the sitting members, and complained of the return at the last election ; while the other two, addressed to a common law jurisdiction of the House, impeached not only the return of Broadwood and Courtenay in the previous July, but also the return of Broadwood in May. Two of them stated that *“ at least one half of the electors were accustomed to demand or receive bribes ; that it was well known they were in the habit of openly selling their votes to the highest bidder ; and thus they could at any time secure the success of the candidate for whom they voted, and that they were therefore called ‘ balance men,’ and were well-known in the books under that*

*appellation'.*" A debate arose in the House on the presentation of these petitions, and the due course of procedure was pointed out by the Speaker to be to take the election petition first. Accordingly it was called on the day appointed, but no answer was made, and neither of the other two petitions was again presented to the House.

The next election was June 29th, 1841, when the Conservative candidates were Messrs. Henry Broadwood and Thomas Seaton Forman, whilst on the Liberal side appeared Messrs. Edward Simcoe Drewe and Augustine Robinson. Much money was spent on each side, the bribes ranging from £40 to £50 each. The Conservatives gained the seats, and the return was not challenged.

There was no other election for six years — July 29th, 1847 — when the only Conservative candidate was Mr. Broadwood, the Liberals being represented by Colonel Tynte (son of the former member), and Mr. Serjeant Gazelee. The latter was a "*purity*" candidate, his expenditure amounting to only £26, but at the end of the day he stood at the bottom of the poll as follows Col. Tynte, 395 ; Mr. Broadwood, 265 ; Mr. Serjeant Gazelee, 196.

At the general election of July 7, 1852, the Conservative candidates were Messrs Brent Spencer Follett and John Christopher Mansell; and the Liberals brought out Col. Tynte, Lord Henley, and Mr. Alexander William Kinglake. The election resulted in the return of Colonel Tynte and Mr. Follett.

On the 25th March, 1857, both Liberal candidates were successful, Colonel Tynte and Mr. Kinglake. The same gentlemen were again carried at the next election, in 1859, being opposed, by Messrs. Henry Padwick and Henry Westropp, "*two wealthy strangers.*" The poll was a heavy one, only thirty-one electors out of a constituency of 543 failing to record their votes. A petition was lodged against the return of the Members, but was afterwards withdrawn.

The next election was on July 12, 1865, when Colonel Tynte expressed a wish to retire from the representation. Sir John Villiers Shelley was chosen as colleague for Mr. Kinglake, Mr. Westropp being the Conservative candidate. The latter headed the poll, Mr. Kinglake being next, while Sir John Shelley lost the election by 20 votes. A petition was lodged against the return of Mr. Westropp on the grounds of bribery and corrupt practices, and a cross petition on similar grounds was lodged against Mr.

Kinglake. Mr. Westropp was afterwards unseated. A writ being issued for another election, Mr. Walter Bagehot was introduced in the Liberal interest, Mr. George Patton being the Conservative. The latter was elected by a majority of seven.

In June, 1866, Mr. Patton was appointed Lord Advocate, of Scotland, and had to seek re-election at the hands of his constituents. He was not allowed a walk-over, the Liberals bringing forward Mr. Philip Vanderbyl, who ultimately won the election by a majority of 36.

On November 16, 1868, another general election took place. The sitting Members, Sir P. Vanderbyl and Mr. Kinglake, again came forward, while the Conservatives supported Messrs. Westropp and Charles William Gray. The following was the result of the election: — Kinglake, 731; Vanderbyl, 725; Westropp, 681; Gray, 650. The constituency at this election was more than doubled owing to the operations of the Representation of the People Act of the previous year, rising from 732 to 1,484. A petition was presented, resulting in both members being unseated. The judge reported that corrupt practices extensively prevailed in Bridgwater, whereupon a Royal Commission of Inquiry (Edward Plumer Price, Thomas Chisholm Anstey, and Charles Edward Coleridge) was appointed, and prosecuted inquiries in the town for nearly three months. The result was that the town was disfranchised, and it was fated that the borough of Bridgwater was never again to return Members to Parliament. When the recent Acts of Parliament extended the franchise, and redistributed the seats, Bridgwater gave its name to a county division. Of those voters who had been scheduled for corrupt practices but a handful remained, and they were again placed on the electoral register.

**ADDENDUM.**—Parliamentary elections in Bridgwater appear to have been conducted with much acrimonious feeling, especially previous to recent years. We have before us a pamphlet issued by James Bryant, Town Clerk of Bridgwater, after the election of May 12, 1741, giving a list of the voters, accompanied by "*observations*" — principally derogatory. It was brought out in answer to "*a spurious and incorrect copy of the poll, fraught with assertions false, defamatory and scurrilous.*" Numbers of the electors are described as "*disappointed place-hunters,*" others being designated as "*busy and impudent,*" the Rev.

John Coles, vicar, referred to as being  
“*exceeding busy and clamorous, unbecoming the  
cloth;*” another rev. gentleman (Rev. Henry  
Parsons) as “*a mighty discloser of his party’s  
secrets.*” The candidates were the Hon. Vere  
Poulett, George Dodington and Sir Charles  
Wyndham, the latter being defeated by 12  
votes. It is interesting to notice that out of a  
poll of 200 odd there were eight or ten “*peruke-makers*” paying scot and lot—  
indicative of a good trade being transacted by  
our ancestors in wigs.



Oldridge’s *Parliamentary History*, vol, iv.  
445, published 1816