

KEEN disappointment frequently lies behind the most promising Acts of Parliament. The Reform Bill of 1832 was hailed by thousands of English people as being for them a second *Magna Charta*, It was intended to destroy — as it did — certain glaring anomalies as to the nomination of Members at the sole whim of certain powerful individuals, and also to curb the parallel power of nomination by close corporations. But it was hoped that the Act would effect far greater things. It was devised to restrict "*the enormous expense of elections, which was principally caused by the open bribery and corruption which had almost become a recognised accompaniment of every contest.*" Such was Lord John Russell's ideal.

But the statesman had left out of his calculation one very strong element in the nature of men, at least, let us say, of Englishmen. Half-a-million new voters were added to the electorate. The time over which an election could be spread was reduced, proportionately to the size of the constituency. This, it was hoped, would reduce the costs of elections. But, in English elections, the idea prevailed that every voter possessed, in his vote, a tangibly and marketable asset. The new electors felt this just as much as did the older electorate. The Candidate, it was assumed, desired above all things to become a Member of Parliament. The electors possessed the power of making him, or not making him, a Member. Therefore, in order to induce the constituents to elect him, the Candidate was frequently willing to pay handsomely for their support, i.e., to bribe them. The presence of several Candidates not only added to the joy and bustle of the contest, it also tended to enhance the value of votes. What one Candidate would not give, another might. Of course there were always honourable and upright men who could never be bribed, and who looked upon their vote as a sacred trust inherent in their citizenship. There were such in Bridgwater, and in all electoral districts.

Yet it would be an affectation to assume that this high ideal ruled the minds of most English electors. It did not. The theory that an eager and grateful mass of citizens, resident within a certain

area, desired to send to Parliament a man who would represent their deeply-cherished convictions as to the policy of government, and as to remedial legislation which should make England a happier and better land, was not carried out in fact. Indeed, it could not be. In 1832 the number of people who could read was very limited, and the number who, having read their newspaper, were competent to advise upon the nation's policy, was very small. An increased franchise was probably necessary. The increase, however, did not greatly raise the proportion of what may be called competent voters. The ideals of many and many a one, it is to be feared, might have been squeezed within the dimensions of a quart pot.

From very early days the proceedings in Bridgwater at election times were of the most lively description, rising at intervals to uproarious outbursts. Nomination-day was a huge holiday, when men shouted themselves hoarse in favour of their own Candidate, and in opposition to his opponent. Free fights occurred ; they were a recognised part of the programme. Any *ruse*, trick, or practical joke which one side could play upon the other was freely and faithfully made use of. Voters were kept cooped up in public-houses, made drunk, and thus prevented from polling by the side whose interest it was that they should not poll. Other voters flatly refused to go to the poll at all unless a certain sum was paid to them, rising in amount as the close of the poll drew nigh. Many an election was thus turned in the last polling hour by a set of reprobate men who openly demanded to be bribed, and who not infrequently had received sums of money from both political parties. A strict count was kept of the state of the poll from hour to hour, and as the end drew near votes went up rapidly in price. The Balance men, as they were called, held the election in their own hands, and the longest purse determined the issue. If a really perfect Candidate had appeared in the town, an embodiment of all the virtues — social, political, and parliamentary — it would have been looked upon by many as a dire calamity if no contest should ensue. Perfect Candid-

ates were not wanted, but such as were of the deep-pocketed, free-handed, and long-suffering tribe of men, such as would spring an extra £500 at a critical moment, and keep alive the beautiful traditions of those days.

Innumerable stories are afloat as to the ways of old Bridgwater electors, and they are probably better known to the readers of this book than they are to the writer. There is, or was, a keen delight in those rough-and-tumble times. They contributed, no doubt, to the joys of men, in a certain way. There was generally a good-natured disposition on every man's part to accept any trick or dodge of any friend who might chance to be on the opposing side. The ingenuity of man was racked to outwit the enemy. It was looked upon as a fair and stand-up fight, hampered by almost no restrictions. *"How can we get our man in?"* That was the question. *"How can we get hold of voters from the other side?"* If money could not do it — as it generally could and did — then skill and artifice and plot and plan must be used. Pleasant gifts of *"samples of tea,"* or rolls of money, were in vogue; *"cartridges,"* or seductive bundles of sovereigns; beer and spirits *ad lib.* and *usque ad nauseam.* Agents of splendid skill were employed to distribute the money; a charming man seated in a darkened room handed purses to the astonished and upright recipients. Such a mysterious stranger, locally known as the Man in the Moon, held festival at one of the Inns, and was exceedingly generous to the free and uncorrupt voters of the Ancient Borough. They were merry days, as men say. Undoubtedly they were, but their merriment had its limit. Bribery came at last to rage too furiously. Every dog, it is alleged, has his day. But his day, however long and merry, comes at last to an end. *Après moi le déluge*, said Louis the Fourteenth. Some of the Bridgwater electors of those times might have said the same.

In so old a Borough as Bridgwater the electorate has naturally passed through many changes and developments. In 1816 the right of voting was vested in the inhabitants paying scot and lot. [See Editorial note below TW] But previously,

in 1768, the capital burgesses had tried to prevent the scot and lot voters from polling, claiming that privilege as their own sole right. This claim was rejected by Parliament, who decided that those who lived in the eastern and western divisions of the town could not vote, but that the payers of scot and lot within the limits of the Borough proper could do so. This decision involved, naturally, a very limited number of people then qualified to vote. The Reform Bill, of course, enlarged the electorate, and subsequent legislation, with the extension also of the Borough, again added considerably to the number of voters.

From quite early days petitions against the valid and legal return of Members to Parliament, representing Bridgwater, were made to the House of Commons. This happened at the end of the seventeenth century, in 1781, in 1803, and in 1808. Petitions, however, a hundred years ago were far less formidable weapons than they are to-day. The scrutiny was less rigorous; the consequences were presumably less severe; the matter dropped more speedily out of sight. In a word, the Press at that time reached but a small proportion of the people. The Schoolmaster was not yet abroad. After the passing of the Reform Act thirteen elections for the Borough were carried through. Only four petitions, however, were made during that long period of time (1832 to 1868), and only two of these were brought to trial. These were in 1865 and 1868, and both petitions resulted in the unseating of the Members whose seats were thus challenged.

"So far as we have been able to gather any specific information," said the three Commissioners at the famous Inquiry of 1869, *"touching the several elections which have come under our review, we see no reason to withhold our concurrence in the opinion expressed by every witness who has spoken as to the comparative state of morality in Bridgwater at the different periods in question. It has never varied. Whether in the old times, when the areas of place and population were narrow, . . . and the constituency small; or at the present time when all these conditions appear to have been extended to the uttermost; or in the intervening period; the proportion of*

local corruption has been always the same. It is always three-fourths, at least, of the actual constituency who are said to be hopelessly addicted to the taking or seeking of bribes, and who shew by their conduct that the imputation is well deserved : whilst, of the remainder, a very large part, perhaps by far the largest, are addicted to the giving or offering or negotiating of bribes. Rank and station appear to make no difference. Neither do we find that the needy are more corrupt than the well-to-do, nor the latter less prone to corruption." This, indeed, constituted a very stern rebuke.

But it is necessary to go back a little in order to discover what forces were at work which in Bridgwater eventually culminated in the disaster of 1869. They were numerous ; they were complicated ; and some of them need not be referred to at all. In 1837 a bye-election took place to fill the seat vacated by Mr. Leader, who had resigned. Mr. Broadwood was the Conservative Candidate, and Mr. Richard Brinsley Sheridan represented the Liberal cause. After a terrific contest Mr. Broadwood won by fifty-eight votes. *"There is no doubt whatever that corrupt practices very largely prevailed at that election,"* said the Commissioners in their report. On the 23rd of May Mr. Broadwood's return was petitioned against, and no defence was set up. Whatever might have happened was obliterated by the demise of the Crown, William IV dying on June 20th, thus, according to the practice of that day, rendering necessary a general election.

At this election, which was held on July 26th, 1837, Mr. Broadwood and Mr. Courtenay, Conservatives, were elected, the Liberal Candidates, Mr. Sheridan and Sir T. B. Lethbridge, receiving but seven votes between them. Again a petition was sent up, but nothing came of it. The matter dropped out, and nothing was done. In 1841, at the next election, Mr. Broadwood and Mr. Forman were returned, and *"much money was spent in the contest by both sides."* In 1847 three Candidates offered themselves : Mr. C. J. K. Tynte and Mr. Serjeant Gazelee, Liberals, and Mr. Broadwood as a Conservative. Messrs. Tynte and Broadwood were returned. *"The bribing,"* says the report, *"was extensive as of old, and*

upon the accustomed scale." Both Members, however, retained their seats, since no petition was laid. In 1852 there were five Candidates, three Liberals and two Conservatives ; and Mr. Tynte and Mr. Follett (one for each party) were elected. At the elections of 1857 and 1859 Mr. Tynte and Mr. Alexander William Kinglake were returned. Of the former of these two elections the report says that *"no petition was presented against the return, although there would have been no difficulty whatever in setting it aside."* Of the latter it is recorded that a petition was lodged against the return on the ground of bribery, but *"was withdrawn at an early stage."*

Then followed the events of 1865. Mr. Tynte had announced his intention of not again becoming a Candidate, and his party was represented in the contest by Mr. Kinglake, the sitting Member, and Sir John Shelley. Mr. Westropp, a Conservative who had been defeated at the election of 1859, again came forward. Sir John Shelley, it is said, exacted a solemn pledge from a very active individual in the town that there should be no expenses which were illegal, yet during his canvass *"he constantly met with the reply from voters that they should vote for 'Mr. Most.'"* Mr. Westropp and Mr. Kinglake were elected. A petition was promptly presented against the former for bribery and other corrupt practices, and a cross petition was also lodged demurring to Mr. Kinglake's retention of his seat. Mr. Westropp was unseated, and Mr. Kinglake retained his position. This voidance led to yet another election, when Mr. Patton, formerly Solicitor-General for Scotland, defeated Mr. Walter Bagehot, a Conservative, by seven votes. However, in June, 1866, Mr. Patton was made Lord Advocate for Scotland, which office necessitated his seeking re-election by his constituents. He did so, being opposed by Mr. Philip Vanderbyl, who gained the seat, as the report announced, *"by the most unblushing bribery,"* by thirty-six votes. Thus, from 1866 to 1868, the Borough was represented in Parliament by Mr. Kinglake and Mr. Vanderbyl. In 1868 a general election came.

This, the last election ever held for the

Borough of Bridgwater, was a notable one in every way, and it is rather humiliating to read over the story of what transpired thereat. Mr. Westropp and Mr. Gray, a London merchant, stood for the Conservatives; Mr. Kinglake and Mr. Vanderbyl for the Liberals. Both the Liberal Candidates were elected; Mr. Gray was at the bottom of the poll. "Shortly after the election a petition was threatened on behalf of the Conservatives," the Commissioners said in their Report, "and every conceivable means was adopted by the Liberal solicitors either to suppress it altogether or compromise it at whatever cost." But this was, presumably, found to be impossible.

Mr. Justice Blackburn opened his Court at the Town Hall, Bridgwater, on the 23rd of February, 1869, and the trial lasted four days. Its result was a foregone conclusion. "Counsel were perfectly well advised," said the Judge at the conclusion, "when they advised their clients that the *prima facie* case of which evidence had been given, could not be rebutted or overset, and, consequently, that the seat was lost." Thus both Members were unseated. But worse than that lay behind. "I must report to the House," continued the Judge, "that in my opinion corrupt practices have extensively prevailed in the borough at the last election. What the House of Commons may do upon that, it will be for the House to consider." Thus the two Liberal Members ceased to be Members; they were the last of their race, for the Borough. The Judge had spoken out his mind; it remained for the House of Commons to take up the case, or to let it lie.

Mr. Justice Blackburn made his report to the Speaker on the 26th of February, 1869. It was of such a nature that the House was bound to take action upon it. This was done. A Bribery Commission was appointed to go into the whole proceedings of the last Bridgwater election, and of the entire range of electoral practices within the town. Mr. Edwin Plumer Price, Q.C., Mr. Thomas Chisholm Anstey, and Mr. Charles Edward Coleridge were sent down as Commissioners. They opened their inquiry at the Town Hall on the 23rd of August, 1869. One of the sentences in the preliminary statement made by the Chief

Commissioner must have struck terror into the hearts of some Bridgwater men. "We have power," he said, "to summon before us all persons whom we may believe can give any information to us respecting corrupt practices and the mode in which elections have been conducted in this borough. We have the same power of punishing for contempt of court, for refusal to give evidence, which any of Her Majesty's Superior Courts have."

Then the long story was opened out, and the past history was dug up. The Commissioners sat in judgment for forty-seven days, and the evidence which was taken before them fills over eleven hundred large pages of printed matter. The revelations can only be described as being terrible. No one knew whose turn might come next. No one who had even dabbled in political corruption could feel safe. Those — and there were some — who had wallowed in it and profited by it and made a science of its theory and practice, must have cowered under the long-drawn-out agony of those forty-seven days. It is impossible to record the proceedings of that Commission. A veil must be drawn over it, and the veil had better not be lifted. Some reputations were tarnished, some surprises were revealed, and many men were saddened. So far as regards uprightness and moral force and integrity of public life, it was the saddest epoch in all the history of Bridgwater. It was a sadder time than when the Castle was stormed, and the town besieged. These might be built up again, but the fabric which the Commission shattered could never be rebuilt.

"We find," the Commissioners reported to her Majesty in their long official document dated the 20th of December, 1869, "that corrupt practices have extensively prevailed at the last election and at every preceding election for the Borough of Bridgwater into which we have inquired, up to and inclusive of the earliest in date, that is to say, the general election of the 30th April to 3rd May 1831." It was a startling and a terrible disclosure, and it can rarely have been paralleled, one would imagine, in the history of Election Commissions. It sealed the Parliamentary fate of the Borough, which was disfranchised for its evil doings, and thus the long roll of its

Chapter XV Disenfranchisement

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

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Members of Parliament came to an end. Johannes de la Weye was the first, in 1295. For five hundred and seventy-four years the town had been represented in the Great Council of the nation. Now it was all ended. Bridgwater gave its name, afterwards, to a County Division, and that is the only remaining relic of its enfranchised days.

The stories still current in the town of the fun and frolic which took place at the old election times ; the drinking, the practical joking, the boisterous mirth and the riotous excitement, are numerous enough. The heavy bribes which then were current, the money which wily voters could extort from too willing Candidates — or the agents of Candidates — with ease, the whole rollicking irresponsibility of the period, strike the thoughtful mind with a curious sense of unfitness and of humiliation. When voters treat an election as a huge revel, and clever men connected with its conduct look upon it as a means of self-aggrandisement, it is infinitely sad. Those who fostered such methods, or even assented to them, now prove to have been the enemies of their town. When the fun and the drinking and the bribery are over, men have to sit down and count the cost. Bridgwater is now paying the bill of those unwise ones who ran up the long score, and the price is. Disfranchisement. And unhappily the debt is one which cannot be completely paid.

Bridgwater was by no means singular in her electoral methods. Many other Boroughs were every whit as bad. But they somehow slipped through the meshes of the net which captured our ancient town. In 1685 we kept our charter, although we took Monmouth's side, while a neighbouring town which got into trouble lost its charter for some scores of years. But in 1869 the turn of the wheel came. We lost our Representation in the House of Commons, while our neighbours — who were of like passions with ourselves — got off scot free.

assessment formerly laid on subjects in Great Britain according to their ability to pay.

Edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich, 23/07/2020

Editorial note

Definition of scot and lot — a parish