

THE AFFAIRS OF A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN 1780-1790

THE PARSONS CORRESPONDENCE

(Gloucestershire Records Office, D 214/F 1)

The little village of Kemerton lies at the foot of Bredon Hill and even now no main road goes through it or its immediate neighbours, which are almost hidden among rich fields and fine trees. Until 1931 it was just within the Gloucestershire border and Tewkesbury is the nearest market town, some four miles away as the crow flies.

In 1757 John Parsons succeeded his father as Lord of the Manor and in addition to managing his property he had a solicitor's practice with extensive business in North Gloucestershire and South Worcestershire. The family acquired a coat of arms, which was used on a monument in the Church in 1785, and had purchased the Lygon share of the manorial rights some years after 1608, but when they became sole owners is not clear. Even then the Parsons were not newcomers in the village, as two successive marriages were recorded in the second half of the sixteenth century. Over more than two centuries they had prospered in a modest way.

John Parsons put aside the letters he received, methodically noting on the outside the dates and names of his correspondents. The series of letters begins before 1780 but there are about a hundred between then and the beginning of 1791, which provide the material for this study. These letters are concerned with personal rather than professional affairs and reveal more of Parsons' relationships and activities than of his character. His friends did not hesitate to enlist his help and sometimes this must have put him to considerable trouble, whether in buying a horse or finding a servant.

During those eleven years, forty four people wrote to Parsons and only four of them wrote more than three times. The thirty letters from Charles Edwin of Clearwell, his brother-in-law, cover the whole period and are very informative. He gives the impression of one not easily ruffled, although he was a fairly busy man. Once, in 1780, he was hard-pressed as he could not find time to go to the Epsom races. He has a gentle but distinctive sense of humour, writing for instance "I lost my directions as well as my wife." By contrast Oliver, an army ensign, wrote seven letters. He had some claim on Parsons which was known to both so well it is not mentioned.

These are the begging letters of a frequently impoverished young man who finds himself beset by bills. In 1788 he asked for "as much money as you can conveniently spare" - and by return of post. Five letters from James Martin are largely devoted to parliamentary affairs, and four from J. W. Franklen of Llanvihangle (in Monmouthshire) are dominated by agricultural matters. He was a prosperous gentleman farmer, keen to improve his methods, and expressed the wish that his son would break his journey to Oxford at Kemerton, and there learn from Parsons "the noble and most useful and ancient art of farming." That Parsons' brother wrote only twice and his sister once is more indicative of continuous personal contact than estrangement in the family.

In spite of the quantity of miscellaneous detail the absence of important family information is apparent in the letters and can perhaps be attributed to the frequent meetings these people enjoyed, in each other's homes and less frequently in London and Gloucester, where news was exchanged. For instance, Edwin wrote "I was glad to hear by your friend Smith that you are so well...." The one letter from Harding of Monmouth underlines the importance of verbal exchange of news. He wrote to congratulate Parsons on his second marriage as he had heard of it belatedly from Edwin. This is the only reference to the event in the correspondence. Such meetings depended on frequent and sometimes long journeys about the country and there are constant references to such comings and goings, especially between Clearwell and Kemerton. There is nothing unusual about Edwin's report that "We arrived here (Tolworth, from Tunbridge) all on Monday last, where we intend remaining till the beginning of next month when we intend going to Bath." Even relatively minor matters involved time-consuming journeys; Parsons was notified of the meeting to elect an apothecary at Gloucester Infirmary. There were two meetings, the first "being undecided"; the appointment was postponed for a week and one of the candidates wrote informing Parsons of this and obsequiously asked for the continued "protection of my friends."

"As dogs chiefly occupy the thoughts of a country squire..." is both the opening of a letter and much more than that, it confidently sums up the eighteenth century gentleman, busy with his dogs, horses and property, incidentally keeping his lesser neighbours in their place and attending to the affairs of the county. During 1783 Parsons was in correspondence with the Duke of Beaufort and Rowland Berkeley about the purchase of hounds. In the one case Parsons was acting as intermediary for some mutual acquaintance who had made overtures for the transaction at Cirencester Races. Selling dogs was not done lightly and Beaufort's huntsman would "not send them unless definitely directed." Berkeley was more breezy "always happy to help another sportsman" but Parsons had to send "a careful

Person" for them. But Edwin reported the price of dogs at Tattersalls was so low they were being sold for glove-leather. It follows that presents of venison and partridges were mentioned from time to time, and that race meetings conveniently combined sport with an occasion for informal business. The Assemblies held at the time of the Cheshire races were "the first line for gaiety and respectability", and Edwin found it incumbent upon him to go to the Lydney races.

The serious tone and precision with which business affairs are discussed does something to indicate a lively appreciation of the importance of property, in all its ramifications, which was the foundation of the social and political dominance of the landed classes. Legal claims, the sale or supervision of houses and land, the transfer of money, niceties of interest payments and the privileges of the Lord of the Manor all called for Parsons' attention. The nature of some of the legal matters is a mystery as the letters take them up where conversation had left them. More informative than usual was Edwin's reference to a delay in the courts which was due to "Bolton's counsel's faults." A trying situation was explained when Edwin was having trouble with a "flashy" gentleman who would neither pay promptly for furniture nor be definite about when he would return it. The same letter showed anxiety to sell estates in Northamptonshire to pay off a bond with the proceeds. Edwin's domestic expenses had outstripped his means as he said they needed to "live within themselves" and cut down the expense of entertaining by restricting it to fewer people. Perhaps the London house he was about to move into in October 1780 had brought about this situation. Retrenchment did not lead him to forego a pipe of Madeira, a hogshead of claret and the plan to buy an expensive pair of horses (£80-£100).

Parsons heard one of his own houses was in a state of collapse and the poor were helping themselves to the timber. He attended to the payment of rent and transfer of a farm. One letter relates entirely to the particulars of a house and estate of 170 acres at Chacely which the owner wished to sell. He considered it would "suit any gentleman of moderate fortune," by which he meant £2,000 - £3,000 to spend. The house had the advantage of a turnpike within a mile and a fine outlook with more than twenty churches and the River Severn to be seen. There were preferential rights of common at Corse Lawn and a family pew in the Church.

Two letters give quite another view of the man of property. Nind of Overbury, a farmer, had to write an apology,

but at the same time he made it clear he considered that he was the more injured party. Nind had inadvertently pursued one of his own hares across the parish boundary into Parsons' territory. He took the opportunity to point out that in the past he had raised no objection when Parsons' game-keeper had beaten across his land. Though Nind was implying a measure of equality which Parsons could hardly deny even if he found it distasteful, a deferential distance was kept in the letter by the recognition that "Gentlemen have a wright to have their favourites and act accordingly." Nind signed himself "Your obedient (but unworthy) servant." The second letter was from Dudfield of Kemerton who was probably a small farmer or cottager of the village. He had suffered a series of wrongs at Parsons' hands which he felt had been totally overlooked and he could stand the situation no longer, but he made no demands for restitution as he was socially inferior. One of his dogs had been shot, six of his ducks had been killed, presumably by Parsons' dog, which had just stolen the family joint from his table! In each of these cases Parsons had offended against the accepted forms of the social order.

By the end of the eighteenth century, farming was not simply a matter of age-old routine for those who could afford improvements. It was an absorbing practice as well as a profitable interest. Franklen of Llanvihangle suggested to Parsons they should exchange seed "by way of experiment." He had in mind two or three bags of barley and early peas. He was anxious to secure the services of an English shepherd so that the sheep would be folded on turnips in winter and the fallows in the summer, instead of being left to roam as was the custom of his neighbourhood. Parsons had already had a hand in his purchase of a double plow and was his guide, philosopher and friend on farming matters. He made the choice of the shepherd for him and was later consulted about the terms of service, which amounted to 8/- per week with travelling expenses in addition. In Franklen's opinion the good points of a farm he had to let were supplies of limestone and coal, a nearby harbour and no tithe to pay.

For those who could afford it and had a taste for the fashionable social round there were Assemblies and Race meetings up and down the country, the Opera in London, and Bath, which catered for varied tastes; the London season is not mentioned even though the

gentlemen were there in strength for the parliamentary sessions. George Wyndham, Parsons' nephew, and a gay young spark who found "the scarlet is the only colour to attract the females, and had I remained much longer (in Monmouth) you would have heard of my conveying a sea nymph to Gretna Green," enjoyed himself "exceedingly" in Bath where he stayed a fortnight by which time he had finished his "Bank". He and his party took a house, which was usual; they went to a ball or play each night and there was "no mean living..... but all liberality and good humour." Another correspondent liked Bath so well he would have been happy to spend the rest of his days there. His purpose was to find a cure for violent spasms and pains, "but he was not so ill that he could not enjoy the comforts of a hostess who kept them like fighting cocks." There were the pleasant formalities of taking tea and successfully following up an introduction by leaving cards and each waiting upon the other. He commented with interest on the extravagance of the ladies' clothes, "great coats something like a coachman's at the cape which are three or four deep, the other part resembles much the old Joseph that my mother used to wear forty years back buttoned down to the toe." Edwin was twice reported to be about to go to Bath, and once this was because of his rheumatism. There was another letter from a writer in Bristol where husband and wife were taking the waters, but their thoughts were occupied by such domestic matters as having ten or twelve tons of coal ordered at home, and the cauliflower and broccoli in the garden. Their lodgings in Bristol were two and a half guineas a week and coal there was 14/- or more a ton.

Many of the letters give details of everyday life. There was no effective police force and the difficulty of securing any action was often acute. While Parsons was away from home he heard that a newly hung fitch of bacon had been stolen from a loft above his stables. The writer had tried, unsuccessfully, to find three gentlemen in Tewkesbury and then was quite at a loss as to what to do next. There is the occasional reference to home brewing of cider, curing fitches of bacon and sending such supplies to each other. Goods were often sent by the regular wagon services which operated from inns, or the "market boat" from Gloucester to Tewkesbury. Even now there are some items which can only be readily obtained in London and a few other cities, but at the end of the eighteenth century this difficulty was more apparent in what we should regard as rather more everyday commodities. Parsons bought port from a London supplier with a brother in Gloucester who sent him a firm

request to pay a bill for £16. 9. 0 which was outstanding. His brother sent on request twelve flasks of oil, capers and anchovies, and on another occasion strange medicines like "Godfrey's Jesuits Bark in Powder". Parsons complained to a smart London tailor, recommended by Wyndham, that his charges were too high, but he had little satisfaction as no significant reduction was made. Edwin was more successful when he went in person to pay a bill for Parsons in London, for "your wife's headdress."

The people who wrote these letters took the presence of estate and domestic staff for granted and their horses received more frequent anxious thought. Only those subordinates who had some particular responsibilities were mentioned with few exceptions. Edwin's cook died and an unsatisfactory man-servant had to be replaced. He had a **steward**, "worthy Terrett" on whom he relied most justifiably as his few letters show. At other times Edwin was in need of gardeners. Parsons mentions a gardener and Blomer, who wrote about the stolen bacon, was probably the man he normally left in charge at home. These people made possible the lives of gentlemen who were sometimes heavily involved in public affairs. However, the general run of such matters was pleasantly varied, not too strenuous and yet kept them in touch with each other and local developments.

Parsons was an annual subscriber to the Gloucester Infirmary and in 1787 he was sent a reminder that his two guinea subscription was overdue. The Infirmary fund was opened in 1756 and received such wide support that medical services began almost immediately and a fine new building in Southgate Street was soon underway. The purpose was to provide treatment for those, nominated by subscribers, who could not afford to pay for medical attention. Subscribers of two guineas or more were governors and managed the charity. Parsons was canvassed for his support by a surgeon and an apothecary when appointments were to be made. The erection of the new county gaol, opened in 1784, was also due to the determination of enlightened local opinion, led by the Justices, and Edwin mentioned that he intended going to Gloucester to a meeting about the gaol which had been advertised in the newspaper.

By 1780 the desire to improve the state of the roads and rivers, and to construct **canals** was in full swing. The landed gentry

were interested both for the benefits they could derive from more convenient transport and for the need to guard their property rights. They even hoped to profit financially by investing in such schemes. Parsons belonged to a Road Society, which in giving notice of a meeting, was precise about the time of dinner ordered at the Red Lion, Beckford, but not about any agenda. He received a printed notice of a meeting of the Severn Humane Society, and an invitation to a committee to oppose proposed legislation for the construction of locks and weirs on the Severn. In 1790 he was approached with a view to his taking command of the Winchcombe Infantry; a gentleman was required but he was assured the real work could be left to the Lieutenants. All this varied business was directed by the men who were vigorous in the political management of their county, securing their commanding position in every significant respect.

There are references to elections in 1780, 1783, 1787 and 1789, but only on the first occasion is it really clear there was a general election when local party feeling ran so high that a very great effort was made to organise the campaign and thirteen letters relate to it. There were general elections in 1784 and 1790, but there is surprisingly little evidence of them as they made no local stir.

The first definite intimation of the 1780 election comes in four letters written between 2nd and 9th September. Guise of Rendcomb sent a courtly request for Parsons' vote in the county, his support was sought for Lord Ward's "interest" in the City of Worcester and for the candidates of Mr. Chester's connection in the City of Gloucester. As a Freeman of Gloucester, Parsons was asked by Webb, one of the candidates, to act quickly with his neighbouring Freemen. He seems to have had the right to vote in three or four places, thanks to the distribution of his property.

The county contest only became significant when Mr. Chester, one of the two sitting members, died about 12th December, and only then was Parsons canvassed by his successor, Mr. Dutton.

Edwin, who was re-elected at Cardiff, wrote of the prospect of a "warm contest" in Gloucestershire between

George Berkeley and James Dutton. The latter "stands upon Chester's interest." Thus the death of an established member could be responsible for a sudden and vigorous campaign, and this also happened in Gloucester City in 1789. However, in the end Berkeley withdrew - "Huzza, Dutton for ever!". He had not had sufficiently influential support organised, the Duke of Beaufort was against him and the rival force of Lord Berkeley was not expected to interfere. Berkeley's agent and helpers refused to stir themselves as their previous expenses had not been fully met. No chances were taken as a long letter shows how voters were carefully canvassed, by letters to freeholders, through the post and by hand, and special attention was paid "to some of the principal persons." Parsons had some responsibility for this in Hell Corner(!) where he was known. The influence of principal persons is recognised in the report that "Lady Mill and Snell (of Guiting) have agreed the Freeholders shall go according to their own will.... they will all go together and whoever can make Giles Carter will have a fair chance for the rest." Mr. Dutton made a great effort to establish himself "attended by great numbers of gentlemen" and was ultimately returned.

The last one hears of the 1780 election is in two urgent letters asking for payment of expenses, one being for chaises, presumably to bring in outlying voters from Worcestershire. Mr. Chester's previous election expenses had not been fully paid by January 1780 and he had already spent almost £18,000. Dutton's expenses at the end of the year must have been very heavy as there was so much activity on his behalf. Edwin paid £1,100 for his expenses and in 1790 Martin expressed the view that such expenditure was bad for all concerned, which is hardly surprising.

There were disputed elections in Monmouthshire and Tewkesbury in 1789 and 1790 but neither Wyndham nor Martin seemed in danger of losing their hold. Wyndham's 1787 campaign at Monmouth had been positively enjoyable, and provided the opportunity to make a great impression on the ladies.

Singularly little light is thrown upon the hotly contested elections of 1780 and 1789 in Gloucester where Parsons had varied connections as well as a vote. Passing reference was made to the possibility the Sheriff might interfere to end the 1780 county contest by an arrangement with the City to provide

Berkeley with a seat. This was never seriously taken up and the county Tory interest was not in favour of it. None of the four candidates' names nor the result were mentioned. An invitation to a dinner (price 2/6d) on 4th February 1790 at the Bell to celebrate the election of Mr. Pitt was to mark the end of the 1789 campaign which the Tory interest helped to win, carrying one of the city seats by one vote for Mr. Pitt, against the traditional influence of the Duke of Norfolk, Lord North and the Corporation. There is no other evidence in the letters of what must have been an unusually lively campaign.

Although Parsons received letters from six different Members of Parliament as well as the even more influential leaders of county politics like Lord Ward in Worcestershire and the Duke of Beaufort in Gloucestershire, no policy was ever mentioned. But a copy of verses making a political attack on Fox and the Regency Bill by Richard Hill Esq. is included among the letters. The strength of the personal associations is indicated by the report on the Gloucestershire Anniversary meeting held in London where some fifty people were present including the county members, Mr. Estcourt and the Duke of Beaufort. Edwin went to Badminton for Lord Worcester's birthday and wrote "I shall do everything in my power to support my benefactor, the Duke of Beaufort, and am glad to find Dutton takes that part."

Even more obviously misleading is the evidence of national affairs as they emerge in various letters. The general background of events was always assumed and all that is provided is the immediate detail as it affected the writer; "had to damnd long nights at the house" at the time of the Westminster Election, which Edwin mentioned by name. He supplied some graphic information about the Gordon Riots, but without identifying them. The fact that Lord Sandwich narrowly avoided death by taking refuge in the Treasury was as relevant for the interested contemporary as the presence of soldiers in the park (Hyde Park) with orders to fire, and the existence of a mob of 20,000, burning and pulling down houses. Only a letter from Powell Snell of 1781 gives any indication England was at war, as he was stationed at Okehampton expecting an invasion with orders "chiefly not to risk a general battle." Active service had created personal difficulties, which were of much greater moment. The end of the war in 1783 passed without comment. Oliver's military career took him to various politically troublesome places; he was about to embark for Jamaica

with recruits in 1785 and was stationed in Dublin in 1789 where the troops were used to disperse an unco-operative populace after a bull-baiting. The troops were called "the bloody 64th" as a result. International tensions and Irish unrest were passed over, but the procedure of buying an army commission from a broker is fully explained. This absence of any order of priorities other than the personal provides fresh and vivid moments of insight into the lives of the writers. One must not make the mistake of concluding that they failed to take the great issues of the day seriously, but rather that they mulled them over in company.