

ELECTORAL CORRUPTION AT GLOUCESTER IN 1880

by S. Smith

In the opinion of the Gloucester Journal of the 9th November 1880 "Secret voting does not prevent bribery". Bribery, at election time, had been rife throughout the country; in Gloucester it was rampant.

On the last day of the enquiry into the Gloucester Election Petition 1881, Mr. John Bridge Aspinall Q.C. commented on the people of Gloucester: "A large number of them have had to make disclosures which must have been very disagreeable to them, and the remainder of them to have heard disclosures made which prove the existence in their midst, although they may not have been aware of it, of a state of things which they think probably not creditable to their city, which, therefore, must have grieved them very much, but still, throughout the city, in every quarter there has been nothing but courtesy shown to the Commissioners. With regard to what I may call the guilty portion of the constituency they are at least entitled to one merit, and that is the merit of candour, because, even from the first I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, the whole of the people, on both political sides, who have been implicated in bribery both high and low, have shown very great candour.

They did not wait until they found it was impossible to do otherwise, and it would not have been so creditable to them if we had been obliged to say that only from the moment when they found that nothing could be concealed had they been candid. That is not the fact, because we think they have been candid from the beginning, and judging from what we can see from the proceedings of other Commissions, it does not appear to us that there is any city in which corrupt practices have taken place where, upon the arrival of the Commission the people, both of the richer classes, and of the poorer classes, who have been concerned in the bribery, have been so frank and so honest in telling the whole story about their own misdeeds. Therefore, to that extent we can give credit to the corrupt portion of the constituency of Gloucester."

The candidates for the City of Gloucester at the election of the 1 April 1880 were:-

Thomas Robinson of Longford Park, aged 53. He was a corn merchant, a member of the Town Council 1857-68, and was mayor in 1865, 1866, 1872, and 1874. He was made a justice of the peace in 1857, and was knighted at Windsor in 1894. His nomination as a Liberal was put forward by William Edwin Price, known as Major Price, the son of William Philip Price.

Charles James Monk, also a Liberal, was proposed by Sir William Francis Guise Bt. and William Philip Price. Monk was the only son of the Rt. Rev. Henry Monk, Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol. He was 56, and lived at Eversleigh House in Wiltshire. He was chancellor of the diocese of Bristol 1855 and Gloucester 1859. He resigned both these posts in 1884. He was a director of the Severn Canal Company and a Justice of the Peace.

William Killigrew Wait, Conservative, was proposed by Issac Slater and Charles Henry Clutterbuck. He was a native of Bristol, a merchant of that City, and Mayor in 1869. He was a justice of the peace in 1870. He was 54.

Benjamin St. John Ackers, the second Conservative, was proposed by the same gentleman as his colleague. He was a country gentleman, residing at Prinknash Park, about seven miles from Gloucester.

Apart from Mr. Ackers all candidates had previous experience of parliamentary elections in Gloucester. Robinson was unsuccessful in the by-election of 1873, did not stand in 1874, topped the poll in 1880, but was unseated on petition. Then in 1885 he was re-elected, also in 1886 and 1892. Charles James Monk first represented Gloucester in 1859, but this election, on petition was declared void and it was not until 1865 that Monk again became M.P. for Gloucester. He was re-elected in 1874 and 1880. After that he did not contest the seat again until 1892, when he stood as Liberal Unionist and was defeated by his former running mate., Robinson. But in 1895 Robinson was not a candidate, and Monk once more became M.P. for Gloucester. William Killigrew Wait was first elected M.P. for Gloucester at the by-election of 1873, and again in 1874. He contested the seat in 1880 and 1885, but was defeated each time. The election of 1880 seems to be the first and last appearance of Benjamin St. John Ackers on the political battlefield.

After the Conservatives petitioned against Mr. Robinson at the 1880 election and he lost his seat, Mr. Baron Pollock and Mr. Justice Hawkins, who heard the petition, reported to the Speaker of the House that they, "are not satisfied that the abandonment of the case against Mr. Monk was not the result of an arrangement made with a view to withdrawing from them the evidence of the extensive corrupt practices which there is reason to believe had taken place at that election". As a result the full Commission was appointed.

"Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen, Defender of the Faith" appointed John Bridge Aspinall Q.C., William Robert McConnell, barrister, and Francis William Raikes, barrister, to act as Commissioners at the enquiry.

After preliminary investigation by the Commissioners' secretary, the Commission began taking evidence on the 11 October 1880, and ceased on 10 January 1881, a total of thirty six days. The Commissioners' report was completed on the 22 March 1881.

While pursuing their enquiries the Commissioners named 1,159 voters who received bribes, though 1,916 admitted being bribed, and it was estimated that there was a further 840, making a total of 2,756. The actual bribing was done by 222 persons, this number included those acting for both political parties. On the Conservative side, those who broke the law by being employed and paid by the party and also voting numbered 23, and of the Liberals 81. The number of witnesses called approximated 2,460.

The purpose of the bribery was as much to get the voters to the poll, as to ensure they voted for the party who bribed them.

Many received bribes from both sides and then voted as they saw fit. "To get people to the poll", was an ordinary expression used in Gloucester to denote bribery.

The places where bribery took place were called "sugar shops" and the man who doled out the bribe was "the man in the moon". A brick would be taken out the wall between two rooms, and the "man in the moon" would sit concealed in the inner room. Someone in the outer room would check the voter's name on the voters' list, and would give each one a slip of paper, which he would pass through the hole in the wall and receive, in return, his bribe. Mr. Punch published a cartoon, depicting this type of bribery "in our free and glorious elections".

There were six known Liberal sugar shops and seventeen Conservative. The Liberals exercised more care in disbursing their money, having the better organisation. The Conservatives started handing out bribes haphazardly the night before the poll. Those supporters who did the actual bribing expected to be reimbursed by the candidates after the election was over and done with.

Prominent man on both sides, John Pitchford, Town Councillor, A.G. Jones J.P. (Liberals), R. Potter, T. Taynton and P. Cooke (Conservatives), tried hard to stop the petition, realising an enquiry would reveal the state of corruption throughout Gloucester. The Liberals would not agree to a compromise as it meant losing one of their M.P.s. An interesting side note is that while the detailed investigation into the national election was taking place, the municipal elections fell due. All the members of the City Corporation who were deeply involved in bribery were returned as Councillors.

The Liberal Party organisation was much better than the Conservative. An association called the Liberal Hundred had been formed. The aims were to promote the political interests and to guide the policy of the Liberal Party, to ensure the efficient registration of Liberal voters and to arrange for the consideration and discussion of questions affecting the policy of the Liberal Party in general.

Henry Mousell, head of the firm of Mousell Bros., a Town Councillor, and a very excitable gentleman, made up his mind the Liberals should be elected and supplied an initial £1,300 for bribery. He thought the Liberal Party would approve his action if they won the election, but as a result of the enquiry he felt he would be lucky if he recovered 10s. in the £. He disbursed large sums of money in sovereigns and half sovereigns to various members of the Liberal Committee for the purpose of bribery, but he did not ask for any account to be kept, so that he could see how his money was being spent. At the enquiry the following question was put to him: "Assuming the population of Gloucester is corrupt, you must be a perfect God-send to them". He replied "I have been a very great fool". In all he disbursed sums much in excess of his original £1,300.

It was the contention of the Liberal organisers that they wished to fight a clean election. When they had done this in 1873 they had lost. According to the Gloucester Journal of 16 October 1880 the Liberals, knowing how corrupt the Tories were

sure to be felt compelled to resort to corruption both in the 1874 and the 1880 elections. In fairness to Mr. Monk it should be stated that he wished his election campaign to be conducted as a separate entity, but, because of the formation of the Liberal Hundred it was impossible to keep the campaigns of the two candidates separate. The only move that could be made to protect Monk was to appoint George Lewis as his expenses agent, under instructions not to disburse any monies unless authorised to do so by either Guise, Lucy or Price, three of his close friends.

As against this, Jabez Franklin, Conservative, giving evidence maintained that in 1874 the Liberals stole a march on the Tories by commencing bribery early, at the rate of £1 per vote.

"As I was going down to Sherbourne Street room some men were waiting who said 'Hullo master, you are late. They have been at it these hours'. I said, 'Oh have they?' They said, 'Yes, what is the figure today?' I said, 'Well, half a sovereign'. 'Oh', they said, 'we can go across to the corner shop and get a quid". Therefore, Franklin began bribing the day before the election in 1880, and set up a sugar shop in his own house. He was somewhat overwhelmed by the numbers who turned up.

"At last they did come, rather thick, like a pack of hounds, and I was obliged to shut the doors and go to cover." Jabez Franklin admitted to bribing 500 at £1 a piece. An anonymous and confiding Conservative of Clifton Bristol, advanced £1,500 and never asked for it back. (Mr. Wait, Conservative candidate, lived at Clifton.)

The Commissioners did not excuse Mr. Wait, who had previous experience of bribery in 1874, but tended to absolve Mr. Ackers, because of his lack of experience, and refusal to repay those who had bribed on his behalf. They probed deeply into the question of the great discrepancy between the published accounts of each candidate and the actual amount expended on his behalf. Differences of as much as £2,000 were revealed, and this probably did not reveal the whole. Another line the Commissioners pursued was the names of those bribed and those who did the bribing.

The evidence taken was, in many ways, repetitive. The Gloucester Journal hoped the barrister members of the Commission would bring the enquiry to a speedy close, as they received only five guineas a day, and after the end of the Christmas vacation would resume their normal, and far more lucrative work. Apart from failing to see what useful purpose the enquiry could serve the Journal, on behalf of the people of Gloucester, was much worried about the cost of the whole thing. An estimate in the Journal on the 2 October 1880 was that each day cost £100. The enquiry lasted 36 days, making an estimated cost of £3,600. At that time a penny rate in Gloucester produced about £450. From this it will be seen that the equivalent of an eightpenny rate would be needed to cover the cost of the Commission.

As a result of the findings of the Commission no writ was issued for the holding of a by-election to replace Mr. Robinson who had been deprived of his seat, and from then on Gloucester returned only one member to Parliament instead of two as formerly.

Nearly all the men prominent in organising bribery, and being party to corruption were men of eminent standing the the public life of Gloucester. A last quotation from the Gloucester Journal sums up the whole attitude of the period:

"Many men of exalted position who would resent any imputation upon their probity, take to illegal practices at election times, as naturall as ducks take to water".

Sources

Gloucester Election Petition 1881

W.R. Williams, Parliamentary History of Gloucestershire

B.S. Smith &

E. Ralph, A History of Bristol & Gloucestershire

Gloucester Journal October 1880 to January 1881