

THE RISE AND FALL OF JOSEPH PITT

by RUSSELL HOWES

Joseph Pitt, who gave his name to Pittville Spa, one of the most attractive parts of Cheltenham, never lived in the town. His parents came from Brokenborough, near Malmesbury, but moved to Little Witcombe, in the parish of Badgeworth. Joseph was born in 1759, the youngest of five sons. On his memorial tablet in the church of Crudwell, near Malmesbury, where he was buried, Joseph Pitt displayed the arms of the Pitt family, to which the two prime ministers belonged, but there is no evidence of any relationship. The Pitts of Brokenborough appear to have been yeomen.

Pitt became an attorney or solicitor in Cirencester about 1780. The story of Pitt's rise from obscurity to fortune was briefly told by John Campbell, a barrister with whom Pitt did business, and who became lord chancellor in 1859. 'He used to hold gentlemen's horses for a penny; when, appearing a sharp lad, an attorney took a fancy to him, and bred him to his own business. Pitt soon scraped together a little money by his practice in the law, and by degrees entered into speculations as a brewer, a banker, a farmer and a land-jobber. Everything has thriven with him. He now has a clear landed estate of £20,000 a year, and returns four member to Parliament. He has besides two magnificent houses, one of the best libraries in the kingdom, and £10,000 worth of pictures.'

As a solicitor Pitt had the care of other people's money. For example, he was trustee for money settled on Mary Gale at her marriage. Her solicitor complained that he did not invest the money in the Funds. It was replied on his behalf that he paid her interest regularly, and that 'Mr. Pitt was until a recent period largely engaged as a Solicitor, and many large sums were left in his hands by his clients and others, which he lent out on Mortgage in his own name.' Pitt made some large loans on mortgage, for example £7,000 to William Hill, a coal merchant of Cirencester, and £14,000 to Samuel Harris, a landowner in Moreton Valence. Pitt received rents and profits from the estate of Martha Trotman of Chalford; when she died Thomas Weeks of Painswick claimed that she left her property to him; he was later convicted of forging her will, and went into hiding at Berwick on Tweed. It was alleged that, during the long period when the inheritance was in dispute, Pitt retained this money in his own hands. Pitt was perhaps a hard man when it came to asserting his own rights. When his son became rector of Rendcomb, he insisted that the daughters of the previous rector should pay for dilapidations to

the rectory; their solicitor said that his speciality was debt. In another case Pitt prepared to take proceedings for recovery of a debt against John Wood of Cricklade; but he reached an agreement with the debtor, and wrote, 'my wishes are to be in peace with all men'. When Pitt decided to retire from active work as a solicitor in 1812, he sold his practice to George Bevir at interest. It was a striking proof of his success. Subsequently Pitt sometimes engaged the professional services of Bevir, but he usually employed Joseph Randolph Mullings, also a solicitor in Cirencester.

The work of a solicitor introduced Pitt to the world of politics. A solicitor was needed by proprietors seeking an Inclosure Act. Pitt was solicitor to the proprietors at Minety, where he himself had property, and at Little Somerford. For both places George White was the member of parliament who looked after the Bill at Westminster. The same member was employed for the Inclosure Act which Pitt wanted for Cheltenham. In his own town of Cirencester Pitt was returning officer at elections for the borough. Earl Bathurst, as lord of the manor, appointed the bailiff of the borough and the steward of the manor, and these two were returning officers. Pitt served in both offices. At the election of 1812 he asked John Campbell to be his assessor. Another duty of steward of the manor, which Pitt fulfilled, was to serve as clerk to the court of requests, established for settling small claims in 1792.

Since Pitt was responsible for other people's money as a solicitor, it was not surprising that he should also enter the business of banking. The partnership of Pitt, Bowly, Croome and Brown was set up in Cirencester in 1790. Devereux Bowly and James Fielder Croome were both Cirencester men. The fourth member of the partnership was later replaced by Jacob Wood of Tetbury. The bank's premises were in a handsome wool-merchant's house at the corner of Castle Street and Silver Street in Cirencester. There was a branch at Faringdon. After the South Sea Bubble joint stock banks were forbidden, and no bank could have more than six partners. When Pitt and his associates wished to extend their business to Cheltenham, a separate partnership was established; it comprised the same four partners, together with a fifth, John Gardner. He was a resident of Cheltenham, and owned a brewery there. The bank house was in the High Street, and there was a branch at Burford. Yet a third partnership of Wood, Pitt, Bowly and Croome had a bank at Tetbury, with an agency at Dursley.

Joint stock banks were allowed by law after 1826, and in 1836 it was decided to convert the Cheltenham bank into a joint stock bank, known as the County of Gloucester Bank. The new establishment bought out the

old partnership for £18,000, and granted it the right to take 800 shares of £100 each. At that time the Cheltenham bank was making a yearly profit of £5,000; loans made by the bank amounted to £98,000, and notes were in circulation to the value of £47,000. As soon as plans for the new company were announced, the Gloucester County and City Bank asked to join. The new company then invited the partnerships at Cirencester and Tetbury to join. These two banks together had made loans of £166,000, and had notes in circulation for £74,000. They were bought out for £20,000, and 2,000 more shares were issued. Joseph Pitt bought 50 shares in the new bank. The County of Gloucester Bank was absorbed in 1897 by Lloyd's Bank, who still occupy the same premises in Cirencester.

The opening of the bank at Cheltenham was an indication of Pitt's interest in the fast-growing town, which offered opportunity for speculation to a wealthy man. In 1800 Pitt bought for £11,470 the inappropriate rectory, valuable chiefly for the tithes. The following year an Inclosure Act was secured. Pitt was appointed surveyor of roads for the inclosure, and it was complained that he had altered the route of one road in such a way as to make some land less desirable for building upon. Land was sold to cover the costs of inclosure, but the commissioner decided that the proceeds of the sale were more than sufficient, and refunded a large proportion of them to the proprietors, Pitt getting most. In fact the costs eventually came to much more than was produced by the sale of land. The inclosure award was made in 1806. It is clear that the intention of the inclosure was to free land for building. Pitt began by building the Royal Crescent, which was finished about 1810. Not until 1823 did he begin to develop Pittville; the land which it was to occupy being in the meantime let out under the name of Tithe Farm. Pitt's building operations in Cheltenham have been described in an earlier essay in this series. Besides owning the inappropriate rectory, Pitt acquired the right to nominate the curate. He had plans for building a new chapel, and in 1812 consulted the celebrated architect Robert Smirke. The chapel was not built; but some years later Pitt provided land for St. Paul's church, which was designed by John Forbes, the architect of Pittville pump room. Characteristically Pitt believed a church near his property would enhance its value; and he forbade a graveyard near the new church, because there was a prejudice against houses overlooking churchyards, which might prevent his selling land.

The house of Joseph Pitt in Cirencester was in Dollar Street, and still stands. It presumably served as both solicitor's office and family home. Pitt married three times. His first wife was Mary Robbins of Didmarton, a yeoman's daughter, who brought him a

dowry of £1,000. They were married at Fairford in 1786, but Mary died and was buried at Didmarton two years later. The only child of this marriage was Cornelius, who in 1831 became rector of Rendcomb, where his father had acquired the right of presentation in 1798. Cornelius died in 1840, before his father, and was buried at Chedworth. He was succeeded in 1844 as rector of Rendcomb by his son Joseph, who became well known as a fox-hunting parson.

The second marriage of Joseph Pitt was to Ann Daubeny, of a Bristol family. The Rev. James Daubeny, vicar of Stratton near Cirencester, was an associate of Pitt in buying property at Cheltenham. This second marriage did not last long, for Ann died and was buried at Stratton in 1792. There were no children from this marriage. Joseph Pitt married as his third wife Ann Orlidge, also of Bristol. They had five sons and two daughters. The eldest of their sons, Joseph, was born in 1796, and was sent to school at Eton. He followed his father's profession, and became a solicitor. Unlike his father he never married. He died in Lichfield in 1869. Another son, William, entered his father's bank, and became manager of the County of Gloucester Bank at Cheltenham. His brother Charles was vicar of Malmesbury from 1829 to his death in 1874. The fourth son, George, became a judge in India. Pitt's third wife died in 1819, and was buried at Crudwell.

Besides his property in Cheltenham Pitt invested in land in the countryside. In 1791 he bought for £21,000 an estate at Minety; and in 1807 he bought for £27,980 a larger estate at Eastcourt, whither he removed his home. In both places he set about inclosing the land. Details of his work have been given in a previous essay.

Joseph Pitt was now a country gentleman, and he crowned his ambition in 1812 by becoming a member of parliament. He made his way into the house of commons through the purchase of rotten boroughs. It was tersely announced in the Cheltenham Chronicle, 'Joseph Pitt esquire of Cirencester, who lately purchased the borough of Cricklade, has also within these last few days become the proprietor of the borough of Malmesbury'. Pitt himself was elected for Cricklade, and remained one of its members till 1831. He bought the manor of the borough and hundred of Cricklade from the Earl of Carnarvon; this enabled him to appoint the bailiff of the borough, who was returning officer. He already owned the manors of Great and Little Chelworth and the manor of Cricklade and Staple. Pitt's interest in the borough was clearly electoral, for the expense of holding manorial courts was more than the quitrents, which were under £8 a year. The electors were, in the first place, the freeholders, copyholders and leaseholders in the borough.

T.H.B. Oldfield, in his Representative History of 1816, alleged that the Earl of Carnarvon bought freeholds, copyholds and leaseholds, enabling him to create 200 fictitious votes.

At first Pitt did not own much property in the borough. According to the land tax assessments in 1812 he owned only two houses, but he increased the number by 1818 to 106, most of which had formerly belonged to the Earl of Carnarvon. These houses were mainly cottages, a number of them occupied by paupers, whose rent was paid by the overseers of the poor. A map and list of 1830 show that Pitt owned 79 out of 183 houses in the borough, and was landlord to 120 out of 225 tenants. However Cricklade was not wholly a rotten borough. In 1780 the place had been found guilty of serious corruption, and as a penalty the forty shilling freeholders of the neighbouring hundreds were added to the constituency, making the number of electors 1,200. This made it necessary for candidates to campaign actively for election. Letters from the time of the election in 1818 show that Pitt canvassed in person throughout his wide constituency. His agent wrote letters to electors, and visited them. Some of the electors lived in London, and Pitt paid their expenses in travelling to the poll. John Wood, mentioned earlier, hoped that his services as an elector at Cricklade would make Pitt less determined in recovering the debt he owed him.

Pitt stood for election as a Tory and a supporter of the government. The interests of the Whig opposition in the neighbourhood of Cricklade were upheld by a number of noble landowners, the Earl of Suffolk of Charlton Park, Lord Folkestone of Coleshill, and Lord Holland of Malmesbury. The eldest son of the Earl of Suffolk, Lord Andover, had contested Cricklade in 1807; according to Oldfield he had a majority of legal votes, but was defeated because the returning officer admitted fictitious votes cast for the Earl of Carnarvon's candidates. In 1812 Lord Folkestone supported the candidature of Thomas Calley. He and Pitt were returned unopposed; it was not unusual, where a constituency had two members, for one to represent each party. In 1818 Lord Folkestone put up, besides Calley, Robert Gordon of Kemble. The election was hard fought. Pitt was aided by government influence. One of his supporters wrote 'We Pittites are in high spirits', and added that there was gloom in Calley's countenance, and that Lord Andover (who was supporting Calley) was astonished to find that his interest was not so great as supposed. The result was that Pitt, with 715 votes, and Gordon, with 702 votes, were returned to parliament, while Calley polled only 505 votes. Pitt and Gordon were re-elected at the elections of 1820, 1826 and 1830.

The situation at Malmesbury was quite different. There were only thirteen electors. These were the corporation, comprising the alderman and twelve capital burgesses, which was recruited by co-optation. Such a body could scarcely resist the wishes of a patron, and he nominated the members of parliament. The corporation complained in 1807 that they had not seen their members for thirty years. The power of patronage had belonged to Edward Wilkins, an apothecary, who paid an annuity of £30 a year to the capital burgesses. He was succeeded by Edmund Estcourt, a solicitor, who increased the annuity to £50 a year. His interest was transferred to Pitt, who bought the lordship of the hundred of Malmesbury, and made himself high steward of the borough. How the electors did his bidding is illustrated by a conversation, between Pitt and his agent in 1812, reported by Campbell. 'The agent said, "You must take care, Sir, that the burgesses remember the names before going to the town-hall." Pitt: "I will take care of that; I will write them down." Agent: "That won't do, Sir, for the burgesses cannot read."' Campbell hinted that Pitt was willing that he should have one of the seats for Malmesbury, but Campbell regarded Pitt's political principles with too much abhorrence to accept any offer from him. The members returned by Pitt in 1812 were William Hicks Beach and Sir Charles Saxton. In 1818 Pitt nominated Kirkman Finlay, a business man from Glasgow, who had been lord provost of the city, and Charles Forbes, a Scots merchant in the India trade. In 1820, 1826 and 1830 Sir Charles Forbes and John Forbes were the members for Malmesbury.

There was a third borough in which Pitt had some influence, Wootton Bassett. The electors were the scot and lot payers, who numbered about 250. The principal landowners in the district, the Earl of Clarendon and Lord Bolingbroke, employed many of the electors and influenced their votes. Oldfield described how an attorney called James Kibblewhite set himself to defeat their influence. He bought or built 108 houses, raised payment for votes from 20 to 45 guineas, and put his nominees on the corporation. Kibblewhite was elected member of parliament in 1812, along with John Attersoll. Oldfield went on to say that Kibblewhite sold his interest to Pitt for £22,000 and that Pitt put his eldest son and a former clerk on the corporation. However the land tax assessments indicate that Pitt acquired no property in Wootton Bassett before 1825, when he was the owner of 117 houses, most of which formerly belonged to Kibblewhite. Nevertheless Pitt was concerned in the election of 1818. The candidates favoured by Pitt, Colonel Richard Ellison and William Taylor Money, won by one vote. Their opponents, Horace Twiss, a barrister, and John Wray, who were supported by the Earl of Clarendon, presented a petition to the house of commons. Pitt sent to Wootton

Bassett, to collect evidence of bribery by Twiss and Wry, and to look into the qualifications of voters. He also wrote to Kibblewhite, who presumably retained his property and influence in the borough. Joseph Mullings conducted the defence against the petition before the committee of the house of commons, which decided in favour of Ellison and Money. Twiss was successful in the election of 1820, when he was returned to parliament, along with George Philips, a manufacturer from Lancashire. These two were re-elected in 1826 and 1830. James Kibblewhite was still active in the politics of Wootton Bassett in 1823. A disagreement about the division of legal fees had arisen between his brother Edmund, another lawyer, and Joseph Mullings, who had come to practise in the town. James Kibblewhite said that he desired to protect Pitt's interest in the borough, and was anxious to avoid any schism between those who supported 'the great Proprietor of Property there'. He asked Pitt to mediate, who said that he wished no electioneering views to influence Mullings' conduct. In the end Edmund Kibblewhite paid what Mullings demanded from him.

Pitt's dealings with boroughs were called by Campbell 'trading in seats', though no record survives of his receiving financial benefit from the seats at his disposal. In the house of commons he never spoke. Occasional division lists in Hansard show that he voted as a Tory, even voting against the Tory government when he thought it deserted Tory principles. One of the chief subjects of dissension between the government and the opposition was the question of catholic emancipation, whether Roman catholics, including those from Ireland, should be admitted as members of parliament. Pitt voted against the proposals of Henry Grattan in 1813, those of William Plunkett in 1821, and those of the radical Francis Burdett in 1825 and 1828. He voted in 1822 against the recommendation to admit Roman catholic peers to the house of lords, even though it was made on behalf of the government by George Canning. When the Tory government of the Duke of Wellington finally introduced a Bill for catholic emancipation in 1829, Pitt still voted in the minority against it. At the end of the Napoleonic War the Tory government acquiesced in the Whigs' motion to abolish income tax, but Pitt voted for its retention. It is not known whether Pitt as a landowner voted for the corn law in 1815, but he voted against changes in it meant to promote free trade and cheap bread, which were introduced in 1827. The leader of the opposition in the house of commons, George Tierney, proposed a committee on the state of the nation in 1819, but Pitt voted against it. When George IV became king in 1820 and sought from parliament a divorce, the Whigs championed Queen Charlotte; Pitt voted against their motion on ministers' conduct in these proceedings.

The great question agitating parliament in Pitt's last years there was that of the reform of the electoral system. He owed his seat to the old system, and could not be expected to favour reform. When East Retford was found guilty of corruption, he voted in 1830 for the proposal to extend the franchise to the neighbouring hundred, as at Cricklade, rather than transfer it to Birmingham. The Whig government's Reform Bill passed its second reading in the house of commons by a majority of one at a memorable division in 1831, and Pitt was in the minority against it. Soon afterwards the Bill was defeated in committee, and the government called a general election. Pitt decided to retire from politics, giving as a reason his advanced age; he was 72. In the election Robert Gordon and Thomas Calley, both supporters of reform, were elected for Cricklade. Pitt voted for Calley, despite the difference in their political outlook. At Malmesbury two opponents of reform were chosen, and were jeered by the townsfolk. Cricklade survived the Reform Act as a borough returning two members; Malmesbury was reduced to one member; Wootton Bassett was disfranchised. Pitt sold many of his cottages in Cricklade between 1837 and 1842; he sold the hundred of Malmesbury in 1840 to Joseph Neeld, who was member of Parliament for Chippenham; he sold all but one of his houses in Wootton Bassett in 1830.

The last ten years of Pitt's life were troubled by financial worries. When he died in 1842 his debts came to over £150,000, towards which his estate could produce less than £13,000. The cause seems to have been the failure of his speculation in Pittville. Soon after building began there the country was hit by a financial panic at the end of 1825. The collapse of unsound foreign investment led to a run on the banks, some of which failed to meet their obligations. The bank of Pitt, Gardner and Company in Cheltenham weathered the storm; a public meeting expressed confidence in it and a willingness to accept its notes. But the crisis deterred purchasers from buying land. Many contracts for the sale of land in Pittville were abandoned. When William Cobbett in 1826 rode through Cheltenham, which he regarded as a devouring wen full of tax gorgers, he went 'to see "The New Buildings", which are now nearly at a stand'. He wrote, 'I have seldom seen anything with more heart-felt satisfaction . . . The place really appears to be sinking very fast; and I have been told, and believe the fact, that houses, in Cheltenham, will now sell for only just about one third as much as the same would have sold for only in last October'. The Cheltenham Journal admitted that the price of houses had fallen, but was pleased that speculative buyers had disappeared, and that property was being bought rather by wealthy individuals.

The building operation certainly slowed down. Of 600 houses intended in Pittville, only 100 had been



built by 1830. It had been Pitt's practice to sell plots of land to small builders on long credit, and to accept payment by instalments. Some of these builders became bankrupt. For example, James Watt, described as painter, dealer and chapman, borrowed money from the bank of Pitt, Gardner and Company on security of building plots in Pittville; he became bankrupt, and owed the bank £8,000 in 1825. William Dangerfield and John Knight were described as bankrupts in deeds of 1833 conveying their land in Pittville back to Pitt. The pump room at Pittville was expected to cost £7,000, and cost more than double. It was nevertheless finished, and opened in 1830. In the same year Cobbett ventured to return to Cheltenham, but he was unable to get a room for a lecture, and was burnt in effigy in Pittville Street. Altogether Pitt was said to have spent £40,000 in Pittville.

Pitt borrowed money on a large scale, mainly from his associates in business; most, though not all, of the debts outstanding at his death dated from the years after 1825. He borrowed on bond from the Rev. James Daubeny and his son the Rev. Andrew Daubeny, who belonged to the family of his second wife; from Robert Wright Hall, who had been inclosure commissioner at Minety; from Devereux Bowly, James Fielder Croome and Jacob Wood, his partners in the bank; and from his son Cornelius. These and other debts on bond came to nearly £16,000. Larger still were the debts Pitt contracted on the mortgage of his property. There were three principal mortgagees. From Joseph Mullings, his solicitor in Cirencester, Pitt borrowed over £50,000, on the mortgage of his estates at Minety and Eastcourt, and his property at Cricklade; these estates were already encumbered with mortgages of £46,500 to other creditors, including the Revs. John and Thomas Keble. From John Gardner, the other partner in the bank, Pitt borrowed £6,000, on the security of his property in Pittville; after Gardner died in 1836 Pitt borrowed from his heirs, his widow Mary and his nephew James, making his total debt to them over £17,000. From the County of Gloucester Bank itself Pitt borrowed £8,000 on the mortgage of property in Pittville; besides which he owed over £5,000 on current account. It was stated, 'The income of all the Testator's Estates is about £4,000 Per Annum, and the interest of the money is about £6,000. . .'

The tangled financial affairs of Joseph Pitt were settled in a lengthy case before the court of chancery. The defendant was Joseph Pitt's second son, also called Joseph, to whom Pitt left his property by will; the plaintiff was his grandson, a third Joseph, the son of Cornelius. Pitt's landed estates were put for sale after his death, and passed mainly to his mortgagees. Mullings acquired the estate at Minety

for £12,820, and that at Eastcourt (subject to the other mortgages of £46,500) for £19,000. He also acquired the manors of Cricklade, which he sold to Joseph Neeld. Mullings himself went to live at Eastcourt, and later became member of parliament for Cirencester. The property in Pittville was sold in 1843 and 1845, and passed mainly to Mary and James Gardner and to the County of Gloucester Bank. Many of Pitt's debts were still unpaid fourteen years after his death. The pump room at Pittville was not finally sold by order of the court of chancery until 1890, when Cheltenham Corporation bought it for £5,400.

The property market had recovered by the time Pitt's estates were sold after his death. Of the sale in 1843 the Cheltenham Journal reported, 'There was an excellent attendance of monied men, and the biddings were very spirited throughout'; land made much more money than was anticipated, being sold for 40, 50 and 67 years' purchase. Commenting on the sale in 1845, the same newspaper, after praising the enchanting gardens of Pittville, said here 'the capitalist may find a safe investment for his money.' The building of Pittville was completed. It is sad to reflect that this charming place brought ruin to its creator.

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