

Seven Bribes for Seven Boroughs: the 4th Duke of Newcastle, patron of Bromley House Library

i. The Noble Patron

To His Grace the Duke of Newcastle Nottingham 16th December 1815

My Lord Duke

It is in the contemplation of several gentlemen of this town and neighbourhood to establish a public library and newsroom on the plan of similar Institutions at Liverpool, Manchester and other large towns; and I am in consequence directed to transmit to your Grace the enclosed outline of the plan proposed, and respectfully to solicit the honor of your patronage and support to an Institution so much wanted in Nottingham. I venture to hope therefore that your Grace will give your encouragement to the above undertaking, and beg the favour of your reply at your convenience.

I have the honor to be etc. etc.

John Pearson (founding member of Bromley House Library)

Clumber 7th January 1816

Sir

I received your letter enclosing the outline of a plan for establishing a public library and newsroom at Notting^m.

In the hopes that such an establishment may be a benefit and convenience to the town and neighbourhood of Nottingham, and concluding that it will be in no way political, I beg the favor of you to put my name down as a subscriber.

I remain Sir your obed^t

Newcastle (Henry Pelham-Clinton, 4th Duke of Newcastle under Lyne)

The Duke of Newcastle appears in every history of Bromley House Library, though only within the space of a few lines. His connection to the library can be summed up using the above correspondence - we asked for his patronage when establishing the library, and he said yes. As such, his name appears in the earliest list of subscribers (naturally, given his status as patron, at the very top). His patronage presumably gave the library a sense of legitimacy, respectability and even grandeur - this was a place for the cultured, and cultural, elite of the day.



Henry Pelham-Clinton, 4th Duke of Newcastle under Lyne

Despite having worked at the library for nearly two and a half years, and despite having recited this piece of history to visitors on countless occasions, the Duke of Newcastle has always remained a footnote in my knowledge of library history. This is unfortunate, because the Duke of Newcastle was a fascinating character. Despite holding the kind of political views that encouraged an angry mob to burn his house down (that house being Nottingham Castle), the Duke was, in many

ways, a pitiful figure. Rallying fruitlessly against a liberalising country he was at a loss to understand, the Duke lost a great deal of his power base during his lifetime. In this article, I want to take a look at the man behind the library factoid - who was the 4th Duke of Newcastle, why was he so deeply reviled by his contemporaries, and what kind of impact did he have on the society our founding members knew?

ii. The Most Ancient Art of Borough-Mongering

To understand the political power the 4th Duke frequently deployed, we first have to examine the wider political legacy of the Dukes of Newcastle. This legacy unfortunately (or perhaps, fortunately) seems to have reached its peak under the 1st Duke (and twice Prime Minister), Thomas Pelham-Holles. The 1st Duke, despite never having been recognised as a particularly strong statesman, seems to have survived politically through the deployment of a particular strategy, commonly known as borough-mongering. Throughout his life, the 1st Duke of Newcastle, whether through a particular quirk of employment, ownership, or political influence, owned or controlled at least ten parliamentary constituencies, and held sway in the election of fifteen members of parliament. By the time of the fourth Duke, this seems to have reduced to around seven constituencies - still quite enough to be getting on with.

You might be wondering how the Dukes could exercise this kind of power. Though not all the boroughs controlled by the Dukes of Newcastle operated in the same way, I think it's fair to class a majority of them under the umbrella term of 'pocket boroughs'. These boroughs were usually small villages with small populations where the land and property were owned by a single person or family - ergo, the borough was 'in the pocket' of the landowner. Due to the fact that people couldn't vote in secret, the landowner had the power to bribe, coerce or otherwise force the voters to choose a certain MP. In turn, the MP would be inclined to act on behalf of their landowner-patron rather than their constituents - after all, it was thanks to the landowner that they had been elected at all.

Two of the most notorious pocket boroughs happen to have been owned by the Dukes of Newcastle - the villages of Aldborough and Boroughbridge in Yorkshire. Referred to by the 1st Duke as 'my own two boroughs', Aldborough and Boroughbridge, as of the early nineteenth century, each had fewer than five hundred residents, and fewer than one hundred registered voters, and yet they returned two members of parliament apiece. You might think this was justified if each borough served a particularly wide area, but this clearly wasn't the case - the villages are only a brisk 15 minute walk away from each other. The power of this system becomes clear when we note that neither Manchester nor Birmingham, both rising industrial centres with populations of thousands, returned a single MP to parliament at this time. Boroughbridge was sold before the 4th Duke's time to the banker Thomas Coutts (of Coutts & co. fame) as a means of getting Coutts' son-in-law, the reformist politician Francis Burdett into parliament, while Aldborough was later sold by the 4th Duke, who had no use for it after the electoral reforms of 1832, which largely put a stop to this particular brand of corruption (more on that later). The disposal of these two boroughs hints at the political pragmatism underlying the whole system - though the ownership of the land was often hereditary, boroughs could be bought and sold to those wishing to control parliamentary seats; indeed, often the sole purpose of owning a pocket borough was to wield political power. Once reforms made this system obsolete, owning the land was pointless.

A quick note: despite the similarity of terms, there was a difference between a pocket borough and a rotten borough. While a pocket borough was owned or controlled by a

particular patron, a rotten borough was a once prominent site, perhaps a former medieval trade port or cathedral town, which had become depopulated since its establishment, yet still returned a disproportionately large number of MPs relative to its current population. Although it's tempting to view rotten boroughs as political backwaters, they wielded incredible power: just before the passage of the reform act in 1832, more than 140 parliamentary seats of the 658 were in rotten boroughs - 50 of which had fewer than 50 resident voters. Perhaps the two most infamous examples of rotten boroughs are Old Sarum in Wiltshire and Dunwich in Suffolk, summed up here:



The thriving political hub of Old Sarum, Wiltshire in a painting by Constable (1829)

Old Sarum

- Was the location of the medieval city of Old Salisbury, although ceased to be a city in 1226 when its cathedral was demolished and relocated to its current position in (new) Salisbury
- Resident voters in 1802 general election: 0
- Number of MPs returned by this constituency in 1802 general election: 2
- You might be wondering: how did a constituency with no resident voters elect two MPs? Well, Old Sarum was known as a burgage franchise, meaning that the inhabitants of burgage tenements had the right to vote. The landowners (for a while

the Pitt family) had the right to nominate tenants for each of these burgage houses. These tenants didn't actually have to live in the houses, or be resident in the area at all, but they were the voters. Clearly, none were actually resident in Old Sarum in 1802.

- Unsurprisingly, the parliamentary seat of politicians including Sir Robert Pitt, Thomas 'Diamond' Pitt, George Pitt and Pitt the Elder.

Dunwich

- Was a bustling port town in medieval times, located on the Suffolk coast (around 20 miles from Lowestoft). Unfortunately, coastal erosion meant that the town had largely disappeared by the mid 1600's, save a few houses and, apparently, half a church.
- Despite the handicap of being largely underwater, Dunwich still returned two members of parliament before the reform act was passed.
- Though by no means the smallest or least populated of the rotten boroughs, Dunwich's partially sub-tidal situation captured public imagination, and it has subsequently become one of the best known. As such, it was the inspiration for 'Dunny-on-the-Wold' from the BBC TV series Blackadder - 'half an acre of sodden marshland in the Suffolk fens... population: three rather mangy cows, a dachshund named Colin, a small hen in its late forties' and a soon-to-be-murdered voter.



*Our slogan shall be
'A Rotten Candidate for a Rotten Borough'*

Though it's certainly tempting to visualise the owners of rotten and pocket boroughs as puppet-masters, it was quite rare for an owner to have complete control over the selection of an MP. For example, in Aldborough and Boroughbridge, the 1st Duke could directly

appoint MPs without them even having to stand election, but one of them had to be Andrew Wilkinson, who managed the Boroughs for Newcastle, and had property of his own in the constituencies. The county seat for Sussex had to be filled by a member of the Pelham family, the Member for Nottinghamshire had to be a resident of the county, and did the Members for Newark and Retford. When the 1st Duke attempted to introduce 'strangers' (here defined as non-countymen) to his seats in Sussex, he met with local opposition - indeed, the 1st Duke's threat to evict tenants in Lewes who voted for a candidate he didn't support (that's the man you want as PM!) created an obstinate public, and presaged the Newcastle family's declining influence in the area.

By the 4th Duke's time, the borough holdings of the Newcastle family had decreased quite substantially. Some of their holdings in Sussex (including Lewes) appear to have been inherited by another relative; others such as Hastings and Rye were actually treasury holdings, controlled by the 1st Duke only in his role as Lord of the Treasury. This didn't stop the 4th Duke from being classed as a 'borough-monger' by reformists; someone who used their land holdings for political gain. However, the deeply entrenched corruption of rotten and pocket boroughs was about to be turfed up.

iii. Some Good Old Fashioned Common Sense

In terms of government, the 4th Duke was in favour of 'a sound, plain dealing Protestant administration, devoid of all quackery and mysterious nonsense'. For him, this meant an emphasis on the known quantities of the crown, the aristocracy and the Church of England. The Duke was naturally opposed both to Catholic emancipation and the 1832 Parliamentary Reform Act - the reform act is of particular interest to us here.

The Reform Act of 1832 was a direct challenge to the Duke's traditional means of political authority. It was designed to redistribute the bulk of political seats from tiny parishes like Aldborough, and redundant constituencies like Old Sarum, to industrial cities like Manchester and Birmingham, where people were actually living and working. Though nothing seems more 'sound [and] plain dealing' than having politicians actually represent their constituents rather than some shadowy rich man who often had no connection to the area or the lives of the locals, the reform bill was highly controversial stuff.

The Duke, for his part, was a supporter of a loose political faction known as the Ultra-Tories. Though they may sound like a lacklustre superhero group (why help the cat out of the tree if it's not willing to jump itself?), the Ultra-Tories were nothing particularly out of the ordinary; they were what we would call members of the 'far right-wing' of the party. The Duke was known to favour Lord Eldon (another Ultra Tory) for Prime Minister, fearing that the eventual Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington (Tory, non-Ultra), would not present a strong enough opposition. These fears were realised when the Whigs took office in 1830, under the premiership of Earl Grey (he of tea fame); after several unsuccessful attempts at parliamentary reform, the Whig party were finally successful with the Reform Act 1832.

The reform act brought in several changes, including the disenfranchisement of 56 boroughs in England and Wales, with a further 31 reduced to one MP. It also created 67 new constituencies, and broadened the vote to include people such as shopkeepers and tenant farmers. Many rotten boroughs, such as Old Sarum and Dunwich were disenfranchised by the reform act, as were Aldborough and Boroughbridge.

iv. 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I please with my own?'

In the years leading up to reform, the Duke seems to have become quite alienated from political reality. In the following exchange, from the records of the House of Lords, the Duke appears incensed by press reports of his borough-mongering, despite openly admitting to acting in such a way. He then proceeds to argue against electoral reform with the misguided passion of a politically incorrect grandfather at a family Christmas. The Prime minister, Earl Grey, attempts to humour the Duke, despite appearing quite baffled both by his pettiness and his obviously inflammatory views.

On the 3rd December, 1830, The 4th Duke stood up in the House of Lords to address what he perceived as a 'gross libel upon his character', a remark 'tended, by the words used, to draw him into contempt'. Eventually, after repeatedly mentioning how painful and distressing it was for him to have to address the Lords at all, his apologies for claiming their Lordships indulgence etc., he alighted on the slander in question -

*'Looking into The Morning Chronicle yesterday, he had found in it the report of a speech which was represented to have been made at Nottingham by no less a person than his Majesty's Attorney General. Perhaps, before he went further, he had better read the report to their Lordships from The Morning Chronicle. It was as follows:— "Nottingham Election.— Sir T. Denman, his Majesty's Attorney General, was re-elected a member for the town of Nottingham on Monday last. In the course of his speech to the electors, the learned gentleman, when alluding to his future conduct in Parliament, said, 'My sentiments as to vote by ballot are well known to you all; but if the majority of my constituents shall say that they cannot exercise their privilege of election without it, my support shall be given to it.' "Now he made no comment upon this, because his opinions, also, were well known on this subject. The report of the Attorney General's speech went on thus,—"**I shall use my utmost endeavours against the borough-mongers. And I affirm to you, that the power which has called forth from a nobleman that 'scandalous' and 'wicked' interrogatory— 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I please with my own?'— ought to be abolished by the law of the land**'...Now he had no doubt in his own mind, that, although he was not named in this speech, no other nobleman than himself could be meant; for, if he recollected rightly, he wrote that very sentence— "Is it not lawful for me to do what I please with my own?"*

The Duke, having expanded on his original complaint, then proceeded to enlighten the Lords with his views on electoral reform, in particular the issue of allowing people to vote by secret ballot -

'Now he did hope that no Englishman would consent to admit anything so revolting, so debasing to the character of the nation, as vote by ballot. If Englishmen fought, they fought openly; if they acted, they acted openly; if they spoke, they spoke out and made themselves heard. Englishmen never pursued the conduct of the insidious assassin, whose measures were taken covertly and in the dark. He did, therefore, hope, that vote by ballot would be scouted by every respectable man in the country as altogether un-English, and uncharacteristic of their fellow-countrymen'.

At this point, a seemingly baffled Earl Grey rose to address the Duke -

...though he was free to confess he felt considerable difficulty in giving utterance to one word upon the matter, not having very distinctly understood what object the noble

Duke had in view in bringing forward this matter of complaint, and still less understanding how it was possible that that House should take cognizance of the circumstance complained of.

The Chancellor, for his part, sought to defend the reputation of his friend the Attorney General, blaming the rhetorical devices of a man on the hustings for the harsh words published, and perhaps -

his learned friend's observations had not been reported with that accuracy which generally distinguished the reports in the public papers.

Ah, those were the days.

Though the reform act did essentially sap all of the Duke's borough mongering powers in the provinces, his great fear of a vote by ballot wouldn't be realised until the Ballot Act was passed, 50 years later. In Nottingham, the Duke was reviled for his meddling and his inflammatory political opinions were about to set something else alight.

v. Nottingham Burning

Though much of what the Duke said in his speech to the Lords may seem quite petty to us, behind his anger was a genuine sense of fear.

'Was it decent, was it proper, in his Majesty's Attorney General, to use such language as this ['borough-monger'], which must always be offensive, and which, in the present case, was literally criminal towards him, considering how prone some persons were at this time to attack those who were situated as he had the honour to be? If he was a timid man he might, after language putting him as it were under the ban of the Government, be afraid to leave his own dwelling'.



...and these two chaps seem particularly pleased about it! (detail from picture above).



In this drawing by Thomas Allom, Nottingham Castle is fully ablaze...

As we now

know, his fears were completely justified. In the year following that speech, anger was mounting in Nottingham as attempts at electoral reform were repeatedly quashed. When news reached the city that the latest attempt at electoral reform had been shut down in the House of Lords, people decided to take decisive action. Nottingham Castle, the property (though not live-in residence) of the Dukes of Newcastle was completely gutted by fire, after being torched by rioters on 10th October 1831. People came in their droves to watch the spectacle. Given the extent of the damage, and what must have been the enormity of the fire, it seems lucky that there were only

two casualties. The Duke was actually in the House of Lords when he heard the news, and in his correspondence lamented the 'horrid and fearful state' of the country.

In the aftermath of the fire, the Duke, incensed that little had been done to protect the castle from the mob, sued the authorities for damages. The damages were awarded, but the Duke kept the money for himself - Nottingham castle was to remain a ruin until it was taken over by the council and turned into a municipal museum in the 1870s.

vi. In Conclusion

The Duke himself doesn't strike me as a particularly malicious man, rather one who the government of the day decided it was best to leave behind. That which he felt entitled to - namely political control - was destined to elude him because the means of gaining that control had changed. Having a noble title and a bucketful of cash were both still the key, in many cases, to political influence, but they could no longer guarantee it.

The Duke doesn't appear to have played a particularly active role in library life, though he did donate two works to the library - A Civil and Literary Chronology of Greece written by Henry Fynes Clinton (an antiquarian and ... MP for Aldborough!) and some botanical specimens gathered in the Pyrenees which may constitute part of our herbarium, though they're not listed separately on the catalogue.

The Duke of Newcastle was also a prolific diarist. After the tragic death of his wife Georgiana and eldest daughter Anna Maria died in 1822, the Duke began to keep a diary, which over time, became an eight volume monster, comprising ten thousand entries over 28 years. The diary is currently held by Nottingham University's manuscripts and Special Collections department.

Afterword: I wrote an article about the reformist politician and industrialist Anthony Mundella a few weeks ago, also for the library. While researching that piece, I was surprised to learn that compulsory education was once criticised by conservative commentators for begin 'un-English'; here, the same words are used by the 4th Duke to condemn the right to vote by secret ballot. It's interesting to note that two of the things we might think of as fundamental political and human rights were originally argued to be quite the opposite.

Sources

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