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Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform

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Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform 1790-1885

Edwin Jaggard



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*FOR PAM, MELISSA
AND SARAH*

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EDWIN JAGGARD
MAY 1999

Abbreviations

Bodl. Lib. Bodleian Library, Oxford

BL British Library

CRO Cornwall Record Office

RIC Royal Institution of Cornwall

Introduction

In 1814 in the town of Truro in Cornwall two apparently unrelated events occurred. Firstly, as a consequence of the death of John Lemon, there was a vacancy in the town's parliamentary representation. Lemon had been one of Truro's MPs since 1796, the year in which the Boscawen family of Tregothnan temporarily lost control of the borough's representation. Lemon had been a popular figure with extensive business interests in and around Truro, and his election was a rebuff to the dictatorial patron who had previously controlled both seats. With Lemon's death the Boscawens reasserted their electoral ascendancy at least until 1831.¹ Secondly, the Truro Shipping Company was established. Its Articles of Agreement were signed by more than twenty local business, professional and tradespeople, among them John Ferris currier, Thomas Whitford mercer, John Cuming confectioner, Samuel Randall pipe-maker, Robert Blee iron-monger and Samuel Milford draper. Milford was a Quaker, many of the other signatories were Methodists. Most of these middle- or lower middle-class men became staunch opponents of the Boscawens' manipulation of the parliamentary representation of Truro.² While there is no direct evidence to prove the assertion, they were almost certainly among the 130 townspeople who signed a petition in 1818 promoting the claims of two reformers in opposition to the Boscawens' nominees. Certainly, all who could do so unsuccessfully supported Whig reformers in the general elections of 1830 and 1831, before finally satisfying their long-held expectations in December 1832.

Such challenges, sometimes surreptitious, sometimes open, were an important element of late Hanoverian electoral politics, but in corrupt Cornwall, the one-time exemplar of the Namierite view? Surely not. After all, this was the *locus classicus* of the unreformed electoral system, a county where greed, personal rivalries, venality and political interference through the duchy of Cornwall were allegedly endemic in the reign of George III. The correspondent who wrote of a 1761 election in the infamous Penryn, 'tis said the money is drove abt in wheelbarrows' was grist to the Namierite mill, a refined version of which grinds on in the form of the magnificent *History of Parliament* project.³

¹ The patron's control was successfully challenged again in 1820, but the 'rebels' retired in 1826.

2 RIC, 'Articles of Agreement, Truro Shipping Co., 21 Oct. 1814'.

3 W. Roberts, Jr, to Thomas Hawkins, 30 Mar. 1761, *ibid.* MSS Hawkins
HH/13/76; R. G. Thorne (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1790-1820*, London 1986.
Admittedly Roland Thorne and his dedicated team have not yet completed the final
182032 stage, but there

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What the two events of 1814 in Truro illustrate in simplified form are the opposing view-points in a long-running historical debate about the nature and workings of the unreformed electoral system, the extent to which the 1832 Reform Act wrought changes in the system. According to one side in the debate the Boscawens' temporary setback at Truro was part of the ongoing struggle in an era when the politics of patronage prevailed. Wealthy patrons and there was an abundance of them in Cornwall either nominated members in the boroughs under their control, or exerted their formidable influence to make sure their favoured candidates were successful. Either way voters were largely irrelevant, unless they had to be bought off as so frequently occurred in the Cornish boroughs of Grampond, Tregony and Penryn. As for ideological debate about national or county issues parliamentary reform, commutation of tithes, Roman Catholic emancipation or agricultural protection this was believed to be non-existent.

Ammunition for this side of the argument was provided initially by Oldfield's *History of the boroughs* (1792) prepared for the reformers of the Society for Constitutional Information.⁴ Much of it was republished early in the nineteenth century, later in the same century by Joseph Grego, then explored once more in Edward and Annie Porritt's *The unreformed House of Commons* (1903).⁵ Twenty or so years later came Sir Lewis Namier's magisterial study, *The structure of politics at the accession of George III*, apparently confirming the corrupt, influence-ridden nature of the unreformed electoral system.⁶ The same picture was presented in the Namier and Brooke edited *History of parliament* volumes spanning 1754 to 1790, while the continuation of these features after 1832 was exposed firstly by Norman Gash and later by D. C. Moore, the latter using a questionable socio-historical model to argue for the enduring strength of what he termed 'the politics of deference'.⁷ Among specifically Cornish studies focusing on corruption, venality and the overriding importance of influence were those by W. P. Courtney, W. T. Lawrance, A. de C. Glubb and three short articles by P. Jennings in the *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*.⁸

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are relatively few signs of their most recent conclusions being congruent with current research on the period.

⁴ T. H. B. Oldfield, *An entire and complete history, political and personal of the boroughs of Great Britain*, London 1792.

5 Joseph Grego, *History of parliamentary elections and electioneering in the old days*, London 1892; E. Porritt and A. Porritt, *The unreformed House of Commons: parliamentary representation before 1832*, Cambridge 1903.

6 First published by Macmillan in 1929.

7 L. B. Namier and J. Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754-1790*, London 1964; Norman Gash, *Politics in the age of Peel: a study in the technique of parliamentary representation, 1830-50*, 2nd edn, Hassocks 1977; D. C. Moore, *The politics of deference: a study of the mid-nineteenth century English political system*, Hassocks 1976.

8 W. P. Courtney, *The parliamentary representation of Cornwall to 1832*, London 1889; W. T. Lawrance, *Parliamentary representation of Cornwall: being a record of the electoral divisions*

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Contrary to this, and representative of the opposition view-point in the debate, members of the Truro Shipping Company and people of similar background, played a conspicuous part in Truro politics before and after 1814, most notably in their persistent opposition to the patronage of the Boscawen family. This late Hanoverian participatory activism suggests a political milieu very different from that outlined earlier. And, those whose object has been to question the Namierite view by exposing voters' capacity for independent thought and vigorous debate over national issues, have effectively employed county studies to test their judgements. Richard Davis (who according to one reviewer attacked Moore 'with all the zeal of an inquisitor rooting out heresy') examined Buckinghamshire, R. J. Olney Lincolnshire, and T. J. Nossiter Northumberland and Durham.⁹ Only Davis spanned the pre- and post-Reform Act periods, uncovering elements of consistently independent political behaviour well before 1832. Despite their different methodological approaches all three proved that the world of electoral politics described by Gash and Moore was more preoccupied with issues and principles, and more divided by partisanship than they would have acknowledged.

More recently similar activism has been exposed by Frank O'Gorman and the late John Phillips who have analysed both sides of the same electoral coin.¹⁰ Phillips demonstrates from pollbook analysis of a handful of scattered boroughs (mostly with more than a thousand voters) how 'England contained a vibrant political nation well before 1832, much of it unenfranchised, but continued to suffer from corruption and coercion after 1832.'¹¹ O'Gorman is convinced that after the First Reform Act 'the substance of electoral life, already participatory, partisan and popular, continued'.¹² One electoral system gave way to another remarkably similar to itself. Where the *History of Parliament's* constituency surveys are often permeated with the politics of personal relationships, intrigue and money, Phillips and O'Gorman detect the appearance of partisanship arising from public debate as popular participation in electoral politics grew.

The evidence produced by Phillips and O'Gorman in support of their view-points is very persuasive. More importantly, their conclusion in some

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and boroughs of the county from 1295 to 1885, Truro 1925; A. de C. Glubb, When Cornwall had 44 MP's, Truro 1934; P. Jennings, 'Notes on the parliamentary history of Truro, part iv (1761-1787)', Journal of the Royal

Institution of Cornwall xix (1913), 230-40; 'Part v (1787-1820)', *ibid.* xix (1914), 4339; 'Part vi (1820-1832)', *ibid.* xx (1915), 95-106.

9 R. W. Davis, *Political change and continuity, 1760-1885: a Buckinghamshire study*, Newton Abbott 1972; R. J. Olney, *Lincolnshire politics, 1832-1885*, London 1973; T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, opinion and political idioms in reformed England: case studies from the north east, 1832-1874*, Hassocks 1975.

10 Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, patrons and parties: the unreformed electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832*, Oxford 1989; John A. Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the boroughs: English electoral behaviour, 1818-1841*, Oxford 1992.

11 *Ibid.* 302.

12 O'Gorman, *Voters, patrons and parties*, 393.