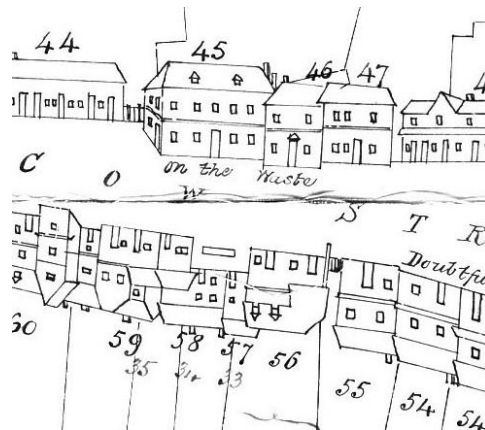




The Former Red Cow Inn

Blue plaque in Petworth Road, Haslemere, commemorating the general election of 1754 which achieved national notoriety, Haslemere



The Parliamentary Electoral System in 1754

In the eighteenth century very few people had the right to vote. A survey conducted in 1780 revealed that the electorate in England and Wales consisted of just 214,000 men - less than 3% of the total population of approximately 8 million. Large industrial cities like Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester did not have a single MP between them, whereas 'rotten boroughs' such as Haslemere with a population estimated at around 600 in 1754 were still sending two MPs to Westminster. Others were more rotten. Dunwich, which had largely disappeared into the North Sea had a population of 32 in 1832 and Old Sarum, an uninhabited hill, had no population at all!

How had this unrepresentative system come about? The House of Commons evolved long before the modern theory of democracy. In mediaeval political theory it was believed that sovereignty flowed from God, not from the people, and that monarchy was the form of government ordained by God. The King (or Queen) was "the Lord's anointed," and it was the duty of the people to obey the King as God's representative. Nevertheless, it was always recognised that the King had a corresponding duty to rule wisely and for the people's benefit, and from an early date it was accepted that this included the duty to listen to the advice of the people, as expressed by their chosen representatives through Parliament. To this idea was added the practical consideration that it was easier for the King to collect the taxes he needed if the people consented to pay them. Over the centuries, the power of Parliament had steadily increased, most notably through the period of the Interregnum and after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when William III came to the throne following the eviction of James II by Parliament. Nevertheless the constitution of Parliament changed little.

Throughout this period the House of Commons consisted entirely of men, most of them men of substantial property, and entirely of Anglicans as, except in Scotland, Catholics were excluded. Women could neither vote nor stand for election. Members of Parliament were not paid, which meant that only men of wealth could take the time to serve. In any case, candidates had to be electors, which meant that in most places they had to have substantial property, usually in the form of land.

There were two types of seats: county seats and borough seats. Virtually all members representing county seats were landed gentlemen. Many were relatives or dependants of peers, others independent squires who did not have titles. These independent country gentlemen, sometimes called "the country party" although they were not an organised party, were often the only source of opposition to the government of the day, since they had no need to gain government favour through their votes in the House.

Members for borough seats were sometimes also local squires, but were more frequently merchants or urban professionals such as lawyers. A large number of borough members were placed in their seats by the government of the day in order to provide support to the government: these were known as "placemen," and it was a long-standing objective of parliamentary reformers to get the placemen out of the House of Commons. Some borough members were men of little means, sometimes in debt or insolvent, who agreed to become placemen in return for government funds. All 18th century governments depended on this corrupt element to maintain their majorities. Some boroughs were under the control of particular ministers or government departments. The members representing the Cinque Ports, for example, spoke for the interests of the Royal Navy.

Each county elected 2 MP's accounting for 92 seats in total. In order to be either a candidate or an elector for a county seat, a man had to own (not rent) freehold property valued for the land tax at two pounds a year. This was known as "the 40 shilling freehold." County members were usually elected without an actual ballot taking place. Only at times of acute party strife did many counties see contested elections. In every county there was a group of landowning families, usually with a peer at their head, and these families would informally agree on who would stand for the county at a given election. They were frequently relatives or allies of the leading peers of the county.

Even in mediaeval times a significant proportion of the King's revenue came from taxes paid by people living in towns, and thus the House of Commons had representatives of boroughs –towns with Royal Charters-from an early date. Each typically elected two members.

Mediaeval kings could and did grant and revoke charters at their pleasure, often to create seats in the

House for supporters, and frequently regardless of the size or importance of the town. Thus there were "rotten boroughs" (boroughs with very few voters) from very early times, but they increased in number over the years as many old towns lost population. The number of English boroughs fluctuated over time, until the last new borough charter was issued in 1674. From then on the number was fixed at 203, electing 405 members.

The franchise for borough seats varied enormously. In some boroughs, virtually all adult homeowners could vote. In others, only a handful of landowners could vote. Another model was that no-one could vote and the borough's members were chosen by its corporation (council), which was usually elected by a small group of property-owners. There were in total 10 different franchise models, mostly linked to property rights, although Oxford and Cambridge – University Boroughs- offered another model and restricted votes to holders of doctoral and masters degrees.

Haslemere was what was known as a burgage borough, meaning that voting rights attached to designated burgages – specified properties or fields in the borough. Because these burgages could easily be bought and sold, these types of boroughs were often the easiest to control and the most corrupt, although, as we shall see, the wheeze of subdividing burgesses deployed in Haslemere introduced a new element of contest and opportunity for corruption into the election of 1754.

Calls for Reform

This system was never in any sense fairly representative of the electorate. What's more, as the 18th century progressed, many seats were not even contested, Haslemere being, as we shall see, an exciting exception. At the Putney Debates of 1647, representatives of various factions of the victorious Parliamentary army debated whether to adopt a more democratic franchise. The radicals led by Thomas Rainborough argued for manhood suffrage. The conservatives, led by Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton, argued that since the great majority of Englishmen were peasant tenants, if given the vote they would vote as their landlords directed, and this would lead to the restoration of the monarchy.

In the circumstances of the time, this proved a persuasive argument, and proposals for a wider franchise or a redistribution of representation were rejected. But no other acceptable basis could be found for electing the House of Commons, and there was no functioning legislature during most of Cromwell's regime. The Restoration of 1660 restored the pre-revolutionary system in its entirety.

Following the Restoration there was a long period during which any challenge to the system of representation was equated with republicanism and treason. Even at the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 there was no attempt to re-open the question.

A reform movement began in the mid 18th century. Although the Whig party as a whole was ambivalent in its attitude to reform, some Whig leaders like Fox and Earl Grey raised the issue many times, but nothing was achieved in the face of Tory resistance.

After 1789 the English reaction against the excesses of the French Revolution stifled all attempts to raise the issue until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Not until the Great Reform Act of 1832 did the march towards the representative system that we know today begin.

The Cow of Haslemere or the Conjuror's Scrutiny at Oxford. Printed in London for the Author and sold by C.Corbett:1754

It is to the title of this anonymous poem published in 1754 that The Red Cow Inn, shown as property number 47 on the extract from a 1775 map on the front cover, owes its infamy. The poem which runs to 62 stanzas is not reproduced here but can be read in Anthony Doolittle's excellent pamphlet on the poem, published in 2008. The poem, which Doolittle argues persuasively may have been written by Rev. Dr Benjamin Butler of Oxford, parodies the elections of 1754 in Oxford and Haslemere, focusing

its attention on Haslemere around The Red Cow Inn which as we shall see, was divided into several freeholds to secure votes for the successful candidates. Referring to the cow giving birth to 8 calves, the poem goes on 'Each Calf did draw, Against all Law, A Freehold from her Belly'. Each calf did vote And swear by Rote, He was a good Freeholder.'

Events in Oxford, also parodied in the poem, were in addition caricatured in some of Hogarth's most famous prints which are reproduced here for a real sense of the 'election experience' in 1754.

The Oxfordshire seats had been held, uncontested, by the party of 'Old Interest', the Tories, since 1710 but in 1752 they were contested by the Whigs, each side spending at least £40,000. The respective allegiances of characters can be gleaned from the colours of the ribbons and banners: orange for the Whigs, blue for the Tories.

An Election Entertainment



The scene is an election 'treat' given by the Whigs to gain voters' support. The guests are arranged around two tables with the two candidates seated at the far end to the left of the picture. One candidate is suffering the attentions of an old hag (pushed toward him by a man who is also contriving to burn his wig with a pipe), and the other has been collared by a pair of drunks. At the opposite end of the table the Mayor has collapsed after consuming a surfeit of oysters and the election agent has just been struck by a brick thrown by the Tory mob outside. In the foreground (from left to right) a Quaker is carefully examining an I.O.U. (clearly a bribe); a boy adds more alcohol to the punch, and a butcher pours wine or gin over the head of a bruiser who has been fighting with the crowd outside.

Canvassing for Votes



The second scene takes place in a village street in front of three Inns,

How do these compare to The Red Cow Inn, or indeed the other 13 ale houses in Haslemere at the time? The landlady of the Royal Oak is counting her 'treat' money. Behind her the figurehead of a lion is about to consume the French fleur-de-lys, a reference to the continuing war between Britain and France.

Images of bribery abound, even on the new Inn sign in the foreground where a shower of gold flows from the Treasury into the wheelbarrow of 'PUNCH' the candidate for 'GUZZLEDOWN'.

In the middle of the picture an innkeeper is being solicited by representatives from the two parties and is happily taking bribes from both.

To the right of the picture two drinkers discuss the decline of Britain's naval fortunes; the man with the pipe is a blind cobbler who obviously cannot see his companion's complicated demonstration.

The Polling



The polling stand is adorned with the flags of the two parties and the candidates sit at the back. The Tory candidate is scratching his head, seeming anxious, and the Whig candidate is looking smugly satisfied. The excitement has proved too much for the election agent who has fallen asleep between the two candidates.

The stand is being swamped by a motley collection of individuals. On the right a dispute is arising involving a soldier who has lost his hands - the Tory representative appears unhappy, taking issue with the man's attempts to take an oath with his metal hook. Two coachmen cheat each other at cards.

Chairing the Member



The successful Tory candidates are being chaired through the streets in triumph. One member is part of the central group and the other is only seen in shadow as he approaches the side of the church in the background. Looking out from the window of the building on the left are the supporters of the defeated Whig candidates, some are clearly amused by the scene unfolding below. Even in defeat the feasting continues, as the procession of cooks towards the front door reveals. A soldier, bleeding from a recent fight and stripped to the waist, takes solace in tobacco, unconcerned about the pandemonium breaking out behind him. The chaired Member in the centre of the composition is about to topple, one of his bearers having been struck by the end of a flail wielded by one of his own supporters. The sense of collapse is heightened by the movement of the sow and her litter as they make a dash for safety. On the side of the church wall is a sundial inscribed with the words 'PULVIS ET UMBRA SUMUS' - we are but dust and shadows. The goose above the Member's head is probably an allusion to a well-known painting by Le Brun, The Battle of Arbela, in which an eagle is pictured above the head of the conquering hero.

Haslemere and the election of 1754

Haslemere, then part of the manor of Godalming, first returned two MPs to Parliament in the election of 1584, presumably through the influence of Viscount Montagu then steward of the manor. On his death in 1592 the manor was leased to the Mores of Loseley, who were also close to Elizabeth I, to whom in turn the Royal Charter for Haslemere was granted in 1596.

As the Royal Charter refers to the town as “greatly decayed and reduced to great poverty and want” it cannot have been any sense of importance or prosperity that gave rise to this right.

The Mores were already represented in Parliament through either Guildford or the County seat but Haslemere added further influence. The More family represented Haslemere throughout the 17th century.

There were two types of votes. Burgage voters earned their vote by paying rents to the lord of the manor. Freehold votes were confined to certain properties. The map on the next page, dated 1735 and prepared by the Surveyor and dedicated to the town's 2 MPs shows that there were 85 voting properties at that time. In practice however, the picture was far less clear and even as early as 1679 lawsuits arose due to the ambiguity of burgage and freehold rights. An area known as The Waste—leased from the Lord of the Manor and including Shepherds Hill and the site of The Red Cow Inn—also held ambiguous rights.

In 1722 the then head of the More family, by then known as More Molyneux, standing alongside Lord Blundell was unsuccessful in the election, polling only 25 and 24 votes respectively against 46 for James Oglethorpe and 45 for Peter Burrell. This began a tenure of 30 years for Mr Oglethorpe, (later General Oglethorpe) and Mr Burrell as MPs representing Haslemere.

However, as the General set sail for America in 1732, having obtained a Royal Charter to establish the colony of Georgia, it is questionable as to in what sense he represented Haslemere. Nevertheless, both were successful again in the elections of 1734, 1741 and 1747.

The General was clearly a colourful personality. Two days after his first election, in a duel in Haslemere High Street he ran his opponent through the stomach! The General's popularity in the election of 1747, may have been helped by his role in quelling the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 even though Horace Walpole had remarked that he was not sure whether he was a Whig or a Jacobite'.

In 1754 the More Molyneux family determined to recover their historic sinecure. James More Molyneux, heir to the estate, stood with Mr Philip Carteret Webb, a London solicitor of some eminence, who was later to use his electoral success to successfully become the Treasury solicitor.

To win the 1754 election, Molyneux and Webb set about buying up freeholds and tenements, such that by election time Webb held seventeen properties and Molyneux 14, with 3 held jointly. In total the two spent £5,500 on properties and over £2000 on other costs. This expenditure was necessary to

outplay the 21 freeholds and tenements held by Oglethorpe, Burrell and their agent.

The Molyneux faction also executed a concerted plan to change the Bailiff and Constable of the Borough Court Leet, who were in favour of the old regime, both influential figures in the subsequent Parliamentary election as they supervised the election and could rule on any disputed vote.

Elections in the 18th Century may have been corrupt, but they were not dull. Even if you owned a property you had to ensure that the resident would vote for you. We learn for example that on the day that they managed to get their man appointed as bailiff, Molyneux & Webb spent £9 15s on food and £25 10s on wine, beer and punch at The George Inn on the site of what is now Lloyds Bank. Quite a party! By the end of the campaign the George had run up credit of £110 10s 11d.

However, the real coup de grace, was the wheeze of splitting the freehold interests, a ruse deployed by both factions.

This was not a new idea and indeed, the Splitting Act of 1696 made this illegal, but in practice the law was unenforceable. A freehold could be leased for the period of the election to a so called faggot voter. A deed of release accompanying the lease entitled the tenant to vote. Haslemere's faggot voters were paid 1 guinea each.

In the event, despite nearly falling out at the last minute, Mr Molyneux and Mr Webb each polled 70 votes, against Mr Burrell's 46 and General Oglethorpe's 45. Compared to earlier elections, an additional 45 votes!

The Red Cow Inn was subdivided into many freeholds. The figure of 8 used in the poem is unlikely to be accurate and estimates vary from 7 to 11. Records of the vote show votes polled by The Red Cow Garden, Barn, & Gateway as well as the Inn. Further properties including 'the messuage adjoining the Red Cow' are likely to be part of the subdivision. The White Horse Inn was also split as was the White Hart on the site where Collingwood and Batchelor now stands.

This election ended the tenure of General Oglethorpe, and the Molyneux/ Webb faction were again elected in 1759 and 1761. By 1761, Oglethorpe had retired from the fray having joined the services of Frederick the Great in Prussia, but Mr Burrell by this time was resorting to additional burgess subdivision to further his cause, to such an extent that he incurred a severe censure. Whatever went on in the elections of 1761, The Molyneuxs, now represented by brother Thomas, (James having died) appear to have fallen out with Mr Webb at around this time, such that in the subsequent election of 1768, Col Molyneux was elected with Mr Burrell who was obviously not too fussy about which side he was on! General Oglethorpe returned to the hustings, this time in alliance with Mr Webb, yet again losing. Mr Webb died a year later.

Mr Molyneux and Mr Burrell were again elected in 1774, although by this time the total votes cast had fallen to 101, as 47 votes were disallowed. In the subsequent elections of 1780, new dramatis personae enter the elections, ending this saga.

The last elections to be held in Haslemere were in 1831, Haslemere being subsumed into the constituency of Farnham as a result of the Great Reform Act of 1834, probably not a good day for property values in Haslemere!



The Poachers Pocket in 1885, then a baker's run by William Gibb, from a picture by John Wornham Penfold

