THE BOROUGH OF STOCKBRIDGE

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THE origin of Stockbridge as a borough is extremely obscure. It is clear that its position is a fairly defensible one, and one which would be a possible centre of trade. The place is built upon the only solid causeway across the valley of the river Test between Andover and Romsey, at the point where the road from Winchester to Old Sarum (and later Salisbury) crosses that from Andover to Southampton, and it is protected to the north and south by marshes (Hughes 1976). The advantage of the narrowing of the Test valley at this point seems already to have been apparent in pre-Roman times, as the strong settlements on Danebury Hill, Meon Hill and Woolbury Hill attest, while the name Le Strete or Lestrait, used in the twelfth century, suggests the existence of at least a secondary Roman road crossing the river at this point. It would indeed seem unlikely that the massive artificial causeway of packed chalk on which Stockbridge is built, if it was in existence at the time of Domesday, could have been built at any other time than the period of the Roman occupation (Hughes 1976, 131, implies that it may date from after 1200).

In the tenth century the hundred of King's Somborne, in which Stockbridge lies, was kept in the king's hands although the adjoining hundreds passed largely into private ownership. At this time many fortified 'burhs', some of them quite small, were being set up as part of the defences of the country against the Danes, and it is tempting to think that Stockbridge may have been one of them. Its name does not appear in the Burghal Hidage of *c.*911 (Hill 1971), but it could well represent a second line of defence blocking the route up the Test valley at the time when the Danes were in control of Southampton after 998. There is unfortunately at present no proof of this, since the coins once thought to emanate from a Stockbridge mint have now been conclusively assigned either to Bristol (Dolley 1973) or to Bridport.

At the time of the Domesday Inquest William d'Ow's manor (See generally Hill 1976, 94) in King's Somborne Hundred contained 'nine houses of burgesses which pay twelve shillings and two pence'. Three burgess households are also mentioned, paying thirty pence, in the Bishop of Winchester's manor of Houghton, the site of which adjoins Stockbridge on the western side of the Test bridge (it has been suggested that these burgesses' houses were in Winchester, though taxed in Somborne and Houghton: Darby and Campbell 1962, Biddle 1976, 384, table 28). There was also in William's manor a mill, indicating the presence of a sizeable stream of water to turn it. In the Victoria County History of Hampshire (Doubleday 1900, 491) William's holding is identified as Up Somborne, a tiny and remote hamlet lying off the course of any main road and possessing no stream except an underground 'bourne'. This identification cannot be right. The only place likely to fit the description is Stockbridge, which lies on the river Test, had a market in the twelfth century and a fair in the thirteenth, contained burgage tenements and was described as a *burgus* in the reign of Henry III, and was the only settlement in the northern part of King's Somborne hundred ever to acquire the status of a parliamentary borough.

William d'Ow's estates escheated to the crown in 1096 and seem to have been retained

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as part of the royal demesne until 1190. In 1176–77 the hundred of Somborne paid tallage of one hundred shillings, the sum normally levied on boroughs and prosperous settlements (Hill 1976, 94). It is tempting to read into this payment an acknowledgement of the status of Stockbridge as a borough, but such a conclusion, although quite probable, cannot be accepted as definitely proved.

In 1190 Richard I granted land in Somborne and Ashley, with the right to hold a weekly market *apud Lestrait,* to his father's trusted friend William de Briwere. This grant was confirmed by John in 1200, the place of the market being then described as *Le Strete* (Hill 1976, 94). In 1221 William received a further grant from Henry III, enabling him to hold, in addition to the weekly market, an annual fair (*Rot. Litt. Claus.* I, 461). This fair continued to be held regularly in the summer. It took place in the main street, which is sufficiently wide to act as a market-place, and survived until modern methods of marketing killed it in 1932. The market hall survives as part of the present Grosvenor Hotel.

William de Briwere was a man clearly interested in the foundation and development of boroughs, which by the end of the twelfth century represented a considerable source of profit to their overlords. His name appears among the witnesses on almost half of the borough charters granted by King John, and he himself obtained from the king, at a price, royal charters confirming burghal status, together with the right of having weekly markets and annual fairs, to three towns on his own estates, Axminster, Bridgewater and Chesterfield. No such charter survives in the case of Stockbridge, but very soon after Briwere's death in 1226 its inhabitants were recognized as already possessing the status of burgesses (Beresford and Finberg 1973, 120–21). The holding of land in burgage tenure is mentioned between 1233 and 1237, and again in 1242 (Loyd and Stenton 1950, 325). In 1283 after the death of Patrick II de Chaworth his estates are described as including 'Stokebrigg the borough, a member of Sumburn, with rents of burgesses, tolls, pleas and perquisites worth £6.10.4' (*Cal. inq. p.m.* II, 288). The people living on the causeway between the two bridges continued to regard themselves as burgesses; in the reign of Edward VI there were burgage tenements there (Merewether and Stephens 1835, II, 1167), and at the time of its parliamentary enfranchisement by Elizabeth I the borough was regarded as having existed from ancient times.

It is an odd and interesting fact that Stockbridge until 1848 never had a parish church of its own, being simply one of a group of outlying chapelries dependent upon the *matrix ecclesia* of King's Somborne (Hill 1976a), a church which was itself appropriated by William de Briwere to the priory which he and his wife founded at Mottisfont. The religious needs of Stockbridge people were satisfied by the old chapel of St. Peter, lying to the east of the Marsh Stream and served from King's Somborne. The building must date back at least to the twelfth century, because, when about a hundred years ago an attempt was made to demolish it, a small and very primitive-looking crucifix was discovered in one of its walls. This crucifix, together with two windows of the twelfth-century period, were removed to the Victorian church of St. Peter, where they still remain. The nave of Old St. Peter's was pulled down, but the chancel, too tough for nineteenth-century stone-breakers, survives and has recently been restored. A borough without a parish church is fairly unusual but not unique, since a few other examples survive in Wessex and on the marches of Wales. The dependent chapels of King's Somborne may represent either the outflow of Christian influence from an early West Saxon 'minster' or the outlying 'field-churches of a great Anglo-Saxon estate, possibly coterminous with the northern part of King's Somborne Hundred, which is known to have existed, with approximately its present

boundaries, in the first half of the tenth century.

Stockbridge borough remained part of the lands which after 1232 passed, by the marriage of two successive heiresses, from the family of Briwere to that of Chaworth. Throughout the thirteenth century the fortunes of the house of Chaworth increased, until by the time when the direct male line came to an end in 1283 they were one of the dominant families on the southern marches of Wales, and possessed of wide estates in south-west England. Maud de Chaworth, the heiress, was in 1296 married to Henry, the second son of the king's brother Edmund, Earl of Lancaster. After the disgrace and death of his elder brother Thomas, Henry succeeded to the whole of the Lancastrian inheritance as well as to the Chaworth lands brought to him by his wife, and these estates passed eventually to his grand-daughter Blanche, the first wife of John of Gaunt and mother of King Henry IV. From the time of Henry's accession to the throne in 1399 until the sale of the manor of Stockbridge to Joseph Foster Barham in 1824, the borough, as part of the Duchy of Lancaster, was held by the reigning sovereign in right of the Duchess Blanche's inheritance.

Stockbridge was never in a position to set itself up as a rival to the more powerful boroughs of Winchester, Andover, Romsey and Southampton, which together dominated western Hampshire. Its prosperity was much more modest; it lived, as it has always tended to live, on the traffic of the road. The causeway on which it is built provides one of the easiest crossings of the Test. The medieval highway from Winchester to Salisbury, following roughly the course of the modern road, ran for some miles along the northern boundary of the forest of Bere Ashley. The most prominent outstanding hill of Stockbridge Down, nearest to this road, appears to have been used, in the eleventh century at least, as a place for the execution of criminals, especially of those involved in breaches of forest law. In the course of excavations carried out in 1936 (Hill 1937) many bodies were discovered, all of them male and all, apparently, in the prime of life and physically sound. One man had been buried in the same grave with his dog, a large and splendid beast which had been decapitated. Under the armpit of another was hidden a small roll of linen, containing the 'Stockbridge hoard' of silver pennies now in the British Museum. This money had not been discovered when its owner was put to death at a place prominently visible from the highroad, as a terror to evil-doers. It was struck at the Winchester mint in 1065.

In 1141 Robert Earl of Gloucester was captured at Stockbridge while protecting the rearguard of his sister Matilda's army in her flight from Winchester to Devizes (*Gervase,* I, 121), and Edward I spent a solitary night there, apparently for no better reason than that it was a convenient stopping-place on his travels (*Cat. Pat. R.* II, *1292–1301,* 288). In the early fifteenth century its main bridge was restored at the cost of three leading citizens of Winchester (two of them successively mayors of that city) as a pious endowment to ensure the safety of travellers and earn their prayers on behalf of the donors' souls. An eighteenth-century plaque, now in the British Museum, has been reproduced upon the modern bridge. It records what appears to be a copy of the original inscription: —

> 'Say of your cheryte a pater noster and an ave for the sowllys of John Gylinges otherwise said Lokke and Richard Gatin and Margaret the wyf of the aforesaid John and Richard, founders and makers of the bridge, on whose sowllys God have mercy'.

Stockbridge carters and merchants carrying on in the fifteenth century a modest local trade in such commodities as salt, fish, dyed cloth, onions and tar appear in the Brokage Book of Southampton (Coleman 1960, 41, 57, 118, 129). An inscription written in Welsh (kindly translated for me by Prof. Sir

Goronwy Edwards), still to be discerned upon a house in Houghton Road, once an inn, offers to Welsh drovers taking their beasts by road to Southampton 'seasoned hay, tasty pasture, good ale and a comfortable bed'. The word rendered 'bed' suggests a nest in the hay.

Stockbridge, along with a number of other small boroughs, was granted the right of representation in parliament, with two seats, by Elizabeth I in 1563 (Neale 1949, 141). This right it retained until 1832, when it was disenfranchised along with a number of other boroughs which had earned the name of being notoriously rotten. Stockbridge, however, wore its rottenness with a difference. It kept its independence, never becoming a 'pocket' borough in which seats could be obtained by application (with payment in money or services) to a single individual. It fell eventually into that class of 'management' boroughs in which a prospective candidate or his agent had to buy his way by the judicious distribution of bribes among the electors. These, for their part, held meetings, usually in local inns, to choose their own returning officer and manage their own voting.

For the first century of its existence as a parliamentary borough there is very little evidence that Stockbridge was corrupt or open to undue influence. Even some attempts to secure seats for candidates put forward by the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster met with no particular success. In 1601, according to Sir John Neale (1949, 227), 'Stockbridge ... had by no means lost its aversion to London-placed "foreigners" or its tradition of loyalty to Hampshire squires'. Down to the time of the Restoration, and even beyond, Stockbridge members were drawn predominantly from those families of local gentry who showed a strong inclination to Puritanism. The families of Gifford, Wallop and Hevenningham, all local and all intermarried, were well represented. It is noteworthy that part of the fortune of Sir Henry Gifford, who sat for Stockbridge in the parliament of 1572, came to him from his mother Anne *née* Bainbridge, the heiress of Thomas Bainbridge of Tytherley, one of the Marian martyrs of 1558 (Doubleday and Page 1903, 72; Page 1911, 516). Two of the regicides of 1649, Robert Wallop and William Hevingham, were Stockbridge members. Essex Strode, donor of the mace, came from the same family as William Strode, one of the Five Members prominent for their opposition to Charles I.

The qualifications for voters in the early elections are unknown, though they must have included the possession of at least a small plot of land between the two bridges. The first two members to take their seats for the borough, Walter Sandys and William St. John, were returned by seven electors, whose names are given as Robert Belchamber (the bailiff), William Poulet, Robert Pystor *alias* Baker, William Skylling, Nicholas Thorpe, William Webb and John Windover (*Parl. Returns* 1213–1702, 403). Of these, Poulet, Pystor, Skylling, Thorpe and Webb can all be identified as members of local landowning families whose main estates lay outside but not far from Stockbridge. In 1614 the voters numbered 28 and the bailiff was reported to have 'got the seal into his own hands' (*J. Hse. Commons* I, 477). The numbers seem to have increased slowly but not dramatically. In 1793 63 named Stockbridge voters were threatened with disenfranchisement for corrupt practices (the bill in fact was never passed) (*J. Hse. Commons* 48, 427). Stockbridge by this time was classified as a 'scot and lot' borough, its right to vote being vested in all householders who paid tithe and poor-rate. Oldfield (1816, II, 514–16) who remarked unkindly though truthfully that 'this borough cuts as distinguished a figure in the annals of bribery as any in England' gives the number of voters in 1816 as 57. Joseph Foster Barham's new building operations after 1824 succeeded in pushing the number up to 148 (Stockbridge Court Records), but the electorate was never a large one.

After the Restoration there is much more evidence than before of regular and systematic bribery, and although the local gentry continued at first to control the Stockbridge seats they were soon ousted by off-comers with longer purses, among whom the East India Company was notably represented. At first the bribes were fairly discreet, and sometimes disguised in the form of presents offered to the community as a whole. Thus in 1681 Essex Strode, one of the sitting members, presented the borough with a splendid silver mace, on which is engraved the royal arms of Charles II with the red rose of Lancaster taking pride of place, the arms of the donor, and the inscription '*Sum adhuc gloria Stockbridge ex dono Essex Strode armigeri*'. Unfortunately for Strode, at the next election his opponent offered five pounds a vote, and the Stockbridge electors, preferring hard cash to armorial splendours, promptly unseated him. However, they kept the mace. In 1697 two members, George Pitt and Thomas Jervoise, presented a discreet but somewhat surprising bribe in the shape of a beautiful set of communion-plate, which is still in the possession of Stockbridge church. In 1713 Sir Richard Steele enlivened the Stockbridge elections by his sense of humour. A tradition recorded by Oldfield tells how he resorted to 'the merry expedient of sticking a large apple full of guineas, and declaring that it should be the prize of that man whose wife should first be brought to bed after that day nine months. This procured him the favour of the women, who are said to commemorate Sir Richard's Bounty to this day (1816), and once made a strenuous effort to procure that no man should ever be received as candidate who did not offer himself upon the same terms' (Oldfield 1816, III, 515). Payment for votes came to be regarded as a regular source of income in Stockbridge, and the threat in 1716 of a Septennial Act restricting general elections to one in every seven years was regarded as a serious attack upon the standard of living. As the poet John Gay wrote (Underhill 1893, I, 188): —

'Sad melancholy every visage wears,
'What! No election come in seven long years? . . .
. . . 'Our streets no more with tides of ale shall float,
'Nor cobblers feast six years upon a vote.'

The act, however, was never passed and the menace to Stockbridge burgesses' incomes was averted. Throughout the eighteenth century they controlled a seller's market in votes. In 1784, Robinson estimated the price of the two seats at Stockbridge, for a single election, at £6,000 'judiciously expended' (Laprade 1922, 76) and in 1793 the candidates Cator and Scott were stated by witnesses summoned before a select committee of the House of Commons to have paid 70 guineas a vote, and to have offered in addition an unspecified amount of material benefits in the shape of free groceries and coal for the families of committed voters (Select Ctte. 1793).

The business arrangments of the Stockbridge electors did not go entirely unnoticed by the House. Between 1689 and 1693 the corruption of the place was already becoming notorious, and there were allegations, not only of bribery on an extravagant scale, but also of intimidation by threats of bringing serious accusations against unwilling voters. An attempt was made to pass off the bribery as a matter of reimbursements made to the inhabitants of Stockbridge for the expenses to which they had been put in quartering the soldiers sent by James II to oppose William of Orange on his march from Torbay in 1688. This excuse failed to convince the House, where in 1693 it was resolved that, on account of the notorious bribery and corruption practised by the electors of Stockbridge, 'a bill be brought in disabling the said borough from sending burgesses to serve in parliament for the future'. News of this impending measure caused extreme alarm and despondency among the Stockbridge voters, who saw the prospect of a large part of their incomes

slipping out of their grasp. They hastily sent up petitions to parliament against the bill, making no rash promises for the future, but taking their stand upon the ancient right of the borough to parliamentary representation.

The House was unimpressed. The bill for the disenfranchisement of Stockbridge went forward until it reached the committee stage. There it foundered, not because anyone had much enthusiasm for the survival of Stockbridge as a parliamentary borough, but because it proved impossible to reach any satisfactory agreement as to what should be done with the two forfeited seats. Romsey petitioned for them but was refused, probably because the house felt that this arrangement would give the town an unfair advantage over Andover. They were offered to Basingstoke, which showed no desire to take up the offer. A suggestion that two extra seats should be given to the County of Southampton was rejected as forming an awkward precedent which other counties would probably try to exploit. Finally the matter was dropped altogether (*J. Hse. Commons* 11, 145; Bohun 1702, 273).

During the eighteenth century the proportion of Hampshire men who sat for Stockbridge showed a very marked decline. Probably as a result of the proceedings of 1693, the venality of the borough became widely known, with the result that Stockbridge developed into a happy hunting-ground for the wealthy carpet-bagger who knew what he wanted and was prepared to pay for it. From the Stockbridge point of view, however, the system had its merits. As a small and unimportant part of a royal duchy, the place was unencumbered by the presence of any powerful local patron. There was no manor-house to exert influence, and the voting was arranged among the electors in a cheerful and fairly democratic way, even if the determining factor were not the merits of the candidates but their ability to pay on the nail. The fact that the bailiff acted as returning-officer not only helped to keep the local court alive, but ensured a considerable amount of active local participation in its affairs. It was said that the landlord of a flourishing inn would connive at the election of one of his own ostlers as bailiff and 'carry the mace before him' (Oldfield 1792, 2, 73). Inns, in fact, seem to have been regarded as the normal centres of political activity, not without good reason, since they have always been the men's clubs of an English village. John Bucket, landlord of the inn called the King's Head, seems to have been the convener of the electors of 1790, who met regularly in his premises. His activities, together with those of his friend and ally Christopher Bishop the bailiff, succeeded in pushing the price of votes up to 70 guineas apiece, and some aspiring spirits tried to bargain for 80 until it became obvious to Bishop that the candidates would not play.

The aftermath of this affair led to the last great fight to preserve the Stockbridge voters' right to manage their own elections, and resulted in an investigation made by a select committee of the House in 1792–93. The findings of this committee were published and are still extant. It appeared that the members who had actually been returned at 70 guineas a vote were John Cator and John Scott, the propriety of whose election was challenged by the defeated candidates, George Porter and John Foster Barham. Porter and Barham were clearly men of determination and influence, although in their campaign against the bribery practised by their successful rivals they were, as their subsequent careers showed, moved less by moral indignation than by the defeat of their parliamentary ambitions. Barham in particular showed himself, in his later career, an adroit and ruthless exponent of the arts of bribery and worse. Barham and Porter brought their grievances to the notice of the House and asked for an inquiry. In the course of the evidence which was given to the committee, it emerged that Cator and Scott

had carried on extensive negotiations, through their agent, with Christopher Bishop. The meetings used to take place at the Wheatsheaf Inn at Popham Beacon, and Bishop would thereafter ride back to Stockbridge and report the results of his diplomacy to meetings convened at the King's Head under John Bucket's presidency 'not at dinner but at hogsheads of Beer'. When the bargain was concluded at 70 guineas, the beer seems to have been of a strength worthy of the occasion, for it was reported that 'the whole room was in a roar', and some witnesses declared, probably with a good deal of truth, that they could not remember anything of what happened after the hogshead had been tapped.

After a full investigation by the committee the election of Cator and Scott was quashed, and Porter and Barham were returned unopposed. 63 named voters were threatened with disqualification, although it is not clear whether this threat was put into practice. The list contains many names of families who may still be found taking an honoured place in Stockbridge affairs today, but oddly enough neither John Bucket nor Christopher Bishop was mentioned in it. It would perhaps be indiscreet to enquire why they were omitted. Bishop disappears from the history of Stockbridge after this episode, but Bucket lived there to a ripe old age and died in an aura of genuine affection and, it appears, of great respectability. His epitaph in the churchyard of Old St. Peter's can still be deciphered:—

'Alas, and is poor Bucket gone?
'Farewell, convivial, honest John ...
'In this same motley, shifting scene
'How various have thy fortunes been ...
'But high or low, or wet or dry,
'No rotten stave could malice spy.
'Then rise, immortal Bucket, rise
'And claim thy station in the skies,
'"Twixt Amphora and Pisces shine
'Still guarding Stockbridge with thy sign.'

From 1793 to 1822 the two Stockbridge seats were occupied either by Porter and Barham or by their nominees. Barham, though he seems never to have lived in Stockbridge, was clearly interested in the place, and took some pains to establish his influence there and to make himself popular. He bought the rents of assize from the duchy, and acquired property in the High Street, where he built the graceful and distinctive Town Hall at his own expense. By 1820 he owned at least 80 houses between the two bridges. Some time between 1820 and 1822, however, he seems to have suffered a brief financial set-back. At this time he sold 72 of his Stockbridge houses to his political opponent Lord Grosvenor, with the clear implication that this sale represented a transfer of rights, or at least of influence, in the Stockbridge seats. Grosvenor put forward one of his rising young protegés, Edward Smith Stanley, and Barham applied for the Chiltern Hundreds.

Grosvenor's name is commemorated in the gracefully built inn which is so prominent a feature of Stockbridge High Street. He had, as it turned out, driven a very bad bargain, for Barham was an adept in the art of eating his cake and having it. After 1822 his fortunes took a turn for the better, and in 1824 he bought the manor of Stockbridge outright from the duchy. This put him into the position where he could summon the courts, and instruct his steward to name the jury, who in their turn elected the bailiff who acted as returning-officer. At every court held between 1824 and 1829 presentments were made of the names of 'all legal inhabitants of the borough', and the number rose steadily. The increase in the number of people eligible to vote was in part the result of Barham's new enterprises in building houses. In his sale of land to Grosvenor he had reserved for himself two strips of firm land running out into the marsh from the southern side of the High Street. On these he proceeded to run up new and very insanitary cottages in the areas later known as Blandford Row and Trafalgar Street. Being indubitably situated

between the two bridges, these cottages housed voters. Other dwellings were erected by the process now known as 'infilling' the spaces left on the main causeway, and just behind it in the gardens of those houses which were still in Barham's hands. The power of the Grosvenor connection in Stockbridge was soon eroded as Barham regained control of a majority of the houses within the borough. Moreover he was once more in a position to be free with his money, and he had no objection to bribery provided that it was not found out. Before he could regain his own seat in parliament his health failed, but his son John was one of the last two representatives to sit for Stockbridge, being returned in the election of 1831 (Stockbridge Court Records).

The following year saw the passing of the Reform Bill and the end of Stockbridge as a parliamentary borough. It still remained, as it remains to this day, a modest economic and social centre for the surrounding villages and farms. The annual fair, granted in 1221, continued to flourish as a centre of the local trade in sheep throughout the nineteenth century, and down to the time of the First World War it was regarded as an important local occasion, the scene of a carnival and of much entertainment. The old market-hall, now incorporated into the fabric of the Grosvenor Hotel but still quite easy to identify, was the scene of the last flockmasters' dinner in 1932. Horse races were held on Danebury Down until the First World War, and the grandstand which did double duty as a Roman Catholic chapel, survived many years later.

Time and modern traffic, which seemed at one period to threaten the prosperity of Stockbridge, have in the past few years combined to restore it. With the disappearance of the local branch lines of railways, the economy of rural England has come once again to depend upon roads, and roads since pre-Roman times have been the life lines of Stockbridge's existence. With the increase of motor traffic its fortunes have revived; it provides once more an obvious halting place for travellers bound for the south-west, and its inns cater for a far greater volume of traffic than in the days of William Briwere or of John Bucket. It has a flourishing comprehensive school, four centres of religious worship, some shops of which John Gylinges, Richard Gatin and Margaret would thoroughly have approved, several active local societies and an exceedingly notable fishing club. If it cannot be said to stand quite in the first rank of English boroughs, it has at least made an interesting and varied contribution to the fabric of English history.

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