

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HOY TO MARGATE'S EARLY GROWTH AS A SEASIDE RESORT

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It is a well known fact that the size and character of English seaside resorts have been strongly shaped by patterns of communication, particularly as regards their availability and cost to the passenger. Immediately one thinks of railways and especially their popular excursions at 3rd class fares, which were well below the statutory one penny per mile on parliamentary trains from 1844 onwards. Indeed, the birth and popularization of seaside resorts have been attributed to railways. This thesis, however, is totally inapplicable to Margate, which as a mature seaside resort was already more than a century old by the time the South-Eastern Railway, having been extended from Ashford to Thanet, was opened on 1st December, 1846. The town had been launched as a sea-bathing resort as far back as 1736, just twelve years after Daniel Defoe had observed how 'the town of Margate is eminent for nothing that I know of, but for King William's frequently landing here in his returns from Holland, and for shipping a vast quantity of corn for London Market, most, if not all of it, the product of the Isle of Thanet, in which it stands'.¹ The founder of modern Margate was a local carpenter, Thomas Barber, who first advertised a sea-water bath with 'convenient Lodgings to be Lett', in *The Kentish Post, or Canterbury News Letter* of 17th July, 1736.²

When the first official census was taken in 1801, Margate returned a population of 4,766 which, by 1831, had comfortably more than doubled to 10,339.³ At the latter date Margate was flourishing as a seaside resort, having expanded and matured thanks to steamboats

¹ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through England and Wales Divided into Circuits or Journies*, i, (1927), 119.

² John Whyman, *Kentish Sources VIII. The Early Kentish Seaside (1736-1840), Selected Documents*, (Gloucester, 1985), 160-1.

³ G.S. Minchin, 'Table of Population, 1801 to 1921', (Ed.) W. Page, *The Victoria History of the County of Kent*, iii (1932), 359.

which had been introduced from London on a regular basis from 1815 onwards. In 1839, it sufficed merely to comment that its 'baths, hotels, libraries, reading rooms, assembly rooms, theatre, bazaars, promenades, etc. surpassed those of most other places on the coast',⁴ not forgetting the seaside boarding-house and lodgings. That steamboats brought immense prosperity to Margate between the 1820s and the 1840s is an undisputable fact which has been addressed elsewhere⁵ and was widely recognized at the time. An early steward of steam vessels unreservedly asserted in 1828 that 'the inhabitants of Margate ought to eulogize the name of *Watt*, as the founder of their good fortune; and *Steam Vessels*, as the harbingers of their prosperity'.⁶ Four years previously *The Times* had concluded that 'the introduction of steamboats has given the whole coast of Kent, [and] the Isle of Thanet in particular, a prodigious lift'.⁷

Margate's pre-railway popularity rested on water communications: before 1815, on hoys, sailing packets and yachts and, thereafter, on steamboats. Indeed, as will be shown, the greater carrying capacity and the lower fares of sailing vessels, compared to stage-coaches, introduced quite early on a wider cross-section of visitors to Margate, causing it to become an exception to the general rule that Hanoverian watering-places were almost exclusively resorted to by the upper classes. Furthermore, Margate derived no benefits from royal patronage which contributed so enormously to the expansion of its great rival, Brighton.⁸ The rise and prosperity of Margate and Brighton, which resulted from contrasting causes, respectively hoys and royalty, were observed by *The Times* on 1st September, 1804.

'Margate, August 30 . . . has not been so full of visitors for eight years past. . . . Every *hoy* or, according to the modern term, every *packet* is literally *loaded*. The smallest of these vessels brought down 120 persons yesterday morning. . . . [But] there are not here, at present, many persons of high rank and fashion.

Brighton, Thursday, August 30 . . . is at present unusually full of company; and the presence of his ROYAL HIGHNESS has its obvious influence on the vivacities of the place'.

⁴ *Pigot and Co.'s Royal National and Commercial Directory and Topography*, (November 1839), 339.

⁵ John Whyman, *Aspects of Holidaymaking and Resort Development Within the Isle of Thanet, with Particular Reference to Margate, circa 1736 to circa 1840*, ii, (New York, 1981), 536-65; John Whyman, 'Water communications to Margate and Gravesend as coastal resorts before 1840', *Southern History*, iii, (1981), 111-2, 120-38; John Whyman, 'The Glorious Days of the Thames Steamers to Thanet', in *The Maritime Heritage of Thanet*, (East Kent Maritime Trust, Ramsgate, 1993).

⁶ R.B. Watts, *A Topographical Description of the Coast between London, Margate and Dover . . . With an Account of the First Application of Steam . . . in Propelling Vessels*, (1828), 9.

⁷ *The Times*, 28th September, 1824, 2c.

⁸ E.W. Gilbert, *Brighton: Old Ocean's Bauble*, (1954), 11-17.

By 1815, Margate had passed well beyond any bounds of initial growth, and could lay claim to being the first resort to become 'popular' in the widest interpretation of that word, especially as to its amenities and recreations, a fact long acknowledged by historians and historical geographers, including Professor Gilbert.⁹ In explaining Margate's eighteenth-century rise as a seaside resort, several influences were at work, including a developing craze for sea-bathing and seaside holidays, emerging out of an extensive publicity bestowed on the medicinal virtues of sea water, sea air, ozone, instances of longevity, climate and salubrity; developments in communications; an expanding demand for holidays, whether for medical reasons or pleasure, and finally responding to the needs of consumers on the supply side of holidaymaking. This meant having somewhere to stay and things to do, hence an expansion of inns, hotels, boarding-houses, lodging-houses and out-of-town villas, as well as bathing machines, baths, assembly rooms, circulating libraries, playhouses or theatres, indoor and outdoor amusements and opportunities for local excursions, all of which were soon provided from the 1750s onwards.¹⁰ Of the long-term causes contributing to Margate's success as an early seaside resort, consumer demand was clearly crucial, more so than the alleged medicinal qualities of sea water and sea air, or developments in transport. Dr John Walton has argued, consistently, powerfully and correctly, that consumer demand was the principal force shaping the overall growth and character of resort development in this country,¹¹ but equally this demand was susceptible to accessible low-cost transport facilities and this is where the 'hoy' enters the picture.

Edward Hasted in 1800 was well aware of what was happening, and he was not alone, when he wrote of Margate rising

'unexpectedly, and that no long time since, to wealth and consequence, owing principally to the universal recommendation of sea air and bathing; . . . the rage of . . . Londoners . . . spending their summer months . . . on the sea coast; and when it came to be known that the shore here was so well adapted to bathing, being an entire level and covered with the finest sand, . . . and the easy distance from the metropolis, with the conveniency of so frequent a passage by water, it gave Margate a preference before all others, to which the beauty and healthiness of it, and of the adjoining country, contributed still more'.¹²

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18–20.

¹⁰ Whyman (1981), *op. cit.*, i, 108–389, or Whyman (1985), *op. cit.*, 87–92, 94–8, 100–4, 110–3, 132–4, 143–7, 152–5, 158–66, 176–84, 191–2, 198–206, 211–21, 224–7, 237–58, 265–80, 293–305, 307–17, 377–8.

¹¹ John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History, 1750–1914*, (Leicester, 1983), Chapter 2 being devoted to 'The demand for seaside holidays', 5–44.

¹² Edward Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, X, 2nd Edn., (Canterbury, 1800), 321.

This explanation followed a reference to 'several passage-boats, or yachts, as they are now called, . . . fitted up with cabins and other accommodations', sailing 'every day to and from London, constantly freighted with passengers [and] baggage'.¹³ Indeed, to his amazement, 'the number of persons, which the inhabitants boast are carried to and from this place in the vessels yearly, is almost beyond a moderate credibility, even to 18,000 on an average'.¹⁴ In 1812, Mrs. Pilkington had no hesitation in believing that 'the cheapness and convenience of the packet-boats have . . . greatly contributed to the popularity of the place'.¹⁵

Guidebooks, too, attributed Margate's success to hoys and sailing packets. Two references suffice to illustrate this point. Intending visitors were informed in 1797 that

'during the season, eight Packets sail to and from *London* alternately, and frequently make the passage in ten or twelve hours. They not only bring a great part of the company, but [also] such necessaries, for their accommodation, as cannot be supplied by *Margate*. . . . These vessels are fitted up with a degree of elegance and convenience, that at once shows the emulative spirit of their owners, who are men of respectability; and to whose persevering exertions *Margate* must be thought not a little indebted for its present prosperity'.¹⁶

Five years later it was suggested that 'it is perhaps owing . . . to the very superior accommodation which they afford, as well as to the civility and attention of the masters and seamen who navigate them, that Margate stands so highly distinguished in the list of watering places'.¹⁷

From an early date a journey to Margate presented no great obstacles, thanks to hoys operating regular, frequent and cheap services from and to London. It was easier to journey to Margate than to the Sussex resorts. The early pre-eminence of Margate was founded on communications by hoy or sailing packet, exploiting the almost exclusive advantage of a direct and low-cost water-communication link with an expanding London, using the Thames as a natural highway. The potential offered by hoys was already apparent to John Lyons when he compiled Margate's first guidebook in 1763.

'As *Margate* is only a large village, you cannot expect that it should be so regularly supplied with shops, as a market-town; not but that there are several good ones, and many very reputable Tradesmen. This deficiency is, in a great measure, supplied by the numerous articles to be found in most of them, and by their ready and quick

¹³ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁵ Mrs. Pilkington, *Margate!!! or Sketches amply Descriptive of that Celebrated Place of Resort*, (1813), 93.

¹⁶ 'By an Inhabitant', *The Margate Guide, A Descriptive Poem with Elucidatory Notes*, (Margate, 1797), 75.

¹⁷ *The New Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs Guide*, 2nd Edn., (Margate, 1802), 50.

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communication with *London* by the Hoys. Was it not for the assistance of these vessels, it would be almost impossible for *Margate*, and the country round it, to furnish entertainment for the vast numbers of people who resort to it. They are sloops of eighty or a hundred tons burden. There are four of them, two of which sail in alternate weeks. . . . They usually leave *Margate* on *Friday* or *Saturday*, and *London* on *Wednesday* or *Thursday*. Passengers, of whom there are often sixty or seventy, pay only 2s. 6d. and the freight of baggage is inconsiderable. They sometimes make the passage in eight hours, and at others in two or three days, just as winds and tides happen to be for, or against, them. . . . The passage is cheap, and in fine weather extremely pleasant and agreeable. . . . The Masters are very careful, decent men. . . . They transact incredible business'.¹⁸

Hoys have been described as 'among the most interesting of all coastal craft', needing to be 'sturdy enough' to overcome adverse weather conditions and 'fast enough to make regular passages'.¹⁹ Their history can be traced back to the sixteenth century, with Faversham possessing sixteen hoys by the 1580s, six of which sailed regularly to London with corn.²⁰ Having origins firmly in the corn trade, they were frequently noted during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. John Taylor, the Water Poet, referred in 1637 to hoys operating from Maidstone, Rochester, Faversham and Margate.²¹ They were observed by Celia Fiennes in 1697,²² by the Rev. John Harris²³ and Daniel Defoe²⁴ before the 1720s, and by the Rev. William Newton, the early historian of Maidstone, in 1741.²⁵ As between the early seventeenth century and the 1720s and 1730s the Faversham corn hoys increased their tonnage from between 20 and 30 tons to 60 tons, being advertised as such in *The Kentish Post, or Canterbury News Letter*.²⁶ Defoe noted 'large hoys, of fifty to sixty tuns burthen', navigating the Medway to and from Maidstone.²⁷ Already by the early eighteenth century corn hoys while sticking to a 'cutter-rigged design' were 'decked-in', and this represented 'an obvious improvement on the earlier open hold'.²⁸

¹⁸ John Lyons, *A Description of the Isle of Thanet, and Particularly of the Town of Margate*, (1763), 14–15.

¹⁹ Dennis A. Baker, *Agricultural Prices, Production and Marketing, with Special Reference to the Hop Industry: North-East Kent, 1680–1760*, (New York, 1985), 303, quoting Richard Hugh-Perks, 'The Hoys and After', *The Faversham Magazine*, i, no. 4, (1968), 9–10.

²⁰ Baker, *op. cit.*, 303.

²¹ W. Jerrold, *Highways and Byways in Kent*, (1907), 110.

²² (Ed.) Christopher Morris, *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, (1947), 122.

²³ John Harris, *The History of Kent in Five Parts*, (1719), 123.

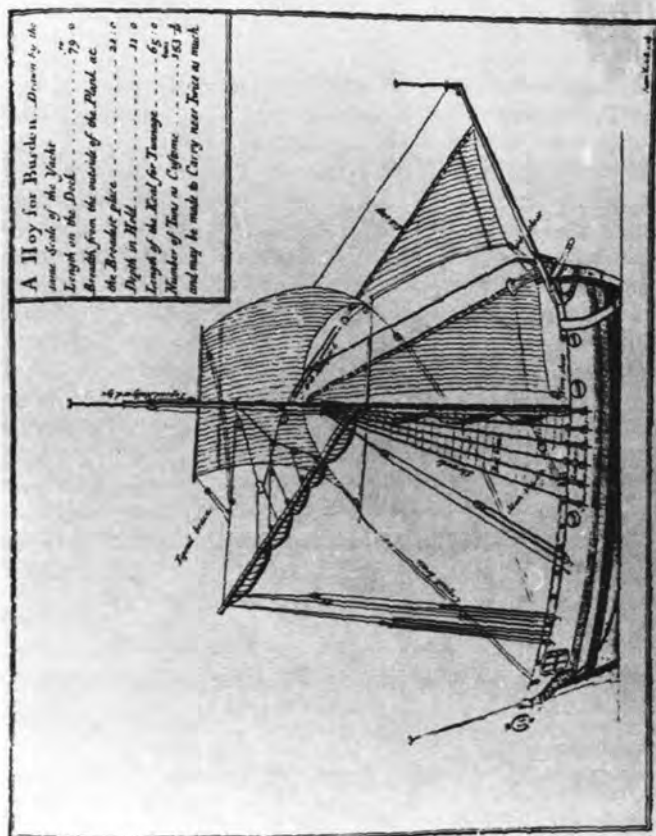
²⁴ Defoe, *op. cit.*, 99, 111, 113.

²⁵ William Newton, *The History and Antiquities of Maidstone, The County-Town of Kent*, (1741), 103–4.

²⁶ Baker, *op. cit.*, 303–4.

²⁷ Defoe, *op. cit.*, 113.

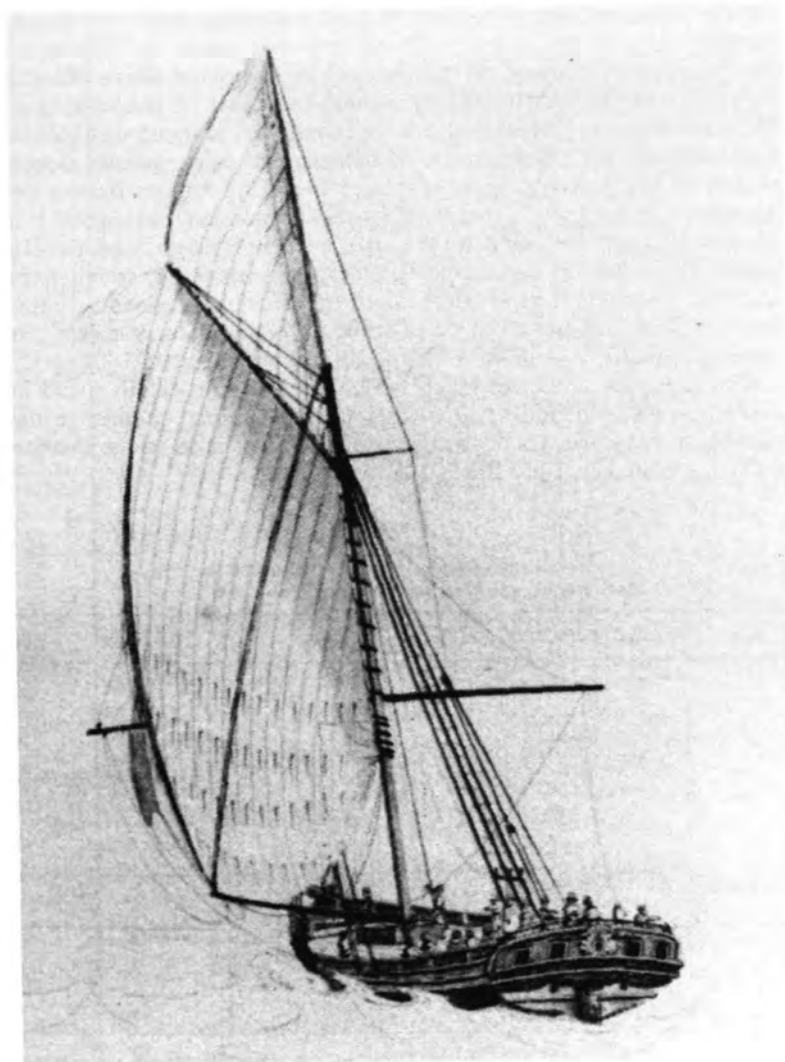
²⁸ Baker, *op. cit.*, 304.



Early eighteenth-century English hoist.
 [Dennis A. Baker, *Agricultural Prices, Production and Marketing, with Special Reference to the Hop Industry: North-East Kent, 1680-1760*, (New York, 1985), Plate 4, facing 304.]

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PLATE II



The old Margate hoy, c. 1780.

[An illustration of the old Margate hoy published by R. Lambe in 1820. The Original is in Margate Public Library, Local Collection.]

Blessed with 'an excellent safety record' such that 'insurance was considered unnecessary',²⁹ Kentish hoys, including those of Thanet, carrying corn to London and returning with shop goods, had developed the practice of conveying 'passengers and luggage along the sea coast',³⁰ and this comfortably pre-dated the onset of sea-bathing at Margate. From its inception as a resort, therefore, Margate was able to exploit an already existing form of transport, its hoys, as corn sloops with a tradition of passenger carrying, becoming famous during the eighteenth century. Over succeeding decades, however, passengers and their luggage triumphed over corn and other cargo, and purely passenger-conveying sailing packets or yachts emerged, which were thought to be somewhat superior to the old hoy. Indeed, greater respectability was bestowed on them by renaming them 'packets', as the ever watchful eye of *The Times* noted on 1st September, 1804.

The following table and graph, which are based on details found in contemporary guidebooks, directories and newspapers, summarize the number of hoys, packets or yachts and the trend of fares on the London to Margate run between 1763 and 1815.

TABLE 1

Vessels employed and the fares charged on the London to Margate sea route, 1763-1815

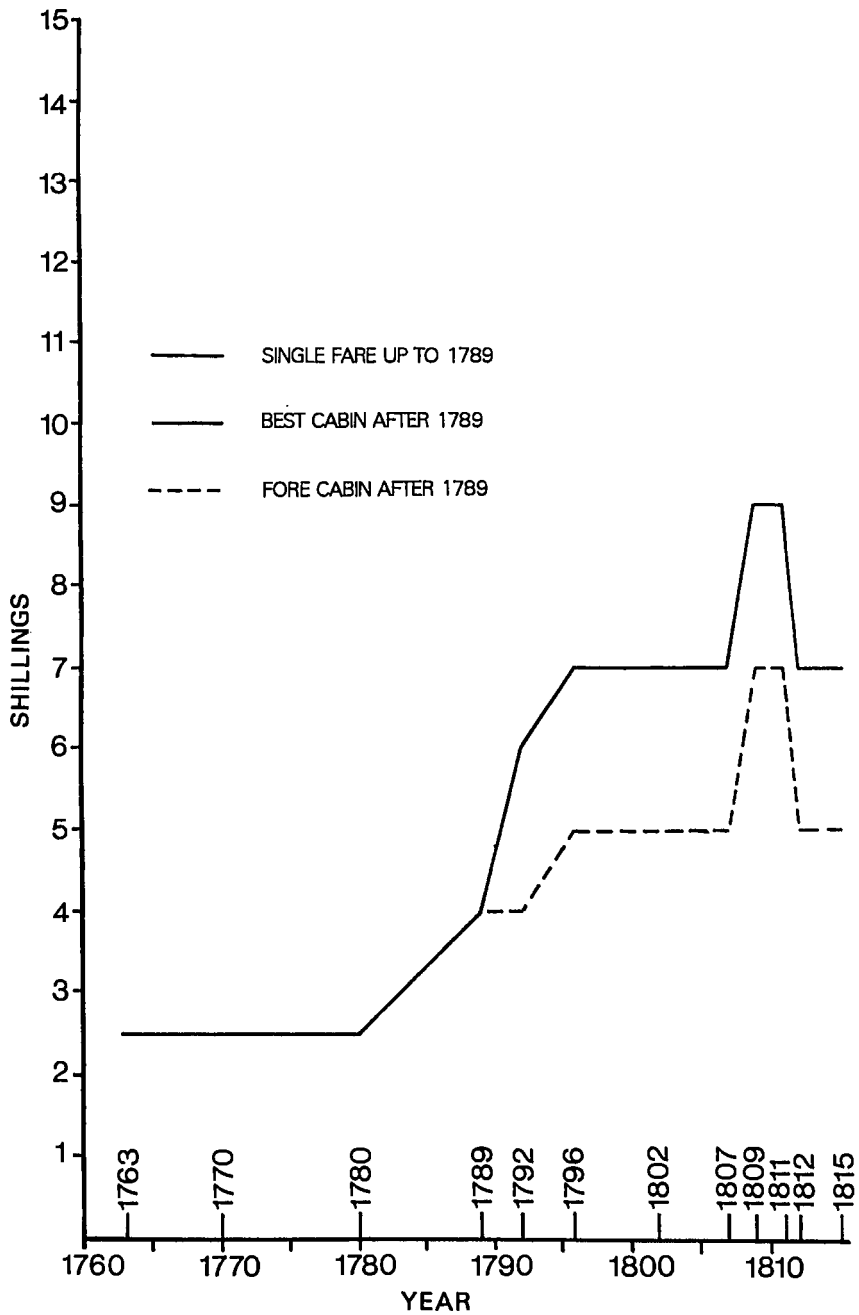
Year	Hoys	Packets or Yachts	Fares	
1763	4		2s. 6d.	
1770	5		2s. 6d.	
1780	5	1	2s. 6d.	
1789	6		4s.	
1792	6		10s. 6d., 6s., 4s.	
1796	3	8	10s. 6d., 7s., 5s.	
			<i>Best Cabin</i>	<i>Fore Cabin</i>
1802		9	7s.	5s.
1807	3	9	7s.	5s.
1809	2	9	9s.	7s.
1811	3	11	9s.	7s.
1812		7	7s.	5s.
1815		7-13	7s.	5s.

There was an impressive increase in the number of vessels operating between 1763 and 1811. During the Napoleonic Wars between 1811 and 1815 some of the packets were switched from passenger carrying

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

³⁰ R. de Kerchove, *International Maritime Dictionary*, 2nd Edn., (1961), 382.

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to troop carrying, but, from advertisements placed in *The Times*, it is clear that at least seven packets continued to ply regularly with passengers between London and Thanet during the summer months of 1812 to 1815.³¹ The minimum single fare ranged from 2s. 6d. to 7s. falling back to 5s. in 1812 and 1815 – double that of 1763. A single fare obtained between 1763 and 1789, with complete stability until after 1780. The 1790s produced differential fares which were associated with greater comfort. Guidebooks of that decade emphasized how the packets were ‘fitted up in an elegant and commodious manner, and furnished with good beds’,³² which were a real amenity whenever the hoys were becalmed or delayed by contrary winds or storms and as a result extended the sea voyage to and from London beyond a single day. By the 1800s, some of the packets boasted ‘a state-room or after-cabin, which [could] be engaged by a select party for five or six guineas’.³³ On 12th July, 1815, *The Times* advertised three packets offering private state cabins, which could be hired separately. Children in arms were conveyed at half fare in 1812.³⁴ In 1780 baggage was carried at under 6d. per cwt.,³⁵ and at later dates ‘proportionably cheap’.³⁶

Compared with the twice-weekly sailings noted by John Lyons in 1763, a 1796 directory published a much improved pattern of sailings (see Table 2) which were daily during the season, with the added observation that ‘the expense for each passenger is very moderate’.³⁷

Competition was keen among the different hoy proprietors as is all too clear from advertisements which were placed in *The Times* from July, 1811 onwards. Passengers intending to sail on the Princess of Wales yacht, leaving Ralph’s Quay, near Billingsgate, at midday on Fridays during July, 1811, were advised that ‘carriages and persons passing down St. Dunstan’s hill not only avoid Thames-street, and the unpleasantries of Billingsgate, but will face a clean paved passage to the vessel; and Ladies and Gentlemen can step on board without having other vessels to pass over, or any other annoyance’. On 4th July, 1811, James Laming, who

³¹ For instance, seven Margate packets in a front-page advertisement in *The Times*, of 14th June, 1815, followed on 12th July, 1815, by an advertisement relating to six Ramsgate packets at fares of 7s. and 5s. respectively in the best and fore cabins, the latter offering ‘a passage . . . preferable to that by the packets of a contiguous watering place’, meaning Margate.

³² *The Kentish Traveller’s Companion*, 5th Edn., (Canterbury, 1799), 265.

³³ *The New Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs Guide*, 5th Edn., (Margate, 1809), 53.

³⁴ *The Times*, 16th July, 1812 and 22nd July, 1812.

³⁵ *The Margate Guide*, (1780), 19.

³⁶ *The New Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs Guide*, (1809), *op. cit.*, 53.

³⁷ *A Short Description of the Isle of Thanet; being chiefly Intended as a Directory for the Company Resorting to Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs*, (Margate, 1796), 23, 97–8.

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TABLE 2

A list of the yachts or packets sailing between Margate and London during the season, 1796.

<i>Name of Vessel</i>	<i>Sails</i>	<i>Returns</i>	<i>Fares</i>	<i>Master</i>
Robert and Jane	Sunday	Thursday	5s., 7s., After Cabin 10s. 6d.	Capt. Kidd
Royal Charlotte	Monday	Friday	5s., 7s.	Capt. James Laming
Britannia	Friday	Wednesday	5s., 7s.	Capt. Finch
Diligence	Saturday	Wednesday	5s., 7s.	Capt. Sandwell
Duke of York	Tuesday	Saturday	5s., 7s.	Capt. Kennard
New Rose in June	Wednesday	Sunday	5s., 7s., After Cabin, 10s. 6d.	Capt. Palmer
Princess of Wales	Wednesday	Sunday	5s., 7s., After Cabin, 10s. 6d.	Capt. Hillier
British Queen	Thursday	Monday	5s., 7s.	Capt. R. Laming

'The above vessels sail to Dice Quay, Billingsgate Dock, Lower Thames Street, London, where answers are given respecting the hours of sailing'.

sailed from Dice Quay, Billingsgate, every Friday at 12.30 advertised the Royal Charlotte packet as being 'a very fast sailing one, . . . being allowed in size and convenience to be one of the first in the Margate employ', while a few days later the Duke of Gloucester, captained by John Chapman, was being promoted on 9th July, 1811, as 'a new vessel', with 'excellent accommodations', which 'sails equally fast with any vessel in the employ'. During July, 1813, Mrs. S. Laming, who owned the British Queen packet, returned 'sincere thanks to her Friends and the Public, for the favours conferred on her late husband [Richard Laming] for many years', begging 'to inform them, that she continues the same business, and trusts, that a steady adherence to the comfort, convenience and safety of passengers, will induce them to patronize her endeavours to support herself and a large family in it'.³⁸

'The Old Margate Hoy' was immortalized in 1823 by Charles Lamb:

'Margate . . . was our first sea-side experiment, and many circumstances combined to make it the most agreeable holyday of my life. We had neither of us seen the sea . . . [but] can I forget thee, thou old Margate Hoy, with thy weather-beaten, sun-burnt captain, and his rough accommodations?'³⁹

³⁸ *The Times*, 17th July, 1813.

³⁹ Charles Lamb, *The Last Essays of Elia*, [1833], (Ed.) E. Blunden, (O.U.P., 1929), 34.

MARGATE PACKET..



The Royal Charlotte,

BURTHEN 90 TONS,

(An entire new Vessel, with many very extensive additional Conveniences)

JAMES LAMING, Owner,

ROBERT PALMER, Master,

SAILS FROM

DICE QUAY, Billingsgate, London, every FRIDAY, and from Margate to London every MONDAY,

During the Season.

After Cabin, 7s.—Fore-Cabin, 5s. each Passenger. Children in Arms, Half-Price.

This Vessel takes in Goods at the usual Freight—All and every the Dangers and Accidents of the Seas, and of Navigation of whatsoever Nature or Kind, or howsoever occasioned, excepted.

J. Laming may be spoken with on Board; at the Gun Taverns, Billingsgate; at No. 8, Finch Lane, Cornhill; or at his House, Duke Street, Margate.

* * * No Money, Plate, Watches, or Jewels will be accounted for, unless delivered to the Master, and paid for accordingly.

To prevent Mistakes, the Friends of J. LAMING are requested to insert the Words ROYAL CHARLOTTE on their Directions.

Warren, Printer, Margate.

A hand-out advertising the facilities of the Royal Charlotte Packet, owned by James Laming, which conveyed passengers between London and Margate, in 1803. [Margate Public Library, Local Collection, Arthur Rowe Bequest.]

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PLATE IV



'The Old Margate Hoy'.
[Charles Lamb, *The Last Essays of Elia*, With . . . Illustrations by Charles E. Brock, (1906), 53.]

The hoy became a popular target for caricature and literary and poetic licence. George Saville Carey offered the following advice to travellers in 1799: 'should you be disposed to go by water to Margate, you will often be under the necessity of arming yourself with a great deal of patience, and a good store of victuals; you must shut your eyes from seeing indecent scenes, your ears from indecent conversation, and your nose from indelicate smells'.⁴⁰ On 17th August, 1795, *The Morning Post and Fashionable World* reported that

'several caricaturists are now at Margate. . . . The exhibitions of the *City Ladies* ascending from the Hoys . . . present daily the most *whimsical* exhibitions'.

One very famous caricaturist who visited Margate during 1807 was James Gillray. Residing some 150 yards from the beach gave him ample opportunity to observe the arrival and departure of the hoys.

'Packet just arrived. People just landed from y^e packet. Fatigued and faded – some Sick and Invalid wrapd up in Great Coats with their Bags and Baskets of Provisions. High wind. Ladies Petticoats blowing over their heads. . . . Returning the cheapest way all sick. Mama Sucking y^e Brandy Bottle. Captain Rowe at helm – Miss Puking up her inside – some eating, some smoking, some playing at Cards – some singing, some drunk'.⁴¹

Both the arrival and departure of a hoy attracted great crowds which, as a social phenomenon, became well known as 'hoy fair'.

'Of the many delightful walks in and about Margate, this [the Pier] is the most frequented, [being] uncommonly crowded at the coming in or going out of the packets, which is generally termed *hoy fair*, and on it are frequently to be seen upwards of a thousand persons of all distinctions, indiscriminately blended together; and it can therefore be no wonder, if the humours of such a motley group, welcoming their new-comers, should not now and then occasion such diverting scenes as to baffle all possibility of description'.⁴²

Much quoted in this and other guidebooks of the time were the following lines attributed to John Wolcot, writing under the pseudonym Peter Pindar, describing the welcoming scene at Margate on the arrival of a hoy.

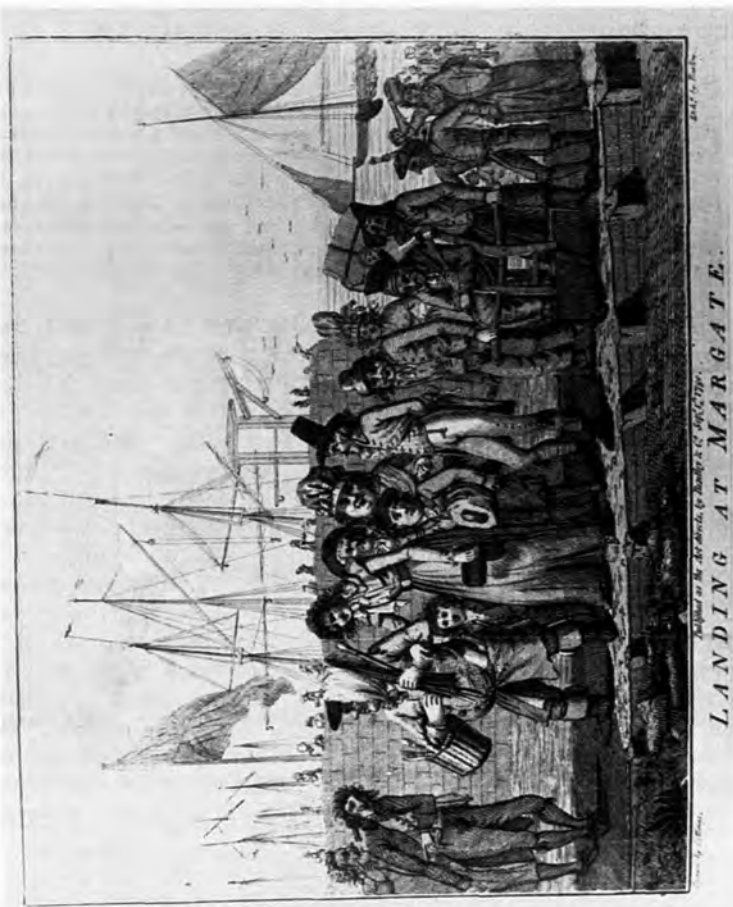
'Soon as thou gett'st within the Pier,
All Margate will be out I trow,
And people rush from far and near,
As if thou had'st wild beasts to show'.⁴³

⁴⁰ G.S. Carey, *The Balnea: or, An Impartial Description of All the Popular Watering Places in England*, (1799), 34–5.

⁴¹ D. Hill, *Mr. Gillray The Caricaturist*, (1965), 136–7, 143.

⁴² *The New Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs Guide*, (1809), *op. cit.*, 51.

⁴³ Quoted, for instance, in *ibid.*, 51; also in E.W. Brayley, *The Beauties of England and Wales or Delineations Topographical, Historical and Descriptive*, viii; Kent, (1808), 961.



A cartoon showing exhausted visitors landing at Margate after a Journey by Hoy in 1790.
[Margate Public Library, Local Collection, Parker Bequest.]

Already in 1792 John Wolcot had published *Odes of Importance, etc. . . To a Margate Hoy*, followed in 1798 by *Tales of the Hoy: Interspersed with Song, Odes and Dialogues*.

Passengers frequently had to contend with long delays or were buffeted by storms. In 1832, Captain Kennett Beacham Martin who, prior to being an employee of the General Steam Navigation Company, had commanded a sailing packet for six years, recollected how

‘the passage from London to the Isle of Thanet, by fast sailing packets, . . . as far as good pilotage and nautical skill could command success, was brought to very great perfection. The vessels were handsomely modelled, . . . and possessed excellent accommodations for one hundred passengers, on a short voyage; and, with a fair wind, numbers would crowd on board for a passage to Margate, or Ramsgate; but the elements are fickle, and the voyage begun in pleasurable anticipations too often terminated in delay and disappointment: on those occasions the passengers’ provisions became exhausted, and ill humour seated itself beside the empty hamper’.⁴⁴

A hoy arriving at Margate at 1 o’clock on 19th August, 1781, had accomplished the journey ‘with very great difficulty’, due to high winds and rough seas, so that 100 passengers, predominantly females, had found themselves ‘in a very dangerous and pitiable situation’.⁴⁵ Five years later a Margate hoy bound for London ‘with near 100 persons on board’ collided with a collier ‘and very narrowly escaped going to the bottom’.⁴⁶ The London-bound coal trade was at its busiest during the summer months and shortly after this incident it was noted that over 1,000 colliers were crowding into the Pool of London.⁴⁷ A year later another hoy bound for Margate had to ride out a violent storm prior to entering the harbour, whereupon several passengers reported that ‘their situation was not to be described’.⁴⁸ During 1797, one hoy bound for Margate took twenty-seven hours to complete its voyage, the passengers being driven below deck by rain which ‘made them as *comfortable* as the people in the black hole [of] Calcutta’.⁴⁹ On 29th August, 1804, a Margate hoy arrived up to four hours late on account of ‘a very thick fog’.⁵⁰ When the Margate packet, *The Grand Falconer*, was ‘dismasted off the Reculvers’ early on Sunday morning,

⁴⁴ Captain K.B. Martin, *Oral Traditions of the Cinque Ports and Their Localities*, (1832), 28.

⁴⁵ *The Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 22nd August, 1781, 3d; also *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 23rd August, 1781, 2c.

⁴⁶ *The General Advertiser*, 22nd August, 1786, 2c.

⁴⁷ *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 9th September, 1786, 4a.

⁴⁸ *The Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser*, 21st August, 1787, 4.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 16th September, 1797.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1st September, 1804, 2d.



Voyage to Margate, (?) I. Cruikshank.
[M. Dorothy George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire*, (1967), 154.]

16th September, 1810, its passengers were landed at Herne Bay and proceeded to Margate 'some on foot, and others in carts and other carriages'.⁵¹ Although wealthy families despised the vulgarity of the hoys, preferring to travel by public coach or in their own private carriages, coaches being favoured by ladies of fashion, coaches, too, met with accidents, it being reported from Margate on 4th September, 1795, that 'the Mail Coach this morning was overturned between Canterbury and this place'.⁵²

In 1763, John Lyons had declined to recommend the hoy 'too strongly to Ladies of great delicacy',⁵³ yet, some years later, on her first visit ever to the seaside Catherine Hutton travelled down to Margate 'in nine hours and forty minutes [but] went back in thirty-six hours'. She recalled in a letter to her father written on 19th May, 1780, that 'for four hours after we got upon the sea I was miserably ill and in strong hysterics'.⁵⁴ Her travelling companion, Mrs. André, 'was so disgusted with the hoy that she returned to town in the diligence'.⁵⁵ For one correspondent of 1800 the return passage was 'too fine to be expeditious', yet 'my female friends, . . . mild and fine as it was, were very sick indeed'.⁵⁶

Despite all the sarcasm against 'The Old Margate Hoy' and its clientèle, it was always compared to travelling by road both cheaper and more popular, as *A Guide to all the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places* noted in 1803.

'MARGATE, conveniently situated in respect to the metropolis, . . . is always enlivened by a more numerous Company than any other sea-bathing place. The Hoys, which sail every tide from Billingsgate, are cheap, and sometimes agreeable and rapid conveyances, but as the distance by land is only 73 miles, the roads good, and the vehicles numerous and certain, . . . ladies especially prefer the passage by land. . . .

TO MARGATE there are plenty of conveyances, both by sea and land. Post-chaises and stage-coaches present nothing particular, being the same in most parts of the kingdom, except that on this road the drivers of such vehicles, as well as their masters, are said to be characteristically impertinent and imposing. . . . A passage in the Margate hoy [on the other hand], which like the grave levels all distinctions, is frequently so replete with whim, incident and character, that it may be considered as a dramatic entertainment on the stage of the ocean. The fare being only five shillings for the common cabin, and half-a-guinea for the best, is a strong inducement for

⁵¹ *The Morning Chronicle*, 19th September, 1810, 3c.

⁵² *The Morning Post and Fashionable World*, 7th September, 1795, 2d.

⁵³ Lyons, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁵⁴ (Ed.) Mrs. C. Hutton Beale, *Reminiscences of a Gentlewoman of the Last Century: Letters of Catherine Hutton*, (Birmingham, 1891), 24–5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁶ Centre for Kentish Studies, Cobb MSS.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HOY TO MARGATE'S EARLY GROWTH

numbers to prefer this mode of travelling, though it cannot be recommended to persons of nice delicacy.

Here the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the sick and the sound, the gentlemen and the blackguard, are all jumbled together; and though there is much for the humourist to laugh at, there is more to offend the decent and well-bred, [and yet] not less than 20,000 persons annually sail to and from this port. Hence with great truth live-stock may be regarded as the principal and most lucrative branch of commerce in which the people of *Margate* are engaged. In consequence of this profitable trade, *Margate* has risen from insignificance to wealth and consequence'.⁵⁷

In reality, a hoy journey to Margate did not necessarily occupy more time and was certainly much cheaper than travelling by road. In 1771, the landward journey of 72 miles from London to Margate was accomplished in thirteen or fourteen hours at total fares of 16s. to 19s.⁵⁸ It was always possible to adopt a more leisurely approach to the landward journey, so that six years later when John Baker, a barrister of the Middle Temple and sometime Solicitor General of the Leeward Islands, travelled to Margate for a five-week vacation, he set out from London at 9 a.m. on 9th September, 1777, spent the night at Rochester and the following night at Canterbury before finally reaching Margate at 1.30 p.m. on 11th September. On the return journey he departed from Margate at 1.45 p.m. on 14th October, spent that night in Canterbury and the following night in Rochester before arriving home just after 6 p.m. on 16th October.⁵⁹

During the 1790s the single coach journey cost between 21s. and 26s.,⁶⁰ or four or five times the minimum hoy fare of 5s. When Joseph Farington, R.A., the topographical artist and diarist, returned from Broadstairs to London he left Margate by coach at 5 a.m. on 27th August, 1804, and arrived fourteen hours later in London at 7 p.m. prior to which he spent the night of the 26th in a Margate hotel.⁶¹ Although coaches ran more reliably to scheduled timetables, which was one advantage they had over the erratic times of the hoys, the latter did offer passengers opportunities to stretch their legs and it still took eleven hours to accomplish the coach journey as late as 1815.⁶²

It is not easy to calculate the total traffic which was handled by the Margate hoys and yet they seemed to have carried more passengers than the coaches. Individual coaches accommodated up to six

⁵⁷ *A Guide to all the Watering and Sea-Bathing Places*, (1803), 251, 254, 256.

⁵⁸ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, xli, (1771), 167.

⁵⁹ (Ed.) P.C. Yorke, *The Diary of John Baker*, (1931), 417, 421-2.

⁶⁰ *The Universal British Directory of Trade, Commerce and Manufacture*, (1796), and *A Short Description of the Isle of Thanet*, *op. cit.*, 95-8.

⁶¹ (Ed.) J. Greig, *The Farington Diary*, ii, (1923), 278-9.

⁶² *The Times*, 11th July, 1815.

passengers inside,⁶³ with others riding on the outside. Even allowing for the 'great complaints' which were levied during August, 1802, at the Brighton coaches for being 'loaded with passengers, not less than eight or ten persons being frequently stowed on the outside',⁶⁴ each individual coach carried relatively few passengers. The position could be very different on the individual hoy. A guidebook of 1797 proudly announced that the hoys 'sometimes bring above a *hundred* passengers at a time',⁶⁵ and this figure is supported by newspaper reports,⁶⁶ it being noted by *The Times* on 16th September, 1797, that 'so great is the rage for watering places, that the Margate packet had, the week before last, 152 passengers on board'. The maximum number of passengers who could be carried at any one time had risen considerably from the 60–70 mentioned by John Lyons in 1763.⁶⁷ On 24th August, 1800, *The Observer* revealed that 'seven hoys last week conveyed to Margate 1,342 persons'.

In 1792, it was calculated that 'vessels bring and carry during the Bathing Season to and from London 18,000 passengers'.⁶⁸ This estimate is supported by figures which were presented in 1850 to *The Select Committee on Ramsgate and Margate Harbours*, showing the following numbers of passengers travelling to and from Margate on sailing packets.⁶⁹

<i>April to April</i>	<i>No. of Passengers</i>
1812–13	17,000
1813–14	20,506
1814–15	21,577

The volume of traffic handled by the hoys, coupled with their lower fares compared to coaches, had important social consequences for Margate. Hoys were instrumental in bringing to Margate, perhaps more than to any other resort, a widening cross-section of society during a century that was so noted for elegance and high living. Cheap water communications facilitated the development of Margate as a middle

⁶³ As per fn. 60 above.

⁶⁴ *The Times*, 18th August, 1802, 3d.

⁶⁵ *The Margate and Ramsgate Guide in Letters to a Friend*, (1797), 15.

⁶⁶ For instance, *The Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 22nd August, 1781, 3d; *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 23rd August, 1781, 2c; *The General Advertiser*, 22nd August, 1786, 2c; *The Morning Post and Gazetteer*, 28th August, 1799, 2d; *The Times*, 1st September, 1804, 2d.

⁶⁷ Lyons, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁶⁸ *The Kentish Companion for the Year of Our Lord, 1792*, (Canterbury, 1792), 160.

⁶⁹ *Report from the Select Committee on Ramsgate and Margate Harbours: Together with the Proceedings of the Committee [and] Minutes of Evidence*, [660], (1850), 169.

and lower-class resort. In 1778, it was specifically stated of Margate that 'the middle and inferior classes may have recourse to the benefits of this place by the cheapness of a sea voyage; as hoys and yachts are continually passing between this place and *London* for the conveyance of goods and passengers at a very cheap rate'.⁷⁰ In 1789, it was further noted that 'the chief of the company which come by the hoys are . . . of the inferior cast; very few persons in genteel life come by water, without they are recommended by their physicians so to do, to experience the sea-sickness, which is thought to be very beneficial in some complaints'.⁷¹ It became distinctly unfashionable to be seen travelling to Margate in a hoy, *The Times* being no less explicit on 10th September, 1803, when it observed that 'at Margate the distinctive title of Fashionables is given without reserve to all the visitors of that agreeable watering place, who do not arrive there by the Hoy'.

Newspaper reports show that hoys lowered the social tone of Margate. The 'great number of people' comprising the company at Margate at the end of August, 1786, were assessed as being 'mixt as usual with *Baronets* and *Haberdashers*, *Butchers' wives* and *Honourables*'.⁷² *The Times* of 5th August, 1799, noted how 'Margate is already beginning to be crowded, as usual, with all sorts, and for all purposes', added to which 'some tradesmen have gone down to get, and others to get rid of their money'.⁷³ The legacy of hoys lowering the social tone of Margate lingered on in the minds of fashionable and discerning visitors long after they had given way to steamboats from 1815 onwards. This point is well illustrated in the following extracts from an 1828 diary describing a holiday in Ramsgate with visits to Broadstairs and Margate.

'16 August. This morning we went over to Margate. . . . At Margate we saw plenty of "hoy" people dressed in *buff slippers* or *shoes*, *nankeen unspeakables* and *duffy coats* or *dressng gowns*. They afforded us much amusement.

18 August. This morning . . . we hired a little boat to go to Pegwell. . . . It is celebrated for shrimps and all the Margate "hoy" people go there in abundance. We saw 8 or 10 flocks of them'.⁷⁴

Wealthy families who avoided the hoy, nevertheless, took advantage of the cheaper water communications to transport their domestic

⁷⁰ *A Tour Through the Island of Great Britain*, 8th Edn. (1778), 139.

⁷¹ *The New Margate and Ramsgate Guide in Letters to a Friend*, (1789), 12.

⁷² *The Daily Universal Register* (subsequently *The Times*), 1st September, 1786, 2c.

⁷³ Quoted also in J. Ashton, *Old Times: A Picture of Social Life at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, (1885), 65.

⁷⁴ Centre for Kentish Studies, U 2446 F1, *MS Journal of a Holiday in Ramsgate in 1828 including Visits to Broadstairs and Margate*.

servants. John Baker's diary records how on 12th September, 1777, 'the Hoy came in about 12 and in it the maid (Sally Matthews) Mrs. Woodington hired in London'.⁷⁵ Domestic servants certainly accounted for a proportion of the summer passengers by hoy, as George Keate observed during the 1770s. A very real risk of sea sickness is also hinted at in the following account.

'I HAVE been these three days balancing in my mind, whether I should return to town by land, or by water. The great road, however rich in beautiful prospects, hath no novelty to me, who have so frequently travelled it; – and the course of the THAMES, being perfectly new, made me rather inclined to trust the sea. . . . But then there is no conveyance on this element, but the HOYS! – And what does that signify? – there are always merry folks aboard. . . . I have seen them so many times go off in such high spirits, that I shall not dislike to make one among them. – A crowd affords variety, and is never unpleasant to me, if I have the liberty of sitting still in it. . . . Half MARGATE from the Pier-Head, and the deck of the HOY seemed already covered with passengers. – The morning was delicious. . . .

No sooner had we begun to push off, when a *good voyage* was echoed from a hundred voices at once; while, *Do not forget that parcel – My love to Harry – Tell BETTY I shall soon be in town. . . . Have you got your basket of cold meat? Take care your bonnet does not blow off – Be sure give PEGGY that letter* and a thousand such other mementos were resounded from various quarters.

I began now . . . to survey the cargo we ourselves had on board. – It consisted of a few gentlemen, who, like myself, enjoyed a passage by sea; – some decent shopkeepers, and their wives, who had been washing off the summer dust of LONDON, – and the remainder chiefly composed of the servants of families, that had left MARGATE, who were all extremely communicative, and appeared to have spent their time in that happy idleness, which such an excursion from home usually gives them.

The rolling of the ship gave a new turn to matters. Some put on a very serious countenance, – some turned pale, – others complained of a swimming in their head, – others, that everything moved *under* them, – and it was not long after, before it became very apparent, that everything moved *within* them, so I sat very quietly, and gathered up the flaps of my coat, for I hate to carry away the property of anyone. . . . In about eleven hours from the time we left MARGATE [we] were safely landed at WOOL QUAY'.⁷⁶

Margate was fairly unique in attracting shopkeeping holidaymakers from the 1770s onwards. Some London shopkeepers set themselves up in business during the summer months, but George Keate observed others who travelled to Margate purely for recreation and pleasure: 'the decent tradesman slips from town for his half-crown, and strolls up and down the Parade as much at his ease as he treads his own shop, [while] his wife, who perhaps never eloped so far from the metropolis before,

⁷⁵ Yorke, *op. cit.*, 417–8.

⁷⁶ George Keate, *Sketches from Nature, Taken, and Coloured, in A Journey to Margate*, 5th Edn., (1802), 245–8, 251.



'The o'er-washing billows.'
[Lamb, *op. cit.*, 55.]

stares with wonder at the many new objects which surround her'.⁷⁷ On 30th August, 1774, *The Morning Chronicle* noted how

'there has not been so universal a dullness in town as there now is, since the eve of the last election. The streets are almost without passengers. The quality have left St. James's for the sake of visiting their seats and their boroughs; and the tradesmen seem in general to have deserted their shop boards and counters for Margate'.⁷⁸

Subsequently from the mid-1790s onwards domestic servants and

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷⁸ Quoted also in J. Hampden, *An Eighteenth-Century Journal: Being a Record of the Years 1774-1776*, (1940), 95.

shopkeepers were joined by patients travelling to and from the Margate or General Sea Bathing Infirmary which, being intended for poor people suffering from scrofula or tuberculosis, opened its doors at Westbrook on the outskirts of Margate during 1796 as not only 'the country's first hospital for tuberculosis',⁷⁹ but also as 'the oldest Orthopaedic Hospital in the world'.⁸⁰ Its foundation five years previously in 1791 owed much to the famous eighteenth-century Quaker physician, Dr John Coakley Lettsom (1744–1815), who firmly believed that fresh air, sea-water, sunlight and regular habits were essential to the treatment of many diseases, especially those of the chest, and all tubercular troubles.⁸¹ In promoting the institution he argued on 2nd July, 1791, that 'among the numerous places of resort on the Sea-coast none appeared to him, as well as to several others, to whom he had intimated his design, so proper as Margate or its vicinity, the extreme salubrity of that part of the coast, and the ready and cheap conveyance thither giving that Place a decided preference to all others'.⁸² Hoys fixed the location of a 'General Sea Bathing Infirmary' at Margate, as was made clear in 1801 in 'Hints for Establishing a Sea-Bathing Infirmary at Margate for the Poor of London', for 'by the Thames, a cheap conveyance to sea water is commanded and hence Margate, or its vicinity, seems peculiarly adapted for this salutary purpose'.⁸³ By January, 1816, within twenty years of its opening, it had treated 3,756 patients.⁸⁴

Hoys, by allowing a widening cross-section of society to travel to Margate for pleasure, inevitably stimulated the holiday trades of the resort, as *The Times* was quick to report on 13th September, 1804.

'We are now gathering in a most plenteous harvest. Ship and coach loads of cocknies are arriving every day, so that we are fuller than we have been all this season, which is one of the fullest we have ever known. Our lodging houses can with difficulty muster an extra bed for a new visitor; and all the provisions in our market are bought up early in the morning. . . . Our bathing machines are all in a state of constant requisition, and . . . our Doctors find the number of their patients considerably on the increase'.

⁷⁹ C. Dainton, *The Story of England's Hospitals*, (1961), 93.

⁸⁰ F.G. St. Clair Strange, *The History of the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital Margate 1791–1991*, (Rainham, 1991), 13.

⁸¹ Dainton, *op. cit.*, 93; also A. Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry*, (1950), 311.

⁸² Centre for Kentish Studies, *The Original Minutes of the Margate Infirmary, 1791–3*, 2nd July, 1791.

⁸³ J.C. Lettsom, *Hints Designed to Promote Beneficence, Temperance and Medical Science*, iii, (1801), 236–7.

⁸⁴ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, lxxxvi, (1816), 17.

Popular entertainments of the 1800s included pier promenading, a camera obscura and donkeys,⁸⁵ it being 'the fashion . . . especially at *Margate* for the Company to amuse themselves by riding on Asses'.⁸⁶

The humble 'hoy', subsequently restyled a 'packet' or 'yacht', played a major role in promoting the growth and popularity of Hanoverian Margate. It was a major sustaining factor in its early rise. On the basis that *The Morning Chronicle*, of 8th September, 1810, having noted that it was 'crowded with company', could consider it 'as London in miniature, being in many circumstances an epitome of that vast metropolis', it seems logical, therefore, to apply the label 'London-by-the-Sea' to Margate at an earlier date than it is applied to Brighton.

⁸⁵ John Whyman, 'The Uniqueness of Margate as a Seaside Resort (Part IV)', *The East Kent Critic*, No. 170, (June, 1977), 3.

⁸⁶ *The Thanet Itinerary or Steam Yacht Companion*, (1819), 42.

SIDNEY OF PENSHURST – ROBERT, 2ND EARL OF LEICESTER¹

FELIX HULL

For many years Allen Grove and the writer of this paper were jointly responsible for a WEA class at Maidstone. The final course arranged by them dealt with persons and families from Kent who played a part in national history, the talks being based on local sources. This paper was one of the series.

‘A name to conjour with’ – Sidney! This remarkable family resided at Penshurst for two hundred years before the male line failed and the estate passed through the female line twice over. For almost half of this period of residence, Robert, 2nd Earl of Leicester, was alive. Born in 1595 and dying in 1677 at the age of 82, he straddles the stage, linking the fame of Sir Henry and Sir Philip with the autumnal glow of Henry, Earl of Romney and John, 6th Earl of Leicester. Yet, curiously, it is not a colossus, but an enigma which faces us: this nobleman, friend of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, special ambassador to Denmark and France, lieutenant of Ireland, speaker of the House of Lords, remains a shadowy, unreal figure who seldom reaches the pages of history and then usually in criticism. Father of three able sons – Parliamentary general, republican diplomat and theorist and handsome Machiavellian statesman – the father is the less real for his obscurity in an age of harsh black and white.

In order to assess the man it is necessary first to consider his background. The Sidneys were no medieval noble family. Of course, they accepted an honourable, but wholly fictitious pedigree prepared by the notorious Robert Cooke, Chester Herald, and allegedly stemming from one, Sir William de Sidne, chamberlain to Henry, Comte d’Anjou, later King Henry II of England, but of whom history shows no trace.

¹ This article is based on the De L’Isle and Sidney MSS. deposited in the Centre for Kentish Studies and is published with the kind permission of the Viscount De L’Isle. *The Calendar of the De L’Isle and Dudley MSS.* (6 vols.), published by the Hist. MSS. Commission between 1925 and 1966 has also been used extensively.

Such, however, was the way with gentle families of Tudor England: sound farming and astute mercantile acumen might be their origin, but this would hardly suffice the College of Heralds where suitability rather than accuracy was the password in matters genealogical.²

The real Sir William was indeed chamberlain to Edward VI; his wealth stemmed from royal office and loyal service and, too, from fortunate marriage alliances in an earlier generation. During the reign of Edward VI part of the estate of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk and brother-in-law of Henry VIII, passed to the Sidneys. Earlier in 1539 the abbey of Robertsbridge, with its valuable iron works, had been granted to Sir William and then in 1551 Penshurst followed.³ These estates provided a vast inheritance in Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, Lincoln, Nottingham and Rutland and made the Sidneys one of the great landed families of the day. Wealth in land coupled with royal associations led to further aspirations and marriage of a distinctly dynastic character for the young Henry Sidney, who espoused Mary, daughter of John Dudley, Earl and later Duke of Northumberland. At the end of the reign of Edward, therefore, Henry Sidney was married to the daughter of the most powerful noble in the land, was brother-in-law by marriage to Lady Jane Grey and also to the young Robert Dudley, to become the famous Earl of Leicester. Such associations were dangerous, and it says much for Henry's diplomacy and possibly his skill in covering his tracks, that he survived the Dudley debacle and was indeed used as a trusted servant equally by Mary Tudor and in due course by Elizabeth I. Small wonder, also, that the sons of the Dudley alliance, Philip and Robert, should swiftly come under the tutelage of their brilliant uncle, the Queen's favourite, or that each should continue the tradition of courtier and government servant. Yet, the hazards were many, the widow of Philip Sidney married Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and having escaped the collapse of Dudley, the disaster of the young Earl of Essex in 1601 might easily have engulfed Sir Robert Sidney also.

Sir Philip Sidney – a name indeed: poet, courtier, soldier; a man of whom all spoke with favour as of the rising star of Gloriana's court. Even after his death in 1586 the eulogies continued, the tale of Zutphen and the words, 'Thy necessity is yet greater than mine', epitomizing the 'verray parfit gentil knight' of whom Chaucer had sung two centuries before. This sudden and calamitous loss, in the same year as Sir Henry,

² CKS. U1475 T3/144 and F5. The deeds are a set of forged charters, including one purporting to bear the seal of Henry Plantagenet as Count of Anjou before 1154. The other document is the pedigree prepared by Robert Cooke, Chester Herald, on the basis of a fictitious ancestry.

³ CKS. U1475 T9/4, 5.

removed the star but left a legend and the young Robert born in 1595, who never knew his uncle in life, must have been dominated by the ghostly presence of this remarkable paragon. Curiously the Penshurst records are almost silent and the glimpses of Philip Sidney which survive suggest an impossible prig and hot-tempered young gallant, hardly the man of tradition.⁴

It was inevitable that Sir Henry's younger son, Robert, should follow his brother in matters of a career, yet one senses a man of less dynamic character. Adequate, competent and diplomatic are the words which come to mind in considering Sir Robert Sidney, Leicester's lieutenant in the Netherlands after Philip's death, governor of Flushing from 1586 to 1616 and surveyor of the estates of Anne of Denmark after she became Queen. His complete love match with Barbara Gamage of Coity in Glamorgan brought yet more estates, more iron works and coal mines to the Sidney family and, as the years passed, honour upon honour came his way. Lord Sydney, Viscount Lisle and finally Earl of Leicester – in part his own merit, in part the Dudley inheritance at work, for Elizabeth's Leicester had left no child whose legitimacy could be established beyond doubt. So, Sidney of Penshurst and Dudley of Kenilworth were forever linked in honour and in destructive and expensive litigation.⁵

This, then, is the background of Robert Sidney, born to Barbara Gamage in 1595. He was actually the third son of the marriage, the eldest, Vere, died in infancy, Sir William served under his father in the Netherlands and died in 1612 when his troop was transferred to his younger brother then barely eighteen years of age. Thus, suddenly and unexpectedly, he became the inheritor of a vast estate, an amazing tradition of public service in Ireland and the Netherlands and a tale of artistic genius and courtly behaviour. One wonders at this boy who roamed Penshurst, who learned from his Welsh mother, whose father was at Flushing or more probably at Court – a soldier and a courtier, and who suddenly became aware of his burden of nobility. By the age of twenty, he was Lord Lisle in his own right as eldest son of an Earl – indeed, Earl of Leicester, a name still in 1618 carrying overtones of the Armada and royal favour: a great heritage and the whole world before him.

One has only one question – was he really of this calibre, or was it a case of inherited greatness thrust upon less able shoulders? The marriage of Robert to Dorothy Percy in 1616 was of the kind to be

⁴ CKS. U1475 F26; C7/14.

⁵ CKS. U1475 L2, 3. There is a considerable quantity of documentation for these law suits, principally affecting Robert, 1st Earl of Leicester.

expected and allied him with Algernon Percy, 10th Earl of Northumberland and later Lord Admiral, his brother Henry Percy and his sister Lady Carlisle, Henrietta Maria's confidante. From the time of his father's death in 1626, it was inevitable that the 2nd Earl of Leicester should make his career at Court within the service of the young King and his favourite Buckingham, and in this the untimely death of the Duke had no adverse effect on the future of Robert Sidney. He had, after all, served an apprenticeship as a soldier and had sat as member for Wilton and as knight of the shire for Kent in 1621 and, subsequently, for Monmouthshire, progress was inevitable but the field uncertain.

His opportunity came in 1632 when he found himself chosen as special plenipotentiary to the King of Denmark and responsible for a diplomatic mission of the greatest delicacy. The background is complex but must be briefly examined.⁶

Attention has been so riveted to the constitutional crisis of the seventeenth century that the bankruptcy of English foreign policy during the first half of the century tends to be overlooked. Europe lay under the persistent cloud of sectarian dispute, not eased by the erastian policies of the heads of states. The marriage of James I to Anne of Denmark had allied two of the stronger Protestant houses, but James dreamed of greater things and saw himself as a possible arbiter of Europe's troubles. Hence, he sought peace with Spain and urged upon the unwilling Dutch the truce which in 1609 ended forty years of struggle for independence. If his daughter, Elizabeth, should marry a Protestant leader in Frederick, Elector Palatine, his son should espouse a Catholic Spanish princess and thus preserve a delicate balance. The failure of the Spanish match, rejoiced at in Britain, only led to entanglements with the unstable royal politics of France.

In the meantime, however, the dogs of war had been unleashed by the choice of the Elector Palatine as King of Bohemia, a customary Austrian perquisite, and Frederick, brave but foolhardy suffered a swift reversal of fortune. James, much against his will, found himself obliged to assist his son-in-law to the best of his ability. The first period of the Thirty Years War only resulted in the ignominious defeat of the Protestant princes of Germany and with them the hopes of James, and the defeated nobles sought a new protector in Christian IV of Denmark.

The Anglo-Danish marriage alliance here led to further complications for James in 1620 borrowed some 300,000 rix-dollars from his brother-in-law at 6 per cent interest. In theory this was a short-

⁶ CKS. U1475 F25/1. The Earl's personal journal of his visit to Denmark.

term loan, but, although the interest was paid, no principal made its way back to Denmark during the term. When Christian found himself urged to support the Protestant cause against the Emperor he, in turn, turned to Britain for help – negotiation with James and later with Charles I led to an agreement to assist with English troops and to contribute £30,000 a month to the Danish effort. This proved too much for the English treasury to bear; Christian held back from ratifying all the secret clauses of the Treaty; and Charles, attempting to raise funds and honour his part of the agreement, ran into dramatic conflict with his first parliaments. On 17 August, 1626, the Imperial general, Tilly, inflicted a crushing defeat on the Danish forces and after a series of reverses and no really tangible help from England or the Netherlands, Christian sought peace in 1629. In Danish eyes British perfidy had been the principal cause of disaster.

It was at this critical moment that the Queen Dowager of Denmark died. Reputedly of great wealth, she bestowed substantial legacies on members of the family including her nephew Charles I of England. It is hardly remarkable that this monarch chose to claim his share, for his finances were seldom solvent; nor is it strange that Christian appropriated all such funds, asserting with a measure of justification that what he had seized only served to pay off part of the English debt.

This, then, was the delicate family squabble with its international implications which resulted in Leicester's dispatch in September 1632 and to him fell the unenviable task of pacifying the Danish King, proving his master's point and satisfying Christian as to British solvency and good faith. A task almost doomed to failure, requiring the offices of a most skilled diplomat, was thrust on a relatively young man whose diplomatic experience was nil. The mission failed, completely, utterly. Leicester met the King three times at least, but suffered studied insult upon insult, Christian openly hinting that his presence was no longer required and his final audience appears to have been in the form of a bacchanalian orgy possibly deliberately designed to complete the earl's discomfiture. During this visit attempts to impress appear to have resulted in dislike from the Danes and charges of extravagance at home and he returned empty-handed except for two minor concessions regarding merchants paying tolls in the Sound and on the Elbe. These, Christian conveniently forgot as soon as opportunity served.

Such was the embassy to Denmark, yet within five years Robert Sidney was entrusted with an even more delicate and difficult mission!

The European conflict did not end with the defeat of Denmark and the Protestant princes found a new champion in Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. A great general, he brought unqualified success until his death at Lutzen in 1633. From this time, however, what had begun as a religious struggle became essentially political, for under the guidance

of Richelieu, France entered the lists as the champion of anti-imperial forces. Protestant and Catholic now fought not in the interests of ecclesiastical probity, nor on behalf of the Palatinate, but purely and simply in the interests of France and Louis XIII, who feared a greater Austrian hegemony. Charles I, with his family associations with the French king, still hoped to play a key role in holding the balance and still hoped to support the claims of his sister and her family to their Rhineland electorate. Despite his state of bankruptcy in terms of cash and of consistent policy, he decided to propose a firm alliance to Louis with the express aim of freeing the Palatinate from Bavarian control. A special embassy, with the Queen's blessing, should be sent to Paris to open urgent negotiations and who better able to head such a mission than Robert, Earl of Leicester.⁷

Whatever assessment we may now make, the King was genuine in his appointment and the earl was told that he was chosen 'both for your qualitie and worth, and for the experience wee have had of your wisdom and dexteritie in your former negotiations'. The editor of the *Hist. MSS. Calendar of De Lisle & Dudley MSS.*, vol. 6, writes: 'The compliment was kind and savoured of Charles' benignity and trust in the men whom he appointed to do him service. It was also encouraging and Leicester needed encouragement in this assignment. He was not setting forth to negotiate with a King, who, despite his animadversion was an uncle of the English monarch and a Protestant. His new employment would take him to the Court of a Catholic autocrat, guided and advised by one of the shrewdest statesmen in Europe. . . .'

As in Denmark, so in France: the French were neither flattered nor really interested in the proposal, for to them the Elector was both a nuisance and an unnecessary encumbrance in their main struggle with Austria. Indeed, before the end Leicester challenged the French minister Bouillon that by his philosophy the French would always remain the right party and that thereby they would become as great a menace to the peace of Europe as Spain had been! Second, there was already an English ambassador at Paris, Lord Scudamore, who was not informed of Leicester's appointment and who was *persona non grata* at the French court, but who, for two years, strove to undermine Leicester's negotiations. Third, as always, there was inadequate financial backing for the enterprise. Leicester, himself, wrote of Paris as 'the most chargeable place of Christendome' and there were endless wrangles over the payment of adequate subsidies, not improved by a

⁷ CKS. U1475 089/1-4 and also C132. A very large part of the personal MSS. concern this mission, and the earl carried on extensive correspondence with the countess and, especially, with Sir William Hawkins, his London agent.

certain antipathy between the earl and Secretary Coke.⁸ Pleas for funds fell on deaf ears for ready money was conspicuous by its absence at the Caroline Court and even the regular payment of agreed sums quickly stood in arrears. There was indeed much appearance of goodwill and support – Henrietta Maria and Lady Carlisle saw to that, but little substance in any of the negotiations which dragged on interminably for the five years, 1636–41. In part, the fault must rest with Charles for at the same time as professing his desire for a treaty of alliance with Louis, he repeatedly acted in a manner most calculated to give offence to the French monarch, who reasonably concluded that France could ‘go it alone’ and that the embassy was only useful as a delaying tactic.

Well before the end of the period Leicester was utterly disillusioned and this, coupled with the increasingly disturbing news from home, led him to seek a change of employment. This subject he broached to the king during a visit home in 1639 when he actually went north to York with the royal forces and according to his own account urged the need for an accommodation with the Scots, a plea which fell on deaf ears.⁹

There was one field in which the Sidneys had distinguished themselves – Ireland – and it seems that Leicester had a dimly formed ambition to follow up the work of his grandfather, Sir Henry, in that country. Perhaps, there, the ill-luck and frustration of his diplomatic missions might be overcome in action. This desire was well known to the Northumberland faction; the return of Sir Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, in 1639 was the opportunity; and, in May 1641, Leicester was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in place of Strafford who was executed on 11th of that month.¹⁰

It is at this point, however, that the enigma of Robert Sidney’s career becomes most evident for, apparently, he remained an absentee governor never assuming in Ireland itself the office to which he had been raised. His sons Philip and Algernon were there and later, between 1646 and 1647, Philip, Lord Lisle, also did a term as Lord Lieutenant under parliamentary aegis, but for the earl himself the Irish Sea formed an impenetrable barrier. Apparently, too, he remained on good terms with the king and was appointed Lieutenant of Kent as an additional duty; he was sufficiently respected to act repeatedly as Speaker of the Upper House in 1642; and despite his equivocal position his estates

⁸ CKS. U1475 C132 *passim*. The letters to Sir William Hawkins are full of references to the earl’s financial plight in Paris. See also *Calendar* vol. 6, pp. 57–65.

⁹ There is a reference to this matter in the Introduction to Vol. 6 of the *Calendar*, p. xxix.

¹⁰ See CKS. U1475 F25/2 for a reference to this event, but the actual Letters Patent is missing.

suffered little hurt from the parliament men in comparison with Knole or Hothfield, or indeed Surrenden.¹¹

In 1641, therefore, the stock of the Earl of Leicester stood high and in May his commission of appointment was sealed. Lady Leicester wrote 'that this nue honor maie bring to you an increase of all that is called hapines. You are now in a faire way of dooing much good, both in publicke affaires and in your private fortune. . . .', and there was every reason for a swift transfer to Dublin, yet it never came.¹² In fact, the appointment was the result of long intrigue. In 1639, when the matter was first broached two possibilities had been apparent, the Irish office, if Wentworth retired, or that of secretary of state for England in place of Coke. Northumberland supported the Irish office, his brother, Henry Percy, the English, but the king, without committing himself to any change of occupation for the petitioners rejected the secretaryship because Leicester was 'too high' for such office.¹³ So the intrigues continued: Lady Dorothy used all her skill with those of her family and others, and in particular approached Lord Holland only to receive equivocal answers, for he had his own eyes on Ireland. Sir John Temple, Irish Master of the Rolls from 1640, worked faithfully and endlessly for Leicester but the king blew hot and cold, while Ireland itself with the removal of Strafford's 'thorough' rapidly fell apart. From 1639, the Lord Lieutenant was absent and from the autumn of 1640 technically the office stood vacant and, while Charles played fast and loose with the life of his greatest champion, Ireland drifted swiftly toward chaos. The need in 1641 was for a clear and direct policy backed by adequate strength and the transfer of Leicester from Paris on his appointment might have saved the day. Instead, the king ordered him to stay at his embassy and instructed that he return to England in September when they might talk over the Irish question! On October 23rd the uprising in Ulster and the massacre of Protestants began!¹⁴

At Leicester's return to England, therefore, the urgency of his Irish command was at its height, yet he delayed taking action. He became Lieutenant of Kent, yet again, his dilatory approach to his duties has been regarded as a contributory cause of the county's troubles in 1642. Everitt refers to his refusal to grant commissions of deputy lieutenancy under the Militia Ordinance and writes that 'Leicester was by nature indecisive' and then adds the significant comment: 'as Lieutenant of Ireland he had declared himself "environed by such contradiction as I

¹¹ See *Calendar*, vol. 6, 436 and note, and also CKS. U1475 C133/32.

¹² CKS. U1475 C82/41 and also *Calendar*, vol. 6, 403-4.

¹³ CKS. U1475 C129/9 and *Calendar*, vol. 6, 339-40.

¹⁴ CKS. U1475 C25/2 and *Calendar*, vol. 6, 555.

can neither get from them nor reconcile them. The parliament bids me go presently, the King commands me to stay till he dispatch me. The supplies of the one and the authority of the other are equally necessary. . .’.¹⁵

Leicester was in fact caught between two fires and the epithet of ‘indecisive’ has yet to be proven – it had not been a characteristic of his family. As England slid towards civil war, he was indeed only partially in the confidence of either side and like many other gentlemen found himself unable to reconcile opposing claims of loyalty. Moreover, one result of the 1641 massacre had been to create still more constitutional difficulties at home, for Pym, while accepting the need for prompt and effective action, refused to allow a situation in which the Irish army would be under the authority of the crown. The fears raised by Strafford’s Captain-generalcy and his assumed intentions of using the Irish forces to enforce the royal will in England, effectively destroyed the hope of taking much needed action in Dublin when the emergency arose. Leicester’s experience as a diplomat had taught one lesson, that without adequate supplies and financial resources, action only courted disaster. Added to this Lord Lisle was a member of the Lower House, having just returned from the Scottish campaign; while his brother-in-law, Northumberland, the Lord Admiral, was one of the leading peers critical of, if not hostile to, royal policy. The apparent indecision of 1641–43 may have stemmed more from a bewildered mind faced with conflicting loyalties than from any basic weakness of character and perhaps, who knows, Leicester was trading on the traditional Sidney skill in diplomacy and in this he failed. In a note compiled in 1645 to explain a quarrel with his wife over money he wrote: ‘but it pleased God that that which should have been for my good [i.e. Ireland] became for me an occasion of falling, though not by any fault as I can make it appear’.¹⁶

So passed the rest of 1641 and 1642. Speaker of the House of Lords, he was well aware of the problems of the day and perhaps again chose to delay issuing the Kentish deputy lieutenantcy warrants because he sought to have full legal authority from Crown as well as legislature – this would certainly correlate with his attitude over Ireland, but if so, it was a false hope and the year ended at Edgehill not in an accommodation, while Kent was seized, forcibly, by a militant group of gentry and soldiers.

¹⁵ *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640–1660* (1966), 107. T.P.S. Woods in *Prelude to Civil War* (1980), 56, also refers to Leicester as ‘a worried, weak man’.

¹⁶ CKS. U1475 F25/2. Notes by Leicester on his affairs between 1636 and 1650. A full transcript is in *Calendar*, vol. 6.

Yet, the needs of Ireland persisted. The earl had already despatched his sons and Lisle was in command of inadequate forces; many of his goods were in Dublin and he sat at Chester waiting to sail. Even the weather conspired against him! On 30th December, 1642, Sir John Temple wrote 'I see it pleaseth God as yett to detaine your Lordship from us by these constant westerly winds' and a week later Lord Lisle wrote 'we are all impatient of this west wind and chiefly your Lordship'.¹⁷ But the whim of royalty must be obeyed and by the middle of January he was back at Oxford at the king's behest and the opportunity passed, for ever. In Ireland itself trouble continued and all seemed lost. On 14 January, 1643, Lord Lisle wrote 'your Lordship knows how those that are earnest in the buseness strive against the streame' and in May of the same year to his mother writing of the Irish government he added: 'I thinke we must shortly all leave them and the rebells to agree amongst themselves. I confesse I wonder how they ever fell out. . . . the government being now wholly guided by the Irish party'.¹⁸ By the summer the commission had been removed and in 1644 James, Marquess of Ormonde, took the seals of office. It was with more relief than sorrow that Lord Lisle and his brother Algernon returned to England in August 1643.

So, again, we return to Sir Robert Sidney's 'indecision'. Was his account of the affair accurate? With the example of Strafford before him was discretion the better part of valour? And if so can one blame him? The *Dictionary of National Biography* reiterates the same point and speaks of distrust 'on account of moderation or irresolution' and this is the character which has been assigned to the 2nd Earl of Leicester, yet he carried out his task at Paris, if not successfully, at least to the general satisfaction. He is accused at times of extravagance and overspending, never of irresolution – is this again the judgement of the Whig historian unable to appreciate the dilemma of the moderate in a revolutionary world? It is strange, nonetheless, that this courtier and 'civil servant' suffered little from his personal friendship with the king. In 1643, he returned at last to Penshurst to meet a new challenge. His prolonged sojourn at Oxford had created more than suspicion amongst his enemies and the County Committee at last placed Penshurst under sequestration and accused Leicester of delinquency.¹⁹ With this attack upon his home and trustworthiness irresolution vanished and he challenged, successfully, the fabrication of his enemies. He had never, he asserted, taken up arms against Parliament and never would do so.

¹⁷ CKS. U1475 C114/25.

¹⁸ CKS. U1475 C83/3 and C126/1.

¹⁹ See *Calendar*, vol. 6., 436 and note and also CKS. U1475 E36; 084/1, 2.

He had gone to Oxford on the king's orders as Lieutenant of Ireland and had done nothing in opposition to Parliamentary claims and orders. This said and accepted, Ireland was abandoned and Penshurst once more received its lord, who for the remaining thirty-four years of his life never again took a really active part in politics and national affairs.

Yet, for some years the enigma continues. His plea that he had not taken up arms might be accepted, but his right to attend the House of Lords was suspended and thus he continued, as he had started, neutral. Perhaps the active support given by his older sons to the cause of Parliament helped to preserve his patrimony and after the surrender of Charles, he and Lady Leicester were assigned the custody of the younger royal children and some of the royal jewels also reached Penshurst.²⁰ In 1648, however, the army demanded the removal of the prince and princess and a dispute regarding the ownership of the jewels followed the death of the princess Elizabeth. That seems to be the end and the comment 'passive' as a characteristic of the earl certainly seems to apply after the execution of the king.

Disillusioned with politics, with Court and Parliament; soured with the disappointment inherent, though not automatically so, in posts of high office, the man of fifty-five became increasingly embittered. Lady Dorothy, his wife, had been his great and constant love and helpmeet over the years and, in 1636, on his departure for France he had made over all his estate rents and income to her personally, relying himself on fruits of office.²¹ During the long years of the Parisian embassy this arrangement had proved its worth for his main private income had been kept separate from the costs of official duties. Lady Leicester had worked tirelessly for her lord and money problems had never caused friction between them. The earl's retirement from public life in 1643 carried with it the loss of income and in 1645, exceedingly hard up, he asked his wife for money or for some jewellery which he could pawn. To his surprise and bitter resentment she refused!²²

Just why Lady Dorothy chose to humiliate her husband in this way no one knows, nor is it clear how the dilemma was overcome or whether relations ever after were strained. Certainly by 1649 Lady Leicester was a sick woman, she had complained of persistent headache as early as 1640 and one surmises that the last ten years of her life were clouded by ill health and possibly by an increasingly bitter tongue, for a year or so before her death in 1659, Sir Robert was having to excuse rumours of his ill-treatment of her to his brother-in-law.²³ Nevertheless,

²⁰ CKS. U1475 083/26 and *Calendar*, vol. 6, 484–91 *passim*.

²¹ CKS. U1475 F25/2 for details.

²² CKS. U1475 F25/2.

²³ CKS. U1475 C85/24 in particular.

her death when it came was a bitter blow and left the earl without the close friendship and advice of one who was ever outspoken in her assessment of men and situations.

Then, in 1653, there came a breach with Philip, Lord Lisle. The cause again is uncertain, it may have been over finances or the handling of the Welsh estate, but the quarrel cut deep and led to the younger man striking his father across the face.²⁴ This was unforgiveable and despite an attempt at reconciliation about ten years later there is no evidence that relations were ever normal again, nor that the insult was, or could be, forgiven. In the same year, too, the earl quarrelled with his young nephew and son-in-law Viscount Strangford, who had been residing at Penshurst as the earl's ward. Strangford suddenly accused Leicester of misappropriating the income from his estates and demanded both estates and rights. Whatever the justice of the claim, there seems evidence that the earl's enemies had been at work and had temporarily obtained the ear of the viscount, but it was one more element in the cup of bitterness which was Leicester's lot.²⁵

His second son Algernon, was an outstanding scholar and also a parliamentary soldier of ability and one-time governor of Dover Castle.²⁶ In 1658, he was chosen as one of the Protectorate embassy sent to Denmark, the successful issue of which was over-shadowed by the Restoration. The change of government left Sidney and his colleagues in an ambiguous position, but ultimately their embassy was ended and they returned to England: except Algernon Sidney.²⁷ It is said that he was unable to subscribe to the oaths required by Charles II from former opponents and this may be the case, but it is hardly the picture which emerges from the letters to his father which have survived. At one stage Lord Lisle accused his father of being too much under Algernon's influence, and it may be that Leicester was anxious that his son should not run into danger. If so why was Algernon apparently neglected and why did Sir John Temple write in terms that suggest anything but a fatherly attitude by the earl? In January 1661, he wrote: 'I have heere returned your sonnes letter. . . . He writes very discontentedly & expresseth much trouble & a very deepe sence of your Lordship's displeasure which he thinkes falls very unhappily upon him. . . . but I shall forbear to say more'.²⁸ Certainly, Algernon Sidney stayed in exile until his father's death wandering through Europe as a penniless soldier of fortune who none the less was prevented by family

²⁴ CKS. U1475 F24, see also *Calendar*, vol. 6, 614.

²⁵ CKS. U1475 C125.

²⁶ CKS. U1475 0101/4.

²⁷ CKS. U1475 C84/4-8.

²⁸ CKS. U1475 C114/33 and *Calendar*, vol. 6, 512-4.

pressures from taking up duties as a mercenary. His letters of the 1660s suggest a sense of deliberate neglect and an unwillingness on the earl's part to correspond with or to assist his second son.²⁹

This impression of an embittered old man residing at Penshurst alone with his books is heightened by his curt refusal to become involved in the politics of the Restoration. He welcomed his reinstatement to the House of Peers, but declined to attend on account of age and infirmity.³⁰ He claimed the residue of his fees due from the embassy to Paris and the lieutenancy of Ireland and in this he received some satisfaction, but over a period of seventeen long years he drifts further and further into obscurity, outliving most of his generation and out of sympathy with his own family. There is no evidence regarding his youngest son, Henry, handsomest man of the Restoration Court. Certainly the late seventeenth century saw the name of Sidney pass through the full gambit of fortune's vicissitudes: 2nd and 3rd Earls estranged and apparently retired from active life and affairs; Algernon exiled, pardoned and then executed for a plot in which he played little part; Henry, star of the Court, sent to the Hague as emissary and returning not as Charles II's liege subject, but as a leading figure in William III's entourage opposing the Jacobite government in 1689. For him great honour, Earl of Romney, the last to hold high office, for from the death of Philip, 3rd earl, in 1698 till the pathetic end of the eccentric Jocelin, 7th earl, in 1743 is a bare 45 years – 'Ichabod', the glory had indeed departed!

Such is the story of Robert, 2nd Earl of Leicester, a man for whom written history has only the verdict of 'irresolute' and 'passive'. It seems impossible to re-establish him completely for at the moment of crisis he failed to rise to the heights demanded, preferring, it seems, to hide behind a curtain of conflicting loyalties. Yet, this is not the whole picture. He was a man of great promise and one who held the friendship and esteem of courtiers and servants alike. King and queen trusted him and approved him and even the leaders of Parliament looked on Leicester as more of an ally than an enemy. He was scholar, bibliophile and a keen observer of affairs, keeping diaries, detailed, if not brilliant, and requesting copies of Lords and Commons journals while at Paris that he might keep fully informed.³¹ He recorded the execution of Charles I and the dismissal of the Rump Parliament by Cromwell: what went wrong?³²

Even after a detailed study of the earl's papers this question still

²⁹ CKS. U1475 C84/1–22.

³⁰ CKS. U1475 C95/3 see also Z101, 104.

³¹ CKS. U1475 C132/110.

³² CKS. U1475 F24.

remains. Why did he fail to live up to the promise? Was he really irresolute? What went wrong? Without some additional information the answer remains elusive and the man enigmatic. There is little doubt that disillusionment and disappointment played a large part and that these coincided with national catastrophe. In the circumstances he failed to rise to the occasion – far from being a coward, he dared not move without adequate security from both parties. Where another might have ignored kingly or parliamentary wishes and made a bold, if futile, gesture, Robert Sidney played a waiting game hoping against hope for a reconciliation of interests which never came. This paralysis at the moment of greatest need has damned him in the eyes of those who found the claims of either side to be supreme. Nevertheless, when all has been said in extenuation, was this quite the whole story? The hesitation of 1641–43 would appear to link up with his personal relations – was the real cause of Lady Leicester’s denial of help in 1645 the reaction of a strong-willed and imperious woman to a husband who has apparently failed to live up to the standards she set? These are the unknowns of history: questions to be asked and probed but often never answered adequately for the answers lie for ever lost in the thoughts of the participants. Thus, Robert Sidney, 2nd Earl of Leicester, passes slowly from sight and almost from historical memory. At Penshurst he prepared his will – a lengthy complex document to which between 1665 and 1675 he added at least nine lengthy codicils, and under which his heir Philip, Lord Lisle, was rejected, Algernon partly restored to favour and Henry clearly the overall gainer and favourite.³³ Small wonder that after his death the third earl challenged the will, which left him nothing, except the entailed estate, and removed even the books and library which he cherished, to his younger brother. A man of many parts, perhaps Robert Sidney was not of the stuff of martyrs and heroes; perhaps, too, in the confines of his beloved Penshurst among his books, he at last found himself and discarded the ghostly tyranny of uncle and great uncle and the tradition of a century – who knows?

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³³ CKS. U1475 T325/2–7.