

ELECTION ISSUES AND THE BOROUGH ELECTORATES
IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

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A STUDY of the Kentish boroughs in the civil-war period lends considerable support to Professor Plumb's recent contention¹ that a politically-conscious electorate exerted real influence on the choice of members of the seventeenth-century House of Commons.² Despite the difficulty of penetrating the minds of the 'inferior sort' of freemen who in all eight boroughs voted in Parliamentary elections, it is nevertheless possible to provide some evidence both of the existence of concern for general issues in 1640 and of the growth of such concern by 1660-1.

The size of the electorate in these Kentish towns varied from New Romney's 16 or so voters to the 200 or more of Dover, Sandwich and Canterbury.³ Even of the smaller boroughs, only decaying Queenborough showed virtually no interest in political and religious matters during this period. New Romney was slow to reject the traditional patronage exercised in the Cinque Ports by the Lord Warden but, by April, 1641, appears to have been making an independent choice.⁴ As Professor Everitt has shown,⁵ Kent was not dominated by any great family or small group of such families at this period: apart from the Lord Warden, therefore, with his customary if somewhat precarious right to nominate at least one member at Dover, Sandwich, Hythe and New Romney, only the Archbishop in Canterbury could be regarded as

¹ J. H. Plumb, 'The Growth of the Electorate in England from 1600 to 1715', *Past and Present*, no. 45, 90-116.

² An expansion of some of the arguments put forward in this article can be found in M. V. Jones, 'The Political History of the Parliamentary Boroughs of Kent, 1642-1662' (London University, Ph.D. thesis, 1967).

³ Kent County Archives, N.R./AC2, p. 265 *et passim*; for Sandwich and Dover see below; Hythe had 30-35 in 1640, Hythe Assembly Book 209, pp. 238, 240. For the other boroughs, an estimate of the number of freemen in 1662-3 can be made from the records of the proceedings of the Commissioners for Corporations: Canterbury had over 200, Rochester probably just under and Maidstone just over 200, Queenborough 26; see Canterbury Dean and Chapter Library, A/C5 ff. 59b-62a; Rochester City Archives, Ro/AC2 ff. 71 a and b; *Records of Maidstone* (Maidstone, 1926), 147-49; Kent County Archives, Qb/JMs5, pp. 6 and 7.

⁴ See Kent County Archives, N.R./AC2, 283, 287, 293; at the by-election in April, 1641, there appears to have been a divided vote, not customary at New Romney. The 'major part' chose Mr. Richard Browne, very probably the Mr. Browne 'sett up by the precise pty' at the county election in October, 1640, see B.M. MS. Stowe 743, f. 149a.

⁵ Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion* (Leicester, 1966).

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

a patron of the first rank.⁶ In the other towns, local gentlemen vied with each other at elections.

In Kent as elsewhere the elections in 1640 were particularly keenly contested, and an unusually large number of electioneering letters were written by candidates and their agents, both to each other and, more formally, to the corporations. In 1640, letters of the latter type were still largely traditional, dwelling on the prospective candidates' care for local concerns and respect for the Mayor and his brethren: Sandwich was promised support for a new harbour, reminded of one candidate's natural affection for his birthplace and of another's friends in high places.⁷ Even so, there were some small signs of change. Writing before the election for the Short Parliament, Sir Edward Partheriche stressed as a point in his favour that he had no influential patron: Sir Thomas Peyton hoped that the Mayor and Jurats would not suspect him of making a bid for the support of the freemen.⁸

The elections themselves were lively. Traditional ties and restraints were often broken; the Lord Warden nominated his customary candidate in vain at Sandwich and at Hythe, despite a persisting tendency for naturally conservative mayors and corporations to conciliate powerful patrons. Less well-supported candidates had alternative cards to play, their trump often proving to be the readiness of the body of freemen to challenge the town rulers. Peyton and Partheriche were the freemen's choice at Sandwich for the Short Parliament, and when the Mayor and Jurats attempted to ensure the election of the protégés of the Lord Warden and the Lord Keeper respectively, a near-riot took place, and the opposition leaders set off to London to present their appeal against the return. For the Long Parliament, Peyton and Partheriche were safely elected by 'the meanest sort' and in the face of continued opposition by the Mayor and Jurats, who worked for the Lord Warden's candidate. Their best efforts had not been able to secure him more than 87 votes, while Peyton had 179 and Partheriche 106: it was small consolation that the 87 had been 'of the better sort'.⁹ At Canterbury, too, the election for the Short Parliament was marked by the assertion of the numerical power of the freemen, against the support that some at least of the Bench were prepared to give to the Archbishop's nominee.

Behind such friction in the boroughs lay considerable local conflict. However, both in Sandwich and in Canterbury, the freemen were stirred by more than local jealousies. In the Short Parliament elections,

⁶ By the 1660s, however, naval influence was developing in Rochester.

⁷ Kent County Archives, Sa/C₁, ff. 10, 12, 13, 14a.

⁸ Kent County Archives, Sa/C₁, f. 13; B.M. Add. MS. 44846, f. 2.

⁹ Kent County Archives, Sa/Ac7, ff. 365b, 366, 367b; Sa/C₁, Mayor and Jurats to Lennox, 13th and 30th October, 1640. For the Lord Warden's failure at Hythe, see *State Trials* 4, pp. 113-18.

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

Nicholas's chances at Sandwich were materially weakened by the spreading of a rumour that he was a Papist. His candidature was supported both by the Earl of Northumberland and by the Lord Warden, and the Mayor and Jurats were accordingly prepared to do what they could for him; but as they explained to Nicholas himself, the rumour had hopelessly prejudiced the people against him. They did, however, take into custody and examine some of the propagators of the slander and those who had been influenced by it—a sadler who admitted he had been worried by the suggestion, and his informant, a turner, who had himself been told by the real originator of the story, one William Fagge, that Nicholas was 'a rank papist'. Nicholas was informed by his own agent at Sandwich that it was 'the factions Nonconformists' there (who supported Partheriche) who had been behind Fagge and responsible for the damaging smear.¹⁰ At Canterbury Laudianism was enough to damn the Archbishop's candidate: when he referred, in a speech he was rash enough to make to the electorate, to a picture of a benefactor of the city, a 'tumultuous' popular assembly chanted 'no pictures, no [i]mages, no Papists, no Archbishop's Secretary; we have too many [i]mages and pictures in the Cathedral already'.¹¹ By October, 1640, an observer noted in Maidstone an ominous tendency for the followers of the local victim of Laud's purge of Puritan clergy, Thomas Wilson of Otham, to organize themselves as a 'party of the Othamish' in preparation for the elections for the Long Parliament.¹²

The townsmen remained alert to religious and political issues during the next troubled years. They read their news-sheets, and discussed them at shop-doorways,¹³ they argued and contested fiercely over matters of religion, inside and outside their churches and at times also in the local council-chambers and general assemblies. Some of their members lost their places in the Commons as a result of the turns and changes of the 1640s, but while they survived, men like Peyton and Partheriche for Sandwich, and Sir Henry Heyman for Hythe, acted as a channel of communication for news from Westminster for their constituents. Again, the news often related to local interests, such as the Cinque Ports' ill-founded hope to secure exemption from taxation; but general political matters were not ignored.¹⁴ Sandwich annalists

¹⁰ P.R.O. MS. SP/16/448/33 I; *C.S.P.D.* 1639-40, 333, 561-2.

¹¹ B.M. E.52 (10) *Cathedral News from Canterbury*, 18, 19; according to E279 (13) *Antidotum Oulmerianum*, 28, most of the Aldermen were ready to accept the Archbishop's recommendation.

¹² B.M. MS. Stowe 743, f. 149a.

¹³ A good picture of such activities in Dover is given in the proceedings of the Mayor's Court, B.M. Add. MS. 29,624, f. 174a *et passim*.

¹⁴ B.M. Add. MS. 44846, ff. 6b, 11a *et passim*; see also, Dorothy Gardiner, *Historic Haven—the story of Sandwich* (Derby, 1954), 254; for Hythe see, George Wilks, *The Barons of the Cinque Ports and the Parliamentary Representation of Hythe* (Folkestone, 1892), 81, 82.

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

commented increasingly on public affairs and reactions to them.¹⁵ Canterbury was the scene of the preliminaries to the Kentish Rebellion in 1647 and 1648, and Maidstone was shaken in 1649 by a tussle of wills in its parish church between the greatly respected Presbyterian cleric, Thomas Wilson and the regicide Mayor, Andrew Broughton, over the king's execution.¹⁶ Men of all ranks had signed the multitudinous petitions of the 1640s, culminating in that of 1648 demanding the king's death.¹⁷ It is hardly to be expected that the interest of the 'inferior sort' in national affairs should have diminished in such a period, and there is some reason to suppose that it increased.

Unfortunately, little evidence survives for the Cromwellian parliaments. Under the Instrument of Government, Hythe and New Romney ceased to qualify for separate representation, and the other boroughs, with the exception of Canterbury, were reduced to a single member each. The electorate itself was also reduced, in some cases substantially so.¹⁸ When, as in Canterbury, Maidstone and Dover in 1654, and Sandwich, Canterbury and Maidstone in 1656, a local man or a town official was chosen, that very fact limited the need for written correspondence both before and after the election. For 1654 virtually nothing can be found. In 1656, Sandwich elected her Town Clerk, James Thurbarne, in obstinate preference to Colonel Hewson, but although it can be inferred that feeling against the military was running high amongst the Sandwich electors, no details survive. In Canterbury there was considerable party-feeling, reflected in 'a base jeering, quibbling Catch, or Libel' found circulating there, stuffed with hostile references to Richard Culmer whom the Cavaliers now hoped might be ejected from his living in Thanet. The verse began:

'And what's the News in Kent?
They want a Parliament.'¹⁹

¹⁵ Kent County Archives, Sa/Zb—the Annals, kept by a variety of prominent townsmen, include at least 3 for this period in which comments on national events are included: Sa/Zb 6, 8, 9; Sa/Zb 7 describe local politics 1661–65 in considerable detail.

¹⁶ For the 1648 rising, see Alan Everitt, *op. cit.*; Wilson preached a sermon against the execution and Broughton left the church, see William Newton, *The History and Antiquities of Maidstone* (London, 1741), 135, 136.

¹⁷ Bodl. MS. Tanner 57(2).

¹⁸ Dover freemen's lists for mayoral elections for the 1650s indicate the removal of at least 50 freemen and the absence from elections of many others, leaving around 100 in attendance. In 1655, however, the number actually casting a vote in the mayoral election was probably in the region of 40. The Indenture for the 1654 Parliamentary election named 56 electors. BM. MS. Eg.2120; *C.S.P.D. 1655*, 355; P.R.O. C219/44 pt. 3. In Sandwich, the freemen as a body were excluded from voting in mayoral elections at least from early 1656 to 1659, although in the Parliamentary election of 1656 some freemen not of the council were among the 35 who signed the Indenture: *C.S.P.D. 1655–6*, 138; Kent County Archives, Sa/AC8, f. 131.

¹⁹ Richard Culmer (the younger), *A Parish Looking-Glasse* (1657), B.M. 4105aa25.

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

and was Cavalier in tone. One of the members returned by Canterbury in 1656 was the Recorder, Thomas St. Nicholas, an outspoken Republican; the other, Vincent Denn, was a local figure. In either Canterbury or Dover (Major-General Kelsey's letter is ambiguous on this) there was some support from 'the rabble' for Cony,²⁰ and although Kelsey's well-known comment on the Kent elections—'the spirit is generally bitter against swordsmen, decimators, courtiers, etc.'—seems to refer particularly to the County contest, there was doubtless a similar feeling in the towns: of those elected, not only Sandwich's James Thurbarne, but also St. Nicholas of Canterbury appear to have been amongst those regarded as unacceptable by the Council of State when Parliament met.²¹ At Dover, Kelsey stood in person, with all the prestige acquired from his years as Lieutenant of Dover Castle as well as his more recent Major-General's authority behind him. He won the seat, of course. Yet, from the charges levied against him in 1659, it seems that there was opposition at any rate from a republican group in the town, 'several honest persons' there being branded by him as disaffected because they 'would not give their Votes for him to be a Parliament-man for Dover . . .'. Had local interests alone been at stake, Kelsey was the most effective patron Dover could desire; his vote in favour of the government of a Single Person in an earlier Parliament had not, however, been forgotten.²²

General issues of immense importance could not but be in men's minds during the elections of 1659, 1660 and 1661. In Hythe, at least, the radicals organized themselves in support of men who offered the kind of political and religious programme they desired. Henry Oxinden of Barham, a candidate at Hythe in 1659, was informed by Captain Lawrence Knott that there was 'an Intrust in Heath (Hythe)', ready to elect him as one who was 'against tything selfe-seeking Ministers And also against the abuses which are acted by the Lawyers'. Moreover, Oxinden's agent in Hythe suggested that votes were difficult to get because some were saying 'that neither you nor Kenrick²³ are for them but for the pulling downe of the ministrie'. After the election, Oxinden was told that 'the Anabaptise were generall' for him. He lost, but Kenrick won a seat, and the voting was very close.²⁴ Hythe had a small electorate, and small electorates were notoriously easy to

²⁰ Bodl. MS. Rawl. A.41, 442.

²¹ *C.S.P.D. 1656-7*, 87, 88; for the secluded M.P.s see P. J. Pinckney, 'A Cromwellian Parliament' (Vanderbilt University, Ph.D. thesis, 1962).

²² B.M. E993(8), Articles of High Crimes etc. (1659), 4; this attack on Kelsey is strongly Republican in tone.

²³ Colonel William Kenrick, a known Republican.

²⁴ Dorothy Gardiner (ed.), *The Oxinden and Peyton Letters 1642-1670* (London, 1937), 225-9.

intimidate or bribe, yet from this correspondence principles rather than profits seem to have been the electors' chief concern.

By the spring of 1660, however, the radicals' spirits were dashed and the cavaliers were in practice if not in theory restored to the franchise. Men like Kelsey, who had been influential for the past decade, were now eclipsed. The towns did look, anxiously, for protectors—but they were not necessarily unselective. For Dover, for example, as for the other Ports, Edward Montagu naturally filled the vacuum left by Kelsey's disgrace. He was no enemy to Puritanism or to Parliaments: he could accord with Dover's preference for a moderate Presbyterian/Royalist settlement. Self-interest and the public interest could well be considered to coincide; the formal assurance sent to Montagu by the Mayor and three Jurats that the town would understand its own and the Commonwealth's interest and vote for him, perhaps expressed a real truth. It is true that when one of the group wrote some days later to press Montagu to attend to certain vital matters, the letter contained 'Not a single word about national politics but only about local needs!', but this does not necessarily mean that the Dover electors were totally uninterested in national affairs.²⁵ During the weeks before the election, Montagu had been urged to conciliate the freemen and make it plain that he did not intend to rely on the 'phans'—the fanatics who were deeply unpopular with the majority of the townsmen.²⁶ Outside Dover, Montagu's influence was by no means certain. The Sandwich electors refused to abandon the Town Clerk, Thurbarne, in favour of his kinsman: indeed, the Mayor and Jurats informed Montagu that any attempt to get Thurbarne to stand down was likely to result in a swing by his supporters amongst the freemen to a less desirable candidate.²⁷ Both Thurbarne and Henry Oxinden of Deane, the other M.P. for Sandwich and a collaborator of Montagu's in Dover, had served in Cromwellian Parliaments, and although now prepared for a Restoration, both were Puritan in their sympathies. Oxinden definitely (and Thurbarne just possibly) was in Wharton's list of those likely supporters of Presbyterian measures to whom papers were given in November, 1660.²⁸ In 1661, Thurbarne was to be one of the few Presbyterians to sit in the Cavalier Parliament. Montagu's recommendation also failed in Hythe, where one of the successful candidates, Andrewes, inherited Henry Oxinden's group of supporters, and

²⁵ Bodl. MS. Carte 73, ff. 357, 382; Godfrey Davies, *The Restoration of Charles II 1658-60* (Oxford, 1955), 327, 328.

²⁶ Bodl. MS. Carte 223, f. 200.

²⁷ Bodl. MS. Carte 73, f. 393.

²⁸ G. F. Trevallyn Jones, 'The Composition and Leadership of the Presbyterian Party in the Convention', *English Historical Review*, lxxxix (1964), 348; a 'Mr. Thurland' is listed, probably Ed. Thurland of Surrey, but as Thurland had previously spoken against the Presbyterians (*ibid.*, p. 317) a confusion of names is possible.

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

showed himself willing to stand by them when some of their number suffered in the purge of the Corporation in the following winter.²⁹

By the spring of 1661, and the election for the Cavalier Parliament, other boroughs, too, had suffered their first purge by the restored royal government. Moreover, the Duke of York was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. Small wonder then that the town corporations should show themselves willing to give their votes and use their influence to secure members acceptable to the authorities. Yet, nervousness and self-interest are not the only springs of electoral action even in 1661. In Sandwich, Lawson's detailed report to Montagu concerning the prospects of the election of his kinsman makes no reference to general issues. It stresses chiefly the need for the support of the Duke of York, although it also makes clear that the freemen were not committed to the two Kentish gentlemen favoured by the Mayor and Jurats.³⁰ In the event, one of the members elected for the town was the Presbyterian Thurbarne, and to the Sandwich electors was addressed at this election a letter of application for the seat which showed a quite unusual concern to explain the candidate's political and religious position. Sir Edward Partheriche, the writer, failed to gain nomination, but his letter is the more interesting because it is so different in tone from his letters of 20 years before, when he successfully contested Sandwich for the Long Parliament. Then he promised support for local causes, now he related his record as their former member, stressing particularly his early move for the king's recall and his concern for religion. Had they elected him to the Convention, he wrote, he might 'have bine Instrumentall of a greater Setlement of ye affaires of this Kingdom then now they are in who should have endeavored y^t Religion might have bine soe settled upon ye foundation of our first Reformation in King Edward ye 6th and Queen Elizabeths lives . . .'. If elected now he would endeavour 'that not only y^e king may be righted & restored to the full in all That belongeth to his Crowne and Dignity . . . and be Secured by Good Laws against the feare of further Rebelions But y^t all others alsoe may Partake of equall communicative Justice . . .'.³¹ Partheriche at least expected the Sandwich electorate to take a wider view of a parliamentary election in 1661 than he had done in 1640. The Royalist, Sir John Mennes, doubtless encouraged by a previous approach to him by the Mayor and Jurats, wrote in the older style, promising to serve the town and put them to no charge,³² and if Partheriche's reasoned appeal bore no fruit neither did Mennes's flattering promises. The Duke of

²⁹ Dorothy Gardiner (ed.), *The Oxinden and Peyton Letters, 1642-1670* (London, 1937), 244, 245.

³⁰ Bodl. MS. Carte 73, ff. 347, 353.

³¹ Sa/C4, 22, Sir E. P. to M. and Jurats, 21st March, 1660-61.

³² Sa/C4, 21, Sir J. M. to M. and Jurats, 14th March, 1660-61.

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

York's influence was exerted in support of Montagu's kinsman, Edward Montagu, and his election secured, James Thurbarne filling the other place. There was interest in Sandwich in election results elsewhere: one of the many letters confiscated by the government after the shattering London result was written by the Baptist, George Gosfright, to his Sandwich friends, whom he evidently expected to share his pleasure in the dissenters' triumph.³³ (John Blewet of Canterbury received a similar letter from a friend). Dover returned the Castle interest in the person of Vincent, its Lieutenant, and George Montague; both men had influence behind them, and again both are amongst Wharton's 'Friends'.³⁴ There seems to have been keen electioneering in the town, as on 12th March, the Assembly decreed that any freeman trying to make a party or parties among the freemen for election purposes, or speaking to another freeman for that purpose, should be disfranchised.³⁵ In Hythe, the Duke and Montagu jointly recommended John Hervey, who secured one seat, but Phineas Andrewes was again elected to the other place, despite his having affronted some of the Corporation by his support of two ousted radical Jurats. His unexpectedly heavy election expenses may, however, indicate a degree of bribery on this occasion; his old supporters were disfranchised on 20th March, leaving him dependent on gaining the support of the Mayor and his friends.³⁶ In Rochester, one seat was won by Sir William Batten, in the face of fierce opposition from the leading supporters of crown and cathedral in the city. Batten was doubtless helped by his connection with the Navy, but he was also a moderate who, despite his participation in the 1648 Insurrection, had lived quietly under the Commonwealth. One of his supporters, John Wilde, had stripped the Cathedral's monuments during the recent upheavals, whereas 'a great stickler' against his election was Peter Stowell who lavished £100 on the battered church after the Restoration.³⁷ The influence of the Cathedral party had recently been increased by the admission of many of its clergy to the freedom; however, the balance was maintained by the enfranchisement at the same time of several citizens of Chatham.³⁸

Thus, after the Restoration, as before, Kent proved no exception to the general rule that corporations were 'the nurseries of faction'.³⁹ The electors, moreover, remained politically alert, despite the savage pruning

³³ *C.S.P.D.* 1660/61, 539, 542.

³⁴ G. F. Trevallyn Jones, *op. cit.*, 351, 352.

³⁵ Dover Archives, Assembly Book, 1603-1673, f. 210b.

³⁶ Dorothy Gardiner (ed.), *op. cit.*, 244-5, 250-1. Hythe Records, Assembly Book 211, 196.

³⁷ *C.S.P.D.* 1677, 117; W. Shrubsole and S. Denne, *The History and Antiquities of Rochester* . . . (Rochester, 1772).

³⁸ Rochester City Archives, Ro/AC2, ff. 53, 54.

³⁹ H.M.C. Finch MSS. I, 120.

ELECTION ISSUES IN MID-SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY KENT

of the freemen-lists undertaken by the Commissioners for Corporations in 1662 and 1663. In local elections some of them fought successfully to install magistrates sympathetic to Nonconformity (despite the Commissioners' purge in Sandwich, James Thurbarne was chosen Mayor by a tumultuous Assembly in 1665, when 'most of the freemen that were put by their voate did voate').⁴⁰ Their interest in national affairs was to have its next opportunity to show itself in the crisis years of the late 1670s.

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⁴⁰ Kent County Archives, Sa/ZB7.