

THE MAYOR OF GARRATT



Mock Elections in 18th Century
South London

THE MAYOR OF GARRATT

In the eighteenth century, Garratt was a tiny village in the fields between Wandsworth and Tooting. It had little political significance whatsoever and certainly no parliamentary representative. But from the 1740s to the 1800s mock elections for the fictional office of “Mayor of Garratt” attracted huge crowds to this tiny (now vanished) South London hamlet.

Garratt Green and the Leather Bottle Inn were the centre of a huge rowdy satirical pisstake of the election process of the times. Elections normally coincided with actual parliamentary elections and, at first, two Mayors were elected each time.

Eighteenth-century elections were noisy, chaotic and often violent. Only a tiny percentage of the population, the property-owning upper class and small numbers of the middle classes were eligible to vote. Many areas had no representation in Parliament, while many rotten boroughs with little or no residents elected MPs. There was huge pressure for reform of this farcical system, especially from the rising middle class, who were pushing for political clout to go with their increasing economic power.

Despite lacking the vote, huge crowds would often gather at election platforms, to cheer or jeer, fight, drink and generally take the piss...

The element of farce, which all classes appreciated and which found its most extreme expression in the bizarre annual ritual of the election of the Mayor of Garratt, where the world turned upside down for a day to allow comic speeches, vulgar banter and political impersonation.

The first recorded election was in 1747. There are disputed views as to how the event originated... According to a 1754 account by a leading local Quaker, the first Mayor had been elected in about 1690 by some watermen who were '*spending a merry day at the Leather Bottle*'. A 1781 description of the election, however, claimed the elections had begun about 30 years earlier as a result of successful local opposition to the illegal enclosures on Wandsworth Common, the leader of this opposition becoming known as the Mayor of Garratt. This fits with the date of the first recorded election, though there doesn't seem to be any evidence of a 1740s campaign against enclosures.



Garratt in the early 19th Century.

The fame of the Garratt elections was spread by Samuel Foote's farce, *The Mayor of Garret* (1764), and from 1768 candidates often came from London and its surroundings rather than just the Wandsworth area.

The candidates were always poor tradesmen, usually with a drink problem and sometimes with a physical deformity. The main qualification was a quick wit.

They assumed such titles as Lord Twankum (a

cobbler and gravedigger), Squire Blowmedown (a Wandsworth waterman) and Sir Trincalo Boreas (a fishmonger).

The candidates first walked or rode in procession from Southwark, and then paraded in Wandsworth, sometimes in carts shaped like boats. In 1781 there were *'scaffoldings and booths erected in Wandsworth at every open space; these were filled with spectators to the topmost rows, and boys climbed to the topmost poles, flags and colours were hung across the road, and the place was crowded by a dense population full of activity and noise'*. They then rode in procession along Garratt Lane, accompanied by the Clerk, the Recorder and the Master of Horse, who in 1781 rode at the head of the 'Garratt Cavalry', a troop of 40 boys mounted on ponies. At the hustings, on Garratt Green, each candidate had to swear an oath (their right hand resting on the sign of the mob - a brickbat!), *'handed down to us by the grand Volgee, by order of the great Chin Kaw Chipo, first Emperor of the Moon'*.

This oath was too rude to be repeated by Victorian folk historians; it scrutinised voters' property qualifications (the test to see if you had enough property to be eligible to vote) in the language of sexual innuendo:

That you have admitted peaceably and quietly, into possession of a freehold thatched tenement, either black, brown or coral, in hedge or ditch, against gate or stile, under furze or fen, on any common or common field, or enclosure, in the high road, or any of the lanes, in barn, stable, hovel, or any other place within the manor of Garratt; and, that you did (Bona fide) keep (ad rem) possession of that said thatched tenement (durante bene placito) without any let, hindrance, or molestation



The Leather Bottle Inn, about 1890.

whatever; or without any ejection or forcibly turning out of the same; and that you did then and there and in the said tenement, discharge and duly pay and amply satisfy all legal demands of the tax that was at that time due on the said premises; and lastly, did quit and leave the said premises in sound, wholesome and good tenable repair as when you took possession and did enter therein. So help you..

The huge crowds, said in 1781 to be 20,000, but at other times to have been as many as 100,000, blocked the streets for hours. Pub landlords donated funds to provide the candidates' lavish costumes, and were well-rewarded: on one occasion the pubs ran dry and only water was left, selling at 2d per glass. *Some historians reckon the whole event was solely staged to boost pub profits...*

From the 1760s the elections were associated with radical politics, and hero of the bourgeois reform party and darling of the "London mob" John Wilkes and his supporters wrote some of the candidates' addresses. The candidates usually stressed their patriotism and loyalty to the King, while protesting economic hardships and the lack of liberty for the labouring classes.

Gradually the Mayoral election became more and more seditious, especially in the 1790s.

In 1781 there were six candidates:

'About three o'clock the candidates proceeded with their several equipages towards the hustings; his Lordship [Lord Viscount Swallowtail, a basketmaker] was elegantly seated in a wicker cage, which was mounted on a cart and driven by a servant in a laced livery. The next in order was Sir John Harper [in reality James



Jeffrey Dunstan

Anderson, a breeches-maker & inkle-weaver] who rode uncovered in a phaeton drawn by six horses, and was dressed in white and silver, with a blue ribband round his shoulder; this worthy knight recruited his spirits every furlong by a glass of Geneva [gin] ... After him came Sir T. Blaize [a blacksmith] mounted on a cart-horse, with a pack-saddle and halter, and paper ears reaching to the ground. Sir Christopher [a waterman] rode triumphantly in a boat drawn by four horses and filled with many emblematical devices.'

The press of carriages, wagons and horses prevented these candidates reaching the hustings, but Jeffrey Dunstan, '*proceeding without noise or ostentation*', arrived at the Green on his own and proceeded to address the electors until interrupted by the hustings platform collapsing. '*The other candidates then not appearing, and a message being received from Sir John [Harper] that he was too drunk to attend, [Dunstan] was declared duly elected*'.

Dunstan, the most celebrated of the Mayors, was a second-hand wig seller in the West End. He was a foundling who took his name from the parish of St Dunstons-in-the-East in the City of London, where, in 1759, he was discovered on the step of the churchwarden's house. He was brought up in the workhouse, had knock-knees and a disproportionately large head, and only grew to a height of 4 feet ... He had '*a countenance and manner marked by irresistible humour, and he never appeared without a train of boys and curious persons whom he entertained by his sallies of wit, shrewd sayings and smart repartees*'. Dunstan's lively sallies made him popular with the crowd, who twice more returned him to office. He became a close friend of controversial populist MP John Wilkes. A man fond of his drink, Dunstan became too outspoken against the establishment and in 1793, at the height of the French Revolution, he was tried, convicted and imprisoned for seditious expressions. Dunstan remained Mayor until 1796 and was died the following year, apparently as the result of a drinking spree.

Dunstan's successor was Henry Dinsdale (Sir Harry Dimsdale), described as '*a deformed dwarf, little better than an idiot, who used to sell muffins in the streets about St Anne's Sobo*'. He lived in a small attic near Seven Dials (a notoriously poor and rowdy area north of Covent Garden). In 1804, he stood as the Emperor Anti-Napoleon, addressing his subjects as the 'Emperor of Garratt'. Dinsdale died in about 1810.

The Garratt election seems to have declined in popularity from the 1790s, losing both its patronage by the aristos and its support from political radicals. There were several reasons for this. In its heyday, the whole grand show had been a spectacle for people of all backgrounds: many of the better-off to come and enjoy the rough and tumble of lower-class rowdiness: and even sponsored the candidates. Like many carnivals, festivals, fairs it had become a release for social and political tensions in a relatively harmless satirical free for all. This wasn't unusual for the times, even a certain level of violence and direct action could be acceptable, as in bread riots, when crowds forcibly redistributed bread at times of high prices. The prevailing paternalistic social system allowed for a certain amount of



Henry Dinsdale

ritualistic rebelliousness, as long as it stayed within traditional and expected boundaries. Exceed these limits and the powers that be would crush you: as striking and rioting silkweavers and coalheavers found out in 1768.

As the 18th Century went on however, not only did pressure for reform from below grow, but the authorities fear of “the Mob” and plebeian rebelliousness increased. The riots of the 1760s in support of Wilkes’ campaign against corruption in Parliament, increasing economic violence, and above all, the terrible and shattering events of the Gordon Riots in 1780, when rioting crowds virtually took over the city and drove the rich into flight, scared the shit out of the upper class. Any occasion for crowds to come together became a potential riot situation. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and the violent social upheaval it created, inspired many radicals in England - and further terrified those in power. Certainly from 1793, the height of the radical violence of the Revolution, the Garratt elections were frowned upon (Dunstan was jailed for sedition this year).

Hand in hand with this of course, the moral trend was away from rowdiness and pissed trouble-making, and towards hard work, sobriety, respectability. Not only were the authorities keen to get rid of fairs, mass gatherings etc where the plebs’ baser passions could break out, but also reformers and radicals also more and more internalised the drive for a respectable, sober, orderly and educated movement for change. Artisan radicals increasingly saw such unruly traditions as embarrassments to their properly directed political efforts to improve their lot.

This movement developed into the powerful London artisan radical scene, which produced the London Corresponding Society, Owenism, the Cooperative Movement and the Chartism. Although these were strong and important manifestations of the self-organised working class, you can’t help feeling that leaving behind wild outbreaks of carnival and satire like the Garratt Elections, something was lost...

What with repression and changes in working class culture, there were no more Mayor of Garratt elections after 1804, apart from an unsuccessful attempt to revive the custom in 1826.

APPENDIX:

THE MOCK-ELECTION IN THE KING'S BENCH

“Nothing during the last year excited more curiosity than the Mock Election, which took place in the King's Bench Prison; as much from the circumstances attending its conclusion, as from the astonishment expressed that men, unfortunate and confined, could invent any amusement at which they had a right to be happy.”

In July 1827, the inmates of the King's Bench Prison, in Borough, South London, organised a fantastical mock hustings, to elect an MP to represent 'Tenterden' (a slang name for the prison) in Parliament. Three candidates were put up, one of whom was Lieutenant Meredith, an eccentric naval officer. “... *As I approached the unfortunate, but merry, crowd, to the last day of my life I shall ever remember the impression... baronets and bankers, authors and merchants, painters and poets... dandies of no rank in rap and tatters... all mingled in indiscriminate merriment, with a spiked wall, twenty feet high, above their heads...*”

All the characteristics of a regular election were parodied. Addresses from the candidates to the 'worthy and independent electors' were printed and posted up around the prison; contending parties wrote broadsheets & sang songs attacking their opponents; there were processions with flags

and music, to take the several candidates to visit the several 'Collegians' (i. e., prisoners) in their rooms; speeches were made in the courtyards, full of grotesque humour; a pseudo-“high-sheriff” and other “election officers” were chosen to oversee the proceedings “properly”; and the electors were invited to 'rush to the poll' early on Monday morning, the 16th of July.

“Hitherto it had been a mere revel; but on the latter day the frolic assumed a serious aspect, from the interference of the marshal of the prison.”

Worried about the disorder that might arise (and that the inmates might be enjoying life in a manner non-profitable to him and other warders?!), Mr. Jones, marshal of the prison, put a stop to the whole proceedings on the morning of the 16th. Apparently the proceedings were halted violently, exasperating the prisoners. They resented the language used towards them, and opposed the treatment to which they were subjected; until a squad of Foot-guards, with fixed bayonets, forcibly drove some of the leaders into a filthy 'black-hole' or place of confinement.

“The three candidates, and other persons who were active in the election, were for some time kept in close confinement, and a sergeant's guard was introduced, and remained in the prison all night. The result was pacific; but the conduct of the marshal has been much censured and threatened with a parliamentary investigation.”



THE MOCK ELECTION IN THE KING'S BENCH PRISON.

**Quotes from an account of the Mock Election
by Benjamin Haydon, imprisoned in the Kings Bench for debt, July 1827.**