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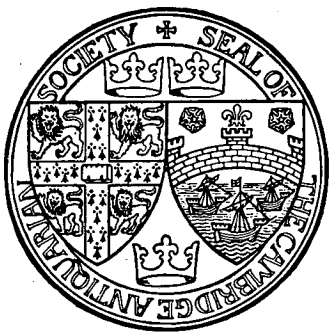

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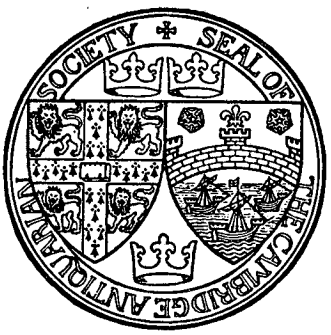

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CONTENTS

	page
Officers and Council of the Society, 1977 - 1978	
The Society's Room and The Proceedings	viii
Field Officer's Report	ix
The Field Walking Group of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society First Report	xi
A Roman Lead Tank from Burwell, Cambridgeshire CHRISTOPHER J. GUY	1
The Roman Farm Settlement at Godmanchester, II W. H. C. FREND	5
A Fragment of Pre-Conquest Sculpture from Balsham, Cambridgeshire DOMINIC TWEDDLE	17
Elm - A Field Survey DAVID HALL *and* D. R. WILSON	21
An Investigation of Royston Cave SYLVIA P. BEAMON *and* LISA G. DONEL	47
Cambridgeshire Earthwork Surveys, III A. E. BROWN *and* C. C. TAYLOR	59
Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent M. J. MURPHY	77
Coaching Routes of the Cambridge Region, 1820 - 1850 DAVID H. KENNETT	89
The Cambridge Antiquarian Society J. G. POLLARD	105
Book Reviews	117
Note on Four Anglo-Saxon Pots in Luton Museum T. BRISCOE	121
Index	

BENJAMIN FLOWER AND THE POLITICS OF DISSENT*

M. J. Murphy

THE impact which the French Revolution made on English life and opinion was considerable. English reaction ranged from cautious optimism on the part of politicians to the infectious enthusiasm of radicals, poets and intellectuals. In particular the Dissenters, who especially revered the constitution of 1689 and were celebrating its centenary when revolution broke out in France, moved from veneration of past events in Britain to admiration of present events in France. Richard Price, the veteran dissenting minister, thanked God publicly that the French were demanding their rights.[1] With a general election in the offing and the Dissenters once again campaigning for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, their reaction turned the French Revolution from an exciting foreign spectacle into a passionate domestic issue. Another result was the founding of Corresponding Clubs and Societies all over the country and, inspired in particular by the writings of Tom Paine, these renewed the constitutional agitation of the 1780s.[2] The main effect of their activities, taken together with subsequent events in France, was not the regeneration of English politics but the encouragement of government repression. By 1793 Loyalist Associations were established in every major city and town, Church-and-King mobs hounded radicals and denounced Jacobins as a tide of loyalty swept the land. After the outbreak of war with France reformers were prosecuted, *Habeas Corpus* suspended, public meetings proscribed and all manifestations of radicalism severely checked.[3]

One effect of the war was to encourage the development of newspapers in a society avid for information[4] and despite the many difficulties involved in such a venture, Richard Flower, a Hertfordshire farmer and brewer, with the backing of a few liberal friends, decided to set up a newspaper in Cambridge and persuaded his elder brother Benjamin to become editor.[5] Flower and other reformers of the 1780s had come to believe that the provincial press could play an important part in furthering their demands for civil and religious liberty. Thomas Walker claimed that there was no more formidable an enemy to political error than an impartially conducted newspaper and that the key to reform was enlightened public opinion. Opinion, once roused outside Parliament, was expected to prevail.[6]

The most advanced journalistically and politically of the provincial radical newspapers in the 1790s was the *Cambridge Intelligencer*.[7] Flower's aggressively

* I wish to express my gratitude to Professor D. Read who first suggested the theme of this article and Professor E. P. Thompson who gave useful advice on parts of it.

radical editorials were to gain him national repute among reformers as he strove to further the cause of religious and political liberty in this university stronghold of Toryism and the established Church. Surprisingly we have remarkably little information on Flower's own life and his career in journalism poses almost as many questions as it answers. What we do know is that he was a radical figure of national importance, one who helped to ensure that liberal ideas continued to be discussed during this critical period in English history.[8]

Benjamin Flower was born in 1755, the son of a prosperous and respectable London tradesman. He inherited a share of his father's business after his death in 1778.[9] Possessing little of his father's commercial ability, he quickly lost his inheritance in stock-market speculations. Forced now to earn his living, he became a bank clerk and later an educational tutor. In 1785 he became a representative of Messrs. Swale and Denny of Tiverton and spent much of the late 1780s travelling abroad on their behalf. While in France he witnessed some of the earliest scenes of the French Revolution and as a result was inspired to write a rather discursive work called *The French Constitution* (1792), a major part of which described the defects of the English political system. Nevertheless it encouraged his bother Richard to offer him in 1793 the position of editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*.

The *Intelligencer* was a typical eighteenth-century provincial print and was similar in format to its Tory rival the *Cambridge Chronicle*. The main news continued to be taken from the major London newspapers, usually a column or two of local news was added and there was the occasional letter to brighten what would now be regarded as rather dull and stolid fare. However the *Intelligencer* had a few noticeably different features. Compared to the *Chronicle* it displayed very few advertisements and its inability to capture local advertising revenue made certain that the *Intelligencer* would never be a commercial success. A more important feature was the editorial, which Flower developed at a time when it was unknown in the provincial press.[10] He used it to instruct local and national opinion, comment on political events and offer solutions for national problems. In his hands the editorial became an important journalistic means of shaping public opinion and the *Intelligencer* was the first provincial newspaper in England to introduce the editorial into journalistic practice.[11] Flower was no longer content to plunder the London prints for political comment. This was a vital step forward in the development of independent provincial politics and Flower's example was not only imitated by other short-lived radical newspapers in the 1790s but followed and improved upon by the greater provincial newspapers of the nineteenth century.[12]

Flower's radical sentiments explain why the newspaper failed to capture local advertising revenue. He admitted that 'his local circulation was trifling and his advertisements scarcely worth naming' but nonetheless was gratified to discover that it was 'handed about the University.'[13] However, the paper's overall circulation continued to grow at a surprising rate for a provincial print. At a time when provincial editors counted their sales in hundreds, Flower in 1797 was selling 2,700 copies of the *Intelligencer* per week.[14] His printed list of distribution agents on January 24, 1801 explains the paradox because it clearly confirms that the *Intelligencer* enjoyed a

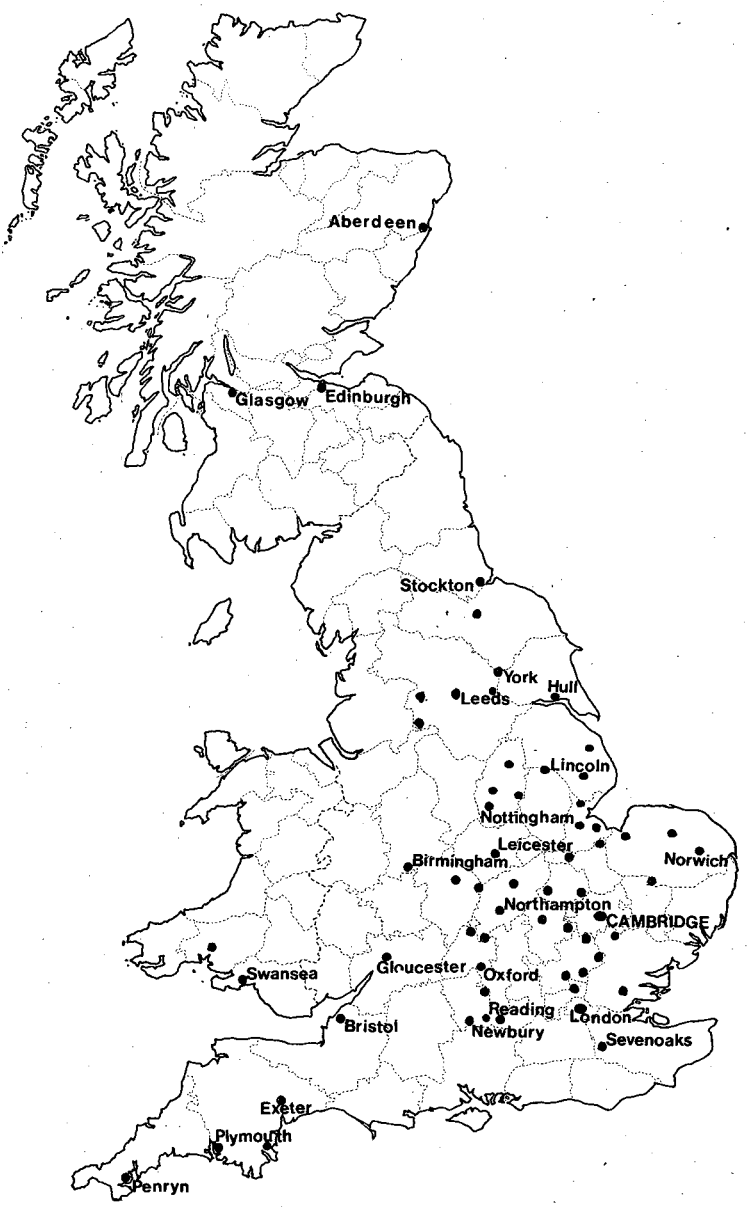

Fig. 1. Agents for the *Cambridge Intelligencer*.

national circulation (Fig. 1). It was widely read in the north of England, in Scotland, London, Middlesex and the West Country.[15] John Guest, the founder of the Dowlais iron works introduced it into South Wales.[16] Weston Hatfield, editor of *The Cambridge Independent Press* (1819-1934), claimed that it was 'read, admired and hated from the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed to the Land's End in Cornwall.'[17] Coleridge warmly recommended it as an alternative to his ill-fated periodical *The Watchman.*[18] It consoled Joseph Priestley in his American exile and even reached the unfortunate Fyche Palmer at Botany Bay.[19]

The major reason for Flower's national readership was the dissenting connection. His father had been a well-known nonconformist and Benjamin was greatly influenced by a home background which encouraged discussion, argument and debate on the major political and religious issues of the day.[20] Guided by the religious writings of the Cambridge Baptist Robert Robinson, he became an Arian, one of the less radical branches of English Unitarianism. The Unitarians everywhere comprised far more intellectual elements than any other group of Dissenters, and their academies were noted centres of social as well as religious enlightenment. The connection between newspapers and Dissent during this period, and in particular the contribution of Unitarians to the press, is well known and illustrated by the careers of Gales of *The Sheffield Register,* Taylor, Garnett and Harland of *The Manchester Guardian* and Ward of *The Sheffield Independent.* [21] All displayed an earnestness in religion which was characteristic of their sect; it was practically impossible to be an uncommitted or casual Unitarian. Furthermore they demanded absolute freedom of thought and religion and this helped to establish a tradition in which political liberty itself flourished. They also possessed what was often referred to as 'a mentality of revolt.' Flower was typical of the group, a Rational Dissenter in the tradition of Joseph Priestley and Richard Price.[22]

This special connection between religion and politics was developed by Flower and the result was that the *Intelligencer* became a sort of nation-wide congregational magazine for Rational Dissenters. It included extracts, letters and articles from George Dyer, Mrs Barbauld, Gilbert Wakefield, Henry Crabb Robinson, Christopher Wyvill and Mary Wollstonecraft.[23] It published some of the early poems of Coleridge and acted as a forum for dissenting news, opinion and misfortunes at a time when Dissenters were regarded with considerable hostility.[24] In Cambridge itself a number of clergymen were tried for alleged sedition, the best known being William Frend, Thomas Fyche Palmer and John Jebb.[25] However, there was also a tradition of political dissent in both town and university.[26] The Cambridge Constitutional Society distinguished itself in the 'county movement' for parliamentary reform and was also one of the first bodies to petition Parliament for the abolition of the slave trade.[27] In 1790 the members adopted the fundamental principles of the Revolution Society. Already the inheritors of the religious thought of Milton and Locke, they now embraced the more revolutionary ideas of Paine.[28]

Flower's printing shop was located in Bridge Street and the first copy of the *Intelligencer* appeared on July 20, 1793, by which time majority opinion had already

rejected reform ideas. In his opening editorial he stressed the importance of an independent and impartial press, declared that he supported the British Constitution and the Glorious Revolution but was also 'anxious for the preservation of the invaluable and inalienable rights of the people.' He therefore openly professed himself 'a friend to the Reform of our Representation.'[29] The paper soon displayed advertisements from the Sheffield Constitutional Society, the London Society for Constitutional Information and the London Corresponding Society. Many similar societies faded rapidly after enthusiastic beginnings, and events in France, as prophesied by Burke, soon turned popular feeling against them. By 1799 every printer was also considered 'the raw material of a traitor.'[30]

Flower was not deterred by severe government repression, accusations of Jacobinism or demonstrations of loyalty in the town.[31] In his view the nation remained in need of drastic reform and Pitt and Burke he condemned not as mere enemies but as apostates.[32] Pitt was the minister most responsible for the evils of a war which was unchristian and unjustifiable and whose economic policies were ruinous to the English people 'taking the bread out of their mouths, faster than they can earn it.'[33] The inevitable result was poverty, high prices, petty food riots and attacks on farmers. These, Flower believed, were pilloried unjustly for the consequences of a war more brazenly supported by 'the Liverpool Slave Traders . . . the Members of our Volunteer Corps . . . and the clergy.'[34]

Flower rejected Pitt's apparent conviction that, because French political extremists abused their liberty, Englishmen had to be deprived of theirs; furthermore it was 'melancholy to think that the blood and treasure of the nation is to be squandered, and its dearest interests sacrificed, in the ridiculous attempt to bring madmen to their senses . . . But we are told this is a religious war . . . not only by those pious statesmen, Messrs Pitt and Dundas, but even by clergymen - and clergymen who would fain persuade us that their principles are more *evangelical,* and their practice more *holy* than the generality of their brethren. Oh, Shame, where is thy blush!'[35] After Pitt's resignation in 1801 Addington's policies proved in all essential points to be the same. Flower, by now utterly exasperated, demanded that he begin 'the work of national reform in the Senate . . . instead of fattening on the spoils of the nation and . . . heaping wealth upon his relatives.'[36]

During this period Flower was occasionally attacked by prints such as the *Anti-Jacobin* for sentiments he expressed 'with the frankness of a Marat.' He rejected such ill-informed assaults while insisting that his principles were similar to those of the most illustrious men of every age 'no other than what were preached by Bishop Hoadly before George I . . . they are the sentiments of Locke and Newton . . . enforced from the pulpit of this University, pleaded for in the better days of Watson and Paley and are best calculated to promote peace, order and goodwill towards men.'[37] His sentiments were certainly not republican and, though he insisted he was not a party man, like Wyvill and many other gentlemen-reformers he continued to regard Fox with admiration.[38] This did not prevent him criticising the Foxite opposition, too many of them in his opinion being Whigs in name only. His relationship with the radicals was

also somewhat equivocal. Annual Parliaments and universal suffrage, he argued, should not be regarded as the only panacea for the nation's ills and he stated that he had yet to be convinced that the English people were 'fully prepared for the exercise of the enjoyment of the most abstract rights in the most unlimited degree.'[40] Nevertheless he insisted on the right of the Corresponding Societies 'to peaceably call the attention of the public to the grand business of Reform in general.'[41] He soon discovered how disagreeable it was to be a moderate in a world running to extremes, denounced on the one hand as 'a Jacobin' and on the other mocked by radicals such as Major Cartwright for being too cautious and half-hearted. Reform of Parliament in Flower's opinion was the key to political change and to make this possible it was necessary to effect a change in local and national attitudes and opinions. He therefore gave full coverage to public meetings, petitions and parliamentary debates and used the editorial to inform and stimulate public opinion.

Though the borough of Cambridge was a closed Corporation exemplifying all the evils of the old unreformed system, Flower concentrated his editorial attacks primarily on the Hardwicke interest.[42] The Duke of Rutland, who dominated the borough through his nominee John Mortlock, had, after all, played an active part in the county reform movement of the 1780s. Philip Yorke, third Earl of Hardwicke and Lord Lieutenant of the county, was soon made aware that Flower was 'the leading Dissenter' and major opponent of government policy in the area.[43] During the 1802 election Flower launched a trenchant attack on Charles Yorke's reputation and politics. Together with his supporters, 'the ministerial high Church junta', he was condemned for his unquestioning support of Pitt and his repressive domestic and Irish policy. He was blamed for the continuation of the French war and for his family's alleged use of corruption in local politics.[44] It was a good tactical moment to attack because it was clear that the Yorkes were temporarily losing their hold on the county representation, due in some measure to their support for the costly Eau Brink scheme to improve the navigation between Cambridge and King's Lynn. The election proved both expensive and embarrassing, Yorke admitting in a letter to his half-brother 'I think I have never been so harassed in my life.'[45] When Hardwicke learned of the possible closure of the Tory *Cambridge Chronicle* later in 1802, he expressed the utmost concern that Hodson's newspaper should 'not fall into bad hands . . . I will state the case to Addington . . . I think Hodson should be supported; but if he cannot his paper should be transferred to some loyal subjects . . . who will not only, with insistence, employ it to good purpose, but as a lash upon Mr Flower.'[46]

Politics was not Flower's only preoccupation during this years; religion was also of vital importance. Disappointed at their failure to get a repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, Flower and other Dissenters hardened their hearts against the Church and State that had rejected them. Their opposition, however, did not arise exclusively out of their legal disabilities. Dissent always had a close affinity with reform and this is why after 1792 Unitarians in particular were singled out as special objects of attack.[47] Religious antipathies combined with political prejudice to explain the situation. Their approach to religion aroused considerable indignation.

Unitarianism, which frankly made Christ a creature, subverted the whole Christian scheme of salvation. They rejected dogma and emphasised conduct and good works rather than faith.[48] Thus the freedom they sought was a freedom not merely to think but to act - to preach, publish and exert pressure. Support for the war was seen by Flower as the true test of conduct and here the established Church, the Evangelicals, and particularly Wilberforce, stood condemned for showing their approbation of National Fasts and a war so bloody and expensive in human lives.[49] Flower accused them of the sins of 'Prevarication, Perjury and Bloodshed' and claimed that these 'proved them the utter enemies of the gospel of Christ. With unblushing effrontery these men continue, like the Pharisees of old, to wrap themselves up in their own pretended righteousness, and while stigmatising all the clergy who differ from them as blind and *carnal,* they have neither the courage to defend their own conduct, nor the honesty to confess their own sins.'[50]

The abolition of the slave trade was another cause supported by Flower, who believed like his co-religionists that it was part of the nature of an individual that he was free. Abolition was a religious crusade and Flower refused to be deterred from supporting it by either government repression or popular accusations of Jacobinism: 'Any man who has the effrontery or the depravity to defend it ought to be treated in society as a wretch who would, without scruple, turn Pickpocket, Highwayman or Murderer as it might best answer the purposes of his black and polluted heart.'[51] Pitt, 'This wretch . . . for a long time thought sincere in his wishes for its abolition',[52] and Wilberforce, 'the evangelical statesmen with his bloody votes',[53] were continually castigated for not solving the problem. Even Cobbett was condemned because of his 'detestable principles respecting the Slave Trade.'[54] There was however some equivocation in Flower's early attitude to the slavery issue, as he opposed immediate and total emancipation, but by 1801, frustrated at Parliamentary prevarication on the matter, he urged the slaves themselves to solve the problem by breaking 'their chains over the heads of their oppressors.'[55]

Another noticeable feature of Flower's paper was its editorial campaign for Catholic emancipation and political justice for Ireland. Emancipation he saw as a civil and not a religious right and the existence of an alien established Church and 'the scandalous oppression of Tythes' he regarded as 'a gross imposition on a large majority of the kingdom.'[56] These were questions in which Flower the Dissenter was passionately interested - the nature of civil rights, the place of religion in the constitution and religious toleration. Flower realised that unless some progressive and liberal solution were offered for the Anglo-Irish problem there was every possibility of a revolt in Ireland. He was determined that the English people, unsympathetic as they might appear, should be informed of Ireland's wrongs and, as well as much editorial comment, he printed extracts from the leading Irish newspapers and journals.[57] When the rebellion of 1798 broke out Flower stated that it was the direct result of English oppression and 'the consequence of such a system have often been predicted.'[58] He demanded leniency for the Irish rebels and opposed the proposed Act of Union which would deprive the Irish Protestant Parliament of its independence. After the Act had

been forced through the Irish legislature, the King refused to countenance the granting of Catholic emancipation and martial law was proposed instead. Flower was understandably irate: 'We dare not, after reading such debates, give vent to our feelings: we turn from scenes in which *Corruption, Profligacy, Torture, Cruelty, Fire* and *Blood* have been displayed in the most glaring colours, with equal horror and disgust, and leave the subject to the reflection of our readers!'[59]

Flower's outspoken opposition to government policy is the more note-worthy when one realises the mounting government repression of the years after 1797. By this date the war had become more of a national effort and many apostasised or became disenchanted in the face of such a sustained and popular campaign. In 1799 Flower's out-spokenness finally led him into libelling Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff and Regius Professor of Divinity at the University. Flower's editorial was in defence of an earlier attack by his co-religionist Gilbert Wakefield on Llandaff's *Address to the People of Great Britain* (1798). Flower was found guilty by the House of Lords, fined one hundred pounds and sentenced to six months imprisonment in Newgate for referring to Watson as 'the Right Reverend time server and apostate.'[60] Wakefield was also imprisoned as was another Unitarian George Dyer, for coming to Flower's defence. Isolated for so long, the target for unremitting attack, Flower began to have second thoughts about continuing as editor of the *Intelligencer*.[61] Shortly after his release from prison he was married to Miss Eliza Gould, an independent and self-reliant disciple of his (who had visited him in prison) and who had also suffered for her liberal beliefs.[62]

Once released from Newgate however, Flower decided to persevere, but the editorials of the later years betray progressive disillusionment. Public apathy and political indifference were widespread, and there appeared little possibility of a speedy conclusion to the war though an uneasy peace prevailed from 1801 to 1803. When hostilities were renewed Flower decided to retire from journalism. He established himself in business at Harlow in Essex, where he printed the works of his favourite Divine, Robert Robinson.[63] However he was not yet ready to retire from politics and in 1807 launched a new radical journal entitled *Flower's Political Review and Monthly Register* in which he developed and expanded his political and religious beliefs. The quotation printed under the title of the *Register* indicated that it would continue to fight the good fight: 'What is morally wrong can never be politically right.' It enjoyed only limited success though Thomas Hardy stated that it was popular among London radicals and 'held very deservedly in high estimation.'[64] Flower ceased publication in 1810 soon after the death of his wife in child-birth. Though he maintained contact with former friends such as Robert Aspland, Theophilus Lindsey, Dr Southwood Smith and W. J. Fox of the *Monthly Repository,* he devoted most of his later years to educating his two highly-gifted daughters, Eliza and Sarah.[65] (Pl. 1). He settled in Dalston in 1820 where Harriet Martineau, who befriended his daughters, was a regular visitor. He died in 1829 and was interred in the country burial-ground belonging to the Protestant Dissenters at Harlow.

Flower is obviously a forgotten man in the history of English provincial journalism.

NJAMIN Flower

Sarah Flower Adams

ELIZA Flower

From H. W. Stephenson, *The Author of Nearer, My God, to Thee,* Lindsay Press, (London, 1922).

Pl. 1. Benjamin Flower and his daughters.

Yet he was one of the few who ensured that popular radicalism was not entirely extinguished during the era of Pitt's repressive domestic policy.[66] He refused to see England as being only engaged in a war of national defence: England was also repressing civil liberties, crushing an Irish rebellion with ferocity, afflicted with soaring bread prices, political corruption and fear of change. Though deeply influenced by the French Revolution, Flower can best be seen as part of the English Dissenting tradition - revering men like Priestley, Price and Wyvill whom he praised for their independent principles and sincere attachment to the constitution, believing as he did that 'the true spirit of liberty is a spirit of order . . . a strict observance of the laws and a peaceable conduct.'[67] E. P. Thompson rightly refers to the *Cambridge Intelligencer* as 'the last national organ of intellectual Jacobinism.'[68] Indeed during this period Flower was the only provincial editor consistently to denounce the war with France and advocate peace, civil and religious liberty and reform of the representation. He was always keen to extend to others the ample liberty which he claimed for himself. Throughout the 1790s government repression was, however, extremely effective and the few radicals that escaped prosecution fled or disengaged from political activism. Many simply gave up. In Flower's case it was disenchantment not default. Like Thelwall he could claim that he never did desert the public - they deserted him.[69]

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60. *Ibid* 20 April, 4 May 1799. See also B. Flower, *Proceedings of the House of Lords* (Cambridge, 1800).
61. *Camb. Int.* 26 Oct. 1799.
62. *The Monthly Repository,* Vol. v, (1810), pp. 203-206.
63. Flower, *Statement of the Facts,* p. xvii.
64. *Place Papers,* BM., Add. MS., 27818 Fos. 64, 71, 96, 208, 244.
65. F. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1944), pp. 190-98; S. Flower-Adams, *Vivia Perpetua* (London, 1893), pp. v-xii; Stephenson, *The Author of Nearer, My God, to Thee,* pp. 7-12.
66. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class,* pp. 197, 798.
67. Camb. Int. 9 Aug. 1794.
68. See C. C. O'Brien and W. D. Vanech (eds.), *Power and Consciousness* (London, 1969), p. 166.
69. *Ibid* p. 158.

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CONTENTS

	page
Officers and Council of the Society, 1977 - 1978	
The Society's Room and The Proceedings	viii
Field Officer's Report	ix
The Field Walking Group of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society First Report	xi
A Roman Lead Tank from Burwell, Cambridgeshire CHRISTOPHER J. GUY	1
The Roman Farm Settlement at Godmanchester, II W. H. C. FREND	5
A Fragment of Pre-Conquest Sculpture from Balsham, Cambridgeshire DOMINIC TWEDDLE	17
Elm - A Field Survey DAVID HALL *and* D. R. WILSON	21
An Investigation of Royston Cave SYLVIA P. BEAMON *and* LISA G. DONEL	47
Cambridgeshire Earthwork Surveys, III A. E. BROWN *and* C. C. TAYLOR	59
Benjamin Flower and the Politics of Dissent M. J. MURPHY	77
Coaching Routes of the Cambridge Region, 1820 - 1850 DAVID H. KENNETT	89
The Cambridge Antiquarian Society J. G. POLLARD	105
Book Reviews	117
Note on Four Anglo-Saxon Pots in Luton Museum T. BRISCOE	121
Index	