

THE SPRING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION AT HASTINGS, 1640

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The themes of the Spring elections of 1640, fought in an atmosphere of turbulence and tension caused by the Scottish revolt and marked by the court versus country struggle, were sharply etched in the Hastings election contest. Like many other boroughs and shires, Hastings rebelled against court pressure. The Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports had traditionally enjoyed some influence in the choice of the port's members and, at his request, courtiers, non-resident in Hastings, had often been chosen as burgesses for the port. This traditional pattern was severely challenged in the Spring contest, challenged by the freemen of Hastings. Their action was part of a more national phenomenon. As in other boroughs, they demanded a greater voice in the election, urged the selection of a local candidate and conducted a vigorous campaign in their candidate's behalf.

The principal contestants reflected the major theme of the Spring contests, the struggle between court and country groups. Robert Read, the Lord Warden's nominee, was non-resident, a relative and employee of Sir Francis Windebank, a principal Secretary of State and member of the Privy Council. Read's ties to the court were obvious. Thomas Eversfield, of Grove in Hollington, Sussex, was his opponent. Eversfield was no stranger to Hastings; he owned property there and was, therefore, a local man in the eyes of his supporters. More important, Eversfield seemed to be a potential opponent of the court. His father certainly had been; he had fought the forced loan of 1621 and even faced the fearsome Star Chamber after a dispute with the local vicar. Thomas Eversfield was thought to have similar views. These two candidates, in themselves, illustrated the clash between the court and country opposition.

Within a few days of the decision, taken early in December, 1639, to summon Parliament, the court began its attempts to secure parliamentary seats for its nominees.¹ Both the Lord Warden, Theophilus Howard, Earl of Suffolk, and the Earl of Dorset supported Read's candidacy at Hastings. Suffolk also nominated John Ashburnham as well. Dorset's secretary, John White, was very

¹ W. Scott and J. Bliss, eds., *The Works of Archbishop William Laud* (7 vols., Oxford, 1847-1860), iii, 233, 282-283; Bellievre to de Chavigny, 22 Dec., 1639, P.R.O., French Trans., 3/71; Wentworth to Radcliffe, T. D. Whitaker, *The Life and Original Correspondence of Sir George Radcliffe* (London, 1810), 187; Windebank to Hopton, 13 Dec. 1639, R. Scrope and T. Monkhouse, eds., *Clarendon State Papers* (3 vols., Oxford, 1767-1786), ii, 81-82; King to the Lords of the Council, 6 Dec., 1639, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/435: 37; Vane to Rose, 21 Feb., 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/446: 3; Nicholas to Pennington, 12 Dec., 1639, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/435: 64.

active indeed, too active, in Read's behalf during the campaign.¹ Read was also nominated at several other boroughs, a mark of the court's zeal in the Spring elections.²

It was in Hastings, however, that Read's election would be won and the battle fought. The opposition group was already working vigorously amongst the freemen to deny Read the victory. Their candidate was Eversfield and the campaign in his behalf was hectic; in fact, it must have appalled the Mayor of Hastings, Thomas Barlow. 'Some of Eversfield's party,' he wrote, 'went about privately from house to house to get things to a writing . . . for his election.' Eversfield's men were preparing a petition, urging that he be admitted to the borough so he could stand for Parliament. The petitioners carried their document all over Hastings, hoping to get the signature of every freeman. Some of Eversfield's followers were his tenants, while others were his neighbours; they all laboured 'for him strongly in the Taverns . . . at Alehouses, and at private assemblies.' Eversfield was also engaged, sending letters to the freemen but, the Mayor complained, ignoring the Mayor and Corporation. These letters urged the freemen to continue their opposition to the port corporation although it promptly denied Eversfield's admission to the borough, thereby hoping to halt his campaign before any votes were cast. By this act, as well, the corporation hoped to secure Read's election.³

To make the campaign all the more bitter and decisive, a local issue was involved which brought one Robert Underwood to the fore. He became one of Eversfield's strongest and most able supporters. Underwood was a London fishmonger and, from all the mayor's reports, a most insolent one. He first came to the attention of the civic dignitaries by initiating a suit against the town corporation for closing an alehouse, which, the Mayor asserted, was operated by 'an ill conditioned fellow and his wife [who were]

¹ Ashburnham to Nicholas, 31 March, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/449: 44, 'Declaration of the Freemen of the Port and Town of Hastings in Sussex,' 20 March, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/448: 45; 'Deposition of William Parker and John Jackson,' 1 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 7.

² Pescod to Lord Charles Lambert, 6 Jan., 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/441: 48. Read was possibly a potential candidate at Southampton sometime before 6 January, 1640, but probably was refused there since other candidates, put forward by the Earl of Portland and the Duke of Lennox, had the field to themselves. Read was also recommended to Boroughbridge, Yorks., by the Earl of Strafford while the Earl of Suffolk, Sir John Manwood, lieutenant of Dover Castle, and Sir Francis Windebank all wrote to the Port of Rye in his behalf as well. The Earl of Strafford to the boroughmaster and boroughmen of Boroughbridge, co. York, 17 Jan., 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/442: 31; The Earl of Suffolk to the Mayor, Jurats and Commonalty of Rye, 8 Feb., 1640, Sir John Manwood to the Mayor of Rye, 26 Feb., 1640, Sir Francis Windebank to the Mayor of Rye, 8 March, 1640, Historical Manuscripts Commission, *MSS. of the Rye and Hereford Corporations, et. al.*, 209, 210.

³ Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 7 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 39, enclosure I.

put down divers times for disorder and abuses.' Underwood, the Mayor fervently believed, should have stayed with his fish buying, but instead he constantly intermeddled with affairs that were no concern of his. Earlier, Underwood had also vexed the local fishermen. They had complained about his activities, arguing that Underwood required the approval of the town officers before he could purchase fish. The Mayor's interview with Underwood was a stormy one; Underwood, the Mayor claimed, was insolent and scornful, putting his hat on and ignoring the Mayor's questions. Since that instance, Underwood 'has born an inveterate malice against us, labouring in all companies to entrap us and disgrace us . . . writes threats, combines, conspires all he possibly can, [and] screws himself into the affections of the discontented.' The Mayor's suspicions were further aroused since Underwood, formerly a needy man unable to pay his bills, was now suddenly affluent; he had money enough even to maintain a suit against the corporation.¹

The election contest was a wonderful opportunity to cause further trouble for the corporation and Underwood seized it with both hands. He rushed about the town and countryside 'saying that the town of Hastings is basely governed by a company of base corrupt fellows, a company of knaves and that they do not do justice.' Worse than that, claimed the flustered Mayor, he was never quiet, 'but runs from house to house, from man to man amongst the freemen and others, makes parties, divisions, gets them in companies' and had, the Mayor incredulously reported, secured a large following against the freemen 'by tipling, drinking and consulting their intended combination.' Eversfield, too, was deeply involved, often visiting Hastings to see Underwood and his faction. Underwood was Eversfield's "main agent" amongst the freemen. From the harassed Mayor's point of view, Underwood was nearly the devil incarnate; for Eversfield, Underwood was a superb agent and organiser.²

On 17 March, the Mayor informed Read and Sir John Baker that they had been elected. He urged them both to take the freeman's oath for the borough as soon as possible.³ Read must have thought he had been elected without incident but, within three days, the storm broke over his victory at Hastings.

Read, so the freemen charged, had employed bribery to win the election. Their declaration, prepared and signed on 20 March,

¹ Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 7 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 39, enclosure I; 'Evidence Against Underwood,' 1 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 8; Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 9 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 52.

² 'Evidence Against Underwood,' 1 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 8, Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 7 and 9 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 39, enclosure I and 16/450: 52.

³ Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Robert Read, 17 March, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/448: 19.

asserted that after the writ was received and various letters of recommendation read, 'one Mr. White [Dorset's secretary] in the behalf of one Mr. Robert Read did make this proffer: that if the Mayor, Jurats and freemen would be pleased to make choice for him for one of the burgesses, he would . . . give to the poor of the said town of Hastings 20 pounds down, and 10 pounds a year during his life and 2 barrels of powder yearly for the exercise of youth.' Several of Read's supporters approved of White's declaration, but the Mayor, sensing opposition amongst the freemen, adjourned the meeting to a later date. In the interval, the freemen claimed, Read and his friends 'procured divers letters of recommendation from certain noblemen.' With the new letters in hand, the now more confident Mayor scheduled another assembly for 17 March. When the freemen arrived at the hall, the Mayor read the new letters recommending Read. After allowing a brief time for the consideration of the missives, the Mayor, speaking for the corporation, asked the freemen if the letters were acceptable. Although the freemen approved of the letters "as letters of recommendation," they remained adamantly opposed to Read. An impasse had been reached. The frustrated members of the corporation replied by threatening 'that as many [freemen] as would not give consent should answer it at Dover Castle'; the freemen were being menaced with the wrath of the Lord Warden. With this, all hopes of compromise vanished and many of the embittered freemen now strode out of the hall, gathering at the bottom of the stairs. The Mayor, determined to proceed, asked the few remaining if they approved of the letters. 'Some few of them answered Aye' and the Mayor promptly declared Read elected, without, the freemen alleged, ever nominating him.¹ The Mayor's account of the incident agreed on one point: he admitted that a number of freemen, he claimed fifteen, left the hall 'in a rude and contemptuous manner' and refused to return, despite his earnest entreaties to do so. He also admitted that those that left were threatened with a fine, but said nothing about the alleged threats against the freemen at the hands of the Lord Warden. He claimed a proper election had taken place wherein 'all except 4 declared themselves unanimously for Sir John Baker and Mr. Read.'²

Read's opponents had a good case. The charge of bribery was valid. John Ashburnham, a court candidate at Hastings who failed to exert himself in the contest since he was going north with the King's army, wrote Edward Nicholas about the Hastings affair. He had tried to reassure some of those who were questioning Read's election. Ashburnham was confident Read would deny the bribery

¹ 'Declaration of the Freemen of the Port and Town of Hastings, in Sussex,' 20 March, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/448: 45.

² 'Certificate from the Mayor and Jurats of Hastings in the manner of the election of the burgesses for this borough,' 7 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 39, enclosure II.

charge, 'which, let me tell him, will be no ill advice for him.' Ashburnham then made a most revealing comment: 'were he [Read] not my friend, I should question his election myself and Mr. White, his impertinences and over busying himself in that place.'¹ Even the Mayor of Hastings, although denying the bribery charge, had to admit 'that a friend both to us and the said Mr. Read, upon occasion given him here in town, made some propositions to us for the general good of the town but we elected not the said Mr. Read in respect of them.'² Whether the Mayor's hair-splitting was right or not, the main point was clear. One of Read's active supporters, White, had offered a bribe to secure the election. White was a very active election agent for the Earl of Dorset in the spring campaign; he may well have decided to stop at nothing so that Read might triumph. The freemen had a substantial foundation for their charges and, as the Mayor, the corporation and Read would soon discover, this was just the beginning of their difficulties in Hastings.

Eversfield, Underwood, and the freemen continued their active campaign to both overturn the election and embarrass the port corporation as well. Underwood, no doubt, was spreading the charge of bribery far and wide. Not content with this, he and Eversfield were soon demanding that the Mayor account for all the ship money collected in the port. The freemen, too, continued to pursue their 'factious' ways. Sir John Baker, attending the Court Hall to take his oath as a freeman, was joined by some twenty freemen, who, before the Mayor's shocked eyes, 'publicly told Sir John that he was not elected and that there was no election made of the barons to the parliament.' The freemen also attacked the town clerk 'with much scornful and despitiful affronts and threats,' blaming him for Read's election, even Read's candidacy! They waxed eloquent on this occasion, claiming that 'children unborn' would curse the town clerk for his actions. The clerk, terrified by it all, refused to leave his house, not even for the King's business.³

Although the distraught Mayor begged Read to inform the Lord Warden of all his difficulties so that Eversfield and his supporters could be stopped, Eversfield and his group appeared to be unstoppable.⁴ Supposedly Eversfield had '500 pounds to spend upon the town' to keep the opposition alive and, to the dismay of Mayor Barlow, he also involved himself in the alehouse difficulty previously

¹ Ashburnham to Nicholas, 31 March, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/449: 44.

² 'Certificate from the Mayor and Jurats of Hastings of the manner of the election of the burgesses for this borough,' 7 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 39, enclosure II.

³ 'Deposition of William Parker and John Jackson,' 1 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 7; Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 1, 7, and 9 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 6, 16/450: 39, enclosure I and 16/450: 52, enclosure I.

⁴ Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 1 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 6.

raised by Underwood. He spread the news of the 'election all about the country' but still had time for frequent visits to Hastings where he encouraged his followers and urged them to prepare and sign a petition against the election. He was sure Parliament would overturn Read's victory.¹ The attempt was made. The freemen of Hastings petitioned the House of Commons on 14 April, asking that the election be investigated since, they alleged, there was no free election as required by the laws of the realm. Nothing, apparently, came of the petition since it is nowhere mentioned in the journals of the house.²

Many important aspects of the Spring election contests were illustrated in the Hastings election. As in other boroughs and shires, the court candidate ran into heavy weather in the election. Read was fortunate to win; many of his fellow court nominees were not so successful. As William Poley wrote, 'there is labouring on all hands for places' and Hastings was no exception. Prior to 1640, the Lord Warden could and did recommend candidates to Hastings without much fear of trouble or failure. The Spring election marked a significant change which was a reflection of the troubled times. Read was aware of the changed election atmosphere, noting in a letter the heavy traffic for burgess-ships and sadly commenting that 'we who were made sure at first of burgess-ships are as likely to miss them as others, men being not able to perform what they promise.'³ In Read's case, the Mayor carried out his promise to the Lord Warden at considerable cost. Had it not been for his chicanery at the Court Hall, Eversfield might well have won. In any case, a free election would have been very close.

Hastings was also a remarkable example of an opposition or "country" group campaign. Thanks to the skilful agitation and organisational abilities of Underwood and Eversfield's constant encouragements to the freemen, Hastings found itself partaking of and witnessing a very aggressive and well-led effort to defeat the court candidate. The campaign, fought on a door to door, man to man and alehouse to alehouse basis, was, no doubt, a novel experience for the Mayor, corporation and citizens of Hastings. It was not novel or unique for the Spring elections. In other boroughs and shires, such as Sandwich, Essex or Gloucestershire, campaigns of a similar nature were conducted. It is probably too much to say that the country faction conducted a nationally organized campaign in the spring of 1640; their resources and experience were perhaps not adequate for such a task. But it was an interesting

¹ Mayor and Jurats of Hastings to Read, 7 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 39, enclosure I.

² 'The Humble Petition of the Greater Part of the Freemen of the Ancient Town and Port of Hastings in the County of Sussex,' 14 April, 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/450: 83.

³ Poley to D'Ewes, no date, British Museum, Harleian MS. 383, f. 144; Read to [Windebank], 20 Feb., 1640, P.R.O., St. P. Domestic, 16/445: 80.

feature of the Hastings election and others that court candidates often found themselves fighting for their parliamentary lives against opposition candidates supported by a well-disciplined and devoted group.

National issues and attitudes played a role in the election struggle at Hastings. Eversfield was attractive as a candidate, not because of any utterances on national questions, but because his father had been an active Puritan and opponent of the court.¹ Mention was also made of a grievance that affected the whole country. Eversfield and Underwood both raised the issue of ship money and demanded an accounting from the Mayor. Another theme, clearly shown in Hastings, was the preference for local candidates in opposition to non-resident courtiers. Too, the freemen of Hastings, like many of their brethren in other boroughs, demanded a greater voice in the port election. They had their own candidate and, despite every effort of the corporation, waged a bitter battle in his behalf.

The Hastings contest was unique in one respect: the bribery charge set it apart from other spring elections. It perhaps indicated nothing more than the lack of skill displayed by White; perhaps, too, it indicated the desperate urgency felt by the court to ensure the placing of its candidates. White proved himself a most inept election agent, at least in Hastings. Ashburnham criticized him severely for his blunder and admitted that were Read not his friend, he would believe the bribery charge. The Mayor also felt obliged to mention, in a roundabout way, that an offer was made to the town by one of Read's supporters. Read won his election through bribery and the Mayor's determination to follow the Lord Warden's recommendation.

The election of March, 1640, was one of the most stirring Hastings ever witnessed. But it was more important than that since it marked the development of an organized and determined opposition group, a group which would, as Read learned to his sorrow in the elections to the Long Parliament in the fall of 1640, carry Eversfield to victory. Thus, the Hastings contest was more than a locally nerve-wracking battle between local and court interests; it was part of a national story: the bitterly fought spring elections of 1640.

¹ M. F. Keeler, *The Long Parliament, 1640-1641* (American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1954), 170.