

THE NEUTERING OF THE FELLOWSHIP AND THE EMERGENCE OF A TORY PARTY IN LEWES (1663–1688)

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The disappearance of the Fellowship from the formal record of town government in Lewes, during and after the 1670s, has been noted in passing by previous local historians. This article seeks to set that disappearance in the wider context of the sectarian and political divisions occurring within the county town at the time. In particular the consolidation of a new civic elite, quite distinct in its composition from that of the redundant Fellowship, is seen as marking the emergence of a Tory party in the Borough.

The Fellowship of 'The Twelve' in Lewes retained its essential continuity during the long years of civil war and revolution between 1642 and 1660. Although not a magistracy, its members constituted a civic elite, filled vacancies by co-option, and chose each other annually to be High Constables. These two officers had a special responsibility for law and order throughout the borough, although not in Southover and the Cliffe. To this end they supervised two Headboroughs, controlled a lock-up in the west gate, and occasionally husbanded a small stock of fire-arms. They also served to integrate the borough with a wider political world, providing a point of reference for central government and acting as spokesmen for neighbouring Constables at Quarter Sessions. They were chosen each October when the Stewards and Court Leet assembled. The Leet met mainly to enforce by-laws against various nuisances; but the Fellowship remained distinct from it, autonomous and self-perpetuating, protected by prescriptive custom.¹

But this stately cycle of election and co-option ended abruptly in 1663. Whit Monday of that year witnessed the last recorded co-options, while in October, and again in 1664, the Constables were chosen by the Justices of the Peace assembled at Lewes for their Michaelmas Sessions. Moreover neither Constable so chosen in 1663 was a member of the Fellowship, and in 1664 only one was.² Noting this last development, the local historian Paul Dunvan judged that 'From this period we may date the rapid decline of that Society'—and clearly so, since Constables were no longer being chosen either by or from within the Fellowship. It had in effect been politically neutered. Dunvan noticed other evidence of discontinuity: for the civic years 1663/4–1666/7 'there is nothing more given in the Town-book, than barely the names of the Constables and Headboroughs'.³ Upheaval often leaves the barest official record for posterity.

Dunvan also advances a reason for such a serious break with precedent. 'This may, with some probability, be imputed to the contemporary persecution of many respectable Presbyterians and other Non-conformists in the town and its vicinity.'⁴ This 'persecution' was itself the result of 'the Clarendon Code'. Although Charles II was restored in May 1660, a settlement in Church and State was finally shaped after the election, a year later, of an aggressively Anglican and 'Cavalier' House of Commons, which chose to equate Nonconformity with political sedition. A revised prayer book was authorised in April 1662, and then an Act of Uniformity was passed which required clergy in the re-established Church of England to accept it, together with episcopal ordination and an oath

promising non-resistance to royal authority. As a result some two thousand ministers—Presbyterian, Independent and Baptist—were deprived of their livings in August 1662 or soon after. Laws were also revived which threatened with fines and imprisonment any one who boycotted worship in his parish church according to the new rites. Tens of thousands of the laity, therefore, became potential Nonconformists. The same Anglican yardstick was used to purge the towns of political undesirables; commissioners were to rid corporations by March 1664 of all office holders who refused the non-resistance oath or the Anglican sacrament. The prospect of political exclusion and religious persecution caused dismay, anger and a sense of betrayal among 'Dissenters', and the summer of 1663 buzzed with rumours of plots and insurgence. These prompted fresh legislation: the Conventicle Act (1664) outlawed all assemblies of five or more adults 'under colour of religion', and the Five Mile Act (1665) forbade Nonconformist ministers and teachers to live near a corporate town or any parish where they had served before August 1662.⁵

Nonconformists in Lewes quickly felt the force of these new laws. Under the Commonwealth the town had emerged as a hive of sectarian activity. Quite apart from a militant group of Quakers, against whom every hand was turned, two powerful congregations were flourishing there by 1660. Edward Newton ministered to the Presbyterians and the Fifth Monarchist Walter Postlethwaite to the Independents. Both were duly deprived of their livings in August 1662.⁶ Nearly a year later forty-nine men from the parishes of St. Anne's and St. Michael's were indicted at the July Quarter Sessions for not attending their parish church. Forty of these were convicted the following October and fined four shillings each. Respectable as well as numerous, they included five woollen drapers, four tailors, two bakers, two hosiers, two apothecaries, two haberdashers, two linen drapers, two grocers, a maltster, cordwainer, barber, joiner, hatter, shearman, butcher, clockmaker, blacksmith, husbandman, physician and 'gent', as well as five clerks and a writing master.⁷ Four of the clerks proved to be deprived ministers—Edward Beecher from Kingston, John Earl from Tarring Neville, Henry Godman from Rodmell and Postlethwaite from St. Michael's. Edmund Calamy later noted that perhaps a dozen or more ejected clergy took up residence in Lewes, a town 'blessed with more than an equal share of these good ministers'.⁸ Also in October 1663 a further nine men were presented for non-attendance from St. John's parish, which still left Dissenters in All Saints, Southover and the Cliffe unaccounted for.⁹

Local Nonconformists were not unduly abashed by these moves, however—at least not according to the informer John Hetherington. Writing from Lewes on 11 October, the last day of the Michaelmas Sessions, he claimed that conventicles were still frequented 'as much as in Oliver's time'. 'Fellows preach here . . . no way qualified and obstinate opposers of His Majesty's government'. The recent convictions for non-attendance had uncovered only the tip of the Dissenting iceberg: five times as many more might be 'put in' at the next Sessions in January. Such hesitant caution on the part of 'our public ministers' he attributed to 'fear of a turn'. Lewes, it seems, like everywhere else, was alive with rumours of rebellion. There had been talk 'of an intention of a plot for this town to have risen . . . but nothing was made out'. He ended with a plea that the Deputy Lieutenants and Justices of the Peace be further encouraged to assist 'the honest party' in the town, especially since no militia forces were available in the area.¹⁰ His letter was addressed to Joseph Williamson at the office of Sir Henry Bennet, a principal Secretary of State (and later Earl of Arlington), who maintained an intelligence network in the provinces, of which Hetherington was probably a part. But although the government was monitoring the situation at Lewes, the attitude to Dissent of such senior ministers as Bennet was by no means clear-cut. Many never fully subscribed to a political strategy which rendered the Crown the prisoner of a Church and

Cavalier party, however loyalist. These doubts were shared by Charles II himself, as his brief attempt at toleration in 1672–3 was to show soon enough.

Clearly, however, the 'honest' party in Lewes harboured no such scruples, nor did their fellow loyalists among the Justices of the Peace, since the same week which saw forty convictions for non-attendance also witnessed the first neutering of the Fellowship—the selection at the October Sessions of two Constables neither of whom were members of that 'Society'. As Dunvan surmised, this manoeuvre too was also directed against the Nonconformists. Being a prescriptive body, the Fellowship was not dependent on a royal charter for its legitimacy, and was not subject presumably to the commissioners appointed under the recent Corporation Act, who were busy purging Dissenters elsewhere in the county. Much depended, therefore, on whether an 'honest' majority could be cobbled together within the Fellowship that October; if not, then the recalcitrant body would need to be by-passed, however great the damage to civic autonomy and tradition.

But it must have been blindingly obvious to the loyalist party's leaders that no such majority was feasible, since eighteen of the Fellowship's twenty-three members were known to be confirmed Nonconformists. One, the grocer John Savage, had been singled out in January to swear the new oath of allegiance at Quarter Sessions;¹² sixteen more were convicted for non-attendance at church that October, or were soon to be, when the authorities finally moved against Dissenters in All Saints parish;¹³ and an eighteenth, the grocer Richard Button, although removing to Mayfield, still journeyed back as late as 1673 to worship with the town's Independents.¹⁴ The Anglicanism of two others, Ellis Midmore and the draper Stephen Snatt, may well have been lukewarm; certainly Snatt's wife and daughters remained stalwart Dissenters.¹⁵ All but one of these twenty were already in office at the Restoration, and as such they had co-operated closely during the 1650s with a ring of radical local gentry, such as Henry Shelley, William Spence, Anthony Stapley, Herbert Hay and Herbert Morley.¹⁶ Faced by such an adamant Nonconformist majority, therefore, the 'honest' party had no option but to by-pass the Fellowship, appeal to Quarter Sessions, acquiesce in a period of 'direct rule', and so destroy all civic continuity. But politically the prize must have seemed well worth it. The town was a headquarters of county government and contained a Borough sending two members to Parliament. Its merchants, moreover, controlled a major cross-Channel route through Newhaven; the notorious Republican Edmund Ludlow had slipped abroad along it, and the same vessel 'carried over Mr. Richard Cromwell some weeks before'.¹⁷

Except for an order declaring William Swan to be Headborough in place of Peter Barton,¹⁸ no direct reference to this annihilation of the Borough's prescriptive constitution appears among the records of Quarter Sessions. The two years of direct rule are specified only in the Town Book. But it clearly provoked bitter opposition from the by-passed; the tanner Ralph Pope, a Constable elected in 1662, was still refusing in January 1664 'to deliver over the weights and measures and other things in his custody of public use to the present Constables',¹⁹ and as late as July 1667 it took an order from the County Commissioners for Charitable Uses before Pope, Stephen Snatt (Constable 1657–8) and the draper Edward Holmwood (1658–9) would hand over bonds and money belonging to the Borough.²⁰ Direct rule by Quarter Sessions ended, however, in October 1665 when new Constables and Headboroughs were chosen 'at the Law Day holden for the Town and Borough of Lewes'. The selection of civic officers was thereby returned to a traditional context, the meeting of the Court Leet, and this proved to be more or less permanent, although the Justices again intervened in 1668 and 1678.²¹ But the Fellowship was never restored in any shape or form. Although a full record of civic affairs resumes in October 1666, no mention of it occurs in the Town Book until 1698, when an unsuccessful resurrection was attempted by two surviving members.²² Moreover, only two of its twenty-three members in October 1663 ever served as Constables

thereafter. Neither were Dissenters, and both had been co-opted after the Restoration, perhaps as a sop to the 'honest' party.

The Town Book is silent on the crucial question of how civic officers were chosen 'at the Law Day'. However it does divulge that the accounts of the retiring Constables were 'given up' to the new Constables and to 'the rest of the Jury'.²³ Since the checking of such accounts had previously been a function of the Fellowship, it may follow that the same Court Leet Jury played a part henceforth in selecting the civic officers. But the only fragment of direct evidence contradicts this. During a brief return to direct rule in 1668–9 the Quarter Sessions Order Book at last waxes explicit on the matter.

'Complaint being made to this Court by the present Constables of Lewes that they have served in their office of Constables above one year now last past, and that no others are likely to be chosen by the Lords of the Leet of the said Borough or their Steward, it is therefore ordered by this Court that Henry Hopkins and Ferdinando Bryan, the now present Constables, be discharged, and George Tye and Thomas Russell are by this Court nominated and appointed Constables in the room and steads of Henry Hopkins and Ferdinando Bryan until the Lords of the Leet shall duly elect and make choice of others . . .'.²⁴

This may not, of course, be a full or accurate description of the selective process operative since 1665; but it may be, in which case the Borough had regressed to a crude form of direct seigniorial government. Such a transfer of power would certainly have been the surest means of permanently excluding Dissenters from taking office as Constable, and excluded they largely were until 1688. All three Lords of the Leet in 1665 headed intensely loyalist families. Richard Sackville, Earl of Dorset, and a prominent courtier, was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Sussex in 1670, together with his son Charles, who succeeded him in 1677.²⁵ George Neville, Baron Bergavenny, and Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, were both Catholics. Bergavenny died in 1666, but his infant heir grew up in the faith; and although Norfolk was insane, his brother acted for him until inheriting the title as a Catholic, also in 1677.²⁶

But whatever the exact process by which Constables normally emerged after 1665, the exclusion of practising Dissenters from that office was almost total. Only four out of thirty-four Constables between 1663–4 and 1688–9 can be identified among over 150 Nonconformist householders resident in the town at that time. The barber John Knapp died in office in 1674, and his place was taken by his trustee and fellow Presbyterian, the grocer Walter Brett junior, who served again in 1684–5.²⁷ Dunvan suggests he was chosen against his will.²⁸ Possibly it was hoped that he and Knapp would refuse to proceed against other Dissenters, thereby exposing themselves to the penalties of the law. Certainly Brett was a marked man; in 1684 and 1685 a loyalist Grand Jury denounced him as 'dangerous and ill affected to the present government'.²⁹ The other two, however, seem to have become committed Churchmen. The butcher Thomas Tourle (1676–7 and 1685–6) attended a Presbyterian conventicle in 1670, but he chose four loyalist godparents for his daughter in 1689;³⁰ while the haberdasher Joshua Curle (1670–1), although fined for non-attendance in 1663, soon married into an intensely Anglican family and conformed heavily thereafter.³¹

This virtual monopolising of high office in the town by Churchmen reflects how sturdily the equation of Anglican and loyalist principles was maintained at the provincial roots of English politics. During the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81) loyalists might be renamed 'Tories' and their opponents 'Whigs', but the same gut reaction prevailed; indeed if anything, it was strengthened among Tories as Monmouth's Rebellion followed the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis.³² In 1684 carefully picked Grand Juries declaimed at Quarter Sessions the nexus between Dissent and sedition. 'Long and woeful experience' had shown that 'an introduction to Rebellion took its rise

from . . . pretences to . . . tender consciences', which were touted by 'persons of antimonarchical principles'.³³ Denunciation grew even more strident in July 1685. 'The late horrid invasion and rebellion of James Scott, late Duke of Monmouth, and all his traitorous and bloody associates' had been 'abetted and assisted by the whole body of the malcontent, dissenting and fanatical party, or those pretending to tender consciences'.³⁴ Only from 1686, when James II's pro-Papist purposes became blatant, were Tories slowly forced to choose between their king and their creed, a dilemma which broke the political mould shaped in 1661–3.³⁵

Naturally enough, many of the twenty-eight Anglican Constables between 1663–4 and 1685–6 sprang from, or married into, families with marked Church or Cavalier links. This was clearly so in the case of the first two, Thomas James and John Holney. Both of them also needed to be middle-weights socially, since they embodied such a violent breach with tradition. James was a self-styled 'gent', who bequeathed messuages and land in the Cliffe in 1667, together with a burnt-out property in London called 'the Cock'. By 1663 he had married a daughter of Samuel Towers, a Cliffe merchant whose father was formerly a prebendary of St. Paul's.³⁶ Samuel was also a kinsman of John Towers, the zealously Laudian Bishop of Peterborough, impeached in 1641. John's own son, the polemicist William, first used the word 'deist' in its modern sense, and maintained the family's monarchist record by publishing in 1660 a treatise on the *Obedience Perpetually Due to Kings*.³⁷

Also by 1663 another daughter of Samuel Towers was married to the surgeon Henry Hopkins. He became Constable in 1667–8 and 1679–80, and must have developed quite a wide professional reputation, since he was summoned in 1687 to bleed the daughter of an influential fellow Tory, Sir John Ashburnham.³⁸ Yet another son-in-law of Towers was Thomas Stephenson, the rector of St. John's, who died in 1665,³⁹ and his daughters in their turn married two prominent local incumbents, William Snatt and Thomas Whalley. Before his departure to become vicar of Cuckfield in 1682, Snatt spearheaded the prosecution of local Quakers, and he was accordingly denounced in their 'Book of Sufferings' as a drunkard and lover of debauched company, who 'did keep in his house a Crucifix and other Popish Relics'.⁴⁰ He had, though, the courage of his High Church convictions, being deprived at Cuckfield as a Non-Juror. He also later underwent a brief imprisonment after absolving Sir John Friend on the scaffold at Tyburn for complicity in the Assassination Plot of 1696.⁴¹ His brother-in-law, Whalley, led a quieter life, first as headmaster of the Grammar School in the 1680s, and then as rector of the Cliffe.⁴²

James's fellow Constable in 1663–4 was John Holney, an apothecary and 'student in physic', who died in 1707 leaving lands in Shermanbury and West Grinstead.⁴³ Besides being Constable again in 1669–70, he also served on the rabidly Tory Grand Juries which assembled in 1684 and 1685.⁴⁴ He too could claim strong clerical links. His wife was the daughter of a former rector of Shermanbury and the niece of Thomas Gratwick, patron of the living there, who married Holney's widowed mother;⁴⁵ and his father was almost certainly the same John Holney who was ejected from a Fellowship at Pembroke College Cambridge in 1644.⁴⁶

Holney's family connections were with the western Weald, and his residence in Lewes can only have been brief by 1663. James and Hopkins, too, seem to have transferred from the Cliffe to the Borough at much the same time. Yet another new arrival was Edmund Middleton, who issued a trade token as a haberdasher in 1666.⁴⁷ Very much a Tory activist, he became Constable in 1665–6, 1672–3 and 1678–9 and was a fellow Juror with Holney in 1684–5. His links, too, were Wealden. Both his signature and his coat of arms confirm him as the same Edmund Middleton, 'citizen and haberdasher of London', who witnessed a marriage settlement in 1659, whereby lands were remaindered in turn to three brothers, Francis, Arthur and Thomas Middleton, and then to

Edmund himself.⁴⁸ He must, therefore, have been a kinsman of their uncle, Thomas Middleton, who played a 'neutralist and crypto-royalist' role as MP for Horsham between 1640 and 1648.⁴⁹ As such, he too could claim to be a 'gent' with the right loyalist connections.

The convergence of these loyalist activists on the Borough suggests that the 'honest' party needed external reinforcement, if the power vacuum created by the neutering of the Fellowship was to be adequately filled. Not all loyalist Constables, however, could be accused of political carpet-bagging. The Lewes born saddler, Henry Rose, served as Constable in 1666–7 and 1674–5, and the registrar of All Saints described him deferentially at his death as 'a very honest, just, and good man'.⁵⁰ His son, another Henry, held office in 1677–8 and 1686–7, and his nephew William in 1684–5. The explicit Cavalier link is provided, however, by his brother Samuel, who presumably fought for his king in the Civil Wars, since he was awarded £8 by the County Treasurers for Maimed Soldiers in 1662, at a time when pensions to Parliamentary veterans were being suspended.⁵² But Samuel's wounds were not sufficiently impairing to inhibit his activity as an informer. In 1667 he caused a sail and anchor to be impounded at Brighton, on suspicion of their being stolen from Portsmouth dockyard. 'There has been much of this trade in the town', he piously assured the Navy Commissioners. Someone should be deputed to control it, and he would be 'diligent' if thought fitting.⁵³ To coax some such crumb of state patronage must have been many a loyalist's dream.

Another indigenous Tory network stemmed from Thomas Russell, rector of St. John's between 1632 and 1661. Although he clung to the living, he was briefly confined as a delinquent in 1642,⁵⁴ and his widening family circle remained staunchly Anglican. His eldest son, the grocer Thomas Russell, became Constable in 1668–9, and another was parson at Hollington; one daughter married the incumbent at Ripe, another the haberdasher Joshua Curle, who served as Constable in 1670–1,⁵⁵ and a third the Deputy-Registrar of the Ecclesiastical Court in Lewes, James Clarke.⁵⁶ That Court played a key role in the legal harassment of local Dissenters, and according to local Quakers Clarke was 'a fat man who sweated much when abusing Friends'. After his death in 1682 at the early age of thirty-six, the same source noted that he expired 'senseless . . . being a sot, much addicted to wine and brandy'.⁵⁷ Three years before, his assistant, one Walter Jones, a 'sharer in God's righteous judgement', had also passed on 'distressed in mind'.⁵⁸

The Ecclesiastical Court provided a haven for other Tories as well. Clarke's successor was Thomas Barrett, whose bitter diatribes against Lewes Nonconformists and their Anglican fellow-travellers will be touched on later. He married a daughter of the rentier William Pellatt, Constable in 1681–2.⁵⁹ Pellatt's own wife, however, had dubious antecedents, her father being William Alcock who served successive regimes as Clerk of the Peace between 1640 and 1660.⁶⁰ Another official of the Court was the public notary Samuel Astie, who as proctor also busied himself by pressing charges against Dissenters.⁶¹ Like Clarke and Barrett, he too made a loyalist marriage, to a daughter of the innkeeper Fernando Bryan.⁶² As well as owning the freehold of the Swan in Southover, Bryan occupied the Star in 1675 and afterwards the White Lion.⁶³ All three were commodious establishments and doubtless overflowed with a rising tide of patrons visiting the county town for business and pleasure. Like Middleton he was politically very active, serving as Constable in 1667–8, 1675–6 and 1682–3.

Equally zealous in the Tory cause was Bryan's fellow innkeeper Ralph Richardson, who bequeathed the freehold of the Star in 1688 to his nephew, the vicar of West Dean.⁶⁴ Yet another loyalist with ecclesiastical links, he was Constable in 1664–5, 1670–1 and 1680–1, and a Juror with Middleton and Holney in 1684–5. During the Protectorate he hosted the Bull, which under his auspices seemingly became a haunt of embittered Cavaliers. Pious John Pellet of Arundel was assaulted there one winter evening in 1657 by the brothers Henry and Francis Woodcock. They were

inflamed by his opinion that the Lord had trampled the royalists 'as mire in the street under the feet of the present power', and that any remaining 'implacable' should be deported to work on the sugar plantations in newly conquered Jamaica.⁶⁵

No such marked Church or Cavalier links have been discovered for the other Anglican Constables serving between 1663–4 and 1685–6. But several did share with Bryan and Richardson a close association with the drink trade. George Tye, for instance, who was Constable in 1668–9 and 1676–7, preceded Bryan at the White Lion. As churchwarden of All Saints he tricked the Quaker Ambrose Galloway into parting with two thin cheeses, after that worthy had refused to contribute his rate to the repair of the 'steeplehouse'.⁶⁶ Slightly further down School Hill stood another well patronised hostelry, the Turk's Head, which was kept by John Tooke while he was Constable in 1674–5 and 1678–9.⁶⁷ Another loyalist's sign board was that of William Read, Constable in 1679–80 and 1689–90, which swung outside the appropriately named King's Head on St. Anne's Hill. His trade token carried an image of the king, crowned, and with a sceptre in his hand.⁶⁸ The cook Robert Phipps, Constable in 1672–3, was a licensed alehousekeeper between 1667 and 1685, and the pension allowed by the Justices in 1684 to Robert Phipps of Lewes, 'aged and in decay' (his father presumably) could well have been a reward for political services to the 'honest' party by the son.⁶⁹ The maltster William Swan, Constable in 1671–2, also had a stake in the drink trade.⁷⁰ From it, too, may have come any dowry accompanying the wife of Anthony Holman 'gent', who served in 1666–7; he married Anne, 'daughter to old Henry Townsend who lived and died at the Black Lion' (now the Crown in All Saints).⁷¹

Such a powerful contingent of publicans does suggest, therefore, that the trade formed a local bastion of Toryism. During these years their inns catered for a county elite which was largely Anglican and loyalist, at least in name. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Major Generals, Dissent must have remained bracketed in many minds with Prohibition, and certainly the Quaker emphasis on the 'sottishness' of their (Tory) prosecutors reflected a wider 'Puritan' disdain for drink, and especially for alehouses, which publicans like Tooke also occasionally ran.⁷² All Nonconformists in Lewes seem to have boycotted the trade; none of the hundred and fifty or more Dissenting householders kept an inn or alehouse, although any applying for a licence may possibly have been rejected on political grounds.⁷³

The most active of the remaining ten Constables was the draper John Delves. He served in 1675–6, 1683–4 and 1688–9, although his name was erased from the Grand Jury list in January 1685.⁷⁴ Being born at Newick in 1645, he shared a wealden background with Holney and Middleton; his father farmed at Vuggles there and left him land in Ringmer. By 1688 he was occupying premises on School Hill owned by Middleton.⁷⁵ His fellow draper John Artrige, Constable in 1681–2, may also have migrated from the weald, since his relatives were clustered in Chailey.⁷⁶

The speed with which such new arrivals, as Holney, Middleton and Delves, could claim a leading role in the affairs of the 'honest' party, together with its reliance on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, on the drink trade, on the humble saddling dynasty of Rose, and on rentiers like James, Pellatt and Holman, all suggest that local Tories were under-represented within the town's indigenous retailing elite. But they did receive some reinforcement from three butchers, Richard Grisebrook (1664–5 and 1671–2), William Thurgood (1665–6 and 1673–4) who employed the informer Edward Scripps, and Thomas Tourle (1676–7 and 1685–6), from Grisebrook's son-in-law, the cordwainer Thomas Erridge (1683–4), and from two grocers, Thomas Harrison (1669–70 and 1677–8) and Thomas Verrall (1685–6).⁷⁷ But Harrison's business may have failed, since a Lewesian of that name, 'a poor person', was granted a pension by the Justices in 1683.⁷⁸

Another Constable, the turner James Read (1680–1), certainly did die in office ‘insolvent and unable to satisfy his debts’.⁷⁹ Perhaps the ‘honest’ party came near on occasion to scraping the bottom of the social barrel. This would account for the selection of an illiterate sieve maker William Weston (1682–3).⁸⁰

Certainly Dissent continued to claim a generous segment of the Borough’s propertied class. In spite of civic exclusion, it showed no signs of withering away. On 31 December 1663 the informer Hetherington wrote sourly to Williamson that ‘this town continues much at the old rate and as great secretaries as ever’. Twenty shops had stayed open that Christmas Day, and a midnight brawl broke out in St. Anne’s churchyard, when the newly intruded minister Henry Thurman tried to officiate at the burial of ‘a saint’. The ‘rogues grew so insolent that they were very like to throw him into the grave’.⁸¹ In 1669 Presbyterians in the town were reckoned to number ‘at least 500’, mainly of ‘the middle sort’; Independents were ‘numerous’, and a third congregation in the Cliffe (probably Quaker) was estimated at sixty. Two more conventicles existed in the vicinity, at Plumpton and Westmeston, each with about two hundred members.⁸² On the whole prosecutions for non-attendance were sporadic and the penalties far from draconian; and after 1673 no Presbyterian or Independent service seems to have been interrupted or informed against. Even harassment of Quakers began to slacken in the 1670s. So much so that the Monthly Meeting felt it necessary in 1681 to censure the children of Mary Akehurst for ‘scoffing at people on the fast day as they went to the Steeplehouse’.⁸³

The continuing vitality of Dissent in Lewes was also manifest at the political level. Amid the general loyalist euphoria of May 1661 Sir John Stapley and Sir Thomas Woodcock were elected as MPs for the Borough.⁸⁴ Both had been involved in an abortive royalist plot against Cromwell early in 1658,⁸⁵ and they continued as representatives during the eighteen years of the ‘Cavalier’ Parliament. In 1678, however, the surface of provincial politics was everywhere whipped into a frenzy by the national panic associated with ‘the Popish Plot’ — a general belief, based on allegations by Titus Oates and other informers, that a Catholic conspiracy existed to assassinate the king and extirpate Protestantism. This crisis allowed a ‘Whig’ assault on the royal prerogative through a demand that James, the Duke of York, be excluded from succession to the throne, and this provoked two general elections in 1679 and another in 1681.⁸⁶ The results at Lewes were a Whig triumph. William Morley and Richard Bridger were returned in February 1679,⁸⁷ and both were endorsed as supporters by the Earl of Shaftesbury.⁸⁸ Morley had succeeded his father Herbert at Glynde in 1668. His business contacts in Lewes were all Dissenters, so was his doctor John Panton; and in 1672 he gave £2 to ‘Mr. Newton for preaching’.⁸⁹ He died soon after voting for the Exclusion Bill,⁹⁰ and his seat was taken by Thomas Pelham, eldest son of the third baronet, who had also been endorsed by Shaftesbury when elected earlier for East Grinstead. Pelham sat for the Borough until 1702, and his prominent services to the Whig cause brought him a peerage.⁹¹ Richard Bridger of Hamsey had regularly attended Quarter Sessions since October 1660 and he remained MP till his death in 1694.⁹² Both he and Pelham were referred to in September 1681 as candidates the ‘Dissenting party’ were resolved to choose again at any future election.⁹³

The elections of 1679, therefore, marked a signal defeat for the Tories in the Borough, and it may be no accident that the first known reference to Bonfire celebrations in Lewes dates from the same year, when Benjamin Harris described a mock religious procession through the town which ended with a Pope being burned in effigy.⁹⁴ Such demonstrations were widely matched elsewhere. As if to consolidate their parliamentary victory, Dissenters also appeared on the Jury of the Court Leet between 1681 and 1683; they included indeed two former members of the Fellowship, John Lopdell and Thomas Matthew. But meanwhile the impact of the Popish Plot and the Exclusion

Crisis had finally convinced Charles II that a vigorous patronage of the Tory party should underpin his counter-attack to displace Whigs from political office at all levels.⁹⁶ Already in September 1681 'the Presbyterians' at Lewes were reported to be keeping 'a very strict fast' as a protest against the execution of Stephen Colledge, a Whig organiser in London who was an early victim of this 'Tory reaction'.⁹⁷ The royal counter-attack increased momentum after June 1683 when the discovery of a 'Rye House Plot' to assassinate the king brought loyalist and anti-Whig feeling to fever pitch. In July 'ill affected persons . . . such as we apprehend to be disloyal' were disarmed in East Sussex;⁹⁸ these presumably included some Lewesians, since seven muskets and two swords were taken from various inhabitants that summer and stored in the Sessions House.⁹⁹ Soon after the government dismissed from the Commission of the Peace a local magistrate, Henry Shelley, who had long been a thorn in the flesh of the 'honest party'.¹⁰⁰

For several years local Tories had been hindered by the absence of any trustworthy JP resident in the Borough. Sir Thomas Woodcock sold his property on St Anne's Hill in 1664,¹⁰¹ but his place was quickly taken by Sir Thomas Nutt who busied himself with Sessions work from a mansion later to be rebuilt as Newcastle House.¹⁰² A keen loyalist, he was allegedly prominent in pressing charges in 1670 against local Presbyterians worshipping in Henge Lane, a quiet by-way which led down into the brooks below Mount Caburn.¹⁰³ This provoked the schoolmaster John Ayres to publish *A narrative of the late proceedings of some Justices and others . . . against several peaceable people . . . only for their being quietly met to worship God together*. According to Ayres Nutt threatened two informers 'that if they would not turn accusers he would make the County of Sussex too hot for them, but if they would he promised . . . it should be worth them at least five pounds a man'.¹⁰⁴ Dunvan later singled him out as 'one of those malign retailers of penal law who accelerated the glorious revolution',¹⁰⁵ but Calamy believed he quickly became more moderate, since Nutt allegedly informed Bishop Gunning of Chichester in 1674 that 'they who would have good neighbours must be such themselves'.¹⁰⁶

By 1674, however, Nutt had probably quitted Lewes, since he sold his town house in 1673 to William Spence of Malling. The sale itself suggests a slackening of loyalist zeal, otherwise Spence might well have been ruled out as a prospective buyer. A lawyer by training, and a professed Baptist, he sat in the Barebones Parliament of 1653, where he showed himself to be 'a radical pacemaker'.¹⁰⁷ His restoration to the Commission of the Peace in 1668 during a royal flirtation with Dissent must have irritated the 'honest' party, especially as he attended the Sessions assiduously till his death in 1679, although in January 1671 a 'quartane ague going and coming all this winter' kept him at home. Not surprisingly he allowed local Quakers the full benefit of any loophole in the law when informers denounced their conventicles to him.¹⁰⁸

But worse still perhaps for Lewes Tories was the steady attendance of Henry Shelley on the bench from July 1673. The departure of Nutt left him as the only resident magistrate,¹⁰⁹ with Spence of Malling as first reserve. Shelley was nominally an Anglican, but his sister Martha and her husband Robert Coby were practising Independents.¹¹⁰ Moreover the family tradition was hardly loyalist; his father had sat in the Long Parliament and cooperated closely with the county elite during the Civil War.¹¹¹ Like Spence, therefore, Shelley proved adept at exploiting the law to shield Dissenters. When in 1682 the incumbent of All Saints, John Eresby and the proctor of the Ecclesiastical Court, Samuel Astie, requested him to proceed with due haste against a Quaker meeting, he refused to be 'a journeyman for idle fellows' and instead reproached Eresby for reading a few prayers and a homily and then 'dismissing the people'. Just before his removal from the bench in 1683, Bishop Carleton of Chichester argued that his 'being disgracefully turned out for the neglect of his duty' might make 'honest' other Justices 'of the same stamp' and so diminish 'faction and schism and disobedience to the Government'.¹¹²

The Bishop's opinion was probably prompted by an emotional letter from Thomas Barrett, his Deputy-Registrar at Lewes. The town's loyalists obviously felt themselves beleaguered, in spite of the Tory reaction; perhaps the election results had badly shaken their morale. Barrett reminded his superior that 'this part of your diocese, as it is far remote from your palace, so is filled with a sort of men who are further remote from loyal principles than perhaps any other diocese . . . For here is contempt of the King's command and all Acts of Parliament. We have still conventicles held, schism maintained, and the preachers of it defended by those pretended officers of justice who, for fear of being thought too active in prosecution, have totally neglected what lay in their own way for promoting the loyal cause'. At the previous Quarter Sessions one JP (doubtless Shelley) had warned the people 'of extortions in ecclesiastical officers' and 'of errors in their proceedings as to excommunications'. Barrett's spleen was expressly reserved for such Anglican fellow-travellers with Whig sympathies. 'The continuance of this moulded faction here is not owing so much to the professed Separatists as to others, who go to church . . . who, being really private favourers of the factious party, under the disguise of churchmen take all opportunities of serving their turns'.¹¹³ In April 1684 the Tory attack was pressed a stage further when Shelley was singled out by the Grand Jury, together with Thomas Pelham and a few others, as 'dangerous and ill affected to the present government'.¹¹⁴

But between the autumn of 1685 and the winter of 1688–9 the Tory reaction faltered and failed. Loyalism lost all coherence as James II's resolutely pro-Papist policies were unfolded, especially as they were linked with explicit political patronage of Dissenters and extreme Whigs, and with a purge of those Tories unwilling to endorse such a framework of government.¹¹⁵ Thus in December 1686 the Commission of the Peace for Sussex was remodelled; three Pelhams were dismissed, along with Sir John Ashburnham.¹¹⁶ In July 1687 Sir John Gage, a wealthy Catholic landowner from Firle, attended the Quarter Sessions at Lewes as a JP, and in November he was appointed Sheriff.¹¹⁷ The following October John Spence of Malling and John Hay of Little Horsted appeared on the Lewes bench.¹¹⁸ Spence was brother and heir to the radical William who died in 1679, while Hay had close Dissenting and Whig links.¹¹⁹

The Constables chosen in 1686, 1687 and 1688 continued to be Anglicans—Henry Rose and the draper Edward Burtenshaw, the tobacconist Simon Snell and the butcher Reginald Jarvis, John Delves and the tailor John Hawkham;¹²⁰ but whether the newcomers were full blooded Tories, trimmers, or Whig fellow-travellers like Henry Shelley, cannot be known. October 1689, however, marked a decisive turning point. The innkeeper William Read had held office before, in 1679–80; his fellow Constable, however, the hatter James Bridger, had been declared 'ill affected' as recently as July 1685.¹²¹ By 1690–1 and 1691–2 all four Constables were Dissenters; three of them had been denounced along with Bridger, and two were sons of deceased members of the neutered Fellowship.¹²² Clearly the Anglican monopoly of civic office in Lewes was over. A new day had dawned on the Borough's politics.

The Fellowship, however, was not restored, although a few members survived the long years of exclusion. Of the sixteen presented for non-attendance in or after 1663, only the saddler Richard Savage seems to have left the town. The rest remained, to live and die Dissenters. Networks of Presbyterian or Independent relatives, overseers, trustees and witnesses, web the wills of the haberdasher Nicholas Curle, who died in 1666, the draper Richard Barnard (1666), the hatter Samuel Cruttenden (1667), the rentier George Stonestreat (1669), the maltster Robert Swan (1671), the shoemaker Edward Bailey (1672), the baker Stephen Botting (1673), the draper Edward Holmwood (1674), the apothecaries Richard Russell and Thomas Fissenden (1684), and the drapers Thomas Matthew (1690) and John Lopdell (1692).¹²³ The grocer Walter Brett senior

was cited in 1684–5 as ‘dangerous and ill affected’ along with Matthew and Lopdell, and with the sons of Barnard, Cruttenden, Russell and Fissenden.¹²⁴ Matthew was also denounced for saying that ‘every good Protestant or good Christian would be for the Bill of Exclusion’.¹²⁵ Although the will of the merchant William Peake (1684) has no sectarian overtones, he was a non-attender in 1672–4.¹²⁶ He also made a ‘kindly’ intervention on behalf of local Quakers; to remove them from harsh conditions at Horsham Gaol, he sued them for trading debts, thereby securing their transfer to a far laxer regime in the King’s Bench Prison.¹²⁷ The last survivor of all was the tanner Ralph Pope, who had refused to hand over the weights and other Borough property in 1663. He died in 1706, having boycotted St. John’s church until the Toleration Act.¹²⁸ None of the fifteen died in penury, in spite of sporadic fines and political exclusion. Indeed all but Botting and Pope left land outside the town, together with Irish property in the case of Barnard and Russell.

The fate of the Fellowship, the consolidation of a Tory party, and the sustained cohesion of the Dissenting interest, all serve as reminders that the reign of Charles II witnessed deep political divisions, which are not easily compatible with a steady trend towards a Glorious Revolution. Hitherto these fissures at the local level have been largely neglected by historical research; the glamour of the 1640s and 1650s has proved too alluring. The evidence for Lewes is neither abundant nor colourful, but it does provide a framework. Hopefully future studies will fill out the picture elsewhere in Sussex, both at county level and for other embattled communities.¹²⁹

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