

THREE SURREY SPEAKERS.

BY

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CHANCE has decreed that only in one instance has a single family produced three Speakers of the House of Commons, and the circumstance gives an opportunity to examine and compare the character of the House and the nature of the Office during the periods of their services.

The first member of the Onslow family to become Speaker was Richard, a nephew of Humphrey, Bailiff of Shrewsbury, Sheriff of Salop and Squire of Onslow, near Shrewsbury, where his ancestors had been settled for some 350 years. Richard was the younger son of a younger son, and came to London to seek his fortune at the Bar, entering the Inner Temple in 1545 at the age of 17. But besides the practice of the law he indulged in some profitable speculations in land for which the recent dissolution of the Monasteries gave ample opportunity. He became a Surrey man in 1559 when he married the heiress of Knowle, near Cranley.

Although Richard had to seek his fortune he had useful connections, for he was kin through the Corbets with the Devereux, and through his Uncle Humphrey's marriage with the Dudleys.

During the reign of Mary though, he sat in two Parliaments for Steyning. He held no appointment, but with the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 all was changed, and doubtless Richard owed much of his future advancement to his kinsman Lord Richard Dudley. In 1563 he became Recorder of London, and in 1566 Solicitor-General. In that year Williams the Speaker died. The choice of his successor was of importance

to the Court. The Queen had no desire to summon Parliament, but lack of money necessitated it, though she knew that the whole question of the Succession would be raised. The Speaker was (and still is) the Channel of Communication between the Sovereign and the House, and the Crown claimed a considerable right of appointment over him—indeed the right to refuse a Speaker was exercised by Charles II. Hitherto Speakers had been unanimously chosen and Richard's election was the first to be contested. Though proposed by Sir E. Rogers, the Senior Privy Councillor, he was only elected by the narrow majority of 12.

Elizabeth's conception of her powers was a wide one. In her instructions to the Speaker she said, "It is in my power to call Parliament, in my power to dissolve them, in my power to give assent or dissent to any determination they should form. I have enjoined them already to meddle neither with matters of state or religion and I take the present opportunity to require that no Bill regarding State affairs or reformation in causes ecclesiastical be exhibited in your House. In particular I charge you upon your allegiance if any such be offered, absolutely to refuse them a Reading, and not so much as to permit them to be debated. . . ."

The House was not to be trifled with and determined that the question of Supply should go hand in hand with that of the Succession. Elizabeth's rage was great, but she did not lose her head. After a furious outburst she gave a promise of marriage but peremptorily forbade discussion of the Succession. This the Commons would not accept; so the Queen sent for the Speaker and said that if any person felt himself not satisfied he should come to the Privy Council. The House met this by a request for freedom of deliberation while the Subsidy Bill lay significantly on the table. Elizabeth became more conciliatory in her language and tried a bribe by offering to forego a part of the subsidy, but the deadlock continued, so Richard was again sent for and told by the Queen that "for the goodwill she bore to them she revoked her former commandments but desired the House to proceed no further in the matter at that time." This compromise was accepted and the subsidy voted. Parliament was then dissolved.

Considering that Richard was the friend of Leicester, and

the Court nominee (against the popular party) for the Speakership, it must be presumed that the words of his address to the Queen upon the Dissolution of Parliament had been previously agreed upon. They ran as follows: "Although there be for the prince provided many princely prerogatives and royalties, yet it is not such as the prince can take money or other things or do as he will at his own pleasure. . . ." Both Hallam and Taswell Langmead cite this passage in proof of the contention that the theory of the limitation of the Monarchy greatly limited by law was intact.

Richard had not relinquished the Solicitorship when he became Speaker, but resigned it in 1569 to become Attorney General of the Court of Wards and Liveries. He died rather suddenly in Shropshire in 1571.

The second Speaker was another Richard, great-great-grandson of the preceding. He was born in 1654 and served in the last three parliaments of Charles II, and the first of James II. With the death of his father Sir Arthur he became the Leader of the Whigs in Surrey and was member for Surrey in the Convention of 1689, which conferred the Crown upon William and Mary. At first he was a whole-hearted supporter of William, but like many Englishmen he did not understand him. Son and grandson of Parliamentarians, he was jealous of the rights and privileges of the Commons, of his own class and of British liberties. He was insular and narrow in view as regards foreign affairs: his conception of an "English King" was a servant of the Whigs; and he misunderstood and mistrusted William's continental policy.

He was a Lord of the Admiralty for some years, but left office in 1693. His ambition lay towards the Speakership, but the Tories succeeded in obtaining the choice of Robert Harley and the Election of 1702 returned a Tory majority of two to one. Not till 1708 did the balance become more even and in that year Richard as a Whig, not unacceptable to the Tories, was chosen Speaker. He had trouble in the Chair from a predecessor, Sir Edward Seymour, who had been Speaker in 1672. Shaftesbury wrote "The late Speaker beset the new one and he will have a hard task. . . ." His tenure of the Chair lasted but two years. He was a great stickler for form and ceremonies and very eager to maintain

his dignity and that of the House of Commons, so that he earned the nickname of "Stiff Dick." For many years he had represented the County and had been the Leading Whig in Surrey. He seems to have been tactful in the management of his constituents, for Lord Hardwicke wrote of him after his death "The old Lord Onslow used always to talk to the Surrey gentleman as if he was nothing and it was their interest and support that he relied on, which took with them extremely." But he lost his seat in the Tory reaction of 1710 and very nearly retired altogether from public life. Godolphin, however, procured his election for St. Mawes in Cornwall and he sat for that place till re-elected for Surrey in 1713.

All his life he had been a firm supporter of the Protestant Succession. He conducted through the House the Succession Act of 1705, and had a hand in all the Acts to secure the Hanoverian Succession. The Queen's health and the recovery of the Tories filled him with alarm. In 1714 the parties were near to Civil War. In the event of Anne's death, which was imminent, the Whigs were ready for a rising to support the Hanoverian Cause and invited Marlborough, who was then living in Flanders, to lead them. Richard was sent to Flanders to concert action with Marlborough. Bolingbroke appointed Ormonde, a Jacobite, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. But events moved too fast for the Jacobites. Anne died suddenly and all went smoothly for the Whigs. George I was proclaimed without opposition and a clean sweep was made of Bolingbroke and the Tories. In the new Ministry Richard became Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he did not hold the office long. He was the first peer created by George I, and in 1716 he became Lord Lieutenant of Surrey on the death of the Duke of Halifax. His health was failing and he only lived a year, dying in December, 1717.

Arthur, the third Speaker, was a nephew of the last mentioned. He was born in 1691 and educated at Guildford Grammar School, Winchester and Wadham College, Oxford. He seems to have spent his vacations at Clandon with his uncle to whom he says he owed much—indeed, when Chancellor of the Exchequer he procured for his nephew a post at the Treasury and afterwards at the Post Office. Arthur had been

called to the Bar but he practised very little. Still his legal knowledge stood him in good stead since he became Chairman of Surrey Quarter Sessions and was Recorder of Guildford from 1722 till his death.

In 1720 he entered Parliament as member for Guildford and soon attracted the attention and gained the friendship of Walpole, who succeeded Sunderland in 1721. Arthur's maiden speech was well received and he increased his reputation in the debates on the South Sea Bubble.

Walpole entrusted him with a large share in the parliamentary prosecution of Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, and also in the impeachment of Macclesfield, and he took besides considerable part in ordinary debate. He generally but not invariably supported Walpole.

George I died at Osnabrück on June 13, 1727. With the accession of George II, Walpole's power seemed gone. The new King desired Spencer Compton (the Speaker) to draw up the necessary declaration to the Privy Council. Arthur went to see Walpole who was in the depths of depression. "He (Walpole) took me into his arms with a flood of tears that came immediately from him, crying out that this kindness of his friends had drawn a weakness from him that his enemies never could do."

The scene must have been a strange one and Walpole much overwrought. Our ancestors in the eighteenth century must have been much more prone to emotion than we are, for one can scarcely picture a disappointed candidate for the office of Prime Minister bursting into tears in the arms of one of his parliamentary supporters.

However, he need not have worried—a Compton Government proved impossible and in spite of George II, Walpole kept his place. He told Arthur he would like to see him Speaker.

The first business after the demise of the Crown was the General Election. Politics in Surrey were in rather a divided state. There had been a split in the Whig Party, and one or two recent county elections had gone wrong. Lord Onslow thought that the family interest might be recovered by making the rising hope of the family stand for the County. Arthur was against it, he was very popular in Guildford and his

seat was safe there, whereas a County election was always a more precarious event. Walpole advised against it, he himself had had a similar experience and had been beaten for Norfolk. He said that he might perhaps have carried it later, but he preferred to take no risks and to sit for his own pocket boroughs of Lynn or Castle Rising, which he could control. His interest was at Arthur's disposal, but he warned him that if any accident should happen to the project of making him Speaker he would doubtless have other Office and then be obliged to seek re-election, which might be inconvenient in a County. However, the decision taken, Arthur set to work to canvass the county. He had two united Members, John Walter of Burbridge and Thos. Scawen of Carshalton against him, who were well equipped with money and party spirit. Plenty of money was at Arthur's disposal and he had so much support that he began to have no fear for the result. Once his Uncle Richard had polled 1300, and he hoped he might do as well. As the poll went on it became clear that Arthur headed it by a large majority. The two other candidates not knowing which would beat the other, began to work against one another, trying to persuade their supporters to poll only single votes, and Walter went so far as to get his father to try and persuade Arthur to get his supporters to give their second votes to his son. This raised Arthur's anger, and he told the apologetic Walter that he knew he could return either of the candidates he pleased, but he would have nothing whatever to do with them. Failing in this, they came to an agreement by which Walter was publicly to withdraw from the election. The bargain seems to have been that if Walter withdrew, Scawen was to bear his election expenses! However, the attempt did not succeed and there was a terrific disturbance, much "opprobrious" language and the two candidates were accused of selling the county. After some time Arthur gained a hearing and said with some indignation that the attempt was illegal, dangerous and unheard of; that the election was the right of the freeholders to choose whom they thought fit and those chosen were bound to serve whether they liked it or not, and could not therefore renounce the election; the Sheriff was bound to go on so long as there were any freeholders left who should

offer their voices ; that he could not judge who were duly elected till the poll was over and he had cast up the numbers who were upon the books, and then he was bound to declare and return such as he found to have the majority, even against the desire and consent of them that had it. At this there were loud cries of "Go on, go on,—no selling the election." If Walter's renunciation had been accepted the poll would have closed and as it happened Walter would have won, as at that time he had a slight majority over Scawen. However, after the scene just described, many of Arthur's supporters gave their second votes to Scawen and he was elected.

The rumour that Arthur was to be Speaker went all over the country. Walpole spoke openly of it and Lady Lechmere calls him the "intended Speaker." Compton was made a Peer shortly before Parliament met and Arthur's election was unanimous, as it always was in the four subsequent Parliaments in which he filled the Chair.

He writes that he had many fears, but some encouragement when he first became Speaker. He had never made bitter enemies and had shown himself respectful and impartial to all, but he was, he felt, young, and had had but a few years' experience in the House. Compton, however, helped him and his advice and experience at the outset was at his service. He soon found that a knowledge of the procedure of the House at first hand was essential. In later years he told Hatsell that Stables, the Clerk, had put him wrong occasionally and therefore he studied the Journals himself ; the result was that he became the first authority on procedure and precedent. Two large MSS. volumes at Clandon are the result of his researches and opinions.

It is no doubt true that Walpole was the principal means of securing the Speakership to Arthur, and it has been suggested that his reason for so doing was that Arthur was a friend of his and he hoped for his assistance in the Chair for party advantage. To procure such a Speaker would not have been unlike Walpole, who had told Arthur in years gone by that the "way to the Chair lay thro' the gates of St. James," but he knew Arthur very well, and he knew that though he was his personal friend, and was a firm supporter of the Whigs, he had opposed him on more than one important question, both

by vote and speech. Though he was a strong Whig, Arthur made such a parade of his independence—indeed he rarely spoke except against his own party—that it seems scarcely credible that Walpole could have conceived that he would be a willing tool. The Speaker in those days, however, very often did use his authority to help his own party, and Walpole may well have been surprised at the attitude of impartiality and disinterestedness that Arthur adopted and made the rule for all Speakers who followed him.

The election of 1727 returned a strong Whig majority to the House of Commons, stronger even than Walpole's most sanguine expectations had anticipated, but there is no doubt that his position gave him a great advantage, for not only did he hold the ordinary influence enjoyed by a Government, but he also wielded the power of the S.S. fund and used it lavishly and unscrupulously. In the correspondence of the time we read constant laments from Arthur of the universality of corruption in politics. Thus he writes on February 7th, 1740, to his friend Sir T. More Molyneux, "God knows there is so much of it about everywhere that I dread the consequences of it with regard to the religion and morals of the nation, and to tell you the truth I am quite sick of the world. I say this to you as a man of virtue to whom I can disclose my heart without being liable to be laughed at."

History has branded Walpole and Newcastle as being the most corrupt Ministers of the eighteenth century, and so possibly they may have been; but not because they were necessarily dishonest men, but because if they wanted to be Ministers at all they were obliged to be corrupt. Walpole maintained his power for many years largely by bribery and open corruption, yet Arthur, who openly condemned corruption, describes Walpole as "a wise and able Minister and the best man from the goodness of his heart, which was characteristic in him, to live with and to live under of any great man I ever knew." The truth is that both Whigs and Tories were equally corrupt, but in different ways.

The Tory nobility possessed the great bulk of the landed property in England. Joined to the large Tory landlords were all the secondary landowners, the vast majority of whom were Tories. The Church patronage too was in the hands of

the landlords, so that as the Squire was, so the parson was. But few electors cared for anything but their own private interests and the powers of the landlords were quite sufficient to terrorize the electorate; rents were raised above the real value of the land; small borough towns were decreased until they could be easily managed; corporations possessing the exclusive power of election were carefully filled with the landlords' dependents; every effort was utilized to bind the tenant to the interests of his landlord. No ballot protected him, he had no redress, for the proceedings of the landlord were certainly legal and were moreover protected by the right sacred in English law of every man to do as he likes with his own.

Thus the Tories could coerce the constituencies by force, and all that remained to the Whigs was persuasion. As the Tories owned the land, so the Whigs owned the money, and to defend themselves against coercion they resorted to bribery. Thus armed, they invaded the strongholds of their adversaries and often the persuasive cash of the Whig candidate overcame the fear of Tory threats. It was not however always necessary to bribe the individual elector; it was often more easy to gain the patron or his nominee; and in this again the Whigs had an advantage. So long as they were in power they had a monopoly of office, titles and ribands, and the judicious dispensation of this patronage was useful then as later in the determination of the political principles of individuals. Another weapon lay in the hands of the Whig majority in the House of Commons. The Committees to decide on Election petitions were invariably packed and disputed elections were decided in favour of the party in power.

Arthur ascended the Speaker's chair at a critical moment in our Parliamentary history. He watched the House with a critic's eye, and has handed down to us the result of his observations in a series of notes on "Opposition." With the advent of the second George the modern principle of a Parliamentary Opposition begins to take shape. Of this principle Pulteney was the author. Until the days of George II the struggle between parties had not been between man and man across the floor of the House, but had been mainly a struggle for the ear and favour of the Sovereign.

With the public outside the House this struggle had nothing to do, but when Pulteney faced Walpole he called to his aid not the King's mistresses, but the intelligence and criticism of the people. It was they, not the King, who were to be the arbiters in future of the nation's destiny.

Richard Onslow, the Elizabethan Speaker, clearly regarded himself principally as the servant of the Crown, the second Richard as the servant of the Whig party, for undoubtedly he shewed partiality to his own side as did other Speakers of his time. Arthur is the first Speaker who considered himself the servant of the House of Commons. In 1738 he laid it down that the Speaker cannot take part in debate when in the Chair. But he spoke frequently when the House was in Committee.

In 1741 the Opposition to Walpole was greatly increased. At first it was proposed to challenge the Government by opposition to the re-election of Arthur as Speaker, but this was abandoned as too dangerous. "As for opposition to their Speaker," writes Chesterfield to Dodington, "if it be Onslow we shall be but weak, he having by a certain decency of behaviour made himself many personal friends in the minority." As a matter of fact, Arthur was triumphantly re-elected. He showed some reluctance to be put forward again, perhaps having heard that there might be opposition to his candidature, but he need not have troubled himself. When the Clerk announced that the House should proceed to the election of a Speaker, he was proposed by Pelham, and seconded by Clutterbuck, the whole House shouting "Onslow, Onslow." So he took the Chair for the third time. It was on this occasion that he abandoned the meaningless form of excuse and the time-honoured appeal to the House that he might make a plea to the Crown that the Commons might be directed to make a better choice. "Since these gentlemen have elected me to this eminence" he said, while still on the steps of the Chair and before the Sergeant-at-Arms had put the Mace on the table, "I have only now to return them my humblest thanks for this particular instance of their favour to me, the sense of which I hope I shall always retain with that respect and gratitude to the House this mark of esteem will ever claim from me."

Walpole resigned in February, 1742, and Wilmington became head of the Government. Limerick carried a motion for an enquiry "into the conduct of Robert, Earl of Orford, during the last ten years" by 252 to 245 and a secret committee was appointed by ballot. For the last two places four members tied at 258 and therefore the Speaker gave his casting vote. Two of those who tied were enemies and two friends of Walpole. Arthur gave his casting vote for the two latter. For this action he was much abused, but as the two members elected by his vote were the only supporters of Walpole on the Committee, it seems clear that his action was the right and impartial one. It was, however, said that this action was taken by him "because his attachment to the Court arose from interest." The interest meant his post as Treasurer of the Navy. Arthur had been appointed to this office in succession to Pattee Byng in 1734 and he continued to hold it after Walpole's resignation, but in consequence of what was said in regard to his action in the selection of the members of the Committee of Secrecy, he resigned in May 1742.

The resignation of Arthur of his post of Treasurer of the Navy must have been a great pecuniary loss, since the Speaker in those days received no salary, but only fees on Private Bills. The Speaker's salary was not voted until the time of Addington in 1789.

On March 20th, 1751, Frederick, Prince of Wales, died of pleurisy. His eldest son George (afterwards George III) was but ten years old, so that it was necessary that provision should be made for a regency in the event of the King's death. The first care of the Princess of Wales was to guard the young Prince against influences hostile to herself, and George was kept in strict seclusion so that in the event of an early succession he would be a docile pupil of the Regent. Who the Regent was to be and what were to be his powers pressed for immediate settlement. The choice was limited between the Princess of Wales and Cumberland. A struggle ended in favour of the Princess, who in public affairs was to be guided by a Council consisting of the Duke and certain great Officers of State. Arthur was called into Council by the Pelhams and Hardwicke in drafting the bill. He was at several meetings and opposed Hardwicke stoutly, but the majority was against him and

he said no more. In Committee on the bill, however, Arthur spoke at length against it. Horace Walpole says he made a noble and affecting speech against the bill, but Pelham was very angry ; he said that Arthur had withdrawn his opposition in the private meetings and had no right to oppose the bill in the House ; but Arthur explained that he had accepted the position when he found the majority against him, but had not changed his opinion. Arthur could never see why a Minister or Privy Councillor should acquiesce in public to a measure which he had opposed in the Cabinet or in the Privy Council.

In 1753 Arthur was sixty-two years of age and had some thought of retiring from Parliament, but Pelham approached him to ask him to reconsider his decision and again undertake the duties of the Speaker's Chair. He urged him strongly to do so. Arthur told him that if he was to be Speaker again he must not expect that he would act otherwise than he always had done, which he knew was not always pleasing to Ministers ; to which Pelham replied : " Sir, I shall as little like, as anyone else in my station, to have a Speaker in a *set* opposition to me and the measures I carry on ; but I shall as little like to have a Speaker over-complaisant either to me or to them." Arthur was immensely pleased with this compliment, which he describes as " nobly said," especially as he and Pelham often differed. Arthur agreed to fall in with Pelham's wishes and was returned unopposed as usual for Surrey, but when Parliament met in 1754 Pelham was dead. The Premiership devolved then on his brother, the Duke of Newcastle. With Newcastle Arthur had always been on terms of friendship, and in 1753 this friendship was cemented by a closer alliance, namely the marriage of Arthur's son George with Newcastle's niece.

When Newcastle became Prime Minister he evidently consulted Arthur regularly on affairs of state, and in the British Museum many of his letters to Arthur are preserved, but unfortunately Arthur seems to have preferred to give his opinion personally rather than by letter, so that we are debarred from learning his views on many subjects which would have been of great interest to us nowadays.

In November, Newcastle resigned and Pitt took office as

Prime Minister. The introduction of a new Militia Bill was a condition of his acceptance of office, and was mentioned in the King's Speech. The suspicion was general that it was designed to entrap recruits into the regular Army. The Tories, consistently with their attitude since the Revolution, vehemently opposed it, in the Lords, and the Opposition succeeded in cutting it down to 32,000 men for England and Wales, in which form it became law. After the harvest when the first attempts were made to enforce it, riots took place in Surrey and other counties. In Surrey the mob was headed by a farmer named Worsfold, wielding a partisan said to have been used by his ancestor under Queen Elizabeth. Arthur was at Guildford and was surrounded by a threatening crowd headed by Worsfold. He got into his carriage and set out for Imbercourt followed by the people, they accompanied him all the way, threatening violence, and were only appeased when Arthur gave them an assurance that no steps would be taken to form a militia till next Session.

George II died on October 30, 1760, and Parliament was immediately dissolved and Arthur did not seek re-election. The Address on his retirement was moved by Phillips and seconded by Legge, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. For the first time a pension was granted to the Speaker and the news was communicated to him in the following letter from the Prime Minister :

"I cannot deny myself the pleasure of sending you the earliest Notice, that I last night received the King's Orders, to prepare a warrant for His Majesty's signature, granting to you and your Son, for your joint Lives, and the survivor of you, three thousand pounds per Annum. . . ."

Arthur survived for eight years after his retirement. On the day of his death the House went into Committee on the Bribery bill, and as he was dying he desired the House to be informed that he died in peace on hearing of the Bill.