

THE HALF MOON TAVERN, CHEAPSIDE, AND CITY POLITICS

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The importance of the tavern and coffee-house in the 18th century can scarcely be exaggerated. Much attention has been paid to the literary and social significance of these meeting-places, but they played a vital political role as well. It was here that like-minded men gathered to co-ordinate activity. The confrontations in Parliament and elsewhere had frequently been rehearsed with some care by the opposing parties in their respective taverns.

Nowhere were these convivial cabals more evident than in the City of London. Here, as in Parliament, Whigs and Tories waged a long-drawn-out war. But whilst the former maintained the upper hand in Government, the latter usually won the day in the City. The Tories commanded majorities in the meeting of the City's elected representatives, Common Council, and in the assembly of Liverymen, Common Hall. Only in the Court of the twenty-six Aldermen did the Whigs prevail.

The activities of the Tory group obviously deserve the closest attention. Any information about its ale-house gatherings would be most valuable. In fact these City Tories were usually associated with the Half Moon tavern in Cheapside. The Half Moon Club, as it was known, came to be synonymous with the Tory clique.

When the tavern rose to prominence is difficult to say. The first reference yet unearthed occurs in November, 1724 when allegations were made that attempts to impersonate voters on behalf of the Tory parliamentary candidate, Goodfellow, had been organised at the Half Moon.¹ Twenty years later its importance in City affairs was widely recognised. A pamphlet purporting to expose corruption in City government was addressed, with "more Truth, and less Flattery, than is usual in Dedications," to the Half Moon Club: "Gentlemen, As you have had, or least been supposed to have, the principal Direction of Affairs in the Place where this Jobb is said to have been transacted, you are the natural Patrons of the Pamphlet . . ." Elsewhere the Dedication declared that: "Such as direct the Directors of the City are the proper Patrons of an Enquiry for the Benefit of the Citizens . . ."²

Little wonder then that the diaries and letters of the mid 18th century are littered with references to the tavern. In 1757 the Lord Mayor, Marshe Dickinson, was asked to call a Common Council for granting honorary freedoms to Pitt and Legge by a group of Common Councilmen who "came as they said, Deputed from the Half Moon . . ."³ Again, in the following year a meeting was held in the tavern to organise a petition from Common Council in support of Pitt's Habeas Corpus bill.⁴ Then in 1761 the Earl of Hardwicke was pleased to be able to report to the Duke of Newcastle that an attempt by the City Tories to relieve the Crown of the right to appoint the Commissioners of the City's Lieutenancy had apparently been defeated. Hardwicke had been shown a draft of an agreeably moderate petition to the King which, his informant told him, would be accepted by the Common Council committee dealing with the matter. From this Hardwicke could only conclude that the "Half-moon Club have come into it."⁵

It was a frequent practice for Tory Liverymen and Common Councilmen to use the Half Moon for what were described as “previous meetings.” At these candidates for forthcoming elections in Common Hall would be selected, tactics at Common Councils discussed, and Representations in the name of the City prepared. In 1765 a surly Address to the King was framed at the Half Moon before it was accepted in Common Council.⁶ Addresses from Common Hall in 1773 and 1775 for the redress of various grievances had similar origins.⁷ It was also customary to nominate Tory candidates for the main City committees each year in the tavern. Common Council would then vote for a Half Moon list or for a rival Whig one.⁸

The Half Moon itself became a symbol for the City Independents. It was reported that after the return of two Whigs as Common Councilmen for Billingsgate Ward, “Mr. G_____ of Botolph-Lane, (with his *usual Modesty*, and by Way of Triumph) carried the HALF MOON on a Black Escutcheon round the Hall, attended by the Hisses of all Well-wishers to this City present; it was afterwards affix’d to the Wall of the Weyhouse Meeting-House, where a great Bonfire was made, that had like to have been attended with bad Consequences . . .” The paper, however, noted that as a result of a further scrutiny of the poll on behalf of the Tory candidates, “Luna’s Horns may yet gore . . .” The same jest was repeated the following year when the Tories were again defeated. “On this Occasion a certain *Wou’d-be Common-Council-Man*, who particularly distinguish’d himself last Year with his dull Reflections on the HALF-MOON-CLUB, attempted again to be witty, and publicly declar’d, *That his Half-Moon was not yet worn out*, tho’ by a merry Wag it was smartly retorted on him, *That it was sadly eclipsed*.”⁹

There can be little doubt then of the tavern’s importance. But, strangely, it has been little studied.¹⁰ To an extent this neglect has been the reflection of unhelpful evidence. Allusions to the Half Moon abound; facts are rare. Very little, for instance, can be said about the nature of the meetings there. One pamphlet¹¹ does, however, remark of the Address to the Crown in 1765 that:

. . . though an address goes up to the Court with the really respectable name of the city of *London* at the head of it; the sentiments which it contains are, in fact, no more than the private opinions of fifty or sixty very inconsiderable shopkeepers, who consult about the tendency of national measures at the *Half-Moon tavern* in *Cheapside*, and pay an humble Shilling a head to the master of the house (a common-councilman also, but a deserving one) for the evening’s entertainment.

It seems plain that, though there was much talk of a Half Moon *Club*, the meetings were informal affairs. Prominent City Tories would get word of a gathering and simply pay a small sum for their beer and tobacco whenever they attended. There are no signs of restricted membership, a subscription or a set of rules.

Fortunately more can be deduced about the nature of the tavern itself and its successive Masters. The Half Moon was situated on the northern side of Cheapside between Foster Lane to the west and Gutter Lane to the east. It lay at the northern end of Half Moon alley or court, and on the eastern side of Saddlers’ Hall. It was normally approached from the narrow alley but there were also entrances from Priest’s Court off Foster Lane, and through the tavern from Gutter Lane.¹² The property was leased from the Saddlers’ Company.¹³

The building was evidently a substantial one. The Hand-in-Hand Fire Office valued the property at £1,400, later £1,850, excluding an adjoining apartment. Successive policies speak of sixteen (later fourteen) rooms, and ten (later nine) chimney pieces. There were

“three storeys and garrets”. The ground floor apparently measured sixty-three feet by twenty-four.¹⁴ Like most taverns of the period it had one large Assembly room where meetings could be held. The pamphlet which castigated the cabal which prepared the Address of 1765 suggested that a wealth qualification be introduced to exclude such unworthy Common Councilmen. Then, so it hoped, “the great room at the *Half Moon* would possibly be filled with a number of truly eminent citizens.”¹⁵ Certainly large numbers could be accommodated. Eighty of Pitt’s supporters gathered to support the Habeas Corpus bill in 1758,¹⁶ and one hundred and thirty Liverymen crowded into the tavern in 1771 in order to nominate candidates for Sheriffs.¹⁷

A large household was required to maintain the establishment. In 1698 the *Half Moon*’s vintner, Charles Cutler, found work for four apprentices, two journeymen and two servants.¹⁸ One of Cutler’s successors, Michael Martindale, took on sixteen apprentices (on seven year terms) between 1726-57. This would suggest that there was work for four apprentices at a time in the house. Martindale is also known to have employed a porter.¹⁹ In fact, business was such that Masters could not confine themselves to the main building and its adjacent apartment. Martindale and others rented from St. Vedast’s parish a brick house at the eastern end of Priest’s Court, next to the northern entrance to the tavern.²⁰

There is also the question of the identity of the Masters themselves. In 1666 the old tavern, known as the Mermaid, was destroyed in the Fire, and its successor was renamed the *Half Moon*.²¹ In 1671 the Master is recorded for the first time: one Matthew Fowler, who was still there in January 1694/5.²² By 1698 the proprietor was Charles Cutler who remained until at least August 1703.²³ His successor was Giles Hooper who was living at the *Half Moon* by November 1705 and left in 1709.²⁴ Thereafter firmer ground is reached. The churchwardens’ accounts of St. Vedast, Foster Lane, in which the house was partly situated, provide an unbroken series of poor rate assessments for the property from 1709. From these it can be deduced that the following were Masters of the *Half Moon*:²⁵

Thomas Baldwin 1710-16
John Champion 1718-24
Michael Martindale 1726-58
Michael Robinson 1758-61
Christopher Holyland 1761-69
Thomas Payne 1770-72
Robert Phillips 1778-84
Lewis Lewis 1786-1817

A few details about the circumstances of these tenures may be supplied. Baldwin, Martindale, Payne and Phillips all died at their posts, and the widows of Baldwin and Payne filled two of the interregna, in 1717 and 1773-77.²⁶ Some doubtless bought the remaining years of the lease from the previous Master or his widow, but at least one, Michael Robinson, received the tavern as a legacy, from his uncle Michael Martindale.²⁷ Another, Giles Hooper, fell on hard times; he had part of his Livery fine returned to him by the Vintners’ Company and he ended his days as a Beadle at the Hall.²⁸

But Hooper was happily the exception rather than the rule. The Masters were generally men of some substance. Their unique position at the heart of the City’s political life afforded them considerable influence. Three of them became Common Councilmen for Farringdon Within: Martindale from 1739-58, Holyland 1763-69, and Phillips 1782-83.²⁹ Martindale indeed was Deputy of his Ward for the last three years of his life, and after his death his

friends were granted permission by the Vestry to set up a monument in his memory.³⁰

As alehouse-keepers the Masters were obliged to take up the Freedom of the City in order to obtain the necessary licence, and if Liveried they were therefore entitled to vote in parliamentary elections.³¹ Most of them favoured Tory or Independent candidates. Fowler, Cutler, Hooper and Baldwin voted for Withers, Hoare, Newland and Cass in 1710; and Champion for Parsons, Williams, Lockwood and Barnard in 1727. Holyland too recorded a respectably ‘Country’ vote when he polled for Harley, Ladbroke, Beckford and Trecothick in 1768; and only Phillips upset this pattern by siding with the Ministerial Pittite, Atkinson, in opposition to the radical Sawbridge in 1784. Yet even here it should be noted that Pitt was posing as a supporter — albeit a luke-warm one — of parliamentary reform, and that Wilkes (though a spent force by this time) backed the Ministry in the election.³²

The involvement of the Half Moon’s Masters in City politics may be illustrated elsewhere. In 1689 Matthew Fowler became embroiled in a dispute over the employment of an apprentice. The case revealed that one of the men who had placed the boy with Fowler was Robert Rowland, Common Councilman for Bishopsgate Within from 1680-83 and 1689-1700, who declared that he had known Fowler for twenty-five years. When the matter was put to arbitration, Rowland chose to act for him a neighbour of Fowler’s, one John Johnson, who was then present in the tavern. Johnson was Common Councilman for Farringdon Within from 1681-83 and 1688-96, and was later Alderman of that Ward from 1696-98.³³

There are other such connections. Shortly before his death, Michael Martindale engaged one Samuel Marriott as an apprentice. Marriott later became Master of the Paul’s Head tavern in Cateaton (later Gresham) street, where Wilkes and his friends were known to spend some of their evenings.³⁴ Another haunt of the radicals, Holyland’s Coffee House in the Strand, may have taken its name from the son of the Master of the Half Moon.³⁵ A still more important venue for the Wilkites was the London Tavern at the southern end of Bishopsgate street. It was here that the Society of the Bill of Rights was founded and subsequently held its meetings. It was here that Lewis Lewis was working when in 1776 he took up his freedom in the Vintners’ Company, and when he moved to the Half Moon he changed its name to the New London Tavern.³⁶

But even this rather ostentatious association with the City’s politicians did not secure the Half Moon’s future. In fact, the end to its illustrious life came suddenly. In 1817, with the departure of Lewis Lewis and the imminent expiration of the lease, the Saddlers’ Company seriously considered letting its own Hall and adapting the tavern for its meetings and entertainments. But the cost was considered unreasonable and the building was instead let to Messrs. Butler and Son, manufacturing chemists. This new existence, however, was shortlived. In 1821 the tavern and the Hall were gutted by fire and the Company seized the opportunity to redevelop the area. A new and enlarged Hall was erected and the site of the Half Moon was lost for ever.³⁷

1. *Post-Man*: 26-28 November 1724.

2. *The City-Secret; or, Corruption at all Ends of the Town; Containing a Succinct History of an 100,000l. Jobb, etc. Being an Examination of the Conduct of several Comptrollers*... (London 1744) i, iv.

3. Guildhall Library (G.L.), MS. 100. Dickinson’s Diary: 14 April 1757.

4. P.C. Yorke, *The Life and Correspondence of Philip Yorke, Earl of Hardwicke* (Cambridge 1913) III 45-6.

5. British Library, Add. MSS. 32,918 f.177. Hardwicke-Newcastle: 1 February 1761. For other references to the Half Moon in the 1760s, see J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge 1976) 48, 223.

6. *A letter to the Common-Council of London, on their late very extraordinary Address to his Majesty* (London 1765), 19-20, 40-41.
7. Corporation of London Records Office (C.L.R.O.), Common Hall Book 8, ff.174v., 194.
8. See, for instance, *London Daily Post*: 7 February 1735/6; 4 February 1737/8. The Whig list was prepared at the Fleece tavern, Cornhill. For an example of the rivalry between the two taverns, see the discussion of the alleged jobbery in the building of the Mansion House in *London Daily Post*: 15 December 1738.
9. *Daily Post*: 16 January 1740/1; 22 December 1741.
10. There are some miscellaneous gleanings in B. Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses* (London 1963) 254-6, no.519.
11. *A Letter to the Common Council*, 40-41.
12. It is most clearly represented, though not named, in R. Horwood's map of London (1795). A copy may be seen in the C.L.R.O. See also the description in W. Maitland, *The History and Survey of London* (London 1775 edition), II 926.
13. Permission was not granted to consult the Company's archives. Another disappointment is the absence of a print of the tavern. The print rooms of neither the British Library nor the Guildhall Library contain one. Contributors to *Notes and Queries* in 1900 drew the same blank (9th series, Vol. VI 168, 257, 356, 413).
14. G.L., MS. 8674 Vols. 46 p.194, 58 p.265, 70 p.183, 82 p.233, 95 p.208, 107 p.123, 113 p.325, 122 p.232 (1733-79). The policy number was 6029.
15. *A Letter to the Common Council*, 43.
16. Yorke, *op. cit.* 45-6.
17. *Public Advertiser*: 24 June 1771. I am indebted to Dame Lucy Sutherland for this reference.
18. Poll Tax assessments: Farringdon Ward Within (Saddlers' Hall and Gutter Lane precinct). C.L.R.O., Assessments Box 69 MS. 3.
19. Vintners' Company, Register of Apprenticeship bindings: G.L., MS. 15,220 Vol. 2, pp.695, 697, 707, 723, 746, 756, 768, 781; Vol. 3, pp.10, 40, 56, 72, 80, 81, 82. His porter is mentioned in his Will (n.27) and in the Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Vedast: G.L., MS. 778, Vol. 3, f.34v. (7 October 1740).
20. For the insurance policy see G.L., MS. 8674 Vol. 100, p.50; and for other references, MS. 778 Vol. 3, *passim*.
21. K. Rogers, *The Mermaid and Mitre Taverns in Old London* (London 1928), 36-44.
22. *Ibid.*, 43, 44; Poll Tax 1694/5: C.L.R.O., Assessments Box 60 MS. 15.
23. Poll Tax 1698: C.L.R.O., Assessments Box 69 MS. 3; *The Registers of St. Vedast, Foster Lane, and of St. Michael Le Quern, London* (Harleian Society Publications Vol. XXX), Vol. 2 (London 1903) 254 (the burial of Cutler's daughter, Elizabeth).
24. *Ibid.*, 258 (the burial of one of Hooper's servants).
25. G.L., MS. 778 Vols. 1-7: St. Vedast's Churchwardens' Accounts 1709-1820.
26. *The Registers of St. Vedast*, Vol. 2 268, 295, 299; *Gentleman's Magazine* Vol. XXVIII (1758) 340.
27. Martindale's Will, proved 18 July 1758: Public Record Office, PROB 11/839/224. Robinson already had a one-third share of the business from his uncle.
28. Vintners' Company, Livery Roll: G.L., MS. 15,208 no.42; Vintners' Company Court Book (1721 37) pp.221, 301. Two Masters had connections with the Bell tavern in Friday Street. Both Champion and Holyland had worked there before moving to the Half Moon: MS. 15,210; 15,208 no.139; 15,212 Vol. 1 p.296.
29. C.L.R.O., Lists of Common Councilmen. For Martindale's unopposed election see *London Daily Post*: 21 July 1739.
30. St. Vedast Vestry and precinct minute books, and the Joint Vestry of the united parishes of St. Vedast and St. Michael Le Quern: G.L., MS. 779 Vol. 1, 17 April 1759.
31. Only Payne and Robinson did not take on the Livery of the Vintners' Company: G.L., MS. 15,208 no.s 42, 139, 241, 485, 550, 793, 863; MS. 15,210, List of Liverymen 21 March 1733/4. For Payne's admission to the freedom see MS. 15,212 Vol. 2 p.3. Robinson's freedom has not been traced.
32. All these polls may be consulted in the G.L.
33. C.L.R.O., Mayor's Court Interrogatories: 28 September 1689.
34. G.L., MS. 15,220 Vol. 3 pp.82, 152. See also Wilkes's dinner diary in the Appendix to W.P. Treloar, *Wilkes and the City* (London 1917).
35. The Society for Constitutional Information appears to have met at Holyland's: P. Brown, *The Chathamites* (London 1967) 380.
36. G.L., MS. 15,212, Vol. 2 p.14. That Lewis changed the name on his arrival cannot be proved conclusively, though it seems probable enough. The Churchwardens' Accounts speak of the Half Moon in an entry for 22 June 1781 (Accounts of 1781) and there is no mention of the House by name until 22 August 1786 when it appears as 'the Tavern' and then on 1 February 1787 as the 'New London' (both entries in the Accounts of 1786). MS. 778 Vol. 5 (no pagination). On the basis of records of Freemasons who met there Lillywhite dated the change of name to 1782-89. He also attempted to establish when 'Lewis's' was added to 'New London'. In fact, the prefix seems to have been added or omitted at will. As late as 1807 Lewis was said to be at (simply) the New London when he took an apprentice. MS. 15,220 Vol. 3 p.347.
37. J. W. Sherwell, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Guild of Saddlers of the City of London* (London 1889) 140-42. The changes may also be traced in the Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Vedast's, Vol. 7 *passim*, and 8 pp. 34, 63, 91.