

A POLITICAL AGENT AT WORK IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AYLESBURY

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Abundant attention has been given to the career of John Wilkes, the 'Friend of Liberty', and his association with Aylesbury. Very little has been devoted to a man who probably did more than anybody to secure Wilkes his first parliamentary seat. This paper focuses on John Dell, the Aylesbury brewer who was Wilkes's Political Agent. The author cannot prove any family connection with his subject, who was, however, the great-great grandfather of the novelist, Ethel M. Dell.

For over one hundred and fifty years the name of Dell in Aylesbury was synonymous with brewing and, particularly during the last part of the eighteenth century, Dell's became one of the leading breweries in the town.

The founder of the dynasty was Jacob Dell, a Maltster, who appears in the Aylesbury Poll Book of 1700 when he was leasing 'barns, a hovel and a little cow house at the North End of Aylesbury.'

He and his nephew, Jacob son of Jeremiah, purchased five cottages and a Malt House in Catte or Castle Street belonging to Thomas Edmonds in 1719 for £101.1/- and the same year bought a part of what is now Temple Square near Castle Street for £231.1/-.²

From this simple beginning the fortunes of the family grew apace, undoubtedly helped on its way by the marriage of great nephew John to Elizabeth Green of Witchurch, an heiress who traced her ancestry back to William of Wykeham (Lord Chancellor of England and Bishop of Winchester, founder of both New College, Oxford and Winchester College)³

John Dell held many parish offices in his 67 years, including Parish Constable and Overseer of the Poor. He was a Trustee of the Bedford Charity, the so called Surveyors of the Highway, and of the short lived Aylesbury Foundling

Hospital.⁴ This, in its modest way, began to give him an insight into some of the more important posts attainable to those with friends in high places.

Thomas Potter, the profligate son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of the two Members of Parliament in the election of 1754. Dell was in his early thirties and he acted as Potter's Political Agent. His job was to monitor local opinion and report on events in and around the town. He also, no doubt, did his best to keep the electors 'sweet' for, at a time when bribery was blatant, a brewer was able to point voters in the right direction, helped on with a barrel or two of beer with the compliments of the sitting or prospective member.

At this election John Wilkes, then at the beginning of his radical political career, assisted Potter in a successful campaign in and around Aylesbury. The town was without an established patron and rich outsiders had long been welcome.⁵ Wilkes himself, however, stood for Berwick, where he failed to be elected, and consequently began to look around for something nearer home. His position in that place had become hopeless, as he says, 'Though I talk big still, yet Berwick is damned.'

As early as 1753 and keen to take over the Aylesbury seat, Wilkes was in correspondence with his mentor. 'I think him [Potter] peculiarly

happy in having so clever and fit an agent as yourself. My warmest wishes attend you.⁷

It is clear that as an established political agent, Dell was the ideal choice for Wilkes and he quickly established himself as a trusted confidant. Wilkes's pending appointment as High Sheriff was conveyed to Dell. 'Be as silent as the grave, only whisper Stephens when you see him that he is to be my chaplain if he pleases.' (John Sevens was the vicar of Aylesbury.) In the same letter the now famous and well-worn phrase which attended Wilkes all his life, and which adorns his tomb stone, surfaces. 'You see I declare myself throughout as a FRIEND TO LIBERTY and will act up to it.'

Although there is no evidence of an earlier connection, as a pupil of Dr Leeson's Aylesbury Presbyterian academy and later as occupier of nearby Prebendal House, Wilkes must have been aware of Dell's importance in the community and their paths must have crossed early on. Indeed with Dell's own Presbyterian upbringing, it is quite possible he too attended the Leeson seminary. (Dell was baptized in 1723 at St Mary's Aylesbury by Mr Ward, the Presbyterian Minister.)⁶

The so called Wilkes-Dell letters consist of 78 letters penned by Wilkes to his agent between 1753 and 1761 with a few later ones written well after Wilkes had moved to new and greener pastures.

The originals were inherited by the Parrott family and are quoted at length by Robert Gibbs in his History of Aylesbury as well as by Wilkes's biographers of later years.⁷ The letters were copied by Mrs Lee of Hartwell and this transcript was deposited with the B.A.S. by Dr T. G. Parrott in 1920 with a copy now in the hands of the B.R.O.⁸ The late Hayward Parrott was of the opinion that a branch of his family sent the originals to salvage during the Second World War.⁹ One dated 6 January 1761, however, remains in the hands of the County Museum at Aylesbury and is in their permanent display.¹⁰

The letters cover two main subjects. There

are a series of instructions to Dell on how to woo the voters on his behalf around election time and then more instructions on the management of Wilkes's Aylesbury estate. (Upon Wilkes's marriage in May 1747, Prebendal House and the demesne had been settled upon Trustees by the bride's parents for the benefit of the young couple. Upon the failure of their marriage some years later, Wilkes persuaded his wife to surrender her jointure for an annuity of £200 whilst he retained the Aylesbury estate and the custody of their only child, Mary, known as Polly.¹¹ Wilkes's sense of humour comes over well and there is often a bantering tone in the correspondence; a kind of literary leg pulling. Indeed an hitherto unacknowledged tone of self deprecation is evident when he says, 'I see I am to fight . . . as if my squinting phiz had never been seen at Aylesbury.'

Writing in a similar vein from Kirby-over-Carr he reports, 'I have only the melancholy news to tell you, Mr Returning Officer, that one of your Members is in perfect health, and so is, I can assure you, your most gracious Sovereign. . . . I talk, however, of penetrating into Scotland. . . . I suspect, however, I shall not succeed in this, as I never heard of any of its natives returning thither.'

This mission must have been accomplished for a few days later he commences his letter from Edinburgh with the warning, 'I hope before you open'd this letter, you took the necessary precaution of airing it, drying it by the fire etc and washing your hands in vinegar for fear of a propagation of some Scotch animal in our good County town.'

Perhaps many years later when, after his arrest for high treason and committal to the Tower of London, Wilkes's request not to be put in a room previously inhabited by a Scotsman for fear of catching the Itch (i.e. scabies) was part of his perverted sense of humour; or did he really believe the worst of anyone or anything from north of the border.¹²

Elections were often called at short notice. As soon as the writ was in the hands of the Under-Sheriff, every effort would be made to

get it under way as quickly as possible. In this way a contested election could be avoided and when there was no contest, there were fewer promises to be redeemed.

Some advice on this procedure was given to Wilkes in a letter from the sitting member, Potter. His appointment as joint Paymaster General in November 1756 was held from the voters for as long as possible and Dell was briefed accordingly. 'You and I must be very cautious lest we burn our fingers . . . without the proper forces we must be defeated, if an enemy takes the field against us . . . be cautious about every word you say to every creature. I will get you the best directions for your conduct as Returning Officer. I have sent you by the post the book of voters and beg you not to eface that but to make such another as soon as you can.'

Interestingly enough, although Dell was Wilkes's Agent, Constables of the two Manors of Aylesbury and the Prebendal, of which Dell was one, also acted as Returning Officers at election time. His triple role was one which certainly would not be tolerated in the twentieth century.

In June of the next year Potter suggested the best course of action after telling Wilkes, 'I . . . resign the borough of Ailesbury into your hands . . . my seat is vacant but most unfortunately the new writ cannot occur til next Tuesday . . . you should employ some careful person in Town [i.e. London] to speak to the messenger of the Great Seal, Mr Crawford, who if he is told that he will receive ten guineas will ride so as to deliver the writ that evening at Ailesbury . . . you may before the sun sets proclaim the election for the Saturday morning. By this means you will avoid two inconveniences: the seditious conversations of the market people on Saturday and the day of leisure for hatching iniquity.'¹³

The following day Potter wrote again to John Wilkes, 'I will take care to order the writ for Ailesbury that evening for Wednesday morning. I think, therefore, you had better not make any declaration until Saturday morning and, if you give a rout that evening and promise to distribute money on Monday, I should hope you

will keep things quiet. Mr Potter has done what he could to prevent the Duke of Newcastle sending down any opposition to you and from every other quarter you have no reason to expect one.'¹⁴

The news was passed to Dell. 'I have been this morning with Mr Potter and he entirely relinquishes to me your good borough of Aylesbury . . . I am determind to offer my services and will give two guineas per man, with the promise of whatever more any one else offers . . . Potter offers to come down, and to act any part we would have him, either by openly espousing me, or by a mock fight against me. Let everything be a profound secret. If you think two guineas is not enough, I will offer three or even five to be secure . . . it is a kind of retainer or fee at entrance.'

It was not just a question of 'a shilling for a widow and a half crown for a poor family' but a calculated act of bribery. 'I will send Samuel with 810 guineas. I shall follow with the rest . . . I would not risk too much by one conveyance. What Samuel has in all events will last tomorrow's operation.' And then there were the suppers and routs. '. . . invite all the Independants to sup with Mr Wilkes. I mean to give the supper at the White Hart and pray speak to Hill accordingly to give a good supper . . . and a rout for the town in the usual manner and will bring you bank or cash, as you like for it'.

Then it was always important to know who was who and for whom. 'I wish you would make me out a list of all the streets in Aylesbury and then mark the houses in each street that vote and their present possessions and take care nobody intrudes into the parish.' And even Dell's elderly father was made use of. 'Has your father finished the list he was able to make out of all the voting houses distinguishing them according to the streets?'

Wilkes was also unhappy about the other sitting Member, John Willes. This man was the son of Sir John Willes, the Chief Justice of Common Pleas, and had been an intimate friend with whom Wilkes had fallen out. Sir John's own claim to notoriety was that he had removed

the Summer Assize from Buckingham to Aylesbury and, by holding them there himself about the time of the election, thought to procure the support of a grateful electorate for another of his sons. This action had been reversed by an Act of Parliament.¹⁵

Wilkes wrote of his former friend, 'I am determined to oppose him and will attack him with the utmost spirit in every way, particularly the true Aylesbury way of palmistry. Be assured I will at any expense carry my point', and a week later, 'I will sink Willes by the weight of metal'—both obvious references of the promise of bribes to the pliable voter.

On the management of the estate, Wilkes sends a continuous stream of instructions and suggestions on improving things. In 1756 he was determined to enlarge the property and sought Dell's help with the Feoffees. 'I shall take it a favour if they will grant . . . a lease of the garden, late Jackson's, the house and garden of Ironmonger, the ground you mention of Chilton's and the other slip almost opposite to your backgates.'

He was also keen for the Parish to improve the road to Prebendal for, in a letter written from Morgan's Coffee House, Bath, in May 1756, he says, 'Now, Mr Surveyor, I have a favour to ask of you. It is that you would make Cat Street a good road to the Parsonage, for I had much rather come that way than by Church Street. I wish the banks were bricked in the upper part of the street, as you have lower down.'

Whenever Wilkes was about to visit his estate, clear instructions were given to Dell to lay in a good stock of fuel and food in Prebendal House. Preparing for a visit to his property in 1754 he orders for his supper, 'a neck of mutton and broth and two roast fowls and lay in a surloin of beef, a leg of pork, a fillet of veal, two fowls and a pair of rabbits in order to chase hunger from our doors: not forgetting good fires in the dining room and best parlour, to chase away the cold, which at present in London is very extreme.'

Wilkes appears affectionate towards the rest of the Dell family, often asking after their well being. One Christmas time he says of his daughter, 'My dear girl is perfectly well and is everything I wish her. The compliments of this merry season to you and Mrs Dell, not forgetting Sukey's fireside.' (Susanna was Dell's sister who in November 1761 married the Vicar of Aylesbury, the Rêvd John Stevens, DD,¹⁶ Wilkes was one of the witnesses to the marriage and the letters reveal that the Vicar was one of Wilkes's fellow carousers in Aylesbury.)

Dell was also put in charge of the garden, of which Wilkes appears to have been fond but which, in the not so distant future, was to cause friction. Brother-in-law Stevens was also a loyal gardener. In January 1755 after urging Dell to 'comfort your wife in this cold weather', Wilkes goes on, 'I am glad to hear my garden is emerging from that state of chaos it has long been in. I hope Stephens will restore it to beauty and order. Pray tell him how kindly I take his bestowing so much pains on it. I long to hear that the plantations are finished.'

His affection for his only legitimate child, Polly, is well known and this is clearly reflected in the letters. His friend Potter's daughter caught the dreaded smallpox in 1757 and then it was to be Polly's turn as Wilkes tells Dell in April, 'She is in as fine a way as can be. All the symptoms are favourable. She is pretty full but not above a dozen on her face.'—clear reference to the ever present worry that scars left after the disease would disfigure; no more important to a woman than a man, as a glance at Wilkes's own portraits confirms.

The same letter gives some indication of the split between husband and wife when he tells Dell, 'I had desired her mother to attend her before and after the inoculation was performed. I wrote to Mrs Wilkes recommending Miss Wilkes to her Mother's care; but she has never once come near her. I am greatly obliged to my Mother Wilkes etc. for their daily care.'

A certain degree of intimacy is apparent between the politician and his agent and in one

of the few references to his parents throughout the long series of letters, Wilkes records the death of his father Israel, '... my heart is so full of grief, for my poor father died today, but without a pang or groan, only ceasing to breath. I wish that you and I, with every friend we have, may have as quiet and peaceful an exit.'

He also talks of Mrs Wilkes when he writes in 1757, 'Mrs Wilkes came here [St James's Place] last Saturday and I have two maid servants solely to tend her. I am to give you her compliments and she longs to see Betsy'—a clear reference to Dell's wife, Elizabeth. It is not certain from this whether he refers to his wife or his mother but it has been said that, after their separation in 1756, he never saw his wife again.¹⁷

John Wilkes's second election as one of the two Members for Aylesbury was in 1761 but it is clear that, on this occasion, he was tiring of the ever stretched out hands of the 'wretched impertinents'. Confronted with the possibility of others contesting the seat, he wrote to Dell at length two months before the election, 'I told you by Saturday night's post . . . I would not be bullied by a mob. I know to the last, if any man offer a single shilling more [than the suggested five guineas bribe to vote for him], that I will not be your member . . . I will never be trampled upon and would as here sell my estate at Aylesbury and quit the Borough now as hereafter. If I am now mastered—adieu Borough.' The storm clouds of his financial problems to come were already gathering.

His father's death a couple of days later must have eased the problem for the time being and he writes, 'If Mr W. [Willes the opposing candidate] lends 5 to the poor [i.e. guineas] I will lend 6. If he does 6, I will lend 7, if he 7, I eight, and so on I assure you. I desire you to let this be known to all my good friends at Aylesbury, whom I will support to the last, and who I am sure would not have me be guilty of any disrespect to the ashes of a father, not only unburied, but scarcely cold, to whom I have such obligations. I know the nature of Aylesbury perfectly, and I feel at my heart the kindness of the Independents to me: but for the

mercenaries, I am to buy them. If W gives any sum, the next day I will (for I know I can) go beyond it, and upon that, with the support of my disinterested friends, I will carry Aylesbury'. This he did but by how many votes, from an electorate of approximately 500, is not known.

His disenchantment surfaces again, however, within a month of the re-election and he appears to resent what he saw as ungrateful townsmen. 'After so many acts of kindness to many individuals', he writes, 'I found what I had to trust from the majority . . . I love to do acts of humanity and feel a real sense of gratitude towards the few independents who have obliged me . . . But I will not be the dupe of the mob'.

Orders were given to keep from the house and gardens, 'all the rabble at Aylesbury. If any of the better sort care to walk in the garden, the gardener shall attend them, as is done everywhere else, and then I shall get rid of the numbers of women, children, dogs etc. You would stare at the little thefts they make. I mean the lower sort; the best flowers, etc. etc. I have directed Thorpe to keep the gates always bolted and whoever rings, he will attend and will go with any company round the garden.'

Still on the subject of the Prebendal garden, an implied note of criticism surfaces in the same letter when he writes, 'As to your private door [into the property], I object greatly on account of the servants, and therefore will scruple no expense to make the Well answer the purpose of a Well. I can scarcely manage my own servants, much less yours too, and the only way to preserve any harmony is to keep them distinct. When the Well is done, your servants can have no business with mine in the Parsonage Yard; mine none with yours, except the trifles of dung etc when I am down which is seldom and likely to be seldomer.'

A delightful mental picture can be captured of the scene at the Well in the Parsonage Yard—that of servants gathered around drawing and carrying water to their respective households and using the opportunity to flirt and gossip while the Master was away in London; the chatter of children and the barking of dogs

adding to the general harmless mayhem. But this was to all cease forthwith.

As a concession to the Dell family, however, Wilkes desired, 'whenever you or Mrs Dell chose to walk in the garden you would, without Thorpe and with the children at any time: but do not send servants with them.'

There are gaps in the correspondence. When Wilkes was resident at Prebendal House, the need for written instructions was less and certainly after the outburst over the garden in 1761, only five letters survive covering a span of twenty years. Dell's usefulness was on the wain and as one of Wilkes's biographers has commented on his 'docile satellites', he was inclined to forget their services as soon as they were no longer useful to him.

Certainly no letters are extant for the period of Wilkes's trial for libel in May 1763 (the *North Briton* episode, for which Wilkes is best known, is outside the scope of this article). Nor are there any following his expulsion as Member for Aylesbury in the first few days of 1764.

For five years Wilkes remained in exile on the

continent. His Aylesbury estates were sold by public auction in 1764 in an effort to ease his financial problems and William Lee appears to have purchased the bulk of the interest. The whole property other than the house and garden was sublet to Dell for £270 per annum.¹⁸

Upon Wilkes's return to this country in 1768 and his subsequent imprisonment, Dell must have written expressing his concern at the latter event for Wilkes, in thanking him for his 'very obliging letter', acknowledges 'the old bottled beer you were so kind as to send me. . . . I have a particular pleasure in drinking your health and the County Town of Bucks in its produce.'

Still in the King's Bench Prison four months later and with all connections severed with the town, John Wilkes writes to his old Agent what is clearly meant to be a final note, 'Mr Wilkes presents his compliments to Mr Dell and has only time to return many thanks for the obliging letter of the 6th and to assure him and all his family of the regard Mr W ever bears them.'

'Old Steady', as Wilkes affectionately called Dell, had made his exit from the politician's life.

REFERENCES

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3. *Origins*, Magazine of Bucks Family History Society, Vol. 3 No. 3, 23.
4. V. E. Lloyd-Hart, *John Wilkes and the Foundling Hospital at Aylesbury*, 36.
5. Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754/1790, Part 1*, 215.
6. B.R.O., *St Mary's Parish Registers*.
7. *Gibb's History of Aylesbury*, 217/224.
8. Bucks A.S., Miscell. Series, Copies of originals. B.R.O., D/X 463, photocopies of above.
9. Author's conversation with the late Hayward Parrott.
10. This letter was purchased by the Society in 1939 at Sotheby's. It had probably been misplaced from the main body of letters when they were being copied at Hartwell and it does not appear in Mrs Lee's transcript.
11. H. Hanley, *The Prebendal Aylesbury*, 41/43.
12. Lloyd-Hart, *op. cit.*, 23.
13. Add. MSS 30867, f. 125/134.
14. *Ibid.*
15. R. Sedgwick, *The House of Commons 1715-1754*, Part 1, 197.
16. B.R.O., *St. Mary's Parish Registers*.
17. Hanley, *op. cit.*, 43.
18. Hanley, *op. cit.*, 9.

The direct quotations are from the Wilkes/Dell letters, which have not been enumerated.