

THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

It is a formidable thing, Gentlemen, to succeed to your President, the late Dr. Stubbs, the most learned and laborious of historians. I feel as unfit to occupy his presidential chair as his episcopal throne, and I cannot say more.

It is scarcely less formidable to be asked to open an archæological museum when one is not an archæologist. One has to rub up and test one's ideas, and consider whether there is any phase of archæology which one can discuss without discredit. Archæology to most of us is the attempt to reconstitute the remote past from the scanty materials available—from a pot, a parchment, or a coin. If this were our object to-day, I should have declined to come. To deal with the days when Buckinghamshire was a forest of beech-trees and peopled with deer, or when the Chilterns were impassable because of the robbers who haunted them, would be a task beyond my power or inclination. But when I see that the advertised list of persons of whom you have relics in the museum comprises Louis XVIII., Lord Beaconsfield, Burke, Cowper, Oliver Cromwell, Gray, Hampden, Penn, Milton, Shakespeare, and John Wilkes, I feel that I am on firmer ground. Those names represent possible and tangible history. In truth the history of Bucks lies chiefly in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. And if I say that it lies chiefly in the Eighteenth Century, I do not forget the stainless Hampden or the disputed Penn. I do not forget, or at any rate I seem to remember, though I cannot verify my quotation, that when Lord Beaconsfield was asked by an historical and political opponent, where were the freeholders of Bucks who had followed Hampden to the field, he replied, 'Why, where you would expect to find them—in the county of Buckingham.' The county indeed is rife with Seventeenth Century history. But it teems with the Eighteenth.

And so I claim that the great epoch of Bucks was the Eighteenth Century, and I base my claim on the contention that the renown of Bucks rests on its political history. Civil war is not politics, it is something more. When politics have passed into civil war they have ceased to be politics. But the glory of Bucks was when the fratricidal sword had been sheathed, and men were forming, rudely and blindly perhaps, but patriotically and strenuously, the England of to-day. Buckinghamshire blossomed in the Eighteenth Century: The Eighteenth Century lingered with her when she had disappeared elsewhere, as if loth to part with her favourite region. Of this I remember two proofs, and I will give another illustration later on. When there was a question between 1830 and 1840 of connecting Bucks, then in the diocese of Lincoln, with the diocese of Oxford, the Bishop of Oxford asked about the ecclesiastical character of Bucks. 'Oh! topboots or Exeter Hall,' was the reply, and thereupon the Bishop declined a nearer connection. Now, though Exeter Hall belongs to the Nineteenth Century, the topboots were a relic of the Eighteenth. Again, the late and last Duke of Buckingham told me that when his mother went from Stowe to Wootton, or Wootton to Stowe, she always rode on a pillion behind a groom—at least as lately as 1830. Now, the pillion was pure Eighteenth Century. It was necessitated, no doubt, by the want of roads, which forbade a carriage; and it was probably the want of roads that delayed the entry of the Nineteenth Century into Bucks.

However that may be, I contend that politics have been the pride of Bucks, and that her political position was achieved in the Eighteenth Century, and that it lasted till politics passed out of the hands of the grandees, and became popular and democratic. I claim for Bucks that she is the most famous of English counties in the field of politics during that period. There were terrific electoral contests elsewhere: in Yorkshire, for example, and in Northamptonshire. But Yorkshire is not a county, but a province, and Northamptonshire cannot claim the continuous political life of Buckinghamshire. It is, I think, safe to say that there were more political combinations hatched in

Bucks during the Eighteenth Century than in all the rest of England, except London and Bath. Why was this? The reason seems to lie in the Palace of Stowe and its inhabitants—Lord Cobham and the great house of Grenville.

Lord Beaconsfield once declared that there is something in the air of Bucks favourable to political knowledge and vigour; and he adduced in proof of this assertion the fact that the county could claim four Prime Ministers. Great, I remember, was the searching of hearts at that affirmation. The list, indeed, is simple enough, if not flawless: George Grenville, Lord Shelburne, Lord Grenville, and Lord Beaconsfield himself make up the four. The list is not flawless, because though we can claim with confidence the Grenvilles and Disraeli, our claim to Shelburne is imperfect; and if we can claim Shelburne, we can on similar grounds claim Portland. For Portland had a villa at Bulstrode, where he frequently resided, quite as much as Shelburne at Wycombe; but Portland was a Nottinghamshire man, his domicile was Welbeck; while Shelburne was a Wiltshire man or an Irishman, and his domicile was Bowood.

Putting Portland and Shelburne aside as doubtful, there remain only Disraeli and the Grenvilles. Of Disraeli it is too near his time to speak. None, however, who sauntered with him at Hughenden, and heard him discourse on the porch, the oven, and the tank, could doubt his deep-seated attachment to Buckinghamshire and his Buckinghamshire home. He would, indeed, declare, with a smile of apology, as he showed his guests the details of his property, that nothing could equal the egotism of a landed proprietor on Sunday afternoon. But he himself was only a brilliant accident in the life of the county; his ancient and illustrious race had only just ceased to wander, and he or his father might, but for chance, have pitched their tent elsewhere. Stowe and the Temples and the Grenvilles represent something much more ancient—a race rooted in the county for centuries; a race which long controlled the county, and at one time almost threatened to absorb it.

This political power began under the fostering

influence of Lord Cobham, who was not only a politician, but a Field Marshal; and at Stowe there gathered that remarkable group which was known as the Cobham Cousins—Grenvilles, Lyttletons, and Pitts—Thomas Pitt and the terrible Cornet of horse. This powerful combination, composed of one man of genius and several men of ability, all more or less impracticable, might have governed the country for a generation had they only been able to agree. That, however, was obviously out of the question; and the Temple of Friendship, reared by Lord Cobham to contain the busts of his friends, had, long before it was finished, survived its purpose and meaning.

But it was not one group of men that embodied the political power of the dynasty of Stowe, for it continued through long generations. There was the generation of Lord Cobham, then that of Temple, George Grenville, and Pitt, brothers and brother-in-law, constantly at variance, constantly endeavouring to patch up a formidable and fraternal peace. Then when they disappear a new generation comes on the scene—a Temple not less turbulent and active than his uncle and predecessor, with his brother, William Grenville, destined through long years to be Secretary of State, and to succeed his cousin as Prime Minister; finally, that cousin, William Pitt.

Then again that generation passes, and is succeeded by a new one. The head of the house is now Marquis of Buckingham, and is on the verge of achieving the ancestral object of ambition, and restoring the historic but sinister dukedom of the Staffords, the Villiers, and the Sheffields. He is at the head of a clan all sworn to further that object. There are in his own family, besides his own marquissate, the peerages of Grenville and Glastonbury. He has in the House of Commons men such as Wynn, and Phillimore, and Fremantle, more or less fit to sit on the front bench; he has his brother, Lord Nugent; perhaps a dozen all told. In 1821-2 there are negotiations conducted by the Duke of Wellington and Lord Londonderry on the one side, and by Lord Buckingham and Charles Wynn on the other, as between two independent States. At last the treaty is made. Lord Bucking-

ham is made a Duke, his principal lieutenant in the House of Commons is admitted to the Cabinet, places are found for other members of the party, and in exchange their votes are given to Lord Liverpool. It is a singular transaction; it is pure Eighteenth Century; and it is, I suppose, the last of its kind in our annals, unless the Lichfield House compact, which was in any case much less pompous and avowed, be considered analogous. Within the next twenty years the second Duke of Buckingham had hastily joined and hastily left the Peel Cabinet, and the great Grenville epoch of the history of England had come to an end. It had lasted for more than a century. During the whole of that time there had been a Grenville finger in every political pie. During the whole of that time Stowe had been a political fortress or ambuscade, watched vigilantly by every political party; the influence of Stowe had been one which the most powerful minister could not afford to ignore: and the owner of Stowe had been the hereditary chief of a political group. Tons of correspondence survive to show the activity and power of that combination.

And the temple in which all this power was concentrated was worthy of its trust. Its magnificent avenue, its stately but not overwhelming proportions, its princely rooms of reception, its gardens, its grottoes, its shrines, still breathe the perfume of the Eighteenth Century. In its superb saloons we seem to expect brocades and periwigs and courtly swords: we seem to see the long procession of illustrious ghosts that in life were the favoured guests of the house—Pope, and Thomson, and Glover, Vanbrugh and Chesterfield, Pitt plighting his troth to his Hester, Horace Walpole, and a world of princes—an unrivalled succession of curious and admiring visitors from all parts of England and Europe. The house has lost its priceless collections, but no atom of its unpurchaseable charm. Bare, but still beautiful, Stowe remains the central glory of Buckinghamshire.

The dynasty of the Grenvilles, however, by no means exhausts the claims of Buckinghamshire to political preeminence. We have, besides, the remarkable family of Wharton—that Philip Wharton who married the

heiress of Winchendon: his son the Marquis of Wharton, who, as the writer of 'Lillibullero,' almost sang James II. off his throne; who was at once a Presbyterian, a duellist, and a debauchee; who was the first electioneering strategist of his time. Macaulay in his word-sketch of him notices two features: 'What shame meant he did not seem to understand;' and again, 'He never forgot a face that he had once seen.' Neither characteristic was likely to hinder his success, and the latter is the rarest and most precious of political qualifications. At any rate, and by divers means, he had become the Monarch of the Vale, and had built up an extraordinary edifice of political power, as is proved by the honours heaped on his son before he came of age; that son again the Philip, Duke of Wharton, who, in twelve years, hurried his brilliant talents, high fortunes, and princely position to a beggar's grave.

We may, if we care to, claim John Wilkes, perhaps not the worst of a breed which will never be extinct. He was at best the sceptical representative of an honest cause. But we are probably none of us Wilkesites, any more than he was himself. Still, the mention of Wilkes has at any rate two advantages—that it brings us to speak of the borough of Aylesbury, in which we are met to-day.

Aylesbury owes its charter to its fidelity to the cause of that unhappy Queen—the first Mary—who was to marry Philip II., to be vainly lured by the supreme happiness of maternity, and to inflict quite honestly and conscientiously such cruel suffering on the loyal people of her realm. The reward was little appreciated. Four years afterwards, in the year of the Queen's death, Aylesbury, heedless of the lucrative contingencies to be associated with parliamentary representation in the future, did not take the trouble to return a member to Parliament. Fourteen years afterwards, however, a vigorous widow, Lady Pakington, widow of the lord of the manor of Aylesbury, supplemented the languid deficiencies of the burgesses by nominating two members, and announcing to the borough, without further ceremony, that she had elected them. The borough bowed to this imperious female, who thus

carried woman suffrage further than has ever since been even advocated. A little later she obtained the election of her second husband; and imagination pauses before the possibilities which might have resulted had this determined lady enjoyed a longer life. For she only lived forty-six years, and she had already torn up the Constitution by the roots.

Wilkes was elected in 1757, when Aylesbury was already a typical eighteenth-century borough. Eighteen months before, he had written, 'I am told there are many expensive customs at Aylesbury in Christmas-time, particularly about St. Thomas' day,' and, a week or two later, had approved a scheme of a shilling for each widow and half-a-crown for each poor family—to celebrate, I presume, the festival of St. Thomas. This, however, was only ground bait. For the actual election he was willing to give two guineas per man, and up to three or five if necessary. At a later election he determined to supply £5 to each of three hundred chosen electors, 'and let the rest do their worst.'

It is, I think, impossible not to pause here and indulge in a momentary burst of envy for these fortunate potwallopers. They, indeed, made the best of both worlds. They voted for freedom and purity to the cry of 'Wilkes and Liberty,' and received £5 a-piece for doing so.

At a later epoch, just inside the Nineteenth Century, Aylesbury had reduced the art, I will not say of corruption, but of political remuneration, to a science. Representatives of the candidate sat with two bowls before them. One contained punch, the other contained gold; and when a freeholder had proved his right to vote he was given a glass of punch from one, and two guineas from the other; and then he voted by intuition for the right man.

But enough of Aylesbury; it was a specimen of an eighteenth-century borough, neither better nor worse than its neighbours. In the Nineteenth Century, what with enlargement of its boundaries, and frequent Reform Bills, it changed its character and became an enlightened and incorruptible constituency. But I cannot trespass on the Nineteenth Century; for no casuistry would include it at present within the defined boundaries of archæology.

But let us not pause another moment before proceeding to our most splendid political figure, Edmund Burke. He may not rank among our Prime Ministers, for he was never even in the Cabinet; but it is scarcely extravagant to maintain that he will survive them all. No doubt, like Mr. Disraeli, whose title he inspired, he was not a son of the soil. He was the child and friend of Ireland. But we claim him without doubt and without misgiving: he was a man of Bucks by adoption and grace. He lived in the county for thirty years—the best, and, but for his irreparable bereavement, the happiest of his life. Here he planted with his usual enthusiasm, here he spent his money like a gentleman farmer, here he wrote and dictated, here he entertained, and here he died. Nothing is left of his dear home at Gregories: of his active life in that country nothing survives but a dagger—the one he is supposed to have thrown down in the House of Commons. But his memory is still vivid among us. Nor did Westminster rob us of his remains, for his bones rest with Waller's at Beaconsfield.

But I have not yet done. So splendid are the claims that I have already recited that we are in danger of overlooking the last and the greatest of all. I am claiming for Buckinghamshire a political pre-eminence among English counties, and herein we are bound to remember, to use the language of a bidding prayer, 'the King's College of our Lady of Eton,' which we are proud to reckon within our boundaries; the august and generous foster-mother of innumerable politicians, and some statesmen. To all the statesmen, and as many of the politicians as is safe or desirable, our county can lay an unquestioned claim. She did not bear them all, but she did rear them all. Learning, indeed, the beloved College did not always give; at any rate, she did not force her erudition on her forward charges. But with a full hand she imparted her unconscious but priceless graces of character: honour, courage, fellowship, friendship, manhood, loyalty, and reverence; man's duty towards himself and his neighbours. Long may that lamp shine in Buckinghamshire. Long may Eton rear men for England. Long may England owe her debt to Eton.

And now I draw to a close. I do so with a feeling that many may deem it presumption on my part to attempt to satisfy the cravings of an Archæological Association with remarks on anything so recent as the Eighteenth Century. The Eighteenth Century they may say is not archæology at all.

Ah, gentlemen, they forget. They forget how far we have left the Eighteenth Century behind. We have even turned our backs for ever on the Nineteenth Century, which contains the best part of the lives of some of us; we are, for good or for evil, launched into the Twentieth. The uncounted days are gliding away, bringing our generation on to the dark river and the constant ferry, bearing our country buoyantly forward towards the illimitable future. We are moving every day and every minute to the period when we ourselves shall be archæological matter. In another century we who are here shall be objects of interest; in two centuries, subjects of curiosity. And what shall we be in the thirtieth? Should our Archæological Society assemble then, which I do not doubt for a moment, what will be the position? That is a problem which, like most other problems, we cannot solve. Of what will their exhibition consist? No doubt our successors will examine, with something between a smile and a tear, some unique specimen of those portentous hats which enshrine the brain-power of respectability—of our bankers, our legislators, and our divines. They will gather round the glass case which contains the naked mechanism of an umbrella, the tireless wheel of a bicycle, the unmelodious horn of a motor-car. Most thickly of all will they surround the surviving but crumbling skeleton of the last horse. Our paper will long have been dust, our newspapers will be a part of the air they breathe (as, metaphorically, they are now), they will have no means of deciphering or realising our manner of life except from these interesting relics. What a vista of speculation this opens! What will be their opinion of us? What a pity it is, as Mr. Balfour would say, that the operation cannot be mutual, and that we cannot form or express our opinion on them.

And they themselves—what and where will they

be ? My successor in the chair—by the bye, will he occupy a chair ?—may he not, for example, be standing on his head, which the Newer Medicine may then have discovered to be the only healthy position, when legs from disuse shall have dwindled or disappeared ? And his address ? Will he deliver one, or will he communicate it to some machine which will disperse it at large to an inattentive world, or which may be placed by the roadside to be tapped by any casual wayfarer, who may happen to thirst for eloquence or knowledge ? Public speaking, as at present practised, especially the oratory which perplexes banquets, will, I venture to prophesy, have long been abolished as a barbarous and mischievous absurdity.

And the Association itself ? Will it meet on the earth, or will it float in the air, responsive to the ruling of the president, and to the modulated rays of the Sun ? These are questions we cannot answer, and which do not really concern us. It is enough for us that we have lived our little span, and reached the evening of our summer's day. But it is not unwise or unreasonable for the dispassionate minds of choice archæologists to remember that there are but a few steps from the demonstrator to the subject, and that they, in a comparatively short time, must be transformed from the exponents into the objects of antiquarian investigation. It may moderate their criticism, and leaven with an element of Christian charity the acerbities of philosophical inquiry.

Be that as it may, I would fain hope, and express the hope on your behalf, that our successors, whether they meet on, or above, or below the earth, will not be unmindful of the past glories of Buckinghamshire, and that they may even be not unwilling, in their abundant toleration, to concede that we of the Twentieth Century—that pregnant phrase of which we think so much and know so little—were, if their potent microscopes are still able to discern traces of our existence, not wholly unworthy of the traditions of the famous and beautiful county in which we dwelt.