

‘THE BOYS OF STROUD FOR EVER!’

The Election Riots of 1834

by Philip Walmsley

In the last century elections often had the excitement of local football ‘derbies’. Indeed, in 1826, a general election year, the *Gloucester Journal* reported that a London lady of fashion was seeking a stay at a place where she could enjoy ‘the fun and frolic of a contested election’. During the 53 years when it enjoyed the status of a parliamentary borough, Stroud enjoyed several elections of this kind.

The Reform agitation of 1830–1832 raised the political temperature throughout the country and in Gloucestershire nowhere more than at Stroud, which was to become a two-seat borough by the Reform Act. This did not yet lead to violent rivalry in borough elections, for Stroud opinion differed from that in the rest of the county by being overwhelmingly pro-reform, and local Tories wisely kept quiet. In the first borough election in 1832 the three candidates were all reformers.

However, many inhabitants of Stroud borough qualified as electors for the East Gloucestershire division, in which opinion was more evenly divided. A consequence of the Reform Act was that voting in county elections was no longer limited to the county town, so that in East Gloucestershire voting now took place at Chipping Campden, Cheltenham, Cirencester, Northleach, Stroud and Tewkesbury in addition to Gloucester. At the first election for the new division in 1832, the Reform candidates were the former members for the county, Sir Berkeley Guise, first elected in the fierce contest of 1811, and the Hon Henry Moreton, son and heir of Lord Ducie. Only one Tory candidate came forward, C W Codrington, the son of the proprietor of Dodington Park in the south of the county, and Guise and Moreton were duly elected. A look at the voting figures showed that they owed their election to the support of Cheltenham and, above all, Stroud:

	Guise	Moreton	Codrington
Stroud district	909	920	178
Cheltenham district	549	522	299
Other districts	1853	1742	2195
Total	3311	3184	2672

Clearly, if the Tories (or the Blues, as they were known in this county) could increase their strength in the districts where they were strongest, and weaken their opponents, the Yellows, at Cheltenham and Stroud, they stood a good chance of winning the seat.

They did not have to wait long. Sir Berkeley Guise died in July 1834, and the eastern division was thrown into the turmoil of a by-election. The new Yellow candidate was C H Tracy Leigh, eldest son of C Hanbury Leigh of Toddington Park, whilst C W Codrington again stood as a Blue. The campaign was brief. Little more than a fortnight elapsed between Guise’s death and the nomination, a fortnight spent in furious canvassing by the candidates and their friends throughout the division. On the 31 July, when both candidates were canvassing at Moreton-in-Marsh, there was what the *Gloucester Journal* described as a ‘general row’, in which windows were broken. The election indeed attracted national attention, with *The Times* correspondent sending reports to his paper during the last week of the campaign. These almost daily reports give a vivid picture of the contest, although the correspondent seems not to have travelled outside of Gloucester and Cheltenham.

After the nomination at the Shire Hall on 7 August, voting took place on Monday and Tuesday, 11 and 12 August, the hours of voting being from 9.00 am to 4.00 pm on the first day and 8.00 am to 4.00 pm on the second. With open voting, the progress of the poll could be monitored, and at periodic intervals details of the voting were sent by express horsemen from the voting booths to the central committees of the two parties at Cheltenham. These reports, pointing to a victory for Codrington, inflamed the Yellow mob there, and probably also at Stroud.

MOB RULE

With feelings running so high, disorder was to be expected. At Stroud, the Blues feared that the large Yellow mob around the hustings would intimidate their voters as they came to cast their votes, and had sought in advance the agreement of their opponents to the swearing in of special constables for the occasion. This request, however, the Yellow committee refused, unlike their fellows at Cheltenham, where nearly one hundred special constables were enrolled to maintain the peace.

At Stroud, the hustings were set up in King Street in the open space in front of the recently erected Victoria Rooms, most of which has now been replaced by the Woolworth’s building. (The corner of the Rooms still stands, housing Hilton’s shoe shop.) To the north of the open space was the Royal George Inn, facing down King Street towards the hustings and the Rowcroft, the site being now occupied by Foster’s. In this inn the Blues set up their committee room.

Thwarted in their desire for special constables, the Blues had to rely on the ineffective parish constables, of whom only fifteen were available for duty on the election days.

On the first day, as the election got under way, the Blues complained of the harassment of their voters, colours being snatched away and damage being inflicted on a carriage containing voters. In the afternoon there were scuffles round the entrance to the ‘George’, the Blues accusing the Yellows of trying to effect an entrance, whilst the Yellows claimed that the Blues had stationed prize-fighters in the inn, including one Rogers, known as the Herefordshire Chicken, who had made sorties into the street, in one of which he had knocked down six bystanders, and in another eight or ten. During the evening, the ‘George’ was virtually under siege, several windows being broken. It does not seem that on the first day any attempt had been made to restore order.

During the night, the Gloucester Blues reinforced the ‘George’ by sending there thirty men, who according to the Yellows, were armed with bludgeons.

Conditions on the second day remained as bad, the ‘George’ now the target for stones which broke all its windows. It was not until the close of the poll at 4 o’clock that the Riot Act was read by N S Marling, a Yellow supporter and one of the three local woollen manufacturers who had recently been made magistrates. It was to no avail, and the disorders continued into the evening. Repeated attacks were made to break into the ‘George’, but these were all thrown back by the Blues, helped now by the Yellow committee. During one of these attacks, Marling was injured in the face by a stone and had to withdraw, his place being taken by another Yellow clothier magistrate, W H Stanton. The riot only petered out shortly before midnight.

At the close of the two election days, the 'Royal George', the town's principal inn, had had all the windows and doors on the two fronts facing the street destroyed and the local magistrates and constables had been shown to be utterly ineffective. The follow-up was equally unimpressive. At the Lent Assizes of 1834 two pairs of brothers, Samuel and William Bennett, and Elijah and Charles Moseley, pleaded guilty to the crimes of riotously assembling with others at Stroud



'The Royal George' Stroud in the early years of the century

and beginning to demolish the 'Royal George'. They were sentenced to death, although the counsel for the prosecution recommended them to mercy, and in the event they were freed after serving short periods in prison.

The costs of the damage to the 'Royal George' were met by the Hundred of Bisley, the proprietor Richard Parker receiving £87.15s, and his tenant Thomas Smith £41 2s 7d.

As to the election, the worst fears of the Yellows were realised, and the Conservative candidate Codrington won by the narrow majority of 70 in a total poll of 5488. The turbulence of the 1834 by-election did not, however, inaugurate a succession of fiercely fought contests in the eastern division of the county. Having gained one of the two seats in 1834, the Conservatives won the other in 1841 when the sitting Liberal member withdrew and his party produced no other candidate. From then until its redistribution in 1885, the eastern division was a safe Conservative seat, with only one further contest, a by-election in 1854. Such excitement as was to be found in elections, Stroud in future had to find in its own borough contests.

SOURCES

Gloucester Journal 16,30 Aug 1834

Gloucestershire Chronicle

The Times

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