



Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society

A Disputed Election

Yet again, Bletchingley made its mark on life in Britain - this time in January 1624.

Like other Parliamentary Boroughs before the Reform Act, Bletchingley came under the patronage of single, individual, persons meaning that they could have undue influence on the outcome of the parliamentary elections and also the day to day business of Parliament. These boroughs were often referred to as “**pocket boroughs**” – Bletchingley was more susceptible than most as two MPs were elected from the constituency – meaning double the influence for the person who held the patronage.

By 1624, the pocket borough was in the hands of Lady Howard but during that election something remarkable happened as the election was disputed and it took three goes to get a “properly legal” result. At the time the only people that could vote were the seventeen “burgage holders” (*see Rotten Borough for details of what constituted a burgage*).

First election: In January 1624 the local bailiff delivered the call for the election to just one of the burgage-holders in Bletchingley instead of all of them. The news quickly spread to the other burgage-holders, who, in any case, agreed to hold the election five days later. The meeting was held, allegedly at the White Hart, and Sir Miles Fleetwood and John Hayward were elected

But... a Henry Lovell was not happy with the result, though he failed to persuade the bailiff to issue a new precept for a new election. Lady Howard (lady of the manor) evidently also shared his disappointment, and on 8 February, a Sunday, her bailiff announced in church that a second election meeting would be held the following day which would be open to the inhabitants of the borough generally, not just the burgage-holders.

Henry Lovell was supported by the rector, Dr. Nathaniel Harris, who was a friend of Lovell’s wife. Harris had taken offence when John Hayward had told him that his curate was not eligible to vote in the election. On the day of the new meeting, Harris (the rector) read in church a letter from Lady Howard commending Lovell and Fleetwood, and he reminded the congregation that she might well withdraw her annual benevolence to the poor of the parish if she was displeased with the result.

So a **second election** was held the next day, when 30 inhabitants of the borough took part and this time Fleetwood and Lovell were duly elected. It was later alleged that Lovell had used bribery, although it was thought the sums involved were ‘very little’. Indeed, it was reported that Lovell gave voters 6d. each - for beer. However, it was also reported that he threatened some of the inhabitants with actions for breach of promise if he was not elected; he also repeated Harris’ warning that Lady Howard could withdraw her charity to the village.

A petition to the Houses of Parliament was then made, who decided that the 17 burgage holders were, in fact, the only rightful electors; the bailiff had nothing to do with the matter. It was held that Mr Lovell had been guilty of contempt in procuring a new election and he was ordered to the Tower at the House's pleasure until he made submission on his knees at the bar of the House.

Meanwhile Sir Myles Fleetwood decided to sit for Launceston when Parliament opened and so a new election was required but from which Lovell was barred. By this time, Dr Nathaniel Harris had also come under censure by Parliament for aiding and abetting Lovell; it was said, they had jointly threatened to try and persuade Lady Elizabeth Howard to withdraw her charity from the borough unless Lovell was elected.

The rector also managed to upset the House of Commons by saying "*how the chief priests and elders sought false witnesses*": he alleged that John Hayward had told lies and that the House had supported Hayward.

In answer, Parliament decided that the rector had attempted to alter the course of a free election "*by abusing the pulpit to his private malicious ends*" and he was ordered to the Bar to be sharply admonished, to confess his faults on his knees and ask the pardon of the House.

On the following Sunday in his own church in Bletchingley, at the start of his sermon, Nathaniel Harris was obliged to admit his fault, ask for the love of his neighbours and to promise reformation. This was executed accordingly on all points. As Uvedale Lambert notes in his *Parish History*, no doubt this was one of the best and most attentive congregations as the Rector ever saw.

The House of Commons also decided that the first election had been valid as the 17 burgage holders had been the rightful electors albeit the call for the election had been informal. At **the third attempt** Edward Byshe of Burstow was duly elected in replacement of Sir Miles Fleetwood to sit alongside John Haywood.

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