

## THE GORDON RIOTS

Friday, 2nd June, 1780 was hot. Early that morning a vast crowd of men had assembled in response to an advertisement inserted in several newspapers by the Protestant Association on the previous Wednesday. The advertisement recorded resolutions approved in Coachmakers' Hall on Tuesday evening, the first of which was "That this Association do meet on Friday next, June 2, in St. Georges Fields, at 10 o'clock in the morning, to consider of the most prudent and respectful manner of attending their petition, which will be presented, the same day, to the House of Commons."

Most of them were composed of quiet, intent and sober-looking men, 'the better sort of trades people,' with hymn books, a determined look in their eyes and wearing blue cockades in their hats. St. Georges Fields was a big open space, south of the river, where Waterloo Station now is, bounded to the north by an oak lined street called Melancholy Walk and to the east by Dirty Lane. The petition comprised mainly the signatures of thousands on parchment and before the procession set off a tailor sewed them together and when he had finished it was rolled up like a carpet and passed from shoulder to shoulder, because it was so heavy.

Lord George Gordon arrived by coach, made a brief speech and then the crowd was divided eight abreast into four divisions, the London, the Westminster, the Southwark and the Scottish. They practised marching by making three or four circuits of the Fields, led by a piper ahead of the Scottish division in the van. They crossed the river over London Bridge, marched up Fish Street Hill into Grace Church Street, left down Cornhill into Cheapside, up Fleet Street and the Strand to Charing Cross and then down Whitehall to Parliament Street. As they passed through the narrow streets of the City others, less reputable, joined them and followed on behind. This long procession, nearly four miles long, was joined by others which had crossed by Blackfriars and Westminster Bridges.

Soon after 2 o'clock the first coaches carrying Members of Parliament began to arrive and they had to run the gauntlet of the crowd.

Dickens in 'Barnaby Rudge' provides in the second half of that book a remarkably accurate historical account of the riots. Kathleen Tillotson, in her introduction, refers to his powerful narrative which 'combines fidelity to fact with the doings of his fictitious characters. He adds but never falsifies.' I have relied to a great extent on his imaginative writing as a source for this paper.

About the density of the crowd Dickens says 'It is a familiar expression in describing a great crowd that a person might have walked upon the peoples' heads. In this case it was actually done; for a boy who had by some means got

among the concourse, and was in imminent danger of suffocation, climbed to the shoulders of a man beside him and walked upon the peoples' hats and heads into the open street; traversing in his passage the whole length of two staircases and a long gallery. Nor was the stream without less dense; for a basket which had been tossed into the crowd, was jerked from head to head, and shoulder to shoulder, and went spinning and whistling on above them, until it was lost to view, without ever falling in among them or coming near the ground.'

With regard to the Members of the Lords and Commons approaching the House he writes, 'Their carriages were stopped and broken; the wheels wrenched off; the glasses shattered to atoms, the panels beaten in; drivers, footmen and masters, pulled from their seats and rolled in the mud. Lords, commoners and reverent bishops, with little distinction of person or party, were kicked and punched and hustled; passed from hand to hand through various stages of ill-usage; and sent to their fellow-senators at last with their clothes hanging in strands about them, their bag-wigs torn off, themselves speechless and breathless, and their persons covered with the powder which had been cuffed and beaten out of their hair.'

Lord George Gordon finally moved that the Petition should be taken into immediate consideration and the motion was seconded by Alderman Bull. After six hours of tumult and hubbub, at about 8 o'clock in the evening the House divided and the motion was overwhelmingly defeated by 192 to 6.

There then remained the difficulty of getting home, but finally the Guards were called. A little after 9 o'clock a party of Foot and Horse Guards arrived commanded by two justices. The order to charge was given but the mass of the crowd was so great that the cavalry had to retire and return at full gallop to move them. However, this had the desired effect and by 10 o'clock when Members went home there were only a few stragglers in Palace Yard and the surrounding roads.

Just after midnight, that is in the early hours of Saturday, 3rd June, a group of 'resolute, half drunk venomous-looking' men marched down Great Queen Street to Lincolns Inn Fields carrying lighted torches, spades, pickaxes, blacksmiths' hammers, staves and crowbars. They crossed into Duke Street stopping outside the Chapel of the Ambassador of the King of Sardinia. The crowd, including hundreds of street boys and prostitutes, pickpockets and rowdies, broke into the Chapel and smashed everything in it. Vestments, altar ornaments, pews and anything else that would burn were passed over the heads of the mob and put on a number of bonfires.

By noon on Saturday, 3rd June, peace appeared to have descended on London. At three in the afternoon there was a flutter when thirteen men arrested the previous evening were examined by Sir John Fielding at the Public

Office in Bow Street. But the soldiers guarding the prisoners delivered them safely to Newgate by about 5 o'clock.

By 9 o'clock a vast milling mob had gathered in Cripplegate to threaten and intimidate the Irish colony who lived and worked in the area.

Mr. Malo, a merchant of Irish extraction, had been warned of the mob's intention and Sir James Esdaile, Alderman of Cripplegate, called out all the constables in the district. The Lord Mayor, Alderman Kennett, was there and after some time had elapsed sent a message to the Tower for military assistance, and an officer and seventy three soldiers arrived, albeit when many of the demonstrators had gone home.

The next night the riot in Cripplegate started in earnest and continued for two horrifying days and nights. The riots subsequently spread through London and returned to the City. On Tuesday evening, 6th June, Newgate was attacked and burned and the prisoners released. On Wednesday, 7th June, the King's Bench and Fleet Prisons, the Borough Clink and Surrey Bridewell were in flames and prisoners gone, the New Gaol and Poultry Compter had been attacked. The Bank of England was attacked as were the toll houses on Blackfriars Bridge.

By Thursday, 8th June, the molten and burning lava of riot and destruction was beginning to cool and by Friday, 9th June, the influences of law and order were tightening. By Saturday, 10th June, London began to return to normal apart from the sight of soldiers everywhere.

The trial of Lord George Gordon for high treason started on 5th February 1781 and he was found not guilty. He died in Newgate on 1st November 1793.

That, very briefly, is the story of the Gordon Riots, but I would like to reflect particularly on the parts played by the Corporation and Cripplegate in the drama.

I feel it is difficult to express an opinion on the background but to me the simplest and clearest explanation is in the words used by the Attorney General, to open the trial of Lord Gordon. I quote from the shorthand record of the trial prepared by Joseph Gurney.

"In the latter end of the year 1778, an Act of Parliament passed to repeal certain provisions affecting the Roman Catholics in this country contained in an Act of Parliament made in the eleventh and twelfth years of the reign of King William III (i.e. in 1700 and 1701). The particular provisions which it was the object of this Act to repeal were these,

. . . every popish priest, exercising any part of his function in this

Kingdom, was liable to perpetual imprisonment; every person of the popish religion keeping a school, or taking upon himself the education, government or boarding of youth, was liable to the same punishment. And by another part of this Act Roman Catholics were rendered incapable of inheriting or taking by devise or limitation any estates from their parents or others unless they should take oaths and subscribe a declaration, which by their religion they could not conscientiously do, and their estates were to go immediately over to their next of kin being protestants, and them and their families left to starve.

This Act containing such severe penalties could only be justified by the necessity of the case, for the salvation of the state and our religion. It is the height of severity to punish men for serving good in their own way, or employing themselves in one of the most important duties to society, the education of youth; that men for these reasons alone be doomed to a loathsome prison for their lives, and to the perpetual society of the most profligate and wretched of mankind, is cruel and horrid.

The Bill . . . passed through the House of Commons with almost unanimity, the opposition made to it from some was not to the principle of the Bill, but that it did not go far enough in the redress; it should in the opinion of those have been extended to other penalties, for I must inform you that in the time of passing the Act of King William, the Roman Catholics stood by law excluded from any share in the government, from any office of trust, civil or military, and the persons of that religion performing any part of their functions, as priests or keeping of schools or educating youth, stood liable to many pecuniary penalties and in some instances to temporary imprisonment.”

Why Cripplegate? In his book ‘Cripplegate Ward’, written at the end of the last century, Sir John Baddeley, one of my illustrious predecessors, writes “About 1745 two small buildings were unobtrusively opened as Roman Catholic ‘Chapels’ in Ropemakers’ Alley. They were afterwards known to the initiated, respectively as Father Dillon and Fuller’s and Father Bernard and Dunn’s, but for reasons which may easily be imagined, were called Messrs Brown and Thompson (the caretakers) Penny Hotels. Protestants in the neighbourhood strongly suspected that Roman Catholic services were practised in this humble church, but they did not feel themselves called upon to interfere with the religious worship of men whose private virtues they esteemed.”

Baddeley does not mention that Moorfields was one of the poorest districts of London, just to the east of the slum quarter of St. Giles and north of Bedlam. Christopher Hibbert in his book ‘King Mob’ writes that “it was a part of London where many Irish labourers had lodgings and where the doss-houses were frequently full of Irish vagrants who paid a penny a night to sleep on lousy, rat ridden straw.” “Although most Irish immigrants were unskilled

labourers or self-employed street-hawkers, porters, chairmen, milk sellers, publicans and doss-house keepers, there were also in various parts of London small Irish colonies of skilled or semi-skilled workers, mainly bricklayers and weavers. In Spitalfields and Moorfields there were whole streets and courtyards occupied by Irish weavers.”

The church was situated on the south side of Ropemakers’ Alley, now Ropemaker Street, at the western end abutting onto Butlers Alley, probably in the middle of the road that is still there by the Public Service Building in Milton Court. East of Ropemakers’ Alley was Moorfields, a large open space, with Bethlem Hospital on the southern side north of London Wall.

In the morning, it is timed ante meridian, of Tuesday, 6th June, the Court of Aldermen met. The minutes record “That on Saturday last his Lordship was informed several people were assembled in Ropemakers Alley in Little Moorfields, but not many in number. That on Sunday (the 4th June) afternoon he received further information of a very great concourse of people being assembled in a riotous manner before the Roman Catholic Chapel in the said Alley, and thereupon sent for the two Marshals and Marshalmen, when Thomas Gates the Upper Marshal appearing he directed him to collect what number of constables he could procure, and immediately go there and endeavour to disperse the people. That in the evening his Lordship attended by Mr. Alderman Clark, Mr. Alderman Peckham and Mr. Sheriff Pugh went to Ropemakers Alley and stayed there till three o’clock in the morning. Soon after his arriving there not being able to procure a sufficient number of peace officers to put a stop to the riot, and the burning of furniture of the Chapel and other houses, and those constables who were there not exerting themselves effectively towards suppressing the same, his Lordship thought it his duty to send to the Commander in the Tower for the military to aid and assist, who sent at one time 30 men, another time 15 and at last 30 men more: but finding that force insufficient his Lordship and the Aldermen endeavoured to persuade them to desist and be quiet, which they accordingly did and then quitted the place leaving Mr. Sheriff Pugh behind. That on Monday morning he was informed the riot had recommenced and again sent to the Tower for a military force when in compliance with his Lordship’s message more soldiers came, with a party of horse who were there at this time, and the populace had already destroyed and burnt down the Rome Chapel and two or three of the adjoining houses.”

The Lord Mayor then reported receipt of letters dated 3rd, 4th and 5th June from Viscount Stormont and the Earl of Hillsborough regarding information that ‘tumults might arise within your Lordship’s jurisdiction’ and expressing confidence ‘from your known activity that you will not omit any legal exertion of the civil power which may contribute upon this occasion to preserve the public peace,’ together with the Lord Mayor’s reply.

After this matter had been dealt with Mr. Thomas Gates, Upper Marshal was called who reported that as directed by the Lord Mayor on Sunday he had sent a message 'to all the Marshalmen requiring their attendance at Ropemakers Alley Moorfields immediately, and was informed that Joseph Bradley . . . gave for answer that he would not come to protect any such popish rascals.

"James Clark weaver was called in and acquainted the Court that seeing several people on Sunday afternoon assembled in Ropemakers Alley and boys throwing stones he applied to the said Joseph Bradley to whom he was directed, desiring his attendance there as a constable to do what was necessary on the occasion. That Bradley answered him he would not go to protect any popish priest for he had taken the oaths of allegiance, abjuration and supremacy as a constable". Joseph Bradley was called into the Court and confirmed what Mr. Clark had said. The three then withdrew and no doubt after discussion the Court recommended that the Lord Mayor suspend Mr. Bradley as Marshalman. Mr. Bradley was recalled to the Court and suspended without pay.

Finally the Court recommended that the Lord Mayor 'take the most effectual methods to prevent any riots or tumults within the City as his Lordship shall think proper and this Court will defray all expenses attending the same.'

Common Council met in the Chamber of Guildhall at 6.00 p.m. the next day, Wednesday, 7th June. The minutes record that the Lord Mayor said the reason for summoning members at such an unusual hour was 'to take into consideration the very alarming and riotous proceedings that will continue to be carried on by many disorderly and evil disposed persons in different parts of the City.'

A manuscript copy of a Royal Proclamation referring to the assault on Newgate and the destruction of houses elsewhere was laid before the Court together with the letters from Viscount Stormont and the Earl of Hillsborough. The Court resolved 'That the Sheriffs of London be directed to raise the posse comitatus immediately and to pursue with the Lord Mayor and other magistrates of this City the most effectual legal means for restoring and preserving the public peace.'

The Court then accepted with thanks the offer of the services of the Military Association and requested the Sheriffs of London 'to take the military force under their command and endeavour particularly to protect the Mansion House, Guildhall and Bank of England.'

Finally they resolved, again unanimously, 'that this Court doth agree to petition the Honourable House of Commons against the Act of Parliament lately passed in favour of the Roman Catholics' the resolution to be signed by the Town Clerk and published in as many papers as possible the next day.

The report and the resolutions suggest an efficiency and enthusiasm which is not entirely supported by others. In particular Hibbert in his book refers to 'grossly inadequate preventive' measures.

Dickens deals with this point at some length in Chapter 6 of *Barnaby Rudge*. An old gentleman says to the Lord Mayor 'Men can't stand on being respectable when their houses are going to be burnt over their heads with them in 'em. What am I to do, my Lord? Am I to have any protection?'

'I told you yesterday sir' said the Lord Mayor, 'that you might have an alderman in your house, if you could get one to come.'

'What's the devil's the good of an alderman?' returned the choleric old gentleman.

'To awe the crowd sir' said the Lord Mayor.

'Oh Lord ha' mercy' whimpered the old gentleman as he wiped his forehead in a state of ludicrous distress, 'to think of sending an alderman to awe a crowd! Why my lord, if they were even so many babies, fed on mother's milk, what do you think they'd care for an alderman! Will you come?'

'I', said the Lord Mayor, most emphatically, 'certainly not.'

It is difficult to imagine the fury and the impetus of the mob and it is unfortunate that we can only refer to newspaper reports rather than see video recordings. Dickens refers to the attack in Moorfields on the Sunday evening 'Beginning with the private houses so occupied, they broke open the doors and windows; and while they destroyed the furniture and left but the bare walls, made a sharp search for tools and engines of destruction, such as hammers, pokers, axes, saws and such like instruments. Many of the rioters made belts of cord, of handkerchiefs, or any material they found at hand, and wore these weapons as openly as pioneers upon a field day. There was not the least disguise or concealment — indeed on this night, very little excitement or hurry. From the chapels they tore down and took away the very altars, benches, pulpits, pews and flooring; from the dwelling houses the very wainscoting and stairs. This Sunday evening's recreation they pursued like mere workmen who had a certain task to do, and did it.

In the same manner they marched to a place of rendezvous agreed upon (that is Moor Fields) made great fires in the fields, and reserving the most valuable of their spoils burnt the rest. Priestly garments, images of Saints, rich stuffs and ornaments, altar furniture and household goods, were cast into the flames, and shed a glare on the whole country round; but they danced and howled, and roared about these fires until they were tired, and were never for an instant checked.'

And later he writes 'At one house near Moorfields, they found in one of the rooms some canary birds in cages, and these they cast into the fire alive. The poor little creatures screamed, it was said, like infants, when they were flung upon the blaze; and one man was so touched that he tried in vain to save them, which roused the indignation of the crowd, and nearly cost him his life.'

The contemporary annual register confirms all this and reported also 'They dragged Father Dillon from his bed of sickness, and beat him so brutally that he died a few weeks afterwards.'

There is not enough time to give descriptions of the assault on Newgate, the attack on the Bank of England or the brutal destruction of houses and their contents. I can only record that it was a particularly busy time for the Corporation. Meetings of Common Council were held on Thursday, 8th June, to deal with the petition to Parliament, and other matters, of the Court of Aldermen in the afternoon of Saturday, 10th June, Tuesday, 13th June, Friday, 16th June and Saturday, 17th June. Common Council met on Monday, 19th June, among other things to give thanks to the London Military Foot Association and the Light Horse Volunteers. They agreed to present each with 'a handsome pair of colours with the City Arms' the cost being charged to the Committee of City Lands. The Court of Aldermen met again on Wednesday, 21st June, Saturday, 24th June and Tuesday, 27th June when 'Thomas Beach esquire, Coroner for this City, was ordered to lay before this Court an account of all inquisitions taken by him within this month upon the bodies of persons who have been killed by accident or otherwise.'

The congregation of the Chapel in Ropemakers Alley received compensation sufficient to enable them to lease and furnish a large building situated a few yards from Moorfields on the northern side of White Street, occupying part of the site of what is now the City of London College.

In 1820 a larger church was required to accommodate the increased congregation. The Rev. Joseph Hunt bought the freehold of a site occupying the whole of the north side of East Street, Finsbury Circus, from the Corporation of London and the Fishmongers Company for £5,000. On 20th April 1820 the new church, dedicated to St. Mary, was consecrated.

When in 1850 Pope Pius IX re-established the Catholic Hierarchy in England, Nicholas Wiseman, first Archbishop of Westminster, chose the church as his Pro Cathedral, and so it remained for 19 years.

Toward the end of the century the congregation decreased, and after an appeal by Cardinal Vaughan to Pope Leo XIII the church and presbytery were sold and a new church, the present St. Mary Moorfields, was built in Eldon Street and endowed out of the proceeds. For the first time in about 150 years there was no Roman Catholic church within the City Boundary, and so it has remained since then. The sale realised £204,000 and the greater part of the proceeds was devoted to the building of Westminster Cathedral in Victoria.