

# SIR JOHN CASS AND HIS FOUNDATION

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Every February City workers are surprised to see the Lord Mayor, Sheriffs and the Alderman for Portsoken in full ceremonial attire emerging from St. Botolph's Church, each wearing a red feather. Scores of children follow them in procession from the church to the primary school across the road, bringing traffic in the east of the City to a standstill. It is Founder's Day for the Sir John Cass's Foundation and the Lord Mayor is continuing a tradition that stretches back nearly 300 years.

But who was Sir John Cass? And why did he establish a school in Portsoken ward all those years ago? Despite the regular observance of Founder's Day, the memory of Sir John Cass has become obscure. Few people are aware of who Cass was and the reasons for the establishment of his Foundation have become a mystery to the many who are familiar with his name.

I will try to reveal the colourful history of the Cass Foundation and the City connections of the Cass charity, on which I am proud to have represented the Corporation for over 20 years. Sir John Cass was actually a high profile public figure who played a prominent part in the political, social and commercial life of London at all levels. He was a Member of Parliament, Alderman and Sheriff of the City of London, the Master of two Livery Companies, an important landowner and businessman, highly active in the political and commercial life of his age. He was an active participant in major events and was even suspected of involvement in a plot to assassinate William of Orange. John Cass was born in Rosemarie Lane (now Royal Mint Street) on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1661. His parents were Thomas and Martha Cass and he was to be the only son of a very successful father. Thomas Cass was born in Whitechapel in the early 1630's, the son of an innkeeper, who grew up to become a carpenter. By 1652 Thomas Cass had obtained the Freedom of the Carpenters' Company. Later, he became Warden and Master of the Company. In 1665, alarmed at the rate at which the plague was spreading through the City, he removed his family to the hamlet of Hackney, a pleasant village of 1,000 inhabitants. There he bought land and property in the neighbourhood.

Thomas Cass prospered as a contractor and supplier to the Navy where he came into contact with Samuel Pepys. After the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 which brought William of Orange and Mary to the throne, Thomas Cass appears to have lost influence in relation to his former sources of income through defence contracts. Within a few years of William's accession the Cass family came very close to complete disaster through association with the Jacobite cause. Indeed, they were strongly suspected of being traitors and plotters against King William. Both John and Thomas Cass had become involved in the Tower Hamlets Militia and were close associates of its commander, Sir John Friend, who was a neighbour and business associate. In 1692 the Stuart Court in exile planned with sympathisers in England to launch an invasion which was to be combined with an uprising following the planned assassination of King William. Sir John Friend was deeply involved in the plot and had undertaken to raise a regiment of cavalry and two of militia around the Tower of London. Sir John Friend commanded the Tower Hamlets Militia in which Cass father and son served as officers and there can be little doubt that the Militia was an important part of Friend's plans.

In fact, the attempt to restore the Stuarts was effectively doomed to failure after a naval battle in May 1692. In England the leading plotters fled or were informed upon and arrested. Many prominent figures were under suspicion of complicity with the Stuart cause. Sir John Friend was tracked down and arrested while attempting to hide in the Cass family home in Hackney. He was subsequently tried for treason at the Old Bailey and executed at Tyburn in 1696.

Inevitably, Cass and his son John were suspected of complicity with the plot, but there was no proof and they claimed to have acted simply as good neighbours offering sanctuary to a fellow resident of Hackney. However, the evidence revealed that Friend owed a sum of £1,300 to Thomas Cass. This was an enormous sum and equivalent to at least half a million pounds in modern money. Friend's estate was confiscated and the Cass family had to wage a long struggle to recover the debt. It seems probable that these allegations delayed the emergence of John Cass into public life and continued to be a source of embarrassment throughout his career.

It was only after the death of his father in 1699 that John Cass began to emerge into public and political life. He was first appointed Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Tower Hamlets. In 1701 he made his first of several unsuccessful attempts in the aldermanic elections for Portsoken. Near the

end of the seventeenth century, Portsoken was one of the most densely populated parts of London. It was therefore, in numbers of population, larger than most provincial towns in England at that time. While John Cass had been born on the edge of Portsoken and baptised in the parish church of St. Botolph's, his reason for selecting the Portsoken ward as his point of entry into City politics was because Portsoken was traditionally a Tory stronghold. It was a ward where a rich, High-Anglican Tory, with reputed Jacobite connections, could hope to win.

While the monarchy and the royal court continued to be a major influence on political allegiance, it was religion which determined the main political dividing lines. The Tory-Whig divide was complex, but in simple terms it can be said that the Whigs favoured religious pluralism and tolerance as well as a constitutional monarchy and the Tories did not.

John Cass was always concerned with City rather than national politics and there were important differences between the two. In terms of religion the City elite was pluralist with large numbers of Dissenters, Jews and Huguenots. As a result some leading City institutions, such as the Bank of England, became a target for High Church Tory militants.

Electioneering in the City involved extensive philanthropic activity. Several leading Tories were lavish patrons of the Charity School Movement which became a significant part of the political process. Charity Schools began to proliferate in London during the second half of the seventeenth century, in a period of political and religious instability, and gathered momentum during the early eighteenth century. At this time the City was packed with people and teemed with children. Large families lived in single rooms and poverty was widespread. The Poor Law established in the time of Queen Elizabeth I had broken down. Parishes competed with each other in setting up schools and in the City they were also established on a ward basis. By 1729 there were 132 Charity Schools in London with over 5,000 pupils. For most children this was the only form of education available.

John Cass offered to found, fund and build another school to serve Portsoken ward if the parish would contribute £20 per annum towards the salary of a master. This offer was accepted and the parish authorities offered him a piece of land south of old St. Botolph Church on the west side of Houndsditch. This agreement to a large extent put into effect the terms of a will which Cass had made in 1709 stipulating his intention to

build a school "to instruct 50 boys in reading, writing and arithmetic and 40 girls to write and cast accounts, to read and learn plain sewing".

To an extent, therefore, Cass's founding of a school was part of his overall strategy to win the aldermanic elections for Portsoken. However, it is likely that his political ambitions would have been frustrated were it not for the intervention of fate.

The school was planned, built and opened against a background of a long drawn out aldermanic contest for Portsoken ward that commenced in 1709 and was overtaken by national events and the parliamentary elections of the following year. In the first election Cass was put forward as one of two Tory candidates and they won by a large majority. After a long debate the Aldermen chose the alternative candidate although they were well aware that Cass was the serious candidate and only he had the financial resources to qualify as an Alderman. By a strange coincidence, the same meeting of the Court of Aldermen which had rejected Cass, made another decision which was to have far reaching consequences. As a result, John Cass became a Tory champion and events were set in motion which led to one of the greatest general election upsets in British parliamentary history. On the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1709 the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Samuel Garrard, presided over a service in St. Paul's Cathedral, to which he had invited a young Oxford don and clergyman, Dr. Henry Sacheverell, to preach the sermon. Dr. Sacheverell had acquired a reputation for strong sermons, but even he could not have anticipated the chain of events set in motion by his sermon in St. Paul's. The sermon took the form of an attack upon "villainous and seditious principles" in Church and State, but was really an assault on Whiggery and religious pluralism. Singled out for attack were Dissenters, Anglican Moderates, the Hanoverian Succession and the principles of the Glorious Revolution.

By tradition, the Court of Aldermen at its next meeting would order the sermon to be printed and published. However, the Court of Aldermen refused to print Dr. Sacheverell's sermon; they also condemned the preacher and drew his sermon to the attention of the Government. As a result, Cass and Sacheverell became, for a time, High Church Tory comrades in adversity and associates. Both went on to triumph over their adversaries in a most spectacular manner and the aldermanic attack rebounded in their favour.

Dr. Sacheverell's sermon was printed privately on his own instructions and became one of the first great publishing sensations, selling at least 100,000 copies. Urged on by the Whig Aldermen, the Government decided to impeach Sacheverell, charging him with "seditious libel" and "high crimes and misdemeanours" against the State. The intention was to hold a political show trial with a view to making an example of him. Like the aldermanic decision, made contemporaneously, to exclude John Cass, the move proved to be a major miscalculation from the Whig point of view. The trial convinced people of Sacheverell's point that the Church of England was under attack. In the City the rejection of Cass was considered to be an affront to the civic constitution by the Whig Aldermen.

Conducted by the House of Lords in Westminster Hall, with Robert Walpole as leading prosecutor, the trial of Dr. Sacheverell was a national sensation despite its length and complexity. There were public disturbances throughout the trial, several churches and religious meeting places and other buildings were burned and the Bank of England was attacked. Troops had to be called out to control mobs chanting "High Church and Sacheverell" and "Down with the Bank of England and the meeting houses; and God damn the Presbyterians and all that support them".

Royal as well as popular opinion appears to have turned in Sacheverell's favour and by the end of the trial it was clear that only a token punishment was possible and that the Government had made a serious political miscalculation. The sentence was that Sacheverell be forbidden to preach for three years. His famous sermon was burned by the common hangman under the supervision of the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs, but this simply provided welcome additional publicity. In the circumstances these measures were practically an acquittal. Sacheverell paraded London in triumph and then embarked upon a sensational and highly popular tour of the English Provinces.

Immediately after the trial the Queen began openly to favour the Tory cause which rallied in most parts of the country. In the City of London the aldermanic rejection of John Cass paved the way for his political apotheosis. In September the City Tories nominated John Cass as their fourth parliamentary candidate. This was an open challenge to the Whig Aldermen since City parliamentary candidates were invariably chosen from the aldermanic ranks from which Cass had been deliberately excluded. Had he been an Alderman it is quite unlikely that he would

have been a candidate as there were several more senior Tory candidates available. Rejection had made John Cass a prominent public figure and a Tory champion. However, he still had some distance to go before becoming the Alderman for Portsoken.

The General Election that year was a rout for the Whigs and a triumph for the Tories and it represents one of the most dramatic reversals in British parliamentary history. In the turbulent and closely contested City elections John Cass managed to scrape home as the fourth City Member of Parliament by just 16 votes. The continued attempts by the Court of Aldermen to prevent his election for Portsoken gave rise to much Tory agitation, in particular, by the Tory majority in Common Council. There were even demands for constitutional reform of City government.

In the contest for the aldermanic seat of Portsoken in October 1710 another wardmote was obtained and Cass was again excluded. A third election followed and Cass was again elected along with another candidate. The Aldermen responded by selecting the alternative who immediately disqualified himself by making sworn declarations that he was not worth the £15,000 required. Cass finally secured his aldermanic place in 1711 after being elected for a fourth time. After three elections the Court of Aldermen had the right to fill the aldermanic vacancy by nomination. In the event, and in the circumstances, they lacked the political courage to take such a controversial step. John Cass was now Member of Parliament for the City and the Tories were in the ascendant.

The formal opening of the Charity School at Aldgate early in 1711 was more than simply a lavish ceremony. It was in effect "... a popular demonstration in the City in the Tory-Anglican cause". The service was conducted by the High Anglican and Tory hero Dr. Sacheverell and events were attended by 60 Peers and 40 Members of Parliament. This was a clear indication of its political significance and it was, quite literally, the Tory Party at prayer. This was a truly remarkable inauguration for a small charity school on the edge of the City of London. The presence of so many powerful people was in itself quite extraordinary, but the real sensation lay in the attendance of Dr. Sacheverell who was seeking advancement in the Church and had hopes of becoming a Bishop.

John Cass did not become a prominent Member of Parliament and it seems clear that his political interests and ambitions continued to lie within the City rather than on the national stage. In 1711 he was

nominated as one of the Tory candidates for Sheriff. Cass followed his father's footsteps by becoming Master of the Carpenters' Company. When he developed the ambition to be Mayor he sought the membership and support of a more influential Company by moving to the Skinners.

John Cass was knighted by Queen Anne in June 1712 on the occasion of the City's address of thanks to the Queen for the Treaty of Utrecht which was to end the War with France. Under the treaty, England gained a great deal at the expense of France, Spain and Holland. One notable gain was a virtual monopoly of the slave trade across the Atlantic and within the Americas. The newly created Sir John Cass was to gain from this personally as a shareholder and member of the Court of the Royal Africa Company which was primarily concerned with the slave trade. In this connection Cass was no different from many prominent and wealthy men of his day.

In the following year Sir John Cass was one of the two Tory candidates for Mayor. In anticipation of this he had moved his allegiance to the Skinners in order to secure the support of a more influential Company with more impact on Common Hall. In the event, Cass failed to secure the Tory nomination for Mayor. In the parliamentary elections of October 1713 Cass stood once more as a Tory candidate for the City of London. The contest was close and Cass finished as the third City MP. In the parliamentary elections of January 1715 he lost his seat. Nevertheless, he continued to be active in City politics. In his final years charitable activities became more important and he clearly came to the conclusion that the Charity School would be his most enduring monument.

Sir John Cass died at his home in Grove Street Hackney on the 5<sup>th</sup> July 1718 in the middle of the night in circumstances which are commemorated to the present day. At the time of his death he had dictated a new will which was intended to replace that of 1709, but he died suddenly before completing the signing. According to established mythology, Sir John signed two of five sheets and then suffered a "haemorrhage of the lungs" and died holding a bloodstained quill. This somewhat macabre story is commemorated by the red feathers which give Founder's Day such a distinctive and colourful aspect. After his death it took thirty years for his successors as Aldermen for Portsoken to prove the new will.

The Sir John Cass's Foundation was finally established in 1748. Since then, the Foundation's School has had a continuous existence and has

emerged as a survivor among charity schools and the Cass Foundation came to act as a home of last resort for several other charitable trusts and schools.

In 1751 the Trustees commissioned Louis Roubiliac, who is well known for his statue of William Shakespeare now in the British Museum, to fashion a life-sized statue of Sir John Cass. For his services Roubiliac was paid £100. The statue is now valued in excess of one and a quarter million pounds and will shortly be one of the major exhibits in the new Guildhall Art Gallery. Today the School, at present situated in Duke's Place near the boundary of the wards of Aldgate and Portsoken, is the only state school in the City of London. The Foundation continues to support the school together with a range of other schools, individuals and organisations. These activities continue to honour the memory and disburse the endowments of the founder, Sir John Cass, in ways which he could hardly have foreseen when seeking election as the Alderman for Portsoken in 1709.

Last year was the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Foundation. To mark the event, the Lord Mayor, Sir Richard Nichols, invited the Foundation to a celebratory luncheon at the Mansion House. There, the Foundation continued the tradition of employing colourful speakers when Richard Chartres the Lord Bishop of London gave the address.