Boston’s Early Stuart Elections, 1604-1640

John K. Gruenfelder

Boston’s elections from 1604-1640 illustrated many of the themes that marked early Stuart electoral history. The port, which had tried ‘to send local men to Westminster’ with only occasional success in the Tudor period, seemed well on its way toward becoming a patronage borough in the reigns of James I and Charles I.1 Indeed, after refusing to return two strangers in 1621, its elections from 1624-1628 indicated that, like many other boroughs in the early seventeenth century, Boston was turning into a safe borough for the return of outsiders. In 1628, however, a contested election and quarrel over the franchise, a quarrel possibly led by Sir Anthony Irby in alliance with the port’s freemen, reversed Boston’s habit of choosing strangers, usually the nominees of England’s former Lord Keeper and Bishop of Lincoln, John Williams.

If any one family exercised influence in Boston’s elections, it was the Irbys of Gosberton, Whaplode and Boston whose members would serve for the port for over a century. Leonard Irby, Lord Clinton’s surveyor, was elected for Boston in 1553; he would continue to represent the port well into Elizabeth’s reign, making his last appearance at Westminster in the Parliament of 1571. His nephew, Anthony, later an alderman and recorder of Boston who much improved the family’s fortunes, entered parliament in 1589; he would be elected for Boston to every subsequent parliament from 1593-1621.

It was his grandson, Sir Anthony Irby, who may have encouraged the involvement of Boston’s freemen in the disputed election in 1628. The Irbys got their start at Boston with the help, it seems, of the Clintons, earls of Lincoln, who also exercised some influence in the port’s elections; indeed, in 1553 Lord Clinton’s intervention proved to be too much even for Boston’s recorder, William Cecil, to overcome. However, there are traces of Cecil’s successful intervention at Boston since Vincent Skinner, an exchequer official and Cecil’s servant, was elected in 1584, 1586 and 1588. Skinner’s strong Lincolnshire connections no doubt also aided him in Boston’s elections.2

The town’s inability to return ‘local men’ consistently to parliament may be explained partially by its ‘desolation and decay’. Its economic difficulties began in the late fourteenth century, thanks to the shift from wool to cloth as the major export which ‘left Boston in severe decline long before the opening of the Tudor period’. The erosion of the port’s trade was especially noticeable after 1520 ‘when a sharp decline set in’. Indeed, after 1540, wool exports had fallen to well under one-third of their volume in the first decade of the century’. Boston’s charter, granted by Henry VIII in 1545, was designed, in part at least, to restore the port’s finances. It allowed the corporation to ‘ annex all Boston’s rich gild properties and to spend the proceeds on municipal repairs’. Unfortunately, Boston’s hopes of financial salvation through the gild lands were never fully realised and the port’s poverty apparently continued. There were signs of economic improvement from 1600 onward although the evidence is conflicting. In 1565, Boston ‘had few ships of any considerable size’ but ‘by 1610-1618 there were seventeen ships’, including four of sixty tons, credited to the port. However, in the early 1590’s, a petition to the Queen emphasized the port’s impoverishment, a claim accepted by Lord Burghley who listed Boston, in January 1598, as ‘manifestly decayed’, a status the corporation was still claiming in 1607. The 1620’s were marked by further complaints. In 1624, Boston’s ‘slucres or piles’ were ‘in great decay’; in 1626 and 1627, the corporation repeatedly petitioned the Privy Council for relief from demands to ‘furnish a ship’ for the King’s service because of the port’s ‘decay and misery’. If such claims were at all accurate, the port was in economic difficulties, a factor which may explain its willingness to return outsiders, who would serve in parliament at their own charge, from 1624-1628.

Boston’s charter also established a narrow electoral franchise which was confined to the mayor, twelve aldermen and eighteen common councilmen, the very kind of franchise which frequently contributed to the success of a patron, such as a Clinton or Cecil, often enjoyed.3

In the elections of 1604 and 1614, Boston chose men connected with the port and county. Anthony Irby was elected for both parliaments and served, in 1604, with Francis Bullingham, son of Nicholas Bullingham, a former Bishop of Lincoln. Bullingham, returned for Lincoln in 1601, was not a freeman of Boston but the corporation readily agreed to his admission, granting it to him ‘gratis without any money’. Irby’s partner in the Addled Parliament of 1614 was Leonard Bawtree, a lawyer from a Boston family, who was made a freeman prior to his election without charge since he had ‘promised to do his best endeavours for the confirming of the Charter by act of parliament and for other business for the good of this corporation’. Bawtree’s legal expertise must have been attractive to the corporation, bent on securing confirmation of Boston’s charter. Indeed, in its first two elections, Boston, in common with other boroughs, had apparently recognised the potential of parliament as an attractive to the corporation, bent on securing confirmation of Boston’s charter. Indeed, in its first two elections, Boston, in common with other boroughs, had apparently recognised the potential of parliament as an institution that could be used to resolve local problems. By electing local men, Boston also indicated that it believed that such burgesses, experienced in the port’s affairs and more responsive to its wishes, would be more capable of maintaining Boston’s interests in parliament. Such independence, however, could be costly as the port discovered. In 1614, it granted £30 ‘towards the defraying of charges to be expended about the effecting of business for this corporation’ at the parliament but for it seems little return. Bawtree spoke on three occasions and was primarily concerned with defending the King’s right to levy impostations. Bawtree gained enough favour with James I to receive his reward, a promotion to sergeant-at-law at the end of the brief and unhappy parliament. Irby, however, may have done even less.

The Cecil and Clinton families, Boston’s Tudor patrons, reappeared in the port’s election for James’s third parliament in 1621. It was apparently their only attempt to restore their former influence. Thomas Cecil, Earl of Exeter, was first in the field with his nomination for in November the corporation, no doubt after some petition discussion, decided that Exeter should be informed that the port was determined to ‘make choice of two of their own freemen now dwelling amongst them for burgesses.’ These brave sentiments were partially realised in Boston’s
election of Anthony Irby. However, within a month the corporation's views were altered, probably through the influence of Theophilus Clinton, Earl of Lincoln, who triumphed where Exeter failed. Perhaps Lincoln, as Boston's High Steward, could not easily be denied; at any rate, he was probably behind Boston's return of Sir Thomas Cheeke of Pirgo, Essex, to serve with Irby. Cheeke, an outsider who shared Lincoln's reformist religious views, was the brother-in-law of the earl's close friend and fellow reformer, Robert Rich, second Earl of Warwick, a connection that probably explained Cheeke's successful nomination at Boston. The corporation's willingness to accept Cheeke, who may have been willing to serve without pay, was probably encouraged by the costs Irby was already running up, for by the New Year he had already received £20 'toward his charges and other businesses concerning this house to be performed at the parliament'.

But electioneering at Boston was not yet over. Cheeke had also been returned for Harwich and preferred to serve for the Essex port. Another election was necessary to fill Boston's second burgesseship and both Exeter and Lincoln promptly tried to fill the gap. Exeter's nominee was a courtier, the Welshman Sir Edward 'Lewes' or Lewis, constable of Beaumaris Castle and a former servant to Prince Henry. Lincoln, too, recommended a stranger, Sir Alexander Temple of Etchingham, Sussex and St. Mary's Hoo, Kent, who, before he finally won election for Sussex in 1626, had a remarkably hard time in finding a parliamentary place. In 1624, Temple went through two contested elections, two petitions to parliament and still failed to win a seat at Winchelsea. His luck, and that of Lewis, was no better at Boston in 1621. The port's corporation would have nothing to do with either outsider and preferred a neighbour from Lincolnshire, Sir William Armyne of Osgodby, who promised the corporation he would 'do good service for this house without any way charging them', a happy merger of local responsibility and service at no cost to the corporation. Armyne's strongly puritan views may have also been to his advantage at Boston. If, however, Boston expected much from Armyne and Irby, its hopes were disappointed. Irby's remarks, if he made any in parliament, escaped the diarists, while Armyne spoke but a little and not, it seems, on subjects of interest to Boston.

The elections of 1621 were a costly business for Boston. In addition to Irby's charges, already £20 by the first of the year, the port also obligingly paid Exeter and his footman for their electoral expenses. The earl's footman had rushed post haste to Boston with the warrant for the by-election; he was paid £1 for 'his pains'. The port also thanked the earl 'for sending the said sheriff's warrant' and expressed its sentiments in a more tangible way as well. The corporation, perhaps worried over Exeter's possible reaction to the refusal of his nominee, promised him that it would pay all his charges 'for seeing out of the said writ or procuring the said warrant from the sheriff'. It also decided, in July 1621, to pay his usual gratuity. They were, in spite of a not inconsiderable charge, determined to remain on the ageing earl's best side if they could do it. Other expenses, over the second election also had to be met. Indeed, if Boston's economy was recovering in the 1620's, it did not come too soon, given the costs it committed itself to pay in its 1621 election.

Perhaps costs were becoming too great a burden for the town to bear, since in its 1624 election a new patron, or possibly even two, made their presence felt in its election. John Williams, who had held a prebend at Lincoln since 1613, was now Lord Keeper and Bishop of Lincoln and it was probably at his bidding that Boston elected, as one of its members, the outsider William Boswell, a native of Suffolk, fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge and diplomatist, who had been Lord Herbert of Cherbury's secretary during his French embassy in 1620. Boswell was Bishop William's secretary and commissary of Lincoln. Boswell, who presumably served Boston without charge, was made a Freeman for the customary £5 fine and was elected with another Lincolnshire squire, Sir Clement Cottrell. Cottrell also paid his fine, and while it is likely that his county connections contributed to his electoral success, it is also probable that his ties to James I's great favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, were also useful. Cottrell, Lincolnshire's vice-admiral, was as early as 1619 considered to be 'a creature of the Duke of Buckingham's' and he was a groom porter to both James and Charles I, and in July 1628, received a gift from the King of £50,000 'to be paid out of monies found due to the Crown... for discovery of concealed debts'. It is certainly possible that given his inestimable value to the Duke of Buckingham, he may well have backed Cottrell's return for Boston.

Cottrell, however, had also been chosen at Grantham and preferred it. Once again, a by-election was necessary and Sir William Armyne stepped in to secure Boston's 'prime place' as Cottrell's replacement.

In spite of the intervention of the Earls of Lincoln and Exeter, Bishop Williams and, as it seems likely, the Duke of Buckingham, Boston had through its first four elections (1604-1624) returned only two outsiders, Cheeke and Boswell. It equally that number in its next two elections, those of 1625 and 1626. Bishop Williams was, no doubt, responsible for Boswell's return in 1625 and was probably also behind the choice of his secretary, Richard Oakeley, in 1626. Oakeley, of a Shropshire family, was a graduate of Merton College, Oxford, had been called to the bar at the Middle Temple in 1621 and had been a clerk to Sir James Whitelocke. His only link to Boston must have been his bishop's recommendation. The town's other member in 1625 and 1626 was Sir Edward Barkham who, unlike Oakeley, had his £5 fee for the freedom of the port remitted. The reasons for Barkham's elections remain obscure. He was the son of Sir Edward Barkham, of Wainfleet, Tottenham and Southac, Norfolk, an alderman, sheriff and Lord Mayor of London. Barkham's father, like Anthony Irby, was interested in the Virginia Company; later, Sir Anthony Irby, the grandson of Anthony, would take as a third wife the daughter of Sir Edward Barkham and sister to the Boston M.P. in 1625 and 1626. Barkham's Lincolnshire connection may already have been enhanced at this stage by some tie between the Irby and Barkham families and given Anthony Irby's undoubted influence in Boston's affairs, it is possible that Irby, still serving as Boston's recorder in 1625, may have used his influence to see to Barkham's return. However, Boston had in two elections returned two outsiders and appeared to have become, for Bishop Williams at least, a safe borough for his clients and servants. If the entertained such a belief, it was shattered in the port's 1628 election.

Boston's election must have taken place in an atmosphere of some excitement. Puritanism had always been strong in Lincolnshire and many of the county's elite and leaders of its county community, men like Sir Thomas Grantham of Lincoln; Armyne, Boston's former M.P. and the county's resident peer, the Earl of Lincoln, were strongly reformist in sympathy. Their views, encouraged no doubt by the preaching of such Lincolnshire clergy as John Cotton of Boston, helped make them staunch foes of Charles's privy seal loan and forced loan. Their community was being taxed without its consent and resistance was fierce. The Earl of Lincoln found himself
summoned before the Privy Council and clapped in the Tower for his unrelenting opposition; other opponents of the loan, Grantham, Sir Edward Ayscough and Sir John Wray, the young Sir Anthony Irby's brother-in-law, were sent to the Gatehouse while Armine and Boston's mayor went to the Fleet. Irby, too, resisted the loan but, following a meeting with the Privy Council, apparently made his peace. He at least escaped imprisonment. 12

According to the council minutes, Boston's election passed off smoothly; Richard Bellingham, who had become Boston's recorder in November 1625 and who later emigrated to Massachusetts where he became the colony's governor, was chosen along with William's nominee, Oakley. But in fact in the election, held under Boston's traditional, and narrow, franchise, Oakley had been challenged by Sir Anthony Irby and had won by but one vote — fifteen to fourteen. All might have been well for Oakley had not Boston's freemen entered the fray, claiming their right to vote and furthermore, claiming that they had, with a unanimous voice (of the sixty-seven present) declared Irby elected. The reasons for the freemen's actions are unknown. However, there are grounds for speculation that Irby, fearful of seeing his family's traditional role in Boston's elections dashed and determined to reclaim it, turned to the freemen as his allies in an attempt to re-establish his family's influence. It is also possible that Irby and the freemen were encouraged by dissident members of the corporation who had been angered by their narrow defeat and determined to deny victory to Oakley, by urging them to contest the return by challenging the port's franchise. Such stratagems were not unheard of. Similar events occurred at Chippenham and Warwick, to note but two. Oakley's position, opposed by nearly half the corporation and the freemen involved, was untenable. He was an outsider and the forced loan, levied on the local community without its consent perhaps made it imperative, in the eyes of some at least that Irby, a local man, be joined with Bellingham to represent the town's wishes in parliament. That, of course, presumes a substantial degree of sophistication among Boston's citizens but, given the preaching of a John Cotton and other like-minded men, it was possible that such sentiments might well be expressed. 13

Irby and his supporters petitioned the House of Commons against Oakley's return and the corporation's claim that only the mayor, aldermen and common councilmen could elect. The corporation argued that 'they had the election without the commonalty' for the past eighty years and produced witnesses and their 'book of common council' to prove their assertions. The corporation also noted that the wagers of Boston's members were not paid by the commonalty but out of the port's treasury. The petitioners responded that the franchise by common right had belonged 'to the commonalty and before 30 Henry VIII.,' and therefore, they could elect. They also 'produced divers returns by the Mayor and commonalty'. The precedents cited and arguments presented, given the sympathies of the committee of privileges led by its redoubtable chairman William Hakewill, probably made little difference. The committee was determined to enlarge electorates wherever possible and Boston's case was no exception. The committee and the House of Commons agreed that 'the election of burgesses, in all boroughs, did, of common Right, belong to the Commons; and that nothing could take it from them, but a prescription, and a constant Usage beyond all Memory.' It was a remarkable decision, repeated in the Parliament of 1628 in five other contested borough elections which, as at Boston, meant that their franchises were similarly enlarged. For Boston, it meant that Irby was 'duly elected, and ought to have been returned'. For the committee and the House of Commons, it was another blow against unwanted influence in elections. 14

Given the puritan views and 'country' sympathies of many leading Lincolnshirers, including those of Boston, it is not surprising that Charles's 'personal rule' found little support in the county. The court's attack on the traditional authority of the county community, its religious innovations and vexatious taxing schemes of which ship money was the most notable, provoked antagonism and resistance. When the crisis finally came, thanks to the Scottish rebellion, the county and boroughs of Lincolnshire returned, among their members of the parliament of 1640 'a group of strong puritan leaders'. 15

Boston was no exception. Indeed in terms of electoral history its 1640 elections were anti-climatic. No contests apparently developed and in both elections it returned two strong opponents of the Crown, Sir Anthony Irby and the port's recorder, William Ellis. Ellis, a son of Sir Thomas Ellis of Grantham, owned property near Boston and was a leading Lincolnshire Presbyterian. He was such a strong opponent of the court that he would later be accused of republicanism. Irby was also an active member of the reform group. He served on many committees in the Long Parliament and when war came was quick to take up arms against the King. They were both local men, known in their community and responsive to its wishes. Irby would, in the Long Parliament, present Boston's petition of grievances against the Crown. His former brother-in-law, Sir John Wray, 'handed in the Lincolnshire petition'. 16

The wider franchise secured in the election contest of 1628 was decisive for Boston's electoral history. Boston, unlike for example Cambridge, Dover or Sandwich, reversed its electoral pattern and once again elected its own. Perhaps, given the traditional influence of the Irby family, it might have eventually happened anyway, but it is worth remembering that Irby won his first election thanks to the wider franchise imposed by the House of Commons. In its four previous elections on the narrow franchise (1624-1628) it had returned five men of whom two were outsiders. They won four of the port's eight burgess-ships until Irby, on petition, won over Oakley. Thanks to that petition, Irby and Bellingham, both local men, served in the Parliament of 1628 and Ellis joined Irby in the Parliaments of 1640. Local men then, were elected and outsiders like Boswell and Oakley disappeared from the port's early Stuart electoral history. In that sense, Boston's elections exemplified the electoral history of many an early Stuart borough.

FOOTNOTES

1 Boston, which returned members from 1547 onwards, sent fifteen men to Westminster down to 1601. Of those fifteen, only three, George Forster, a local lawyer, Leonard Irby, probably a nominee of Lord Clinton and Irby's nephew, Anthony, can be described as 'local men'. Four others, including Vincent Skinner, a likely nominee of Sir Robert Cecil, could be considered as belonging to the gentry or as 'neighbouring gentry'. One was an outsider and the reasons for the election of others, as well as their connections to Boston, remain obscure; G. A. J. Hodgson, Tudor Lincolnshire, Lincoln, 1975, pp. 107, 109-110.


Book Review


It is a truism of the new local history that one must look closely at the surviving remains in field and buildings, in streets and market place, in order to understand fully the past; and yet it is still something which few local historians do, especially for towns. Dent has recently launched its Archaeology in the Field series for which local historians will be grateful — its earlier volumes on Fields, and Woodland in the British landscape are splendid. This volume seeks to draw the attention of archaeologists and local historians to the surviving pattern of physical remains which will help to throw light on the development of towns.

This is an ambitious undertaking and, as a starting point, this book provides a useful introduction. In places, it has become a brief history of the English town and as such suffers from the lack of space available. At other times, it gets too far from surviving remains and into generalities. But nevertheless, it will stimulate many local historians to look, not just for the more obvious town walls, gates, castles and churches, but at the less obvious street plan, names, market place, housing and industry. The book takes the story from town origins to the present (and even a brief word on the future), but in essence the story stops at 1900. There are plenty of plans (not always clear) and some plates.

Lincolnshire readers will, of course, turn to see what the book has to say about its quota of towns — for the book is full of detailed examples. And here a warning note must be sounded. Covering such a vast canvas (all of England and all periods of urban history), the authors have been forced to rely upon a wide range of existing sources, some of them of doubtful value. Many errors are thus once more enshrined in the details in its pages. Little is said of Boston, despite its 18th century rebuilding; Grimsby is not mentioned in text or bibliography despite its recent history; the account of Stamford is full of inaccuracies; and on Lincoln (to which there are many references) there is nothing after the Reformation. Readers then must not accept unquestioningly the details of this book; but its general outlines will be most suggestive. It is well-produced (an odd ‘running head’ on page 119 may temporarily throw the reader off course) and cheap.

ALAN ROGERS
NOTTINGHAM