The Battle of Epworth
3rd June, 1852

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The incident to be described formed part of the long campaign which preceded the North Lincolnshire election of July 1852. But in order to understand what was at stake in that contest, and the part played in it by the electors of the Isle of Axholme, it is necessary to go back a few years, to the events of 1846. In that year the Corn Importation Bill was passed, marking the end of agricultural Protection and the inauguration of Free Trade. The farmers of Lindsey, which at that time formed the constituency of North Lincolnshire, were all but unanimous in their attachment to Protection (that is, to the maintenance of home prices by duties on imported grain). But the passage of the Bill was not marked by any great agitation in the division. Prices were high, which tended to lull the farmers into a mood of resignation rather than indignation. Moreover, both the sitting Members, the whig Lord Worsley and the tory Robert Adam Christopher, opposed the third reading of the measure; and once they had cast their ineffective votes little more could be done.1

In opposing Free Trade both Members also opposed their respective party leaders, Russell and Peel. But whereas Christopher's protectionism led him to break with Peel, and to join the independent Conservative party led eventually by Derby and Disraeli, Worsley's vote marked no such irrevocable breach with his party. He hoped, indeed, that once the issue of Free Trade versus Protection had been laid to rest, the farming electors of his constituency would allow him to return to his old allegiance. He knew well that the farmers who customarily voted for him cared little for whig traditions, and that many of them cared less for Liberal principles. But as a Member of long standing—he had first been returned for the county in 1831—and as the son of a popular and influential landlord—the first Earl of Yarborough—he could count on a strong local "interest" in North Lincolnshire.

By 1852 his hopes were destroyed, and his local interest lay almost in ruins. He had been the victim of unfortunate circumstances, and of his own failure to meet those circumstances in an effective manner. The first blow fell in the autumn of 1846, when his father died and he succeeded to the Yarborough estate and title. Ordinarily his son would have been the safe and natural choice to succeed him in the representation of the division. But his son was still a minor, and it was necessary to find a seat-warmer until he came of age. The
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choice which Yarborough made was that of Sir Montague John Cholmeley, second baronet, a wealthy Lindsey landowner and a loyal supporter of the Yarborough interest. Against these advantages, however, was the fact that Cholmeley was a poor speaker and a politician of indifferent skill. Yarborough hoped that no contest would arise to expose these deficiencies.

For a time politics in the division went along quietly enough. Neither Cholmeley nor Christopher desired to antagonise each other's party, both being anxious to avoid the expense as well as the ill-feeling that a contest at the next general election might provoke. In the autumn of 1849, however, agricultural prices began to move sharply downward, and the farmers were quick to lay the blame on Free Trade. They began to form protectionist societies in the major market towns of Lindsey, or rather to revive them from an earlier period of agitation. And they began to suspect that both Yarborough and his 'nominee' Cholmeley had since 1846 become converts to Free Trade. Cholmeley made matters worse by telling a farmers' gathering at Caistor, in the autumn of 1850, that it was hopeless to look for a return to protective duties, and by departing shortly afterwards for a prolonged tour of the continent. He returned in the spring of 1851 to find the division buzzing with discontent. Yarborough advised him to assure the electors that he, Cholmeley, remained in principle a protectionist. But the farmers, mistrustful of such tepid principles, demanded a leader who would be prepared to fight a general election, if need be, to repeal the measure of 1846.

They found their champion in James Banks Stanhope, the nephew of the strongly protectionist fifth Earl Stanhope, and the possessor of a large estate near Boston inherited from Sir Joseph Banks, of Revesby. But although an aristocrat, Stanhope led a movement that was composed largely of tenant farmers, yeomen, and small freeholders. His intervention was not at first countenanced by Christopher, who, keen protectionist though he was, did not like to see the "peace of the county" disturbed. Stanhope's party had no such scruples. They vaunted their independence of the great houses, and did not hesitate to attack Lord Yarborough himself, whom they regarded, with some reason, as the principal influence behind Cholmeley's conduct.

Stanhope soon gathered support in the Boston neighbourhood, and the small holders of the Lindsey Marshes began to rally to his cause in the autumn of 1851. But he knew that the contest between himself and Cholmeley, when it came, might depend largely on the Isle of Axholme. The Isle, because of its numerous small freeholders, had great weight in the electorate. And it was a part of the county which had never come within the orbit of the Yarborough interest.

The Isle, however, was inclined to keep itself to itself, and, cut off from the rest of Lindsey by the river Trent, was slow to respond to political movements in the rest of the county. It was not until March 1851 that a protection society for the Epworth district was set on its feet. But, once aroused, the Islonians showed themselves by no means wanting in fervour for the protectionist cause. Wheat, the price of which had slumped badly since 1848, was their principal cash crop. Many of the small freeholders began to find difficulty in keeping up with their mortgage payments, and mortgagees were not so indulgent as (some) landlords when it came to the question of arrears. The decline of the flax-growing industry, and the decrease of river traffic on the Trent, were contributory factors in the economic depression. Here is an ordinary yeoman farmer, George Cocking of Crowle, speaking his mind to an Epworth meeting in January 1852:

"They had been struggling with this Free Trade for four or five years, and they were now tired out, for there was no use in a farmer spending his time and his money if his business would not pay . . . . The burden the farmers now had to bear was intolerable, and to get rid of it they must send men to parliament in whom there could be no mistake . . . . They
had got a pledge from Mr. Stanhope, and if he did not do his duty they could turn him out, for it was the farmers who were bringing him out, and not the great landlords."

Stanhope himself, a stranger to the Isle, might not have worked with great success on the Islingtonians' feelings. But he was enthusiastically supported by men who had considerable local influence. The president of the Isle of Axholme Agricultural Protection Society formed in 1851, as of its predecessor in the 1830's, was Richard Popplewell Johnson, of Temple Belwood, the largest landowner in the Isle, and a Conservative in general politics. But of more influence was his neighbour John Collinson, of Beltoft. Collinson was a solicitor in substantial practice at Doncaster, but he came of an old Axholme family, and as clerk to the Epworth bench was a personage of considerable local weight. Equally important, he had much experience of election work in the Isle, having acted as Conservative agent at the previous contest in 1841. The farmer who took the vice-presidency of the protection society was Edward Carr of Beltoft Grange.

Not far from Beltoft, though on the opposite bank of the Trent, was Ashby Decoy Cottage, the seat of Henry Healey. Healey, a substantial gentleman farmer, came to take a prominent part in the approaching contest, and he put all his influence in the Isle behind Stanhope. In 1841 he had chaired Worsley's Epworth committee, and his change of front did not go unremarked. The Liberal Henry Lister Maw, of Tetley Hall, near Crowle, wrote to the Doncaster Gazette in January 1852:

"What may have instigated Mr. Healey to so monstrous a jump ... he best knows. If it be any dispute he may have had with the Noble Lord about farming transactions, the law is open, and there are counsel: they may impel each other." Several months after the election George Maxted, the Liberal agent at Winterton, wrote to Yarborough:

"The old decoy-duck and his duckling, I hear, are as violent as ever; but I have no hesitation in saying that ... hostility from that quarter springs up more from some imagined slight from being foiled in obtaining a certain farm, than from any real change in political principles!"

The truth behind these insinuations may never be known for certain. The bare facts appear to be that Healey had farmed at Little Limber, on the Brocklesby estate, in the early 1830's. His son, George Chippendale Healey, succeeded him in the tenancy in about 1838, but died, leaving an infant son, in 1842. His wife remained, and her second husband, Robert Raven, succeeded to the tenancy. At first he held the farm as it were in trust for his stepson, but in 1846 or 1847 Henry Healey and the second earl of Yarborough disagreed over the financial aspect of the arrangement, and the earl presumably decided that the Healey interest in the tenancy had lapsed. In the autumn of 1846 Healey refused to sign a requisition for Cholmeley, but declared that he would have supported Captain Dudley Pelham, Yarborough's brother, had he come forward. But by March 1851 he was an avowed enemy of Yarborough and his "nominee" Cholmeley. "Things had come to such a pitch," he told the Axholme protectionists, "that public men would rather abandon their principles than give up a party."

The temper of the Isle was indicated when the Owston Agricultural Society, a professedly non-political body, met in November 1851. Cholmeley was invited to attend, but, warned by his agent at Epworth, Richard Dawson, he wisely kept away. The meeting was "boisterous", and the most forceful speech came from Healey. Describing a recent meeting with Cholmeley, he said he had promised to take good care of the Member for Lindsey when he came into the Isle, "... And I told him further, we will turn him out!" (loud cheers).

In January 1852 Stanhope began to canvass the division in earnest, although there was still no immediate prospect of a dissolution. It is significant that he opened his campaign with
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a monster meeting at Epworth. Cholmeley’s party began a canvass in the following month, but met with little success. The Liberal cause stood worst in the Isle, where Dawson failed to form canvassing committees, and where in consequence a paid worker had to be engaged to trot round the parishes on Cholmeley’s behalf. By April Cholmeley was ready to withdraw, but Yarborough prevented him from doing so, and in May the reports from the district committees began to improve. The Liberals regained supporters in the Marsh, and at Louth Cholmeley met Stanhope face to face on 12 May. Supported by a noisy band and a mainly sympathetic crowd, he accused Stanhope of originating the slanders that he, Cholmeley, was a Roman Catholic and a Free Trader. (“Great uproar, in the midst of which Mr. Stanhope gesticulated violently.”) But things still stood badly in the Isle, and the Liberal election committee determined to take the war into the enemy’s country. Two demonstrations were planned, at Gainsborough on 1 June and at Epworth on 3 June.

The Gainsborough meeting went off peacefully enough. Stanhope did not attend, and Christopher and Cholmeley dealt with each other in a friendly manner. Gainsborough was not an excitable town, and the gentry of the neighbourhood, though predominantly Conservative, were no great friends of Stanhope. But Cholmeley’s supporters knew that the Epworth meeting would be hostile, and made preparations accordingly. It would do no good if Cholmeley were humiliated or shouted down, so it was decided to make a good showing and send a body of respectable Liberals to appear at the meeting. Joseph Kirkham, of Audleby, a Yarborough tenant and a keen Liberal, was responsible for seeing that a band and flags were in attendance. John Hett, the Brigg solicitor and Liberal agent, made sure that a number of substantial farmers, many of them Brocklesby tenants, would accompany Cholmeley to the demonstration. It was arranged that they should travel by rail to Gainsborough and then by steamer to Owston Ferry, from where they would walk in procession up to Epworth. Meanwhile Thomas Rhodes, Cholmeley’s principal agent, wrote to several Liberal gentry, including William Hutton of Gate Burton, Weston Cracroft of Hackthorn and George Tennyson D’Eyncourt of Bayons Manor, inviting them to support the candidate with their presence on the hustings.

The Conservatives, hearing rumours of these preparations, braced themselves to give as good as they received if any trouble arose. Henry Healey’s son, Captain R. T. Healey, put his military experience to good use by assembling a body of mounted farmers to keep order at the meeting. He was reported to have warned a neighbour of Cholmeley’s “not to venture to the ‘battle of Epworth.’” Supporters from Scotter and Messingham as well as from the Isle itself were encouraged to swell the Conservative numbers, and a band was engaged to drown that of the visitors.

When the Liberal expedition reached Epworth on the morning of the demonstration, it found all in readiness for its reception. Hustings had been erected in the market place, under the windows of the Red Lion, and the Liberal and Conservative sides of the platform were divided by a rail. Facing the hustings, on the opposite side of the market place, Captain Healey had drawn up his troop of about one hundred and fifty horsemen. And between them and the hustings was a space for the pedestrian audience already filled on the Conservative side.

As the Liberals entered the market place they installed their band immediately under their side of the hustings, and the rest of their party, standing between the band and the Conservative horsemen, soon began to make more elbow room for themselves. At first the horses, unused to such work, shied away from the waving banners and sticks of the Liberals, and the cavalry were obliged to give ground. In the midst of considerable noise and excitement Sir Robert Sheffield, a respected Conservative politician with property in the Isle, came forward to open the proceedings. While he attempted in vain to make himself heard, the horsemen, using their heavy-handled riding whips, began to make headway against the Liberals. The latter turned their flag poles into staves, and some grabbed or fetched the nearest sticks or branches that came to hand. All this time the gentlemen on both sides of the platform, so far from setting
an example of decorum, contributed to the confusion. The Liberals demanded the removal of the horsemen and the Conservatives a hearing for Sheffield. Captain Healey, according to one report, dismounted and attempted to negotiate a bargain with the Liberals. But all hope of moderation was at an end. The horsemen, encouraged to “close in” from the platform, and assisted by the Conservative infantry, who had likewise sacrificed their banners for weapons, made a successful charge which temporarily drove the Liberals out of the market place and up towards their committee room at the King’s Head.

In the hull which followed Sheffield concluded his remarks, and Christopher, as the senior Member, rose to give his address. But the Liberals had now returned in strength, and Christopher’s voice was lost as the band struck up “O! dear, what can the matter be?” with “desperate emphasis, the musicians having caught the fever of excitement.” The Liberal “bludgeon-men” became more frenzied. They danced and brandished their clubs “like wild Indians”, chanting “Take your horses awa-a-a-a-y,” and began another assault on the Conservatives. But by now their opponents’ blood was up. The horsemen rallied and moved forward into the crowd, urged on by Christopher and others from the platform. The front of the hustings on the Liberal side gave way, and its occupants, under a hail of stones and ginger beer bottles, scrambled back into the shelter of the Red Lion. “Sir Montague Cholmeley was saved from injury at this crisis by being dragged through the open sash of a shattered window.” The horsemen “drove away the blues [Liberals] with great fury, band and all, broke their flags, and amidst a general skirmish took entire possession of the field.”

After this victory most of the cavalry dismounted, and Cholmeley, to the disgust of some of his friends, was persuaded to address the meeting from the pink [Conservative] side of the hustings. He received a respectful hearing. Later in the day the Stanhopeites held a dinner in the Red Lion, and the blues, nursing their wounds, made their way back to Gainsborough. Contrary to some early reports, there had been no loss of life. Mr. John Maw (of Epworth) was severely injured. A week later the Doncaster Chronicle reported that “when raised up for for a few minutes he immediately faints away.” But “a man at Belton, who was reported to be dead, is better.”

Though deprived of martyrs, the Liberals made much, in the ensuing debates in the local and national press, of the provocative presence of the horsemen, and of the brutality with which they had ridden down those on foot. “It is obvious”, wrote Hutton to Cholmeley, “that the horsemen had been putting lead into their sticks for a week, and that you were not to be heard.” The Conservatives countered with accusations that the Liberals had deliberately hired ruffians to make a disturbance. Sheffield wrote to Sir Charles Anderson, of Lea, on 7 June:

“If Sir Montague had come into the Isle with Hutton and a few friends, he would have had as good a reception as either of the other candidates and we should have had no riot, but coming into the Isle with a vessel full of wild men and a band from Gainsborough and navvies and fellows of that description to bring the colours has occasioned all this mischief. . . . The bringing freeholders in this way from one district to another is the likeliest way to make a riot, and is most improper.”

As usual, neither side had a monopoly of the truth. By the day of the meeting both sides were expecting a disturbance. There were doubtless some who relished the prospect, and who took care to go suitably armed. But all accounts agree that the Liberals began the hostilities with their heckling and jesting. And it is more than possible that, by the time they reached Epworth, the yeomanry from the wolds had been augmented by less respectable elements, some of them a little the worse for liquor.

In truth the proceedings at Epworth, outrageous though they might appear to modern eyes, were only a somewhat exaggerated form of traditional political behaviour. The purpose
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of the meeting was not to convince one’s opponents by rational argument but to impress them by a “show of strength”. The ceremony of the nomination, when (in the case of contested elections) the candidates were committed to go to the poll after a show of hands, was a similar occasion. Riots at nominations were not infrequent at this period. The excitement was heightened by the traditional saturnalia of bands, flags and favours, of which the North Lincolnshire Liberals made extensive—and expensive—use at this election.

Even the presence of the horsemen at Epworth was an extension of a traditional practice. Christopher told a meeting at Alford on 15 June that

“it had always been the custom when he had visited the Isle for a number of his supporters, some on horseback and some on foot, to meet him half a mile out of the town, and go to Epworth in procession.”

The difference was merely that instead of dismounting on reaching the market place, the horsemen had remained in their saddles. In 1807 two of the candidates at the Lincolnshire election had entered Lincoln for the nomination at the head of a cavalcade of their mounted tenantry. More recently six hundred horsemen, led by the band of the Sherwood Foresters regiment of yeomanry, had accompanied the Conservative candidates into Newark for the South Nottinghamshire nomination of 1841. One is reminded of the feudal lord at the head of his dependent retinue. But the more recent military history of the county was probably the more important factor. The farmers who turned out for the Epworth meeting were in the tradition of the yeomanry cavalry, composed of independent freeholders, and ready to defend their locality against the hostile foreigner. Horses had always been the favourite mode of transport in the Isle. At one time, due to the state of the quagmires that passed for roads, they had been the only means of getting about.

Sheffield’s remark about the movement of electors from district to district is a reminder that there were still strong regional feelings in mid-nineteenth century Lincolnshire. Captain Healey told the readers of the *Stamford Mercury:*

“From my knowledge of the Isle of Axholme, and my personal observations, it is perfectly clear that if the strangers, who had no voice in the Isle, had not in the first instance attempted to obtain possession of the front of the hustings, the riot would not have occurred.”

The Isle of Axholme, a remote and secluded district for much of its history, had a particularly strong sense of local allegiance, and outsiders found its inhabitants “rude, uncivil, and envious to all others.” Although they preferred to keep themselves to themselves, they had a tradition of political involvement, and that of a direct and violent kind. Their opposition to the drainage measures of the seventeenth century is well known. In 1653 the commoners declared that

“if the Lord Protector himself were to come, they would make no more of him than of an ordinary person, . . . and that they would choose a hundred men out of the Isle, against a hundred of Cromwell’s soldiers, who should fight them for their possessions.”

In 1852, by championing the cause of Protection, the Islonians imagined that they were again fighting for their livelihoods.

During the month of June 1852 the Liberals improved their position in the Isle, as they did in the division as a whole. But the Epworth meeting was perhaps on balance a bad thing for Cholmley’s cause, for it contributed largely to Christopher’s determination to coalesce with Stanhope, a move he had hitherto resisted. The fact that he, and not Stanhope, had received the brunt of the opposition, helped to persuade him that there was nothing to be gained from a continuing truce with Cholmley. The partition down the middle of the hustings showed the true state of political feeling, at least in the Isle. In July few of the Isle voters split between Cholmley and Christopher. It was their support, indeed, for Christopher and Stanhope that helped to unseat Cholmley at the polls.
R. J. OLNEY

The North Lincolnshire election of 1852 marked the end of an epoch. Legislation was introduced in 1854 curtailing expenditure on bands, flags and paid helpers. Civilisation, moreover, in the shape of newspapers, improved roads and even at length a railway, was beginning to percolate the Isle of Axholme. Its age of rioting was over.

Notes

1 This paragraph and the four which follow are based on the author’s unpublished thesis *Lincolnshire Politics*, 1832-85.
2 They were returned unopposed at the general election of 1847.
3 *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 28 March, 1851.
4 *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 19 November, 1847, 29 June, 1849.
7 See Lincolnshire Archives Office, Taylor, Glover and Hill deposit, 2 TGH 1/16/3/21.
8 Died 1871. See also 1 TGH 2/C.
10 *Poll Book of the North Lincolnshire Election, taken in July*, 1852, pp. 235ff.
11 L.A.O., MON 25/13/1/10/3, George Maxsted to Yarborough, 28 March, 1853.
12 L.A.O., Yarborough MSS., YARB 5 (estate rentals, surveys); 2 TGH 1/31/4/5.
14 *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 4 April, 1851.
16 *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 5 December, 1851.
17 MON 22A/52, f. 5.
18 *Stamford Mercury*, 14 May, 1852.
19 L.A.O. Stubbs deposit, STUBOS 1/10/3/51-7; MON 25/13/1/2/2, ff. 24 ff.
20 *Stamford Mercury*, 11 June, 1852.
21 The account of the events of 3 June is based on newspaper reports appearing in the *Doncaster, Nottingham and Lincoln Gazette* (4 June), the *Hull Packet* (4 June), the *Boston, Stamford and Lincolnshire Herald* (8 June), and the *London Times*. Further information, much of it contradictory, is provided by the *Stamford Mercury* (11 June), the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* (11 and 25 June), the *Doncaster Chronicle* (11 June), and the *London Morning Herald*.
22 A letter of Cholmeley to the *Morning Herald* dated 8 June, 1852.
23 Scunthorpe Museum, Sheffield MSS., F/1/1/1.
24 *Stamford Mercury*, 18 June.
26 *Stamford Mercury*, 9 July, 1841.
27 Foot passengers were expected to give way to horses loaded with corn (Rev. W. B. Stonehouse, *The History and Topography of the Isle of Axholme*, London, 1839, p. 45).
28 *Stamford Mercury*, 18 June.
30 Quoted in *ibid.*, at p. 101.
31 32 voters out of 964 split between Cholmeley and Christopher in 1852, compared with 245 out of 1,033 who split between Christopher and Worsley in 1841.
32 Only 24% of the Axholme voters plumped for Cholmeley, the lowest proportion of any district in the division. The total votes polled were Christopher 5,585; Stanhope 3,579 and Cholmeley 4,771.