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FINANCES AND GOVERNMENT OF CANTERBURY 1700-1850; AN OVERVIEW

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A series of papers in *Archaeologia Cantiana* has presented details of researches into the finances and government of Canterbury from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century.¹ These papers describe *inter alia* the functioning and finances of the Canterbury Burghmote 1700-1835, and of the Canterbury Council 1836-mid 1850s; the role of the Aldermen and of the Canterbury Courts of Justice 1727-1840; the care of the poor, including the Court of Guardians 1727-1840s; and the Commissioners of the Pavement 1787-1840s. A particular study has been presented of James Simmons, Canterbury's foremost citizen from the mid 1700s into the early nineteenth century.

The present paper adds to the work already published, examining some aspects of City life, together with the influence of the Cathedral, Parliamentary affairs and the Military on the City. Additionally an attempt is made to compare Canterbury with other County Boroughs of the period, and to set Canterbury's experience in the context of national events and trends. Finally, the key points emerging from the totality of the work are summarized and some relevant broad conclusions are suggested.²

Leisure and Civic improvements

While the main business of the Burghmote throughout the eighteenth century remained the control of the commercial life of the City through ownership of the markets and control of the Freemen and Guild rolls, its direct and indirect influence, and that of its members, permeated aspects of Canterbury life not its formal concern. The Burghmote and members of the ruling elite participated, and were prime movers, in the promotion of major efforts to provide and increase social, leisure and civic improvements. The Burghmote demonstrated strong support for the annual Canterbury Races. Its property was let for use as a theatre from the 1740s and a permanent one was erected in the 1790s with assistance from Burghmote members. Assembly rooms, providing a venue for musical performances, social occasions and dances, were Burghmote property. Activities such as a choral society, and a Society for the Cultivation of Useful Knowledge were supported by the elite. Regarding civic improvements, the Burghmote assisted and worked in harmony with the Pavement Commissioners to transform the City from medieval squalor to Georgian elegance in the years 1787-1790, with James Simmons as both Mayor and Treasurer of the Commissioners in the key year of 1788-9. Additionally, Simmons financed and created the Dane John pleasure gardens out of the rough pasture let to him for a peppercorn rent by the Burghmote for that purpose. Public baths and medicinal spa waters were also promoted with Burghmote assistance. These advances in leisure and civic amenities came some decades later than, and were not as impressive as, similar improvements in cities such as York and Exeter, but it may be said that they constituted a measure of urban renaissance presided over by the ruling elite. A somewhat deliberate commercialisation of leisure was thereby achieved, enhancing Canterbury's attractiveness as a market town.

Patriotism and volunteering

Canterbury citizens, led by the Mayor and Burghmote, were always ready to brighten their lives by supporting national events with patriotic fervour. Records show that events such as the declaration of war on Spain in October 1739, on France in

1744 and when peace was declared in 1748, occasioned elaborate processions, with street decorations and fireworks. In Napoleonic times, the City supported the war effort with grants of money, and raised three Volunteer Infantry Companies totalling 300 men to assist the Army and the Militia forces in defending the country and maintaining order in the possible event of an invasion. It may be, however, that although the primary motive for volunteering was patriotism, participation in the Movement by Canterbury's leading citizens enhanced their authority in the City and advanced their standing in the County and Country at large.

Industry and Commerce; Communications to the Sea

The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the destruction of the shrine of St Thomas in the sixteenth century robbed Canterbury of its major industry – the Pilgrim trade. Subsequent immigration by Walloons and Huguenots made the City a great centre of wool, cloth-making and silk weaving, reaching heights in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when there were 126 master-weavers employing 1300 'strangers' and 260 English. From that high point the industry declined throughout the eighteenth century, largely because of cheaper French goods and competition from East India silks. By the end of the eighteenth century, the weaving industry in Canterbury was virtually dead. Providentially, at the same time hop growing in and around the City grew to the point where at the beginning of the nineteenth century it represented the major industry in the area. To some extent, therefore, it helped to fill the employment gap left by the demise of weaving, but few other activities used more than a handful of employees.

The position of Canterbury at the junction of major roads to London, Dover, Whitstable, Margate, Ramsgate and Ashford ensured that the City's economy benefited from the coaching era, particularly after the tolling of these major arteries and the widening and paving of the streets by the Pavement Commissioners. However, Canterbury, unlike Maidstone, lacked direct access to the sea by water, for easy and cheap transport of goods, and communications generally. Fordwich, the river port of Canterbury, had antiquated loading arrangements and could not take boats of a reasonable size. In the years from 1790 to 1807 attempts were made, with James Simmons as prime mover, to promote a canal from Canterbury to the sea, on a line to Nicholas Bay, near Reculver. That attempt foundered when it was finally discovered that the proposed harbour at Nicholas Bay was sited on quicksand. An alternative plan, to improve the River Stour to Sandwich was adopted. This envisaged vessels of 100 tons berthing in Canterbury, and the scheme got as far as raising capital of £100,000, most of it locally, and procuring an Act of Parliament in 1825.

In the event the river scheme did not proceed further. Royal assent to a Bill for a railway from Canterbury to Whitstable, with improvement of harbour facilities there, was given in 1825, ten days before the Stour canalization bill. After five years of effort, and at a cost about three times the £30,000 estimated, the Canterbury to Whitstable Railway opened on 3 May 1830. The line operated using stationary steam engines hauling the coaches up the inclines, with gravity employed on the downward slopes. The Invicta locomotive was intended for use on a short and relatively level stretch entering Whitstable. However, Invicta proved not to be man enough to do the

job, and after a few months was retired, and replaced initially by four horses, and then by a third stationary steam engine.

Harbour facilities at Whitstable were improved and the CWR bought its own steamship to operate from there to London, but the enterprise was not a commercial success. As railway development in the Country at large increased and technology improved, the CWR, operating with three stationary engines and no locomotive, taking 40 minutes for a six mile journey, appeared increasingly outdated. Silting problems at the harbour added to the difficulties, and cost-cutting competition from road transport reduced profit margins. Throughout the years to 1844 the line ran at a loss, and debts increased. On 30 September 1844 the South-Eastern Railway took charge, renting the line from the CWR (which was finally dissolved in 1853, when the SER exercised its option to buy the line). In 1846 the SER re-laid the permanent track at a cost of £1,600, in order to convert to steam locomotive use. In that year the SER line from Ashford to Canterbury was opened, thereby connecting the City to London by rail. At that point, control of Canterbury rail links passed out of the hands of the local interests which had, until then, directed the CWR and financially supported it.

It is clear that, while the enterprise of local capital seeking to open up direct and economic lines of commercial traffic with the world outside Canterbury must be applauded, there was never enough money or experienced management expertise to do the job successfully. And, in the event, no great commercial or industrial enterprise appeared in Canterbury to use the newly created link to advantage. The main benefit was that in the two years after the opening of the CWR, the cost of carriage of goods to Whitstable was reduced by half.

A Market Town

The economy of Canterbury, the nature of its businesses and the distribution of its wealth, changed little during the eighteenth century. Tax returns from 1721 to 1790 are consistent with the picture of a workaday market town, with no great personages of title living within the walls, and with richer members of the community living in or near their commercial premises, mainly in the centre of the town. Although the population increased during that period, no new large industries appeared. The numbers of retail outlets, manufacturers and specialist traders increased roughly in proportion to the increase of population.

The population of the City increased from around 6,000 in 1700 to 10,000 in 1801, and then to 15,000 by 1831, but nevertheless its place in the league table of English provincial towns slipped markedly, from 10th in 1700 to 23rd by 1750, and further downwards in the nineteenth century. Maidstone had overtaken Canterbury in population by the early 1800s, and by that time had replaced the City as the focus of the County of Kent. The location of the new county gaol and the holding of assizes in Maidstone, assisted the town in attracting to itself the growing and lucrative patronage of the landed gentry, and of the County community, fostering a relationship which underpinned the town's regional importance. The Medway provided Maidstone with what Canterbury lacked – a route for trade and commerce between neighbouring towns and villages and the London Diaspora, East Anglia and the Continent, with Maidstone as the entrepreneurial hub. Additionally, specialist

industries such as high grade paper-making, engineering enterprises and gin distilleries gave the town a strong industrial base. By the 1830s Maidstone had become fully established as the County town and focus of Kent, while Canterbury remained relatively static as the market town for its immediate area.

Influence of the Cathedral

The rights and jurisdictions of the Dean and Chapter and those of the City authorities (including the Guardians of the Poor and the City magistrates) were such that they were quite separate and distinct authorities in secular matters, with no direct formal links between the two. The exception was the Pavement Commissioners, whose activities extended to the Precincts. The clergy had representatives among the 200 Commissioners, but in practice they played no significant part in the Commissioners' affairs.

The Chapter's main influence in the City was as major landlord of properties in the commercial heart of the City, as employers of labour, and as customers of the City's businesses and shops. In the uneasy landlord-tenant relationship, the Chapter willy-nilly set the standards for property values, and there is some evidence that their policies may, from time to time, have inhibited long-term planning by tenants. Socially, life in the small community of the Precincts proceeded largely independently of City life, though with some contacts through, for instance, the Theatre and music making. While relations between the two were generally polite and respectful, nevertheless a gulf existed which was particularly wide in the early 1830s at the time of the Reform Act. In times of crisis, however, when, as in 1795/6 and 1800/1, food shortages and high prices threatened the industrious poor with famine, and consequently civic unrest threatened the peace, leaders of the two communities acted together to manage the crisis, chiefly by providing voluntary relief.

Archbishops of Canterbury had no residence in the City, and paid only short formal visits to the Cathedral and Canterbury at irregular interval every few years. Such visits invariably included a formal entertainment of the Archbishop by the Mayor and his colleagues, and vice-versa, but, throughout the eighteenth century, the face which the Church presented to the citizens of Canterbury was that of the Dean and Chapter.

Parliamentary Affairs

Local Government in Canterbury proceeded largely independently of Central Government, at least at formal levels. The Burghmote was, however, always ready to signify strong support for the Protestant Monarchy of the House of Hanover, notably in a number of occasional petitions full of patriotic fervour. Measures in Parliament itself only received Burghmote attention when they directly affected Canterbury.

Parliamentary elections were, however, of great and continuing interest to the elite of the City, the City Authorities, the Freemen and the commercial life of Canterbury. The elite gained kudos (and possibly money) from associating with landed gentry in promoting candidates; the City Authorities, income from the sale of Freedoms; Freemen (who were the voters), money and favours from the sale of their votes; and the City generally, from the influx of non-resident voters and other visitors

coming into Canterbury for the elections and spending money there. No single person or interest dominated the constituency. Politics and political parties as such had only a somewhat nominal role in the elections; power, position, financial pickings and personalities played major roles. The result of a Canterbury election was seldom a foregone conclusion, but candidates living in the area were generally favoured. For the first half of the eighteenth century, landed gentry with estates close to the City supplied the MPs. For the second half and into the nineteenth century, some personalities from Canterbury's local government were elected to Parliament, thus seeming to offer a promotion route from local to national politics. Bribery, corruption and malpractice were standard features of most contested elections in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth, Canterbury's Parliamentary representation was twice suspended as a result of Royal Commission enquiries.

Military Presence

From 1795 onwards, soldiers were permanently housed in barracks built on the outskirts of the City. The custom in goods, supplies and recreational facilities which the presence of 2-3,000 military must have brought to a market town of around 10,000 people would have been considerable. A contemporary source has commented that, when many other towns in the British dominion severely suffered from the paralyzing effects of War, the City of Canterbury considerably increased in size and population, and this prosperity was partly ascribed to its being the Chief Military Station in the Southern District, having a General's staff, a park of Artillery and several Regiments stationed in the vicinity. Social activities in the town also benefited from the participation of soldiers, and although soldiers from time to time caused unwelcome disturbances, it would seem that financial gains outweighed disadvantages.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER COUNTY BOROUGHES

Published work relating to the finances and government of Lincoln, York and Exeter – each, like Canterbury, County Boroughs operating under Royal Charters until 1836, and also like Canterbury, Cathedral cities – has been studied, and the main features revealed by such work compared with Canterbury's experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Below is summarized the key points arising from the comparison.

The pattern of Local Government in the four Cities is broadly comparable. In each, self-perpetuating Corporations ruled commercial life, with no recourse to direct taxation. The Charters under which the Boroughs operated ensured that local government officers, including magistrates, were drawn from citizens engaged in commerce, trade and the professions, living and working in the Borough. This may have helped members of the ruling elite to remain in close touch with the feelings of the populace, and have enabled them to manage crises in years of high prices and famine (particularly in 1790/1 and 1800/1) so as to avoid riots or violent disturbances. To this extent, such Boroughs may have constituted areas of relative stability and continuity in times of turmoil and incipient revolution in other parts of the Realm.

Increasing expenditure on the poor, and on Paving, Lighting and Watching the streets was met in varying degrees by sponsoring the creation, through Acts of

Parliament, organizations separate from, but linked to, the Burghmotes, such as Guardians of the Poor and Pavement Commissioners, with tax-raising powers. Social activities amounting to urban renaissance were fostered, on different time-scales, in each, partly to attract the custom of the landed gentry and visitors.

All four Boroughs bequeathed legacies of considerable debt to the more democratic Councils which succeeded them in 1836, but also left portfolios of property more than sufficient to liquidate the debts. The powers of the new Councils subsumed those of the Corporations, with the addition of powers to set up local police forces and to levy Council rates. The appointment of magistrates ceased to be automatic by reason of local government office, and became a function of Central Government. One result of these changes was that the total bill which ratepayers had to meet was more than doubled.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In 1700, Canterbury was governed by an oligarchic, self-perpetuating Burghmote and bench of Magistrates, with no recourse to direct rating. By the early 1800s, two further corporations, with full rating and toll raising powers, existed alongside the Burghmote, and the Magistrates were levying a County rate to defray legal expenses. The three corporations were linked through membership by the Mayor and other Magistrates of these ruling bodies. By the early nineteenth century, total expenditure on local government in the City had increased some five-fold compared with 1700, the difference supplied by rates and tolls. Also by the early nineteenth century, the old system of (enforced) amateur volunteers carrying out duties which underpinned local government had been largely replaced by a system of paid officials.

The business of the Burghmote itself changed little throughout the period 1700-1835, being concerned mainly with the regulation and control of the commerce of the City, through enforced enrolment of Freemen and apprentices, linked with guild membership, and with ownership of the markets. The Burghmote jealously guarded its rights and privileges, though towards the end of the eighteenth century its hold on Freemen and enforced Guild membership was strongly challenged and severely damaged. The Burghmote income, mainly from dues and property rentals, was barely sufficient to meet expenses; in most years the Chamberlain's accounts showed negative balances. With no cash or investment resources, heavy capital expenditure often had to be provided, at least in part, by public subscription, or to wait for the occasional windfalls of income from, for instance, substantial fines from renewal of leases, or from large numbers of purchases of Freedoms in parliamentary election years.

Extensions of the Burghmote's role into areas which increasingly required capital or additional yearly expenditure were therefore effectively precluded by inability to levy rates. Rather than seeking new powers for itself, the Burghmote either supported or acquiesced in the creation, through private Acts of Parliament, of separate Corporations with rate and/or toll raising powers. The Corporation of the Court of Guardians was so created in 1727, to group together the fourteen parishes of the City for Poor Law purposes, with the Burghmote handing over the ownership and revenues of the Poor Priests Hospital to the Guardians for use as a central

workhouse. Similarly, in 1787, a Corporation of Commissioners of the Pavement was set up to pave, light and watch the streets of the City. These two Corporations were distinct legal entities, with income derived from rates, and, in the case of the Commissioners, street and tolls on the importation of coal and coke into the City.

Canterbury's Magistrates in Quarter Sessions exercised similar judicial powers as those of Kent County Magistrates, but in addition had the power to try capital offences. Surprisingly few indictable offences are recorded at each session in the eighteenth century, though the numbers of crimes increased with the onset of the Napoleonic Wars. Less than two dozen capital cases are recorded in the years 1727-1840, and in at least half of these the sentence was reduced to transportation. The creation of the Guardians in 1727 and of the Pavement Commissioners in 1787 reduced the administrative role of the Magistrates in the relevant areas. In 1772, a County rate began to be levied by the Magistrates, and officials, until then conscripted on a voluntary basis, began to be paid.

Social amenities and leisure activities in the City – theatre, race meetings, concerts, music clubs, assemblies, balls, recreational areas, newspapers – grew during the eighteenth century, demonstrating a degree of urban renaissance, civic improvement and commercialization, though not as early in the century or as wide in range as, for instance, at York and Exeter. All these amenities, initiated or supported by the ruling elite, assisted in attracting local landed gentry and their custom to the City. However, the rise of Maidstone as the administrative and social focus of the County of Kent, as a thriving entrepôt through which produce of the County flowed by river to the London Diaspora and other destinations, and as an important manufacturing location, enabled the town to overtake the City as the recognised county focus of Kent, much to Canterbury's detriment. Efforts by Canterbury to promote a canal to the sea failed, and despite the early construction of a railway to Whitstable, a successful and easy route to the London Diaspora was not achieved. With no substantial manufacturing capability, the Industrial Revolution passed Canterbury by, and the City remained a market town, declining in importance to other urban centres in the county and country. The gap in the City's economy caused by the demise of weaving was, however, to some extent filled by the growth of the hop industry and by the establishment of the City in the 1790s as a major military centre.

Throughout the eighteenth century, national politics penetrated little into local affairs in Canterbury, except in the run-up to, and during, Parliamentary elections. No great magnate or single interest dominated the City as a Parliamentary Borough, and as a result, elections were, with few exceptions, contested, and the results far from predictable. MPs elected generally came from the local landed gentry, or, in the latter half of the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries, from among Canterbury's local government elite. Apart from the excitement of the hustings, Canterbury's main interests at election time were in the extra custom derived from visitors, in the income gained by the Burghmote from the Freedoms to gain the vote, and from inducements and bribes of all kinds pressed on Freemen to influence their votes.

A study of the backgrounds of the ruling elite shows that local government in Canterbury in 1700-1835 was in the hands of citizens living and working in the City – shopkeepers, tradesmen, craftsmen and professionals of the middling sort. The extant charter of James I effectively ensured that neither the landed gentry nor the

clergy participated in the running of the City. Because of their strong connections with ordinary citizens the ruling elite of Canterbury seem to have been able to foresee and forestall incipient problems of public order, particularly in times of high prices and famine. The management of such crises on 1795/6 and 1800/1 by the City elite, in conjunction with the Dean and Chapter, avoiding a serious breakdown of public order, is an example of this. This situation may be contrasted with that in rural areas, where the ruling magistrates were drawn almost exclusively from the landed gentry and clergy.

From the above, a broad pattern emerges of the self-perpetuating elite of Canterbury adapting their rule, somewhat tardily, reluctantly and under pressure of events, to try to accommodate and manage, as best they could, changes in social and economic circumstances in the eighteenth century, aiming at the same time to sustain their own dominance while attempting to foster the City's commercial viability and its general standing in the ranks of provincial towns. The evidence supports the view that they had a measure of success in some of these aims, and that local government in the period 1700-1835 may not have been as incompetent, inefficient and impervious to change as Municipal Boroughs have sometimes been held to have been. Moreover, local government of other similar Municipal Boroughs such as Lincoln, York and Exeter follow the same broad pattern as Canterbury. The middling background of the elites in each may, therefore, not only have helped ensure stability in times of crisis, but may also collectively have represented islands of relative calm in areas of serious unrest.

Roy Porter notes that through the 1790s, the margins by which central government 'battered down the hatches and survived the prospect of civil and even bloody revolution' were slim'.³ He advanced the view that one reason assisting the survival of central government was that under the English Poor Law, parochial softening of the blows to the poor occurred. He added that the 'disaffected and literate artisans in the North and Midland towns were the weak link in the chain of local government'. Conversely, this present paper suggests the tentative conclusion that ancient Municipal Boroughs such as Canterbury were strong links in the local government chain, which by their existence assisted the survival of central government. We may also conclude that the evidence of this thesis supports a view elaborated recently by David Eastwood that in the eighteenth century, changes in local government of Municipal Boroughs were achieved largely as a result of initiatives by local elites, and that, in part, until 1835, relations between central and local government were worked out through the promotion by localities of private Bills designed to achieve and implement such changes.⁴

The replacement of the Burghmote by a City Council under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 introduced a measure of democratic election and abolished the concept of Freeman. However, apart from the establishment of a paid police force, the assumption of direct responsibility for law and order, and the ability to raise rates for approved purposes, the Council's purview remained similar to that of the Burghmote. The Guardians continued as a separate body, though from the 1840s onwards they were under the control of the central Poor Law Commissioners, and the Pavement Commissioners were not taken over by the Council until the 1860s. Stricter rules were applied to prevent the misapplication of public funds, and charitable legacies and Trusts formerly administered by the Burghmote were placed

under independent Trustees. The Reform Act of 1832, together with the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, resulted in a reduction in numbers of Parliamentary elections, and in an even smaller Council election roll of burgesses, with a substantial number of people on each roll not listed on the other – a somewhat anomalous situation, which the passage of time and the adoption of further Acts extending the franchise eventually modified. In the first Council election in 1836, most burgesses voted for one or other of two lists of six candidates in each of the three wards, and those candidates in favour of reform swept the board by twenty seats to four, and also captured the Mayoralty, and the six Aldermanic seats. Few members of the old Burghmote survived. The introduction of a measure of democracy into local government had brought with it a demonstration of strong links with national politics not apparent before, and which persisted thereafter. Democracy had also to be paid for in cash; the new Council's rates were nearly double the comparable expenditure under the old regime.

ENDNOTES

¹This article was originally published in *Archaeologia Cantiana* cxx 2000 pp347-348. Other relevant articles in *Archaeologia Cantiana* are as follows:

'Turnpike roads in the Canterbury area', cii, 1985, 171-91.

'James Simmons: a Canterbury tycoon', cv, 1988, 215-42.

'James Simmons – a postscript', cviii, 1990, 268-9.

'The finances and government of the City and County of Canterbury in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries', cix, 1991, 191-246.

'Finances and government of Canterbury early to mid nineteenth century', cxii, 1993, 25-54.

'Finances and government of Canterbury: eighteenth to mid nineteenth century Court of Guardians', cxvi, 1996, 147-81.

'Finances and government of Canterbury: eighteenth to mid nineteenth century; Canterbury Courts of Justice', cxviii, 1998, 291-325.

'Canterbury Court of Guardians: eighteenth century - a Postscript', cxix, 1999, 343-51.

² The further work in this paper, additional to that in the papers listed in note 1, is summarized from F. H. Panton 'Finances and Government of Canterbury Eighteenth to Mid Nineteenth Centuries', PhD thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury (UKC) 1999, copies of which are lodged in the KAS Library and in the Canterbury Cathedral Library.

³ Porter, Roy, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1961), Pelican History of Britain (ed. by J. H. Plumb).

⁴ Eastwood, David, *Government and Community in the English Provinces 1700-1870*, 1997, Macmillan.
