

# DUNWICH: THE ACQUISITION AND MAINTENANCE OF A BOROUGH

by SUSAN MITCHELL SOMMERS

DURING THE HANOVERIAN era, social control and stability were in large measure established and maintained on the local level. For the political classes and their leaders, political influence was considered vital to securing social stability. The figures who exercised their influence to this end were, not coincidentally, also the men who at least guided the mechanisms of local politics. Thus a study of local politics, considered on its own merits, quite apart from any relation to Westminster, reveals a complex system of interrelationships and behaviours which can be observed and analyzed, with far-reaching implications. Political behaviour is in some sense a microcosm of the broader society. So it is with the hope of discovering more about life in the provinces of Hanoverian Britain that we turn our attention to one of its previously neglected boroughs, that of Dunwich in Suffolk.

During the Middle Ages, Dunwich was a cultural and commercial centre. But the sea steadily eroded the East Anglian coastline, and the borough suffered severely. In 1754 Thomas Gardner described the state of the town and its port:

Dunwich (in antient Time) was a CITY, surrounded with a Stone-wall, and brazen Gates;[it]had fifty-two Churches, Chapels, Religious Houses, and Hospitals; a King's Palace, a Bishop's Seat, a Mayor's Mansion, and a Mint; as many Top-Ships as Churches, &c. and not fewer Wind-Mills. Also a Forest that extended from the Town Southeast seven Miles, now [all] covered by the Sea: And the Port converted to firm land (Gardner 1754, 1).

Gardner (1754, 98) estimates that in mid-century there were only 'about one hundred souls subsisting [there], so that some of the freemen for want of a sufficient number are obliged to hold more offices than one.' The condition of the borough occasioned Oldfield's famous comment that if the sea continued to ruin the town,

the encroachment that is still making will probably, in a few years, oblige the constituent body to betake themselves to a boat, whenever the king's writ shall summon them to the exercise of their elective functions; as the necessity of adhering to *forms*, in the farcical solemnity of Borough elections, is not to be dispensed with (Oldfield 1816, IV, 562).

Along with other Suffolk boroughs, Dunwich underwent a late 17th-century constitutional crisis, focused on the right of election.<sup>1</sup> Between 1688 and 1709 the right of election was challenged by petition four times. Twice the right of outsiders to vote in parliamentary elections was upheld, and twice they were denied.<sup>2</sup> The question seems to have been finally settled in 1709, as the result of a petition brought against the election of Sir Charles Blois and Robert Kemp. The right of election was, according to the committee, vested in resident freemen not receiving alms (Oldfield 1816, IV, 560). This decision limiting the franchise can be seen as the first firm step toward the drastic reduction of Dunwich's electorate which was accomplished in the remainder of the century. Since this decision restricted the franchise to freemen resident within the remains of the ancient borough boundaries, the eventual political extinction of Dunwich was virtually guaranteed as the Medieval city vanished into the sea.

At the accession of George I, Dunwich was a diminished but still independent borough, regularly contested at considerable expense by Suffolk landowners.<sup>3</sup> Though the number of freemen was already small, divisions within the Corporation made for frequent contests in the years leading up to 1727.<sup>4</sup> The few political papers remaining from the period indicate that

Members were forced to devote a good deal of attention and money to maintaining their interest in the borough. One of the most expensive was the general election of 1722, when the two sitting members tried unsuccessfully to retain their seats. When substantial loans and gifts to the electors failed to win them enough support, one of the ousted members, Sir Robert Rich, attempted to overturn the election by petition. His efforts eventually came to naught, but only after he had spent another considerable sum trying to woo electors in a subsequent by-election. Even as these machinations took place, however, the days of Dunwich's political freedom were coming to an end.

Given the small population and decayed condition of Dunwich, it is no great surprise that partisan contests are largely absent from a study of its political history after the 1720s. No election was brought to a poll from 1727 until the borough lost both seats in 1832. After a number of contested elections in the first decades of the 18th century, political affairs were virtually reduced to a series of financial transactions. Unlike other such venal boroughs, Dunwich spent much of the century under the control of only a handful of patrons. This is unusual since control in venal boroughs rested almost entirely upon the patron's ability to outspend would-be opponents, causing interests in these constituencies to be unstable and short-lived. Thus it is not flamboyant partisanship, but what is revealed about how a pocket borough was won, managed, and maintained that makes Dunwich so interesting. Documents remain which enable us to study how two sets of Dunwich patrons, the Downings and the partners Sir Joshua Van Neck and Miles Barne, approached the problems facing borough patrons, and reveal the extent to which a borough could manage its patrons, as well as the expected reverse.<sup>5</sup>

While the borough remained independent long after it ceased to be any sort of population centre, this status was fatally challenged in 1718. As Patricia Murrell notes in her study of Suffolk politics, by the early 18th century the full political effects of Dunwich's diminishing population, brought about in part by encroachment by the sea, were finally felt (Murrell 1982, 13). The Crown grant which had given the borough of Dunwich to its burgesses and townsmen under Edward I, demanded a fixed rent of £75 a year. This sum was reduced to £5 by letters patent of Charles II, in recognition of the decay suffered by the borough. This instrument expired with Charles's death, but the borough continued to pay the reduced rate (*C.T.P.*, 1714–19, 413–14). In 1718 proceedings were instituted against the Corporation for arrears, and after the imprisonment of ten burgesses for non-payment, amends were made to the Crown. Shortly thereafter the borough, including its lands and properties, was granted to Sir George Downing in fee farm on a 99-year lease, for £5 per annum.<sup>6</sup> This grant ended Dunwich's history as an independent borough, as it effectively made Sir George (and his successors) the Corporation's landlord and patron.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the number of freemen naturally declined along with Dunwich's population, but the electorate was subject to further artificial restrictions as well. Romney Sedgewick reports some forty freemen in 1714, but after 1765 this figure was systematically reduced by Sir Joshua Van Neck and Miles Barne, and by 1798 the actual number of resident freemen had stabilized at sixteen.<sup>7</sup> This close management of the electorate was not actively opposed by most of the freemen, especially in the latter part of the century, because it gave each of them a larger share in the treats and favours, and more individual importance in the Corporation. This reconciliation between the electorate and the patrons developed largely after the death of Sir Jacob Downing in 1765, when Sir Joshua Van Neck and Miles Barne wrested control of the borough from Lady Downing. Thereafter, the great wealth of the Van Neck family provided a substantial boost to the 'natural interest' enjoyed by the Barne family, with both factors contributing to an increased stabilization in borough politics. With Van Neck's vast mercantile wealth, the partners were able both to satisfy Dunwich electors and intimidate prospective challengers.

As noted above, the first patrons of 18th-century Dunwich were the Downing family, who were of East Anglian origin, and had parliamentary interest in both Dunwich and Gamlingay in

Cambridgeshire.<sup>8</sup> Sir George Downing controlled Dunwich both as lord of the manor and as political patron. He had long owned an estate in the Dunwich area, but upon the grant of the 99-year lease of the borough, he began systematically to acquire properties within the borough as well.<sup>9</sup> He and his heir, Jacob Downing, kept the electors firmly in hand, requiring that each prospective freeman sign a bond before enrollment to guarantee loyalty. These bonds frequently appear to have been a mere formality, as in the case cited below, when prospective freemen who actually owed Downing nothing at all were induced to sign a bond before they were allowed to be sworn. In addition, freemen were frequently offered loans or mortgages at attractive rates after they were sworn, further to cement their attachment to the interest. Many freemen, though not all, also occupied Corporation-owned houses, which they held at low rents at the patron's pleasure.

These practices were crucial to the Downings' control of the borough, but became burrs to those electors who resented the autocratic management style of the Downings. In at least one documented instance, a freeman was emboldened to complain about the forced signing of bonds. Francis Robinson gave the following undated deposition at an inquiry into the matter:

He was entitled to his freedom of the said Borough by birth, and about two years before the death of Sir George Downing which happened in 1749 he applied to him for leave to take up his freedom, as he had always understood that it was necessary to have his consent for that purpose. That he was answered he would do so, but it must be on such conditions as other people did, which was signing a bond which he understood to be a check upon him, to keep him in the interest of Sir George. Mr. Robinson answered that he did not choose to give any bond as he was not indebted to Sir George, or had any connections with him.<sup>10</sup>

In the same document, Mr Wingfield, the Town Clerk, asserted that

the Bond was of no significance, as it was only by way of securing his votes, and that he would take care it should never hurt him, and he would endorse on the Bond that said Francis did not owe Sir Jacob any money, and that it was by way of securing his vote. . .<sup>11</sup>

That the Downings took the use of bonds to secure freemen's loyalty quite seriously is clear from a letter of 20 October 1761 in which Sir Jacob complained bitterly against Robinson and the members of the Corporation for refusing to 'sign the bond'. He took this as a sign of ingratitude, and suggested that the lot of them were probably 'embezzling my money without my consent', and threatened to send 'every man into Jail, that has had one Shilling of the Money'.<sup>12</sup>

Sir Jacob routinely used the signed bonds as a threat if any freemen displeased him, and upon at least one occasion actually procured a disfranchisement. The unfortunate elector was Francis Swatman, a prominent Dunwich freeman with whom Sir Jacob was on perpetually bad terms. Sir Jacob eventually decided that the borough was better off without Swatman as 'an active political participant. To effect this, he threatened that 'he would put a bond in suit which the father had given whereby he would be ruined and stripped of all his stock, and everything he was possessed of. That in order to save his father and family from ruin, he did consent to be disfranchised'.<sup>13</sup>

This practice led to prolonged litigation upon the death of Sir Jacob, when Sir Joshua Van Neck and Miles Barne wrested the interest from his intransigent widow.

In part because their methods were so stringent, the Downings constantly faced a small but vocal opposition within the Corporation. Influential local men like Francis Swatman and Francis Robinson were frequently tempted to build up their own followings amongst the freemen, using the bonds as fuel for the fires of discontent. Robinson was apparently particularly adept at this. On 13 July 1761 Sir Jacob complained to his agent, John Paine, 'I wish Mr. Robinson wou'd Lend none of the Freemen Money, it is only an Encouragement to Idleness, and what, you know, I ever dislik'd in Swatman. . .'.<sup>14</sup> In October Robinson was still cultivating an independent

interest, and Sir Jacob again complained: 'I can plainly see that He has been Lending Money to as many of the Freeman as wou'd borrow of him, and I am determin'd to break the Neck of those Schemes.'<sup>15</sup> Robinson broke definitively with the Downing interest after Sir Jacob's death, helping Sir Joshua Van Neck and Miles Barne in their bid to take over borough patronage.

Sir Jacob Downing suffered from gout, which prevented him from managing Dunwich as actively in the years leading up to his death in 1764. After decades of tight control, it is little wonder that the Corporation grew restive during his decline, and felt that it was time for a change. A pair of prospective patrons soon offered themselves. On 9 February 1764 the Revd. J. Gordon of Cambridge wrote to Miles Barne,

Seeing the Death of Sr Jacob Downing mention'd in the papers of last night, I can't help taking this first opportunity of putting you in mind of the Borough of Dunwich. Do Sir, take a trip thither immediately – As the people can't know immediately to whom their habitations are likely to belong, this must certainly be a most favorable time for a New Candidate.<sup>16</sup>

Miles Barne had a well-established interest in the borough. He had purchased a nearby estate in 1744, and was first returned for Dunwich by Sir George in 1747. More than sixty years later, his son Michael claimed that Barne was foisted upon Sir George by headstrong freemen who felt slighted by their patron:

Sir George Downing either residing at too great a distance or for want of an heir had not thought it worth his while to pay that attention to the freemen that they thought they deserved, and though he possessed all the land and houses, still he was obliged to give way to the wishes of the freemen and my father was elected with himself in the year 1747.<sup>17</sup>

Though Michael Barne gives the distinct impression that his father was forced upon Sir George, Sir Jacob mentioned in 1758 that Miles Barne paid £1,200 for his seat – £200 more than the usual amount.<sup>18</sup> Barne did not continue in the seat in 1754, but his son reports that he declared that if he outlived Sir George, he would stand again for the borough.<sup>19</sup> In the event, Sir Jacob was able to assume the family interest, forestalling Barne's plans for several years. Finally, with Sir Jacob's death in 1764, the legal status of the 99-year grant made to Sir George was thrown into question, leaving an open invitation to Miles Barne to try his luck again with Dunwich. Barne lost no time in reviving his pretensions in the borough, dining with fifteen freemen to sound them out only three days after Downing's demise on 6 February 1764. He decided, however, that it was too early to form any judgment, 'until an antagonist appears'.<sup>20</sup>

An antagonist soon presented herself. Sir Jacob's widow, Margaret, Lady Downing, was determined to preserve her interest in the borough.<sup>21</sup> Although the Downings were childless, Lady Downing clearly saw that the borough was a valuable family asset, and believed it was something she could effectively manage on her own. In an era when few women took an active role in politics, Lady Downing was exceptional. Her determination and willingness to employ even Machiavellian tactics on her own behalf further set her apart from those women who were willing to make political appearances and extract promises of votes for their husbands and kinsmen.

The key to Downing influence over the electors in Dunwich (aside from the obvious legal control over Corporation property) had long been twofold: bonds and mortgages. Lady Downing made the most of both instruments in the ensuing battle for control of the borough.<sup>22</sup> Early in the century, probably in the first years of Sir George's patronage, the practice of offering freemen mortgages and subsidized rents was formalized, with the borough patron allowing freemen to live rent-free (or nearly so) in Corporation houses, in return for political loyalty. It was certainly a long-established relationship when the freemen first courted Miles Barne in 1747, or else their defection would not have occasioned such surprise. Sir Jacob held the borough more firmly than

his predecessor had, and no such infidelities challenged his patronage. Upon his death, however, the situation changed markedly. Unless Lady Downing was able either to win the sympathetic loyalty of the freemen, or legally to compel them to remain in her interest, her control of the borough was in peril. Both Barne and Lady Downing moved to fill Sir Jacob's now-vacant Parliamentary seat as a first step in securing the borough. Barne wrote to his wife on 11 February 1764 that 'Mr Peter Taylor, the gentleman we met at Mrs Mayer's appeared this morning as a candidate upon the recommendation of Lady Downing at Dunwich. The whole number of freemen is 15 and 14 have declared to him peremptorily that they will vote for me'.<sup>23</sup> Lady Downing was not amused at the disloyalty of her electors, and immediately threatened to arrest all those who had signed bonds for her husband. The panic that ensued indicates that many freemen were caught twice over: they both occupied Corporation houses and had signed bonds to the Downings. This gave Lady Downing additional leverage over them by threatening both eviction and arrest for debt if they failed to comply with her demands. On 12 February Lady Downing wrote to John Paine, the family's long-suffering agent, urging him to talk sense into the freemen: 'All that at present can be promised is that I will make everything as easy to them as possible, provided they will oblige me in the support of my friend Mr. Taylor. If they considered their own interest they would not hesitate a moment to comply with my request'.<sup>24</sup> Barne realized that Lady Downing was willing to bring out the heavy cannonry, while he was not as yet equipped with similar weapons. He suggested a compromise, by which he would support Taylor at the by-election if Lady Downing would give written assurance of her support for his own candidacy the next general election.<sup>25</sup> Lady Downing responded by ordering Taylor to distribute £500 amongst the freemen. In addition, she authorized the creation of six new freemen, in an attempt to shore up her support within the Corporation (Childs 1973, 18). The freemen who had signed bonds with the Downings turned to Barne for relief. He was asked to provide assurances about the sums, in return for which the freemen would 'all stand staunch for you'.<sup>26</sup> Barne complied, and at the ultimately uncontested by-election on 18 February he was elected to fill Sir Jacob's seat.

Lady Downing warned prior to the election that 'Mr. Barne, will, if he succeeds in his election, leave the voters in the lurch, as the money due to me from them is more perhaps than he is able or at least willing to pay'.<sup>27</sup> She clearly intended to test his resolve. Her displeasure was intense, and swept all before her, including the hapless Mr Paine:

The ill success . . . I look upon in no other light than owing to the rascality and the ingratitude of the freemen, and I look on your friend Mr. Robinson to be the ring-leader and the corrupter of the whole Corporation, and I think it would have been but civil in you to have let me into the proceedings and transactions both before and during the time of the election. . . The ingratitude I have met with in this affair from the Corporation, they must needs in some measure expect a return, and they may depend upon it.<sup>28</sup>

Miles Barne was not left entirely to his own resources against this formidable widow. Sir Joshua Van Neck purchased Heveningham Hall in 1752, at least in part because of its proximity to Dunwich. Sir Joshua was barred from sitting in Parliament himself because he was Dutch by birth, but he had political ambitions for his sons.<sup>29</sup> Settling the family at a respectable country seat near an apparently manageable borough must have been seen as yet another shrewd business decision on the part of the elder Van Neck. Sir Joshua had a history of success in business dealings, and upon his death in 1777 was described as one of the richest merchants in Europe (*Gent. Mag.* 1777, 147). In 1764, however, he was far from contemplating death. Looking at politics as being fundamentally a business proposition, Van Neck suggested an alliance with Barne.

Shortly after his election as Member for Dunwich, Barne wrote to his solicitor Mr Jackson to sound him out about Sir Joshua's suitability as a political partner. From Barne's account of their

negotiations, it is apparent that Sir Joshua was enthusiastic about getting involved in Dunwich politics:

After repeated applications from Sir Joshua Vanneck Bart. by Mr. Hinton his steward in the county and Mr. Negus in London upon the subject of joining with me in opposition to Lady D. in the Borough of Dunwich, and assurance that he would accommodate the freemen with his lands contiguous by dividing or subdividing – I waited upon him in London and acquainted him with every circumstance relative to the Borough, the views of the freemen, and that I could not possibly come into any agreement with him until Lady Downing had taken some disagreeable measures with the freemen, which when done, I was confident they would approve of his co-operating with me, assent to his son's being chose at the next vacancy, and to all other matters that would be agreeable to us.<sup>30</sup>

It remained to be seen if Van Neck's business acumen would translate into political perception.

Immediately following the initial negotiations between Van Neck and Barne, Lady Downing facilitated the partnership by having Francis Robinson, whom she considered especially culpable, arrested.<sup>31</sup> The arrest was based on Robinson's signature on a bond, and this unresolved business made Sir Joshua uneasy. His concern was well-founded, for Lady Downing entered into legal action against the other freemen with vigour. Barne took the counter-offensive and in March had Lady Downing's agent Paine removed from his post as Town Clerk. One of the Town Bailiffs, Edmund Watling, reported to Barne on 24 April that 'Paine took it badly, and said he would much rather have been shot to death', apparently as much out of fear of Lady Downing as at any personal loss.<sup>32</sup> The lady's reaction was swift and determined. Within the month she had six more freemen arrested.<sup>33</sup> Already in early April, Sir Joshua wryly observed, 'I fear we are over head and Ears in the Law, which is no pleasant amusement to me, but we are engaged and must go through with it'.<sup>34</sup>

Two weeks earlier, on 22 March, Henry Negus, an attorney long associated with Dunwich Corporation politics, had written to Sir Joshua to inform him that a meeting of thirteen freemen had expressed pleasure at Lady Downing's behaviour, 'as it entirely put an end to the interest of that family', and declared that 'they would very readily put themselves under the direction of yourself and Mr Barne and that no offers whatever that Lady Downing might make shall ever bring them back to her interest'.<sup>35</sup> The freemen agreed to Miles Barne and Van Neck's two sons being made freemen, and to support Gerard William Vanneck's candidacy for Parliament at the next general election.<sup>36</sup>

Sir Joshua and Barne saw control of the Corporation as their most effective weapon against Lady Downing, and proceeded accordingly.<sup>37</sup> The partners pursued the takeover deliberately. They agreed to limit the electorate to thirty-two freemen (sixteen resident and sixteen non-resident), a number which would have to be achieved by a sizable creation of loyal freemen. This would effectively swamp the electorate, diluting any strength the Downing faction still claimed. Accordingly, six new freemen were created immediately before the by-election in February (at which Miles Barne was elected Member). Sir Joshua enquired on 27 March about the proper procedure for having his sons sworn as freemen of the borough. He wrote to Negus, with the query:

What remains for my sons to do in order to take up their Freedom, you'll inform me of when in Town. In every step towards settling an Interest in the Borough we must go hand in hand with Mr. Barne, and then things I hope will go well. If once that Interest is consolidated, it will in course become my study and desire to cultivate and Increase it, Sensible the Freemen will not be wanting in furnishing us with the means of serving them.<sup>38</sup>

A list of newly sworn freemen dated 5 April 1764 includes Gerard William Vanneck and his brother Joshua, and Miles Barne junior. They had been chosen at a court on 28 March, at which

time Miles Barne senior was also sworn as a freeman. Joshua Vanneck and Miles Barne junior were sworn as Capital Burgesses. Miles Barne senior and Gerard W. Vanneck were sworn as Bailiffs at the same meeting of the Great Court.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent to this swearing in, twelve more Van Neck-Barne supporters were made honorary freemen on 25 August 1764. Four days later new officers were chosen, and another five men claimed their freedom by birthright.<sup>40</sup> On 29 September the newly augmented Corporation granted Town properties to Miles Barne and Sir Joshua Van Neck on lease for 99 years, including the Maison Dieu, the Hospital, Corporation and Town Lands.<sup>41</sup> The legality of this move was highly questionable, since the Crown grant to Sir George Downing had not yet expired. Still, the town's charter gave the Corporation and freemen control over the borough and, presumably, its properties. The partners grasped at this resulting uncertainty, and exploited it to their best advantage. They continued to consolidate their hold on the Corporation in October and November, by filling up final vacancies in the Common Council and the body of Aldermen.<sup>42</sup> Lady Downing tried, without success, to have these new Councilmen and Aldermen disqualified by claiming that the freemen who elected them were themselves improperly chosen and sworn.<sup>43</sup> Failing this, she concentrated on other harassments within her power.

It appears that from fairly early on in the struggle for the borough, Lady Downing realized that she was in a vulnerable position, and she became increasingly aggressive in her attempts to retain control. By May 1764 her attempts to woo the electors had been transformed into a campaign of revenge. If she could not reclaim the loyalty of the electors, she would make life as difficult as possible for them and their new patrons. As a consequence, Barne and Van Neck had to keep a very close eye on both the borough and the lady. On 20 May 1764 Negus wrote to Sir Joshua that Lady Downing was planning an extended stay in Dunwich. Confident that she had permanently alienated the freemen, he wrote:

I forsee no ill consequence from it save that of increasing the expenses, as some of us must often be at the Borough and when we are, the men will expect to have some entertainment. They all declare intentions of remaining steady which we believe they will do. If we should find Lady Downing endeavouring to get them to her interest and think it right to take some of them out of the town, we must do so, but at present that is unnecessary.<sup>44</sup>

Sir Joshua became more certain of his position with the Corporation as Lady Downing's persecutions continued. Despite his anxiety at the seemingly unending expense of the borough, he took some comfort from his belief that Lady Downing was bringing even more expense upon herself, and with much less to show for it in the end. On 29 June he wrote to Negus:

Her residence will do her no good, as she pursues in the same measure of distressing the Freemen. If it is revenge we may lett her satisfy herself, as it must turn to our advantage. If she acts by advice, I think she is Ill advised for whatever expense she putts Mr Barnes and me to, she must spend her guinea to our half-guinea, which to judge by the carracter she bears here, she will not be fond of on a continuance.<sup>45</sup>

One of the partners' greatest assets in the war with Lady Downing was the defection of her much-abused agent, John Paine. In late May, Negus wrote to Sir Joshua that 'we have been able to bring Paine over to us which we were desirous of doing as his evidence will be a great service. He is to remain with Lady Downing to be a spy upon her'.<sup>46</sup> Sir Joshua was sceptical, however, and warned Negus that 'you should not lose sight of the principles of one acting in that double capacity and consequently trust no further than what you see and feel'.<sup>47</sup> Over the next several weeks, Negus and Sir Joshua continued to debate Paine's loyalty. Sir Joshua agreed that Paine could be invaluable in clearing up the matter of the bonds, and accepted that he was no doubt willing to help them because of 'some slight from her Ladyship'. Sir Joshua warned, however, that 'we must be cautious with him, for he would not be ye first man, that had engag'd as a Spey,

in order to gett at your Secret in behalf of an adversary'.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, Sir Joshua and Barne were convinced of Paine's conversion, on financial if not moral grounds. On 15 June 1764 Sir Joshua wrote to Negus, 'I think he is now sincerely with us, and indeed interest must make him so, as he could not otherwise expect a share of the election money'.<sup>49</sup> Eventually Lady Downing turned her attention to Paine, and upon discovering his duplicity brought an unsuccessful suit against him for non-payment of rent.<sup>50</sup>

While Van Neck and Barne strengthened their grasp over the Corporation, they continued to struggle with the problem of the bonds held by Lady Downing. In June 1764, Sir Joshua urged Negus to 'make your Self as much Master as possible of the constitution of the borough, by the help of the Books, and to get Evidence about the nature of the Bonds'.<sup>51</sup> Lady Downing continued to prosecute her case against the freemen vigorously, serving eviction notices on all of them who lived in borough houses. Barne and Van Neck, through Negus, reassured the freemen and their families that they could continue to occupy the properties.<sup>52</sup> The partners did what they could to support their harried electors, paying legal expenses and standing bail for them when Lady Downing had them arrested. His correspondence indicates that as early as April 1764, Van Neck was already distressed by the cost of the borough. On 14 April he confided to Negus, 'I must desire you . . . prevent . . . putting us to unnecessary expences. They will now run high enough without superfluous formalities . . . and a Burough may be purchas'd too dear'.<sup>53</sup>

While the lengthy legal process churned through the actions brought by Lady Downing, the partners continued to consolidate their hold over the Corporation. In the autumn of 1764 the Van Neck-Barne alliance was more firmly established by Barne's move 'to convey his estate in Dunwich for the use of himself and Sir Joshua and their heirs to hold . . . in common, at a price that has been settled between them'.<sup>54</sup> Negus explained to Mr Jackson that 'the intent of the agreement between Sir Joshua and Mr. Barne you perceive is that everything relative to the Borough should be done at a joint expense with a joint consent'.<sup>55</sup> Despite their influence with the electors, Van Neck and Barne remained concerned with Lady Downing's continued presence in Dunwich. In response to rumours that she was having her Dunwich home suitably furnished for her permanent residence, Van Neck wrote to Negus, 'this speaks the necessity of our going forward without delay in widening our bottom, and increasing our power. I wish therefore that you would think very seriously about it, and if something was necessary to be done to gain a majority of the old freemen in order to choose more honorary ones'.<sup>56</sup>

To compound Sir Joshua's concerns about the borough, strains began to show both within the Corporation and in his partnership with Barne. It was apparently still easy at this stage to lose the good-will of the freemen, who had just thrown off an onerous patron and were little inclined to compromise. Francis Robinson, an important man in the Corporation and one of the partners' earliest allies, was given a lease for one of the borough properties, Scotshall Farm, on very easy terms. On 22 January 1765 Van Neck wrote a worried letter to Negus, lamenting their handling of the affair:

I fear we have acted very impolitickly in not concealing the Lease granted to Mr. Robinson for Scotts Hall. This has been represented to ye Freemen in a wrong Light and gives them Jealousies as if Mr. Rob. only acted with private views to himself. To this I attribute their objection of chusing Mr. Barne as Bailiff; in Lieu of Mr. Robinson deceas'd. I own I do not like this beginning of an opposition on their part, and still hope you will be able to prevail on them. . .<sup>57</sup>

Edmund Watling appears to have been the instigator of much of the unrest in the borough, and it was undoubtedly he who criticized the Scotshall lease most vociferously. As the freemen became aroused at this case of apparent favouritism, factions coalesced around Watling and Robinson. Watling (who was not a freeman) reportedly canvassed the Corporation to be granted his freedom, and Robinson's secure lease effectively made him an independent political actor in the borough. By the autumn of 1765, Sir Joshua was receiving unsettling accounts of what was going on amongst the freemen. He warned Negus on 20 September,



Mr Robinson has again testified to me, his uneasiness in regard to Mr. Watling, whom he is inform'd has induced some of the Freemen to propose him to be made one at the next meeting, as this would infallibly bring on a contest in the Borough, and in its consequences force Mr Robinson into other measures against the joint Interest of Mr Barne and Myself, I hope Mr. Barne will effectively prevent Mr. Watling's being propos'd.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to his concerns about the freemen, Sir Joshua began to doubt his partner's wisdom in throwing good money after bad in legal proceedings with Lady Downing. In December 1765 the cases against Robinson and Chapman were decided in Lady Downing's favour. Van Neck the businessman felt he had been tricked into wasting his money on a result which though promised, was in all events unlikely. He suggested to Negus that he might propose a compromise to Lady Downing:

It is a matter of great surprise to me that the great and learned men in the Law should have induced me to spend such a sum of money to obtain a point which their great learning must have made them see was not obtainable. This you cannot suppose will reconcile me with the profession. As I do not suppose Lady Downing is by this time much more in love with it, I persist in my opinion that if by the means of Mr Jackson or some other proper person, a compromise could be made with Lady Downing whatever sacrifice Mr Barne and myself should make, we shall save money by it, for God knows what dance we shall be led by the learned in Chancery and when we shall see an end of it. I therefore desire you to speak seriously about it to Mr Barne, for such milk cows as Lady Downing and her adversary they will not easily lose hold of.<sup>59</sup>

Before the month was out Sir Joshua had been dissuaded from pursuing a compromise, but he was still discouraged about the entire situation. Sir Joshua regarded Dunwich in much the same light as a commercial venture, in which one invests a certain amount of time and money in return for a probable profit. But Dunwich was proving to be a decided liability. Sir Joshua complained on 26 December,

My little confidence in the judgement of Mr Barne and total ignorance of the blessed law made me seek for a guide in the cause against Lady Downing. Mr Nuthal [Nuttal] saw Mr Coulthurst with Sir Fletcher Norton, and afterwards went to Lord C. so that he was fully informed and agreed we were next to proceed to King's Bench which from the reasons he gave me, I conclude was preferring Purgatory before a worse place, for to that dilemma we seem to be reduced. However, it was some satisfaction to me to know from such great authorities that of the two evils we chose the least.<sup>60</sup>

To make matters worse, Van Neck and Barne began to bicker about money, especially Barne's ambitious building projects in Dunwich. One document estimates the partners' 1765 building expenses to have been in excess of £2,000.<sup>61</sup> Sir Joshua was extremely alarmed that his partner did not share his concerns about the mounting cost of securing and maintaining the borough. When Sir Joshua learned in 1766 that Barne had authorized a fresh round of construction, he exclaimed, 'It may prove the dearest Borough in the Kingdom, and if we are to go on till the General Election, the expense will much exceed the value of a seat in Parliament'.<sup>62</sup>

As the 1768 General Election approached, Sir Joshua and Barne found themselves on very strained terms, with the solicitors Negus and Jackson acting as go-betweens. Sir Joshua was further irritated by Barne's involvement in a monetary fiasco with Robinson which threatened to destabilize their hard-won interest in the borough. Barne and Robinson were in dispute about £260 which Robinson claimed from Barne as losses, presumably living and legal expenses, associated with his eviction and arrest by Lady Downing. After initially agreeing to wait until

after the election to settle the question, Robinson apparently became incensed at Barne's treatment of him, and threatened to split the Corporation, inviting a contest.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, on 26 December 1767, Robinson broadly hinted to Barne at the possible results of his discontent:

All thoug we have had some Dispute I keep my promas, I canot say but from the beging of matters at the late Election thing[s] has not past so agreeable as I expected & I have be for said that I have note bin will used . . . I think it realy Crewell using how Ever as we are gong to be Ingaged in Corupration [business] lets have all matter settled for I really assure you it would be very Disagreeable to me to See either you or Mr Vanneck be the least Disaponted in this affair.

Robinson warned Miles Barne that he had learned,

that you & Mr Vanneck will be strongly oppos'd at Dunwich at the Inswing Election & by Mr Harvey & a nother gentleman but could not learn his name both to be assisted with L:D Interest this you may depend on as fact . . . I[say] lett them Dwo all possable it will be to no purpose however the freemen are to have offer to have Lands & many things Else they can Disire.<sup>64</sup>

Although Sir Joshua discounted the threat of any genuine opposition, he was understandably upset with his partner for endangering what they had spent so much time and money to secure.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Sir Joshua had reason to believe that Barne had misrepresented his dispute with Robinson, in the hope of casting the matter in a more favourable light. On 30 December he wrote, exasperated, to Negus:

On receipt of your Letter of the 27th Inst, I had just been writing to Mr Hinton, for you and him not to med. any more in the dispute between Mr Barne & Mr Robn. Every information Mr B. gave me in our last Interview, proves to be a misrepresentation, to give it no worse name. It has finish'd my knowledge of the man. I am Imbarle'd with him and must go through the engagement till that is over his dispute with Mr Rob. must not affect the unanimity of the Borrough.<sup>66</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable that in their dispute the partners would become aligned to some degree with the factions which had appeared in the Corporation. Sir Joshua saw that to maintain a stable interest in the borough, the partners needed to secure Robinson's good will. Over the years Robinson had cultivated an independent interest in Dunwich using those means at his disposal, and the partners inadvertently rendered him independent by granting him a long, comfortable lease. But Barne placed his confidence elsewhere, and Sir Joshua noted with disgust, 'there is no trusting to words with this strange man as long as he is directed by that worthless fellow Watling. . .'<sup>67</sup>

The root of the quarrel between Sir Joshua and Miles Barne was, of course, financial. The two aspiring politicians had widely differing expectations as to the costs and returns associated with controlling a parliamentary borough. These differences led inexorably to conflict over the value and importance of Dunwich. Sir Joshua for his part found Barne extravagant, and not at all conscientious about record-keeping. Finally, in June 1768 Sir Joshua instructed Negus to put the partnership on a new footing:

It is highly proper likewise to put into writing our agreement in future viz – to allow the half-guinea quarterly to each freeman for treats, and not to give them any other to prevent rivalship in this respect between us; not to engage in any expense of building purchases without mutual consent beforehand, and lastly that the account shall be kept alternately by each of our agents, either for six or twelve months as shall be agreed upon . . . you ought to tell him openly your opinion, that without settling matters thus for the future, the infallible consequence must be a rupture between us.<sup>68</sup>

These measures appear to have restored the partners to a workable relationship, because after

they weathered this period of misunderstanding, they and their families continued to manage the borough unchallenged until it was disfranchised in 1832 (Thorne 1986, II, 270).

What does this narrative reveal about the nature of politics in Dunwich? For more than a century, from 1722 until 1832, partly politics played no role in the borough. Those factions which can be identified formed around purely local personal and financial issues, with no regard to questions of principle or national concerns. This is not to say, however, that borough patrons had an easy time of it. It is clear from the earlier history of Dunwich that its freemen were accustomed to a high degree of attentiveness from their patrons, particularly of a financial nature. This observation is borne out not only by the costliness of a Dunwich seat before Sir George Downing gained control of the borough, but also by the freemen's assertiveness in recruiting Miles Barne as a candidate when they became dissatisfied with Sir George's patronage. While it has been observed that Downing nominees did not need to put in a personal appearance in Dunwich to secure their success, Sir George and Sir Jacob were themselves assiduous in tending to the needs of their constituents.<sup>69</sup> This need to cultivate the borough also animated the Van Neck-Barne partnership in its building efforts on behalf of the town. Amongst other expenses, Barne and Van Neck jointly built a house in the borough, which they took turns in occupying. While in residence each patron was expected to treat the freemen handsomely. It is clear that although Van Neck and Barne were not challenged from without once they secured the borough from Lady Downing, they had to undertake considerable and continuing expenditure to maintain their interest against internal threats. Dunwich electors were apparently perfectly willing to vote as requested without regard for political principle, so long as their houses were kept up and treats punctually distributed. This fact was so well established that during his unsuccessful county campaign in 1790 Sir Gerrard Vanneck was tellingly lampooned:

For the borough of Dunwich I sat heretofore,  
Where I paid for each vote, as I pay for a whore,  
And I hope my Electors won't think me a dunce  
Tho' I sat for three Sessions, and never spoke once.<sup>70</sup>

## APPENDIX

### MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT FOR DUNWICH, 1715–1796

1 Feb. 1715	Sir Robert Rich; Charles Long.
23 Mar. 1722	Sir George Downing; Edward Vernon.
7 Dec. 1722	Sir John Ward (in place of Edward Vernon, sitting for Penryn).
4 Dec. 1726	John Sambrooke (in place of Sir John Ward, deceased).
18 Aug. 1727	Sir George Downing; Thomas Wyndham.
26 Apr. 1734	Sir George Downing; Sir Orlando Bridgeman.
21 Feb. 1738	William Morden (in place of Bridgeman, appointed to office).
4 May 1741	Sir George Downing; Jacob Garrard Downing.
2 Jul. 1747	Sir George Downing; Miles Barne.
21 Jun. 1749	Sir Jacob Garrard Downing (in place of Sir George, deceased).
16 Apr. 1754	Sir Jacob Garrard Downing; Soame Jenyns.
1 Jan. 1756	Soame Jenyns (re-elected after appointment to office).
2 Dec. 1758	Alexander Forrester (in place of Jenyns, forced by Downing to vacate his seat).
27 Mar. 1761	Henry Fox; Eliab Harvey.

30 Nov. 1762	Henry Fox (re-elected after appointment to office).
29 Apr. 1763	Sir Jacob Garrard Downing (in place of Henry Fox, called to the Upper House).
18 Feb. 1764	Miles Barne (in place of Sir Jacob Garrard Downing, deceased).
16 Mar. 1768	Gerard William Vanneck; Miles Barne.
8 Oct. 1774	Gerard William Vanneck; Miles Barne.
10 Dec. 1777	Barne Barne (in place of Miles Barne, who vacated his seat because of ill-health).
8 Sept. 1780	Sir Gerard William Vanneck; Barne Barne.
31 Mar 1784	Sir Gerard William Vanneck; Barne Barne.
18 Jun. 1790	Barne Barne; Joshua Vanneck.
1 Mar. 1791.	Miles Barne (in place of Barne Barne, appointed to office).
25 May 1796	(Sir) Joshua Vanneck, Bt; Snowdon Barne.

## NOTES

- 1 The political crisis in Dunwich, as in many other boroughs, was a result of attempts on the part of Charles II and James II to secure the loyalty of Corporations.
- 2 Outsitters were freemen who did not reside in the borough.
- 3 In 1721 Sir George Downing estimated that £5,000 would be needed to secure a seat for a prospective running mate. One of the sitting Members, Charles Long, was reputedly prepared to pay that sum to retain his seat. The other Member, Sir Robert Rich, was said to offer £50 a vote.
- 4 Between 1715 and 1727 there were four contested elections and by-elections.
- 5 For biographies of the Barne and Van Neck families, see Namier and Brooke 1964 and Thorne 1986.
- 6 Gardner 1754, 26. The reason for this grant is unclear, but seems to have been as insurance against future Corporation non-payment of rent.
- 7 Sedgwick, I, 324. Dunwich patrons used different methods to control the electorate: the Downings concerned themselves more with guaranteeing electoral loyalty, while Van Neck and Barne carefully restricted the number of freemen. Barne and Van Neck agreed at the time to allow sixteen resident freemen (who could cast votes for Members of Parliament) and sixteen non-resident or honorary freemen (who could not vote in Parliamentary elections, but could participate in Municipal elections).
- 8 B.L., Add. MSS 35, 679, ff. 51, 89, 106.
- 9 Among those properties over which Sir George Downing acquired control under the terms of the 99-year lease were houses 'rented' to the freemen, built by donations made by previous Members, and owned by the Corporation. These seem to have been leased to Sir George and Sir Jacob, and later the Van Neck-Barne partnership. Control over these properties greatly enhanced patron control over the electors.
- 10 Barne family archive, S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/134, n.d. 'Narrative of the transactions relative to the bonds given by the freemen of Dunwich to the Downings'. Though undated, this document is undoubtedly part of the lengthy legal proceedings which surrounded the Barne-Van Neck take-over of the borough.
- 11 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/134.
- 12 C.U.L., T941/Section II, Sir Jacob Downing to Francis Negus (?).
- 13 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/134, n.d.
- 14 C.U.L., T941/Section IV, Sir Jacob Downing to Mr Paine.
- 15 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Jacob Downing to Mr Paine (?), 9 Oct. 1761.
- 16 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/110. Gordon was the Cambridge tutor of Barne's son.
- 17 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/70, 'Memorandum respecting the Borough of Dunwich', Michael Barne, 13 Mar. 1813.
- 18 B.L., Add. MSS 36, 497, f. 268, Sir Jacob Downing to Lord Hardwicke, n.d., probably late June 1758, 'Mr Barnes gave £1,200 when he was last chose. . . .'
- 19 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/70.
- 20 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/122, Miles Barne to Mrs Barne, 9 Feb. 1764.
- 21 Lady Margaret Downing was the daughter of the Revd John Price of Barrington, Gloucestershire. She and Jacob Garrard Downing were married on 17 May 1750.
- 22 From at least 1716, Members for the borough had concerned themselves with securing bonds from, and extending mortgages to electors (S.R.O.I., HA 18/EB/2/9, letter to Charles Long, M.P., 4 Oct. 1716). An undated document, probably from 1716 or thereabouts, details 'Disbursements at Dunwich by Mr Betts'. Betts was at that time political agent for one of the Members, Charles Long. At the end of this long list of electoral expenses is the following entry: 'Eight new-built Brick houses covered with a coat of Reed with three acres of land, cost about - £450:00' (S.R.O.I.,

- HA 18/EB/8/8). For this to be an election expense, the houses must have been, at least by this date, part of the management scheme for the borough.
- 23 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/124. As this number indicates, if the Corporation was full, nearly all freemen must have been members.
  - 24 C.U.L., T941/Section I.
  - 25 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/112, Thomas Soame to Lady Downing, 14 Feb. 1764.
  - 26 Quoted in Childs 1973, 18.
  - 27 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Lady Downing to John Paine, 12 Feb. 1764.
  - 28 S.R.O.I., 185/36. Lady Downing to John Paine, 21 Feb. 1764.
  - 29 Although Sir Joshua spelled the family name Van Neck, as two words, his sons anglicized the name to Vanneck.
  - 30 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/134, Miles Barne to Mr Jackson, Mar. 1764.
  - 31 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Lady Downing to ?, 12 Feb. 1764. In the letter she expresses her surprise that Robinson turned against her and her candidate, Taylor. She writes, 'He will not only bring utter ruin upon himself, but the rest of the corporation also'.
  - 32 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/112.
  - 33 William Chapman was sued for £1,900, John Woolner for £200, Mr Dunnel for £1,120, Mr Goodwyn for £2,280, Mr Foster for £1,780 and Mr Styles for £2,190 (C.U.L., T941/Sections I–V, copies of writs sent to Henry Negus). Only John Woolner's debt seems to have been legitimate, as Sir George had held a mortgage on his house for £150 (Childs 1973, 20). In Woolner's case, he had actually taken a loan, using his privately owned home as collateral. Under more regular circumstances, the chances were good that his mortgage would not have been called in.
  - 34 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus.
  - 35 Quoted in Childs 1973, 19. Letter book in possession of Vanneck family.
  - 36 This creation was possible because of the property Barne owned in the Borough, half of which he sold to Van Neck, for the erection of a house they would jointly own.
  - 37 The Corporation consisted of two bailiffs and twelve capital burgesses. The burgesses were elected by the freemen, and the bailiffs selected from the burgesses.
  - 38 C.U.L., T941/Section I.
  - 39 C.U.L., T941/Section V, 'List of the Borough', 5 Apr. 1764. On the reverse, under the heading 'Not in their Interest', are the names Thomas Buck, bailiff and John Paine.
  - 40 C.U.L., T941/Section V, 'List of Van Neck Supporters', 25 Aug. 1764, includes Sir John Blois, Thomas Walpole, Richard Walpole, George Barne, Daniel Oliver, Henry Negus, H. Hinton and five others; 'List of new Borough Officials', 29 Aug. 1764.
  - 41 C.U.L., T941/Section V, (unbound) Great Court minutes.
  - 42 C.U.L., T941/Section V, 19 Oct. and 5 Nov. 1764.
  - 43 C.U.L., T941/Section I. Letter to ? from John Whittington, Lady Downing's agent, 31 Mar. 1764; Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 8 Apr. 1764.
  - 44 Quoted in Childs 1973, 21.
  - 45 C.U.L. T941/Section I.
  - 46 Quoted in Childs 1973, 21; 27 May 1764.
  - 47 C.U.L., T941/Section I; 29 May 1764.
  - 48 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 5 Jun. 1764.
  - 49 C.U.L., T941/Section I.
  - 50 C.U.L., T941/Section III, undated note.
  - 51 C.U.L., T941/Section I.
  - 52 C.U.L., T941/Section IV, letter to Henry Negus, 14 Jul. 1764.
  - 53 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 14 Apr. 1764.
  - 54 Quoted in Childs 1973, 22, Henry Negus to Mr Jackson, 18 Sept. 1764.
  - 55 Quoted in Childs 1973, 22, Henry Negus to Mr Jackson, 9 Oct. 1764.
  - 56 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 22 Jan. 1765.
  - 57 C.U.L., T941/Section I. Robinson was a common name in Dunwich, and Mr Rob. refers to Francis Robinson, while Mr Robinson, deceased refers to another man.
  - 58 C.U.L., T941/Section VII.
  - 59 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, n.d. (Dec. 1765).
  - 60 C.U.L., T941/Section VII, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus. Nuttal and Coulthurst were Suffolk attorneys.
  - 61 C.U.L., T941/Section VI, 'An Account of the Sundry Disbursements by John Hinton & Edmund Watling for the use of Sir Joshua Van Neck, Bart. & Miles Barne Esqr. for building and repairing at Dunwich and other Expenses attending that Borough in the year 1765'. Building expenses listed at £2,065 10s. 5 1/2d.
  - 62 Quoted in Childs 1973, 26, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 16 Jun. 1766, letter book in possession of the Hon. Mrs Peel, Suffolk.
  - 63 C.U.L., T941/Section VI, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 2 Jan. 1768; Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, probably Jan.–Feb. 1768.
  - 64 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/110.

- 65 S.R.O.I., HA 53: 359/134, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Miles Barne, 16 Jan. 1768. Lady Downing applied to Grafton to send two candidates, but he declined in consideration of Van Neck's interest in the borough.
- 66 C.U.L., T941/Section I.
- 67 C.U.L., T941/Section I, Sir Joshua Van Neck to Henry Negus, 2 Jun. 1768.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Namier and Brooke 1964, I, 379. We can surmise from the election of Barne in 1747 what might happen if the electors felt neglected.
- 70 S.R.O.I., HD 486/5, n.d., probably 1790, 'Mynheer Vander Necker's Humble Petition and Lamentation'.

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#### *Abbreviations*

- B.L. British Library.
- C.T.P. *Calendars of Treasury Papers*.
- C.U.L. Cambridge University Library.
- Gent. Mag.* *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- S.R.O.I. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.