

150TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER

AT THE 150TH Anniversary Dinner at The Guildhall, Bury St Edmunds on Friday 27 March 1998, Lord and Lady Cranbrook were the guests of honour. Those attending included the President and Mrs Blatchly; the four Vice-Presidents: Mr Norman Scarfe, Dr John Wymer and Mrs Wymer, Mr David Dymond and Mr Peter Northeast; the Hon. General Secretary, Mr Edward Martin and the Membership Secretary, Dr Joanna Martin; the Hon. Financial Secretary, Mr Adrian Parry and Mrs Parry; the Hon. Editor, Dr David Allen and Mrs Allen; Mr Shawn Kholucy and Mrs Nesta Evans, organisers of the Dinner. Also dining were Dr and Mrs Richard Barber, Mr and Mrs Alan Barker, Dr and Mrs Martin Bartlett, Mrs Vivien Brown, Dr R.E. Church, Dr and Mrs Neil Cruickshank, Mrs E. Dawson, Mr and Mrs Timothy Easton, Mrs Valerie Fenwick, Mr Paul Fincham, Mr and Mrs Nicholas Fiske, Mr and Mrs Tom Gondris, Mr Frank Grace, Prof. Christopher Harper-Bill, Mr and Mrs Glyn James, Mr and Mrs David Jones, Mrs Doris Hatfield, Mrs Rachel Lawrence, Mr Robert Malster, Mr and Mrs Middleton-Stewart, Mrs Valerie Norrington, Dr Carole Rawcliffe, Mr and Mrs Richardson, Mr and Mrs Nicholas Ridley, Dr Steven Plunkett, Mr William Serjeant, Mr Brian Seward, Mr and Mrs Sieveking, Prof. Hassell Smith, Mrs Margaret Statham, Mr and Mrs Fraser Sutherland, Dr Anne Sutton, Mr and Mrs John Taylor, Mr and Mrs Adrian Thorpe and Mr Peter Underwood.

Peter Northeast said Grace before dinner, after which the Loyal Toast was proposed by David Dymond. The President then welcomed the company, before inviting Jane Fiske to recall earlier great occasions at the Guildhall. He then called upon Lord Cranbrook to propose the toast 'Long life to the Institute', to which Norman Scarfe replied. The President then closed the proceedings.

Dr Fiske spoke as follows. Mr President, my Lord, ladies and gentlemen: there must have been countless events, both great and small, associated with the Guildhall since its medieval origins. I know that there are dozens of people here tonight who are far better equipped than I to recall them. The difference between us is that they have cleverly escaped our President's eye and, consequently, have enjoyed a totally carefree evening, unburdened by responsibility. 'Just speak for three minutes', our President said. 'You will be a sorbet' (he did not say a mere trifle) 'before the meatier speeches and toasts to follow.'

Now my knowledge of this place encompasses about two minutes towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, when it was a venue for public and private meetings, elections and entertainments. On this, our 150th anniversary, it must be the entertainments that we remember rather than the weightier stuff of politics and economics – perhaps the private ball given by James Oakes, the banker and yarn merchant who lived in the beautiful house opposite, for his teenage children one snowy night in January 1786 – such a night that Miss Nesfield's carriage needed four horses to pull it from Wickhambrook to Bury. Among the forty-three guests was the kindly Dr John Symonds of Moreton Hall, Fellow of Peterhouse, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Recorder, traveller, friend to many of the leading artists, thinkers and scientists of his day: a Renaissance man, if that is not too anachronistic a description; in short, he was the 18th-century John Blatchly of Bury St Edmunds. With him he brought the two de la Rochefoucauld brothers, whose exploits have been brought to us so vividly by our Vice-President, Norman Scarfe. Dr, later to be Sir, Thomas Cullum, a keen naturalist like our honoured guest tonight, was there. Also Captain Poole who, at 2 o'clock one afternoon three months earlier, had ascended from Angel Hill in his balloon and had remained aloft for one hour and twenty minutes before landing at Monk Soham, twenty-seven miles away.

François de la Rochefoucauld did not record the evening specifically, but one can imagine some of his thoughts. The fourteen couple of dancers only danced English country dances

which, as far as one can see, were all seen by François as minor, but interminable, variations on *Strip the Willow*. Did the women hold themselves as badly as he maintained: their heads hanging forward, arms dangling, eyes lowered in grim concentration before being grabbed by hearty and too merry gentlemen, whose dancing was awkward, ungainly and without rhythm? One has to admit that the cartoons of Henry Bunbury do tend to suggest that he was close to the mark.

The dancers, clearly having greater stamina than we, or merely needing to keep warm, kept up their dancing from seven in the evening until three in the morning. They were accompanied by a violin, tabor and fife. The violinist came from Lavenham from whence good violinists still come today. Fifty-nine bottles of wine, sherry, port and punch were drunk that night, plus twelve gallons of table beer. Not bad going for a teenage party. Indeed, drink is a theme which literally flows through the Guildhall at this period. It was actually the cause of a private party held here in 1795. Maria and Charlotte Oakes and their friends were very disappointed when the ball planned to celebrate the King's birthday at the 'Angel' that year was cancelled at the last minute. All the young men who were to have partnered them had drunk so much at the earlier public dinner that they were unable to stand, let alone dance. So the girls had a fresh crack at it here three weeks later. The guests on that occasion, which, I self-indulgently report, included the Revd John Fiske and his two daughters, sparkled and danced beneath a massive chandelier hired especially for the evening.

Drink may possibly have been the cause of the town doctors making a minor error of judgement when they declared John Fairfax, the proprietor of the Norwich Stage Wagons in Risby Gate Street, dead at an annual Guildhall Feoffment Trust dinner here. He had apparently 'been seized with a terrible fit'. 'However,' it was cheerily reported, 'after being got into a warm bed there appeared some return of life.'

The Guildhall was the venue for the aldermanic or mayoral dinners given by the new incumbent on assuming office at the beginning of October. These dinners heralded the start of Bury Fair and the town's social season. In October 1812 the new Alderman, Orbell Oakes, entertained the Corporation and tradesmen to

A very elegant dinner Consisting of 1st & 2nd Courses with [as tonight] an handsome Desert. The Whole was extremely well served by Boldero [the licensee of the 'Angel'] with Madeira, sherry & Port wine, all good of the sort. Reckoned 153 Gentlemen at the 3 Tables. Boldero undertook the whole at 1 gn a head finding everything but venison & game. Including Servants, Paying the Park keepers, waiters, Porters etc etc Boldero's bill for this was 150 gns. Many excellent Toasts were drank & Several good Songs sung by Mr Inledon [who was a very famous opera singer who sang in the first performance of Haydn's *Creation* at Covent Garden]. Abt ½ doz Card tables were erected after dinner 40 men stayed on for supper

and continued to carouse until 2 o'clock.

Six days later they were all at it again following the General Election, this time at the expense of the newly-elected Members Lord Charles Fitzroy and Frederick Foster, nephew of the fifth Earl of Bristol. Boldero did the honours once more and 'many loyal & Constitutional Healths were drank & everything passed off most pleasantly' until 8.30, when there was a mass exodus to the Assembly Rooms for the election ball. Boldero, like his counterparts at the 'Angel' today, was a masterly organiser. That night he produced dinner for 130 here, including '3 doz bottles Madeira @ 9/-, 3 doz Sherry @ 6/-, 14½ doz Port @ 5/6, Tea, sugar & cakes for £155 5/-', and supper for 240 at the Assembly Rooms, while, presumably, still catering for guests at the 'Angel'. This task was made easier at the 1826 election ball when he was able 'to dress dinner' in the newly refurbished kitchen at the Guildhall.

We have had a beautifully dressed dinner tonight. That dinner, like this, was 'accompanied

by a great many loyal & constitutional 'Toasts' but, unless led by our President, I fear that we shall miss out on the 'Variety of Patriotic Songs' that have echoed from these walls at dinners over the centuries.