

# THE TOWN CORPORATION AND THE ARISTOCRACY: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BURY ST EDMUNDS 1754–1757

by YASUSHI AOKI

OUR VIEW OF eighteenth-century history is constantly changing, and the idea of the ‘long eighteenth century’, from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, is relatively new.<sup>1</sup> It does not go without concurrent changes of view concerning various aspects of eighteenth-century British society, for the idea means that the image of a comparatively serene Britain under the control of complacent landowning classes is superseded by that of a more dynamic Britain with incessant changes, improvements and rivalries. Political history, especially the history of parliament and political representation, is one of the most affected fields of historiography. For example, recent research questions the once dominant interpretations of Sir Lewis Namier and his school of historians, and suggests that ruling elites represented eighteenth-century local society far more honestly and efficiently than was previously thought.<sup>2</sup> Numerous local bills were proposed to the House of Commons on which members of parliament had to make political decisions under pressure from the constituency and a wider public. It was often politically dangerous for members of parliament to ignore requests from their constituents and local communities.

In order to understand the relationship between the members and their constituencies, it is necessary to examine closely how members were elected. However, the situation varied by constituency. The number of constituencies totalled 317 in total, including three pairs of Scottish alternate counties. Elections at English boroughs were extremely variable. Detailed case studies of individual boroughs, of which there were more than 200, are largely still to be made, while there remains a conventional image of parliamentary elections in eighteenth-century boroughs, especially small-scale boroughs. It tends to be thought that boroughs with a small number of electors were placed under the sway of influential aristocratic patrons. It should be added that the town corporation has often been blamed for complicity in electoral corruption.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines particularly the case of Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, in the mid 1750s.<sup>4</sup> At the general elections of 1754 and 1761, constituencies where contested elections took place were only one fifth or even one sixth of the total. So the period has been thought to be at the zenith of electoral sluggishness, which was misleadingly said to be characteristic of eighteenth-century British politics.<sup>5</sup> At Bury, however, the general election of 1754<sup>6</sup> and the by-election of May 1757 were fiercely contested. A study of these two contests hopefully gives material useful for considering political representation in other eighteenth-century English boroughs.

In parliamentary studies, Bury St Edmunds before the great reform of 1832 is usually classified as a corporation borough, in which the qualification of voting was strictly associated with membership of the borough corporation. A little fewer than thirty English boroughs are thought to be in the same group. In addition, some boroughs of other types had a similar momentum potentially. For example, Bridgwater, Somerset, was a borough of ‘scot and lot’ type, where inhabitants paying scot and lot, or local rates, could take part in the parliamentary election. The corporation of Bridgwater, however, petitioned the House of Commons in November 1768, claiming that the right of election of members to serve in parliament for their borough was in the mayor, aldermen, and capital burgesses of the borough, and in them only.<sup>7</sup> It was presumably for the purpose of opposing the influences of the Poulett family, the patrons of the town. Although the argument was rejected by the select

committee of the House of Commons the following March,<sup>8</sup> the episode serves as a reminder that many corporations regarded the vote as a privilege of the few, and tried to lessen the number of voters in eighteenth-century parliamentary boroughs.

The constitution of all pre-reform parliamentary boroughs was essentially the same. However, details were different from borough to borough. Where Bury was concerned, the full members of the corporation who were eligible to vote included the alderman, 12 capital burgesses, and 24 burgesses of the common council.<sup>9</sup> So the maximum number of voters was theoretically 37,<sup>10</sup> but vacancies often remained unfilled for years, so the voters in the mid 1750s examined here amounted to only 29. The council minutes show that the number attending the assembly of the corporation, which was occasionally also the electoral meeting, rarely exceeded 25 in the 1750s.<sup>11</sup>

In the eighteenth century Bury St Edmunds was under the influence of three great landed families, though the influence of each family varied from one period to another.<sup>12</sup> In a descending order of rank, the first were the Fitzroys, the dukes of Grafton, descended from an illegitimate son of Charles II. Their seat, Euston Hall, is about ten miles north of the town. The third duke of Grafton became the prime minister in 1768. In the middle of the eighteenth century the Fitzroys were certainly great Whig magnates, even at a national level.

The second were the Herveys, earls of Bristol. They were Whigs, too. Though the building of the famous rotunda of Ickworth House started in 1796, forty years after the elections examined in this paper, the family had owned landed estates in the area for a long time. They attained the earldom only in 1714, but their connections with the town dated from at least the sixteenth century. These connections were closer than those of the Fitzroys and the Davers of Rushbrooke, the third influential family.<sup>13</sup> Looking overall, the Herveys were the predominant, or, if this word is too strong, the pre-eminent family in eighteenth-century Bury, but their influence was never seen as unchallengeable or unassailable.

The third influential family, the Davers, had their country seat, Rushbrooke Hall, a few miles south of the town. They were known to be Tories in the first half of the eighteenth century, and sometimes succeeded in taking advantage of the occasional unpopularity of the Herveys. The Davers were a relatively new family in the area, having arrived only in the late seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> The founder of the family, Robert Davers, is said to have migrated to Barbados in the West Indies as a poor young boy in the 1630s. He became a successful planter there, and returned to England when he bought a landed estate near Bury St Edmunds around 1680. He was created baronet in 1682 and his son and namesake, the second baronet, was elected to represent Bury in 1689 and the county of Suffolk sixteen years later. The second son of the latter, Sir Jermyn Davers, the fourth baronet, served first as a member for Bury, then as a knight of the shire, for a total of twenty-one years. The Davers family had been completely accepted in the town of Bury and the landed society of Suffolk by the time Sir Jermyn died in 1743.

In eighteenth-century Bury the townspeople paid respect to those three families. Each family even had a member of the corporation who openly worked as their agent.<sup>15</sup> Most members of parliament representing the town in this century were members of those influential families or their nominees. This respect, or reverence, had to be very carefully maintained, however. Even though their influence was great, their occasional unpopularity was unavoidable, for example when an indiscreet family member arrogantly behaved as if his election could be taken for granted.<sup>16</sup> Members of the three families regularly acted as generous patrons of various local activities. In 1802, James Oakes, a banker and merchant of Bury who was elected alderman five times in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, interestingly recorded in his diary that the two members of parliament and one ex-member from those three families had contributed the substantial sum of £20 each to subscriptions for the poor. However, Oakes did not name any other individual subscriber, though many participated in the subscriptions.<sup>17</sup>

As is well known among historians of eighteenth-century society, the relationship between influential families and town people was reciprocal. It is now time to examine in detail how this relationship worked at parliamentary elections.

The elections studied here are the general election of 1754 and the by-election of May 1757.<sup>18</sup> In their study of *The House of Commons 1754–1790*, Namier and Brooke regard the 1757 by-election at Bury St Edmunds as one in which no contest happened.<sup>19</sup> This is clearly contradicted by an entry in the council minutes of the corporation of Bury.<sup>20</sup> The probable reason for the lack of contests which Namier and Brooke point out is that there was no Fitzroy or Davers of age. This reasoning is factually incorrect, for Sir Robert Davers the fifth baronet was born about 1730 and actually competed for a seat in 1757 as seen below.<sup>21</sup> Another election in the mid 1750s, the by-election of December 1756, chronologically situated between the two contests of 1754 and 1757, was certainly an election without contest.

The general election of 1754 at Bury was fought between four candidates competing for two seats. The first candidate was William Stanhope, Lord Petersham. He had represented Bury since 1747 and aimed to be re-elected in 1754. He was a son-in-law and nominee of the second duke of Grafton. The duke's grandson and heir, Augustus Henry Fitzroy, later the third duke and prime minister, was still under age at the time of the general election. The second candidate, Augustus John Hervey, was a member of the Hervey family, nominated by the second earl of Bristol. A.J. Hervey, a naval officer, was a younger brother of the second earl and later became the third earl of Bristol. They were grandsons of the first earl and sons of the famous courtier Lord Hervey.

The third candidate, Felton Hervey, was a younger son of the first earl of Bristol, and was elected at Bury without a contest at the general election of 1747 as his father's nominee. Felton, who fell out with his nephew the second earl, who succeeded to his father's earldom in 1751, decided to seek re-election in 1754 by himself. This made the situation complicated, because he was certainly a Hervey, but he became a candidate against the will of the second earl. The fourth and last candidate was William Crofts of Little Saxham, near Bury St Edmunds, who was born in 1711 and married in 1737.<sup>22</sup> He stood for Bury in 1754. His grandfather had represented the borough from 1685 to 1688.<sup>23</sup>

At Bury St Edmunds the last contested general election before 1754 was that of 1727, when Sir Jermy Davers, the fourth baronet, failed to keep his borough seat though he won a county seat at the same time. After this, sons of the first earl of Bristol were elected without opposition on three successive occasions. Their running partner in 1734 and 1741 was Thomas Norton, who was related by marriage to the Hervey family.<sup>24</sup> In 1747, the earl of Bristol and the duke of Grafton shared the seats one for one, Felton Hervey and Lord Petersham being elected unopposed. In view of such a history, it seems that, for the 1754 general election, Petersham and Augustus John Hervey, the pair of candidates nominated by the two influential peers in alliance,<sup>25</sup> were more promising. The result was not as expected, however. Petersham was successfully elected, but the two Herveys tied with fifteen votes each. The double return was reported to the House of Commons, and Felton finally obtained the seat several months after the general election.<sup>26</sup>

The by-election of May 1757 was fought only five months after that of December 1756. The earlier election was made necessary after Lord Petersham succeeded his father as the second earl of Harrington. In place of him, Augustus Henry Fitzroy, commonly called the earl of Euston, was elected without opposition. He was the heir of the second duke of Grafton, having just come of age in time for this by-election. A few months later, however, the duke died, and Euston became the third duke. One of the seats of Bury was vacant again.

The candidates for the by-election of 1757 were Augustus John Hervey, a loser at the previous general election, and Sir Robert Davers the fifth baronet. He had succeeded to the

baronetcy in the early 1740s when he was under age, and this by-election may have been regarded as an occasion for reasserting the local influence of the family. Although Davers's sister Elizabeth had married Frederick Augustus, a younger brother of Augustus John Hervey in 1752, the two families were not on good terms. The election of 1757 was a simple one-to-one contest. So voters had one vote only to cast, whilst they had two votes each at the general election of 1754. Augustus John Hervey won a close contest by eleven to ten. Four years following this by-election, two Herveys monopolised both seats of the borough. This was a very exceptional situation for eighteenth-century Bury St Edmunds. For the earls of Bristol, even keeping one seat continuously for a family member, not to mention monopolising two seats, could never be taken for granted. At the by-election held in 1775 after A.J. Hervey vacated his seat on succeeding to the earldom, a Hervey candidate was defeated by Henry Seymour Conway, a nominee of the duke of Grafton. It took more than twenty years for the Herveys to regain a seat at Bury at the 1796 general election. A contrasting scene was seen at Wilton. This old Wiltshire borough, a few miles west of Salisbury, was, like Bury, a corporation borough, but the electoral history of the two boroughs was completely different. Wilton was under the dominance of the Herberts, the earls of Pembroke. Their imposing stately home, Wilton House, is situated in the town of Wilton, so the family's influence over the borough corporation was far more direct. It became known as a pocket borough of the earls. Surprisingly or unsurprisingly, members of parliament for Wilton between 1734 and 1780 were all Herberts, all of them elected without contest. It is time to return to examine contested elections at Bury in the mid 1750s.

This examination relies mainly on three documents, all of which are housed in the Suffolk Record Office in Bury St Edmunds. The first is a document in the Grafton Papers.<sup>27</sup> It is a note made by someone concerned with the electioneering in 1754, which forecasted the votes to be cast by twenty-nine voters of Bury at the time. Referring briefly to the document, Dr. S.M. Sommers wrote in her doctoral thesis on politics in eighteenth-century Suffolk that it was a list apparently made preparatory to the election.<sup>28</sup> In this paper the list will be fully compared with the actual result of the election of 1754 and also with the votes cast at the by-election three years later.

The list predicted that the general election would be a very close one, but that the aristocratic pair of Petersham and A.J. Hervey would win. The numbers of votes to be obtained by each candidate were as follows on the list: Petersham 16, A.J. Hervey 16, Felton Hervey 15, Crofts 11. The expected margin of the successful candidates against Felton was to be only one, and even the majority against Crofts was not so large. The total votes on the list were 58. The compiler of the list presumed that all 29 voters would cast their two votes without abstention or plumping. Plumping means voting for one candidate only.

The second document is classified among voting lists of the corporation of Bury.<sup>29</sup> It was certainly a voting record made by a corporation clerk. The votes recorded in the document were 16 for Petersham, 15 each for the two Herveys, and 7 for Crofts. The total votes were 53, against the forecast of 58, for one member of the corporation was absent on the day of election,<sup>30</sup> and three plumped. A.J. Hervey regrettably lost one vote from the expected 16. Consequently, this loss of only one vote blocked him from entering the House of Commons for a further three years. Crofts was, as expected, in the last place, but his votes lessened by four. Although the forecasted numbers of votes were exact right for Petersham and Felton Hervey, the names of the voters who supported them were not the expected ones. The differences between the forecast and the actual result of the election can be seen in the table compiled for this paper, which will be used below. As said above, the result of the general election at Bury, still undecided for the second seat, was returned to the parliament.

The last document is a note attached to a draft for the council minutes of the day of the by-

## Votes in Parliamentary Elections of 1754 and 1757 at Bury St. Edmunds

G: Petersham ; B: A.J.Hervey ; F: Felton Hervey ; C: Crofts ; D: Davers  
1: vote ; Ab: absent on the day of election ; —: deleted from the voters' list

No.	Name of voters (CB) : Capital Burgess in 1754	1754 Vote expected				1754 Vote cast				1757 Vote cast		Grouping
		G	B	F	C	G	B	F	C	B	D	
1	Allen, William (CB)	1	1			1		1		1		
2	Booty, William	1	1			1	1			—		
3	Cass, William	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
4	Challis, John		1	1			1	1		1		
5	Cocksedge , Mathias (CB)	1	1							Ab		
6	Complin, Thomas	1	1			1	1				1	
7	Coppin, James			1	1			1	1		—	
8	Eldred, John	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
9	Gallant, William			1	1			1	1		—	
10	Grigby, Joshua		1	1			1	1			1	
11	Halls, John	1	1			1	1			Ab		
12	Harrison, Samuel			1	1			1	1		1	Against Bristol
13	Hart, Peast	1	1			1		1			1	
14	Hawes, Robert			1	1			1	1		1	Against Bristol
15	Hervey, Thomas (CB)	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
16	Jackson, Edward Isaac (CB)	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
17	Jaye, John	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
18	Johnson, Thomas	1		1		1	1			1		
19	Mills, John	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
20	Oakes, James (CB)			1	1			1	1		1	Against Bristol
21	Prime, Samuel (CB)	1	1			1	1			Ab		
22	Ray, Orbell			1	1			1	1		1	Against Bristol
23	Rayment*, Richard	1		1		1				—		
24	Robards, William			1	1			1			1	Against Bristol
25	Rogers, Peter			1	1			1			1	Against Bristol
26	Siday, John			1	1	1		1		Ab		
27	Sturgeon, James			1	1			1	1		1	
28	Ward, Neale			1	1			1	1		1	Against Bristol
29	Wright, Lawrence (CB)	1	1			1	1			1		For Bristol
<b>Total</b>		16	16	15	11	16	15	15	7	11	10	
Sources: Suffolk Record Office, Bury St. Edmunds Branch		423/270				719/1				D4/1/7		

\* Spelled "Coxsedge" in the forecast list

\*\* Spelled "Raymond" in the forecast list

election, 26 May 1757.<sup>31</sup> It records 21 votes cast at the by-election. The qualified members of the corporation on the day were 24, while 5 had passed away since the last general election. Of the five missing, the name of William Booty is found in the registers of St James's parish, Bury St Edmunds. His burial was recorded on 16 February 1757, about three months before the by-election. The names of James Coppin and Richard Rayment were found in the burial records of St Mary's parish between the general election of 1754 and the by-election of 1757.<sup>32</sup> The number of current corporation members was less than two thirds of the full strength of 37, but attempts to fill up vacancies were not actually made until 12 August 1762.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, 3 were absent on the day of the by-election of 1757, so the polling voters were only 21, of which 11 cast their votes for Augustus John Hervey.

These three documents give interesting information about who voted, or who was expected to vote, for which candidate. The data is arranged in the table titled 'Votes in Parliamentary Elections of 1754 and 1757 at Bury St. Edmunds' (See table).

The table is roughly divided into five blocks, separated by bold lines. The far left block is for the name of voters ordered alphabetically, with a reference number for convenience. Out of 29 voters, 7 were capital burgesses on the day of the general election of 1754, and their names are marked by (CB). The second block shows how each voter was expected to vote in the first document forecasting the general election. This block is subdivided into four columns, each of which is for one candidate. The candidates are, from left to right, Petersham, represented by G for Grafton who nominated him; A.J. Hervey, represented by B for Bristol; Felton Hervey, represented by F; and Crofts, represented by C. Numbers, for example in columns G and B of the second block of the table, mean that the unknown compiler of the forecast list expected such a voter to vote for Petersham and A.J. Hervey. The third block is for the votes actually cast at the election of 1754. It is subdivided into four columns again. This time, numbers mean real votes. So, the voter named Peter Rogers, no. 25, whose marks are found in columns F and C of the second block and in column F of the third block, plumped for Felton Hervey, against the forecast that he would vote for Crofts as well as for Felton Hervey. The fourth block shows the result of the by-election of 1757. Candidate columns are naturally only two, one for A.J. Hervey, represented by B again, and the other for Sir Robert Davers, represented by D. The far right block is for grouping or classifying the voters by political inclination, and the explanation of this will be given below.

The analysis starts with the examination of the forecast list and then moves on to a comparison between the forecast and the actual votes of the general election. The forecast list shows that the compiler thought most voters could be sharply divided into pro-aristocratic or anti-aristocratic groups. The voters who were expected to vote for the aristocratic pair of Petersham and A.J. Hervey were 14, and those expected to choose Felton Hervey and Crofts contesting against the nominees of influential peers were 11. On the other hand, the voters who were thought to cast split votes defying those pairings were only 4, or 14 per cent of 29. However, the dividing line was neither so sharp nor insurmountable when the day of the election really came.

Out of the 29 voters, 9 voted differently from the forecast, including cases of plumping and absence. Reasons for the absence were not known, but it meant abstention as a result. For example, William Allen, no. 1, and Peast Hart, no. 13, cast split votes for Petersham and Felton Hervey, though in the forecast list they were to support Petersham and A.J. Hervey. Conversely, Thomas Johnson, no. 18, who was expected to split his votes for Petersham and Felton Hervey, did vote for Petersham and A.J. Hervey. Why did Thomas Johnson vote differently from the forecast and support A.J. Hervey? The most likely explanation is that Frederick Augustus Hervey, a younger brother of A.J. Hervey and later the fourth earl of Bristol, to be known as the Earl Bishop, patronised Johnson in business in order to gain his



vote. Johnson, a draper, might have changed his political mind for business reasons.<sup>34</sup> One of the voters who plumped was Richard Rayment, no. 23. He voted only for Petersham, though the forecast list counted him as a supporter of both Felton and Petersham. His change of heart seems to have become a subject of public speculation, for his sons had to resort to newspaper publicity in order to deny the rumour that they had unjustly persuaded their father at the general election.<sup>35</sup> This episode implies that the contents of the forecast were widely known and that the townspeople expected the forecast to become true.

In total, split voters increased from the expected 4<sup>36</sup> to 6,<sup>37</sup> and 5 votes were cast unexpectedly by crossing over the line dividing candidates B and F, which means that the voters concerned changed sides at least partially.<sup>38</sup> Those who voted for the aristocratic pair or the opposing pair as expected were still a majority, but it is to be observed that the predictability of voters' behaviour is not very high.

A further examination of the third document regarding the by-election of 1757 confirms the above observation on the general election. As said above, William Allen unexpectedly voted for Petersham and Felton Hervey in 1754, with the important result of preventing the election of A.J. Hervey, but three years later he cast a critical vote for A.J. Hervey at the by-election, which brought a victory for him this time. A few voters even more daringly changed sides in three years. Thomas Complin, no. 6, voted as expected for the aristocratic pair in 1754, but was on the side of Davers at the by-election. Joshua Grigby,<sup>39</sup> no. 10, voted for two Herveys in 1754, but his choice was not Hervey but Davers in 1757. Thus voters often changed their minds. The stability of the voters' electoral support should now be questioned.

Now we turn to the far right column of the table. Considering the pre-eminent position of the Herveys in mid eighteenth-century Bury St Edmunds, it seems plausible to divide the voters into pro-Bristol or anti-Bristol camps as the unidentified compiler of the forecast list implicitly suggested.

If a member of the corporation of Bury, that is a voter, was a staunch supporter of the earl of Bristol's interests, he would be accurately forecasted to support Petersham and A.J. Hervey in the first document, and unfailingly vote for them in 1754 and again for the latter in 1757. So, in the table, he will obtain marks in columns G, B, G, B, and B from left to right. This type of voter counts seven, from William Cass, no. 3, down to Lawrence Wright, no. 29. Those seven voters are noted as 'For Bristol' in the far right block or column of the table.

Thomas Hervey, no. 15, classified into the 'For Bristol' group, deserves a special mention here. Being a son of the first earl of Bristol, he was an elder brother of Felton as well as an uncle of Augustus John. Thomas sat for Bury from 1733 to 1747 when he grudgingly gave up his parliamentary seat in favour of Felton.<sup>40</sup> Seven years later, at the general election of 1754, Thomas Hervey actively worked to oust Felton in favour of Augustus John, and reported the situation at Bury in a long letter to the duke of Newcastle.<sup>41</sup> According to Thomas, the ambition of Felton would end in the destruction of both the interests of his family and the Whig cause in the borough of Bury,<sup>42</sup> and the enemy behind the scene was Sir Robert Davers. Thomas unusually took the trouble to attend electoral meetings in 1754 and 1757 in order to vote for his nephew, though he was never a diligent corporation member and his record of attendance at council meetings was very poor.

On the other hand, the marks of voters who were strongly against the Herveys will be found in columns F, C, F, C, and D of the table. Such staunch opponents of the earl of Bristol's interests are noted as 'Against Bristol'. If we take into consideration the fact that Crofts was a far weaker candidate compared with the other three candidates of 1754, who were all sons of peers, the elector who failed to vote for Crofts in 1754 can still be regarded as a consistent opponent of the Herveys. By adding those voters whose marks are in columns F, C, F, and D, the 'Against Bristol' group counts seven, too.

Two tentative conclusions can be made from the analysis of the votes. One is that the political configuration of corporation members was settled to a certain extent in mid eighteenth-century Bury St Edmunds. Whether or not the Whig cause was really concerned as Thomas Hervey suggested, several members of the corporation could be then, and can be now, safely judged as being for the Herveys' interests or against them. It is conceivable from the table of votes that this political rivalry had an aspect of institutional conflict within the corporation, for capital burgesses were predominantly in favour of the Herveys, while the opponents of their interests were slightly prevalent among burgesses of the common council.<sup>43</sup> It also seems probable that various ties strengthened the cohesion of each camp. Just one example of family ties between group members will be shown here. James Oakes, no. 20, who was the father of the diarist and alderman of Bury cited above, went hand-in-hand with Orbell Ray, no. 22, against the Herveys. Ray was a brother-in-law of Oakes, and Oakes had been elected a corporation member with the support of Ray's father.<sup>44</sup>

Bury St Edmunds had three rival families of influence in the eighteenth century and the pattern of their relations varied during the period. In the mid 1750s examined in this paper, the Fitzroys were allies of the Herveys, but the former changed sides to sign an agreement with the Davers four months before the general election of 1761.<sup>45</sup> Those facts emphasise both influences of aristocratic patrons of the town and possible political reactions against them in the corporation, and they are familiar to historians of eighteenth-century politics and society.<sup>46</sup>

The second conclusion, however, accentuates another side of the story. Out of 24 men who remained in the corporation on the day of the by-election of 1757, those who were expected to behave and actually behaved in support of the Herveys consistently were just 7. Constant members of the opposing group were 7, too. It means that the remaining 10 were moderates, or politically dubious men, whose records in the table of votes are, from the viewpoint of political affiliation, not entirely consistent. In the corporation of mid-eighteenth-century Bury where the strength of pro-Bristol and anti-Bristol groups was almost evenly balanced, a very small swing, or even absence or abstention, among the moderates could bring important consequences in elections. Enough examples of their wavering have already been given, so it is necessary here only to point out again that some voters really changed sides daringly in three years. Those 10 voters were neither consistent supporters nor opponents of the Herveys. Ten out of 24 is a significant figure, not negligible as exceptional. The existence of the third party of a significant size led to a relative independence of the corporation of Bury St Edmunds from a dominant aristocratic family or families in alliance.<sup>47</sup> It might also remind eighteenth-century historians that other pre-reform corporation boroughs possibly evaded the fate of absolute aristocratic dominance.<sup>48</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on a paper read to the 'British History in the Long Eighteenth Century' seminar at the Institute of Historical Research on 28 January 2009. The author would like to express his special gratitude to Professor Julian Hoppit and Dr P.E. Murrell, both of whom kindly read the paper and gave advice on its publication.

#### NOTES

- 1 O'Gorman 1997.
- 2 Langford 1988; Langford 1991.
- 3 For an interesting argument about the rhetoric of associating corruption with town corporations, see Sweet 2007.
- 4 The sources of electoral facts in this paper are Namier and Brooke 1964, and other volumes of the History of Parliament's series of *The House of Commons*, unless otherwise noted.



- 5 Cannon 1972, 277.
- 6 The general election of 1754 was called just after the sudden death of Henry Pelham, the prime minister, almost seven years after the previous general election in 1747. The Whig government, under the duke of Newcastle who succeeded his younger brother as prime minister, won a substantial majority nationally. Whig candidates obtained both seats at Bury St Edmunds, too. However, the election was not a peaceful one by reason of the rivalry in the urban corporation, as seen below.
- 7 Somerset Record Office, D\B\bw/2/1/3, 'Borough Council Minutes', fol. 315; *Journals of the House of Commons*, xxxii, 44.
- 8 *Journals of the House of Commons*, xxxii, 301–2.
- 9 Capital burgesses were senior members of the corporation of Bury, and they were chosen from the common council. The alderman or mayor was elected annually from the capital burgesses: Fiske 1990–91, i, 119.
- 10 Oldfield 1816, iv, 542–47. Besides those 37 members, the recorder played an essential role in the borough corporation, but he was not entitled to vote in a parliamentary election.
- 11 SROB, D4/1/3(a). Out of 23 assembly meetings held in the years from 1753 to 1757, only three were attended by 25 members or more.
- 12 The overview of parliamentary elections at eighteenth-century Bury is given by Sommers 1992, 221–54. A brief sketch of Bury politics in her book is also useful: Sommers 2002, xix–xx. On the electoral politics in early eighteenth-century Suffolk, P.E. Murrell's doctoral thesis (Murrell 1982) is very informative.
- 13 Also the earls of Bristol were hereditary high stewards of Bury St Edmunds.
- 14 The Davers family is less familiar than the preceding aristocratic families. See *Rushbrook Parish Registers*; Aoki 2003, 79–80.
- 15 For example, in the minutes of a council meeting in 1788 James Ward, a Burgess of the common council, was described as an agent of Sir Robert Davers: SROB, D4/1/4, fol. 116. See also Fiske 1990–91, i, 129.
- 16 The general election of 1722 is a good example. Carr Hervey, the eldest son of John Hervey, the first earl of Bristol, failed to keep his borough seat.
- 17 Fiske 1990–91, ii, 20; *Bury and Norwich Post*, 12 May 1802.
- 18 The general elections at Bury before 1754 will be briefly discussed below.
- 19 Namier and Brooke 1964, i, 378–79.
- 20 SROB, D4/1/3(a), fol. 612.
- 21 It was not until after the defeat at the by-election of 1757 that he left for North America, where he died in 1763.
- 22 *Little Saxham Parish Registers: Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, with Appendices, Biographies, &c. 1559 to 1850*, 15, 47, 210–11.
- 23 *Little Saxham Parish Registers: Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, with Appendices, Biographies, &c. 1559 to 1850*, 208.
- 24 Elizabeth, the second wife of the first earl of Bristol, was a cousin of Frances, the wife of Thomas Norton. Both were of the Felton family of Playford Hall, Suffolk.
- 25 The second earl of Bristol wrote to the duke of Newcastle on 1 November 1753, that 'his [Bernard Mills, who was soon to be the rector of Hitcham, Suffolk] friend in the corporation of Bury was equally well affected to the duke of Grafton and to my-self'. The sentence seems to make clear sense in the context of the alliance between the Fitzroys and the Herveys: BL, Add. MS 32733, fol. 186.
- 26 Namier and Brooke 1964, ii, 619.
- 27 SROB, Acc. 423/270.
- 28 Sommers 1992, 235–36.
- 29 SROB, Acc. 719/1.
- 30 Mathias Cocksedge, a capital Burgess, did not attend the council meeting summoned for parliamentary election on 17 April 1754: SROB, D4/1/3(a), fol. 599. He might have died before the general election, for the registers of St Mary's parish in Bury St Edmunds refer to the burial of 'Mr Cocksedge, Alderman', on 14 March 1754. The identification is not certain, for Mathias Cocksedge had never been an alderman of Bury, while 'Mr' Cocksedge's first name was not recorded.
- 31 SROB, D4/1/7.
- 32 *Bury St Edmunds, St James Parish Registers, Burials 1562–1800*, 283; SROB, typescript transcript of Bury St Edmunds St Mary burials, 1700–1812.
- 33 SROB, D4/1/3(a), fols 629–35. This was only after the mandamus for filling up vacancies in the corporation was issued. At the time the corporation members numbered only one alderman, four capital burgesses, and fifteen burgesses of the common council.
- 34 Childe-Pemberton 1924, 43–46. Many members of the Bury corporation are thought to have been involved in business, so the case of Johnson was probably not a peculiar one.

- 35 *Ipswich Journal*, 27 April 1754.
- 36 Challis, Grigby, Johnson, Rayment.
- 37 Allen, Challis, Grigby, Hart, Siday, Sturgeon.
- 38 Allen, Hart, Johnson, Siday, Sturgeon.
- 39 Grigby was also the town clerk of Bury at this time.
- 40 Lewis 1961, 115–16.
- 41 Thomas Hervey to the duke of Newcastle, 10 April 1754: BL, Add. MS 32735, fol. 76.
- 42 In view of Thomas Hervey's reference to the Whig cause in Bury, it is interesting to find several names of corporation members of the mid 1750s among the voters supporting John Holt, a Whig nominee defeated at the 1727 general election for Suffolk. See *A Copy of the Poll for the Knights of the Shire for the County of Suffolk ... 1727*.
- 43 The conflict really harmed the working of the corporation. In the 1750s the council minutes of Bury often recorded that the corporation failed to elect an alderman for the next year, because the alderman and major part of the capital burgesses on the one hand, and the major part of the burgesses of the common council on the other, disagreed with each other. For examples, see the proceedings of 23 August 1753 and 19 August 1756: SROB, D4/1/3(a). There was no alderman at either parliamentary election here examined, and the meeting was presided over by the coroner, that is the alderman of the preceding year.
- 44 Fiske 1990–91, i, 3–4. The family ties between the Oakes and the Rays were business ties as well. James Oakes junior, the diarist, was apprenticed to Orbell Ray in the late 1750s and became his partner in a large yarn-making company four years later. While James Oakes senior had died before then, the son was soon to be elected Burgess of the common council.
- 45 Namier and Brooke 1964, i, 378.
- 46 It should also be borne in mind that the ravages of the political conflict in the corporation were barely mitigated by the procedure of mandamus. When the corporation members were not able to agree on the election of the alderman, or when too many vacancies remained unfilled for long, the mandamus of the King's Bench was to be sought in order to normalise corporation proceedings. For the early development of the procedure, see Halliday 1998.
- 47 One of the reasons why corporation members of Bury St Edmunds could afford to be relatively independent is thought to be that mid eighteenth-century Bury escaped severe economic vicissitudes. Tiverton, a corporation borough in Devon, was a contrasting case. It depended too much on textile industries which were hit very hard in the late eighteenth century, and its corporation became 'a haven for the bankrupt and broken remnants of a once-mighty industry': Bourne 1986, xxi.
- 48 Fifteen out of 27 corporation boroughs were pocket boroughs. It seems that this fact has often made historians form a general impression of the closed nature of corporation boroughs. However, eight boroughs, including Bury St Edmunds, 'were to some extent under patronage, yet none was completely closed', and four 'maintained some degree of independence'. Namier and Brooke 1964, i, 27–30.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Copy of the Poll for the Knights of the Shire for the County of Suffolk ... 1727*.  
*Bury and Norwich Post*.  
*Bury St Edmunds, St James Parish Registers, Burials 1562–1800*, Suffolk Green Books, 17.  
 Bury St Edmunds (1916).  
*Ipswich Journal*.  
*Journals of the House of Commons*.  
*Little Saxham Parish Registers: Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, with Appendices, Biographies, &c. 1559 to 1850*, Suffolk Green Books, 5. Woodbridge (1901).  
*Rushbrook Parish Registers, 1567 to 1850 with Jermyyn and Davers Annals*. Suffolk Green Books, 6. Woodbridge (1903).
- Aoki, Y., 2003. 'To be a member of the leading gentry: the Suffolk voluntary subscriptions of 1782', *Hist Res*, lxxvi, 78–92.
- Bourne, J., (ed.), 1986. *Georgian Tiverton: The Political Memoranda of Beavis Wood 1768–98*. Torquay.
- Cannon, J., 1972. *Parliamentary Reform 1640–1832*. Cambridge.

- Childe-Pemberton, W.S., 1924. *The Earl Bishop: The Life of Frederick Hervey, Bishop of Derry, Earl of Bristol*, 1. London.
- Fiske, J., (ed.), 1990–91. *The Oakes Diaries: Business, Politics and the Family in Bury St Edmunds 1778–1827*, 2 vols. Woodbridge.
- Halliday, P.D., 1998. *Dismembering the Body Politic: Partisan Politics in England's Towns, 1650–1730*. Cambridge.
- Langford, P., 1988. 'Property and "Virtual Representation" in Eighteenth-Century England', *Hist J*, xxxi, 83–115.
- Langford, P., 1991. *Public Life and Propertied Englishmen 1689–1789*. Oxford.
- Lewis, W.S., (ed.), 1961. *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 30. New Haven, Conn.
- Murrell, P.E., 1982. 'Suffolk: the Political Behaviour of the County and Its Parliamentary Boroughs from the Exclusion Crisis to the Accession of the House of Hanover', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne).
- Namier, L., and Brooke, J., 1964. *The House of Commons 1754–1790*, 3 vols. History of Parliament, London.
- O'Gorman, F., 1997. *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688–1832*. London.
- Oldfield, T.H.B., 1816. *The Representative History of Great Britain and Ireland*, 6 vols. London.
- Sommers, S.M., 1992. 'Politics in eighteenth-century Suffolk' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Washington University).
- Sommers, S.M., 2002. *Parliamentary Politics of a County and Its Town: General Elections in Suffolk and Ipswich in the Eighteenth Century*. Westport, Conn.
- Sweet, R., 2007. 'Corrupt and corporate bodies: attitudes to corruption in eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century towns', in J. Moore and J. Smith (eds), *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780–1950*. Aldershot.

#### Abbreviations

BL	British Library
SROB	Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds

