

## Rich Ruffians and Brutal Force!

*During the general election of March 1820 there were riots and serious disturbances which prevented fair balloting from taking place.*

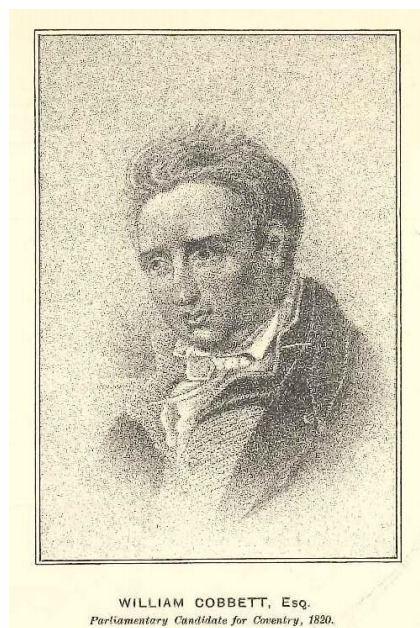
The death of King George III on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1820 triggered a general election in Britain. Political elections are often times where strong opinions clash, but for the city of Coventry this election was marred with bribery, riots and violence.

Historically in Coventry only Freemen were allowed to vote after having completed a seven-year apprenticeship and continuing to practice their craft within the city boundaries. However, there were exceptions which allowed an estimated 600-1,000 people from outside of the city to vote in elections in Coventry. The inclusion of these 'out-voters' may have led to unfair outside influence.

During the 1800s the two main political parties were the Tories (Conservatives) and the Whigs (Liberals). Despite the Tories winning the overall majority in the country and ruling from 1807-1831, Whigs were actually commonly elected within Coventry.

Two prominent Whig names were Edward Ellice, who had won the MP seat for Coventry in the previous 1818 election, and Peter Moore. The latter had been awarded a gold cup which acknowledged public appreciation for his long service and politely hinted at his anticipated retirement. Despite these mixed responses, both men decided to run in an apparent joint effort – a risky move which could have potentially split their Whig votes!

The two Whigs were up against William Cobbett of the Radical Party. He was controversial as he had come back from America and showed support for the political activist Thomas Paine, whose rhetoric was referenced during the American Revolution. Moreover, Cobbett did not have the support of the Corporation, which essentially ran the Warwickshire borough. Therefore, despite running for MP in all earnest, from the outset the circumstances were not in Cobbett's favour.



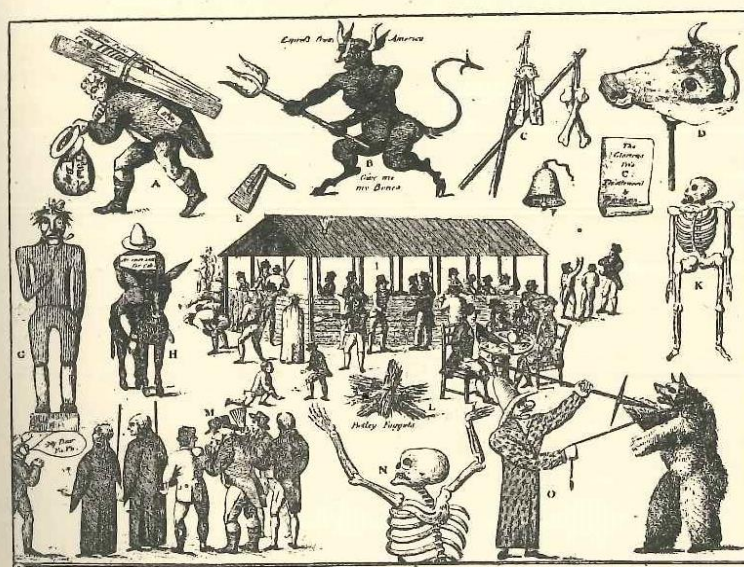
*Parliamentary Representation of the City of Coventry by T.W. Whitley. Image of Mr William Cobbett.*

Cobbett began his campaign by appealing to London out-voters and then to enthusiastic voters in Coventry. On Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> February, two weeks before the election, Cobbett was travelling from London to Coventry

when he received a message from a 'band of rich ruffians' that he would be murdered if he attempted to enter the city! Cobbett says that they were so fearful that he would win that they drunkenly 'gave orders to go out, meet me at a bridge, about a mile from the City, and if I refused to return to London, *fling me over the bridge*'.

When entering the city, Cobbett describes being met by 'little short of twenty thousand' men on the cold streets. This resulted in him losing his voice and preventing him from attending the canvas. During canvassing it was not uncommon for parties to promise 5s to voters if their candidate was successful. So, Cobbett's absence could have dearly impacted his sway to voters.

Further that evening, the windows of the house where Cobbett was staying were smashed by the ruffians. These men had knives and began attacking Cobbett's supporters. From the design of their pen-knives, Cobbett believed that these men were hired thugs.



COBBETT AT COVENTRY.

**A**, Cobbett carrying off the bones of Paine. **B**, The devil pursuing Cobbett to recover his property. **C**, Bones exhibited at the Hustings in derision. **D**, Emblematical of the head of a Traitor. **E**, Watchman's Rattle used to arouse Mr. Cobbett's friends. **F**, Bell used by the collector of bones. **G**, Knave's Post, a friend of Cobbett's. **H**, An ass, a present for Cobbett to ride upon from the booth. **I**, the opponents of Cobbett amusing themselves at the Hustings. **K**, A mock skeleton of Tom Paine. **L**, Faggots to remind Mr. Cobbett of one of his Botley manœuvres. **M**, Cobbett led away from the Hustings by his friends fainting. **N**, An Emblematical figure of Death (painted) to remind Mr. Cobbett of his latter end. **O**, A Radical, with his staff, exhibiting a monster.

(From the Author's Collection.)

Parliamentary Representation of the City of Coventry by T.W. Whitley. Newspaper cartoon showing the public view of Cobbett.

It was Monday 6th March when the competition, Moore and Ellice, arrived in Coventry. Cobbett states that they came with ruffians guarding them on horseback, and that the windows of his lodgings were again damaged that evening.

On Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> March the Corporation, fearing Cobbett's success, introduced Henry Jackson Close as the final candidate. The idea of this was to split Cobbett's votes and ensure a Whig victory. Cobbett realised the situation and attempted to form an alliance with Close as it would help his favour with the Corporation. However, Close was advised not to and rejected Cobbett's offer.

Voting officially began on the morning of Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> March and when polls closed that afternoon Cobbett was in the lead: **Cobbett 81, Ellice 75, Moore 68, Close 28.**

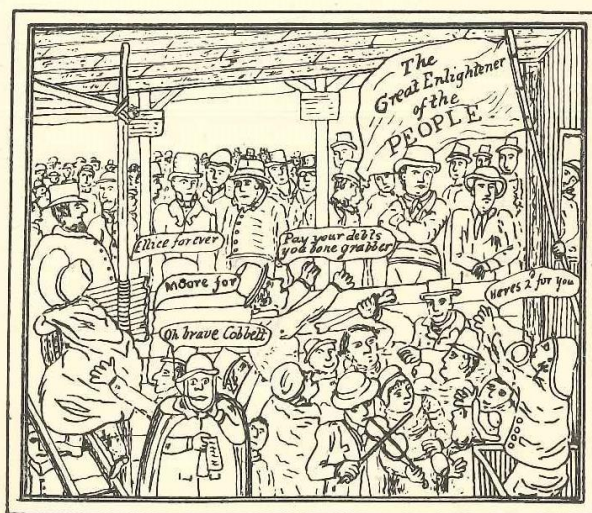
Reportedly Ellice had to be convinced by his supporters to stay in Coventry in order to keep the poll open. These same supporters drunkenly loitered around the voting booth on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> March intimidating prospective voters. Cobbett described that 'a scene of violence and sounds of execrations were witnessed and heard, such, as I hope, were never matched, and never will be again matched, in the world', with at least 20 of his men turned away from the booth.

By the end of Thursday, the results were as follows: **Ellice 198, Moore 180, Cobbett 149, Close 98.** Yet Cobbett argued that he would have polled higher if all of his men were allowed to vote. Even more underhanded was the fact that Close was convinced to withdraw his candidacy with expenses paid!

With Close out of the picture, Cobbett was the only competition for the Whigs. On Thursday evening, Cobbett says that he was surrounded by 'more than a thousand' of Ellice's men and that feared that he could have been killed. Cobbett extraordinarily managed to fight his way through the mob with his sharp-edged snuffbox!

By Friday 10<sup>th</sup> March the ruffians had organised themselves into shifts, violently preventing Cobbett's voters to getting to the booth, with only particularly eager men managing to vote. About 300-400 voters persisted and allowed Cobbett to take the lead ahead of Moore. However, this made the rabble even more violent and then no one dared to vote for Cobbett.

Once polling closed on Saturday, Cobbett was still keen to keep voting open the following week. Ellice's supporters regularly attacked the house where Cobbett was staying, breaking windows and shutters and threatening to kill Cobbett. Some of the ruffians broke into the house and Cobbett's men attempted to hide the cutlery, fearing that knives would be used against them. However, the intruders had again brought their own knives and one man was stabbed twice in the arm. The ruffians eventually fled once officials were called. The house was left in a poor state and Cobbett himself fell ill with a cold.



THE NOMINATION OF MESSRS. MOORE, ELLICE, AND COBBETT, AT THE HUSTINGS.

*(From the Collection of the late W. READER, Esq., in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.)*

*Parliamentary Representation of the City of Coventry by T.W. Whitley.  
Newspaper cartoon illustrating voter's opinions.*

Before polling reopened on the Monday, Cobbett made protests to the sheriff, calling for protection. However, it was not until noon that constables were guarding the voting booths.

The final votes were: **Ellice 1,474, Moore 1,422, Cobbett 517, Close 135.**

After the results, one of Cobbett's men challenged Ellice to a duel, so Cobbett fled the city to Birmingham. Cobbett made statements citing violence against himself and his supporters, and announced a petition to the vote. However, when this protest was considered in May 1820, Cobbett's claims were dismissed.

This turbulent election truly underlines the increased problems of corruption which prevented 'fair play' and protection of all candidates in Coventry. It seems that the Freeman voting system only allowed for voters to be swayed more easily either by money or by violence. It is safe to say that Cobbett left Coventry firmly believing that 'had not *brutal force* been employed, I should have been elected by a large majority'. However, in this case Ellice, the 'man with the money', won the day and was re-elected as MP for Coventry.

### **Sources:**

T.W Whitley, *Parliamentary Representation of the City of Coventry*, Coventry, 1894.

*Cobbett's Election 1820*: including W. Rotherham, *A Correct Copy of the Poll for Members to Represent the City of Coventry In Parliament*, 1820; 'Cobbett's Weekly Political Register', William Cobbett, Vol.36, No.2, London, March 1820.

**(Both books are available in the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery, History Centre, Reading Room).**