

J. J. Gurney and Norwich Politics

J. GURNEY is best known as a member of the Gurney banking family and as an influential Evangelical minister in the Society of Friends between 1818 and 1847. He also played an important role as an active citizen in Norwich. He led the way in the founding of a Lancasterian school for needy boys, supplying them with a virtually free elementary education. He played a prominent role in organizing relief for unemployed weavers and their families during the severe depression which struck Norwich textile businesses in the winters of 1825-26 and 1829-30. In the latter winter, feelings were running high among the weavers who were refusing to work because of the low wages being offered by manufacturers, and Gurney tried to effect some kind of resolution of the impasse. From time to time he entered the political arena. The record of these forays, though brief, illumines the political scene of that time and the changing attitude of Friends toward participation in political activity.

Gurney's primary political aim was to eliminate or lessen corrupt election practices. His general aloofness from politics was prompted by disgust with the extent of this corruption and by sympathy with traditional Quaker opposition to its members, and especially its ministers, becoming active in political party struggles. The corruption in Norwich city elections during Gurney's early manhood was notorious. Bribery and illegal influence of other forms were practised on a large scale by both Whigs and Tories. In the autumn of 1833, in part as a result of a Norwich citizens' petition to Parliament which Gurney had actively supported,¹ a Public Inquiry was begun by Parliament into election practices and city constitutions in Norwich and other English cities. In 1835 the Municipal Corporations Act wiped out the city constitution of Norwich which had been in force since 1404. A recurring problem in Norwich elections had been the small number of those eligible to vote. Even in 1841, five years after the reorganization of the municipal corporation, there were fewer than 3,000 electors in a population of 60,000.

¹ cf. below, p. 55 f.

R. H. Mottram, Norwich novelist and local historian, has concluded that rampant corruption came into Norwich politics about 1808-10, as part of the disruption of a generation of war.

. . . the ancient body of freemen, whose status had once been a guarantee of settled interests and responsible conduct, had been reduced by long chronic unemployment to precisely that state at which men will do anything for money, drink, or excitement.

At a time when there were only 2,316 municipal voters, 1,123 owned so little property that they paid no rates (taxes), and 315 more were classed as paupers.¹

Parliament's Public Inquiry met massive resistance in Norwich. At first the Sheriffs refused to attend hearings or to allow evidence to be taken from their officers. Eventually, however, a fairly clear picture was uncovered. It showed widespread bribery, primarily in local rather than parliamentary elections. Both parties used substantial funds at each election, to purchase votes outright and to treat voters to enough drinks to influence them to vote the right way. Tickets of admission to almshouses under municipal control were given, by the party which won, to its needy supporters. Sheriff's posse men, paid by those running for office, ran away in 1830, when the wooden polling booth was burnt by a mob. And "cooping" was frequently practised, i.e. forcible seizure and abduction of voters known to support the other party. On one occasion several electors were seized, drugged and maltreated, and then taken to Ranworth, 12 miles north-east of Norwich, put on board a wherry and guarded by men with clubs and scythes. They were released only by a counter-attack by the opposing party using another wherry.²

The Gurneys were Whigs, and Gurneys Bank was accused by the Tories of supplying large sums of money to secure Whig victories in city elections. It is a fact that the first Tory ever allowed on the Bank staff in Norwich was employed in 1838. He was taken on only after he had solemnly promised to regard Whig party secrets as equal in sanctity to bank secrets and never to pass on Whig gossip to his Tory friends.³

At Bartlett Gurney's death in 1803, Richard Gurney, Joseph John's elder uncle, had become head of the Norwich

¹ R. H. Mottram, *Success to the Mayor* (London, 1937), pp. 220 ff.

² *Ibid.*

³ W. H. Bidwell, *Annals of an East Anglian Bank*, (Norwich, 1900), p. 195.

Gurney family. He was a conscientious business man and a strict Friend, but the latter description could not be applied to his sons, Hudson and Richard Hanbury Gurney. Hudson, cousin of Joseph John, and a partner in the Norwich Bank, was disowned by the Norwich Monthly Meeting in 1804 for "contributing to a fund for military purposes".¹ His interests were chiefly literary and he had wanted to resign from the Bank long before he actually did, in 1832. His step-brother, Richard Hanbury Gurney, had been a partner in the Yarmouth branch of Gurneys Bank. He successfully stood for Parliament in 1818,² and it was in support of his candidacy that Joseph John Gurney first made a political speech. Something of R. H. Gurney's political platform can be gathered from toasts he proposed at a birthday party for a local squire, in the month before the election. He toasted "The cause of Liberty all over the world"; "the Bishop of Norwich, the Friend of Toleration"; and "Sir Francis Burdett and a Reform in Parliament."³

After the votes were counted, Joseph John Gurney made two speeches on his cousin's behalf to a large gathering in the Swan Inn Yard and to a crowd in the Market Place. These events occurred very soon after the Norwich Monthly Meeting had recognized him as a minister. He was afterwards taken sharply to task within the Society for having appeared on these occasions, though his comments were evidently restrained. To the first gathering he spoke on church and state, contrasting the true Christian understanding of the Church with the narrower view taken by the Tories. The state he defined as being the equivalent of the "people", i.e. King, lords and commons. In the Market Place Gurney paid Norwich's M.P., Wm. Smith, high compliments, thanked the free-men of Norwich for having elected his cousin, and declared that the latter would prove himself a liberal and dependable representative of the free-men of Norwich.⁴

R. H. Gurney again stood successfully for Parliament in 1820. By 1826 he had decided to retire. The Whig paper, the *Norwich Mercury*, spoke well of his record:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

² That R.H.G. went to Parliament at this time indicates that he was not a practising Friend.

³ *Norwich Mercury*, 9.v.1818.

⁴ MS. Autobiography (The Library, Friends House, London); *Norfolk Chronicle*, 20.vi.1818.

he returns to the condition of a private gentleman in the full retention of the same independence with which he entered the House of Commons, with the same plain integrity that has marked his public actions.¹

Yet R. H. Gurney was evidently disapproved of by some in the Society of Friends as a lapsed Quaker, and in the spring of 1819, J. J. Gurney received a sharp rebuke for having appeared in public on his behalf. Ann Alexander was an eloquent Friend and strong supporter of Gurney's Bible-study programme just getting under way at Ackworth School. She had played a major part in dispelling, at summer school Committee Meetings, the suspicions of Gurney's educational methods roused by John Barclay and others. Having heard of Gurney's activities in the recent Norwich election, she wrote him with loving forthrightness, expressing a position widely held by Friends at that time.

As I cannot but believe that serious reflection must lead to the full conviction that the spirit of electioneering is as opposite to the example and precept of him who was "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners" as light is from darkness, it is always to me a matter of surprise that religious characters under our name can take any great part in this business, as it is now so generally conducted.²

In the same year that Joseph John Gurney helped celebrate his "black-sheep" cousin's first election to Parliament, a relative of greater stature was elected to Parliament from Weymouth. Thomas Fowell Buxton had married Gurney's sister Hannah and was to be Wilberforce's successor in Parliament as indefatigable labourer in and leader of the drive for abolition of slavery. Buxton, though never a member of the Society, was close to many Quakers and was obviously an independent, uncompromising and vastly effective Christian politician. His presence in Parliament forced many Friends who had eschewed political activity as spiritually contaminating, to rethink their position. Gurney, two years younger than Buxton, and distantly related to him, had known him well from boyhood. Years before Buxton stood for Parliament, Gurney had recommended this to him as his "most useful and desirable field of action". (Before entering the political world, Buxton had been in the brewery business in London.) Gurney's letter of counsel after Buxton's election

¹ 26.v.1826.

² Letter of 7.v.1819, Gurney MSS. (The Library at Friends House, London.)

in 1818, shows the former's positive view of the possibilities in a political vocation. After urging Buxton to take up "one great object" such as revision of the criminal code, and to pursue it with single-minded vigour, Gurney added:

Do not let thy independence of all party be the means of leading thee away from *sound Whiggism* . . . *there is a great work going on in the world* . . . the human mind, under the safeguard of *religious education*, is advancing to the shaking off of so many of its trammels, and so many of its prejudices . . . But let us not admit any check to the progress of true light, whether moral, political, or religious; and let us take especial care to avoid the *spirit of Toryism*. I mean that spirit which bears the worst things with endless apathy, *because they are old*; and with which reason and even humanity are nothing, and the authority of creatures as fallible as ourselves, everything.¹

One of the ironies of the 1818 Norwich election for Parliament was that the Tory candidate, Harbord,² whom R. H. Gurney defeated, was actually a person of greater integrity and more substantial religious interests than the victor. J. J. Gurney and Edward Harbord came to appreciate each other in the spring of 1819, in a common protest against the practices engaged in during Norwich elections. In March Gurney had written a letter to the city magistrates, defending critical remarks he had made in print previously regarding the Norwich Jail. To this letter, published in the *Norfolk Chronicle* and the *Norwich Mercury*, Gurney had added a footnote on ward elections. He declared that, as they were then conducted by both parties, there could hardly be

a more open scheme of scandalous bribery and corruption; a more profligate waste of money; a more convenient occasion for loose and blasphemous ribaldry; a more fruitful source of misery, drunkenness, and crime; a more certain method of sapping the independence and destroying the morals of the community, of plentifully replenishing both our workhouses and our jails!³

Harbord, who, though well-to-do had not put up any money to secure his own election the previous year, was delighted to read Gurney's statement. The day the newspaper came out he wrote to Gurney,

I willingly surrender to you the glory of having struck the first blow, but as the field is yet open, I must beg leave to put in my claim

¹ Letter of 8.vii.1818, in Charles Buxton (ed.), *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Baronet* (Phila., 1840), pp. 75 ff.

² Edward Harbord, 3rd baron Suffield, 1821 (1781-1835) *D.N.B.*

³ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 20.iii.1819.

as an ally and coadjutor, not of the past, but of your future efforts.¹

Gurney at once answered Harbord's warm letter. He cited more details than he had done in his open letter in the newspapers. Husbands, he declared, were taken from their families and kept sequestered for two or three weeks, in a state of intoxication. Young men, just come of voting age, were "plunged into scenes of dissipation, from the effects of which they never recover". Young and old voters were aroused to a state of enmity against each other once a year, so as to throw the whole city of Norwich into a ferment. It all added up to the destruction of "all right political motives" in the poor who were qualified to vote.

Gurney had a specific solution in mind, a public declaration against all these abuses, signed by all men of influence in both parties in Norwich. Such a declaration should include a public commitment not to open any public houses or spend any money on either drinks or bribes. "Why should not the poor men go quietly up to the Hall and vote, and then go back to their homes?"² Harbord supported Gurney's proposed plan, but felt it needed "teeth" in it. There should be provisions for punishment in case of violation and a system of inspection of the election by both parties. Otherwise each party would fear that the other would covertly resort to the old tactics, and win. Gurney agreed to Harbord's machinery for prosecution as a later step, but persisted in his judgment that a public declaration should be tried first.³

This hopeful planning was interrupted by a scathing reply to Gurney's charges. An open letter to Gurney by an attorney named Atkinson appeared in the 27th March *Norfolk Chronicle* and the 3rd April *Norwich Mercury*. The writer acknowledged that both parties did engage in the disgraceful practices alluded to by Gurney, but he expressed surprise that a member of the Gurney family should publicly be deploring these abuses. The remedy he declared,

rests with you and your nearest connections. Let the Gurney family declare that they will never subscribe another shilling to the support of our Ward and other Local Elections, and do you, Sir, prevent in

¹ Letter of 20.iii.1819 in J. B. Braithwaite, *Memoirs of Joseph John Gurney: with selections from his Journal and Correspondence*, (Phila., 1854), I, pp. 165 f.

² Letter of 22.iii.1819, in Braithwaite, *op. cit.*, I, p. 166.

³ Letter from Harbord to Gurney, 23.iii.1819, and from Gurney to Harbord 18.viii.1819, *ibid.*, pp. 166 f.

future your confidential clerks from becoming the active agents and profuse Paymasters of this profligate waste of money, and we shall soon see our city in peace and quietness again.

Does not the sin, Sir, lie at the door of those who last year subscribed many thousand pounds to bribe and corrupt the freemen of the Long Ward? Were not there poor men, after they had promised to vote in the same interest they had always supported, induced to break their promises by bribes of 40 *l.* and 50 *l.*? a temptation too great to be resisted by most needy voters! Were not a large number of these men *cooped up* at one of R.G.'s [Richard Gurney's] tenants at Northrepps, and there maintained in idleness and drunkenness . . . ? Were not the carriages of some of the Gurney family employed in conveying these miserable promise-breakers, in a beastly state of intemperance, to the poll? And did we not, for the first time, see Quakers, who refuse to bow to Royalty itself, pulling off their hats and saluting these intoxicated wretches?¹

Since Gurney wrote no open letter in reply to Atkinson, we can only suppose that the latter's accusations were founded in fact. Indeed, Richard H. Gurney later admitted to spending £80,000 on electioneering for himself and his friends.² How, then, are we to explain Gurney's actions in speaking in support of his cousin in the spring of 1818, and, in the spring of 1819, openly deploring abuses which were actually being practised by his own Bank? We can only make informed guesses. It seems likely that Gurney learned more, shortly after his cousin's election, as to what had actually been done to win the election. The entry in his Journal shortly after he had spoken in his cousin's behalf, betrayed uneasiness. He noted that "some public measures in support of Smith and Gurney seemed unavoidable" and excused himself by affirming that in his talk on church and state he had tried to raise people's minds a little above mere politics. Yet, all in all, he was unhappy at finding himself enrolled with a party and was convinced that his foray into politics had been "rather lowering to the best things."³

Did Gurney's Bank actually supply money, in addition to individual contributions from members of the Gurney family to defray Richard Gurney's election expenses? We do not know. But the evidence seems clear that money earned by the Bank and distributed as profits to R. H. Gurney and

¹ Letter of 24.iii.1819 in *Norfolk Chronicle*, 27.iii.1819, and in *Norwich Mercury* 3.iv.1819.

² Bidwell, *Annals of an East Anglian Bank*, pp. 139 ff.

³ Entry for 20.vi.1818, in the privately printed folio volume, "Extracts from the Letters, Journals, etc. of Joseph John Gurney" (The Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library; Friends House Library, London), p. 100.

others, played an important part in the corrupt practices alluded to by Atkinson. Probably the Tory machine, though not Edward Harbord personally, gained support from another Norwich institution, the Crown Bank.¹

It seems likely that J. J. Gurney wrote his open letter condemning corrupt election practices, quite aware that his relatives, and even the Bank, had been involved. Indeed, his letter may well have been prompted by a sense of guilt over being a junior partner in such affairs, and as a public protest against Bank policies dominated by his uncle Richard and his cousins, Hudson and R. H. Gurney. Of this we cannot be sure, but it is borne out by the comment made by Bidwell, historian of Gurneys Bank, whose natural sympathies inclined toward those Gurneys who threw themselves without reservation into business and political careers. Bidwell remarked of the 1818 election,

Mr. J. J. Gurney, however, disliked the strife of politics, and abhorred the party spirit, the dissipation and corruption so much in evidence at a contested election. Mr. R. H. Gurney had far more effective help from Mr. Simon Martin [Bank manager] who, though he took no part in public meetings, was a strong Whig.²

Gurney's concern over election corruption was not permanently driven underground by the irrefutable charges against the Gurney family which had appeared in the newspapers early in 1819. During the following summer Gurney talked to a number of citizens about his and Harbord's proposal of a public declaration eschewing the use of illegal influence on voters. Yet nothing substantial was accomplished. Gurney was discouraged by the amount of suspicion and deep prejudice which he encountered in most of the devotees of either party. For more than ten years thereafter, he had nothing to do with party proceedings on either side, and refused to give a shilling towards either local or general election expenses.

After the December 1832 election for Parliament, however, Gurney exploded again in an indignant protest in public print. R. H. Gurney, having retired from Parliament in 1826, had returned to the fray and won elections in 1830 and 1831. In 1832, the year of the passage of the Reform Bill, the election at Norwich reached new depths. Tory candidates

¹ Bidwell, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

² *Ibid.*

won in a contest in which the fraudulent methods hitherto largely limited to city elections were extensively used in the general election.

J. J. Gurney was faced with an awkward decision. Two years earlier his cousin, the defeated candidate, had been involved in some "sorrowful affair", serious enough to have caused J. J. Gurney to be uneasy at that time about his continuing to share in the management of the Bank. When R. H. Gurney had stood for Parliament in 1830, Joseph John had decided that he could not, as a Christian and a Friend, vote for his cousin. He had urged his brother Samuel to take the same position, telling him, "I have reason to know that many eyes are upon us, to watch whether we will act up to our profession or not."¹ Now, in 1832 any public protest against his cousin's defeat would be interpreted both as family bias and as condoning R. H. Gurney's previous lapse.

After anxious deliberation, J. J. Gurney took the more risky path. He wrote another open letter to the *Chronicle* and *Mercury*, declaring that he was preparing to give some money to support a petition to Parliament contesting the results of the recent election, in which thousands of pounds had been spent "in the horrid work of depriving the poor voters of their best treasures—integrity and temperance". Since rottenness had invaded the *Parliamentary* election there seemed a basis for appeal for a Parliamentary investigation of Norwich city politics. "Whatever may be the result of the inquiry as relates to these gentlemen [the successful Tory candidates], the curse and sorrow of our city will unquestionably be brought to light."²

Actually, Gurney hoped that the threat of Parliamentary investigation would force local party leaders to clean their own house. The *Norwich Mercury* (Whig) applauded his letter and eulogized Gurney as the man in all Norwich in whose integrity and good judgment the local citizens had the most confidence.³ The Tory *Chronicle* published a vituperative attack on the "House of Gurney" as the fountainhead of Whig political corruption, at least since R. H. Gurney had

¹ Letters by J. J. Gurney to Joseph Gurney, 26.i.1830, and to Samuel Gurney, 13.vii.1830, Gurney MSS., III, 520, 526.

² Letter of 1.i.1833 published in *Norfolk Chronicle* and *Norwich Mercury*, 5.i.1833.

³ *Norwich Mercury*, 5.i.1833.

entered politics in 1818.¹ Yet in spite of the high feeling, it looked for a time as though J. J. Gurney would be successful in bringing about reform. In February the City Recorder came to him, on behalf of the Tories, asking him whether he would seek to avert the petition to Parliament, if the two local parties would jointly eliminate corrupt practices. Gurney held extended conversations with the Whigs who had drawn up the petition to Parliament and with the Tories, and presented the latter with a scheme for completely remodelling or even abolishing the City Corporation. Nevertheless, though the Tory leaders conferred with Gurney again, his proposed reforms were evidently too drastic to be acceptable. Eventually, as we have seen, Parliamentary action forced a revision of the city government.

Gurney's role in the 1833 petition to Parliament against Tory corruption in Norwich was complicated by the fact that he was himself considering standing for Parliament at the time. Given the general feeling in the Society of Friends against active involvement in politics, it is notable that Gurney, a leading Quaker minister, should have seriously considered going into Parliament. Undoubtedly close association with Fowell Buxton's career as an anti-slavery politician played a part. And the slavery issue was at a crisis stage. (Abolition was finally to be carried in August 1833.) Moreover, the Reform Bill of 1832 made it easier for a Quaker to go to Parliament, since the likelihood increased that a member could enter on affirmation rather than on oath. Gurney was well aware of the case of his cousin, Joseph Pease, who had stood for Parliament in 1832, in spite of strong opposition to this step from both his family and his Quaker meeting. Pease had been asked by the electors of southern Durham to stand as their candidate. He had agreed, but had made no canvas for votes, had spent no money on the election and had declared he would vote in Parliament according to Friends' principles. Pease had been elected and became the first Quaker M.P.²

¹ Letter by M. J. U. Browne to Gurney, 7.i.1833 in *Norfolk Chronicle*, 12.i.1833. Browne reprinted Atkinson's letter of 1819 and added charges of his own.

² Joseph Pease was the son of Edward Pease, "The Father of Railways", who had helped open up the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825. The Pease family, like the Gurneys, had been in business as wool merchants. This may have been the railway into which Gurneys Bank put money in the 1820's. (Cf. Gurney MSS. III, 450, cited by L. S. Pressnell, *Country Banking in the Industrial Revolution* [Oxford, 1956], p. 400).

But something more immediate than Buxton's and Pease's examples prompted Gurney to consider entering Parliament. In the fall of 1832, he broke his rule, followed since 1818, of no election speeches. He spoke at the county election in support of the Whig anti-slavery platform, which played a significant part in the victory of the Whigs. In his Journal on 12th December, 1832 he wrote:

Public affairs—the strife of party—the victories of the hot Tory partizans on the one side, and the brawlings of Radicals on the other—the absence of religious and even decently moral restraint—are subjects of true lamentation to me; and I tremble lest the righteous cause of the abolition of slavery should be frustrated.¹

By early January 1833 Gurney was fairly clear in his mind that he should accede to what seemed likely to be a call from his fellow citizens to send him and John Weyland² to Parliament, “present members being likely to be displaced for gross corruption.”³ Though Gurney's references to the probable vacancy in Parliament were always veiled, he must have been approached by the Whigs who were contesting the recent Norwich Tory victory.⁴ This would explain his Journal comment in late February regarding conference with “High Tories” over reform of the City Corporation. “If I hear nothing further, the negotiation ceases, and I have done my *very best* both for quieting the contentions, and for shutting the door on the possibility of my own election.”⁵

Since there was no precedent for a Quaker minister entering Parliament, Gurney took counsel, in mid-January, with a number of Friends prominent in the committee affairs of London Yearly Meeting or in the Quaker ministry. Three urged caution, but wanted the matter left to divine guidance. Four, including Buxton's brother-in-law, were ready to have

¹ In “Extracts” p. 325.

² John Weyland (1774-1854) *D.N.B.*

³ 1837 Autobiography, in “Extracts”, p. 331; and a letter of 28.ii.1833 to Jonathan Hutchinson, Gurney MSS. III, 571.

⁴ The violent letter in the *Norfolk Chronicle* to Gurney after he had proposed to support the appeal to Parliament contesting the Tory victory, included the following, “Whether the spirit of representation awakened in your breast by the triumph of your friend Pease, shall quit its hiding-place and be made manifest with the electors, or whether, with a decent and appropriate humility, shrinking from your desires, you strangle the ambitious hope in its birth,—whether you prefer the care of souls to the instruction of a nation, the holy murmurs of the Conventicle to the earthly delusions of the Senate, are points which cannot be decided at the present moment.” (*Norfolk Chronicle*, 12.i.1833).

⁵ MS. Journal (The Library at Friends House, London).

Gurney go ahead.¹ But his brother Samuel opposed it and his wife Mary saw "nothing but danger and the cross" in it.² For six weeks Gurney wrestled with the matter. At the end of February he still felt "it may be a service required of me, by the Great Head of the Church." But Gurney would have stood for Parliament as part of his calling as a minister.

The awful question which has haunted me day and night, is *this*: Whether I have a testimony to bear, I mean a quiet, patient, persevering testimony to the cause of Christianity in the British Parliament. If this be indeed the Master's will, I fully believe it would not *bar* or *mar* the anointing in ministry.³

Early in March the problem was solved when Gurney came to have a strong "leading" to pay a ministerial visit to Friends in the London area. A religious visit at that time clearly precluded him from taking the political course, and he was easy in his mind at turning his back on standing for Parliament.

Joseph John Gurney's urge toward political responsibility had been something deeper than toying with distinction. In 1837, as he set sail for three years in America, he was still inclined to think it likely that he would feel called to serve in Parliament sometime in the future "for a specific purpose and a short time."⁴ During the remaining ten years of his life, however, Gurney became increasingly absorbed in the travelling ministry and in the anti-slavery cause in America and on the Continent. There is no evidence of his having again seriously considered standing for Parliament.

DAVID SWIFT

¹ One of these, Joseph Foster, cited the legislative functions of Friends and even Friend ministers in Pennsylvania as precedent.

² MS. Journal, entry on 21.i.1833.

³ Letter of 28.ii.1833 to Jonathan Hutchinson, Gurney MSS. III, 571.

⁴ MS. Autobiography.