

Mr Wilkes comes to town

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John Wilkes was one of the most famous men in England when he visited Margate in August 1780. Copies of his speeches were printed in newspapers and pamphlets throughout the country. His image could be found everywhere: on tobacco papers, halfpenny ballads, porcelain dishes, punchbowls, teapots, prints, and broadsides.¹ Workingmen saw Wilkes as the only politician who would stand up for them, and the middle classes were buoyed up by his challenges to authority; crowds in London chanted ‘Wilkes and Liberty.’ Wilkes had a charm that carried all before it, despite being said to be the ugliest man in England; a savage caricature of Wilkes by William Hogarth shows him in a demonic looking wig, with a hideous squint and a protruding jaw. His entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* describes how ‘for two decades Wilkes fought for ‘liberty’, whether freedom from arbitrary arrest, the right of voters, or the freedom of the press to criticize government and report parliament. He suffered exile, financial ruin and imprisonment for his principles, and by a combination of political courage and tactical skill won notable victories over government.’²

Wilkes was born in 1726 to a wealthy, upwardly mobile family, further helping his prospects by marrying, in 1747, Mary Meade, an heiress some ten years his senior, who owned a large estate in Aylesbury.^{1,2} In 1757 Wilkes was elected MP for Aylesbury, but his political name was made when he published the weekly journal, the *North Briton*, in which he attacked the prime ministers Lord Bute and George Grenville. After one highly critical article, published in 1763, George III and his ministers prosecuted Wilkes for seditious libel, but Wilkes fled to Paris; in his absence, he was found guilty by the King’s Bench, and the House of Commons expelled him as being unworthy to be a member of Parliament. Wilkes stayed abroad for four years, but in 1768 returned to England, announcing that he would both surrender himself to justice when the court of King’s Bench next met, in April, and stand again for Parliament. In March he was duly elected member for the county of Middlesex. In June, Wilkes was finally sentenced to 22 months imprisonment for the seditious libel contained in his publications of 1763 and consequently was expelled from Parliament, on 3 February 1769. This meant that there had to be a by-election; Wilkes stood at the by-election, held on 16 February 1769, and was



John Wilkes, in a print by Hogarth

returned unopposed by the electors. The following day, the House of Commons decided that Wilkes was ‘incapable’ of election, since he had just been expelled from Parliament. A fresh by-election was therefore held on 16 March, but Wilkes was again returned unopposed and again Parliament refused to accept the decision of the electors. A third by-election was therefore called, for 13 April, and this time a candidate, Colonel Henry Luttrell, was chosen to stand against Wilkes. Wilkes again won the election but, two days later, the Commons decided to award the seat to his opponent Luttrell. Not surprisingly, these events led to a major political controversy, with the resignation of the prime minister, the Duke of Grafton, in January 1770. Having failed to keep his parliamentary seat, Wilkes decided to make London his political power base; in 1769 he had

been elected an alderman of London and he eventually became Lord Mayor in 1774.

Although the King's Bench Prison where Wilkes was held in jail was a miserable place for people without money, those who could afford them had comfortable rooms. Wilkes was one of the lucky ones and occupied a ground floor suite, with a view over St. George's Fields. There were no restrictions on visits to the prisoners, and Wilkes regularly entertained visitors to dinner in his suite.¹ His many supporters sent him food; in April 1769, a gentleman at Deal sent him 'fourteen fine mackerel, being the first seen in London, or that have been caught this season.'³ Those supporters that did not send him food and drink consumed them on his behalf; in March, 1769, it was reported that, at Margate

on Monday last, at a chair-club, held at the Fountain Inn . . . the members consisted of exactly 45; when 45 pots of beer, 45 pots of bumbo [a drink made from rum, water, sugar and nutmeg], 45 bowls of punch, and 45 loyal and constitutional healths were drunk; particularly their Majesties, and Wilkes and Liberty: the whole was conducted with the greatest decency and decorum, and what is remarkable, the member that completed the number 45, was born in the year 45.⁴

The significance of the number 45 was that the issue of the *North Briton* that led to the charge of seditious libel against Wilkes was number 45.

Having served his sentence, Wilkes was released from prison in April 1770, an event that was celebrated in many of the towns of Kent. In Canterbury, 'the whole town was illuminated' in the evening, and 'most of the publicans reduced the price of beer to three pence a quart.'⁵ In Margate

our colours were displayed on the church steeple, along the Parade, on the vessels in the harbour, and on the pier; the day was ushered in with the ringing of bells and firing of cannon; at noon 45 rounds were discharged; and at night a general illumination. The friends of Mr. Wilkes met at the White Hart, when 45 loyal toasts were drunk under the discharge of cannon, and silence was proclaimed by beat of drums: in the evening a ball was given to the ladies, and everything was conducted with the greatest regularity and decorum.⁶

In May 1770, Wilkes wrote to his daughter Polly, who was in France, saying: 'I have settled it to take a tour to Dover, to bring you back; and from Dover, an excursion with you to Margate, a very gay place, for a week.'⁷ In August, Wilkes duly rode from London to Dover, met Polly, and then embarked on a triumphal tour through Kent and Sussex; at every town he was wined and dined and the church bells were rung for him. At Dover, 'the Bells rung, and there was a general display of colours from the steeple, and Vessels in the Harbour, with the

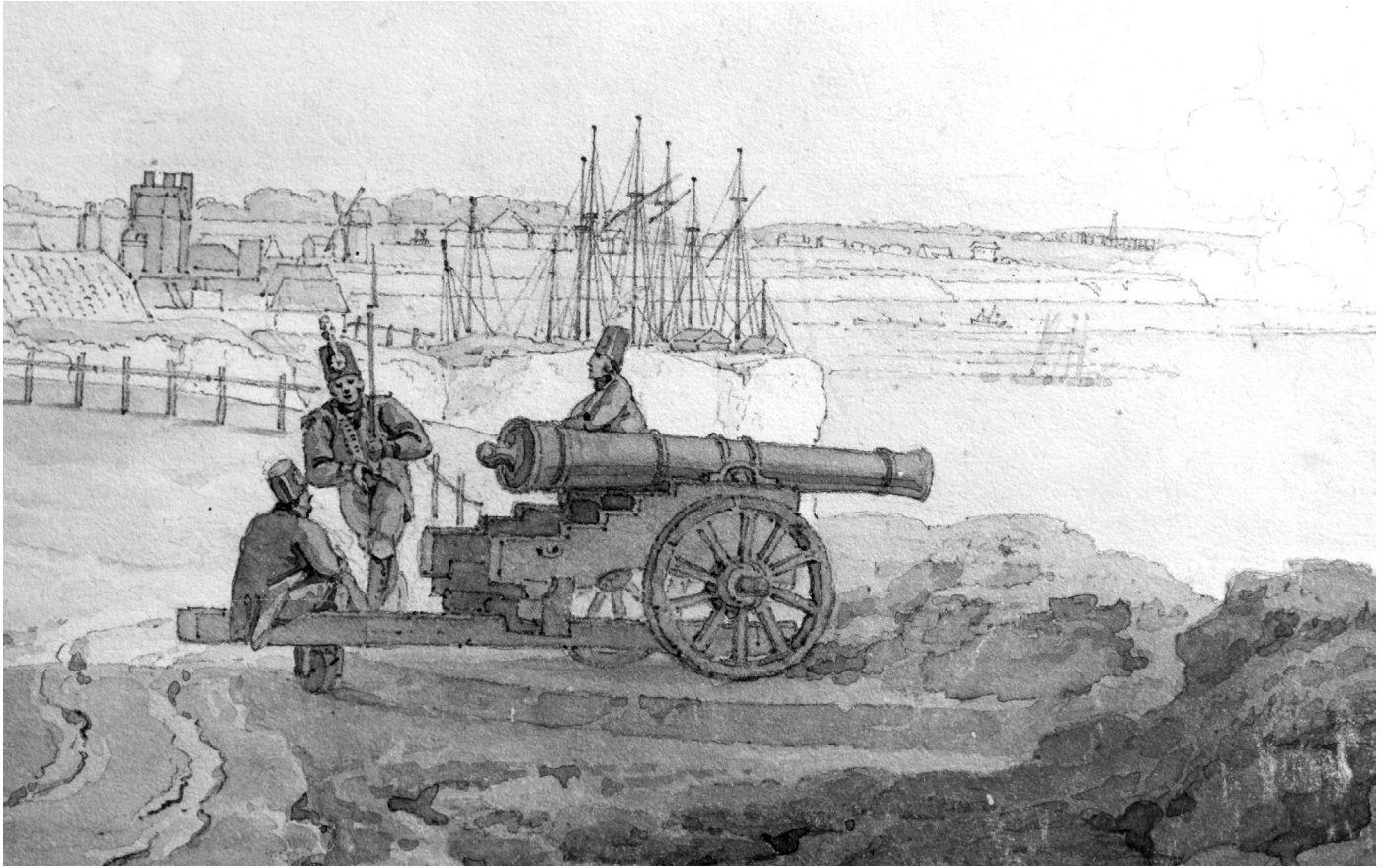
firing of the large Cannon on the Fort, which have not been discharged since the landing of his late Majesty, and an Exhibition of Fireworks on the Parade concluded the joyous Day. During his stay there, he was treated by all Degrees of People, with the greatest Marks of Respect.'⁸

From Dover Wilkes and his daughter travelled to Margate, where the *Kentish Gazette* simply reported that they arrived on Monday, August 6, and that 'they were received with every possible demonstration of joy.'⁹ Fortunately, two more detailed accounts appeared in the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*. The first shows that Margate was just as enthusiastic as Dover:

The inhabitants of Margate took no little pains the other day to testify their joy at the arrival of Mr. Wilkes. It is such a length of time since their old rusty cannon on the fort have been made use of, that it has long been an arch saying amongst them, on being asked if they are ever used, that when their cannon is fired, every window in the town is broke. They were, however, now determined to try the experiment; but six pounds of gunpowder could not be had in the town, nor could even be procured by special messengers from Sandwich or Ramsgate. This disappointment did not, however, abate their patriotic ardour. Six pounds were procured even as far as Canterbury, but it not being recollected that six pounds would only charge the cannon once, the zealous Margatonians sent a second time to Canterbury for a dozen pounds more; and not withstanding the *thunder* of their *dreadful* artillery, lo! (to the great sorrow of all the glaziers) not a pane was shivered in *honour* of the Patriot.¹⁰

This cannon was presumably different to that fired the previous year on the release of Wilkins from jail.¹¹

A fuller report was published in the September 5 issue.¹² This took the form of a letter from a Mr. Charles Easy, staying at Mrs Holme's Boarding House in Margate, to his friend 'Ned', at Oxford. It is hard to avoid the impression that Easy is trying to get a cheap laugh from the goings-on at Margate, but perhaps the letter paints a picture not a million miles from the truth. Easy starts his letter by describing how, when it was heard that 'the Patriot and his Daughter' were to come to Margate, 'the chief inhabitants were summoned by proclamation from the bellman, to assemble at Mitchener's Great Room, to draw up an address, and appoint a speaker, on so memorable an occasion.' Mitchener, at the time, ran the New Inn, described as 'a good Inn and Tavern' with 'a fine Billiard table and Coffee-room.'¹³ The New Inn, originally the Black Horse Inn, at the junction of Duke Street and the Parade, contained the first Assembly Room in Margate, becoming the York Hotel in 1793.¹⁴ Wilkes, however, stayed not at The New Inn, but at the Hotel newly built in Cecil Square in conjunction with



A Cannon on the Fort. Detail from a pencil and wash drawing by Joseph Clarendon Smith, ca 1806

the new assembly rooms;¹² this was known originally as Fox's or Smith's Tavern but was known as the Royal Hotel from 1794 onwards.¹⁴

The speaker chosen to welcome Wilkes to Margate was the Vicar, who, in 1770, was William Harrison. Despite 'his great eloquence in the pulpit,' the choice of the Vicar as a spokesman seems to have been something of a mistake:

when word was brought [to the New Inn] that Mr. Wilkes had just alighted from his carriage at Fox's great parlour, there they repaired in solemn procession; where being arrived, and graciously received, after describing an immense parabola with his left leg, with a hitch at the same time of the opposite heel, as tho' he was troubled with a spavin, the Priest began. 'We think ourselves happy, Great Sir, that you vouchsafe to shed the benign influence of your eyes, though but obliquely, upon the inconsiderable inhabitants of Margate, for there is not an object upon earth worthy of their direct beams: be pleased, Sir, to accept our grateful homage, with that of the rest of our countrymen, and acknowledgements of the many worthy deeds done to this nation by your providence, and being unwilling further to be troublesome, as Tertullus said (Acts xxiv, 4¹⁵) I shall only add an inference or two, and so

conclude.' Nay, indeed he had concluded already, for he could not add one word more. Then the doughty Mr. —, seeing the embarrassment of the poor Parson, stepped forward, and making three obeisances, which corresponded at the same time with as many motions of his bulky bob, and displayed the radiance of his stone stock-buckle, addressed the Patriot in the following terms. 'The Margate people, please you, Sir, are all honest-hearted people, true sons of liberty, and none more so than your most obedient humble servant. I am, Sir, by profession a tallow-chandler; I made no less than one hundred dozen of candles extraordinary the other day;- that glorious day, when you was discharged from your confinement. It would have done your heart good to have seen the general illumination; Margate was all in a blaze; not a house that was not lighted up, excepting one of a shabby scoundrel Tide-waiter [a minor Customs official]! But egad we should have done for him, had it not been for some lukewarm patriots, who made a scruple, forsooth, of knocking a man on the head in the generous cause of liberty! And now, Sir, let me propose it to your Honour to take off the tax from tallow, and to lay it upon glass-windows, it would be attended with public utility, as it would give great encouragement to illumination, on all like occasions and also a greater terror to all such pitiful snivelling fellows, who should refuse to secure their windows on such easy and equitable terms! But, Sir, I have another request

behind, which, might I suggest, without giving offence to your Honour, is, that Margate may be dignified with a Market and a Corporation. This might have been done long ago, I am sensible, by the means of our Lord of the Manor; but he is an Irish Lord, and votes for the Ministry; and now what good can be expected from such people. And let me add, Sir, I am proud, Sir, even at the conceit of addressing your worship, in our fur-gowns, like ourselves, and in a manner befitting the dignity of your Aldermanship. This, and many other favours, we are confident we may hope for from your Highness, when you shall have exchanged your cap of liberty for the cap of maintenance' – He spoke, and bowed, and retired.

There was then something of a free for all: 'Mr. T—ss humbly conceived, that in his worship's wisdom, some way might be found to prevent the monopolies of Cheshire cheese and bacon' and 'Mr. W——n bitterly exclaimed against French barbers and hair-dressers.' Jemmy M——r said that 'he had lately furbished up his *le Marquis de Granby*, from which he hoped for the honour of sousing [pickling in salt or drenching in water] his honour in the sea.' Then a woman who dipped the bathers in the sea, described as 'a sort of a female' stepped forward, 'simpered and courtesy'd,' and then began, 'It comforts my poor heart, almost as much as the preachments of that holy man our Methodist Doctor, to see such pious, good, and virtuous gentlefolk as your Honour.' Since she had 'dipped many fine ladies in my time' she asked 'If you be but pleased to permit me to be dipper to that young lady your daughter.' The offer was accepted: 'The young lady condescendingly bowed, and said her pretensions were so plausible, that she could not but consent to her request.' The next speaker, a fisherman with 'a rough sonorous voice' and 'a thousand expletives, not quite so decent to be committed to writing: 'A ha! What my old cock – my heart of oak,' promised 'I have all my folks to work to night, and if we have not plaguy ill luck indeed, we shall procure a dainty turbot for your Honour's dinner to-morrow.'

The final speaker was 'the gentle Mr. H——l' possibly a reference to Joseph Hall who had begun his career as a circulating library proprietor in 1766, building his Hawley Square library in 1786. During his career, Hall combined the jobs of librarian and bookseller with those of fancy goods dealer and wine merchant, the latter being important for the financial health of the enterprise,¹⁴ helped along, no doubt, by a bit of smuggling. Mr. H——l described 'the declining condition of trade' and complained 'what a horrid encroachment it was upon the liberties of free-born Britons, that he might not take a boat, and launch out a league or two to shake hands with an old acquaintance just come from the East Indies, without being plagued and harassed, and pilfered by those vermin the Excise-

officers and Tide-waiters; and indeed could wish for the indulgence of the government, in permitting some few French gew-gaws to be imported duty-free; by which means a man might gain a reasonable profit to live by; for (continues he) I could prove it to your Honour, that in many articles I now deal in, I do not get 40 per cent'

In reply to all these requests for help, Wilkes 'gave them the highest assurances, that he would take all their grievances under consideration, in order to redress them. And they who were clean enough for that purpose, had the honour to kiss the fair Infanta's hand.'

The letter ends:

But, oh! What powers of eloquence are able to express the tumultuous joy that ensued : - the incessant roar of the rabble at Ephesus was not half so loud, or half so long. Wilkes and Liberty! was the universal cry: no Excise! no Tide-waiters! From the doubling of the Reculver all around the cliffs of both the Forelands, where echo caught the sound, No Tide-waiter! No Excise! and willing wafted it along the winding shores of Sussex.

A few days later Wilkes and his daughter were in Canterbury then travelling on to Tunbridge and Brighton^{8,10} before Wilkes reentered the political fray.

Notes

- 1 Cash, Arthur H. *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty*. Yale University Press, 2006.
- 2 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 3 *Kentish Gazette*, April 21, 1769.
- 4 *Kentish Gazette*, March 18, 1769.
- 5 *Kentish Gazette*, April 21, 1770.
- 6 *Kentish Gazette*, April 17, 1770.
- 7 Wilkes, John. *The correspondence of the late John Wilkes*, Vol. 4, Richard Phillips, London, 1805.
- 8 *Public Advertiser*, August 16, 1770.
- 9 *Kentish Gazette*, August 7, 1770.
- 10 *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, August 25, 1770.
- 11 The number of cannon in Margate varied depending on perceived risk, extra cannon being sent from London when required. In 1779 there were said to be twenty three 18 pounders [*London Evening Post*, August 10, 1779] but in 1780 there were just eight on the Fort [*The New Margate and Ramsgate Guide*, 1780] with two on the pier, and in 1797 all but three eighteen-pounders were removed [*The Margate Guide, by an Inhabitant*, Margate, 1797].
- 12 *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, September 5, 1770.
- 13 *Margate Guide Containing a particular account of Margate*, T. Carnan and F. Newbery jr., 1775.
- 14 Whyman, J. *Aspects of holidaymaking and resort development within the Isle of Thanet, with particular reference to Margate, circa 1736 to circa 1840*. Vol. 1 Arno Press, New York, 1981.
- 15 'But that I be no further tedious to thee, I desire thee of thy clemency to hear us in a few words.'