

Farmers, Nabobs and County Politics in Cornwall, 1832–1868

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Political analyses of English counties in the nineteenth century are still in their infancy. Almost thirty years ago Norman Gash issued a challenge to his fellow historians and students. He emphasised the significance of county studies for the better understanding of national history, explicitly pointing to them as testing grounds for broad generalizations.¹ About the same time others saw the necessity for such investigations, one product of those and later writings being a lively controversy about the elements and functioning of county electoral politics before and after 1832.² Landed magnates, Ultra-Tories, deferential networks, small town dissenters and shopkeepers have been paraded across the electoral stage in attempts to defend or attack sometimes premature generalizations. Undoubtedly the debate has a long way to run.

Recently a new dimension has been added – the mid century political behaviour of the farmers. In particular Travis Crosby and J.R. Fisher have delineated the important nexus between that group and the rural leadership offered by the aristocracy and wealthy gentry.³ Crosby develops his arguments within an assumptive framework of farmer disinclination to overturn 'traditional county leadership', suggesting that in times of rural stress, agriculturists 'wanted merely to spur on those whom they considered their natural leaders'.⁴ Fisher sees greater intransigence among some farmers, contending that when their interests were challenged they were quite capable of directly opposing their social superiors, if they failed to represent the common interest.⁵ Even so, such opposition was shortlived and infrequent. Both Crosby and Fisher develop the premise that yeomen and tenant farmers were usually content to allow the aristocracy and wealthy gentry to act as their spokespersons.

This model of farmer behaviour might be termed 'passive', in the sense that traditional county leadership was rarely defied. It is based upon evidence from several midland and southern counties, including Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Essex and Cornwall. However a

closer examination of rural politics in the last-named of these provides an alternative, 'active' model, one in which farmers repeatedly overshadowed the county's traditional leaders. In order to validate this model what needs to be demonstrated is the way Cornish farmers, especially those in east Cornwall, continually maintained a pivotal position in county politics, always adjusting to changing circumstances.

The politicization of Cornwall's farmers before the first Reform Act has been described elsewhere.⁶ As we shall see, between 1832 and 1841 they moved across the political spectrum, from allies of the Whig-Liberals to supporters of the Conservatives. Divisions within the agriculturists appeared in the mid 1840s, but by the end of that decade protectionist views were once again widely held, so much so that in 1852 the farmers returned Nicholas Kendall, their handpicked nominee for East Cornwall, despite firm opposition from the most powerful of the county's Conservatives. Sixteen years later Kendall, the one-time farmers' friend, was just as decisively ousted by his former supporters, who again thumbed their noses at 'traditional county leadership'. Furthermore the farmers were never single-issue activists, riding to the polls under a protectionist banner. In dissenting Cornwall religious questions were often argued with devastating effect, assisting the agriculturists to displace, rather than spur on or sometimes challenge those who according to the 'passive' model, usually led rural politics.

Until 1826 Cornwall county politics were dominated by a handful of families, among them the Bullers, Carews, Eliots, Edgcumbes, Bassets, St Aubyns and Rashleighs. Some provoked short-lived jealousies as they moved upwards into the group, their mobility often being a consequence of wealth from both agricultural and mining activities, as well as political influence. Some, like the Eliots, Boscawens and Edgcumbes, had enviable borough empires. These were the families who, together with their wealthy gentry allies, were the true Nabobs of Cornish politics – wirepullers skilled at employing every trick in the book in order to impose their will.

For most of the eighteenth century the Nabobs were unchallenged in county politics. Then, after 1774 when William Lemon captured one seat, their hegemony became strained. Even so they hung on until the general election of 1826 which was a disaster for them.⁷ Without proceeding to a poll John Tremayne, one of the two sitting Tories, retired in favour of Edward Pendarves, a reformer. Pendarves was very much the farmers' man; eighteen months earlier at a county by-election he had been pressed by two of their leaders to

nominate for the vacancy. Their action was motivated by the fact that there was every likelihood that the Tories would hold both seats, and they resented it; ‘... the Yeomanry know their rights and strength and will never allow two members to be thrust on them by the aristocracy in this way.’⁸ Pendarves’ eventual election in 1826 was a triumph for a powerful farmer-reformer alliance, and thereafter the Nabobs fought a losing battle.

Their nadir came in 1831. Sir Richard Vyvyan (the sitting Tory) and his running mate Viscount Valletort were soundly beaten by the Whigs Pendarves and Sir Charles Lemon. The election was a calamity for the principal Cornish Tories who found that, despite their wealth and undoubted political influence, they could not win back farmer support. Colman Rashleigh, leader of the reformers, had spent more than twenty years convincing the farmers that they could expect little assistance from the traditional leaders of Cornwall society in publicising their various grievances. Time proved him to be correct, hence the farmer-reformer alliance and, by 1832, the acknowledged political strength of the yeomen and tenant farmers.⁹

This summary of farmer behaviour prior to the First Reform Act suggests at least one departure from the ‘passive’ model. Travis Crosby rightly emphasises Rashleigh’s successful efforts to break down the restrictions on attendance at county meetings.¹⁰ However he overlooks the longer term significance of that alliance which, in 1826 and the following six years, confirmed the supremacy of the farmers and their accomplices over the Nabobs. Under such circumstances it was inconceivable that they would passively yield to an apparently antagonistic group. Instead at meeting after meeting they spoke out for themselves, repeatedly elected the reformer Edward Pendarves (M.P. for West Cornwall 1832–53) and retained a controlling grasp of electoral politics in East Cornwall until the 1880s. Throughout the early years of this ascendancy agricultural protection was merely one among several issues, for example parliamentary reform, catholic emancipation, abolition of negro slavery, payment of tithes, and the various grievances of dissenters. Cornwall’s farmers, then, were no single cause activists.

Following the passage of the Reform Act Cornwall was split into two (Eastern and Western) county divisions. The Eastern, predominantly farming region had approximately 3,500 voters, while the Western, where the mining, agricultural and fishing interests vied with each other, had roughly 1,000 more on the register.¹¹ Each of the divisions returned two members to the House of Commons, and in the decade after 1832 the electoral characteristics of each were soon established. For example West Cornwall was uncontested between

1832 and 1885. Apart from a seven month interlude in 1841–42 when Lord Boscawen Rose, eldest son of the most powerful Cornish Nabob Viscount Falmouth, broke the hegemony, the Conservatives remained seatless. Conversely East Cornwall was vigorously contested in 1837, 1841 and 1852, the Conservatives always holding at least one seat from 1837 until 1868.

Unquestionably the most important event in county electoral politics after 1832 was the shattering of the farmer-reformer alliance. There were many causes, including a rift over protection which developed as a response to two pressures. Firstly the rural Whig landowners like Colman Rashleigh were mostly free-traders who preferred parliamentary candidates with that opinion. Probably a minority of their farmer allies, men loyal to the old alliance and Rashleigh, shared their viewpoint. Among their leaders was Penhallow Peters, an immensely popular figure who often swayed meetings of agriculturists. However there is no doubt that, after 1835, most farmers took the opposite viewpoint. Protection had to be maintained at all costs, and this was the second reason for the disunity.

Other factors, too, prompted a change of allegiance within the ranks of the farmers. Prominent among them was growing disenchantment with Sir William Molesworth, M.P. for East Cornwall 1832–37. Molesworth was a well known radical. Generally his strong free trade opinions were accepted during the euphoria surrounding the passage of the 1832 Reform Act. But in 1835–36 he and Sir Colman Rashleigh (rewarded with a baronetcy for his services to the reform movement) openly disagreed about the former's extreme opinions, among them support for secret ballot, abolition of the hereditary principle in the House of Lords, and Rashleigh's 'whiggery'.¹² Following several bitter public exchanges Molesworth chose to retire at the next general election. Rashleigh then put his political weight behind a new Whig-Liberal candidate, Sir Hussey Vivian (formerly M.P. for Truro) who favoured free-trade. Simultaneously Rashleigh made little attempt to assist the re-election of Sir William Trelawny (Whig-Liberal M.P. for East Cornwall 1832–37), a firm Protectionist.

Another reason for changing farmer allegiances included widespread unhappiness with the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836. Many agriculturists, hoping for instant relief, were not impressed by the government's measure so their grumblings soon assumed a political form. Furthermore there was growing unhappiness at the way the Melbourne Government enforced the provisions of the New Poor Law in north-eastern Cornwall. Sensing an advantage to be gained

from these circumstances the Conservatives brought forward the youthful but very able Lord Eliot to contest the 1837 East Cornwall election: to their delight he topped the poll, leading Vivian and Trelawny.

Such a result encouraged Cornwall's Conservatives, including the once influential Nabobs. It was now apparent that the farmer-reformer alliance had run its course. Radicalism had opened a rift which widened as farmers became more and more disenchanted with the Melbourne Government. Consequently, recognising the farmers' key position in East Cornwall politics, the Conservative party controllers made every effort to woo them. A Conservative Registration Association was set up in 1838, with a layered structure stretching downwards from a central committee, through district agents to parish leaders. Many among the yeomanry were drawn into the network.¹³ Thereafter the Conservatives maintained a handsome superiority at the annual registrations.

This shortlived but politically beneficial revival by them was a vital element in the 1841 victories of Eliot and William Rashleigh junior in East Cornwall, and Lord Boscawen Rose in the Western Division. Nevertheless the successes arose from other factors too. For example protection was paramount among the issues, with many of Cornwall's farmers vigorously expressing their opposition to the Whig-Liberal drift towards free-trade. As well, religious questions played a part. Boscawen Rose's task in West Cornwall was made far easier by Sir Charles Lemon's retirement on the eve of the election – a withdrawal prompted in part by his repeated and very public discomfiture over the Church Rates question. Methodists were thick on the ground in the West. They bitterly resented the rates, which Lemon frequently pledged himself to defend, both in 1835 and 1837. He was certain to be subjected to another barrage of questioning in 1841, just as his dilemma over the Corn Laws (he was a free-trader) would be exposed. Wisely Lemon decided not to tread a political tightrope.¹⁴

Outwardly this Conservative revival in Cornwall was due to many farmers swinging behind protection and the Nabobs speedily taking advantage of the situation, even to the extent of bringing forward a second candidate (Rashleigh) in East Cornwall. But they would never have dared venture upon that step unless they had been certain of farmer support. In other words, they reacted to the farmers' changing allegiance by running a very weak candidate – for Rashleigh was politically naive and totally inexperienced – firm in their conviction that under such circumstances he could not fail. They were right; and the political power of the farmers was clearly demonstrated.

One further comment needs to be made about farmer activism before 1841, and it concerns the divisions within that group in East Cornwall. Certainly dissenters were numerous, particularly in farming districts where of the Methodists, Bible Christians often outnumbered Wesleyans. The former, 'a revivalistic body with a marked holiness emphasis, emerge[d] in areas not penetrated by the Wesleyans in the decade after 1810.'¹⁵ John Rowe has also suggested that in the aftermath of the tithe troubles of the 1820s and early 1830s many Cornish farmers forsook the Church of England for the Bible Christian movement. He then implied that these rural dissenters, hostile to the Church of England (the Church of most Conservative landlords), therefore lost interest in defending protection. Instead their demands centred upon abolition of church rates and relief from a range of dissenting grievances.¹⁶ Hence they supported the radical Molesworth till 1837, then John Trelawny at the next East Cornwall election. Both candidates were free-traders who also were sincerely sympathetic to dissenters' various arguments. Without organisation or expenditure Trelawny received 1600 votes in 1841, in a total poll of 4600. Under those circumstances it is difficult to sustain the argument that there was farmer unanimity on the protectionist issue (various meetings of local agricultural associations and of the Cornwall Agricultural Society after 1837, confirm this), or to deny that religious issues were prominent in farmer politics.¹⁷

II

Following the Conservatives' high point of 1841 when they won three of Cornwall's four county seats, the farmers continued to oscillate across the political spectrum, revealing their power in a variety of ways. In 1847 the hapless William Rashleigh retired because of his public embarrassment by farmer free-traders, then five years later, at the tail-end of a protectionist revival, farmers chose their own candidate and elected him against the wishes of the Nabobs. Repeatedly between 1841 and 1852, Cornwall's 'traditional county leaders' were led a merry dance by those they supposedly headed. In addition religious tensions continued to complicate rural politics. These developments combine in an active model of farmer behaviour very different from that recently suggested.

The closely interwoven nature of various political strands is well illustrated by the trend of events between the 1841 and 1847 general elections. At the beginning of that period, as we have already seen, Cornwall's farmers were split over the merits of a protectionist

policy, however the majority certainly favoured it. Within a year the rupture was again underlined, for Peel's 1842 budget included the elimination of duties on many items and further adjustments to the Corn Laws. It met with a mixed reception from the farmers.¹⁸ Well attended public meetings argued both sides of the tariff question, while the Nabobs remained in the background. Little alteration of this pattern of affairs in Cornwall occurred until late 1845, when the agriculturists once again stepped into the limelight.

William Rashleigh, it will be remembered, had been elected as the second protectionist in 1841. Only when the Nabobs were absolutely certain of majority support from the farmers did they bring him forward. Throughout Peel's government Rashleigh's opinions on the tariff question remained unchanged: agriculture must be protected. At the end of 1845 he was very firmly in the anti-Peel camp, a stand which on the surface at least, would have endeared him to many yeoman and tenant farmers. Why then did Rashleigh decide to retire from his seat early in 1846?

The probable answer lies in circumstances arising from meetings like that at Bodmin in February. There, before a large farmer assembly Rashleigh argued the case for protection, enduring many interjections and howls of opposition in the process. Immediately after he finished Thomas Lidell, a respected tenant farmer from the parish of St Miniver, moved, 'that protection to native industry, and particularly to corn, is absolutely necessary to the well being of the British farmer.'¹⁹ Before he could sit down an amendment was moved, seconded and carried with thunderous applause. The meeting rejected and humiliated Rashleigh, a process which had been going on for some weeks. He and his aristocratic and wealthy gentry backers from 1841 correctly read the political signs. Cornwall's farmers were still divided over protection, however the balance of power had now swung to the free-traders. Therefore Rashleigh had no chance of being re-elected.

This conclusion is supported by the 1847 speeches of the other sitting Conservative, William Carew, who was elected in Lord Eliot's place in 1845. At the by-election Carew, whose family had long been conspicuous among the Nabobs, firmly and unequivocally pledged himself to oppose any reduction in import duties, no matter who proposed them. He was a sincere protectionist. Two years later at the general election he well and truly hedged his political bets. John Tremayne an old Tory county M.P. and one of his party's leaders, proposed Carew on the nomination day. He (Tremayne) criticised Peel's about-face, but then repeated over and over that he knew the farmers were badly divided and therefore would say little about the

virtues of the doomed sliding scale. Seconding Carew's nomination was Edward Archer, a member of the Cornish gentry and a well known free-trader!²⁰ As for Carew, he declared that he disagreed with Peel's measure, hoped that the 'experiment' would succeed, and then explained that he would 'not support protection against the opinions of the legislature at large.'²¹ Clearly he was trimming his sails to the prevailing brèezes, even when he and Thomas Robartes, the Whig-Liberal candidate, faced no opposition.

Carew's stance and Rashleigh's retreat were a reflection of the new balance of farmer opinion, as well as divisions among the Nabobs. In 1841 Lords St Germans and Mt Edgcumbe, G.M. Fortescue, Lord Falmouth, Sir Richard Vyvyan, John Tremayne, William Carew and William Rashleigh senior, the core of that group, swung their considerable weight behind the two Conservatives. By 1847 the unity had fractured. Several of the more eminent protectionists, for example Carew and Tremayne, kept their fingers on the farmers' political pulse and they played no part in promoting or speaking at protectionist meetings. Instead they manoeuvred to retain Carew's seat, reacting warily to the changing opinions of those upon whom success depended.

Religious questions raised further complications, for the farmers were none too pleased with Carew's 1845 vote in favour of the Maynooth grant. That was an action he was not allowed to forget. From the River Tamar in the east to the western extremity of Land's End the county erupted in a series of mass meetings. Even the two Cornish newspapers, the *West Briton* and the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* found themselves united in their opposition to the grant, though on very different grounds.²² Carew couldn't escape the controversy, and his vote was remembered by many farmers for years to come. At the 1847 General Election he was persistently questioned about his religious opinions, a subject which caused him great embarrassment.

East Cornwall's farmers were later angered by a very different religious controversy, one so virulent that it dogged Carew till the end of his active political life in 1874. Hard on the heels of the Maynooth row, in June 1845 Carew, the patron, presented his brother-in-law J. Somers Cocks to the living of the parish of Sheviock, adjoining his seat at Antony. Whether he knew of Cocks' tractarian leanings is uncertain, but within five years the appointment became a political millstone for Carew. Early in 1850 Cocks presided over the dedication of the restored Sheviock church chancel, conducting a service notable for its elaborate rituals.²³ Several months later the *West Briton* published a lengthy report of the occasion, including as well a litany of complaints forwarded by churchwardens

and parishioners to the Bishop of Exeter. Cocks, they believed, was a 'Puseyite'. The Bishop acted firmly; changes were ordered and Cocks reprimanded.²⁴ Such a widely publicised episode meant that Carew's religious opinions came under critical scrutiny by many East Cornwall farmers.

Their religious consciousness was further heightened late in 1848 when two representatives of the British Anti-State Church Association – the forerunner of the Liberation Society – toured Cornwall.²⁵ Particularly in eastern districts they drew large audiences at Baptist, Bible Christian and Methodist New Connexion chapels. The two repeatedly argued for the separation of the Church of England and the government, the unfairness of University restrictions on dissenters, and the principle (state endowment of a church) underlying the Maynooth grants. Their proselytising aroused great enthusiasm among dissenter-farmers in East Cornwall. With ever more frequent complaints of 'Puseyism' in parish churches, together with a revival of strong protectionist sentiments as agriculturists faced yet another downturn in prices, 1849–50 were years of rising social and political tensions. Not surprisingly farmer militancy quickly re-appeared.

Beginning in March 1849 this took the form of a series of meetings throughout East Cornwall. The date is significant because on 1 February the gradual phasing in of free-trade was completed. Thereafter foreign wheat was subject to a mere one shilling per quarter duty. The conjunction of this with falling prices sparked complaints in counties as widely separated as Lincolnshire and Cornwall. When agriculturists gathered at Callington in March, and Liskeard in April, it was tenant farmers who were particularly voluble, along with several of the lesser gentry.²⁶ Adjustments to income tax, or tinkering with the burden of local rates and taxes were not enough, they argued. Instead the farmers insisted that the most desirable solution would be the reversal of free trade.

Robartes, the Liberal county M.P., was criticised for voting against the wishes of his constituents over this and it was William Snell, a vocal tenant farmer, who was reported as saying at Liskeard, 'If Mr Robartes votes dead against them, if he joins Hume, Cobden and Company, why they should not have such a man at all. They would never endure as they had before now that some few squires and noblemen should put their heads together and say you should be represented by us.'²⁷ Snell's final sentence was portentous.

East Cornwall's farmers were now marching together under a familiar banner. At meetings of the Callington Agricultural Association in December 1849, the Wadebridge Farmers' Club in

January 1850, and of the county at Bodmin in February 1850, the farmers unequivocally repeated demands for protection.²⁸ Time and time again it was tenant farmers who were the principal speakers. Soon it became obvious that few landlords of any social or political standing wished to be directly associated with the protectionist movement. Anger against Robartes continually surfaced too, mixed with threats of eviction at the next election.²⁹ Eventually in March 1850 the yeomen and tenant farmers organised the East Cornwall Society for the Protection of Native Industry (E.C.S.P.N.I.), the springboard from which they once again humbled the Nabobs in electoral politics.³⁰

Because of their growing dissatisfaction with Robartes, following a hurried canvass of East Cornwall in August 1850 the farmers decided to run a candidate in harness with William Carew at the next general election. After approaching William Rashleigh junior, who gracefully declined, the E.C.S.P.N.I. then asked a relatively small landowner, Nicholas Kendall, to be their man.³¹ Kendall had frequently opposed free trade in public, was a rigid Anglican, and openly sympathised with the farmers, so he seemed a suitable choice. At first he too declined, but when approached again in March 1851 Kendall agreed to stand – as the second protectionist. Why then did he change his mind?

The answer to that question lies in Kendall's political background, his uneasy relationship with Carew, and his awareness of the strength of farmer activism in East Cornwall. Nicholas Kendall came from a family of squires – lesser gentry who, through the centuries, had sent a number of members to the House of Commons representing the small borough of Lostwithiel. From 1826 he had repeatedly been involved in county elections, initially for Cornwall and later for the Eastern division where he lived. Kendall was outside the Nabob's circle, however he often acted as their unofficial political agent, arranging for William Rashleigh junior to stand in 1841 and persuading Carew to come forward four years later.³² In short he was a vastly experienced local politician who understood as well as anyone the workings of the party. Kendall was also widely known among Cornish farmers, for as Professor Crosby has pointed out he belonged to many of their organisations.³³ Carew, on the other hand, moved in different circles. He was a Nabob, one of the group which for years chose candidates from among its members. Kendall then was a political foreman – Carew a manager.

As for his political opinions, during 1830–31 Kendall was prominent among Cornwall's Ultra-Tories, having absolutely no sympathy with the farmers' reformist aspirations. Nevertheless he saw how

powerful they were, and the way in which they humbled the Nabobs on that and other occasions. In addition to his strong protectionist views, Kendall was also a staunch defender of the Church of England. Thus in political terms, by 1847 he and Carew were on divergent paths, for the latter was luke-warm about protection and in Kendall's opinion had compromised himself over Maynooth.

Their differences were exacerbated in 1850–51, in the course of Lord John Russell's public stand against 'Papal Aggression'. In Cornwall the creation of a catholic hierarchy caused tremendous concern, one result being a full scale county meeting in January 1851, a meeting organised by Kendall because the Nabobs refused to take a public stand on the question.³⁴ Carew absented himself, explaining to Kendall that he was not aware of any Catholic threat, and that he was not prepared to debate the allegedly growing influence of Tractarians at a county meeting.³⁵ The two Conservatives were completely at loggerheads over both subjects. Similarly, there was a growing rift between Carew and the farmers, because of Maynooth and Sheviock. Soon afterwards Kendall agreed to stand for the division as the farmers' candidate.

Unlike most of the Nabobs, Nicholas Kendall knew that 'farmer power' was crucial in East Cornwall. He had repeatedly watched the political pendulum swing according to the farmer's whims, each general election after 1825 proving the point. With the farmers once again flexing their political muscles, Kendall must have realised that he could use the situation to his advantage. After all he was ambitious and well knew the Nabobs' history of electoral innocence when confronted by farmer activism. He was also very aware of Carew's equivocations over protection after 1845, and his flexibility on religious questions. So the strategy probably was that if Carew spurned farmer demands to support protection, Kendall would then offer himself as the only genuine protectionist, and with the help of the E.C.S.P.N.I. win a seat. In the meantime the two men would be allies.

Nothing better illustrates the farmers' political superiority over the Nabobs than events in East Cornwall in 1852. In March Carew and Kendall were invited to address a meeting of the E.C.S.P.N.I. at Liskeard. When at the last moment Carew couldn't attend, he wrote to both Kendall and the secretary of the Society, explaining his views on protection. Carew agreed in principle with the Society, but refused to pledge himself to support the re-imposition of import duties on foreign corn, a stand which did not endear him to his political ally. Convinced of Carew's free trade tendencies, Kendall subsequently misquoted his views to serve his own ends. According

to Kendall Carew had stated that, 'Protection as regards Corn you think to be the Rule, I the exception', therefore he felt entitled to break his pledge.³⁶

Confident of the well organised support of the farmers who had nominated him, and disturbed by Carew's religious opinions, Kendall also based his decision on the farmers' militancy and the weakness of the Nabobs. For them the consequences were disastrous.

Towards the end of May 1852 after a series of spiteful letters, accusations and counter accusations between the supporters of the two Conservatives, Francis Glanville, the chairman of the party's election committee, patched up a shaky reconciliation.³⁷ Afterwards Carew's friends believed his seat was secure; Kendall on the other hand thought that both he and Carew would be elected, therefore the alliance was unnecessary. Even so he did nothing to stop an uneasy canvassing coalition. Consequently Kendall and his friends managed to gain split votes from electors who might otherwise have been ready to plump for Carew, while simultaneously encouraging their own supporters to cast plumpers. Clearly Carew lost by staying in the alliance.

However the most important results were that many of the Nabobs were very unhappy about an alliance with the socially inferior yeomen and tenant farmers, members of the rural middle class with whom they had no wish to work. They also believed that the sitting member (Carew) should not be displaced, and sensed danger from the farmers. But more serious than either of these complications for Carew was the fact that such powerful Conservative landlords as Lord St. Germans and G.M. Fortescue, who believed in the future of free trade, were originally happy to support Robartes and Carew. However when Carew continued his alliance with Kendall, an alliance which explicitly favoured protection they had no alternative but to support Robartes in order to avoid being forced to aid Kendall.³⁸ Other prominent Conservatives such as Lord Falmouth refused to countenance Kendall's opportunistic activities, actively helping Carew and giving passive support to Robartes.³⁹ Sir Thomas Acland and John Tremayne took a similar line. Under the circumstances Carew was doomed, especially as he had alienated the E.C.S.P.N.I., a source of votes he could ill afford to lose. The final result was a slashing victory for Robartes, with Kendall edging Carew into third place.⁴⁰

Not surprisingly the outcome staggered the Nabobs, many of whom still believed that Kendall was the *second* Conservative. They realised too late that they had been deluded by the farmers and their candidate who, under normal circumstances, would never have been

considered as a likely county M.P. As for the farmers they were a group of men for whom they had little political respect. One of the Nabobs, G.M. Fortescue admitted,

... the soreness that is left behind will I fear long long remain and the County will not forget the discreditable exhibition of two Gentlemen nominally coalesced contending against each other with greater abandonment (at least among their supporters) than was exhibited against their opponent!⁴¹

Conversely, the farmers were exultant. Yet again they had shown their political independence from their traditional leaders who, as they had done so often in the past, failed to identify with the prevailing mood of the agricultural interest.

III

Before referring briefly to the longer term outcomes of this controversial episode, it must be emphasised that the farmers' actions in electing Nicholas Kendall were not an unusual aberration in their normal pattern of political behaviour. Rather, his victory is further evidence of a development which began much earlier in the nineteenth century with the forging of the farmer-reformer alliance. Farmer militancy dated from that time, as did the reluctance of the Nabobs to place themselves at the head of the agricultural interest, except in the most favourable circumstances. This is the crux of the 'active' model of political behaviour. The farmers attempted to run their own candidate in 1825, massed behind the reformers until 1835, then played a crucial part in the fortunes of East Cornwall's Conservative M.P.s in 1841 and 1847. Kendall's victory demonstrated once again that political leadership in East Cornwall came from below, rather than above as Fisher and Crosby seem to believe.

In 1852 'traditional county leadership' was preponderantly against Kendall. Among the Nabobs only Earl Mt Edgcumbe and Sir Richard Vyvyan gave their support. The remainder openly assisted Robartes and/or Carew, with several expressing their dislike of an 'alliance' with the farmers. That union was never a reality, for as Kendall explained in 1857 when tensions were still high (Carew was attempting to regain his seat), he had always believed after the supposed reconciliation of May 1852 that he was independent, and therefore had no intention of assisting Carew.⁴² In other words, throughout the weeks before the 1852 election Kendall hunted with

the political hounds (the Nabobs) and ran with the hares – the farmers! The result underlined a continuing reality in East Cornwall politics; the farmers called the tune over their social superiors.

Events in Cornwall also demonstrate that mid-century rural politics were not confined solely to tariff questions. Nicholas Kendall continually exploited various religious controversies after 1844 in order to increase Carew's electoral vulnerability. Protestants and dissenters alike expressed firm disapproval of Carew's pro-Maynooth votes of 1845; Sheviock and the 'Papal aggression' hubbub of 1850 revived the controversy about his religious opinions. Kendall took full advantage of the situation when Carew was the only county member who failed to attend the county meeting in January 1851. The farmers were very much aware of these developments. It was Kendall who organised the county meeting against the catholics, clashed with Carew over his absence, and misrepresented the nature of the meeting to him – much to his concern.

The importance of religious issues in 1852 in East Cornwall may also be judged from Carew's shortlived campaign in 1857 to regain his seat. In his first published address he said that in 1852 a cry had been set up against his religious opinions, therefore he repeated that he opposed extreme views and ultra-ceremonial observances in the Church of England. Later, in March 1857, the same question was raised at a public meeting, so once again Carew had to defend himself.⁴³ Two years later when he contested Liskeard the cries of 'Puseyism', 'Maynooth' and 'Sheviock' were raised, a pattern repeated once more in 1874 when Carew tried unsuccessfully for the last time to be elected for East Cornwall.⁴⁴ Religion was his Achilles heel, and he had to endure some well directed political mud slinging whenever he appeared on the hustings.

Wisely, after July 1852 Cornwall's Conservative wirepullers left Kendall and his farmer supporters alone. Towards the end of that year when corn prices rose, the cry for the reimposition of protection was muted, then disappeared. Kendall quickly adapted to these altered circumstances, becoming a pragmatic and hard working member who was always prepared to represent the agriculturists' interests. Apart from Carew's attempt to regain his seat in 1857 the Nabobs refused to oppose Kendall, although few were happy about his first victory. Sir Richard Vyvyan experienced this from John Tremayne junior; he explained to Kendall in March 1857 that Tremayne had nothing but praise for Kendall's abilities as a member, but 'The extent to which he Tremayne entertained . . . *personal feeling* must have been a sort of mania.' Vyvyan and Tremayne found they shared antipathies to Gladstone, to 'Puseyism' and to

centralisation; they agreed on all points of policy, nevertheless Tremayne considered Vyvyan an enemy because he was Kendall's friend.⁴⁵ Tremayne epitomised the attitude of Carew's supporters. Their antipathy to those who defeated them in 1852 was deep seated. That, in turn, prevented them from re-asserting their 'traditional county leadership'. For the next fifteen years the farmers and Kendall controlled one county seat while Robartes and his Liberal supporters held the other.

One final irony may be used to illustrate the 'active' model of political behaviour by Cornwall's farmers. Two weeks before the 1868 general election Nicholas Kendall retired, because the farmers withdrew their support. He was neglectful of their interests, they believed, as he had been instrumental in increasing the county rates. That was always a sensitive issue with the farmers.⁴⁶ By contrast with 1852 almost all of the Nabobs or their descendants were among his partisans, so Kendall as the lone Conservative candidate found himself supported by those who once would have been considered the 'traditional ruling class'. Opposing him at every public meeting were former allies who made the election campaign a misery for Kendall.⁴⁷ Once more the farmers triumphed. Without opposition two Liberals were elected for the first time since 1835. It was the final proof that, as had been the case since 1826, Cornwall and later East Cornwall politics were patterned by pressure from below, by independent yeomen and tenant farmers whose politics of self-interest were normally pre-eminent.

Notes

I wish to thank Kevin Barry for his comments on earlier drafts.

¹ Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel* (Hassocks, 1977), p. xvii.

² Among the participants have been the late G.S.R. Kitson Clark, the American scholars D.C. Moore and his chief protagonist R.W. Davis, and John Cannon. Three excellent county studies, those by Davis, *Political Change And Continuity 1760–1885: A Buckinghamshire Study*, (Newton Abbot, 1972), R.J. Olney *Lincolnshire Politics 1832–1885* (London, 1973) and T.J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England* (Hassocks, 1975), have shed much light on electoral dynamics.

³ Travis L. Crosby, *English Farmers and the Politics of Protection 1815–52*, (Hassocks, 1977), J.R. Fisher, 'The Limits of Deference: Agricultural Communities in a Mid-Nineteenth Century Election Campaign', *Journal of British Studies*, xxi, 1 (Fall 1981) pp. 90–105.

⁴ Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵ Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁶ Edwin Jaggard, 'The Parliamentary Reform Movement in Cornwall, 1805-1826', *Parliamentary History*, 2 (1983), pp. 113-129.

⁷ For a detailed account of county politics in this period see W.B. Elvins, 'The Reform Movement and County Politics in Cornwall 1809-52', (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1959).

⁸ *West Briton*, 28 Jan. 1825, p. 2.

⁹ At that election four Whig-Liberals were elected for the two Cornish county divisions.

¹⁰ Crosby, op.cit., p. 11.

¹¹ By 1868 the number of electors was, West Cornwall 8168, East Cornwall 8107.

¹² E. Jaggard, 'Patrons, Principles and Parties: Cornwall Politics 1760-1910' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University, St Louis, 1980), pp. 270-72.

¹³ Pelyn (Cornwall), Kendall MSS, Copy of resolutions at Five Lanes Meeting, 27 August, 1838.

¹⁴ Jaggard, thesis, pp. 275-6.

¹⁵ Ian Sellers, *Nineteenth-Century Nonconformity*, (London, 1977), p. 9.

¹⁶ John Rowe, *Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, (Liverpool, 1953), p. 247.

¹⁷ On protection, for example, at the annual meeting of the Cornwall Agricultural Association in June 1839 there was an acrimonious debate between protectionists and free-traders, with Penhallow Peters very prominent. *West Briton*, 7 June 1839, p. 2.

¹⁸ Elvins, op.cit., ch. 9, p. 3.

¹⁹ *West Briton*, 13 Feb. 1846, pp. 2 & 4

²⁰ Ibid. 13 August 1847, p. 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jaggard, thesis, p. 301. The *West Briton* disliked the principle of State endowment, while the *Gazette* was violently anti-catholic.

²³ H. Miles Brown, *The Catholic Revival in Cornish Anglicanism*, (St Winnow, 1980), p. 39.

²⁴ *West Briton*, 18 Oct. 1850, p. 4.

²⁵ Ibid., 13 Oct. 1848, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid., 16 March 1849, p. 2, and 27 April 1849, p. 2.

²⁷ Ibid., 27 April 1849, p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid., 14 Dec. 1849, p. 2, 11 Jan. 1850, p. 1, and 15 Feb. 1850, p. 2.

²⁹ Ibid., 15 Feb. 1850, p. 2.

³⁰ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 14 March 1851, p. 5.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Pelyn (Cornwall), Kendall MSS, undated copy of letter to the Earl of Derby (1867?) summarising his career.

³³ Crosby, op.cit., pp. 174-5.

³⁴ *West Briton*, 10 Jan. 1851, pp. 4-5.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 4. Originally Kendall told Carew that he had no desire to enter the Tractarian controversy, and the topic would not be discussed at the meeting. Carew was taken aback when the address calling the meeting directly referred to this matter. Probably Kendall changed his mind because of the popular mood against Tractarianism.

³⁶ Pelyn (Cornwall), Kendall MSS, Carew to Kendall, 4 March, 1852, and *West Briton*, 9 April 1852, p. 5., in which was published the entire series of letters between the two, and with R. Taylor, secretary of the E.C.S.P.N.I.

³⁷ The meeting was held at Liskeard on 17 May and reported in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 21 May 1852.

³⁸ [D]evon [R]ecord [O]ffice, Acland of Broadclyst MSS, 1148 M/Box 8/4, G.M. Fortescue to Sir Thomas Acland, 10 July 1852, C.C. Hawker to Acland, 7 May 1852, and Acland to Fortescue, 18 July 1852.

³⁹ Elvins, op. cit., ch. 9, p. 33.

⁴⁰ The final result was Robartes 2608 votes, Kendall 1987, Carew 1976.

⁴¹ D.R.O. Acland of Broadclyst MSS, 1148 M/Box 8/4, Fortescue to Acland, 24 July

1852.

⁴² *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 10 April 1857, p. 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13 March 1857, p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 April 1859, p. 5, and reports of Conservative meetings in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* Jan. and Feb. 1874.

⁴⁵ Pelyn (Cornwall) Kendall MSS, Vyvyan to Kendall, 31 March 1857.

⁴⁶ Kendall as Chairman of the County Goal Committee, supported a £100 p.a. increase in the Goal Governor's salary. Throughout his campaign in 1868 he was taunted with this.

⁴⁷ Jaggard, thesis., pp. 354–365. One of Kendall's oldest friends pointed out "... the fact that the old traditional notions of the weight of large "Landowners" in Elections require great modification in the present day when *Tenants* follow the Leaders of their own Class – both from inclination and from class pressure . . ." This had applied long before 1868. Pelyn (Cornwall), Kendall MSS, Deeble Boger to Kendall, 5 August 1868.