

Interest, Patronage and Professionalism: John, 1st Baron Ashburnham, Hastings and the Revenue Services

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It was expected of the Member of Parliament in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that he should perform any number of services for his constituents and for his constituency¹ in general. That well known principle has recently been widely discussed by historians of the early modern political system. The member's role as an expeditor and facilitator of local, provincial and regional business has been stressed by those commentators who have emphasized the role of Parliament as an agency for the conduct of business, rather than as the supposedly natural antagonist of the crown. And that the member needed, in his own interest, to ease his re-election,² to appear as an active, bountiful³ and effective agent for his constituents has been seen by other historians as one of the corollaries of the greatly increased political competition of the reigns of William III and of Anne, the era of the Triennial Act.⁴

Rather less attention has, however, been paid on the one hand to the business which was actually transacted, and, on the other, to the effect on the member, on his constituency and his constituents, of his role as an agent for the conduct of business. The years from 1688 to 1714, on which this essay concentrates, were dominated by war. Obviously the very fact of war meant that constituencies put pressure on their members. Thus, the members for Hastings had to extend the range of services which they performed for individual constituents, their friends, relations and hangers-on. Thus, a note of urgency appears in the solicitation of member by constituent, and of administration by member. Local mariners around Hastings were liable to impressment; M.P.s had to maintain a correspondence, and a personal relationship, with the Admiralty and its officials to secure their exemption or their release from service. And the Admiralty had to be cajoled into providing protection for the local fishing fleet from French privateers. The Board of Ordnance had to be asked for guns

and ammunition so that Hastings could defend itself.⁵ The detention of suspicious travellers was highly desirable, though embarrassing mistakes might sometimes be made. Such matters preoccupied Hastings, as they did seaport towns (and their Members of Parliament) all the way round the English coast from Carlisle to Berwick.

Hastings sought to lighten the fiscal and administrative burdens that were the common lot but, apparently, threatened to hit that one town particularly hard. But Hastings also sought to take advantage of the opportunities which war offered. Among these opportunities, the prospect of employment in the expanding armed forces, or in the fiscal apparatus of the state, loomed large and tempting.

The purpose of this brief paper is to throw light on the relationship of M.P. and patron to constituency and constituents in a time of war. The bias of the sources means that attention will be concentrated on the question of employment, and, in particular, on employment in the revenue services. Evidence will be drawn from the papers of John, 1st Baron Ashburnham; from the papers of the Customs and of the Excise Commissioners; and from the archives of the Borough of Hastings.⁶ I will discuss how the patron was expected to act on his town's behalf before the revenue commissioners, and try to show what the consequences were for the patron and for the town on the one hand, and for the individual officer and for the revenue services on the other. The thesis of the paper is that the position of the patron as intermediary was neither a happy nor an easy one. The contradictory but equally insistent demands of constituents on the one hand and of the state on the other severely curtailed the patron's influence and his freedom to manoeuvre.

Before discussing the relationship of Hastings, through Ashburnham, with the state, I will outline, first, the political position of the Ashburnham family and, second, the procedures for the appointment of Excise officers.

The Ashburnham family seemed to surround Hastings. Though they owned, I think, no property in the borough itself, they had considerable holdings in the vicinity. The estates of the main line of the family were centered around their seat at Ashburnham, just west of Battle. In addition a cadet branch was seated at Broomham Park, Guestling, just out of Hastings on the Rye road. Kinship ties and economic links brought not only the Ashburnham family interest into Hastings, but also drew small market towns like Battle and villages like Brede into its orbit. The family estates and the influence they generated gave sufficient interest, sufficient leverage, to make the Ashburnhams a force to be reckoned with in Hastings politics (a force

which would be on a par with the very differently created interest of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports).

The Ashburnham branch of the family had provided an MP for Hastings since the early seventeenth century. John Ashburnham I sat in the Parliament of 1628, and from November 1640 to February 1644, when his royalist devotion and activism led to his expulsion. John I was the father-in-law of Sir Denny Ashburnham of Guestling, who was, in turn, member for Hastings in 1660, 1661, and 1685. John II, who was to become 1st Baron Ashburnham in 1689, and whose activities form the focus of this paper, was the nephew of John I. Born in 1656, he became member for Hastings in February 1679, was re-elected in October of that year, defeated in 1681, but returned in 1685. James II's Parliament was the only one to which Hastings returned two members of the Ashburnham family. No supporter of James II, yet wary of public commitment, John II floated easily across the barely troubled waters of 1688, to become MP again in February 1689. Coming by ways that are still obscure to the attention of William III, he was raised to the peerage in May of that year. In the 1690s, he lived an essentially private life. Only when his son, William, born in 1679, reached his majority, did Ashburnham re-enter the political arena directly. He put William up as candidate for Hastings in the November 1701 election. The result was a humiliating defeat for Ashburnham and a triumph for John Mounsher, an official in the Portsmouth dockyard. This election provoked Ashburnham into writing the letters, 'brimming with aristocratic spleen',⁷ which have subsequently been widely cited by historians as underlining contemporary insistence on the priority of property (yet the likelihood that voters would ignore it . . .). However, William recovered in the election after Anne's succession and held the seat subsequently (and, in 1702, 1705 and 1708, uncontested) until he succeeded his father in the House of Lords in 1710. Throughout his correspondence, Ashburnham was concerned to stress that the influence and the responsibility belonged to the family as a whole rather than to his son specifically: on several occasions he encouraged the burgesses of Hastings by reminding them that in supporting William, they also gained his own good offices. How Hastings viewed those offices, the advantage they took of them, will be the subject of this paper.

We must now turn from the world of Ashburnham, to the world as seen by the Excise Commissioners from their offices and board room in London. By the late 1690s, the Excise had been under direct government control through a Board of Commissioners for more

than a decade. During that time the whole career structure of the Excise service had become quite formalized. Recommendation, qualification, appointment, apprenticeship, promotion, demotion, dismissal – all were clear and widely understood stages. Thus a would-be Excise officer had his name sent up to the Excise Board. Some men, it is true, presented themselves, in person; others were recommended by friends and relations whose social and political standing was so moderate as hardly to justify our using the term patron of them. But essentially these candidates had their roots firmly in the world of patronage. They were clients. But from the first to have a patron was not sufficient of itself. In the initial paper work was included the candidate's age, marital status and number of children, an assurance that he was a loyal and protestant Englishman, and a certificate (from a serving Excise officer) that he was literate and numerate. Having checked these materials, the Commissioners would issue an order for instruction. The candidate would then be taught the job by an officer, usually near, sometimes actually in, his own home town or village – a Polegate man in Hailsham, for example, or, as we shall see, a man from Hastings in Battle or vice versa. This process of instruction took between three and nine months. When again certified, this time as ready for employment, the candidate's name went again before the Commissioners. It took a deliberate decision by one of the Commissioners to choose a candidate for a particular vacancy from the considerable number of expectants available and qualified for appointment. Patronage clearly played a part here, however difficult it is to uncover all its intricate workings. It may be that a Commissioner was liable too to be impressed by the report of the training officer as to the skills of the trainee. The new appointee became supernumerary, a virtual dog's body, under the direction of the Collector of one of the thirty odd collections into which England and Wales were divided.⁸

Up until this moment, it is clear, the respective roles of patronage and professionalism were finely balanced, in fact equally essential. But subsequently the role of the patron, the role of the master, shrank, and the role of the professional, the role of the manager, grew. This is the heart of the story which follows, the core of the difficulties faced by patrons like Ashburnham.

Clearly, the introduction of a name to the Excise Commissioners and their subsequent decision to follow the recommendation of one of their number and to place a candidate in a vacancy were crucial stages in the process of appointment. So our investigation must proceed with a review of Ashburnham's relationships with the men

who sat on the Excise Commission, before we move on to consider individual cases.

Ashburnham was, one might think, particularly well placed to secure access to the Excise Commissioners at various times in his life. His kinsman and Sussex neighbour, Sir Denny Ashburnham, was a Commissioner from 1665 to 1668 and again, after the Excise had been taken out of farm and was standing on its own feet,⁹ from 1678 to 1689. He was related, too, to Francis Parry, who served on the Commission from 1681 to 1689 and again from 1691 to 1702.¹⁰ Parry he called 'cousin', but I have not been able to discover exactly how they were related. A close acquaintance with one Commissioner was something all members of the political nation would have appreciated: to have had two relations on the Board might have appeared greedy. But, on top of that, Ashburnham's connections with other Commissioners were extensive. In the 1680s, he was evidently on good terms with Dr Charles Davenant, Commissioner from 1678 to 1689.¹¹ In 1702, bemoaning the fact that his 'great friends' Parry and Sir Philip Meadows had left the Board, he could still fall back upon his friendship with Foot Onslow and with Philip Ryley.¹² We might note in passing that Onslow was regarded as the most whiggish of the Commissioners of Anne's reign, whereas Ryley's friendships were mostly with men of tory hue, men who might have been closer to Ashburnham's taste.

Ashburnham's position was not, however, straightforward. Nor, apparently, did he for many years exploit it as he might have done. He was not on the best of terms with Denny Ashburnham through the 1680s. John's estates descended to him from his grandfather (in 1671) and his great uncle (in 1679). Until the late 1680s they were supervised by trustees. Ashburnham did not appreciate the trustees, and he was suspicious of Denny's role in their affairs. Denny was, he thought, 'a great prevaricator, and not to be trusted by me or myne'.¹³ Further, it is unlikely that John had much sympathy with Denny's politics. Shaftesbury may have characterized John as 'base' in 1679, but John's political caution soon asserted itself. In the first and second Exclusion Parliaments he was, at best, anonymous. Danby listed him as in opposition in 1685, but he was discreet about it. Denny, by contrast, was a strenuous placeman; 'doubly vile' in Shaftesbury's eyes; in 1685 'nominated' for the seat at Hastings by James II himself and Mayor under the new charter of that year. Although Denny kept his opinions about the repeal of the Test Act and Penal Laws to himself (as did John) and lost his local offices as a result, his previous commitment may have been more than John

could appreciate. So there is, in John's diary for 1686–7, no reference to any discussion of Excise business with Denny. Nor, in that diary, is there, from the other (demand) end, any reference to requests for places from his Hastings clients and constituents and his Sussex friends. Unfortunately no formal Excise papers exist for this period. But it is clear that the service was not making the impact in the provinces and on patron-constituency relations which it would do by the mid-1690s.

Of Ashburnham's relations with Francis Parry, less is known. Although he, too, was involved in the settlement of Ashburnham's inheritance, Parry was not the object of Ashburnham's suspicion. Nor did Ashburnham's scorn for his brother, George Parry (Ashburnham's hapless Dorset steward), influence his cordial relations with Francis. Francis continued to be used by Ashburnham in legal matters in the 1690s and after.¹⁴ On December 30th 1686, John visited the Excise Office 'to see my Cosen Parry. I stayed with him 2 hours'; in the 1690s, he again records meeting Parry, both socially and on specific Excise business. Parry it was who handled Ashburnham's recommendation of James Paine of Hastings in the summer of 1695, the first positive record we have of Ashburnham as patron of a would-be exciseman.¹⁵

The impression left by the evidence which survives before the mid 1690s is of innocence. Ashburnham portrays himself as, and lives the life of, the dedicated landlord and estate improver. He is not anxious for influence. He is digging in.¹⁶ Nor do we find evidence that dependents and constituents were besieging him to procure employments for them. In an era of peace, like the late 70s and 80s, the corporation of Hastings had less reason to press for armaments and protection. In short, Ashburnham was innocent of the state in its twin roles as extractor of funds and bestower of patronage, roles that would become so crucial and would suffuse so much of public life after the 1690s. And, indeed, the situation by the start of Anne's reign is significantly different. As Ashburnham awoke to the opportunities and burdens represented by the state, so too did the men of Hastings – and of Battle – come to appreciate the attractions of employment in the rapidly expanding state revenue services.¹⁷

We find Ashburnham named explicitly in connection with the instruction and then the employment of three Excise men: James Paine, Jonathan Stephens and Richard Relfe.¹⁸ Each of the three, in his own way, reveals the opportunities presented by the state's service, and its difficulties and pitfalls, for both the exciseman and his patron.

James Paine served as an exciseman for eight years. Instructed in August 1695, at Hastings, he had the kind of undistinguished career that was absolutely indispensable for the Excise service. He was undemanding – of both his patron and the Commissioners – and not inefficient. He kept, apparently, to the rule book. Still a gauger, he died in December 1703. He was then serving at Lindfield in mid Sussex.¹⁹ By then, Paine was sufficiently far from his patron's consciousness to be referred to indifferently and distantly – 'It seems one James Paine . . . ' was how Ashburnham referred to news of his death. Not least the Paine family were not central in Hastings public and civic life, as were several of the families whose involvement with Ashburnham we are about to trace.

The case of Richard Relfe is particularly relevant to the argument about professionalism; the exposed and embarrassing position into which the incompetence of a client could thrust his patron; and the sheer toil which was involved in the maintenance of an interest.

Relfe lived in Battle and married into a Hastings family. He had been born, probably in 1669, in Dallington, hardby Battle. His father, Mr James Relfe, acted as his security when he was seeking employment in the Excise. His other security was Mr Thomas Back of Battle. Both the Relfe and Back families were acquaintances and more of Ashburnham, men of property and of standing in the community, on the fringes of the yeomanry perhaps, men whose families had, at times in the previous century, reached the bottom rung on the ladder of gentility, whilst never consolidating that status, and latterly finding themselves in somewhat reduced circumstances. But they were men of property. Relfe had been invited to dine at Ashburnham; Back to 'come over with his Doggs a hunting'.²⁰

Relfe's order for instruction as an Excise gauger was issued by the Board on May 25th 1703. Ashburnham's request had been passed along to the Board by his London man of business, Whitlock Bulstrode (himself a future Excise Commissioner). The matter had first been raised with Ashburnham by Relfe's father-in-law, John Cooper, in February 1703.²¹ Now Ashburnham was, at that time, already committed to furthering the application of another Hastings man, Jonathan Stephens.²² Reading between the lines, it seems not unlikely that Cooper got the idea of an Excise apprenticeship for his son-in-law from the example of his acquaintance, Stephens. Ashburnham felt somewhat aggrieved at this attempt to jump on the band-wagon. But he did not make any comment on the relative merits or weight of Stephens and Cooper as potential Hastings voters. His concern was less with what Stephens and Cooper might do to aid or hinder his interest, than it was with what he would have to

do on behalf of them. This was not a period of election fever or preparation in Hastings. But fences had to be kept mended, however irritating and time-consuming a matter that might be. Ashburnham's clients, indeed all who thought they could use him, knew that they had to keep the pressure on him. Repeatedly and rather tetchily Ashburnham noted in the spring of 1703 that he was being 'extreamely applied to' for Relfe.²³ Nonetheless, he did – as really he had to – agree to help, though he told Cooper, somewhat frostily, that he hoped Relfe would, while his request was being taken on board, find some useful occupation and not idle his time away. The hints here that Relfe was a rather feckless and irresponsible character were to be proved true in the coming years.

Jonathan Stephens received his order for instruction late in April 1703 and Ashburnham then turned his attention to Relfe's case. His approach to the hard-pressed Bulstrode on this occasion was partly shame-faced. If *you* can succeed in this, 'I promise to be very quiett, very sensible, and very thankfull'. And partly brutally realistic: but if *I* do not succeed, 'I must not expect the first [i.e. quiet], nor of consequence the other two from Hastings'. As Ashburnham's 'great friends', Parry and Meadows, had left the Commission in 1702, he had to leave the matter to Bulstrode. 'I cannot do more, not [sic] better'.²⁴

Bulstrode succeeded. An order of instruction was issued. Relfe was to learn – or, perhaps, fail to learn – the art of gauging in Hastings. After six months, a typical period of instruction, he got his first post, as Supernumerary at Reigate, in Surrey collection. We know from the minute of the appointment that Ashburnham's continuing recommendation helped Relfe in his move from the ranks of the merely qualified to those of the actually employed. Soon Relfe became an officer, and he proceeded to worm his way back towards Hastings, moving to Lewes, before becoming, in April 1704, officer of the Hastings out-ride, stationed at Brede. This was a series of moves characteristic of many an exciseman in the period. The ambitious, the career oriented, may have been willing to serve where their superiors willed. Others sought the comfort and the security (perhaps even the potential bribes, or opportunity to settle scores) of the place they knew. But, within a year of his move to Brede, Relfe had been dismissed. It was reported that he had feigned surveys of those victuallers for whom he was responsible and that the work he had done was inaccurate. Again Ashburnham was called forward. One can imagine him pointing to Relfe's relative inexperience, commending the sobriety of his family, their respectability and responsibility as tenants. The Sussex Excise Collector, Charles Harris, chipped in

with a couple of letters. Relfe's mistakes, he pointed out, were no more than that, errors, certainly not frauds. He had been running a fever too, which threw him out of his stride. So the Board decided to give Relfe another chance. The real test followed this, for he was again posted, this time very much on probation, right away from Hastings, to Foulsham in Norfolk. The task proved too much for him. In August 1705, four months after his restoration, he was once again, and finally dismissed.²⁵

This story is not uncommon. There were many excisemen like James Paine, passing competent, unambitious. They were the backbone of the service. On them, supervisors and collectors could rely. And there were many like Richard Relfe, not really fit for the business, cutting corners in an attempt to keep up with their timetable, their responsibilities. Some were plain incompetent. Some found the physical conditions, the endless tour of victuallers, too much. Others were marginally, perhaps even wholly, corrupt. It is not clear that Relfe was other than incapable, but connivance and corruption lay just round the corner, beckoning the officer, threatening the service.

With Ashburnham's correspondence to set alongside the official record, we can see just how awkward Relfe's behaviour was for his patron, and how state demands and state standards came to dominate the established, customary processes of society. Relfe's behaviour was embarrassing and more. Ashburnham's hope that Relfe 'will behave himselfe soe well that I may have Credit of him'²⁶ was in vain. Relfe proved a costly investment for his patron.

His record, clearly, was dismal. He had not even started off well. On appointment, he had been 'much wanted' by the Surrey Collector, John Whetham,²⁷ but, maddeningly, he had lingered down in Sussex. His tardiness had cost the revenue some £50, claimed Whetham, no doubt storing the name of Relfe away in his memory. Thus early did Relfe almost lose his place, 'before he was warm in it'.²⁸ Later, down at Brede, Relfe had offended the local supervisor, Mr Haddock, and it was he who, picking up the matter of the feigned surveys, had set Relfe's first dismissal in motion. Warned of this impending decision of the Board, Ashburnham had acted rapidly. He wrote to Bulstrode up in London, emphasizing Relfe's illness and adding:

He shall be troublesome noe more, nor will I[write] for him againe if ever he should relapse. He is now recover'd pretty well in all but his affliction for having offended, and for that nothing but the Board can be his Physician.²⁹

But Relfe's dismissal could not be avoided. The task then changed; he must be restored. An appeal went out to Commissioner Ryley. Ashburnham praised Ryley's candour, and then offered him 'an opportunity to exercise soe good a quality', by speaking up for the unfortunate Relfe, 'this poor man'.³⁰ Simultaneously, Ashburnham covered his rear. He went out of his way to stress to his Hastings friends and clients the difficulty of getting an order for the restoration of a dismissed officer: 'the Sin of a false Survey in Gauging is without remission att the Board'.³¹ He wrote to Collector Harris, begging him to intervene. Harris, who had his own as it were extra-mural dealings with Ashburnham, quickly obliged with a brief note. Soon Ashburnham was reporting progress to Bulstrode, noting with some relief that he had received a 'very civil answer' from Ryley.³² In March 1705, a month after dismissal, Ashburnham heard that the Commissioners had agreed to the restoration in principle, but wanted confirmation of the circumstances of the dismissal, and of Relfe's prospects, from Harris. Hedging his bets, Harris had, in his first letter, been short and insufficiently sweet. In his second letter though, he referred to Relfe's illness and fever. With such a letter before the Board, Ashburnham believed, 'I doubt not but he will be restor'd to favor and advantage'.³³

Ashburnham had put himself out for Relfe. He had, too, used Relfe's errors as a warning to other clients and would-be excisemen in Hastings. He could only do so much: they must act by the Commissioners' rules. He hoped that Relfe's restoration would be testimony to his influence, that it would not merely be taken for granted that he was capable of anything and everything a burgess might desire. But his credit with the Excise Board had, in the process, been stretched perilously close to breaking point. When Relfe, in far off Norfolk, was again dismissed, he could do nothing. There Ashburnham had no contacts, either official or unofficial. He told Relfe's father-in-law, John Cooper (who had started the whole business) that he had done all he could. Grimly, he warned that the Board had made it clear (perhaps with an inkling that it would come to such a pass) that 'in case he should againe Relapse, it would not be in their power to serve him any more'.³⁴ Whatever their personal inclinations and pliability, the Commissioners followed their rules. They belonged to the state, not to party, nor to faction, nor to friendship.

Cooper, of course, refused to take the decision as final. He pressed the matter, seemingly endlessly. To each remonstrance, to each entreaty, Ashburnham had to write, essentially excusing his incapacity to alter the outcome. In October 1706, he wrote patiently that:

'the orders of the Treasury to the board of excise are such that I am confident the Commissioners have it not as a thing in their power to restore your son Relfe'.³⁵

This was clever tactically, to blame the Treasury, leaving the impression that were it a matter for the Excise Board alone, they would willingly follow the advice of their good friend Ashburnham. In February 1707, Ashburnham was still wearily writing to another of the Hastings elite, Edward Millward,³⁶ asking him to tell Cooper that the first Commissioner himself, Foot Onslow, had just reiterated what all the parties concerned, he thought, well knew-that:

'what they had done before for Relfe was more than they could justifie, and the [they] had endured much anger for it, and that if they should doe the like any more they might be turn'd out of their office for soe doing'.³⁷

This was what Ashburnham wanted people to think: that the 'blame' such as it was lay with the Treasury. As it happens, this was unlikely. The Excise Commissioners had considerable discretionary powers, of which they made full and, on the whole, good use.

By now, tempers were becoming frayed. The matter of William Ashburnham's re-election for Hastings darkened the horizon. As it happened, he was unopposed, in 1702, 1705 and 1708, but Ashburnham had, nonetheless, to take care. Although Ashburnham would not wish gratuitously to offend Relfe and his Cooper in laws and all their relations, neither could he justify further agitation of the matter. For one thing, he had neither the formal leverage nor the array of informal temptations which might lead the Board to reopen Relfe's case. Nor, more crucially, had he the desire: he needed to conserve his credit with the Excise Board for future occasions, future clients. We do not, alas, know whether Relfe or Cooper were satisfied; nor what happened to Relfe. But for Ashburnham the case was closed.

So Richard Relfe, child of patronage, succumbed to the world of professionalism; so, too, would many like him. Those who survived, thrived, 'got on', were promoted to be supervisors and collectors, largely did so by turning their backs on their patrons and by setting themselves up as experts. Patrons were left with the dregs.

The sad case of Richard Relfe epitomizes one of the problems which Ashburnham shared with similarly placed members of the political elite throughout the land: the liability of the well-meaning (and self-interested) patron to be trapped by the doings of the

incompetent (or, worse, the criminal) client. Relfe was not the only such who had troubled Ashburnham. A couple of years before he had been greatly embarrassed by the attempt of another client to hide matters which were to his discredit (and, potentially disbarred him from the Customs post which he sought).³⁸

A second problem was that of the great competition which came to exist in Hastings, and, indeed, throughout England at this time, for revenue places. We can best see how the consequences of such keen interest were brought home to Ashburnham by looking at his correspondence from late 1703 about a Customs appointment, of a Riding Officer (to prevent the exportation of wool) at Bexhill.

When the serving officer, Pope, died, Ashburnham hoped that his client Robin Brattle might succeed him. He was naively unprepared for, and so severely shaken by, the clamour which the opening provoked in Hastings and its neighbourhood. So fierce was the competition, so earnestly was he lobbied by any number of interested parties, that he was forced to consider retracting his initial recommendation to Godolphin of Brattle. He tried to disguise his retreat by reminding Godolphin that 'onely the man I mentioned' was 'fitt for it', but that it was a retreat the letter made painfully clear:

'there being forty pretenders at least . . . rather than to disoblige soe many . . . I chuse if your Lordship pleases to withdraw my request for Robert Brattle and to leave the thing free'.³⁹

There was 'so much animosity' in the town that he dared not explicitly support Brattle. So he told Hastings attorney Jeremiah Redams that the Lord Treasurer had a list of all the candidates, with details of their qualifications. 'It is in my Lord Treasurer's breast'. And the message went out through the Revd. Cranston to his Hastings friends: I would be glad to procure places for all who want them – if I could. But it is impossible. So, 'I have not interested myself in the least [hardly true, but politic] since I could not oblige the whole town by it'.⁴⁰ At the same time, Ashburnham was being pressed over the appointment of a Salt Officer in the town. Again poor Bulstrode was on the receiving end of his lament – and request:

'You see sir the troublesome instances of a Corporation with their friends when they sett upon having a friendship showed them & of consequence the pain that is given in the last resort of business'.

The whole matter, Ashburnham shrugged, embarrassed, 'is now your province'.⁴¹ No wonder that when, just over three years later, 'poor Robin Brattle' who had, in the meantime, got another local customs post, died, Ashburnham again, and this time finally, put up the shutters.⁴² Cranston, typically, was charged with breaking the news:

'I must intreat you to represent to all my friends that I have promised not to appear at all upon this occasion for anybody to my Lord Treasurer therefore I hope they will hold me excused'.⁴³

In these circumstances, what can we make of Ashburnham's referring in his letter to Godolphin of November 1703 to 'my son's Towne of Hastings'?⁴⁴ It was a proudly defiant, but largely hollow claim. William Ashburnham might have been one of the Hastings MPs, but Hastings belonged to its Corporation, an inbred elite with an eye to the main chance.

Patrons like Ashburnham were being ground between the upper and nether millstones – between the state's revenue commissions, whose expectations were, in this period, high and increasing, and their 'own' clients and constituents. From above came the warning that competence at the very least, professionalism for preference, were desired:

"The Commissioners of Excise are very exact by particular orders from the Treasury in the characters of ability [sic] and fitness in all such persons as are recommended to be gaugers in the Excise, and many are rejected, though highly recommended and supported. I shou'd be concerned if Cooper's son-in-law should be found fault with".⁴⁵

As we have seen, fault *was* found with Cooper's son-in-law. Yet Cooper and his like represented (as I hope the footnotes to this essay have testified) the elite of Hastings. Ashburnham and his son could not afford to antagonize them. Not least, the years from 1694 to 1716 saw a Triennial Act on the statute book: surely its operation was vital in encouraging the pretensions of voters? After all, as Ashburnham told Admiralty Secretary, Josiah Burchett:

"this being a Burghesse Towne I am more than ordinary concerned not to fayle in my engagement".⁴⁶

The matter must be examined from the perspective both of party

conflict and electoral contest, and of the corporation elite as a whole. Not all was plain, two party, political sailing.

It is true that John Pulteney was a whig, and that William Ashburnham was, like his father, a tory. In that sense the representation of Hastings was shared between the parties, and the corporation was divided by party conflict and then reunited by the desire to get as much benefit as possible from the two MPs. It is true, too, that Pulteney and the Ashburnhams could clash. They did so splendidly in the early months of 1702, despite (or, perhaps, because of the failure of) the Ashburnhams' attempt to join forces with Pulteney in the contested election of November 1701.⁴⁷

On the other hand, it was not unknown for Ashburnham and Pulteney to work together. James Paine appears in the Excise Minute Book as recommended by Ashburnham alone, but Ashburnham later acknowledged that this was a joint recommendation.⁴⁸ In similar fashion, differing party labels did not prevent the two Worcester MPs from cooperating to secure benefits for their constituency.⁴⁹ The extent to which consideration of such constituency related behaviour ought to modify impressions of political priority based on the evidence of a scattering of Commons' division lists cannot be discussed here.

There are, too, in Ashburnham's correspondence, few references to *specific* electoral circumstances, to promises of a vote, to acknowledgement of a past vote, or to gratitude for supporting the family interest.⁵⁰

Finally, it is interesting to note that Ashburnham appears to have been most active in soliciting benefits for Hastings during those years of Anne's reign when Pulteney, though still an MP, was in disgrace and out of office. Without any of Pulteney's papers, though, we have no idea of the amount of constituency business that he conducted, say during William's reign.⁵¹

Despite some signs of an electoral preference for tory candidates,⁵² the corporation of Hastings and the local elites of east Sussex sought favours and discharged the responsibilities that went with their elite status, where they could. Thus Thomas Back, probably the son of Relfe's security, was, despite family connections with Ashburnham, instructed in the excise in 1704, recommended by Sir Nicholas Pelham to Commissioner Foot Onslow, both men of whiggish disposition in party political matters. One of Back's securities, in turn, was Mr Daniel Sivier, from another flourishing Battle area family, many of whom were tenants of, and on good terms with, the Ashburnhams.⁵³ Thus the Rev. James Cranston was a mouthpiece of Ashburnham, yet he acted too as security for excisemen instructed at

the desire of Pulteney.⁵⁴ Interestingly, he split his vote in the county elections of 1705 and 1710.

The rage of party undoubtedly existed. There were contested elections for the county of Sussex and, in 1690, 1698, 1701, 1714 and 1715, for the borough of Hastings. But party strife was neither continuous, nor overwhelming, nor all embracing. The cultivation of interest might at times divide a community; but it was the task of MPs to reunite it. This necessitated taking seriously the multifarious requests and demands which the constituency sprouted. Such tasks proved too much for some people. By the end of 1706, Ashburnham was devoting more and more of his time to the improvement of his house and estate in Bedfordshire.⁵⁵ His decision was, I suggest, at least in part prompted by the sheer aggravation, the expenditure of time and energy, of honour, of credit, on the pestering men of Hastings and their kind.

The elite of Hastings was close knit, at once united and (potentially) bitterly divided by ties of kinship, occupation and outlook, ambitions, fears and capacities. Some indication of the complexities of the inter-relationships has been given in the footnotes to this paper. For this elite of freemen and jurats, in a town not noted for its thriving economy or its voracious entrepreneurs, the civic life – the round, the routine, of office-holding, praising, promoting, criticizing, penalizing their fellows – was of fundamental importance. It did not fit easily into the pattern of Westminster, party, politics. It was more inclusive, less cataclysmic. Measurers became meters became pierkeepers became surveyors became overseers. And some such became, in turn, freemen, jurats and mayors. To them, government, and their representatives at Westminster, existed to serve and protect their interests and to break their routines and rituals as rarely as possible. By the time of Marlborough's wars, they were aware of new opportunities for the sustenance of their kind (and sustenance rather than improvement is, I think, the essence here) provided by the rapidly expanding revenue services. For the men of Hastings, the excise service represented merely another form of the old office holding arrangements. The Hastings elite sought instinctively to incorporate the Excise service. The Excise Commissioners (and their fellows on the Customs Board) saw the matter very differently. They tried to separate the Excise service, to make it distinctive. Between Excise Board and borough elite stood the patron. His lot was not, at this time, an easy one.⁵⁶ The question of the relationship between developing administration and political stability, touched on by Sir J.H. Plumb in his Ford lectures on *The Growth of Political Stability*, is clearly important. It was not resolved in the years between

William's arrival and the Treaty of Utrecht, for in that period, administrative developments merely went to underscore the gulf between the world of Westminster and the provincial world, and to emphasize the precarious position of the patron who would try to bridge that gap.

Notes

¹ I am aware that 'constituent' and 'constituency' are anachronisms.

² D.R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, New Haven, 1974, has much analytical material of interest to the historian.

³ In traditional fashion, the Hastings MPs tried to secure their position by leaving marks of their munificence around the town. John Pulteney and Peter Gott saw to the building of a town hall in 1700. The Ashburnhams gave a new mace in 1710. In 1721, Archibald Hutcheson gave some £625 worth of cash and gifts, plus a 'collection of Treatises in relation to the national funds and debts, and several methods of discharging the same, and his most seasonable declarations agains the late South Sea Scheme, & the wicked execution thereof'. These lay, for some time, in the Vestry. T.W. Horsfield, *History .. of .. Sussex*, 1835, i, p. 450-455; F.W. Steer, *The Ashburnham Archives*, Lewes, 1958, p. 63, for various benefactions.

⁴ For Parliament as agency not antagonist, see, e.g., the writings of G.R. Elton. For political competition, see W.A. Speck, *Tory and Whig* . . . 1701-1715, 1970.

⁵ See the entries for Hastings in the *Calendars of State Papers*.

⁶ Ashburnham Mss., East Sussex R.O., Letter Books, Ms.840-847, cover the years 1695-1708 (henceforth cited by call number only); Excise Commissioners' Minute Books, P.R.O., CUST. 47 series; Customs' Establishments, P.R.O., CUST.18; Hastings Borough Archives [=HBA]; Hastings Public Library, Baines Transcripts [=HPL, BT].

⁷ Speck, *Tory and Whig*, p. 4. Ashburnham himself noted grimly that 'a Ropemaker turn'd Courtier is not very Parliamentary' (to James Cranston, 15 Jan 1702, 843/408-9). There is disappointingly little about this election in the HBA.

⁸ A full study of the organization and personnel of the Excise service is in preparation.

⁹ For various aspects of this, see E. Hughes, *Studies in Administration and Finance* . . . , Manchester, 1934; C.D. Chandaman, *The English Public Revenue, 1660-1688*, Oxford, 1975, ch.2.

¹⁰ Francis Parry was private secretary to Sir Robert Southwell and to Sir Peter Wyche in Portugal in the late 1660s and was subsequently himself envoy at Lisbon from 1670 to 1680. A friend of William Blathwayt, he held property at Oakfield, Berkshire. His brother George was Ashburnham's Dorset steward.

¹¹ For Davenant, see D.A.G. Waddell's biographical sketch in the *Economic History Review*, 2nd srs, xi, 1958, p. 279-288. For Ashburnham's dealings with him, see diary entry, 15 July 1687, Ashburnham Mss. 933, and letter, 17 Feb 1700, 842/374.

¹² To W. Bulstrode, himself a future Excise Commissioner, 23 Feb 1703, 844/147. Onslow was Commissioner from 1694-1710, Ryley from 1699-1715. Ashburnham's relationship with Ryley was not so close as to stop him copying a letter to William rather than Philip Ryley.

¹³ Diary entry, 3 Aug 1686, Ashburnham Mss. 931; cf 5 Aug 1686, 'Sr Denny told again abundance of Romances'. Although he rushed to give Denny news of

Rochester's dismissal in 1686, he remained cool thereafter in the privacy of his diary to Denny's attempts to recover money due to him, whilst in public 'I wished him all success'. 'He said he had made an Interest with Mr Brent and the Priests to keep his Office and to gett his money which he believed would cost him (if he could gett it to) £500 bribes'. Diary entries, 23, 28 Dec 1686, 4, 15, 27 Jan 1687, Ashburnham Mss. 932.

¹⁴ 21 Dec 1686, Ashburnham Mss. 932.

¹⁵ 30 Dec 1686, Ashburnham Mss. 932; Ashburnham Mss. 975; letter of 24 Apr 1696, 840/54; CUST.47/1/16.

¹⁶ Ashburnham exerted little direct influence in Hastings during the 1690s. This was primarily because his son, born in 1679, was still under age. It is interesting to note that he did have extensive financial dealings with the Austen family who provided a Hastings MP in the 1690s. They were, in essence, dependent upon his goodwill in extending loans to them. Perhaps he took over the Austen interest when his son was 'ready' to become an MP in 1701. See C. Brooks, 'John, 1st Baron Ashburnham, and the State, c 1688-1710,' *Historical Research*, LX, 1987, pp. 64-79.

¹⁷ The number of Excise officers rose between the 1690s and 1715 from around 1250 to around 2875. Between 1695 and 1707 almost 7,000 men qualified themselves for appointment to the service.

¹⁸ Ashburnham had also aided the career of one Richard Holman: but as that began before 1695, we know little of his circumstances. A Richard Holman had been Chamberlain of Hastings in 1684, freeman in 1685, and was buried in 1698 (HPL, BT, 58, Families: Holman). See Ashburnham to George Parry, 24 Apr 1696, and to Excise Board, 9 July 1697, 840/54, 841/117.

¹⁹ Ashburnham helped Paine to return to Sussex from his first position in far off Grantham, 841/117, 9 July 1697. As to Paine's background: a James Paine became freeman of Hastings in May 1695. I imagine this was our man, added respectability being given to his application. The freeman does not seem to have appeared at any subsequent Assembly meetings. There was, too, a James Paine licensed as an innkeeper, 1694-6. (HPL, BT, 40, Freeman, and 9a, Innkeepers; HBA, C/A(a)2). For Paine's career, see CUST.47/1/16, 30 Aug 1695, and subsequent volumes; 844/332-3, to Bulstrode, 8 Dec 1703.

²⁰ The Relfes had purchased property from the Ashburnhams during the reign of James I; although they had not consolidated their position among the gentry, and James had become Ashburnham's tenant on his manor of Hasleden, James was referred to as 'gent'. (Horsfield, . . . *Sussex*, i, p. 557-8; Ashburnham Mss. 933, 25 Aug 1687; E[ast] S[ussex] R.O., AMS.5742/7). Back was also a 'gent', and an Ashburnham tenant (E.S.R.O., AMS.5684/1 (1679); Ashburnham Mss. 931, 29 Sept 1686; Mss. 933, 10 Nov 1687). His son, Thomas, was another Excise officer (CUST.46/36/71). For Stephens, see below, n.22.

Relfe's application was certified by John Stephens and by the Revd James Cranston. For Stephens, see note 2. Cranston was Rector of Pett, five miles east of Hastings, for thirty six years. His brother-in-law was a Richard Holman of Hastings, who was, I take it, the Holman discussed in n. 18 above. Cranston himself handled some of Ashburnham's Hastings business (e.g., purchasing shares for him in local ships); in return, Ashburnham looked after the Cranstons (e.g., seeking a place at Eton for his son). One of Cranston's daughters married John Collier (1683-1760), town clerk, attorney and five times mayor of Hastings, and, eventually, a key agent for the interest of the Duke of Newcastle. (844/350-1 and 94, 8 Feb 1704 and 19 Nov 1702).

²¹ John Cooper was a shoemaker who became freeman of Hastings in 1693 and was a regular Assembly attendee thereafter. In 1699, he received financial assistance from the town because of 'his incapacity & the Defects of the fishing season'. In 1704, he was

fined 2/6 for fighting. Relfe had married Judith Cooper in July 1702. HBA, C/A(a)2; ESRO, St Clement's Hastings Parish Register Transcripts.

²² Jonathan, who served until March 1708, when he relinquished his position as officer of Battle second out-ride (CUST. 47/55/137), was the brother of John Stephens, who was clearly the active (and aggressive) member of the family. John, a long time freeman and jurat of Hastings, was mayor in 1683/4, 1684, 1698, 1704 and 1705, and Chamberlain in 1699. Ashburnham solicited for him the place of Serjeant of Admiralty for the Cinque Ports (HPL, BT, 40, Freeman; Ashburnham to Deputy Warden, Winchilsea, 12 June 1702, 844/20). Jonathan was unmarried in 1702. The securities for his post were John Stephens and Henry Carleton, whose father was Stephens's brother-in-law. Carleton (Mayor in 1706) was a doctor, who turned his hand too to corn dealing. His father, Thomas Carleton, had remembered in his will a William Beeching (relation, probably father, of another Hastings exciseman, Henry Beeching). Of Henry Carleton's brothers, Thomas, jr., was yet another exciseman (whose vote in the Hastings election of 1689 was disputed – *Journals of the House of Commons*, x, p. 334) while George was Vicar of Ninfield, a living in Ashburnham's gift. Henry's son, another Henry, was reported in 1718 as being 'very desirous of a place'. His desires were gratified: by the time he died in 1771, aged 78, he had been for fifty years Customs Comptroller of Hastings (HPL, BT, 58, Families: Carleton, Collier).

²³ to Bulstrode, 22 Feb 1703, 844/145–6, e.g. Cf. to Cranston, 1 May 1703, 844/183 – 'I doe assure you, that it is not so easy a matter to get an order for one to be instructed for a Gauger in the Excise as John Cooper may imagine, which I would have him made sensible of'. It may be, too, that Cooper had not voted for William Ashburnham in the 1701 election (to Millward, 27 Jan 1702, 843/415).

²⁴ 844/136, 145, 146, 147, 183–4, and 187–8, 6, 23, 23, 23 Feb, 20 Mar, and 18 May 1703.

²⁵ For the formal record: CUST. 47/31/61; 33/87; 36/5; 41/4, 74; 42/4; 44/22.

²⁶ 844/195, 25 May 1703, to 'Frend Cooper'.

²⁷ to Cranston, 18 Nov 1703, 844/318–9.

²⁸ to John Stephens, 9 Dec 1703, 844/333. This is a letter to Stephens about the appointment of his brother Jonathan. He was asked to show this part to Cooper as a warning for Relfe.

²⁹ 14 Feb 1705, 845/103–4.

³⁰ 22 Mar 1705, 845/132.

³¹ to Cranston, 20 Mar 1705, 845/130.

³² 22 Mar 1705, 24 Mar 1705, 845/132, 135.

³³ 24 Mar 1705, 845/136.

³⁴ to Cranston, 21 Aug 1705, 845/225. Again Ashburnham gives instructions to Cranston to make the contents of this letter widely known in Hastings, particularly to Cooper and to Edward Millward.

³⁵ 10 Oct 1706, 846.

³⁶ Millward: 1651–1711, freeman 1681, Mayor, 1686, 1699 and 1700; Captain of the Trained Bands. His will witnessed by John Stephens and by John Collier and by Thomas Lovell (for whom see n. 43). Together with Stephens, he was Hastings' representative to meetings of the Cinque Ports (HBA, C/A (a) 2, 13 Mar 1691). There were at least six generations of Edward Millwards: our man's grandson married Mary Collier (one of the eighteen children of John Collier's second marriage, to Cranston's daughter) and was twenty six times Mayor of Hastings. He took over as Kent coast Customs Surveyor General from his father-in-law. HPL, BT, 58, Families, Millward. Ashburnham appears to have procured a place for him as Gentleman Pensioner (844/352, 17 Feb 1705; inf. from Mr R. O. Bucholz).

³⁷ 847, 18 Feb 1707.

³⁸ Ashburnham reported to Thomas Moore, Mayor of Hastings, that his attempt to secure a Boatman's place for him was threatened by whispers circulated by men of Lord Romney's interest [Romney was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports], that Moore was 'a person dealing in Salt Coales and other Merchandizes & having Shares in trading Vessells and Two Sonnes at Sea that are allsoe traders, all which things have beene arguments made use of against you to shew yr unfitness for the place'. Ashburnham asked Moore to 'send word by the next post if you have dealings in Coal Salt &c'. He clearly feared that Moore did have such dealings and he wanted Moore to suggest 'how I may represent those things to the Commrs'. 15 Jan 1702, 843/407. For the upshot, see below n. 47.

³⁹ 10 Nov 1703, to Godolphin, 844/312.

⁴⁰ to Redams, 23 Nov 1703, 844/324; to Cranston, 23 Nov 1703, 18 Nov 1703, 844/324-5, 318-9. Redams: born 1659, freeman 1691; followed his father as a tailor and as the town's Common Serjeant. Unlike the Carletons, Millwards, and Cranstons, there was no Redams dynasty. HPL, BT, 40, Freeman. The disputed Customs post went to one William Ludgater (*Calendar of Treasury Books*, xix, p. 100, 8 Jan 1704).

⁴¹ 8.12.1703, 844/332-3.

⁴² *Cal. Try. Bks.*, xix, p. 187, 3 Apr 1704 - Riding Officer of Lydd; 845/239, to 'Honest Robin', congratulating him mistakenly on the move from Lydd to Bexhill (not recorded in the *Cal. Try. Bks.*). cf 845/6, to Treasury Solicitor, Capt. William Baker, the organizer of the preventive service, on behalf of Brattle; 845/10, to Thomas Lovell, apologizing for not being able to aid his candidate, as Baker (!) was pre-engaged (29 July and 8 Aug 1704). For the Lovells, see HPL, BT, 58, Families: Lovell. Lovell was agent for Admiralty Droits and Perquisites (*Cal. Try. Bks.*, xix, p. 439, 12 Dec 1704). Brattle, Ludgater and exciseman Jonathan Stephens took the oaths together in Hastings (HBA, C/A(a)2, 27 Apr 1704).

⁴³ 846/4 Jan 1707. Brattle's death obviously affected Ashburnham. He wrote in his copy letter of people anxious to 'succeed poor Robin Brattle in his late Misfortune', subsequently substituting 'office' for 'misfortune'. Brattle was recorded as officer as Lydd when he died (*Cal. Try. Bks.*, xxi, p. 146, 10 Jan 1707).

⁴⁴ 10 Nov 1703, 844/312.

⁴⁵ to Millward, 23 Feb 1703, 844/146.

⁴⁶ 11 Mar 1703, 844/157. Ashburnham is soliciting a place as volunteer in the Navy for the nephew of Excise Collector, Charles Harris. The posting, to HMS Antelope, came at the end of the month (30 Mar 1703, 844/169). Harris was on good terms with Ashburnham. Knowing Ashburnham's penchant for gardening, he had sent him some 'July flower seeds'. He also helped Ashburnham in the purchase of prize wines (11 Mar and 29 July 1703, 844/156, 224). Harris must have made a considerable impact on Hastings. He was an active property developer in the town (HPL, BT, 58, Families, Collier). Sir George Parker, (tory) MP for Sussex, acted as security for him (1 Apr 1701, CUST.47/21/17).

⁴⁷ to Pulteney, 21 Nov 1701, 843/378-9, 383-4. The conflict was over the appointment to a boatman's position in the Customs of Thomas Moore. Ashburnham had rounded up four Treasury Lords. But (whig) Customs Commissioner Arthur Maynwaring cunningly persuaded the Customs Board surreptitiously to evade the Treasury order and to send the advice of Moore's appointment to Hastings via Pulteney, cutting Ashburnham out, 'to deprive me and to gratifye him [Pulteney] in the appearance of having done this piece of service for Mr Mayor' (as Moore then was). To MacBurnye, Ashburnham stoically reported that 'I have beaten the Bush and an other has caught the game'. Yet all was not lost. A week's lobbying and Ashburnham emerged

triumphant with the deputation for Moore, which, thanks to 'a very great Lord my very good Friend', he was able to deliver. This surely is a reference to Godolphin, then waiting in the wings before resuming office. For the episode, see to Cranston, 21 Feb 1702; to MacBurnye, 21 Feb 1702 and 28 Feb 1702, in 843/429–31, 436. This was an anxious time for Ashburnham, keen to put his son's humiliation in the November 1701 election behind him and to consolidate the family interest.

⁴⁸ to Excise Board, 9 July 1697, 841/117.

⁴⁹ For a recommendation coming jointly from Thomas Wyld and Samuel Swift, see CUST.47/33/41, 13 Oct 1703.

⁵⁰ Though see his letter to Bulstrode, 19 Dec 1701, 843/395–6. Ashburnham is attempting to intervene with the Excise Commissioners on behalf of offending officer, John Hussey, 'an elector . . . & has sonnes and other kindred that are soe to, . . . it will secure to my sonne severall votes with the freemen'.

⁵¹ For his disgrace, see H.L. Snyder, ed., *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence* . . . , Oxford, 1975, vol. i. It is unfortunate that Pulteney, despite his long career as an office holder and his close connections with a number of major figures, remains so shadowy a figure. I am grateful to the staff of the History of Parliament Trust for allowing me to see their file on Pulteney.

⁵² Which can be detected in the Sussex county poll books for 1705 (printed in the Sussex Record Society series, iv, 1905), 1708 and 1710 (both in the Brighton Public Library).

⁵³ Sivier was involved as a middleman in the sale of wood from the Battle Abbey estates on the London market. A Sivier was curate at Ashburnham.

⁵⁴ For Thomas Newey, 1705, and for Henry Beeching, 1707 (CUST.47/49/85 and 52/84). Of Newey I know little at present: he was placed as supernumerary at Hertford after qualifying, became officer at Rickmansworth, and in 1709 moved to Ramsgate (CUST. 47/51/45, 54/113). In January 1708 Beeching, on Pulteney's recommendation, became officer at Great Yarmouth; by June he had been discharged as "not capable of doing his duty" (CUST. 47/54/24, 56/88). Beeching's other security was his (?) father, William. He was not a Hastings freeman, but was well known in the borough. From 1688–90, he held an alehouse licence; in 1690, he was left a horse in the will of Thomas Carleton; in 1692, he was cited before the Assembly for stopping up the King's Highway; in 1695, he was himself Highway Surveyor. He was, that is, on terms with, but not himself of, the town elite. See HPL, BT, 58, Families: Beeching, Carleton; and HBA, C/A(a)2, 6 Oct 1692.

⁵⁵ Dr David Hayton has pointed out that the virtual withdrawal of the Bruce family from their Bedfordshire estates at this time left something of a vacuum in the Ampthill area. This may well have provided another motive for the concentration of Ashburnham's attention there.

⁵⁶ This paper has been intended to give a specific illustration of John Cannon's point that 'so small a peerage [could not] have functioned without clients, subordinates and supporters, and it is in the nature of things that such people often acquire power for themselves, sometimes biting the hand that feeds them in the process': *Aristocratic Century*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 124.