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CONTROVERSY IN ELIZABETHAN GLAMORGAN: THE REBUILDING OF CARDIFF BRIDGE

by

PENRY WILLIAMS

IN the late sixteenth century the River Taff divided, on approaching Cardiff, into two branches, of which one ran, as at present, west of Blackfriars Priory, and the other, the more easterly, flowed between the Priory and the Castle. Two bridges spanned the easterly branch of the river, one leading from the west gate of the town, the other apparently connecting the Castle with the Priory. Over the westerly branch of the river one longer bridge carried the road from Cardiff to Cowbridge. In 1575 one of these bridges, probably the last-named, collapsed.¹

The cost of rebuilding or repairing a bridge was heavy, and, although no local authority could be forced to build a bridge where none had been before, the law demanded that existing bridges be preserved. Yet it was not always easy to decide on whom the burden should be laid, for an important bridge might benefit more persons than those who lived in its vicinity. To this problem parliament had provided a simple, but not wholly equitable, answer. By the Statute 22 Henry VIII c.5 bridges within the liberties of a borough were to be maintained by the borough, bridges outside the liberties were to be maintained by the shire.²

Unfortunately this allocation did not prevent disputes. Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire, jointly responsible for Chepstow Bridge, blamed each other for its constant disrepair. Gloucestershire also resented the burden of maintaining Tewkesbury Bridge, situated as it was on the very borders of Worcester-

¹ See Speed's plan of Cardiff in 1610, reproduced and enlarged in J. H. Matthews, *Records of the County Borough of Cardiff* (Cardiff, 1898-1911, 6 vols.), II, pp. 8-9.

² S. & B. Webb, *English Local Government: the Story of the King's Highway* (London, 1920), pp. 85-90.

shire.¹ Nor did the methods of raising money for repairs help to allay ill feeling. In the sixteenth century there was no notion of a general public fund for each locality. Each need, each task had to be covered by its own special levy. When the purpose was unpopular, this aroused a resentment which might have been avoided had the money been drawn from a general fund.²

The town of Cardiff had long felt itself to be over-burdened with the upkeep of its walls, bridges, and harbour-quay. True, the income from two chantries had for some time been devoted to such tasks and had, after a struggle, been preserved from the depredations of the chantry commissioners. But the sum was no more than £10 *per annum*, which did little to meet the £500 or so required for a new bridge; in 1544 and again in 1564 the town had called upon the shire to help with its expenses.³

In 1576, however, the Cardiff authorities were determined to avoid further costs. Insisting that the bridge which had just collapsed lay outside the borough's liberties, they demanded that the whole county of Glamorgan should assume the burden of its rebuilding. The leaders of the shire refused to admit to any such responsibility and an inquiry was held in March, 1576. The jury then sworn found that the bridge lay within the liberties of Cardiff. At this point the shire, prompted perhaps by its sheriff, Sir Edward Mansell of Margam, agreed to raise a voluntary collection of £500 towards the sum of £650 needed for rebuilding. Mansell suggested that Cardiff should ask the Council in the Marches to authorise such a collection, as had been done in the past; and in October, 1576, the town agreed to this course.⁴

Eighteen months later the leaders of the shire found to

¹ W. B. Willcox, *Gloucestershire, a Study in Local Government, 1590-1640* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 108-109. W. Notestein, F. H. Relf, H. Simpson, *Commons Debates, 1621* (New Haven, 1935), III, 171-2; IV, p. 307. Statutes: 18 Elizabeth c.18; 3 James I c.23.

² See Willcox, *loc. cit.*

³ Matthews, *Records of the county borough of Cardiff*, III, pp. 43-46. National Library of Wales, Penrice and Margam MSS (hereafter referred to as P. & M.) no. 5766: lr. to bailiffs of Cardiff.

⁴ P. & M., nos. 3012: lr. to bailiffs of Cardiff (April 28th, 1576); 5765: lr. from bailiffs to Council in Marches. State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth 148/8: brief for the shire (1581). See also P. & M. nos. 3020, 3021, 5766.

their alarm that, in spite of this offer, the town of Cardiff was promoting a bill in parliament to lay upon the county the burden of repairing the bridge. To their annoyance they saw that their own representative in parliament, William Mathew, was chiefly responsible for this bill.

Since Mathew's rôle in the controversy was of central importance, something must be said here of his background and of his relations with the other Glamorgan gentlemen. Eldest son of Sir George Mathew of Radyr, he had married Margaret Herbert, aunt of Sir William Herbert of Swansea and Sir John Herbert of Neath.¹ Closely connected with the Herbert family he was also a near neighbour to the burgesses of Cardiff, since Radyr lies only five miles upstream from the mouth of the Taff. Early in 1576 the animosities surrounding a brawl at Cowbridge had shown something of the friendships and hostilities among the Glamorgan gentry.² On one side were the followers of Edmund Mathew, brother to William, and of the Beaudripps, the Stradlings, and the Herberts. On the other side was the faction of the Mansells, the Carnes, and the Bassetts. Between the two William Mathew set up as a mediator; but his allegiance clearly lay with the first group, and his election to parliament in January, 1577, was probably a triumph for the Herbert party.³

Probably, too, his connection with the Herbert family brought Mathew into contact with the most powerful man in Glamorgan, Henry Herbert, 2nd earl of Pembroke. Lord of Cardiff and of many other Glamorgan lordships, Pembroke was not only the greatest landlord in the county but a man with influential connections at Court. With the help of the earl of Leicester he had recently married Mary, daughter of Sir Henry Sidney, Lord President of Wales, and niece to Leicester himself.⁴ Thus equipped he was able effectively to dominate Glamorgan

¹ G. T. Clark, *Limbus Patrum Morganiae* (London, 1886), pp. 10-11.

² P. & M., nos. L. 11-15: lrs. between William Mathew and Sir Edward Mansell.

³ Mathew is not mentioned in the *Return of Members of Parliament* (1878) in its record of the by-election. He replaced William Herbert, who died in 1576.

⁴ A. Collins, *Letters and Memorials of State* (London, 1746), I, 88-89.

affairs, in which, since he nominated the mayor and bailiffs of Cardiff, he normally protected the interests of that borough.

It is not therefore surprising to find William Mathew following the lead of his Herbert relatives in support of his neighbours, the burgesses of Cardiff, against the shire which had sent him to parliament. According to Sir Edward Mansell, Mathew was acting out of spite, hoping to embroil his enemies, Mansell and the Carnes, in a quarrel with the earl of Pembroke. Probably this was going too far. Admittedly, the dispute over Cardiff Bridge was, to some extent, a continuation of the squabbles between the gentlemen of Glamorgan, since the Herberts and the Mathews stood firm against their old enemies, the Mansells and the Carnes ; but there was also a genuine conflict of interest between shire and borough, which for the moment partly transcended the quarrels of the gentry, and which persuaded Sir Edward Stradling to desert his Herbert allies and support the cause of the shire.

The private motives of either side were not explicitly stated ; both Mathew and Mansell justified their conduct on grounds of public interest. Mathew claimed that the town was too poor to repair the bridge, that the bridge was important to the whole shire, that the money promised by the shire had not been collected, and that the jury which gave a verdict for the shire in 1576 had been far from impartial.¹ In reply the shire contended that Cardiff was not so poor as it claimed, that the main road from Newport to Cowbridge ran through Llandaff, not through Cardiff, and that the bridge was within the town's liberties.² Nevertheless the shire was prepared to collect £500 in order to help ; and we may well ask why, if the shire was willing to pay so much, it objected so vigorously to the proposed bill. The answer is that Cardiff Bridge had become, in the eyes of the shire's leaders, a test case. They argued that there were within the county seventy other bridges which the shire might have to

¹ P. & M., nos. 3013 : E. Mansell to his brother, Antony ; L.25 : Mathew to Mansell and Stradling (June 6th, 1580). State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth, 148/9 : memorandum by Mathew.

² P. & M., nos. 3013 ; 2770 : petition of Glamorgan gentry to Pembroke (April 15th, 1578).

maintain if it lost the struggle against Cardiff: this it could not afford to do.¹

By April, 1578, the issue had been joined, sides taken, and arguments propounded. In that month, under the leadership of Sir Thomas Carne and Sir Edward Mansell, one hundred Glamorgan gentlemen, including among their number Sir Edward Stradling, asked the earl of Pembroke to restrain Cardiff from pursuing its bill and to send the matter to the arbitration of two judges. The gentlemen of the shire were careful to avoid any appearance of opposing the earl's will, pointing out that they had already promised £500, the "rather your Lordship may assure yourself in respect of you". Having tried to win Pembroke to their cause they offered to the town a threat and an inducement: should the burgesses persist with their bill, the shire would build only a wooden bridge; if the town would drop the bill, it should have a bridge of stone.² These tactics failed. After a further petition from the shire in November, 1578, Pembroke replied, during March, 1579, in favour of the town. He asserted that the bridge lay outside the liberties of Cardiff and reprimanded Mansell for hindering the repairs.³

According to Sir Edward Mansell, this reply only served to anger the shire. A new meeting, held at Cowbridge in April, 1579, refused to give any more than the law demanded. However, Mansell, by his own account, persuaded his fellow gentlemen to raise £500 while the judges were being consulted: if the judges found in favour of the shire this sum was to be given to Cardiff as a benevolence. This interpretation of events may not have been strictly accurate, since its author probably wished to reveal himself as a moderating influence between the shire and the borough. Such an appearance was necessary to him when, in November, 1579, he appealed to Sir Henry Sidney, as Lord President of Wales, and to the earl of Leicester, asking them to intercede with Pembroke and promising that he himself would

¹ Ibid., no. 2770.

² Ibid.

³ P. & M. nos. 3590: Pembroke to Glamorgan J.P.s; L.21: Pembroke to Mansell. J. Traherne, *Stradling Correspondence* (London, 1840), no. 61.

persuade his fellows.¹ The spectacle of a leader pointing for tactical reasons to pressure from his angry followers is not, in any age, unusual.

In December, Pembroke and Sidney, after announcing that the judges had spoken in favour of the town, suggested a compromise: for every £100 paid by the shire, the town should contribute £30; if the shire agreed to this, no act of parliament would be promoted.² In effect this solution meant that the shire would pay £500 and the town £150 for a bridge costing £650. Although this laid upon the shire exactly the same burden as it had already offered to shoulder, the plan was only reluctantly accepted: the shire, after insisting that no attempt be made to procure an act of parliament, later complained that the compromise was "more favourable unto the townesmen, than the equitie of their cause did require".³

However, the shire did accept the scheme in principle. Unfortunately, many of its members were less willing in practice: money came in slowly and rebuilding was delayed. William Mathew indignantly blamed Mansell and Stradling for the trouble.⁴ But quite possibly they were innocent, for shortly afterwards the Justices of the Peace, including Mansell and Stradling, wrote to the Lord President of Wales, asking him to summon before the Council in the Marches all "that shall refuse to paie their Benevolence". Their words suggest that they were having genuine difficulty in collecting the money.⁵ This appeal to the Council in the Marches seems to have had little effect, for three months later Sir Edward Stradling, who had been appointed to receive the money, complained that the greater part was still uncollected.⁶

Probably these delays prompted the town of Cardiff to resort once more to parliamentary action. On January 16th, 1581, parliament met for the first time in five years. Three weeks later

¹ P. & M. no. 3585: Mansell to Sidney.

² State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth, 133/8: Sidney and Pembroke to Mansell, printed in *Records of Cardiff*, I, 360.

³ P. & M., no. L.27: draft lr. to Pembroke.

⁴ Ibid., no. L.25: Mathew to Mansell and Stradling (June 6th, 1580).

⁵ A. Collins, *Letters and Memorials of State*, I, 274.

⁶ P. & M. no L.26: Stradling to sheriff and J.P.s (October 9th, 1580).

William Mathew and David Roberts, M.P. for Cardiff, brought in a bill by which the bridge was to be rebuilt within two years and to be kept in repair thereafter, expenses being divided between shire and town in a ratio of five to one.¹ The bill was slightly less favourable to the gentry of the shire than the previous arrangement had been ; but their main complaint was against the principle and not against the detail. Rather belatedly, on February 24th, they moved into action by petitioning Leicester, Pembroke, Sidney, and the Privy Council. Somewhat bitterly they reminded Pembroke of his promise to restrain the town from procuring a statute. They asked Sidney to persuade Pembroke to "commaunde the knight of our shire and Burges of Parliament for this contrey and towne that they desist from preferringe that bill". They begged the Privy Council to further their request that the Queen should veto the bill, and spoke of Pembroke's promise that no bill should be brought forward.²

All these efforts failed ; the bill passed its third reading in the Commons on March 2nd, and its third reading in the Lords on March 9th. It became law at the end of the session.³

Neither of the chief protagonists gained much from the struggle. Sir Edward Mansell, having seen his cause defeated, incurred the wrath of the earl of Pembroke. Forced onto the defensive in 1581, Mansell had revealed Pembroke's assurance that no statute would be procured. Pembroke, always most sensitive about his honour, felt himself to have been publicly accused of breaking a promise. The earl of Leicester, asked by Mansell to intercede, replied that "I cannot but marveyle that a man of your experience would take such a course as you have done". Mansell claimed that he had done no more than remind Pembroke of a promise which he thought had been forgotten, and contended that William Mathew had throughout the affair attempted to discredit

¹ *Commons Journal* for February 8th, 1581. Statute : 23 Elizabeth c.11.

² P. & M., nos. 1821 : petition to Sidney ; 1822 : petition to Privy Council ; L.27 : lr. to Pembroke ; 3011 : petition to Queen ; L.28 : Mansell to Leicester.

³ *Commons Journal* for February 20th, March 2nd, 1581. *Lords Journal*, for March 4th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 1581.

him. This defence seems to have weighed little with Pembroke's friends.¹

William Mathew, who might have expected some reward for his support of the winning side, had little more success than Mansell. Not unnaturally, the gentlemen of Glamorgan resented the desertion of their member, to whom they had paid 5/- a day, one shilling more than the usual rate.² At the next election, in 1584, they returned a different candidate, one who was willing to serve without wages. Significantly, this new knight of the shire was Robert Sidney, brother-in-law to the earl of Pembroke. No doubt the shire, dispensing with Mathew, was anxious to gain the support of its greatest magnate.³ The unfortunate Mathew, who had lost the affections of his fellow gentry, did not long remain in the good graces of Pembroke. In the winter of 1586-7, he and Sir Edward Stradling accused the Cardiff bailiffs of complicity with pirates.⁴ Pembroke, as usual, took the side of the bailiffs and sharply reprimanded Mathew and Stradling. At about the same time the Council in the Marches, of which Pembroke was then President, accused Mathew of concealing a murder. Mathew replied by charging Pembroke with partiality, a move which led to his imprisonment by the Privy Council. He died in gaol a few months later.⁵

The controversy over Cardiff Bridge had no momentous consequences for Glamorgan history. Its importance lies rather in its illustration of the nature and the structure of the county's politics. In an age when local ties and loyalties were deeply felt, towns and counties fought hard to maintain their interests. Boroughs struggled against the central government to preserve their political privileges, against other boroughs to uphold their economic position, and against the county authorities to lessen

¹ P. & M., nos. L.44: Sir William Herbert of St. Julians to Mansell; L.29: Leicester to Mansell (June 17th, 1581).

² State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth, 148/8: brief for the shire. J. E. Neale, *Elizabethan House of Commons* (London, 1949), p. 321.

³ J. Traherne, *Stradling Correspondence*, nos. 15, 68. Neale, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

⁴ J. Traherne, *Stradling Correspondence*, nos. 70, 229.

⁵ State Papers, Domestic, Elizabeth, 200/19, 24, 32, 43, 51; 204/7; 211/16. *Acts of the Privy Council*, XV, 88, 232.

their share of local expenditure. Of this last type of conflict the Cardiff Bridge incident provides a useful example. But the story contains other elements, for, superimposed upon the tussle of shire and borough, was the pattern of rivalry between the Glamorgan gentry: William Mathew's alliance with the Herberts and his hostility to Mansell partly determined the course of the struggle.

The events of 1581 throw some light upon the county's attitude to parliament. The leaders of the shire believed that William Mathew was paid 5/- a day to represent their interests; and they regarded his desertion of their cause with shocked indignation. Bereft of a voice in the Commons, they turned for help to the earl of Pembroke, the earl of Leicester, the Lord President of Wales, and the Privy Council. In so doing they demonstrated their conviction that the House of Commons could most easily be influenced through the great courtiers and the organs of central government.

Finally, the whole story reflects the earl of Pembroke's power in Glamorgan. The leaders of the shire dared not, until the last weeks of the struggle, oppose his will. When they offered £500 to Cardiff, they claimed that the gift was made out of respect for Pembroke. When Cardiff seemed rigid, they appealed to Pembroke for mediation. When Pembroke seemed unsympathetic, they asked Leicester and Sidney to persuade him. Clearly his was the dominating influence in the county.