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Widespread and flagrant corruption at elections

OVER recent weeks, whilst others have enjoyed watching the party leaders' TV debates and reading the party manifestos, I've ploughed through a series of voluminous 19th century government papers to learn more about how our Victorian forefathers voted.

The Select Committee Report on the Parliamentary elections of 1852, as an example, runs to over 500 pages, and gives detailed evidence from 300 witnesses. To make sense of these reports we must remember that, until the 1870s, voting was conducted in public, at the town hustings. Individual votes were then recorded in a poll book and published for anyone to read.

Prior to universal suffrage (1918 for men and a decade later

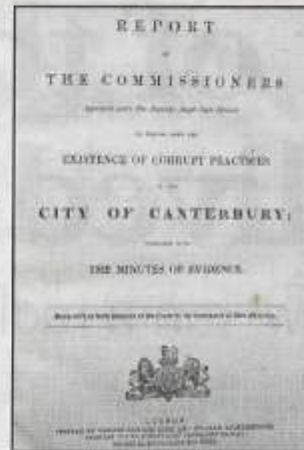
Way We Were



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for women), Canterbury voters consisted of "freemen" appointed by the borough, and "householders" who qualified by virtue of owning property above a particular value. In brief, it appears that candidates, agents, voters and the council engaged in widespread corruption.

The cheating started well ahead of each election, with parties offering inducements to freemen disguised as Christmas gifts – half a guinea a head was

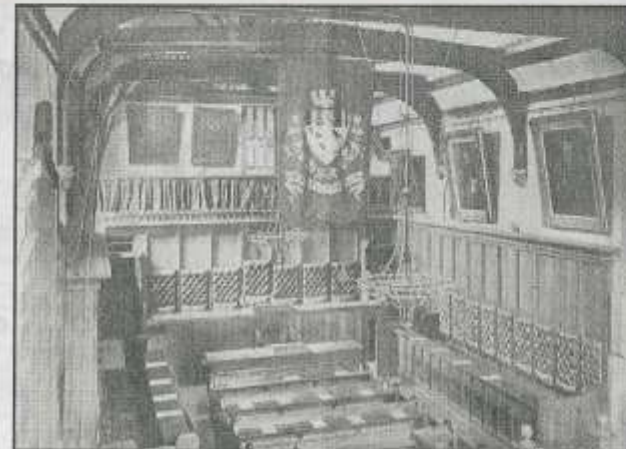


DAMNING REPORT: 500 pages of corrupt practice

apparently the going rate in the early 19th century. Preparatory work also included the appointment of additional freemen. In 1830 the city council admitted over 300 new freemen during the run-up to the Parliamentary election – only a fifth of these new voters were city residents.

The immediate run-up to each election brought bribery in many forms. Some candidates and agents walked the streets with pockets full of guineas to win over voters.

A more subtle approach was the widespread Canterbury "coloured ticket" scheme, under which parties issued tickets that could be redeemed elsewhere for



NO SECRET BALLOT: Inside the Guildhall – where our forefathers cast their votes in public

drink, food, or services, or simply for paying off debts. The report on the 1852 election names nearly 100 individuals who were shown to have accepted or paid out bribes. The numbers for 1847 were double this.

Alongside outright bribery, voters took advantage of offers of temporary employment at rates way above the norm. Obvious targets included those running the ticket systems, the canvassing clerks and the large numbers of "messengers".

How odd that almost all the Canterbury messengers turn out to have been city freemen and therefore voters. Where the candidate couldn't give the voter

paid employment, he could offer work wherever he had influence – government departments, the city council, or professional colleagues.

The Commissioners noted that the Liberal activist Alderman Brent had in this way secured government posts for each of his four sons and an appointment as Deputy Lieutenant for himself.

Candidates also found ways of neutralising the votes of those who belonged to the opposing camp. James Busher, a carpenter in Northgate supporting the Conservatives, explained to the Commissioners that at each election the Liberals got him drunk on rum and abducted him, to keep him from voting.



SIGN OF THE TIMES: All that's left of the Guildhall site

I have a suspicion James looked forward to election time.

In other cases, those heavily involved in corruption were paid to destroy incriminating records and to stay away from the city when evidence was taken by Commissioners – reports refer to these as activists who "need a change of air".

Due to this chicanery, Commissioners found that the outcome of the 1852 elections had been heavily affected by bribery, and were therefore void. The declared winners, Conservatives Henry Pumptre Gipps and Henry Butler-Johnstone lost their seats.