

'For Wilkes and Liberty!'

250th Anniversary of the Election of John Wilkes as Member of Parliament for Aylesbury

This year 2007 will see the 250th Anniversary of the election of John Wilkes as the Member of Parliament for Aylesbury. He was one of the most colourful figures in English political history and 1757 saw the beginning of his career, here in Aylesbury. He is remembered as the father of the British free press and a defender of civil and political liberties.



Statue of John Wilkes by James Butler in Fetter Lane in the City of London

In the spring of 1757, an opportunity arose for Wilkes to stand for Parliament when William Pitt, a future first minister and brother-in-law of Richard Grenville, Earl Temple of Stowe, decided he preferred to represent Bath, instead of Oakhampton. This left a vacancy in Devon which was taken up by one of the two MP's for Aylesbury, Thomas Potter, a rich "libertine" son of the late Archbishop of Canterbury. Potter had introduced Wilkes to various debaucheries and the Hellfire Club – but that's another story! So there was to be a by-election at Aylesbury.

By that time, Wilkes had become a pillar of the community in Aylesbury. In 1752, five years after his marriage, his in-laws, the Mead and Sherbrooke families, had amended the marriage

agreement and allowed Wilkes 'husband's rights' to the ownership of the property his wife Mary had brought to the marriage. He had been made High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 1754; he was also a Justice of the Peace, a churchwarden, a feoffee of the Grammar School, and a trustee of the turnpike. He had built up a large collection of books in his library at Prebendal House (almost half were in Latin, Greek and French), carried out improvements on the house and gardens, and lived the public life of an educated gentleman. Although not a scientist, he was elected a member of the Royal Society; became a member of the Sublime Society of Beef Steaks (a men's club notorious for indecent conversation) and a governor of the Foundling Hospital in London.

But by 1756 his marriage was failing and the Mead-Sherbrookes were tired of worrying about their daredevil, profligate, playboy son-in-law. They negotiated a separation agreement, with Wilkes gaining all the property and also custody of his 6 year-old daughter Polly. In the winter of 1757, his wife Mary had refused to nurse their daughter, when following the new practice of preventative inoculation, she had contracted smallpox – and this had finally severed their relationship.

In April 1757 Wilkes began his campaign for the by-election. John Dell of the Aylesbury brewing family became his agent, despite being one of the four returning officers who counted the vote, and who had been appointed by Wilkes. (As the owner of Prebendal House, Wilkes had the right to appoint two returning officers).

There was one additional candidate for the election: Edward Willes, the brother of the other Aylesbury MP John Willes. Wilkes and his supporters embarked on a canvas, calling on about 400 voters (all men of property which returned at least £40 per annum) to ask how they would vote. But many residents also farmed rented land, and voted as their landlords wished, more out of courtesy than fear. But the voting was public and they prudently chose not to risk their livelihood. So the Willes voters were ignored and Wilkes concentrated on those who might vote for him.

At that time in many constituencies votes were exchanged for favours or hard cash. Aylesbury was a notoriously venal constituency where votes were sold to the candidate who would pay most. Bribes varied between £1 and £5, substantial sums at a time when an annual income for a voter might be £60 or £70. This "lending" continued until the 1832 Reform Act ended such practices.

About a quarter of the electors had promised, without any financial incentive, to vote for Wilkes, but he also paid out a guinea (£1.05) apiece to some 250 "mercenaries". Then Edward Willes withdrew from the contest, and on 6 July 1757 the returning officers announced that John Wilkes had been elected an MP for Aylesbury without opposition. He rushed off to the White Hart adjacent to the new Shire Hall where he had organised a feast for his voters.

On 1 December 1757 Wilkes took his seat in the House of Commons and his amazing political career began: a career that would see him arrested, outlawed, banished, tried, imprisoned, engaged in duels, and elected Lord Mayor of London. His personal history was a long fight for liberty: it secured a free press; the right to privacy; freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures, and the prohibition of non-specific arrest warrants.

S Mitchell

This article draws heavily from an excellent and very readable new biography of John Wilkes, written by Professor Emeritus Arthur H Cash of the State University of New York. The book John Wilkes - the Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty by Arthur H Cash, published by Yale University Press, is in stock at Waterstone's bookshop in Friars Square.

Aylesbury Town Council is planning an event early in July to mark this important landmark in the history of the Town. The anniversary coincides with the annual Roald Dahl festival, based at the Bucks Museum, and the two celebrations should provide a fascinating experience for residents and visitors alike.