

Title: The “anti-reform” Worcester plate – a time capsule from 1832
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Kate Banner, Curatorial and Exhibitions Assistant at Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum

The “anti-reform” Worcester plate – a time capsule from 1832

The period of 1830-1832 in Britain was marked by waves of protests and disturbances demanding reform of the electoral system. In 1830 the existing arrangements, which dated back to the rule of Henry VI, enfranchised less than three percent of the population, mostly significant land and property owners. With a few exceptions, women, much of the middle class and all the working-class were excluded from the process. Exacerbating this, access to power through the distribution of County and Borough MPs was very uneven, with rural towns and areas overrepresented compared to the massive urban populations in the new industrialising cities, such as Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. In the early nineteenth century, this ‘borough-mongering’ as it was known had chiefly benefited the Tory Party in elections, so they and their staunchly anti-reforming leader the Duke of Wellington were virulently opposed to expanding the franchise or reforming the ‘rotten boroughs’. Their parliamentary opponents the Whig Party saw an opportunity in the 1830s to take advantage of popular protest demanding reform to further their electoral interests.

The borough of Worcester was not considered to be ‘rotten’ as such, as it had a freeman franchise, that is, voting rights were given to those declared ‘freemen’ of the city. Freemen were created by inheritance (by being the son of an existing freeman) or won either by purchase or gift from the Corporation. However, in Worcester the unelected Corporation was dominated by anti-reform Tories leading to the creation of honorary freemen with the specific intention of swaying elections. This more indirect corruption allowed party prejudice to be effectively built-in to the electoral system, though in practice the Corporation usually tried to ensure power was shared by one Tory and one Whig MP, a strategy aimed at preventing a contest.

The first signs of popular organisation over the issue of electoral reform in the period in England appeared in January 1830 with the formation of the Birmingham Political Union (BPU), founded by banker Thomas Attwood. Led by printer and businessman Issac Arrowsmith, the nearby Worcester Political Union (WPU) followed shortly after, and by the end of 1830 the WPU had 200 subscribers and was actively agitating for reform. The trend continued into 1831 with the WPU membership growing rapidly to around 1,500 with public meetings drawing more than 10,000.¹ It is estimated that 23 Political Unions were formed in 1830, and by June 1832 there were more than a hundred in Britain. Despite this rapid growth in protest organisations, the social movement for reform harboured several significant contradictions, most notably the question of universal (male) suffrage. Many Whig reformers were opposed to working men getting the vote and splits in the movement began to appear in some areas as the limited content of the Reform Bills became known.

The First Reform Bill which proposed expanding the franchise and reorganising seats, nevertheless, fell very far short of universal (male) suffrage. The Bill was launched in the aftermath of the collapse of Wellington’s Tory government in November 1830. The new prime minister, Lord Grey, was a Whig reformer and in March 1831 the Bill was put to the Commons where it was narrowly defeated. This led to a general election between April and June which, despite the inequities of ‘borough-mongering’, produced a Whig landslide. This created the opportunity to launch the Second Reform Bill which passed through the Commons by a significant majority in September 1831. However, one more hurdle remained, the House of Lords. On October 8th 1831 the Bill was defeated in the Lords leading to a wave of protests and disturbances sweeping across Britain and Ireland. The ‘reform riots’ began with serious disorder in the East Midlands (Derby, Nottingham) followed by unrest in towns in the West and

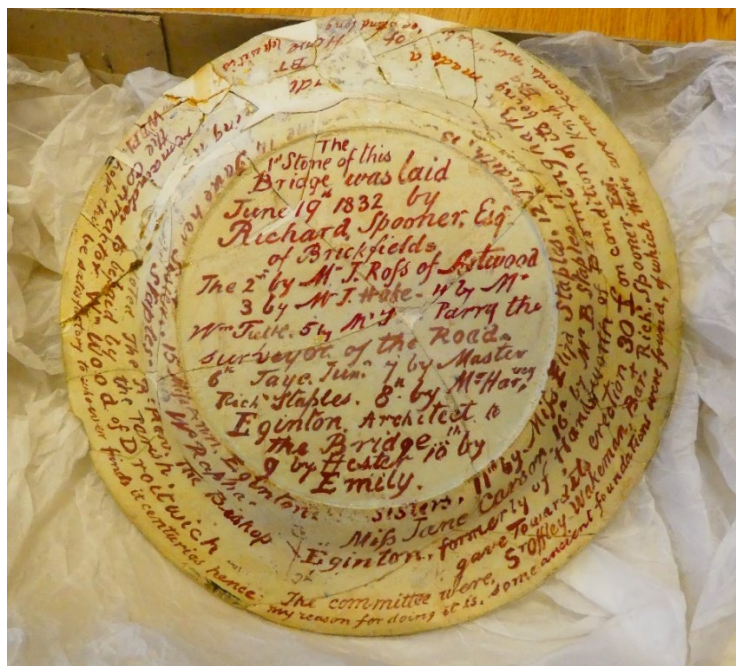
¹ Lopatin, Nancy D. *Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999) pp. 59-60.

Southwest. The wave reached its apogee in Bristol at the end of October with the most serious riot in nineteenth century Britain.

As part of our [research project](#) we are investigating the reform-related riot in Worcester in early November 1831. We were informed by the Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum that they had an interesting artifact related to the reform struggles of the period. The artifact, a reassembled ceramic plate, was covered in text front and back and is shown below:



The 'anti-reform' plate (front)



The 'anti-reform' plate (back)

The centre-front of the plate is transcribed thus:

*Great rejoicings have taken place lately in England on passing the Reform Bill.
I say it will be the ruin of the country.
What say you Mr Finder of this plate about it?*

The writing on the circumference of the plate has largely rubbed off apart from the rather confusing fragment:

...take a good ½ pint of wine...

In contrast the back of the plate is full of personal information:

*The 1st stone of this Bridge was laid June 19th 1832 by Richard Spooner, Esq. of
Brickfields
The 2nd stone by M J Ross of Astwood
3 by Mr J Hake
4 by Mr William {Julle}²
5 by Mr J- Parry the surveyor of the road
6 by Faye {Tison}
7 by Mr Master Rich Staples
8 by Harvey Eginton, Architect to the Bridge
9th by Hester and the 10th by Emily*

And from the inside bottom anticlockwise:

*11 by Miss Eliza Staples 12 by Judith, 13 {---} 14 Jane her sister 15 Miss Ann
Eginton {---} sisters
16th by Mr B Staples, 17th {----} Staples 20 W Rapha {----} Miss Jane Carson
The Right Reverend the Bishop Eginton, formerly of Handsworth Birmingham
{---} gave towards its erection £30 on condition of its being made a {---} remainder
to be paid by the parish.
the contractor William Wood of Droitwich
We hope this will be satisfactory to whoever finds it centuries hence
My reasons for doing it is some ancient foundations were found of which there
are no records. Many think {-} stand long {-} left as it {iw}.
The committee were Sir Offley Wakeman, Bar, Rich Spooner Esq.*

Our research suggests the plate was laid in the foundations of a new bridge being built over the Worcester and Birmingham Canal at Bilford.³ A contemporary newspaper article dated 30th June 1832 refers to this location and notes that during its construction the workmen discovered the ancient structure of a previously unknown water mill. This was dated back to the period of the dissolution of the Monasteries.⁴ Referring to the transcription above, the “ancient foundations” verifies the location as being the Bilford bridge. A second validation comes from the date with the newspaper claiming it

² Curly brackets {} designate that we are unsure of the transcription, or it is unclear.

³ This would be where the B4482 Bilford Road crosses the canal, close to Perdiswell Leisure Centre. The current bridge appears to have replaced the one being constructed in 1832.

⁴ *Worcester Herald* 30 June 1832.

to be Wednesday 20th June, whilst the plate states Tuesday 19th June, suggesting the former was in error. However, the dates are close enough to substantiate the event.



The current Bilford Bridge⁵

Of the people named on the back of the plate we can insert some details. Harvey Eginton 'Architect to the Bridge', his two sisters Hesther and Emily and their father William Raphael Eginton are listed as the 8th, 9th, 10th and 20th stone layers respectively. The Eginton family were renowned for several generations as skilled glass painters and stainers. Harvey went onto design and restore many churches in the region. At the time of his early death in 1849 he held the posts of county surveyor and senior architect for the construction of church buildings in the Worcester district.⁶ Although there don't seem to be many details of a 'Bishop Eginton' the connection to Handsworth in Birmingham is viable as the Eginton family were closely associated with the area.⁷ Sir Offley (Penbury) Wakeman, 2nd Baronet (1799-1858) lived at the nearby Perdiswell Hall, constructed by his father Sir Henry Wakeman in 1788 and demolished in 1956.⁸ The unexceptional Offley Wakeman was probably present at the stone laying as his 'seat' of Perdiswell adjoined the Parish of Claines, the funders of the bridge.⁹

Of particular interest, however, is Richard Spooner (1783-1864), the first stone-layer. He is undoubtedly the son of Issac Spooner the West Midlands nail manufacturer and banker. Spooner (jnr) initially followed in his father's footsteps by helping run the family's banking and manufacturing business. The former, a joint concern with the Attwood family, brought him into contact with their son Thomas, the subsequent founder of the Birmingham Political Union. Richard Spooner and Thomas Attwood became friends, political associates, and financial theorists. In 1812 they were both chosen to represent Birmingham in meetings with parliamentary committees. Spooner made several

⁵ Photograph courtesy of Roger Kidd (creative commons licence <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>) SO8557: Bilford Bridge and Top Lock in Worcester *geograph* <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/5675789?mobile=0>.

⁶ *The Builder* Vol. VII No. 317 3 March 1849.

⁷ Francis Eginton *Handsworth History: Its story and its people* <https://www.astonbrook-through-astonmanor.co.uk/handsworthhistory.co.uk/eginton.html>

⁸ WAKEMAN of Perdiswell Hall, Worcs *The Baronetage of England, Ireland, Nova Scotia, Great Britain and the United Kingdom* <http://www.leighrayment.com/baronetage/baronetsW1.htm>; Perdiswell Park, Worcester Parks & Gardens <https://www.parksandgardens.org/places/perdiswell-park>.

⁹ *Worcester Herald* 30 June 1832.

attempts to become an MP, most notably in the Boroughbridge election of 1820 but despite his electoral victory, he and his fellow winning candidate were deposed on the charge of bribery by an election committee a few months later. Although Richard Spooner was regarded as being a 'radical reformer' and he spoke at meetings with Thomas Attwood in Birmingham in 1829 which were precursors to the formation of the BPU, he took an anti-reform position in the 1830s and rapidly gravitated towards the ultra-conservative section of the Tory party.¹⁰ In an obituary from 1864 Spooner was described as a "Tory of the most bigoted type".¹¹

It is thus possible that the comment "I say it [reform] will be the ruin of the country" on the front of the plate could have come from the pen of Spooner or one of his supporters at the Bridge ceremony. A well-used argument touted by anti-reformers in the period was that the widening of the franchise would bring in voters who had less allegiance to the country, as they owned less property, let alone the largely propertyless working classes. This in turn, they argued, would lead to social chaos and financial ruin. This approach, based on fear, was aided to some extent by the riots and disturbances of autumn 1831 when anti-reform Lords, Bishops and Tory voters were selected for 'rough music' and in some cases attacks on their property or person. Of course, it was pointed out in response by many pro-reformers that the vast majority of those who took part in these protests were peaceful and those that weren't, were disenfranchised in any case. In parliament reforming MPs turned the Tory argument on its head by emphasising the threat of riots and revolution if the Third (Great) Reform Bill *was not passed*. The Worcester reform riot of November 1831 may have played a part in fomenting the reactionary views of Spooner and his anti-reforming associates which are exposed on the plate. Several of them were targeted by the crowd during the disturbance and it is likely that Spooner would have known about the event in some detail.

Another intriguing aspect of the Worcester reform riot relating to Richard Spooner is that several historians have argued that one of the causes of the riot was "Wetherell's marriage into a Worcester family".¹² Sir Charles Wetherell, MP, had been both Solicitor-General and Attorney-General for England and Wales in the Tory governments of the 1820s and was the Recorder for Bristol in 1831. Wetherell was (in)famous for his reactionary views and "violent speeches" against Catholic emancipation and he was a staunch anti-reformer, apparently making even the Duke of Wellington feel uncomfortable. Like Spooner, Wetherell became associated with the 'Ultra-tories' the 'extreme right wing' of British and Irish politics in the period.¹³ It was Wetherell's controversial and contested visit to Bristol on 29th October 1831 that had initiated three days of the most violent rioting in the nineteenth century. The Worcester reform riot followed less than a week later. So, to what marriage were the Worcester 'historians' referring? More than 25 years before the reform crises, in 1804, Richard Spooner married Charlotte Wetherell, Charles Wetherell's sister making them brothers-in-law. This is probably the "marriage into a Worcester family" that the historians were proposing as a causal factor. This link to the Worcester reform riot certainly deserves further investigation.

On the front of the plate, the line "Great rejoicings have taken place lately in England on passing the Reform Bill" refers to the events of June 1832. The Third Reform Bill had been launched in December

¹⁰ Fisher, D.R. "Spooner, Richard (1783-1864), of Glindon House, Warws." *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1820-1832*, ed. D.R. Fisher (Cambridge: CUP, 2009); *Birmingham Daily Post* 25 November 1864.

¹¹ *Stamford Mercury* 2 December 1864.

¹² LoPatin, *Political Unions* p. 97. LoPatin refers to Gwilliam, H. W. *Old Worcester, People and Places* (Bromsgrove, 1983) and Whitehead, David *Book of Worcester: The story of the City's Past* (Buckingham, 1976) for this argument.

¹³ Sack, James J. "Ultra tories (act. 1827–1834)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 24 May. 2008; Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.

1831, passed through the Commons with large majorities in March 1832, and survived the uncertainties of the “Days of May” when Lord Grey resigned as Prime Minister and Wellington was restored to power. This period of intense agitation across Britain was described by historian of Worcester, Tuberville:

*May 14—The Worcester Political Union met on the resignation of ministers, because the Lords, for a second time, refused to accept the principle of the Reform Bill. The meeting was held in Pitchcroft, at five p.m., and the members of the Union went in procession to the grand stand, headed by flags and a band. It is said that at least 10,000 persons were present.*¹⁴

Fear of the consequences of a third failure of the Bill in the Lords after the ‘lessons’ of the reform protests and riots of autumn 1831 put Grey back into power once again and forced Wellington to relent and persuade the anti-reform Tory Lords to back down. The Bill was finally given Royal assent on 7th June 1832. Even though the Great Reform Act, as it became known, fell very short of the demands for universal suffrage, there was great “rejoicing” when it finally passed. The reference on the plate was probably to the celebrations in Worcester on 11th and 12th June, a week or so before the plate was laid in the Bilford Bridge. Tuberville described them thus:

*On the Monday [11 June] the Worcester Political Union, with a great number of lodges and friendly societies, paraded the streets with banners and music, and in the evening dined at various public houses. On the Tuesday [12 June] evening the city was illuminated — the lighting up being almost universal, and costly transparencies and devices in many instances adopted.*¹⁵

The anti-reform plate was clearly placed in the foundations of the Bilford bridge in 1832 as a kind of ‘time-capsule’, passing onto future generations the feelings of some of those close to the political and social crises of the 1830s. As such, it presents us with some fascinating evidence and poses us with a question:

What say you Mr Finder of this plate about it?

Postscript

Research into the Worcester “anti-reform plate” is far from complete and we would urge local historians to add to our initial investigations. We would like to thank Kate Banner, Curatorial and Exhibitions Assistant at Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum for allowing us to view the artifact. We would also encourage interested parties to contact the museum in advance of a visit in order to see the plate.

Roger Ball, Jane Askew and Steve Poole (University of West of England, April 2022)

¹⁴ Tuberville, T. C. *Worcestershire in the Nineteenth Century: A Complete Digest of Facts Occurring in the County since the Commencement of the year 1800* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1852) p. 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 277.