

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Cirencester Contest

by R. W. Jennings
1973, Vol. 92, 157-168

© The Society and the Author(s)

The Cirencester Contest and its Aftermath

By R. W. JENNINGS

IN his book, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, Sir Lewis Namier classified Cirencester as a borough where the patron, Lord Bathurst, had 'influence'. He quotes an eighteenth century definition of 'influence' as '... that degree of weight ... which accustoms the electors on all vacancies to expect the recommendation of a candidate by the patron and induces them, either from fear, from private interest, or from incapacity to oppose, because he is so recommended, to adopt him'.¹ Lord Bathurst would have agreed. 'I am vastly mistaken', he wrote in 1762 to Joshua Parry, minister to the Presbyterian congregation in Cirencester, 'if my nomination for one member should miscarry'. 'If it should prove otherwise', he added, 'it is time for me to find another place of residence'.²

When Queen Anne died in 1714, the Tories were put out into the political wilderness; among their number was Allen, Lord Bathurst, who retired to Oakley Grove, the Cirencester estate which his father, Sir Benjamin Bathurst, had bought in 1694.³ There he built a new house and advised by his friend, Alexander Pope, he created the rides and vistas which make Cirencester Park such a magnificent example of eighteenth-century landscaping.

A Bathurst usually held one of the two seats for Cirencester; the three sons of Sir Benjamin Bathurst, Allen, Lord Bathurst, and his two younger brothers, Peter and Benjamin, were all members of Parliament at various times between 1705 and 1734. If no son were available to take the seat there was a son-in-law. Frances, eldest daughter of Allen Bathurst, married first William Woodhouse, and then James Whitshed; both served in turn as members for Cirencester

¹ Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 2nd edn, 1963), 143.

² All the quotations from letters written to and by Lord Bathurst are taken, unless stated otherwise, from: Charles Henry Parry, *A Memoir of the Reverend Joshua Parry* (London, 1872). Allen Bathurst was raised to the peerage in 1711 and created an earl in 1772; throughout this account he is referred to as Lord Bathurst.

³ Biographical details of the Bathurst family are taken from: *The Dictionary of National Biography*; Kippis, *Biographia Britannica* (2nd edn, 1780); W. R. Williams, *The Parliamentary History of the County of Gloucestershire* (Hereford, 1898).

—the former for two years before his death, the latter for eight years, keeping the seat warm, as it were, for Lord Apsley, the eldest son of Henry, the second earl. In 1783 Lord Apsley came of age and stepped into the position kindly vacated for him by his uncle.

All pervading as was the Bathurst presence, it could not in any way be interpreted as complete direction of the town's politics nor, to quote the Commons Committee again, 'that absolute authority in a borough which enables the patron to command the return . . .'.⁴ Not that the Bathursts did not use their considerable wealth in attempts 'to command the return'. The attempt of Benjamin Bathurst to gain one of the town's two seats in Parliament was excused by an anonymous voter who felt that he ought to reap some advantage 'to recompense the expence of about £150,000 which his Father has laid out among us'.⁵ In a letter to Joshua Parry a Mr Edmund Urmston, another son-in-law to Lord Bathurst, wrote in 1768; 'Apropos of elections, I, the other day, was complaining to a plain, hard-headed artificer of the ingratitude of the borough of Cirencester where Lord Bathurst had laid out near £50,000'.⁶ This was in 1787 after a series of contested elections beginning with the Cirencester Contest of 1754.

Direct control was not possible for two main reasons. Firstly, Cirencester was a 'potwalloper' constituency. Successive resolutions of the House of Commons established that the right to vote belonged to every householder who had lived in the town for at least six months and was not receiving alms.⁷ Secondly, Bathurst influence extended over only one of the two seats. The second was often held by a representative of the Masters, the other considerable landed family in the town, whose house and estate were situated in what had been the precincts of the Augustinian abbey, dissolved by Henry VIII, and given to the Masters by Elizabeth I.

A Master had represented the town well before the Bathursts arrived. Thomas Master served as an M.P. for 35 years; after his retirement in 1747 his son succeeded to the seat but for two years only. When the son died his place was filled by a Mr Coxe, who 'offered himself on Mr. Master's interest'.

'The old and natural interest of this town'—representation of this interest was claimed as the justification of the Master family's control of the seat that was not held by the Bathurst representative.

⁴ Namier, *op. cit.*, 143.

⁵ Samuel Rudder, *The Cirencester Contest containing all the letters, Papers, Verses, Songs etc., relative to the election* (Cirencester, 1753).

⁶ Parry, *op. cit.*, 283.

⁷ Samuel Rudder, *The History of the Ancient Town of Cirencester* (2nd edn, Cirencester 1800), part II, 'The Modern and Present State', 205–208.

THE CIRENCESTER CONTEST

The bitter feelings that gave vent to the invective and violence that led up to the 1754 election—'the Cirencester Contest'—were aroused by what was interpreted as a Bathurst plot to gain control of both seats. This was denied by Lord Bathurst who claimed that he 'never desired more than to have one representative for Cirencester and to have a partner that should be of the same side of the question'. He also disclaimed any 'long standing agreement' between the two families.

The political 'infighting' that went on in Cirencester during 1753 is described in two contemporary accounts which also include various broadsheets and ballads that the contest gave rise to.⁸ *The Cirencester Contest* was published by Samuel Rudder—a Bathurst supporter. *A View of the Cirencester Contest by a Friend to the Old Interest* (Coxe and Master) was published by G. Hill and intended as a reply to 'the mercenary views of a bookseller'.⁹ That Rudder was working for the Bathurst interest is confirmed by a letter from Henry Bathurst to Joshua Parry in which Henry expresses his desire to have a petition prepared by Mr Rudder 'to prevent the Wes [the opposition] from sending up one of their inflammatory performances'. This letter, with others in a correspondence between Earl Bathurst and Parry, appears in *A Memoir of the Rev. Joshua Parry*, which is useful for the light it throws on the above relationship as well as the political situation in Cirencester.

The sequence of events on which Rudder and Hill are agreed was as follows. Following the death in 1749 of Thomas Master, son of the M.P. who had represented Cirencester since 1712, John Coxe, also the son of a former member, took over the seat; he had acquired the manor of Lower Lypiatt by marriage and owned other large estates in the county. He was disliked, but was elected. Rudder has it that another man would have been preferred, but does not give his name—'no encouragement from gent whom they would have chosen'. However by 1753 feeling against Coxe had risen to such an extent that 'they could never think of him any more for the town'. In the same year Coxe's fellow member Henry Bathurst was seeking re-election. As Rudder puts it, Lord Bathurst wanted the Hon. Mr Henry Bathurst chosen and 'for his part did not desire any more'. What stirred up trouble, however, was a rumour that Lord Bathurst's eldest son, Benjamin, was also proposing to present himself as a candidate.¹⁰ 'Some persons in the town' ('fifteen of the principal

⁸ A feature of the Cirencester Contest is the early start to the canvass.

⁹ Rudder, *The Cirencester Contest* . . . ; *A View of the Cirencester Contest by a Friend to the Old Interest* (Coxe and Master) (Cirencester, G. Hill, [1753]).

¹⁰ Benjamin Bathurst had represented Gloucestershire in Parliament from 1734 to 1741.

electors' according to Hill) 'went to Lord Bathurst and proposed to him to chuse either of his sons, provided his Lordship would engage he should join any gentleman they should name and be at equal expense with him'. Lord Bathurst however rejected the proposal, 'which reduced him to the same footing with a stranger'; further, if Benjamin, who lived not far from the town at Siddington, wished to be a candidate then that was his own affair and his lordship had 'no right to interfere'. Thus repulsed, the deputation turned to Mr Benjamin himself whom they invited to a meeting at Lord Bathurst's at 10 a.m. on Thursday, 9 August 1773. But before that meeting could take place Lord Bathurst saw Benjamin—'finding him determined to stand unless Mr. Coxe would decline—which Lord Bathurst had reason to think would not be agreed to—his lordship sent to some of his friends to be ready to canvas as soon as the aforesaid conference should be over'.

In fact Benjamin Bathurst 'put himself forward to the elections' on the very day when the meeting was to be held. All ideas of a compromise were now forgotten. As Rudder writes—'his Lordship had not kept his Promise and he might declare for his two candidates as soon as he pleased and that they should do the same'. Benjamin Bathurst did however make an appearance in the market place to shew his Desire of preserving the Peace of the Town', where he offered Mr Coxe and his friends to decline if he would do the same and they could nominate 'some neighbourhood gentleman agreeable to the town'. This appeal was rejected. From Bath where he had been recuperating after illness Mr Master wrote announcing his support for Mr Coxe *singly*, thus giving the lie to rumours that he had given his interest to Mr Coxe and Henry Bathurst. Hill, in mentioning this also suggests that it was Master's absence from the town that provided the Bathursts with a lucky opportunity to push forward their plans. Three or four days after Master wrote to Coxe on 27 August Henry Bathurst made his entry into the town—and trouble began. This is how Rudder describes the riot that occurred: 'The whole Day was spent in collecting together the Mob on the other side, and People were posted on the Tower to observe what Route he took. The Design of this appear'd evidently afterwards; for when the Company came as far as to the End of St. Thomas-Street they were insulted and abused as they pass'd along by some of the Ring-leaders of the said Mob, who were detatch'd for that Purpose from the main Body. And 'tis observable that the nearer they came to the Mob's Head-Quarters which were at the Abby-Door, the Attack became the more general, till at last, heated with Liquor and abetted by several Gentlemen of

the Town and Country, they became daring enough to seize the Horses Bridles and beat the Riders. They were furnished with Handbells and armed with Dirt and Stones which they plentifully dispensed without Regard either to Rank or Character. Many were thrown from their Horses, and one of them so cruelly beaten that his Life was despaired of, but is since recovered'. Accompanying Henry Bathurst were his brother-in-law, the Chancellor of the diocese of Gloucester, the Revd James Benson, and John Benson, curate of Rendcomb, as well as the Squire of Kemble and the rector of Sapperton, Robert Parsons.

The opposition rejected the charge that the violence was pre-meditated: 'It plainly appears that when the invitation was given to Mr. Master's Friends to drink the Health of their Old Friend and Fellow Townsman at Mrs. Master's we knew not that Mr. H. and his cavalcade would pass by the Abby for how is it possible we could imagine or even guess that when (as we are informed) he went only to the Wood House to be escorted back again he would chuse to make that his way into the Market Place?'¹¹

Whereas Mr Coxe made his entry without the least insult or interruption, Henry Bathurst himself was a prime target. He complained: 'I was myself insulted by a drunken Fellow with an empty pot rioting under the nose of my Horse'. And again, 'Handbells were made use of to frighten the Horses and some Persons were actually thrown by Means of them'.

Who or what groups comprised the opposition to the Bathursts at this time? There are frequent references in Rudder to the 'We's'. A prefatory note explains this as an 'Appellation . . . at first bestowed on 2 or 3 families in the town . . . now frequently applied to their Party in general'. 'They are insolent enough already', wrote an anonymous woolcomber, whose letter is printed by Rudder, 'and if they were to get the better now there would be no bearing with them. or living in the Town'.¹² 'They threaten to take away our trade'—and in fact it was said they had already set up one or two 'comb shops'—but we are assured that 'the woolcombers will not submit to be governed by them'. A ballad, also reproduced by Rudder, goes 'We's t'other Night shew'd their Malice and spite with a Mob of their Butchers and Boys'.

The anonymous woolcomber also accuses the We's of making a bid for support by the Dissenters—'I have been told that the We's

¹¹ The Wood House is a rustic folly in Cirencester Park.

¹² Woolcombing was an important industry in the town during the eighteenth century.

applied to the Presbyterians for assistance to set up Mr. Brice Fisher as candidate'. The other side was also accused of doing the same—of forming an unholy alliance of Church with 'King Killers'. As we have already seen the Presbyterian minister, Joshua Parry, was Lord Bathurst's close friend and in fact was the author of a ballad 'Tom Jordan's Ghost'.¹³ Jordan was killed in a riot—perhaps the same riot which ensued when Henry Bathurst entered the town on 21 August—described by Hill as a 'general engagement between the two mobs, wherein great numbers were wounded, and several carried off for dead; and one Jordan, who fought on the Bathurst's side, lost his life'. On 16 March 1754, at the Gloucester Assizes Thomas Minchin was acquitted of the murder.¹⁴

In a letter in which he admits to the authorship of this 'ballad of my scribbling', Parry refers to the religious theme. 'They [the We's] do all in their power to make populace believe the contest is between Churchmen and Dissenters and of consequence to revive the ridiculous cry of the Church's danger'.¹⁵ Another charge levelled by the We's was that Henry Bathurst had voted for the Jew Bill. This measure was intended to give greater freedom to Dissenters and Jews. It was sponsored by the Prime Minister, Henry Pelham, but the onset of elections and rising criticism brought about its repeal in January 1754. There were celebrations in Devizes and Malmesbury, where an effigy of a Jew was burned. Some months earlier Cirencester electors had petitioned their two members, seeking their assistance 'in procuring a repeal of the said law'. John Coxe in his answer wrote that he would repeal it in its entirety, Henry Bathurst only 'so much of the late act as is in favour of the Jews'.¹⁶

'The elector friend of Coxe' whose derogatory comments on Henry Bathurst have already been quoted, claimed Coxe as no 'Placemen or Pensioner or Expectant'. Another source—the We's letter—is quoted by Rudder as putting 'a word or two' in recommendation of Mr Coxe. 'It is for our credit and will give us a great deal of satisfaction to send such a member to Parliament, who we have all the reason in the world to be assured will be under no influence that will prevail upon him to act otherwise than freely and independently'. This supports the view that there were people in the town who looked

¹³ The first three lines go:

"One Night when the We's were all met at the Ram,
To drink their friend CHARLEY, and B-th--st to damn,
The Ghost of Tom Jordan made bold to appear."

¹⁴ *Gloucester Journal*, 19 March 1754.

¹⁵ Parry, *op. cit.*, 35.

¹⁶ *Gentlemen's Magazine*, vol. XXIII (1753), 471.

for a candidate who would put the interests of the town first and foremost and resented the dominance of the Bathurst interest. The verse of a ballad finished: 'For if you have sense of your votes to Dispense, you will always cry only Single, Boys, Single'.¹⁷ In other words plump for the candidate who stands for the Town Interest and reject the argument that Cirencester could be secured in return for, 'The Honours we have received, the Venison we have eaten, the Bows at Church—all these call aloud for our Gratitude' (*sic*).¹⁸

To what extent can the opposition to the Bathurst interest be labelled Whig? Some light is thrown on Whig activities in the town, some years before the Cirencester Contest, by a correspondence now in the Gloucestershire Record Office.¹⁹ Thomas Bush, an apothecary who lived in Castle Street, wrote a series of letters between 1738 and 1740 to Mr Humphreys, a London lawyer, with the idea of investigating the legality of the mastership of St John's Hospital, an old medieval foundation still supporting a handful of paupers. It was generally considered that the appointment of the master was in the hands of the minister of the parish together with the churchwarden and overseers of the poor; in fact the last four ministers had themselves been masters of the Hospital, the master at the time when Bush was making his inquiries being the Revd. Joseph Harrison. But, wrote Bush triumphantly in a draft of a letter to Sir John Dutton of Sherborne, 'I am . . . persuaded from many circumstances that the present Master never had a grant and consequently is held by usurpation.' So, acting on this information and spurred on possibly by the sudden death of Mr Small, master of another small hospital in the town, St Lawrence's,—'the Whig interest has lost a very good and a very useful man in him' was Dutton's verdict—Bush surreptitiously obtained a grant of the mastership of this hospital (that is St John's) under the privy seal 'subverting for a time, the government of it by trustees, as established by ancient usage.' This was the indignant comment of Samuel Rudder, who went on to complain how Bush, once he was appointed master, sold the hospital bell and let the buildings fall into disrepair.²⁰ But Bush had his eye on more than the opportunity for mere speculation. 'The annual income of this Hospital is a trifle,' he scribbled in the draft of what appears to be a letter to Lord Bathurst, 'but it may influence 12 or 14 votes for the Town and some for the county therefore may be worth something.'

¹⁷ Rudder, *Cirencester Contest*, op. cit., 75.

¹⁸ Hill, op. cit., 16. A footnote reads 'Attending to a respectful Expression of Somebody's or other, that he could at any time secure Cirencester for an Haunch of Venison and a Bow at Church'.

¹⁹ Gloucestershire Records Office, P 86A, CH 4/4.

²⁰ Rudder, *Cirencester*, op. cit., part II, 322.

He finishes illegibly, committing himself 'steadily to pursue the cause of virtue and liberty and heartily oppose tyranny and oppression in all shapes'. What was Bush up to? Was he really intending to stand by his Whig principles or was he offering for sale a secure parcel of votes? What is certain is that he continued as master of the hospital, until his death in 1788, on terms agreed between him and Lord Bathurst. What these terms were we do not know, but we may guess that they included support of the Bathurst interest. In 1768 Lord Bathurst was unable to visit the town during the election as Lady Bathurst had a fever. Instead he wrote to the Revd Joseph Parry that he depended on 'Mr. Bush's assistance to carry on the poll without a riot'. And a fortnight later: 'My best compliments to Mr. Bush and all my friends'.

To return to the Cirencester Contest, Mr Coxe and Henry Bathurst both retired from the scene, presumably to break the deadlock; on 17 April 1754 Benjamin Bathurst was returned along with a newcomer, John Dawnay, who married Charlotte Pleydell of Ampney Crucis. Lord Downe wrote in a letter to the Duke of Newcastle that, 'Your Grace has gained a jealous friend in my brother and the Whigs a very steady man'.²¹ Described also as 'the first Whig avowedly that ever represented this borough,' Dawnay represented Cirencester until 1768, when his place was taken by Estcourt Cresswell. Benjamin Bathurst held the other seat until 1761 when his seat was handed over to his brother-in-law, James Whitshed.

About the 1761 election there is little material and that is contradictory. Lord Bathurst thought that the 1768 election was much more of a contest. The Revd Kilner, on the other hand, who as curate compiled what he called a Parish Book, described the 1761 contest as 'very great' and drew attention to political tactics that were even more in evidence in 1768—i.e. the flooding into town at least three days before the election of soldiers on leave, farmers from the countryside and servants all aiming to secure that room or place with a chimney that would qualify them to vote in the election.²²

The opponent in 1761 was James Clutterbuck who polled 234 votes to the 511 for Viscount Downe (Dawnay's title since 1760) and 508 for Whitshed.²³ Opposition amongst the townspeople continued—identified by Lord Bathurst as the Cripps family. As he sarcastically

²¹ Reference in Namier and Brooke, *A History of Parliament, The Commons, 1754 to 1790* to British Museum, Add. ms. 32733, f. 610.

²² The two volumes of this parish book are still in the parish church; referred to subsequently as Kilner: Vol. II, f. 79b.

²³ Details of this and later elections from Williams, *op. cit.*

put it—and no doubt exaggerated—‘if the C...s are to be absolute masters of the town, I hope they will leave me in possession of my park and woods, and I shall compound for that’.²⁴ The Cripps family was rising in the town and considered to be pushers by Kilner who, when compiling a seat register for the parish church, complained that Joseph Cripps had commandeered no fewer than 26 places for five persons—himself and his wife, their two children and his sister Catherine, ‘without either by your leave or with your leave’.²⁵ In 1767 Mr Whitshed told Lord Bathurst about rumours going the rounds of a new market house to be built in the town. Mr Clutterbuck, unsuccessful parliamentary candidate in 1761 was apparently prepared to offer £1,000 ‘for any public use’. ‘I told him,’ wrote Lord Bathurst, ‘I did not doubt Lord Downe and Mr. Whitshed would each of them do the same. I imagine that the Cripps have heard of this and that is the occasion of the present talk’.²⁶ There was a story that Joseph Cripps even attempted to have Henry Bathurst arrested for debt.²⁷ Lord Bathurst wrote: ‘There is one thing I must insist upon and the judge [Henry] joins with me in it, viz: that the Crippses may not have an absolute dominion over the town’. Though the Crippses did not win ‘absolute dominion’, they did eventually build up a considerable position. Joseph had one cloth mill when he died in 1782; his eldest son, also named Joseph, acquired a second mill as well as a bank and a brewery. It has been said that the motive behind this was to build up a supporting phalanx of voters.

In 1768 James Whitshed was again returned; his companion, a newcomer, was Estcourt Cresswell, lord of the manor of Bibury. He had 447 votes to Whitshed’s 473. He was 23 years old when he became an M.P. but he was, it seems, more keen on racing than politics. He claimed to be an independent candidate;—‘I will continue to maintain the Resolution of standing ALONE and UNCONNECTED *with any other candidate*.’ So he was quoted in a contemporary broadsheet put out by a REALLY FREE INDEPENDENT ELECTOR who nevertheless had a few searching questions to put to Cresswell: ‘Whether there is not a Notoriety of a Compromise between the said candidate and Mr. Whitshed?’ Other questions implied that Cresswell and his managers put pressure on several voters to give their second votes to Mr Whitshed and that Earl Bathurst evicted a tenant who would not transfer his vote to the ‘said independent candidate’. It

²⁴ Parry, *op. cit.*, 284.

²⁵ Kilner, Vol. II, f. 96a.

²⁶ Parry, *op. cit.*, 240.

²⁷ *Wills and Gloucestershire Standard*, 15 June 1889, article by Frederick Cripps.

was stated that as a result '40 electors within two weeks have deserted Blackwell for Cresswell'.²⁸

Samuel Blackwell of Williamstrip owned much property in the county; his wife was the eldest daughter of James Dutton of Sherborne and he was related by marriage to the Masters. The election date was postponed to the end of March. At the Ram Inn Mr Whitshed's supporters consumed vast quantity of liquor; the contest 'was carried on with great spirit and expense'.²⁹ To help his cause Blackwell brought in a large number of 'supporters' from London and other places—some of these, described as a 'set of desperate Ruffians armed with Bludgeons and other offensive weapons', made an attack one night on the Ram Inn 'and there violently assaulted beat and knocked down every Person, Male and Female in the Yard', besides damaging or breaking much furniture and many windows.³⁰ But Blackwell's main purpose was to place these outsiders in lodgings within the town so that they could qualify as voters.

Lord Bathurst in a letter to Parry referred scornfully to 'the pretence of usage for this ridiculous notion of making Londoners inhabitants'. He referred to the 1761 election which 'could not be called a contest'—'nobody minded who were admitted to poll'. On this occasion, however, in 1768 the returning officers—the steward and the bailiff—took legal advice and mindful no doubt of the more formidable offensive mounted by Blackwell rejected more votes. Eventually on the last day of polling when the result was a foregone conclusion 90 of these outsiders were allowed to vote 'upon a suggestion that it would be attended with expense to keep them any longer in the town'.³¹ Some must have remained, however, for a resolution was carried by the vestry on 6 May 'to remove all persons not legal inhabitants to their proper settlements'.³² Samuel Blackwell in an address to the electors of Cirencester printed in the *Gloucester Journal* referred to the 'vexatious and dilatory Poll of six days', and that he would exert himself to the full 'to establish these Rights of which you have been denied the Exercise that they may no longer be determined by arbitrary Decisions'.³³

To Lord Bathurst's surprise—if Mr. Blackwell have not already spent money enough—a petition was made to the House of Commons that John Chaundler Ready (steward) and Timothy Lewis (bailiff)

²⁸ Bingham Library, Cirencester, Sewell Papers.

²⁹ Parry, *op. cit.*, 284.

³⁰ *Gloucester Journal*, 4 April 1768.

³¹ *Poll Book*, 1768, printed by S. Rudder, Cirencester.

³² Cirencester Parish Church, Cirencester Vestry Book.

³³ *Gloucester Journal*, 4 April 1768.

'had behaved very partially in favour of Cresswell and Whitshed'. In fact Blackwell petitioned twice and on both occasions the petitions were withdrawn. The Hon. Henry Bathurst appears on the defensive when he writes, 'I am clearly of opinion and always was of opinion that an occasional inhabitant had no right to vote and therefore cannot conceive what is meant by the assertion of my having given a different opinion last time'.³⁴ Some must have been wondering why if all who had been in the borough three days before the election in 1761 were admitted by 'tacit consent', the same could not apply in 1768.

However the political temperature in the town seems to have fallen considerably by 1774, the year of the next election, when there was only a two-day poll; this time James Whitshed led with 447 votes, Cresswell who received only 174 votes now came a poor third and his seat was taken by Blackwell who polled 380 votes. In the following year—1775—the old earl himself died at the age of 91 and the title was assumed by his second and eldest surviving son, the 'grave, studious and temperate' Henry, this, according to Kilner, bringing about a compromise between the opposing factions.

To sum up: Kilner writes about the Contest—'The Town beyond its common difference of Party was in the highest agitation by reason of Lord Bathurst's two Eldest sons being at that time candidates for Representation in Parliament'. There were however other causes suggested. Kilner himself thought that 'Election spirit has within our Time received a large increase from the Appointment of Surveyors and Turnpikemen, for the Turnpikes set up on every Road and Avenue to the Town'. Turnpike acts were passed in 1727, 1742, 1747 and 1752 but there is no further evidence to support Kilner's statement.³⁵

There is evidence for another grievance—concerning the town's grammar school; the death of the schoolmaster George Wightwick on 26 April 1754 precipitated a row over the appointment of his successor. 'A great majority of the electors' wanted Wightwick's son, Henry, and in fact he produced written evidence of this just before a rival, Mr Francis James, appeared on the scene. Who had the right to appoint the schoolmaster? Was it the townspeople, 'without the concurrence of the Lord of the Manor, the Minister and the Bailiff?' In the end Henry Wightwick lost and James was appointed.³⁶

³⁴ Parry, *op. cit.*, 291.

³⁵ Gloucester City Library, Gloucestershire Collection, JF 9.29, 9.32, 9.35, 9.40.

³⁶ J. Ireland, 'The Common and Free Grammar School of Cirencester', unpublished M.Litt. dissertation, University of Bristol (1968).

Religion has already been mentioned as an ingredient in the controversy surrounding the Cirencester Contest—the references to the ‘Jew Bill’ and the taunts about the supposed ‘alliance’ between Bathurst and the Presbyterians. When the Revd Samuel Johnson, a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford, was inducted as minister of the parish church in November 1753 he stayed with Lord Bathurst until the vicarage was made ready and aligned himself with what Kilner referred to as the Courtier party. Johnson ‘constantly adhered to Lord Bathurst acted with him and for him in everything relating to his interest in this Borough’.³⁷ Immediately he was at loggerheads with the ‘anti-courtiers’ or ‘the greater and more opulent part of the Church People’. Disputes over the appointment of churchwardens were settled in 1756, when it was resolved by a vote of the vestry that ‘for the peace of the town’ one churchwarden should be chosen by the minister and the other ‘by the majority of the Parishioners’.³⁸

³⁷ Kilner, Vol. II, f. 39b.

³⁸ Cirencester Vestry Book.