

MEMORIES

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The election scandal that rocked city



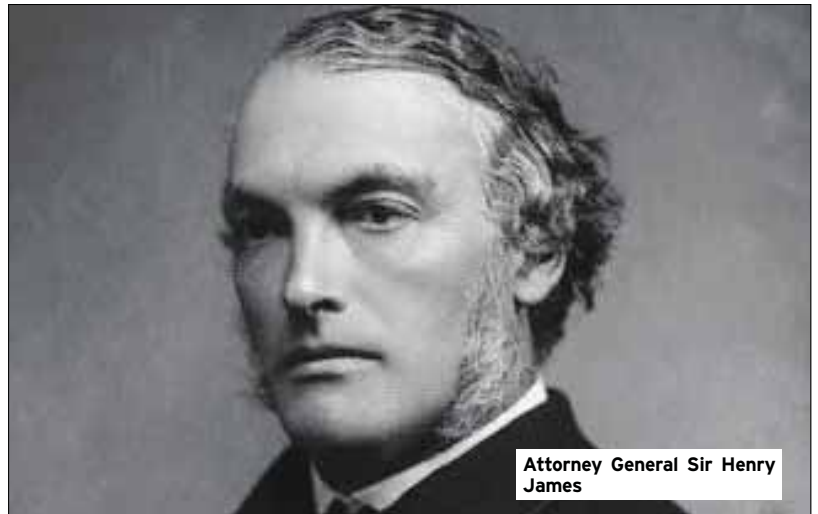
The election of Alfred Gathorne-Hardy, third son of the Earl of Cranbrook, in Canterbury was declared void

The 1880 general election gained notoriety for Canterbury when the result was declared void due to corrupt practices. The city was left with both parliamentary borough seats unfilled following a successful petition having been made to the electoral court.

Voting took place between March 31 and April 27. The election period featured the Midlothian campaign of the Liberals, led by former leader William Ewart Gladstone who attacked the foreign policy of the Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, as immoral.

Both Canterbury seats were won by the sitting MPs, Conservatives Alfred Gathorne-Hardy and Robert Peter Laurie, amidst a new Liberal government elected with a 51-seat majority. Gladstone was invited to form his second administration as Prime Minister and concurrently for the next two years also became Chancellor of the Exchequer.

With polling day just a week away, Richard West looks back at a ballot mired by corruption and bribery...



Attorney General Sir Henry James

But the Canterbury result was thrown into chaos when a petition was brought by losing Liberal candidate Henry Butler-Johnstone raising concerns about the election.

Hansard's June 17, 1880, daily journal of proceedings in the House of Commons was ordered to enter a certificate and report outlining the case, brought under the Parliamentary Elections Act 1868.

Judges George Denman and Sir Henry Lopes had held a trial over three days and concluded: "We certify that we determined that the said Respondents were not duly elected and returned, and that the said Election is void. And we hereby certify in writing such our determination to you."

The judges said that while no corrupt practice was committed by Conservative candidates, a long list of people were found to have been guilty of bribery at the election.

They were: John Munns, William Mount, George Bass, Edwin Bateman, Thomas Dobson, George Hart, Thomas Holttum, Thomas White,

Henry Link and Edwin Williams.

Then on September 1, the Attorney General presented a humble address to the House of Commons that an inquiry be held into the scandal.

Three senior barristers were appointed to carry out the probe.

According to Hansard, John Whitwell (MP for Kendal) said: "Out of the eight constituencies to be brought up for trial six contained the impure element of freemen, and only one, that of Macclesfield, was without freemen or other hereditary voters." He, therefore, wished to know "how far the Commissioners would be empowered to inquire into the proceedings of the freemen as a class in connection with the elections?"

The Attorney General Sir Henry James replied that "it would be within the power of the Commissioners, if the circumstances seemed to require it, to state that corrupt practices prevailed to a greater extent among the freemen or among the ordinary inhabitants of the boroughs

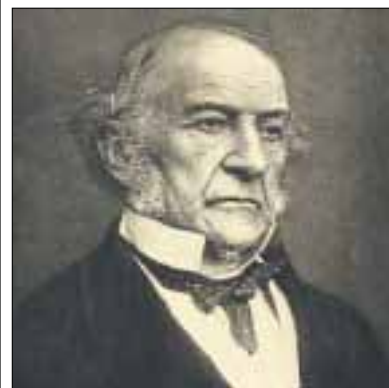
concerned."

The 1880 general election is considered the most corrupt of the century, fortified by the secrecy of the polling booth. This was subsequently resolved by the Corrupt Practices Act 1883 which strictly limited the amount of money a candidate could spend and made each responsible for the actions of their agents.

Even more importantly, the right to vote was extended. The Representation of the People Act 1884 extended the borough provisions of the Reform Act 1867 to the countryside, enabling all men paying an annual rental of ten pounds and all who owned property worth ten pounds to vote. Meanwhile the Redistribution of Seats Act 1885 replaced double member constituencies with single member seats.

Canterbury had no parliamentary representation until the 1885 election.

Richard West is founder of The Chaucer Education Project. To read more articles go online to chaucer.university.



It was the era of great parliamentary battles between Gladstone and Disraeli

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