

The English electoral hustings as depicted by William Hogarth and Anthony Trollope

David Potter

Abstract: This essay discusses aspects of ‘Old Corruption’ in the English electoral process of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through a comparison of works by the artist William Hogarth and the novelist Anthony Trollope, set against the historical background of political reform.

The term ‘hustings’,¹ is used here to describe the riotous outdoor meetings at which parliamentary candidates once addressed potential voters. It is still in occasional use today by political commentators to describe the run-up to an election.² I shall examine the role of the hustings from 1750 to 1899 by comparing and contrasting the *Humours of an Election* series painted by William Hogarth (1697-1764), with vignettes from the novels *Phineas Finn* and *Ralph the Heir* by Anthony Trollope (1815-1883).

The political system during the latter half of the eighteenth century was heavily biased towards the requirements of the English landowning elite and designed to perpetuate their hold on the levers of power. This was facilitated by a small, all-male franchise, based on out-moded property qualifications and the existence of many ‘rotten’ boroughs with malleable or non-existent voters, where MPs could easily be returned through a mixture of influence, bribery or corruption. When coupled with increasing pressure from the working and middle classes in newly industrialising but inadequately represented areas, the combination was a potentially volatile one. The response from successive Whig and Tory governments was slow, but nevertheless managed to avoid the bloodshed which occurred in continental Europe in response to similar pressures, as Angus Hawkins amongst others has shown.³ Trollope wrote his politically-orientated novels against the backdrop of the earlier Whig Reform Act of 1832. This had begun to dismantle some of the ‘rotten boroughs’, create new constituencies to reflect industrialisation, and broaden the franchise to include all male householders paying an annual rent of £10. Trollope lived to see subsequent legislation in 1867 and 1872 establish a wider, more uniform franchise with secret ballots but remaining a male preserve.⁴

Hogarth caught on canvas a sense of the corruption which typified the hustings. He had the ability to shine a critical light on topical political themes which were as newsworthy in the 1750s as they would be a hundred years later in the age of Trollope. Hogarth earned his living largely through the sale of an extensive back-catalogue of engraved prints made from his original paintings. His subscribers included royalty, politicians and high society.⁵ Trollope, like Hogarth a century before, struggled to overcome the relative poverty of his upbringing. His mother wrote novels to support her family and her son later built a significant career in the Post Office, whilst simultaneously pursuing his literary activities. Unlike Trollope, fame came early to Hogarth through the successful reception of his paintings and

¹ Derived from the old Norse for ‘household assembly’, (Oxford English Dictionary: *on-line version*); it can also apply to the whole election campaign or just the temporary wooden platform on which the candidates were nominated and addressed voters

² Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Ch8 *Broadcasting Politics* (Oxford Scholarship Online 2011); see also Chris Bowlby (*BBC History Magazine* Jan 2010) ‘*Changing Times; have we lost the spirit of the Hustings?*’ (on-line)

³ Angus Hawkins, *Habits of Heart and Mind* (pre-publication manuscript, kindly made available to MLA 2011-13)

⁴ For general background to English parliamentary reform, see e.g. Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (New Oxford History of England, 2008); also Christopher Harvie and Colin Matthew, *Nineteenth Century Britain: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁵ Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth; a Life and a World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 549

prints. Marriage to the daughter of the court painter Sir James Thornhill allowed Hogarth to move in political circles, although he never pursued an active political career.

Trollope on the other hand nursed a long-held ambition to become an MP. Earnings from his writing enabled him to attempt this at the age of 53. As he put it in his autobiography: 'to serve one's country without pay [as an MP] is the grandest work a man can do'.⁶ Trollope stood as candidate for Beverley in Yorkshire, a year after completing *Phineas Finn* (1867). His Election Agent told him:

you won't get in. I don't suppose you really expect it. ... You will spend £1000 and lose the election. Then you will petition, and spend another £1000. You will throw out the elected members. There will be a commission, and the ['rotten'] borough will be disenfranchised. For a beginner such as you are, that will be a great success.⁷

As predicted, Trollope did not win the seat but his experiences in the campaign were turned to good use in his novels.

In Hogarth's era debate was virulent over issues such as immigration, Jewish citizenship, marriage laws and the Julian calendar. The artist saw politics as a fruitful subject and in 1753 devised a single painting, the *Election Entertainment* (1753-5), to show the 'feasting, dealing and chicanery' associated with an English election.⁸ This eventually expanded into the *Humours*, four canvasses, each three feet by five, which viewed together are an invaluable historical record of eighteenth-century politics.⁹ In contrast to Hogarth's compact pictorial narrative, Trollope's references to corruption at the hustings were scattered throughout several of his 47 novels.

Hogarth used the fictional setting of Guzzledown, but it was well-known at the time that the *Humours*, and subsequent engravings and prints, represented a corrupt campaign in Oxfordshire during the 1754 General Election. The Oxfordshire seats had been retained uncontested by the Tories since 1710 but by 1752 the Duke of Marlborough had decided to fight them for the Whigs, who already had a large parliamentary majority. This triggered a two-year pre-election campaign notorious for its unprecedented levels of bribery. Jenny Uglow notes that:

Oxford itself had always had strong Tory and Jacobite loyalties and in February 1753, when the Whigs summoned a mob to endorse their candidates they were assailed with loud cat-calls as they assembled outside Christ Church, one of the only two Whig colleges in the city... The whole campaign was a raucous, drunken, violent procession.¹⁰

Hogarth had already suffered financially from pirating of his work and he subsequently laid some of the foundations for modern copyright laws;¹¹ his *Election* series can be accessed via the hyperlinks given below for each picture. The [Election Entertainment](#) shows a public house 'treat', organised by the Whigs to gain voter support. Some critics have seen echoes of Leonardo's 'Last Supper' in the arrangement of the figures.¹² Epitomising the ignominious depths which a sensitive and unsuspecting candidate might have to plumb,

⁶ Anthony Trollope, *The Autobiography of Anthony Trollope* (online - Project Gutenberg), Ch XVI

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth*, p. 547

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 559: The original paintings are now on display together at the Sir John Soane Museum, London

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 550

¹¹ William Hogarth, *The Case of Designers, engravers, etchers etc; stated in a letter to a Member of Parliament (1735)* (Bodleian Online Journals); 'Making of the Modern World' (Gale Cengage Learning)

¹² Uglow, *Hogarth*, p. 553

Hogarth depicts young 'Sir Commodity Taxem' listening to the ramblings of an elderly crone, whilst the second candidate is forced to listen to an incoherent pair of drunks. Neither King nor Church was safe from Hogarth; George III's portrait has been slashed, while elsewhere a fat clergyman is shown surrounded by food and drink. The Mayor has collapsed, through over-eating oysters provided by the Whigs, whilst the Election Agent, attempting to keep precise tally with his book of 'sure' and 'doubtful' votes, has been struck by a brick tossed in by a baying Tory mob. In the centre foreground, a Whig bruiser (reputedly based on an Oxford boxer, Teague Carter) is trampling a Tory banner, 'Give us back our eleven days,' a reference to the recent calendar change. To the left, Hogarth shows a Quaker examining an IOU, indicating that bribery recognised no religious boundaries.

In Hogarth's second picture, *Canvassing for Votes* (1757), he moves the action outdoors. Both political groups have made their headquarters in pubs. The landlady of the Royal Oak is counting her 'treat' money from one of the parties. Two men eating free meals watch from a window as the Tory agent leeringly attempts to bribe women on the balcony above with trinkets from a Jewish pedlar; the implication being that the Agent might not support current pro-Jewish legislation but clearly has no qualms about doing business with a Jew. The well-detailed pub sign has a shower of gold cascading from the Treasury into the wheelbarrow of the 'Candidate for Guzzledown' (Mr Punch); separately Punch is shown tossing coins to the voters, implying that the Whig government has been using taxpayers' money to bribe and coerce. In the background Whig supporters are shown being beaten by an angry Tory mob while, centre foreground, another innkeeper is keeping his options open by taking bribes from both sides. Hogarth regularly up-dated successive editions of all his engravings to reflect new political developments, for example the sixth edition of *Canvassing for Votes* had the teeth removed from the British Lion figurehead to reflect the loss of Minorca to the French.¹³

Hogarth's vision of the hustings drew on his own observations and newspaper reports,¹⁴ while Trollope, in *Ralph the Heir* (1869), undoubtedly used his personal experiences as a candidate at Beverley:

a great proportion of the working men... were freemen of the borough ... and quite accustomed to the old ways of manipulation ... they had always been accustomed to three half-crowns a head in consideration for the day's work. 'They'll *fight* for Moggs at the hustings' [said the Agent] 'but they'll take their beer and their money, and they'll *vote* for us.'¹⁵

With the third picture in the Hogarth series we reach the *Polling* (1758). Now the hustings are brightly decorated with the flags of both parties; blue for the Tories and orange for the Whigs. But they are under siege from a motley crew; here a vote is being solicited from a lunatic and there from an ashen-faced invalid.¹⁶ On a background stone bridge a mob surrounds a coach, probably based on a recent incident at Magdalen Bridge, Oxford when a Tory mob attacked a Whig post-chaise and a Tory chimney-sweep was shot dead. Elsewhere Hogarth shows *Britannia's* coach toppling as her coachmen gamble and cheat at cards, the implication being that negligence and poor government are laying the nation low.

¹³ Christina Scull, *The Soane Hogarths*, p. 57 (London: Sir John Soane Museum, 2007)

¹⁴ *Oxford Journal 1754* cited by Uglow, *Hogarth*, p. 551: 'A receipt to make a vote by the cook of Sir JD (James Dashwood) – take a cottager of 30 shillings a year, tax him at 40; swear at him; bully him, take your business from him; give him your business again; make him drunk; shake him by the hand; kiss his wife; and HE IS AN HONEST FELLOW'.

¹⁵ Anthony Trollope, *Ralph the Heir*, Ch XXIX (Kindle edition).

¹⁶ Scull, *Soane Hogarths*, p.60 cites in comparison, Horace Walpole's description of a government division crisis of 1741; 'It was a most shocking sight to see the sick and the dead brought in on both sides'.

The fourth scene shows the ritual of *Chairing the Member* (1758) where, after their surprise win, the two successful Tories are paraded in triumph through the street, symbolically led by a blind fiddler. The biblical Gadarene Swine, in the shape of a family of Oxford pigs, rush to their destruction. The chimney sweeps take their revenge after the incident in *The Polling*. Hogarth always added an extra twist to his story and here the chaired member is about to tumble from his precarious perch, as his bearer is struck accidentally by a supporter. The artist comments on harsh reality in a sundial inscribed *pulvis et umbra sumus*, ('we are but dust and shadows'). In fact there was no triumphal procession after the 1754 Oxford contest because the Tory victory was immediately challenged by the Whigs on grounds of improper voter qualifications. Indecisively the Sheriff of Oxford returned all four candidates, leaving Parliament to favour the Whigs.¹⁷

According to Jonathan Jones (*Guardian* art critic) Hogarth's hustings captured:

the squalid political world of the 18th century, many decades before the Great Reform Act started to lay the foundations of modern British politics. Reformers would call the system Hogarth portrays, 'Old Corruption'. His pictures with slumped burghers ... take delight in just how corrupt.¹⁸

Jones praises Hogarth's skill in catching both the goal of winning at any cost, and the bribery, mayhem, profligacy and venality associated with this goal. Elsewhere Jon Lawrence notes that the hustings were dominated by the rituals which Hogarth, and later Trollope depicted. They were intensively 'public' affairs where, as part of the 'open voting' process, the rival candidates were expected to address their prospective constituents from the hustings platform.¹⁹ This, and the subsequent public show of hands in favour of a candidate, were supposed to symbolise the 'inclusion' of those citizens without a vote. The eventual widening of the franchise obviated much of the need for this. Together with the 'Secret Ballot' Act of 1872, this would have a telling effect on the viability of the old hustings.

Although Hogarth chose not to represent the 'nomination' stage pictorially, Trollope alluded to it vividly in *Ralph the Heir*;

the hustings ... stood in the market-square ... straight in front of the wooden erection, standing at right angles to it, was a stout rail dividing the space for the distance of fifty or sixty yards, so that the supporters of one set of candidates might congregate on one side, and the supporters of the other candidates on the other side. In this way would the weaker part ... be protected from the violence of the stronger ... there were a great many speeches made that day from the hustings, - thirteen in all... first the Mayor, and then the four proposers and the four seconders of the candidates. During these performances, though there was so much noise from the crowd below that not a word could be heard, there was no violence.²⁰

Later in *Ralph* we see Trollope's own experience at the hustings reflected in his writing, together with his personal views on bribery. The rock which hits Sir Thomas Underwood, the candidate, is reminiscent of the brick which laid the Agent low in Hogarth's *Election Entertainment*, showing little had changed in the intervening hundred years.

¹⁷ Scull, *Soane Hogarths*, p. 62

¹⁸ Jonathan Jones, 'Why Hogarth's hustings gets my vote' (www.guardian.co.uk/art, posted 15.4.2011)

¹⁹ Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, Ch2, *The Fall of the Hustings and the Rise of the Platform*, p. 43 (Oxford Scholarship Online 2011) Print ISBN-13:9780199550128

²⁰ Trollope, *Ralph the Heir*, Ch XXIX *The Election*

Sir Thomas Underwood was received with yells, apparently from the whole crowd. What he said was of no matter, as not a word was audible, but he did continue to inveigh against bribery. Before he had ceased, a huge stone was thrown at him and hit him heavily on the arm ... At last came the show of hands ... the mayor compliment[ed] the people on their good behaviour [and begged] them to go away. Of course they would go away but not till they had driven their enemies from the field. In half a minute the ... rail that had divided the blue from the yellow – was down, and all those who had dared show themselves as supporters of Griffenbottom ... were driven ignominiously from the marketplace'.²¹

As Jon Lawrence points out, some contemporary observers were convinced that greater enfranchisement simply gave more opportunity for corruption and public disorder.²² Certainly until anti-corruption legislation at the end of the nineteenth century, elections could be affected by the venality of a particular candidate. John Miles (Conservative) hired 1,200 'roughs' and ensured a free flow of beer during the Bristol elections of 1868, which were extremely disorderly with armed thugs outside the polling booths and a widespread destruction of property, reminiscent of the scenes painted by Hogarth a century earlier. Miles was eventually unseated for 'corrupt and illegal practices'.²³

For most of the period under examination, voting was a public act which allowed those who provided the 'treats' to see whether they were getting value for money. While Hogarth's brush could deftly convey specific examples of venality and, with his images of cascading coins or a toppling coach, hint generally at the 'Old Corruption', he was inevitably harder-pressed to picture some of the less-specific franchise iniquities. Trollope could weave these into a novel more easily; for example in *Phineas Finn* Lord Brentford owes Finn a favour and to discharge it offers him a Parliamentary seat for the 'rotten borough' of Loughton. Finn discusses it with Brentford's politically-astute daughter, Lady Laura: 'Papa wants you to come and try your luck there...it isn't quite a certainty, you know, but I suppose it's as near a certainty as anything left...my father feels he has to do the best he can with his influence in the borough and therefore he comes to you'.²⁴ Phineas mused pragmatically that:

there seemed ... no valid reason why he should not sit for Loughton. The favour was of a kind that had prevailed from time out of mind in England, between the most respectable of the great land magnates, and young rising liberal politicians. Burke, Fox and Canning had all been placed in Parliament by similar influence ... of course he desired earnestly...to root out for ever the last vestige of close borough nominations; but while the thing remained it was better that [it] should contribute to the liberal than to the conservative strength of the House.²⁵

Trollope goes on to describe what happens when Finn meets some of the burghers of Loughton; he now gives Phineas a slightly different view of reform:

of course we must support the Earl' one tradesman said; 'never mind what you hear about a Tory candidate, Mr Finn,' whispered a second; 'the Earl can do what he pleases here' [Phineas ponders that]...the great political question ...up in London was the enfranchisement of Englishmen...and yet when he found himself in contact with

²¹ *ibid*

²² Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, ch 2

²³ Lawrence *Electing OurMasters* ch 2

²⁴ Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, Ch XXXI

²⁵ *Ibid*

individual Englishmen ... they rather liked being bound hand and foot, and being kept as tools in the political pocket of a rich man.²⁶

In contrast to Trollope, Hogarth incurred criticism that his work contained ‘disgusting, if not depraved exhibitions of human nature’.²⁷ Later art historians have judged him more kindly and, writing on caricature, Diana Donald endorses Charles Lamb’s assessment that just because Hogarth painted ‘common or vulgar life,’ he should not be excluded from the highest canons of history painting.²⁸ His undoubted talent as a landscape artist is clearly visible for example in the outdoor scenes of his Guzzledown election paintings.

Hogarth’s *Humours* and the political novels of Trollope, such as *Phineas Finn*, have remained continuously on view and in print due to popular demand and artistic respect. The above extracts from Trollope, when cross-referenced with the fine detail of the *Humours*, present complementary examples of that ‘Old Corruption,’ which persisted across two centuries despite the efforts of successive governments. By the close of the nineteenth century, the political landscape depicted by Hogarth and Trollope had finally become more democratic, more representative and less open to corruption. An inevitable by-product of this change was the partial silencing of the noise and hubbub of the hustings as the most practical means of allowing candidates to present themselves to voters and non-voters alike. Arguably however the spirit of the old hustings survives in modern constituency public meetings and when party leaders engage in open debate on live television.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Trollope, Anthony, *The Autobiography of Anthony Trollope* (online - Project Gutenberg)

----- *Phineas Finn, The Irish Member* (Kindle Edition)

----- *Ralph the Heir* (Kindle edition)

Secondary Sources

Bindman, David, *Hogarth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988)

Bowlby, Chris, (*BBC History Magazine* Jan 2010) ‘*Changing Times; have we lost the spirit of the Hustings?*’ (on-line version)

Dobson, Austin, *William Hogarth – A Short Biography* (London: 1911) Kindle edition

Donald, Diana, *The Age of Caricature – Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (London: Yale University Press for Paul Mellon Centre, 1996)

²⁶ *Ibid*, Ch XXXII

²⁷ ‘*The Gentleman’s Magazine*’ 1823, cited on Soane Museum website *Collections Legacy: The Soane Hogarths; An Election*, Notes on a Series of Four Paintings

²⁸ Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature – Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (London: Yale University Press for Paul Mellon Centre, 1996), p. 34

- Glendinning, Victoria, *Trollope* (London: Pimlico Press, 1993)
- Hallet, Mark, *Hogarth* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000)
- Harrison, B. ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online*: entries for Hogarth and Trollope
- Harvie, Christopher, and Colin Matthew, *Nineteenth Century Britain: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Hawkins, Angus, *Habits of Heart and Mind* (Pre-publication version)
- Jones, Jonathan, 'Why Hogarth's hustings gets my vote' (www.guardian.co.uk/art, posted 15.4.2011)
- Langford, Paul, *Eighteenth- Century Britain: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Lawrence, Jon, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford Scholarship Online 2011) Print ISBN-13:9780199550128 (esp. Ch.1, *John Bull at the Hustings*, and Ch.2 *The Fall of the Hustings*)
- Scull, Christina, *The Soane Hogarths* (London: Sir John Soane's Museum, 2007)
- Sir John Soane's Museum website *Collections Legacy: The Soane Hogarths; An Election* 'Notes on a Series of Four Paintings'
- Terry, R. C., ed., *Oxford Reader's Companion to Trollope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Uglow, Jenny, *Hogarth; a Life and a World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997)