

A BRIDGWATER RIOT, 1717¹

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“Inter Dominum Regem et Thomam Dowsett, Willelmum Freeman, Jonathan Cockram et Johannem Thomas. Sett forth that Thomas Dowsett, Wm. Freeman, Jonathan Cockram and John Thomas 22d. July 3^o Georgii Regis at Bridgwater upon Thomas Martin, Roger Cane, and James Pettitt three of ye Constables of the Burrough of Bridgwater aforesaid in the execution of their offices did make an assault and then did beat wound and evil intreat”.

This indictment against four soldiers (three commissioned officers and one non-commissioned officer) at the Taunton Assizes in the summer of 1718 was the climax of what started as a, perhaps, not uncommon disturbance between the inhabitants of Bridgwater and the military quartered there. Yet it was more than this, for the inquiry which followed highlighted and increased all the longstanding jealousies and quarrels within the borough and particularly amongst the members of its council.

In July 1717,² three troops of dragoons of Brigadier Munden's Regiment, under the command of Lt. Molineux, and four companies of Col. Fane's Regiment of Foot were moving from Bristol to Exeter. On Saturday 20th July they reached Bridgwater and were quartered there until the following Monday. The officers were to stay at the Fountain Tavern but on Sunday they went to the Swan Inn,³ and there it was later reported “the said Dowsett Cornett Freeman and others had sate up drinking together yesterday being Sunday and all last night”. Early Monday morning the dragoons were ready to leave but Dowsett, Freeman, Cockram and several others were still drinking in the passage of the Swan.

That morning Thomas Martin, landlord of the George Inn, was walking along St. Mary Street and, as he was passing the Swan, he saw “one of the Foot Souldiers near a barell at the Swan Inn doore in which amongst other things was a bag and by the barell a glove”.

¹ This article is based on unpublished documents preserved in the Town Clerk's Office, Bridgwater — mainly the series of Examination Books but also miscellaneous letters and memoranda including the minutes of the Council meetings.

² Old Style dating is used throughout.

³ The Swan Inn was situated on the Cornhill with a back entrance on St. Mary Street; probably on the site of what was lately Thompson's ironmongery store.

Thinking that the soldier had dropped the glove, Martin picked it up and gave it to him, but the soldier then tried to make off with the bag as well. The landlord, Mr. Thomas Yeates, was informed, the bag retrieved and Martin was invited in "to take a mugg of pur".⁴ While sitting on a bench in the passage Martin was approached by Ensign Dowsett who was obviously far from sober. He "came to him with a fuzee in his hand and swore more than five profane oaths that if he did not drink damnation to Dr. Sacheverell he the said Dowsett would shoot him". Both Martin and Yeates, in righteous indignation, said they "would drink damnation to no one". Whereupon "the said Dowsett presently cock't his fuzee and being loaden with powder and shott lett fly at this Informants [i.e. Martin's] head which by good providence the shott mist by about halfe an inch or an inch at the most . . . and went into the wall behind . . . and this Informant verily beleeveth that the said Dowsett had an intention to murder this Informant".

Martin fled with his story and complaint to the Mayor, Mr. Jefferies, who had to be roused from his bed. The two bailiffs, Stephen Kidgell and John Symes, were ordered to go "in a quiett manner" to the Swan "lest amongst a parcell of drunken people any damage should be done" and to bring Dowsett before the Mayor. The bailiffs arrived and asked Freeman and Dowsett "to waite on the said Mayor and aldermen"; the soldiers were in no mood to accept this meekly and "instead of the said Freeman's admitting . . . [the bailiffs] . . . to bring the said Dowsett before the said Mayor and Aldermen . . . he bid them tell the Mayor goe . . . and that they would drink his damnation".

The Mayor, justifiably offended by such language, promptly issued a warrant for the arrest of Dowsett and thus the constables, Roger Cane (an ironmonger) and James Pettitt (a maltster), "in obedience to the said warrant with their Constables Staves in their hands . . . went with the said Martin to apprehend the said Officer". They came to the Swan and produced the warrant, "at which the said Freeman rose up and swore that noe one should dare apprehend any person there or come into the entry, ordered severall Dragoons to stand by him to that purpose and draw their swords which they

⁴ "Pur": probably Purl — a mixture of hot beer with gin sometimes also with ginger and sugar, popular as a morning draught. (*OED*).

did". More than this, "the said Freeman altho he is not the Commanding Officer in Bridgwater ordered the drums to beat to arms which they did and presently appeared to arms before the said Swann doore thirty or forty Dragoons". Already a crowd was gathering and one of these, Jane White, innocently asked the drummer why he was beating the drums. "To have ye blood of such bitches and toads as she was and to rifle their houses and take what they have", was the answer.

The Constables, realising the gravity of the situation, "made Proclamacion according to the Act of Parliament for all Riots etc to depart", but "the said Freeman obstructed it and bid the said Towne men then present to depart". By this time Lt. Molineux had arrived but even his orders to Freeman and Dowsett to surrender were of no avail. Instead Freeman, Dowsett, Cockram and several others tried to escape by riding out of the back gate of the Swan into St. Mary Street. John Christophers (a mason) was in the Swan at this time and heard Cockram declare "God damn my Blood if I do not kill Thomas Martin and shoot him the first time that ever I see him". He also saw Cockram "to charge a brace of pistolls and put the same one into one side of his bosom and the other into the other side of his bosom . . . draw his sword and goe out of the said Swann Inn". The constables, realising the impossibility of their entering the front door of the Swan, had anticipated this move and had gone through the courtyard of the Red Lion to cut off the soldiers. There in St. Mary Street they enlisted the help of Francis Veale (a hatter) and Thomas Williams (a mariner) before the real fracas began; Thomas Martin was still trailing along with the party. The soldiers emerged, "drew their swords and came at the Constables in a furious and hostile manner". Dowsett "being guarded by the said Dragoons on horsebacke drew his sword and made a pass with it at the said Martin to have murdered him". Martin himself later related how one of them "with a sword cut [his] finger and a gash in his hatt so that a bloody fight . . . ensued". Another officer "with his naked sword made a pass at Roger Cane . . . soe that . . [the constables] . . in the midst of an armed power were forced to defend themselves against abundance of drawne swords". "One Quarter Master Cockram cock't his peece and before he could bring it to his shoulder to shoote the said Cane stroke it with his staffe and broke it the said Cockram swearing he would do the said Cane's business". Cockram

swore also to kill Martin "soe that . . [he] . . was thereby afraid of his life and fled away".

By this time the crowd of onlookers had increased, some obviously there solely to enjoy the spectacle. Others just happened to be passing by, such as Edward Raymond who was "goeing along the Street between the Church and the Bridge in Bridgwater aforesaid to put a letter into the Post Office near the Swann Inn". Most of the spectators took no part in the affair — in fact they "were in fear of their lives and ran into an opposite Smith's shop to save themselves". These men included John Bere, a "wollen draper", Robert Davis, a "perrywig maker", and Lyonell Farley, a "saylemaker". Abraham Cridland, a grocer, did not see as much as he would have liked; he stood in his shop door near the Swan front door and saw the bailiffs arrive, but he "did not goe to see what was afterwards done at the Swan back dore because his wife was afraid he should be hurted". Only Ambrose Hozee, a "haberdasher of small wares", intervened. He saw "John Thomas . . . a Corporall . . . with his drawn sword in his hand come amongst severall people then present strikeing at severall of them". Then Hozee "haveing nothing in his hand fearing his neighbours would be wounded and hurt by the said Corporall went in amongst them in hopes to make peace". The constables maintained that they "having many passes made at them narrowly escaped with their lives", but it was Dowsett who was wounded and was forced to return to the Swan for treatment. There the arrest was finally made.

If this was the end of the riot, it was neither the end of the activities of the dragoons nor the first case of a disturbance caused by them. John Furze, a cordwainer, could complain that "this foot soldier now in custody came to the Shop window of him . . . and having a gun in his hand cock't the said gun leveled it at him and snapt the same severall times . . . and this he did without any provocation given unto him". This was confirmed by John Evans and John Parkhouse, two journeymen working in the shop. George Thomas, a "peruke maker", also declared that Cockram and three officers had come into his shop "assaulted and beat him in such a manner that he lost much of his blood and afterwards some of them drew their swords and swore they would kill him which . . [he] . . beleeves they would have done if he had not leapt out of his window

and made his escape from them". They also "broke his bason and spoiled some of his hair which he was working up".

Even after the events of July 22nd, the soldiers continued to be disorderly. Cockram on several occasions swore he would shoot Martin and burn the town. Dowsett shot his fuzee over the houses, and "so far from relenting the rashness of the fact" cut his initials on the Swan wall and drew "severall streakes from his name to the place where the shot went into the wall".

Thomas Sheppard, clerk to Alderman Robert Steare, could tell of an even more alarming incident in the Swan on Saturday, 3rd August. He had gone there to see his brother-in-law, Richard Smith, who happened to be sitting with Mr. Hozee, the Receiver of the Borough, and Mr. Perry, a Quartermaster. Drinking at another table was Corporal Thomas and Cockram, already quite drunk. "And being informed that this Informant [i.e. Sheppard] was Clerke to the said Mr. Alderman Steare he the said Cockram much insulted over this Informant came again at him spitt in this Informants face and was drawing his sword to run this Informant through but the said Quartermaster Perrey leapt up and seized the said Cockram and held him till this Informant made his escape". After this "the said Cockram took a chalke and after a most horrid prophane manner began to sweare, and as he had sworne many oaths he chalked them down then would sweare again and begin to new tally his horrid blasphemous oathes". This quarrel with Sheppard was soon healed for on the following Monday Cockram met him and "desired of him that he would goe and drink with him and takeing this deponent into the coffee house gave him a quart of October and desired that all malice might depart whereon this deponent replying he would have noe malice against him he the said Cockram drank to him and told him he was very glad that that business was put up or words to that effect".

The Churchwardens were not so easily placated and were intent on fining Dowsett for his profane oaths. Ralph Harding, a churchwarden, took along with him one of the constables, William Helpe, to get ten shillings from Dowsett "for his profanely swearing five oaths".⁵ He was not successful and even the "Commanding Officer

⁵ As Ensign Dowsett was an officer, he would incur under an act of 1694 (6 and 7 Wm. III, cap. 11) a fine of two shillings for each profane oath uttered. Servants, labourers, common soldiers and seamen could swear (at the first offence) for one shilling per oath.

of the Dragoons in Bridgwater one Mr. Molineux being then present . . . said he would swear some oaths in order to sitt in Stocks with the said Thomas Dowsett". Lt. Molineux also maintained of the Council that they "were all villains from the Mease even to the Constables' sticks".

The dragoons had little time for the Church anyway; for it was noted that "the officers of the Regiment commanded by the Brigadier Munden . . . doe seldom resort to the parish church . . . And in particular . . . on thursday the first day of this instant August being the anniversary of his Majesties happy accession to the Throne none of the said officers and but few of their common Souldiers were at ye said parish Church in the time of divine Service and Sermon". The Mayor, Aldermen and whole council had attended this service, of course, and had also lit a bonfire, cancelled the market and drank his Majesty's health on this special occasion.

The dragoons for their part listed a few rather thin complaints against the inhabitants of the town: "Thomas Fleman, a joiner, in Bridgwater called Peter Worrell opprobrious names assaulted him and spitt at him". Thomas Manchip was accused of "assembling and beating of a Dragoon (tho' he was out of his quarters after twelve of the clock in the night)". Another dragoon complained of a beating from George Beavis but it had to be admitted that he had "fled for fear of being apprehended for stealing beer or ale from the said George Beavis".

The Council talked of writing to their M.P., Mr. Palmer, but the letter, although written, was never sent. Instead they laid an official complaint before Lord Sunderland at Hampton Court. He replied on 13th August, 1717.

"My Lord Sunderland . . . etc. I have his Majesties Command to order a very strict enquiry to be made into this matter and that the same be done in the best manner . . . Coll. Nevill of Brigadier Munden's Regiment should be joyned with you in it and accordingly he is directed to reapeire to your town . . . to hear and examine the matter of fact . . . It being his Royall intention to punish in the severest manner any officer whatsoever who shall presume to be guilty of such outrages and contempt of the Civill Majestrate".

Colonel Nevill arrived in Bridgwater for the inquiry on 20th August, but relations between him and the Council were strained

from the very beginning. A series of letters passed between them but it is doubtful whether they actually met each other personally. The Council thought that the original evidence taken by them on the day after the riot should be read over to the witnesses and Col. Nevill be allowed to ask questions. Col. Nevill, obviously realising that much can be forgotten in a month, wanted to destroy the case by making each witness start his evidence from the beginning. The letters became more and more hostile.

The Council "doe desire you will be pleased to joine with us therein . . . to ask such further questions of the witnesses which have been examined".

Col. Nevill: "I cannot agree to the manner of examining the witnesses you propose but desire you will be pleased to examine all the witnesses as to the matters in fact and that what the witnesses say may be put into writeing from ye witnesses mouth without first reading over to them their Informacions already taken".

The Council then suggested that they should start with the new witnesses and decide the question of the others later. Col. Nevill would not accept such a compromise: "All I understand by your letter which I received halfe an hour agoe is that you would avoid giveing a direct answer whether you will agree or not to the method I proposed to you this morning in writeing for examining ye witnesses and which I must still insist upon because I take it to be most fair just and reasonable and if you continue to refuse complying with with it I know noe better way than to submitt it to the King's Determination".

On this note the inquiry broke down and the case was left to be heard at the Assizes.

The case at the Assizes is not well documented. The Process Book⁶ records the following charges: Thomas Dowsett for assault on Thomas Martin; Thomas Martin, Roger Cane and James Pettitt for riot and assault on Jonathan Cockram; Martin, Cane, Pettitt, Ambrose Hozee, Francis Veale and Thomas Williams for riot and assault on John Thomas; Martin, Cane, Pettitt and Hozee for riot and assault on Dowsett; and Cockram, Dowsett, William Freeman and Thomas with assault on Cane, Martin, Pettitt, Veale and

⁶ Public Record Office Ass 24/39.

Williams. The Process Book gives no indication of the outcome of the trials and none of the persons is mentioned in the only other surviving record of the Assize, the Gaol Book.⁷ The fact that counter-charges “for causing riots pretended riots and assaults” were brought against the Constables is confirmed by an entry in the Council minutes for 17th March, 1717 O.S. This noted all the above indictments and then gave authority for all “costs, charges, and expenses which hath been already expended paid and laid out or which shall be expended in the prosecution and defence of the indictments shall be disbursed by the Receiver of the said Borough”. Several copies of a barrister’s brief and notes exist but these add little more than the names of the Counsel (Mr. Reynell, Mr. Serjeant Pengelly, Mr. Malet and Mr. Raymond, solicitor) and the fact that Dowsett pleaded Not Guilty. The verdict, however, is mentioned in a statement on 28th June, 1718 by Stephen Kidgell who seems to have represented the Council at the trial:

“This Deponent further maketh oath that the said officers (to wit) Thomas Dowsett an Ensigne in Coll. Fanes Regiment of Foot William Freeman Cornett in Brigadier Mundens Regiment of Dragoons Jonathan Cockram a Quarter Master in the same Regiment and John Thomas a Corporall in the same Regiment were all convicted upon an Indictment against them for assembleing and beating the said Constables and their assistants in the execution of their offices and fined each Twenty pounds for the same and that the said Thomas Dowsett was alsoe convicted upon another indictment against him for firing a gun charged at ye said Thomas Martin and fined Fifty pounds it appearing upon his tryall that the shott narrowly missed the said Thomas Martin’s head and that he shott at him without any provocation and that the evidence was so plain and full against the said officers that the Jury found them all Guilty without going from the Barr”.

So ended the trial but this was not the end of the incident for the inquiry had intensified local quarrels and these continued long afterwards. Immediately on his arrival in Bridgwater, Colonel Nevill had been joined and advised by Mr. Robert Methwen who had long been at loggerheads with the Mayor and Aldermen. It was Methwen who told Nevill to demand the re-examination of all the witnesses.

⁷ Public Record Office Ass 23/5.

This at least was the opinion of Mr. Steare: "Ye said Robt Methwen whom the Colonel took to be his assistant . . . insisted to have all the informacions . . . thrown by . . . and this Deponent doth believe that the said Methwen used all his art to break off the conference in regard the more it was examined . . . the more notoriously and more violently appear". It was also because of Methwen that the communication between the Council and Col. Nevill was put in writing for Methwen was supposed to have a reputation for "swearing falsely", as explained by Ferdinando Anderdon:

"Mr. Robt. Methwin who having the name of man that was apt to swear in causes (wherein he was concerned as a Solicitor) being present as Clerke or assistant to Coll Nevill this Deponent and the said Mr. Jefferies and Mr. Steare did deliver or send to Coll Nevill what they had to say in writing to prevent any mistake and for fear what the said Methwin might swear against them".

Robert Methwen was a local solicitor, a member of the Council and also held the offices of leather searcher and supervisor of windows within the city of Bristol. It is not clear, however, how the quarrel between him and the Council started. The seeds were certainly there in 1716 when Methwen deliberately pressed the case of Grace Jones who had accused two of the Mayor's friends of raping her. In the same year Methwen was one of the leaders of the party which accused the Mayor and most of the Council of Jacobite sympathies. They said that the Mayor, Ferdinando Anderdon, whilst celebrating in the 'Fox' (a room at the 'Fighting Cocks'), had drunk a toast "Here is health to the King on the other side of the water hoping he will be here again in a short time wishing him better success than the last time". On another occasion in the Swan, the Mayor and Aldermen had played the tune "The King shall enjoy his own again". (Anderdon stoutly denied this with an ingenious if illogical answer: "but what Tunes they played (this Deponent having no Judgment or Skill in Musick) knows not, but no such Tune as the King Shall Enjoy his own again").

Perhaps the whole basis of the dispute was one of jealousy that neither Robert Methwen nor his friend and ally Roger Hoare had been elected Mayor or an alderman. This, perhaps, led Methwen to declare "he wondered such an inconsiderate puppy rascall block-head numskull as Mr. Jefferys should be chosen Mayor of ye Corporation".

Certainly the Mayor and Aldermen could find nothing good to say of Methwen as, for example, Alderman Steare:

“The said Methwen in Bridgwater is looked on and esteemed as a public disturber of the tranquility of the town hath for many years been infamous for often swearing for his clients at the Assizes”.

That this was a rather biassed opinion is shown, perhaps, by the testimonial of John Roberts, a gentleman of the town:

“As for Mr. Methwen this Deponent looks on him to be a man of good estate a good husband, a good father, a good father-in-law, a good Common Councill man and zealous for his Majesty King Georges service and interest”.

After many such incidents the Mayor and Aldermen would appear to have eventually gained the upper hand. Methwen was arrested and brought before the Quarter Sessions in January 1717 not only for speaking scandalous words about the Mayor but also for illegally entering the house of Richard Row and detaining his goods. Methwen maintained he was acting in his official capacity and was helping the local leather searcher, John Rogers. Incidentally, for this intrusion Methwen had the assistance of four dragoons.

The climax to all this came with Methwen’s dismissal from the Council on 25th August, 1718 together with his ally, Roger Hoare. Methwen anyway had not attended a meeting of the Council since 6th December, 1717. The pronouncement of his dismissal recorded all the complaints against him:

“Whereas Robert Methwen Gent one of the Capitall Burgesses of this Burrough and parish hath refused or neglected to appeare and attend at many of the Courts convocacions or Halls of the Mayor Aldermen and other Capitall Burgesses of the Common Councill tho he hath been duely summoned soe to doe without making or sending any excuse or excuses for such his refusall or neglects and on the Fifth day of October last and the Sixth day of December last did willfully and obstinately depart and leave the same without any leave or lawfull licence before the said Courts were dissolved And whereas the said Robert Methwen hath refused or neglected for severall months last past to attend the said Mayor to Church upon Sundays and other days of rejoyceing for publick blessings Whereas the said Robert Methwen being heard thereupon hath trifled and made frivolous and insufficient

excuse for his refusalls, neglects and contempts It is now ordered that the said Robert Methwen be and is hereby declared to be removed from being a Capitall Burgess”.

So ended an incident which had started as a disturbance by drunken soldiers a year before and which eventually became inextricably involved in the internal disputes and rivalries so typical of an 18th century borough.