

## **Voting Figures and How to Improve Them, St Albans 1733**

Two letters in The Gentleman's Magazine of 1733, concerning St Albans, resonate somewhat with political questions of today but a short introduction is needed to put them in context.

Sir Robert Walpole, First Lord of the Treasury under George II, introduced extensive financial reforms after the disaster of the South Sea Bubble. He reduced the National Debt and reviewed the system of taxation. In this latter exercise he determined to reduce the Land Tax to stimulate agriculture and paid for this by renewing the tax on salt. Instead of an import duty on wine and tobacco he proposed an excise duty on the sale of these and other commodities, the duty to be collected at warehouses, and not ports, in order to thwart the extensive crime of smuggling and consequent loss of revenue.

These proposals led to widespread opposition, including the alleged invasion of privacy by the excise collectors (the modern-day taxman). Another cause of complaint was the traditional objection of the English, since the Civil War, to a standing army. These objections were the subjects of the first letter quoted below, on the face of it a reasonable request by the voters to their newly-elected MP. It should be remembered that the franchise extended only to adult males possessing residential property of a specified value or, in certain borough constituencies, registered as freemen. This latter is the significance of the second letter.

### ***Gentleman's Magazine***

*Wednesday 24th January Vol.3, p.24 (1733)*

“John Merrill Esq was elected Representative in Parliament for St Albans when the Corporation gave him the following Instructions under their Common Seal, viz.

Sir, We have chose you to be our Representative in Parliament, which is the highest Trust we can repose in you; and in return for so great a Confidence, we expect you will have a constant Regard for the Interest of your Country and especially of this Borough; but as this is a very critical Conjunction, we think it necessary to give you more particular Instructions. In the first Place, Sir, as we are in profound Peace , we are surprized to find no Reduction of the Land Forces, which we conceive to be dangerous to our Constitution, and we feel to be very burthensome and oppressive to us. In the next Place, we are alarm'd with an Attempt to be made this Session of Parliament, for extending the Excise Laws to Commodities not yet excised. We hope, however, that these reports are false, and raised by the enemies to our Constitution, and to his Majesty's Government. But if anyone who calls himself an Englishman, should be so much an enemy to his Majesty and us, as to propose such a Scheme, we expect, Sir, from you, the most vigorous Opposition to it; for we shall look upon the Continuance of so great a Body of Land Forces, and an Increase of Excise Officers, under our present Circumstances, as a sure Presage of an entire Subversion of our antient Constitution, and all the valuable Privileges belonging to it which have so long distinguish'd us from our neighbouring Nations. A Constitution, Sir, that our Fore-fathers have, at the expense of their Lives and Fortunes, deliver'd down safe to us, and which, we hope, we shall have the Virtue and Courage to deliver to latest Posterity, under a Succession of Princes issuing from his present most sacred Majesty whose family came in on the Principles of Liberty, and who can be maintained in no other; whoever, therefore, tries to sap the Foundations of Liberty, is at the same Time undermining his Majesty's Title to the Crown, which Thoughts give us the utmost Abhorrence, and we expect from you, Sir, a constant and steady Pursuit of such Measures as will keep our Constitution, as near as may be in the same

Situation under which it has long flourish'd; and we don't doubt but in such Conduct you will have the Assistance of our other worthy member, and of all other Englishmen." The Corporations of Newbury, Bristol, York, Exeter, Norwich, Reading and many others wrote to their MPs to oppose any attempt towards a new excise or to extend the present excise."

*Gentleman's Magazine*

*17th February, Vol. 3, p.89 (1733)*

"A Letter from St Albans.

The Instructions pretended to be given, under the Common seal of the Corporation, to their new Representative were obtained in the following manner: As soon as the Election was over, (which was not without opposition) Mr. ----- entertained a large Number of the Inhabitants at the House of Wm. C---- [Carr] Mayor of St Albans. After dinner, the Mayor, (who is also the Post-master [returning officer!]) and two or three of the Aldermen were called out by Mr. M -----, and, going into his chamber, signed a Paper of Instructions, which were ready engrossed, but not by the Town-clerk, nor any person in Town, and which, we have Reason to believe, was brought down by the Secretary of a certain Gentleman, once honourable, but now not so much as a Justice of Peace. The same Paper was afterwards presented to others of the Alderman to sign, and to some at their own Houses. After the Signing, the Mayor fixed the Corporation Seal to it; for doing which he is challenged to produce the consent and approbation of his Brethren, and 'tis expressly charged on him, that he did it without a Court being called, and he did it without the previous Knowledge of his Brethren. It is very surprising to see so great a Profession of Zeal for the Constitution and Liberty of the Subject, made by a body of men, who, in defiance of their Oaths, and the Rights and privileges of St Albans have arbitrarily made great Numbers of Non-resident Freemen, not warranted by their Charter or Constitutions. About 200 have been made by this Mayor and his Brethren, of Gentlemen, Servants, and near 30 Clergymen, collected out of London and 5 or 6 Countries [counties], who are all enrolled in the Company of Mercers or Innholders; and, when summoned to serve a Party, come to over-power the Inhabitants and legal freeman; a Proceeding agreeable to the Model set by the late K. James, under whose arbitrary Reign the first non-resident Freeman and Alderman were made.

Yours etc.

Anon."

[The participation of non-resident freemen, as well as the common practice of bribery in elections, was common until the Reform Act of 1832]

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