

ROBERT BIDDULPH AND HIS BULL

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Fig. 1. Detail from Plate 22 of Charles Pye's *Provincial Coins and Tokens issued from the Year 1787 to the Year 1801*.

ONE OF the more artistically dramatic of British eighteenth-century tokens is that issued, initially as a medalet, to commemorate the victory of the radical Whig parliamentary candidate, Robert Biddulph (1761–1814) (Fig. 3), in the Herefordshire election of June, 1796. Charles Pye tells us that two substantive versions were produced by the London medallist, John Milton (1759–1805), the dies of the first (Plate 22, no. 9 (Dalton and Hamer [DH]: Herefordshire 1); Fig. 1), that he reckoned were very rare ('r, r, r' on his scale of scarcity), breaking after 'a few specimens' were struck. Of the second (Plate 22, no. 10 (DH: Herefordshire 4); Fig. 1) he claimed that 2,076 specimens were minted, 'intended for halfpence, but found too expensive'.¹ Although normally struck in copper – occasionally bronzed – proof specimens of the two versions were also produced in silver, presumably for presentation to favoured supporters.

The striking of the token was more complex than Plate 22 would suggest, however, because, as Pye indicated in his 'Observations', there were 'several' pieces that combined the obverse of his no. 9 with the reverse of no. 10 (DH: Herefordshire 2). In the 'Advertisement' or preface to his 1801 catalogue Pye acknowledged the help given to him 'respecting tokens made in London' by, among others, 'Mr. Milton' who, he added, 'kindly gave a most minute account of all in which he was employed'.² There is, therefore, little reason to doubt the accuracy of Pye's comments on this particular issue. Even so, to complicate the matter still further, there are also specimens that combine the obverse of no. 10 with the reverse of no. 9 (DH: Herefordshire 3). This latter combination was not referred to by Pye – nor had it been listed by James Conder in 1798. Interestingly, Miss Banks – who died in September 1818 – did not appear to have a specimen but one did eventually surface in Sir George Chetwynd's collection; we do not know when it had been added to his cabinet but it was in time to be included in Thomas Sharp's

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¹ Pye 1801, [11]. The diameter of the tokens is 32 mm and the average weight of the 'currency' issue (DH: Herefordshire 4) a fraction short of 18 g. This compares with a diameter of no more than 30 mm and weight of 10 g for the average halfpenny token of the time. The tokens were treated as penny size by Denton and Prattent 1795–97, Index, 5; Conder 1798, 45; and Sharp 1834, 12.

² Pye 1801, [3]. Among the 'others' were Miss Banks and Matthew Young.

catalogue of 1834.³ Its absence from the earlier publications, especially that of Pye who had obviously not been alerted to its existence by Milton, causes one to wonder whether this particular variety was a later, nineteenth-century, restrike produced after Milton's death in 1805 for Matthew Young, who seems to have handled much of Milton's token business and continued to possess at least some of his dies.⁴ If this is so it calls into question Pye's implication that *both* dies of no. 9 broke early. Examination of extant pieces certainly suggests that there was little or no deterioration of the *reverse* die of no. 9.

My belief, therefore, is that the sequence of varieties set out by Dalton and Hamer [*DH*]⁵ is incorrect and should be re-ordered as follows:

(a) *DH*: 1 (Pye 9):



Obv. An infuriated bull trampling on his chains with the date – June 3rd 1796 – above and the die-sinker's signature in the exergue.⁶

Rev. An apple tree and a short-handled plough resting on exergue line within an oak wreath. Specimens usually exhibit a developing obverse die crack as shown in the second obverse example above. Very Rare.

(b) *DH*: 2 (Pye – : but Pye noted that there were 'several' pieces that combined the obverse of his no. 9 with the reverse of no. 10):



Obv. As (a).

Rev. Similar to (a) but plough is long-handled and there is no exergue line.

This version is presumably a trial by Milton of a preferred reverse prior to deterioration of the obverse die of *DH*: 1. Rare.

³ Conder 1798, 45; Sharp 1834, 12, no. 4. Nor was the piece included in Thomas King, junior's sale of Thomas Welch's collection in September 1801: reprinted in the introductory matter of Pye 1916.

⁴ It is known that Matthew Young had some of Milton's 'Fullarton' tokens struck for the collectors' market, probably in the 1820s, and it is not in the least unlikely that he similarly had other pieces struck from dies that were in his possession: Dykes 2002, 156. It is perhaps significant that many pieces in various series originally executed by Milton exist from dies that exhibit rust raising the question as to whether Young acquired most, if not all, of Milton's stock of dies and had pieces struck from them. The dies do not, however, appear in the extensive series of Young sales but by then they may have been in the possession of manufacturers such as William Joseph Taylor: pers. comm. by Peter Preston-Morley.

⁵ Dalton and Hamer, 1910–18, 53.

⁶ The date – 3 June 1796 – was the date of the start of the county poll, the declaration not being until 6 June.

(c) *DH*: 4 (Pye 10):



Obv. A more powerful bull than that in (a) and (b), and, as Sharp puts it, with 'the gender of the animal expressed'. The legend *HEREFORDSHIRE* is above and the date in the exergue below.

Rev. As (b) with long-handled plough.

This is the piece issued for currency, Pye saying that 2,076 specimens were struck. Today it is the commonest variety extant.

Scarce.

(d) *DH*: 3 (Pye –):



Obv. As (c).

Rev. As (a) with short-handled plough

Not listed by Pye (1801) or Conder (1798) and not apparently included in Miss Banks's collection. First (?) referred to by Sharp (1834) in his catalogue of the Chetwynd collection.

An anomalous piece, some specimens exhibiting a light die flaw in the obverse exergue probably due to rusting indicating that the issue succeeded (c) *DH*: 4.

It is conceivably a Matthew Young concoction produced as late as the 1820s.

Rare.

While Milton was an engraver of great professional skill his artistry, fluent as it was, was derivative rather than original and he was not regarded by the cognoscenti as a *designer* of the first water. Commending him as a 'die-sinker and seal cutter', Sir Joseph Banks, who always took an almost paternal interest in Milton, nevertheless questioned his creative talent and observed that he lacked the elegance or the classical authority of a Flaxman.⁷ He was, though, accepted as 'a gentleman well versed in the study of antiquities' and, remarkably for one of his calling, was elected to the Society of Antiquaries in 1792.⁸ He was certainly familiar with antique art and symbolism but, like many medallists, he was often dependent on others for his ideas. Both Flaxman and James Tassie were not without influence⁹ and, like John Gregory Hancock before him, Milton derived at least some of his inspiration from Joseph Spence's

⁷ Sir Joseph Banks to the Irish politician and agriculturist, John Foster [later 1st Baron Oriel], [28 June 1802]: Natural History Museum: DTC XIII, 183–4; Dawson 1958, 341.

⁸ 24 May 1792. The phrase 'A gentleman well versed in the study of antiquities', it should be noted, was the standard commendatory formula for election to the Antiquaries at this time. Milton's sponsors, in addition to Sir Joseph Banks, were the President, the Earl of Leicester (master of the Mint, 1790–94), the collectors Samuel Tyssen (in commemoration of whom Milton struck a medal probably in 1802: *BHM* 491; Stainton 1983, 144), George Keate, FRS, and James Bindley, FRS, and the Rev. John Grose and Richard Haworth: from the Society's minutes kindly extracted for me by Adrian James, the Assistant Librarian.

⁹ At least two of Milton's medals were designed by Flaxman while Tassie was the source for Milton's 'Adam Smith' pattern tokens for William Fullarton: Stainton 1983, 137 and Dykes 2002, 151–2.

Polymetis, a lavishly illustrated folio that related the works of ancient artists to the writings of Roman poets.¹⁰ The engraving of the bull, for instance, was modelled on an image of ‘Taurus’ from Spence’s gloss on the signs of the zodiac, although the original animal had no chains (Fig. 2). ‘On some gems’, Spence explained, ‘you have his whole figure in the act of butting with his head, and tearing up the ground with his feet; just like the bull described by Virgil, or like any common bull you please’.¹¹



Fig. 2. ‘Taurus’ from Plate XXV of Joseph Spence’s *Polymetis*, 1747.

Pye’s explanation of the circumstances of the issue of the medalet – ‘struck upon Mr. Biddulph gaining a contested election for the county of Hereford’ – had already been amplified by the poet and political reformer, George Dyer (1755–1841), writing in the radical *Monthly Magazine and British Register* a year or so after the event. Dyer, spurred on by James Wright’s earlier ‘Observations on Coins’,¹² had expressed the view that whenever

Medals are struck, illustrative of any recent occurrence, of public notoriety, or of acknowledged utility, ... a short history of the event, and a plate descriptive of the coin, should be inserted in your Magazine. How far the occurrence may be of sufficient importance to insure celebrity, or how far the coin may display workmanship, so as to invite attention, must always be left to your decision.

But Dyer had an axe to grind and his true intent in writing was brought out in his next paragraph:

My mind was led into this train, by the return of the 3d of June. This day was distinguished in Herefordshire, by the independent manner in which Mr. ROBERT BIDDULPH was chosen representative for that county, in 1796. The 3d day of June, therefore, is celebrated by the yeomanry of Herefordshire, and an appropriate medal is struck. I have sent you one of them; and, as I think some useful hints may be suggested on this subject, I shall be happy to pursue them in a future paper...¹³

No engraving of the medalet was published in the magazine but in accordance with his promise Dyer returned to the subject more fulsomely in a further letter – introduced by a lengthy

¹⁰ Joseph Spence (1699–1768) first published his *Polymetis* in 1747, new editions appearing in 1755 and 1774. Although it quickly lost any serious reputation it remained a useful guide to mythological images and abridged versions for the use of schools were current until the 1820s. For Spence see *ODNB*.

¹¹ Spence 1747, 173. Spence’s reference to Virgil is to the latter’s *Eclogues*, III, 87: ‘... pascite taurum,/ iam cornu petatet pedibus qui spargat harenam’: ‘... feed fat a bull that butts already and spurns the sand with his hooves’: Fairclough and Goold 1999, 44–5.

¹² For Wright and his numismatic writings see Dykes 1996, 195–9 and esp. 195 and 198, n. 4.

¹³ *The Monthly Magazine and British Register*, III, June 1797, 441. For Dyer see *ODNB*.

and turgid disquisition on medallic art – that, after some untoward delay, was eventually published in the magazine in July 1798.¹⁴

June 3, 1796 [Dyer wrote] was a memorable day to the freeholders of Herefordshire; several consider it as the æra of their independence. The character of that county, beyond many other counties in England, naturally inclines to independence, in consequence of the number of small freeholds, into which it is divided, and the productive quality of the land.

Notwithstanding this, through the interest of great families, the county had long been represented in parliament by persons who had not espoused the interests of the people, and one (Sir G. Cornwall [*recte* Cornewall]) had recently exposed himself to suspicions detrimental to his popularity. These circumstances, together with the critical situation of public affairs, and the impatience of the people on account of the high price of corn, which they supposed to proceed from the war, agitated the minds of the yeomanry, and they determined to do themselves justice.

Accordingly, a few days before the last general election, the people of the county rose, as it were, by one general impulse. Till the Wednesday previous to the election they had done nothing actively. The day of election, however, being fixed for Friday the 3d of June, a meeting of highly respectable and patriotic freeholders assembled, who finally determined to nominate candidates, to afford the people an opportunity of expressing their sentiments to the old members. The persons in contemplation were, Colonel JOHN SCUDAMORE, Capt. SYMMONDS [*recte* Symonds], and ROBERT BIDDULPH, Esq. all equally entitled to the character of friends of liberty, and only preferable one to the other as accidental circumstances might render them more or less objects of public confidence.¹⁵

Considerations of long and acknowledged services rendered every preference in favour of the name of SCUDAMORE natural, and the recent injustice heaped on Mr. BIDDULPH, at his late contest for Leominster, excited a general indignation in the breasts of the people. It was, therefore, determined to put these two gentlemen in nomination. . . .

The yeomanry of Herefordshire considering the 3d of June 1796 the æra of their triumph over the powerful influence of great families and of their asserting and obtaining their independence had an appropriate medal struck which I send you.

The figure of a bull has long been received as symbolical of the dullness or tameness of the English character. On the FACE of the medal, therefore, appears a bull breaking its chains, and trampling them under its feet. The inscription on the edge, or, as it is called the LEGEND is simply Herefordshire. The exergue, June 3, 1796.

The reverse is descriptive of the agricultural character of Herefordshire, which is well known to abound with the apple tree, the pride of that county and with the oak tree. A circle of oak leaves, an apple tree, and plough, are, therefore, devices properly illustrative of this character. The simplicity and appropriateness of this medal render it unnecessary for me to offer any more observations. . . .

George Dyer's gloss on the Herefordshire election is of more than passing interest but is it rather a reflection of his belief in the independent freeholder as the basis of liberty than the circumstances as they really were? For all his stress on the independence of the county's 'yeomanry' the 'interest of great families' was still powerfully to the fore in 1796 and the outcome of the election was due to more complex political manoeuvrings than Dyer would have been prepared to admit. For twenty years Herefordshire's parliamentary representation had been divided between the interests of two of the county's established political families, the Harleys, Earls of Oxford, and the Cornwalls of Moccas Court. At the general election of 1790 there had been no hint of hostility to either of the sitting members, the Hon. Thomas Harley, friendly to the Pitt administration, and Sir George Cornwall, a consistent supporter of the opposition. But, in 1794, Cornwall had gone over to government with the Portland Whigs, a splintering of the parliamentary opposition which had reduced Charles James Fox's supporters from about 180 MPs to a rump of a mere fifty or so. This is what Dyer meant by Cornwall's exposing 'himself to suspicions detrimental to his popularity' and it was this that brought him down at the general election of 1796. Not a result of any grass-roots reaction against the 'powerful influence of great families', as Dyer suggested, for then the Tory Harley would have been an equally if not more appropriate victim but rather of a vigorous and vindictive cam-

¹⁴ *The Monthly Magazine and British Register*, V, Supplementary Number, 15 July 1798. Dyer's letter had originally been sent to the magazine 'nearly a twelvemonth' earlier but, according to the editor, it had been mislaid; one wonders how inadvertent this temporary loss was.

¹⁵ Dyer was somewhat confused here. Colonel John Scudamore of Kentchurch was a sitting member for the *borough* of Hereford and had been securely so since 1764. Both he and his fellow Foxite, James Walwyn, supported by the Duke of Norfolk, were returned unopposed for the borough in 1796. Captain Thomas Powell Symonds of Pengethley, another Norfolk attachment, was eventually returned unopposed for the borough on the death of Walwyn in 1800. See Namier and Brooke 1964, III, 419; Thorne 1986, II, 197–8 and V, 116, 328–9, 477.

paign mounted personally against Cornwall's defection by the Foxite Duke of Norfolk, high steward of Hereford and himself a magnate of some political clout in the county.¹⁶ Norfolk had already in the election tried to impose a 'violent opposition man' on the 'open' constituency of Leominster but his candidate, Robert Biddulph, had lost by one vote.¹⁷ Norfolk, now turning his rancour against the apostate Cornwall, brought in his protégé Biddulph as a last-minute candidate for the county.¹⁸

It was a vendetta, according to Cornwall, 'most unexpected' in its success 'even by those who made the attack' but, playing upon the admitted concerns over the high price of corn and the growing unpopularity of the war 'amongst the yeomanry',¹⁹ the revanchist Biddulph, 'the Friend of Peace and Liberty',²⁰ was able to unseat Cornwall though at a cost of £3,000. Even before the declaration, however, Cornwall had in effect given up. With over 800 votes still unpolled and the constituency's non-resident out-voters not yet mobilised he could not face spending more than the £2,000 he had already laid out on the election; financially, he dreaded a 'constant canvass'. He would console himself with the thought that he had gone down as one of the 'Duke of Portland's martyrs'²¹ but had he persevered he might well have retained his seat. He had never lacked for supporters and the dismay felt by many constituents at the Norfolk coup was brought out in a contemporary skit on Biddulph's celebratory medalet – later printed by William Henry Parker, of Broad Capuchin Lane, Hereford – but unpublished at the time.

To
JOHN BULL, of Herefordshire,
On seeing a Medal in Honour of his Exploits on the
Third of JUNE, 1796:

At which time the following lines were written, but now first published:

N.B.—Since the first circulation of this Copper Trophy a new Impression has been struck with some *additions*.

ALAS! poor JOHN BULL, to what ills art thou fated!
 For ever bamboozled, and worried, and baited!
 Whilst soft-hearted friends thy sad hardships bewail,
 They hoodwink thy eyes, and clap thorns to thy tail.
 Thus goaded to fury, what pranks dost thou play,
 Kick, trample, and toss whate'er comes in thy way!
 And still by the close-sticking torment pursued,
 You spurn e'en the hand which supplied you with food.
 For freaks such as these how your drivers extol ye,
 Whilst they laugh in their sleeves at your wonderful folly!
 To complete thy disgrace they have lately thought proper
 To blazon thy shame on a penn'orth of copper.
 What a pitiful figure before and behind,
 Have they here held thee up to the scorn of mankind.
 Thy honest blunt phiz—how it stares on the brass—

¹⁶ Through his marriage into the Scudamore family of Holme Lacy and control of its estate said to be worth £30,000 a year.

¹⁷ *Pace* Dyer Biddulph had not suffered an injustice at Leominster. Twenty-one of his votes had been rejected on the grounds that 'some of our voters had received parish relief and some had, despite our injunctions, boasted of receiving money for their votes': Norfolk, quoted in Thorne 1986, II, 200.

¹⁸ The general election lasted from 25 May until 29 June 1796 but the precise dates of polling in any particular constituency were set by its returning officer. There was thus no necessary consistency of date between constituencies and, as in Herefordshire, a candidate who was unsuccessful in one constituency could move on to another where an election was taking place. Polling could continue for many days, so long as there were voters wanting to participate and candidates wishing to continue although from 1785 the maximum duration of polling in county elections was limited to 15 days. For Biddulph's parliamentary career see Thorne 1986, III, 205–6.

¹⁹ Owing to the bad harvest of 1795 wheat – increasingly the main constituent of bread in the Midlands and the south of England – was in short supply and its price had escalated. Many blamed the dearth on the French war with its vastly increased requirement of grain for the military and an assumed – if not wholly real – disruption of corn imports. In Herefordshire Biddulph's supporters took care to ensure that the popular cry of 'no barley bread' was directed particularly against Cornwall.

²⁰ The Foxite platform was for a negotiated peace with France and the repeal of Pitt's domestic seditious legislation. 'True Foxites loathed the Crown, and they opposed the war because they saw it as a pretext to undermine still further the liberties of the English people': Hilton 2006, 64.

²¹ The county return recorded 1,565 votes for Harley, 1,292 for Biddulph and 1,015 for Cornwall: Thorne 1986, II, 196; III, 205, 502.

One would swear from a Bull thou'rt transformed to an Ass!
 Thy skeleton ribs with compassion we view,
 And—masculine honours at least were thy due!
 Then, prithee, good John, howsoe'er thou may'st scoff it,
 Take a hint from the medal, and turn it to profit.
 Leave butting and roaring—return to the plough,
 Nor quit for harsh oak thy lov'd appletree bough.
 With old cider and old English freedom contented,
 May thy madness, at length, be sincerely repented,
 And ne'er may'st thou more be so ill *represented*.

Six years later at the general election of 1802 the 'breach of faith' with Cornwall was repaired. In a complete volte-face he was returned top of the poll with John Geers Cotterell of Garnons, a candidate also inclined to the administration, as the second member.²² Biddulph, who in parliament had energetically lived up to his reputation as an advanced Whig, was ousted by a crushing margin of 873 votes. Parker's original verses were now quickly published with an addendum:

Well done, honest John, these are ample amends—
 Thy reason's restored, and thou know'st thy true friends.
 Henceforth may'st thou rest from political quarrels,
 Crown'd with heart-cheering Apple and evergreen Laurels.
 The well-woven garland thy temples shall shade,
 Which shall ne'er be untwisted, and never shall fade.²³

More soberly, in the opinion of the *Times*,

The contest now carrying on in Herefordshire is the best contradiction that can be given to the belief that has been generally entertained of the political sentiments of that County. Mr. BIDDULPH, who has constantly voted with Opposition on every question during the war, and considered the Corresponding Societies as very harmless institutions, is suddenly left in a most disgraceful minority, even after his re-election was considered secure. A proof how little his politics have been esteemed in that County.²⁴

In the fashion of the time Biddulph's husting had been supported by rousing verses put out by Edwin Goode Wright, editor of the *Hereford Journal*, to be sung to William Boyce's strains for the patriotic *Heart of Oak*:

BIDDULPH

The Man of a Free and Independent People

TUNE—"Hearts of Oak."

I.

HARK! Hark! ye bold Britons, to Liberty's Voice,
 She invites you to BIDDULPH,—the Man of your Choice:
 He, firm as the *Oak*, in Freedom's great Cause,
 A Pillar will prove to your Rights and your Laws.

CHORUS.

Heart of Oak in our hats, staunch in Liberty's Cause,
We are always ready,
Steady, Boys, steady,
 To BIDDULPH and FREEDOM, RELIGION and LAWS.

II.

Come on, then, with vigor, in spite of all *Arts*,
 And Poll for brave BIDDULPH,—the *Man of your Hearts*;

²² The county return recorded 2,592 votes for Cornwall, 2,049 for Cotterell and 1,176 for Biddulph. Cotterell's election, as a result of a vindictive petition by Biddulph's supporters, was declared void but it was of no avail to Biddulph for at the ensuing by-election, John Matthews, a Cotterell supporter, was returned unopposed as a *locum tenens*. Matthews made way for Cotterell, unopposed, in the general election of 1806, the latter remaining a member for the county until 1831: Thorne 1986, II, 196–7; III, 205, 502, 508. Cornwall retired at the general election of 1807 rather than face a contest although he had been confident he could have come in: Thorne 1986, III, 502.

²³ Published at Hereford, 21 July 1802. Reproduced from Bell 1966, 30–31.

²⁴ *The Times*, 21 July 1802.

That all honest Men may exultingly see,
That the *Lads of old Cider* will dare to be free.

CHORUS.

Heart of Oak in our hats, staunch in Liberty's cause, &c.

III.

Shall the Lad who the sweet Voice of Liberty hears,
His Freedom renounce, and work ever in *Geers?*—
O no!—Then, come on, Boys, we'll drive, hand in hand,
Corruption and Tyranny out of the Land.

CHORUS.

Heart of oak in our hats, staunch in Liberty's Cause, &c.

IV.

We'll bear him in Triumph, that *Cott-r-ll* may see,
Galling Chains we detest, and resolve to be free.—
Here's to BIDDULPH and Freedom! his praises shall sound,
Triumphantly glorious, the Universe round.

CHORUS.

*Heart of oak in our hats, staunch in Liberty's Cause, &c.*²⁵

Wright's doggerel, however stirring it might have been, had failed to excite the electorate a second time, as he was forced to recognise in a plaintive rejoinder to Parker's verses on the medal:

NOTE UPON NOTE

or

A Sequel to JOHN BULL'S Equivocal Eulogy, July 21, 1802

AND AS A HINT TO HIS

FUTURE WELFARE.

'Tis a knot, my dear John, that will bind you, indeed!
'Till again from such bondage by BIDDULPH you're freed:
'Tis a knot like to *Wyndham's*,²⁶ who, for reasons of State,
Your liberty cramped, your prowess to bait!
'Tis a Garland, they tell you, to honour your brow;
It would puzzle *their* heads, if you asked them— 'Pray how?'
When your brethren of old to the Altar were led,
Such garlands were twisted, and deck'd out the head;
But the fatal axe follow'd — when 'procumbit humi bos';
Your blood was purloined by 'Fur atque Sacerdos'.²⁷

Biddulph was never to free the electors of Herefordshire from their 'bondage' and was to remain out of parliament until 1806. In 1801, however, he married Charlotte Myddelton, a Welsh co-heiress and herself successor to the Chirk Castle estate in Denbighshire, and adopted the name Myddelton Biddulph. At the general election five years later, having failed to secure a nomination for Worcestershire, Biddulph put himself forward for Denbigh Boroughs where the Myddelton family had had a controlling interest since the early eighteenth century. Here he was at last successful but gained the seat only by forcing out the sitting member and Pittite supporter, his brother-in-law, the Hon. Frederick West. It was a vicious and unexpected action that was to result in lasting family rancour but it was perhaps very much in character with the man.

Robert Biddulph was the eldest son of Michael Biddulph, a Ledbury barrister and land-owner. Before entering British politics Biddulph had made a fortune in Bengal as a private

²⁵ Bodleian Library, University of Oxford: Johnson Ballads, fol. 313.

²⁶ A reference to William Windham (1750–1810), Whig member of parliament greatly influenced by Edmund Burke, and one of the architects of the Portland Whigs' rapprochement with the Pitt government in 1794.

²⁷ Reproduced from Bell 1966, 31–2.



Fig. 3. Portrait of Robert Biddulph, c.1801, traditionally attributed to Sir William Beechey. The background view is of part of Chirk Castle.²⁸

merchant contracting for bullocks.²⁹ He returned to Herefordshire in 1795 and, like many another ‘nabob’, he came home with parliamentary pretensions, soon attaching himself to the Duke of Norfolk’s interest in his native county. His reputation as a ‘violent opposition man’ had already been established in India where he had been a thorn in the flesh of the Bengal government. Once in parliament, as a staunch Foxite, he carried on a strenuous criticism of the East India Company, and when he contemplated a return visit to the sub-continent in 1798 Cornwallis, the former Governor General, was concerned enough to issue a warning to his successor.

I have stated Mr. Biddulph’s conduct towards my Indian Government in such terms as I think he justly merits. As Mr. Biddulph is a Member of Parliament, he may be looked up to by the young men of the settlement, who have chiefly gone abroad at a very early period of life, and consequently very ill-informed in regard to European politics. Nothing could be so prejudicial to themselves as well as to the general good order of the settlement, as to instil into their minds a spirit of party and of opposition to all Government. Liberty and equality is a most pernicious and dangerous doctrine in all parts of the world; but it is particularly ill-suited to the Company’s servants in India, who are to thrive by minding their own business, and paying a due regard to the commands of their superiors in the service. I trust, therefore, to Mr. Biddulph’s honour that there will be a truce to his politics during his expedition to India.³⁰

Biddulph took care to assure Cornwallis that he would adopt ‘the most profound silence . . . as to European politics’ but in the event he did not go back to India. A wealthy landowner in both Herefordshire and Denbighshire he succeeded his uncle as a partner in the London banking house of Cocks, Biddulph & Co of Charing Cross in 1800 and when he eventually returned to parliament five years later, renewing his opposition stance ‘as an ardently zealous reformer’, he projected himself ‘as a man of business with a sense of mission about securing public economy’. In 1812, though, his parliamentary career was brought to an acrimonious end

²⁸ See Steegman 1957–62, I (1957), 87 (no. 29) and Plate 15 D. The portrait was sold at Christie’s Chirk Castle Sale on 21 June 2004 (Sale 7000, lot 107).

²⁹ Ross 1859, III, 23, n. 1; Thorne 1986, III, 205.

³⁰ Ross 1859, III, 23.

through the machinations of his unforgiving brother-in-law. Biddulph died in 1814 at the age of 53 leaving his heir with an income of £70,000.³¹

To return to the medalet. Although the piece itself gives no indication of its actual issuer there is no reason to doubt Pye's assertion, made, one assumes, on the testimony of Milton, that Biddulph himself was directly responsible for its commissioning, its 'proprietor' as he puts it. It is hardly credible that the medalet was the result of any spontaneous gesture on the part of the 'yeomanry' of Herefordshire as George Dyer would have us believe. However much it might be dressed up as a populist celebration of their 'triumph over the powerful influence of great families' and an assertion of their 'independence' the truth is the medalet was a *Foxite* trophy, a celebration of Biddulph's success as a Foxite 'Friend of Peace and Liberty' in a highly politicized election. While the image of the enraged Hereford bull, normally a comparatively docile animal – hence Dyer's dismissive comment about its being symbolic of the 'dullness or tameness of the English character' – did represent the county electorate,³² his ferocity was directed at Pitt's anti-radical legislation and war policy rather than any local aristocratic despotism.

Having said this, in its original manifestation (Pye 1801, Plate 22, no. 9 (Fig. 1); *DH*: Herefordshire 1), it is unlikely that the medalet would have caused much stir outside Herefordshire with only a date to inform the public's curiosity. The breakage of the obverse die, however, must have encouraged Biddulph to make the piece more generally intelligible if only by the slight gesture of having the county name inserted. It is likely that it was always his intention to aim for a reasonably wide circulation for the piece and, as Pye implies, to introduce it into the currency; not so much as a commercial token but rather as a sophisticated piece of political propaganda, à la Thomas Spence. Such a plan was initially frustrated by the breakage of the obverse die and eventually curtailed by the overriding expense of a piece too extravagant for its purpose. According to Pye 2,076 specimens of the revised version (Pye 1801, Plate 22, no. 10 (Fig. 1); *DH*: Herefordshire 4) were produced before the stoppage and it was one of these that the Londoner Dyer was able to acquire. How plain the medalet's message was to the ordinary public even with the addition of the county name is questionable. Few extant pieces show much evidence of circulation but, however abstruse its iconography, the exceptional artistry of the medalet must have ensured that it quickly found its way into collectors' cabinets; at the Welch sale in September 1801, with the market for provincial coins and tokens somewhat depressed, Pye's very rare no. 9 in copper could still fetch as much as 9s. 6d. and no. 10, 5s., a far cry from the nominal value of a halfpenny for which Biddulph intended to release them.³³

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³¹ Thorne 1986, III, 205–6. The bank – at 43 Charing Cross (16 Whitehall since 1931) – was acquired by Martins Bank in 1919 becoming part of Barclays Bank in 1968. The bank building (remodelled in 1874) is now a public house and wine bar.

³² And not as some of Biddulph's opponents snidely maintained a reflection of Biddulph's earlier 'nabob' career in India.

³³ See Pye 1916 as in n.3 above. Pye 1801, [11] had estimated the then current values of his no. 9 at 15s. and even no. 10 at a remarkable 10s.6d.

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