

“The Sap Scull Club” and the political circles of Wells

Introduction

In 1766, the date of this document, Clement 3 would have been 32 year of age and not yet inherited the Parham Plantation, which took place in 1770. However, he was already following Law as his profession and held a seat in Parliament as an MP for Wells.

This document is of interest as it comprises the ‘Articles, Rules and Regulations’ of what appeared to be a drinking club founded upon satirical caricatures of local figures around the time of the 1766 Parliamentary election in Wells. Drinking clubs were popular among the upper classes, particularly in London, and varied to their degree of drunkenness or debauchery permitted. Whether the purpose of this club was for excessive drinking is not clear, but the encoded allusion to local public figures definitely links it to a satirical intention against the ‘other side’ in the upcoming Parliamentary election.

‘Sap-scul’ was a reference to someone rather stupid or foolish and this seems a derisory description of the opposing political candidate. Some names seem to be made up some are possibly anagrams to act as a ruse rather than direct references to certain people as objects of ridicule. There are elusive references to characters in mythology or contemporary theatrical figures and satirists. So, was this a genuine ‘secret society’ or drinking club? Or rather perhaps a piece of nonsense for entertainment and satire? It would have co-existed at the same time as The Wells Company of Mercers and there may have been overlaps with members’ social circles. No direct reference is made to any of the members of the Mercers as named in David Mather’s report, although Mather does identify the Wells Company of Mercers who met regularly at city inns or members houses whose main form of entertainment was imbibing alcohol. There seemed to be a kitty of alcohol which was brought forward to the next meeting.

In the 1766 election Clement Tudway was standing as a candidate alongside Robert Child. Their opposing candidate was Peter Taylor.

Robert Child (1739-1782) was the grandson of Francis Child (MP for Devizes, Wiltshire 1671) who was a wealthy goldsmith and banker, founder of Child’s Bank. He acquired Osterley House, Middlesex as the family home in 1713. Robert was Oxford educated and became head of Child &Co in 1763. In 1765, until his death in 1782, he became MP for Wells but never spoke in the House of Commons. He was a candidate for Wells, along with Clement Tudway

Peter Taylor (1714-1777) was the son of Robert Taylor, a grocer of Wells. He became a silversmith in The Strand, London. In the seven year war with France he was appointed paymaster general, returning to England in 1763, purchasing the estate in Burcot. He sought to become MP for Wells and served from 1765 to 1766 when he was unseated by the House. He sought to contest the election again in 1768 when he stood against Tudway and Child. His son Robert Paris Taylor was the High Sherrieff of Somerset 1765-1766.

Robert Tudway was Mayor of Wells and the time and the family wielded considerable local power in the Corporation and were in the position of being able to manipulate the election by creating honorary Burgesses.

In 1765 there was an altercation between Robert Tudway and Robert Paris Taylor . The latter did not want the election to go ahead on Christmas Day as it did not please the Bishop of Bath and Wells. Robert Tudway, Mayor, refused to accept a receipt (a writ or warrant) delaying the election date. William Keate (Senior Master of the Borough of Wells) set the date to the 26th December. On the day, more wrangling took place when some votes were disqualified, although Tudway and Child won their seats and Taylor lost.

Election propaganda for Robert Child included a satirical song headed with an insignia 'Child For Ever – No Turn Coat.' The song was called 'The New Song called Burcot Bear, by a Freeman of Wells' and referred to Peter Taylor(The Bruin of Burcot) in stanza 2

*"Great Bruin of Burcot and all his wild bred clan
We strongly oppose even to a man
We'll make rough Bruin rant and tear
And below like a drive BEAR
For no success shall he have here, with our corporation"*

Taylor is referred to as a 'turncoat', however the opposition retaliation with another 'New Song' in which Tudway was referred to as 'An Antigua Devil' under the banner of 'slavery for ever', supported by the 'Child forever'.ⁱⁱ

It seems that rather than obscure rules for a drinking club the whole thing may have been a piece of political satire using the fashion for such clubs as the focus.

The following transcript by Harriett Moffatt of the Archives at Somerset Heritage Centre is of the document found in the Tudway papers lodged there. It is reproduced in its entirety including the crossed out text which appear in the original in this way.

The Sap=sculls Club

*Articles Rules & Regulations, to be Observed and kept by the Members of the Sap=Scull ⁱⁱⁱor
~~Fools Cap~~ Club; Begun and founded in the Borough of Wells the first of April or Allfools day
1766.*

*First, It is to be known that this Club is formed under the Patronage, ~~and to keep up the~~
~~Discomfited Interest~~, of the great and all Blusterious Nero of Wells, The Right Hon[oura]ble
Peter Lord Simbledon,^{iv} Baron of Bears=Cott, in the County of Somerset.*

**The Author might have wrote Illustrious Hero, for aught we know, however, as one reading
might be descriptive of his Lordship, and the other not so, we have left the Text as we found it.
Warburton^v.*

Therefore

*2 nd Every Member, before his Admission, and as a necessary qualification thereto, must
implicitly believe, that our great patron has no equal upon Earth; but in ~~great~~ extraordinary
feats Surpasses all mankind; Crowned heads not Excepted, he having been once Crowned
himself, in the prepared State Chair of Disappointment, with a Crown, which would have ~~suted~~
~~him much better~~ been much more applicable to the occasion had it been turned into the Cap of
our own order, Adorned with Bells and the long ears bestowed by Apollo on Midas^{vi}.*

*3 rd In the Absence of our Patron, it shall be lawfull for our good Broder & renowned Patriot,
Mr Zachary Fungus^{vii}, who has often Bled for his Country and Drawn Teeth likewise, to
assume both the Chair and Crown; adorned as above ~~the latter having the aforesaid [illegible]~~
~~of an Extraordinary Magnitude, first affixed [illegible]~~, and the said Mr Z F being arrayed in his*

Blue and first Gold Suit; as nothing can Ornament him better be less unbecoming, or make him ~~a more~~ appear less unlike a Compleat Hog in Armour^{viii}.

4 th In Case it shall happen, that the Chair and Crown shall be Vacant by the Absence, both of our Patron and Broder Zachary, it will then become an indispensible Duty, on every Member of the Club, to prevent our Senior Brother, William Wiseacre^{ix}, from Steping into the Chair and Snatching the Crown; as he'll not easily be inclined to let it go again to either our Great Patron or Broder Zachary; we all well knowing his strange propensity towards assuming the Authority of his superiors, under Colour of their Absence, which he'll not give up even in their presence; ~~tho' such foolhardiness sho[ul]d be attended with the Danger of his being sent to Newgate, and Spoiling the good Design of our said Great Patron.~~ Wherefore, in such absence the Chair shall be filled by such Member present as shall be best Qualified for it ~~by possessing the greatest Share of those Qualities which are diametrically opposite to Wisdom, honesty and plain dealing.~~ the same (Excepting always, out of the better part of this of this rule, our good Brethren, the aforesaid William Wiseacre, James Oryk ^xthe Bottle Conjurer,^{xi} and Jack Small=Cutt,^{xii} ~~who, tho' Qualified in one respect, are unfit for The Chair, on many Accounts.~~)

5 th In order that the Acts proceedings of our Club may be Carefully preserved, longer than the Club itself is likely to last, it is agreed, that our always=wrong Brother James Nepyn^{xiii}, Successor to the noted Conjurer Mr William Somerset^{xiv} Deceased, shall be appointed to enter and enroll them in his Black=Book; In which Book shall likewise be entred, these present Rules and Regulations, and all others hereafter to be made by this Club; a Copy or Draught thereof, having been first perused, settled and Approved by our worthy Broth[e]r and Adviser Jack Strutt^{xv}

6 th It is agreed that Brother Nepyn shall never suffer our Register or Black Book to get into the hands of our said Brother Strut; lest he sho[ul]d be inclined to make entries therein, of things which happened before he was born. It being as little difficult to make such Entries in our Book, as to enter with his own hand in a Publick Register Book, the Marriage of his own Father and Mother.

7 th No Member shall presume to Trouble himself about, or profess any kind of, Religion; as such a profession wo[ul]d be incompatible with his Duty towards our Patron; who has the greatest Contempt for all things Divine, or that savour the feast of Christianity. Therefore the more reprobate and prophane any Member shall be, the higher will he be held in the Estimation of our s[ai]d Patron; And if he totally disregards the Sabath, and abuses the Church, the more meritorious will such behaviour be Accounted.

8 th Every Member, at the time of his Admission, and on every Thursday afterwards, shall fall down and worship our Great Patron Lord Simbledon, after the same manner as was done, in Ancient times, to the Brazen Image set up by a Certain Eastern Monarch^{xvi}; And it is tho[ugh]t that this worship of our Patron, may safely be Performed, without any Imputation of Idolatry, ~~he not being the likeness of any thing in the Heavens above, the Earth beneath, or the Waters under the Earth.~~

9 th Each Member of the Club shall meet at the place appointed every Thursday Evening; but no business shall be done, till the Chair is filled and the President Crowned, when Brother Nepyn shall unfold the Black^{xvii} book, and wave his Conjuring rod which last shall be the signall that the Club is opened; and being opened it shall remain so till 12 'OClock; during which time it shall not be permitted to have more than Ten Members all talking aloud, at one and the

same time. And no Children shall be Admitted into the Club room, on any Account whatsoever, as we can't bear the thoughts of a Child, it being so very unlike such men as we are ^{xviii}

10th At every Club night, each Member shall, in a full Bumper^{xix}, Drink Confusion and Destruction to all those who are not of our Club, And the same to all Children, and likewise Damnation to the Corporation^{xx}; Excepting those very few Members thereof, who are Admitted into, and make a part of our said Club: such Exploits being precisely agreeable to our notions of Charity and Philanthropy.

~~11th The whole Club shall meet on and Commemorate two remarkable days in the year Vizt the first of April and the Twenty Sixth of December; The former as being the birth of our Prosperous Club and the latter the Nativity of a Child who as he grows older will we are afraid be Father to the City and abound in Generosity and goodness towards it he having even begun to shew Marks of it already tho' so very young And sho[ul]d he Continue to do so our hopes and endeavours will be in vain so that every Member must rack his invention for lyes to Villifie him & Magnifie our Patron And altho' ever so preposterous yet must they be ascerted to the Publick for approved truths nay even if refutable the next moment Every foundation of Scurrility and abuse must be let run upon this Innocent Child or else he'll Certainly as his intimacy increases Convince the people that he means to and will do them good Therefore the Anniversary of his Birth is to be kept by us in a Melancholy and dolefull manner But each return of the Marry day of our Clubs happy Institution is to be Celebrated with all proper Demonstrations of Mirth and Jollity whether real or feigned And every Member is on that day to be ensconced with his proper Badge of our order the Fools Cap so that there may be an Uniformity in shew and appearance as well as in Sentiment and Wisdom throughout the whole Clubb.~~

11th All disputes arising between any of the Members of this Club, shall be heard & determined by our wise Brother and Necromancer Justice Ego^{xxi}, in his great Hall; ~~whom we appoint Chief Justice of our Club~~ And, in Cases of Difficulty, he may take to his assistance as Scribes, or for Advice only, our wise Brethren, Oryk the Bottle Conjurer and Turn about Jack^{xxii} or either of them.

12th If any Member shall be so Extraordinary as to be guilty of doing a Good or a wise Act; or shall pretend to be on a good footing with any of our Adversaries; or shall not throw out his utmost Scandal. falsehood and abuse on them; or shall not do them all the injury in his power; every such Member, so offending, shall be ~~Expelled the Club, and~~ Stigmatized, with that odious Appellation a wise man, and therefore ~~unfit for our~~ Expelled the Society.

13th If any Member of our Club, has a Brother in Law, or any other relation, not inclined to become one of us, he must use all the Arts and Contrivances he Can think of, to Convert him to our purposes; And sho[ul]d such Brother in Law or relation still refuse, and urge his Gratitude to any of our Adversaries, as one reason for such refusal; Our Member must Laugh at Gratitude, and treat it as Chimerical and a nonentity; and must go farther, and threaten utter ruin to such brother in law or Relation and his Children, in Case of a Noncompliance; never Leaveing him 'till he is bro[ugh]t over, tho' it sho[ul]d Occasion his Death. And if our Member sho[ul]d be at a loss, how to Act such apart, he is to be referred to our Brother Strutt for instructions. All these Articles we Approve of and agree to abide by, and fulfill, According to the true intent and meaning thereof'

While it is difficult over 200 years after the event to understand all the allusions here, it is clear that this was a cutting political satire of the day with scorching comments made about the

other side. It makes you wonder whether the politics of the day was better suited to this kind of sport than achieving anything for the good of the country.

ⁱ **Rules of the Sap Scull Club**

Tudway papers. DD/TD/6 Somerset Heritage Centre

ⁱⁱ Tudway Quilter, D. (1985) The Cedars and the Tudways in A History of Wells Cathedral School. Wells Clare Son and Company.p.73

ⁱⁱⁱ Meaning of 'sap scull' (or sap skull) is someone who is a fool or rather stupid.

^{iv} Possibly a word play for Simpleton. There was a Peter Taylor also MP for Wells in 1765 and 1767. Box TD/DD/6 contains documents from Taylor seeking his candidacy which seemed to have been opposed by Clement Tudway – although I have not read the documents.

^v Possible reference to William Warburton Bishop of Gloucester who denounced the slave trade and would have been a perfect figure of derision for Tudway et al.

^{vi} Midas being a rather foolish King, who offended the God Apollo who turned his ears into asses ears. Was this a satirical reference to King George III?

^{vii} Zachary Fungus was a character in London comedian Samuel Foote's sketch 'The Commissary' – see drawing below – held in the V&A. The Commissary was performed in the Haymarket in 1765

^{viii} An awkward, clumsy, base, or mean person dressed in fine clothes or inhabiting a role of authority.

^{ix} William Wiseacre was a writer of the 18/19th c. in 1880 he published The Mirror of Amusement of Happy Village. A little before the time of this document, but perhaps he was known to the members. However the definition of the term Wiseacre is a person who possesses or affects to possess great wisdom. This perhaps fits with the satirical nature of the reference in this context.

^x Oryk may be an anagram for York, thus being James the Duke of York who escaped prison during the Civil War disguised as a woman.

^{xi} The Bottle Conjuror was a fictitious character said to be able to fit himself into a wine bottle. Word was circulated that he was to appear at Samuel Foote's Haymarket Theatre. When he didn't turn up, the audience rioted. Foote was blamed for the hoax. Why the names are put together here is unclear.

^{xii} Unable to find reference

^{xiii} No name of Nepyn traced but it could be an anagram for Penny. James Penny was a Merchant and slave ship owner who defended the trade to Parliament

^{xiv} No reference to William Somerset found but William Duke of Cumberland, died in 1765, the son of George II was present in the audience at the hoax appearance of the Bottle Conjuror. The connection, if there even is one, is obscure.

^{xv} Jack Strutt and Jack Small Cutt maybe one and the same. This seems to be a further allusion to Taylor who is referred to as a 'turnabout' in the satirical song. .

^{xvi} Possible reference to Moses and the 'brazen (bronze) altar' of the Tabernacle

^{xvixvii} It is possible that the 'Black book' is a reference to the Books kept by the 'Several Masters of Companies' that were asked to be produced on Notice by Child where the details of Freeman were contained at the time of poll. Presumably to prevent any rigging of the election.

^{xviii} Possible reference to Robert Child, also MP for Wells 1766-1782 alongside Clement Tudway defeated in the vexatious election of 1766

^{xix} The term 'bumper' may mean a glass full to just overflowing; however, here a 'full bumper' suggests it refers to a drinking vessel. Different types of bumper glasses have been described, often with regard to the drinking sprees of Pirates! Some may be like a glass tankard with a footed heavy bottom, or like a tall glass with a straight side and no heavy base.

^{xx} A reference to the Corporation of Wells

^{xxi} Ego is the Latin word for I; hence Justice Ego may refer to either Clement or Charles Tudway who were JPs

^{xxii} A 'turnabout' is someone who changes their mind or reverses previously made decisions – possible reference to the previously mentioned Jack Strutt.