

# THE HAVANT BONFIRE BOYS

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Edited by Ralph Cousins

## The Havant Bonfire Boys The Background, 1850-1878

By the early Victorian period it seemed that Guy Fawkes Night celebrations throughout the country were all but moribund. In the few places where they were observed at all they had usually degenerated into little more than a pretext for one or two high-spirited adolescents to let off fireworks in the street. Any kind of popular – let alone organised – commemoration was rare indeed.

But all this changed dramatically in 1850 when Pope Pius IX decided to sanction the re-introduction into England of a Roman Catholic hierarchy.

With the Jacobite scares of the 18th century an increasingly distant memory and the Catholic Emancipation Act removing virtually all discrimination against Catholics in 1829, it might have been assumed that the old sectarian fears of Popery had been banished from the popular consciousness. But the extreme reaction to the creation of the first Roman Catholic bishop in this country since the Reformation suggests otherwise. The Bull proclaiming Pius's decision had been issued in September, but news of it only reached England in mid-October, just in time for it to achieve maximum impact on Guy Fawkes Night, and consequently the celebrations that year were unlike anything seen for a very long time.

Local press reports clearly reflect this. Here, for example, is the *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* on the 1850 celebrations at Cowes:

*For years Guy Fawkes has been a stranger to our streets and bonfires have been prohibited here. But the impudence of the Pope's Bull has brought them both to light again. There was a huge bonfire and the effigy of a cardinal was burnt. The surrounding country seemed to be in a blaze. No less than thirteen fires could be seen on the opposite coast of Hampshire and there was not a hamlet on the Island without one.*

At Fareham, according to the *Hampshire Telegraph*:

*The church bells were rung, a sermon was preached on the errors Catholicism. And: In the evening, by means of a general subscription, fireworks were exhibited throughout the town. A bonfire was also lit and an*

*effigy burnt. At Titchfield there was a bonfire, fireworks and a parade with banners, for example 'No Popery' and 'England Expects Every Man To Do His Duty'.*

Whilst at Gosport, according to the *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette*:

*The 5th November celebrations passed off with more demonstrations of popular feeling than there has been for several years. A large bonfire was made near St Matthew's Chapel and one near Alverstoke. And the quantity of fireworks set off of all descriptions was immense.*

1850 may have been exceptional, but it did mark the beginning of a resurgence in popular enthusiasm for Guy Fawkes celebrations. This was, however, increasingly at odds with the official attitude towards them, which was becoming ever more disapproving. In 1859 for example, the compulsory commemoration of the failure of the gunpowder plot in all churches – in force for 253 years – was abolished, thus marking the end of all state involvement in the celebrations. There also seems to have been a concerted effort made by the police and local magistrates in the 1850s and 1860s to suppress large-scale semi-organised celebrations. This could sometimes lead to trouble. For example, in Guildford there were near riots in 1851, 1854 and 1863,<sup>1</sup> whilst at Cowes we have a good local example of just how determined the authorities could be to suppress what seems – in this case at least – to have been nothing particularly serious. This is how the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported it:

*Until within the last three or four years, the celebration of 5th November has been duly observed by our idlers, but with a degree of order that did them credit. Lately, however, a change for the worse has taken place and the streets have been filled with a concourse of disorderly men and boys. On one or two occasions the police have tried to suppress this nuisance, but in vain, for what could a score of policemen do when opposed by hundreds of ne'er do wells?*

The newspaper then alleged that there had been a plot to attack the property of people who had complained about the conduct of the revellers, and that, in consequence, the police presence had been strengthened by the

recruitment of 'specials'. Troops had even been put on stand-by in case things got seriously out of hand. But:

*Happily the mob, cowed by these preparations made to curb any outbreaks, refrained from doing anything unlawful, and we hope for the credit of the town to have seen the last of these processions, which can do no good.*

Judging from press reports, the places where 5 November was celebrated with greatest enthusiasm locally in the 1850s and early 1860s were Bishops Waltham, Titchfield, Fareham and – at least for a time – Gosport.

Gosport is an interesting example of how the celebrations could acquire extra layers of meaning, because for a few years from 1855 (uniquely, it seems) Gosport commemorated 5 November not only as the date that the Gunpowder Plot was foiled, but also when, in 1854, the Russians were defeated at the battle of Inkerman. Incidentally, they also made much here in 1858 of the 300th anniversary of the accession of Elizabeth, though that was actually on 13 November. However, the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported that the 1858 celebrations had been marred by the letting off of fireworks in the street, leading to fears that if this was repeated it could lead to future celebrations being cancelled. Whether or not such a ban was in force in the following year is uncertain – though the absence of any press coverage suggests that it was – but in 1860 the *Hampshire Telegraph* could record that:

*The 5th November passed over this year with more than ordinary quietness. In the evening a group of five grotesquely attired persons paraded the streets [but] the demonstration, however, was miserably stupid.*

And that seems to have been the end of Gosport's 5 November celebrations.

There are no press reports relating to Havant prior to 1864, but that does not mean, of course, that Guy Fawkes Night went unobserved here. Indeed, judging by the magnitude of the events of that year it is more than likely that some form of revelry had regularly been taking place. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that we know about the 1864 celebrations not from any reports of the time, but from the prosecutions that resulted from them at Fareham Petty Sessions about a month later, proceedings which the

*Hampshire Telegraph* described as 'somewhat novel' and which they covered in considerable detail. Part of the novelty probably lay in the fact that eight of the thirteen accused were being prosecuted under the recently passed Gunpowder Act which introduced new penalties for firework misuse, but it must have been mainly because they were all youths from eminently respectable local families. They included Needham Longcroft, son of the solicitor (and a lord of the manor) CJ Longcroft; Anthony Lewis, son of the surveyor and auctioneer Charles Lewis; Richard Stedman, son of the surgeon William Stedman; and Alfred Stent, a junior member of the prominent parchment-making family. They all pleaded 'not guilty' and were represented in court by Mr Field of Gosport. The other five accused, who were described as either 'labourers' or 'navvies' had no legal representation and were charged with rolling lighted tar barrels around the streets.

From the report of the trials we can form a pretty clear picture of the night's events. In the evening a crowd of some 300 to 400 people gathered in the town centre and at about 9pm set off on a torch-lit procession down West Street almost as far as Bedhampton, returning about an hour later. In the meantime a bonfire was lit in the middle of East Street, piles of straw were set ablaze elsewhere and tar barrels were lit and rolled about, causing damage to at least one doorway. Many of the revellers – including Longcroft, Lewis and their friends – were in fancy dress or had disguised themselves with blackened faces or false whiskers. Despite the best efforts of Mr Field every single defendant was found guilty. The eight accused of throwing fireworks were each fined 5s. (25p) with 7s. 6d. (37½p) costs, whilst the tar barrel rollers were each fined 10s. (50p) (or, in one instance, £1 with 4s. 6d. (22½p) costs).

Were the events of 1864 significantly worse than what had gone on before, or were the authorities simply taking a firmer stand than usual in an effort to suppress a customary demonstration? If the latter, they were scarcely successful, for trouble flared again in 1865, albeit on a smaller scale. This time, a crowd of about 100 gathered during the course of the evening and, having commenced by giving 'three groans' for the police, marched up and down West Street and North Street from about 9pm until 10.30pm. An effigy was also burnt (which the police put out) and a bonfire lit in West Street.

In all, eight people were charged with offences although only five were convicted. Thomas Voke was fined 5s. (25p), with costs, for throwing squibs in North Street and George Taylor was fined £1 with costs, for lighting the West Street bonfire. But the really serious punishments were reserved for those who, according to the police, had been the ringleaders conducting the mob. They were none other than Needham Longcroft, Anthony Lewis and Richard Stedman. If the magistrates – on their own admission – had been lenient with the young men for their first offences the year before, they were in no mood to be lenient now. Each was fined no less than £5 with 7s. 6d. (37½p) costs.

This firm action had the desired effect, for we have no reports of any trouble for the next three years. Indeed, in November 1867 the *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* commented on how quiet Havant was. But in 1869 there were more disturbances. A crowd of about 200 gathered in the town centre, a bonfire was lit in West Street and fireworks and fireballs (balls of coal dust and clay used to kindle fires) were thrown. Three people subsequently appeared in court: Henry Pratt, 'a lad', for lighting the bonfire; Charles Stallard, 15-years-old, for throwing fireworks; and James Johnson, an apprentice coachbuilder, for throwing a fireball. Stallard was fined £1, with failure to pay resulting in 14 days imprisonment with hard labour, whilst Pratt and Johnson were each fined £2 with failure to pay resulting in one month's imprisonment with hard labour.

Again, a firm stand proved successful. True, the following year Charles Stallard made his second court appearance and was fined 12s. 6d. (62½p) for rolling a lighted tar barrel 'along the turnpike road', but this seems to have been an isolated incident which actually took place on the evening of 4 November.

In 1871, however, there was more trouble, resulting in seven Havant youths appearing in court. Six were charged with throwing fireworks and the other with lighting a bonfire in North Street. All had no previous convictions for Guy Fawkes Night offences. The chairman of the Fareham magistrates declared that: *The setting off of fireworks had been a nuisance for many years and he was determined to put a stop to it.* Consequently he handed out fines of between £1 and £1 10s. (£1.50p with seven days to pay and seven days imprisonment with hard labour for default. Once again, this seems to have

had the desired effect, for in 1872 there were no reported incidents and 1873 was also quiet, save for the fact that on the night of 5 November, according to the *Hampshire Telegraph*: *A number of fires, which are supposed to have been the work of incendiaries, took place in the neighbourhood and caused much alarm.* A shed belonging to Henry Snook at Belmont Castle in Bedhampton was destroyed; another shed near Havant railway station was badly damaged; and two hayricks were also set ablaze. Was the date a mere coincidence or was something more sinister afoot?

In 1874 there were two more prosecutions for letting off fireworks for which fines of 10s. (50p) were imposed and in 1875 no fewer than seven people were charged, though all for minor offences for which fines of 1s. 6d. (7½p) were deemed sufficient.

This seems to have been the last of the trouble that Havant saw on Guy Fawkes Night, for both 1876 and 1877 passed off peacefully.

#### Bonfire Boys, 1878–1885

This suppression was to lead to two developments. On the one hand, almost universally, Guy Fawkes Night became an increasingly domestic affair celebrated by individual families in their own back gardens. On the other hand, in a very few places, it developed into a grand – but safe and respectable – public event organised by local bonfire societies or bonfire boys.

The pioneer in this respect was the most famous place in the country for 5 November celebrations – Lewes. The earliest bonfire societies here – those of Town and Cliffe – were founded in 1853 after years of mayhem during which local magistrates had struggled in vain to suppress the celebrations altogether. These societies established a form of ceremony which would be imitated elsewhere, including Havant, i.e. a torchlight parade through the streets with a band, banners and people in fancy dress, terminating at a big open space where a bonfire would be lit, effigies burned and a firework display mounted, all under the control of local middle-aged, middle-class professionals and trades people.

Unfortunately we do not know exactly who the original Havant Bonfire Boys of 1878 were, although they must surely have been, by and large, the same

people who we know organised the 1880 celebrations. They included Henry Green, a solicitor; Thorburn and Albert Stallard, parchment makers and fellmongers; John Arter, ironmonger and whitesmith; and Charles Browne, Inland Revenue officer. These then were eminently respectable citizens, but it is revealing that in their inaugural year their application to the local magistrates for permission to organise a parade around the town was refused. Perhaps memories of the 1860s remained strong, and they had to make do simply with assembling in the Fair Field to light a bonfire, burn effigies and let off a few fireworks. These celebrations were so low key that they did not even rate a mention in the local press, and we know about them only from a speech given at the Bonfire Boys' Dinner of 1882 by Green, who recalled that a mere £2 had been raised to buy fireworks, but that even this modest display had scarcely commenced when a spark accidentally fell into the remainder of the stock setting them all off at once, and that finished the night's work.

Things went rather better in 1879 when a parade through the streets was permitted. £14 was raised to buy fireworks and the local press – the *Hampshire Telegraph* at any rate – gave the event a brief but complimentary write-up, commenting that the firework display was *excellent* and that despite a crowd of some 2,000 gathering in the Fair Field *the proceedings were very orderly*. This modest success must have emboldened the bonfire boys because the next year their celebrations were of an altogether greater magnitude, with no less than £50 spent on the festivities. The reporter from the *Hampshire Telegraph* was duly impressed:

*In its brightest days the 5th November could hardly have been more enthusiastically celebrated than it was...at Havant. In most parts of the kingdom, and especially in the large towns, the custom has for years been gradually dying out, but in quiet decorous, easy-going Havant 'Guy Fawkes Day' is becoming more and more regarded as an occasion worthy of being marked in the most orthodox of fashions.*

Events began at 6.30pm outside the town hall in East Street with a parade that marched around the town and ended up at the Fair Field. This parade is described in some detail. First of all came what are referred to as *pioneers* dressed in *fantastic garb* carrying torches and coloured flares. Next came a

*commander-in-chief* in *showy uniform* mounted upon what is somewhat euphemistically described as *as warlike a steed as could reasonably be expected*. He was followed by his *Lieutenant* and a banner bearing the legend 'Prosperity To The Bonfire Boys'. There was then: *a brass band grotesquely dressed, men in armour, a bishop, mace-bearers, and the effigies to be burned*. Finally there were the bonfire boys themselves in what was described as *full regalia*. Once they had reached the Fair Field the effigies were burned on a 30 foot (9 metre) high bonfire, and there was a firework display – courtesy of Messrs Brock and Co. – after which there was another parade around the town and the letting off of 50 rockets. It was estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 people watched the evening's entertainment.

An innovation of 1880 was the holding of a Bonfire Boys' Dinner to which, on 23 November at the Bear Hotel, some thirty guests were invited.

In 1881 the celebrations were at least as grand and the *Hampshire Telegraph* reporter's prose tried to match it:

*On Monday, when the shades of night had fallen, the pleasant little town of Havant was in a state of agreeable excitement. All the inhabitants from babes in arms to the village patriarchs were in the streets, which were alive with train loads of sightseers from Portsmouth and the adjacent towns. The celebrations being of a magnificence that has not been paralleled [with] a daring if not reckless disregard for expense.*

Indeed, £66 had been raised, £48 going on the fireworks alone.

On this occasion the parade began not outside the town hall, but outside the Bear Hotel, and again we have a detailed description. It comprised:

*The Bonfire Boys' Sergeant bearing the Crest of the Society*

*Beefeaters with torches and coloured flares*

*A banner 'Unity is Strength'*

*Harlequins and clowns*

*Bonfire Boys Brass Band*

*Knights in Armour on horseback*

*Pirates*

*The effigies to be burned*

*Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday*

*A banner 'Welcome Peace and Plenty'*

*'Bushrangers'*  
*Dick Turpin and Black Bess (his horse)*  
*A banner 'Success to the Bonfire Boys'*  
*'Indians'*  
*Borough of Portsmouth Coat of Arms*  
*Members of an organisation called the Southsea Walrus Hunt*  
*Remainder of Bonfire Boys' members and subscribers 'in full*  
*costume'*

The parade then proceeded to the Fair Field where a gibbet was constructed on top of the bonfire, the effigies hung from it and a policeman, Mr Charles Browne, recited their 'offences'. The bonfire was then lit and the fireworks let off; an impressive display that included some 200 rockets, the effect of which must, however, have been somewhat spoiled by a thick fog.

The 1882 celebrations were even more lavish, though they had to be held over to Monday the 6th, Sunday being deemed inappropriate. They took place, unfortunately, in what the *Hampshire Telegraph* described as: *The most wretched meteorological conditions it would be possible to conceive*, yet despite the cold and the rain the crowds turned out in even greater numbers than before, with special trains laid on from Chichester and Portsmouth.

Again, the parade began at the Bear Hotel and proceeded along East Street and North Street and then down West Street as far as the Black Dog public house, then back up North Street to the Fair Field. (For some reason the parades appear never to have gone down South Street). Once at the Fair Field the bonfire was lit, the effigies burned and the fireworks let off, with, as an added attraction, a very ambitious and elaborate re-enactment of the British Navy's bombardment of Alexandria which had taken place three months previously. However, this patriotic display was not a success, for the continual rain had made the gunpowder damp and it had to be abandoned. It was re-staged the following evening, but, inevitably, the crowd that turned out to witness it was much smaller. In fact, the extravaganza resulted in a shortfall of funds, with £72 having been spent but only £67 raised.

Another innovation of the 1882 festivities was the reciting of a poem at the Fair Field just before the lighting of the bonfire. The oration was performed by Thorburn Stallard, the bonfire boys' honorary secretary, who, for no

particular reason, was dressed as a Mexican. He began by making a few general remarks about the 5 November celebrations before turning to the big news event of the time – the war in Egypt, to which the bombardment of Alexandria had been the prelude. The war had, just a few weeks previously, concluded with a swift British victory over the forces of Arabi Pasha, and indeed it was Arabi Pasha and his ally, the Turkish Sultan, who were shortly to be burned in effigy. As Stallard put it, they intended:

*To burn the traitor, Arabi by name,  
And also one who knew his little game,  
Whose antecedent character is murky,  
Of course I mean the Potentate of Turkey.*

He then moved on to more parochial affairs such as a dispute between the Local Board of Health and the fire brigade, and the appointment of a new nuisances inspector.

*Coming to Havant, I find that all is quiet,  
Excepting that we nearly had a riot  
Between the Local Board and Fire Brigade,  
In which the Local Board at last were made  
To rub names off a house, which I've heard said  
A certain Batchelor once called a shed.  
They also have appointed an Inspector,  
To be of all foul smells a good detector,  
We hope that by the streets it will be seen  
There's truth in the old words 'New brooms sweep clean'.  
But if the Local Board don't make him do it,  
I only say that they'll be sure to rue it.*

The 1883 celebrations were probably the grandest of all and they were certainly the most expensive, with £73 being spent on them. They were, however, again blighted by the weather which was, according to the *Hampshire Telegraph*:

*A chill November night that sent its cold rain and mist penetrating to ones  
very marrow: wild and murky overhead, cold and soggy underfoot.*

Despite this, the crowds were huge (the *Portsmouth News* estimated 10,000) and the parade was, declared the *Hampshire Telegraph*: *Positively more gorgeous than it has been for some time past.*

The 1883 parade began in North Street and included:

*Robin Hood (Thorburn Stallard) and his merry men; Bluebeard (C Furnice) and his wives; Mephistopheles (Anthony Lewis); [who, it will be recalled, had been prosecuted for his part in the revelries of 1864 and 1865] a buccaneer king (John Arter); and the ghastly and recently captured ghost of Knox Road' (A Winter).*

This is curious as Knox Road, close to the boundary between Havant and Bedhampton, was a recent development and none of the houses there could have been more than seven or eight-years-old. Then followed:

*Clowns, heathen Chinese, Ethiopians, and finally: A mob of brats, cats, rats, acrobats, aristocrats, plutocrats, democrats and red republicans.*

Not only was the parade bigger than ever before, but it also took a more extensive route, journeying as far east as Denvilles and as far west as the Prince of Wales in West Street before its usual termination in the Fair Field. Here, once again, Thorburn Stallard delivered his poem.

The dominant theme this year was Ireland and all three of the effigies to be burned were Fenian conspirators: two involved in the infamous Phoenix Park murders of the year before and the other a 'dynamiter' (Dr Gallagher) who had recently been sentenced to life imprisonment. The firework display that followed must have been quite a sight, including, as it did, shooting stars, salvoes of shells, jewel-headed cobras, aerial banquets, showers of ferns and – surely the *pièce de résistance* – a 700 square foot (65 square metres) representation of the Niagara Falls. Afterwards there seems to have been a considerable crush at the railway station as people struggled to pile onto the trains, although there are no reports of injuries.

1884 followed much the same pattern as previous years, including, it must be said, misfortune with the weather. Just before the commencement of the firework display it rained so hard that people were forced to run for cover. There was also a feeling that for the first time there was a scaling-down of the event as only £56 10s. (£56.50) was raised. The *Hampshire Telegraph*

certainly considered the firework display to be less impressive than it had been, and the *Portsmouth Times and Naval Gazette* whilst proclaiming the occasion an *undoubted success* did nevertheless feel that: *The procession might not compare so favourably with that of previous years*. It seems, however, to have been a colourful and diverse spectacle which included:

*Charles I and his court, a Mexican bullfighter, Herne the hunter, a pirate king, and an assortment of maskers, millers, mummers, mummies, monkeys, marines, mormons, missionaries, mermaids, mongolians, moravians, maniacs, mongeese and myriad millions.*

The crowds too were as huge as ever, arriving by special trains, brakes and buses from as far afield as Portsmouth, Chichester and Petersfield. 4,000 alone were reckoned to have travelled in by train, and, according to the *Hampshire Post*, about 2,000 more were unable to purchase tickets. In fact, the numbers were so great that they actually hampered the parade's progress.

The 1885 celebrations differed significantly from those of the previous few years only in the fact that they were held in fine, dry, weather and surely no one amongst the thousands who left the Fair Field that evening could have guessed that the Havant Bonfire Boys and their spectacular extravaganzas were at an end, but that was indeed the case. Significantly, no Bonfire Boys' Dinner was held that year, and the following October there was a brief announcement in the *Portsmouth News* that there would be no celebrations in 1886 owing to a *deficiency of funds*. As far as one can tell, no subsequent effort was made ever to revive the bonfire boys or any other Guy Fawkes Night celebrations in Havant.

How could such a popular and by now traditional event, organised by some of the pillars of the local community, vanish so quickly and completely? If the bonfire boys had folded after their ignominious first year in 1878, or even after the over-ambitious plans and dreadful weather of 1882, it would not have been a complete surprise, but by 1885 their permanence looked assured.

There is no obvious answer, but it is worth remembering that there had always been dissenting voices that had questioned the celebration of Guy Fawkes Night in such an extravagant manner. The cost certainly distressed

some people, such as the anonymous correspondent to the *Hampshire Telegraph* in 1882 – he merely signed himself *A Protestant* – who wondered: *Whether the money squandered on fireworks might not be better spent on soup kitchens and other charitable measures for the poor.* Others simply thought the celebrations *ridiculous*; in 1879 for instance the *Portsmouth News* used its 5 November editorial column to proclaim, a trifle optimistically, that:

*The absurd custom of parading the streets with ridiculous effigies seems at last to have been all but done away with, and we hope that within a few years the beneficial effects of an enlightened education will entirely eradicate the proceedings.'*

Two years later the newspaper renewed the attack, declaring that:

*On the whole a more senseless celebration could scarcely be conceived, and the sooner it sinks into oblivion the better it will be for this enlightened age.*

But there was another concern, rarely articulated but often implied, that, for all its light-hearted pageantry and spectacle, there lurked beneath the surface of the bonfire boys' celebrations a divisive sectarianism and political bias. This was certainly a notion that the bonfire boys and their supporters were keen to dispel – perhaps a little too often and a little too insistently, as though it touched upon a raw nerve. For instance, in his annual speeches at the Bonfire Boys' Dinner, their president, Henry Green, constantly stressed their impartiality. In 1881 he attributed the success of the celebrations to the fact that: *They had abstained from all party affairs whether in politics or religion,* whilst in 1882 he assured his audience that: *They were not a political or fanatic society but merely wanted to provide innocent pleasure or amusement.*

Everyone, therefore, must have been disturbed by events at Worthing in 1883 where the local Bonfire Club (formed in 1880) suddenly transformed itself into the Worthing Excelsior Skeleton Army, a mob whose sole aim was to drive from the town, by force if necessary, a recently established branch of the Salvation Army.

There is no suggestion that anything like that happened in Havant, but the charge of political bias is not one from which the bonfire boys can be wholly absolved, especially when one looks at their choice of effigies to be burned.

Effigy burning had never been part of the earliest 5 November celebrations and was rare before 1670. Even after this date the figures to be burned were usually drawn from a limited cast of stock characters comprising Guy Fawkes himself, the Pope and the Devil. Only in the 19th century did it become the custom to select contemporary hate-figures – local, national or foreign – who had nothing whatsoever to do with the gunpowder plot.

There is only one example of a purely local figure being selected by the Havant Bonfire Boys for such drastic treatment. In May 1881, John Tremelling, an employee of the Havant branch of the Capital and Counties Bank, absconded with the several hundred pounds he had embezzled by systematically falsifying customers' accounts. Consequently his effigy was consigned to the flames that year. But usually national, and particularly imperial affairs dominated the celebrations. We have already seen that the Egyptian War in 1882 and Fenian terrorism in 1883 determined the effigies chosen in those years, whilst in 1884 it was the Sudan on everyone's mind. General Gordon had been besieged in Khartoum since July (and would eventually be killed when the city fell the following January) so it was the two leaders of the Sudanese revolt, the Mahdi and Osman Dinga who were burned. But when there was no great Imperial crisis or adventure to preoccupy them, the bonfire boys' choice of victim is often revealing. On no less than three occasions, in 1879, 1880 and 1885, Charles Stuart Parnell, the parliamentary leader of the Irish Home Rule movement, was consigned to the flames, as well as his colleague Joseph Biggar in 1880. Whilst in 1881, together with Tremelling, Charles Guiteau, the assassinator in July of United States president Garfield; another Fenian terrorist O'Donovan Rossa; and the unlikely Mrs Annie Besant were chosen.

Why Annie Besant? True she had already gained some notoriety for her atheist views and advocacy of birth control and had come to prominence once more in 1881 through her championing of the atheist MP Charles Bradlaugh who was in the middle of a long battle to be allowed to affirm, rather than swear on the Bible, when taking his seat in the House of Commons. But did that really warrant her being lumped together with a fraudster, an assassin and a terrorist? It may have been thought that she had some local connection since she was the wife (though long-estranged) of the Reverend Frank Besant, brother of the well-known Portsmouth-born writer,

Walter. However, that seems a tenuous link and Henry Green threw little light on the matter in his speech at the Bonfire Boys' Dinner that year. He was adamant that: *The only persons whose effigies had been burnt were those who by general consent deserved to be held up to public execration*, greeted with cries of *Hear, hear*. But with regard to Annie Besant herself he merely remarked, rather coyly, that: *They might have been a little discourteous to the fair sex, having burned a lady*. This was greeted with laughter.

So the bonfire boys were impartial only up to a point. Irish Home Rulers and atheists were clearly beyond the pale. The claim Green had made earlier in his speech about maintaining neutrality in all political and religious matters was simply untrue.

None of this explains why the bonfire boys folded, but it may help to explain why they did not re-form after what was probably no more than a temporary financial crisis in 1886 – they had nearly suffered one in 1884. Perhaps they had become a little too controversial and possibly appeared somewhat old-fashioned, even vulgar, for an increasingly sophisticated urban community.

Bonfire celebrations tended to flourish best in small market towns, for example Titchfield, whose bonfire boys were formed about 1884 and have been in existence ever since, and whilst Havant could just about be so-described in the 1870s, this was barely the case by the late 1880s, by which time many new 'villa' residences had been built and the limits of the town had expanded. Indeed, this expansion would devour the Fair Field in 1887.

It may be significant that the event that superseded the bonfire boys' celebrations in Havant's social calendar was that epitome of genteel respectability – the Chrysanthemum Show. The first had been held in the town hall by the newly formed Havant Chrysanthemum Society on 7 November 1884 and was such a success that it became an annual event around that date thereafter.

This was the future – the Havant Bonfire Boys had had a glittering and spectacular existence, but in the end they were just like one of their own fireworks. Their splendour was purely ephemeral and once it had burnt itself out it could never be revived.

## Appendix

### John Pile

In the Saturday 25 June 1814 issue of his *Weekly Political Register* William Cobbett wrote:

*Why is salt 20s (£1) a bushel, instead of 2s. 6d. (12½p) Because the maker of the salt has to pay 17s. 6d. (87½p) in tax, and in the expences appertaining to the tax. And do the people of Havant, who hanged and burnt Mr. Huskisson in effigy, suppose, that the grower of corn is not to be paid back the amount of his taxes as well as the maker of salt? The people of Havant (for this disgraceful act should be made known) formed a procession, having their victim seated upon an ass, followed by a chaise drawn by men. After parading about for some time, they arrived at a lamp-post, near the church, on which, after suitable admonitions, and exhortations as to the necessity of speedy repentance, the finisher of their law hanged him, while others were employed in making a fire, under the gallows, to consume the suspended body. The execution being accomplished, the mortal remains, viz. the ashes of the offender, were collected, placed in the chaise in a suitable receptacle, and carried away for interment, to the slow and discordant sound of broken bells and other instruments of hideous noise. Now, all Mr. Huskisson's crime was, telling the people very sensibly and very honestly, that, with our present taxes, they could not, upon an average of years, reasonably expect to eat their bread at less than double the price at which they ate it before the year 1792. He said further, that we could not expect to see the taxes diminished; and the statement of the Chancellor of the Exchequer has already confirmed his opinion: And yet the people of Havant have never, that I have heard of, petitioned against any tax; never against any expense; never against war with the Republicans of France, or with the Americans; never against any subsidy, grant, place, pension, barrack, or depot; never against any measure by which the public money was expended, and the taxes augmented, and the currency depreciated. What right have they, therefore, to complain of the high price of bread, in which price are included a large part of the taxes, necessary to meet the expenditure, of*

*which expenditure they have never complained? They act as foolishly, or rather, unjustly, as a man, who, after having ordered an expensive entertainment, should hang and burn the landlord in effigy for bringing in his bill.*

The circumstances surrounding this event were various and complex. Napoleon's defeat on the field of Waterloo was one year in the future, but England's politicians, landlords and tenant farmers were already contemplating the economically depressing effect that the end of the war would have on English farming. The steady increase in the population of the British Isles was reflected in the census figures for Havant: 1,670 in 1801 and 1,824 in 1811. Havant's poor rate in 1800 raised £996, and by 1813 this had increased to £1,525, reflecting the increase in the number of its recipients than in any improvement in their treatment. The average cost, in London, of 4lb (1.8kg) of bread, had remained remarkably steady at about 8d. (3p) throughout the final decade of the 18th century, but during the ten years ending in 1814 it had risen to 13d. (5p). Agricultural wages had risen rapidly throughout the last decade of the 18th century resulting in a real improvement in living standards, but by 1812 wages had reached a peak and were beginning to fall. Agricultural improvements such as the enclosure of the common arable fields, common wastes, and forests; the use of labour-saving farm machinery; and improved cropping rotations benefited the landlords and their tenants, but often left the agricultural labourer worse off. The enclosure of the Forest of Bere (4,137 acres, 1,674 hectares) under Act of Parliament of 1810 and completed in 1814, affected all manorial tenants in Havant with rights of common in the forest, and, although not in Havant parish, the simultaneous enclosure of Emsworth Common (520 acres, 210 hectares) in Warblington Parish would have reinforced the perception of the landless labourer that his traditional world was collapsing about him with no immediate hope of a better one.

The government clearly had some difficult choices to make. Civil unrest was a growing threat and radicalism in a variety of forms had increased since the French Revolution in 1792. One idea, to alleviate the distress caused by increasing food prices and falling wages, was to regulate the supply of wheat by means of a duty on foreign imports which, it was hoped, would, by

maintaining domestic prices, encourage agricultural investment and increase output. Not surprisingly, these measures, known collectively as the Corn Laws, became the subject of considerable debate both inside and outside Parliament which ended only with their repeal in 1849.

William Huskisson was born on 11 March 1770 at Birtsmorton Court, Worcestershire, and he spent most of his early life in Paris where he witnessed the fall of the Bastille. Shortly after returning to London in September 1792 he was introduced to William Pitt, prime minister; Henry Dundas, home secretary; and the young George Canning, all of whom recognized Huskisson's potential and encouraged his political ambitions. Huskisson first entered Parliament as MP for Morpeth in 1796. In 1814 he was MP for Chichester and formulating crucial parts of the Commons' committee report on corn and advocating a sliding scale of duties designed to reduce the duty in times of scarcity and increase it in times of plenty. Despite Huskisson's declaration in a Commons debate on 16 May 1814 that 'The effect of the consequent variation of price (if there were free trade in wheat) on the poorer classes would be in the highest degree injurious', the poorer classes of Havant appear to have remained unconvinced that artificially maintained prices would be of benefit to anyone other than their employers.

From the date of Cobbett's article it seems unlikely that Huskisson's effigy was burnt as part of Guy Fawkes celebrations, but it is good evidence for an inclination on the part of at least one section of Havant's population to express its feelings in effigy-burning half a century earlier than our first records of Guy Fawkes activity in the town. Some of the details of the effigy-burning as described by Cobbett (probably communicated to him by a local correspondent) are remarkably similar to those in later accounts of Guy Fawkes celebrations, suggesting the possibility of some continuity during the intervening years.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Morgan, Gavin, *The Guildford Guy Riots (1842–1865)*, *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, 76 (1985) 61–68

<sup>2</sup> National statistics are from Mitchell, B R, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge: University Press, 1971. Local statistics are from *Victoria County History of Hampshire*, 1912 and Butler, W, *Topographical Account of the Hundred of Bosmere*, Havant, 1817

<sup>3</sup> Hansard, 16 May





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