

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Linda Sexton, The Baron, the Policeman and the Mayor – The Ipswich Riot 1863

Linda Sexton gave an interesting account of a little known event, the Ipswich Riot of 1863, to the July meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall.

The origins of the riot lay in the political and religious tensions which existed in the town in the 19th Century. Ipswich had grown rapidly from a population of 11,000 in 1811 to over 50,000 by 1881. This was typical of the urbanisation occurring across Britain at this time. During the period, the age structure of the community had altered significantly as well, leading to there being many young people in Ipswich. They were largely disenfranchised as the right to vote and the ability to influence political decision making was held by a group of about 200 property owning men. Added to this there were religious tensions within the town.

During the medieval period, a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Ipswich had been a place of pilgrimage for Roman Catholics. There were also five large religious houses and 23 places of worship in the town. However, during the 16th Century this changed. The shrine to Our Lady was destroyed during the Reformation and the parish churches were taken by the Church of England. Ipswich embraced Protestantism enthusiastically and Catholicism was suppressed. Non-Conformist groups were allowed to build places of worship over the next two hundred years but it was only in 1827, after Catholic Emancipation, that Roman Catholics were allowed to build St Mary's Church. In 1861, a second Catholic church, St Pancras, was opened closer to the city centre, with Father Kemp as the parish priest. However, there remained a distrust of Catholicism in Ipswich.

Tensions surfaced in November 1863. The self-styled Baron de Camin began to deliver a series of lectures at the Temperance Hall. They were virulently anti-Catholic and made false, prurient accusations about the behaviour of priests and nuns. Father Kemp was named by de Camin. The lectures were applauded by the audiences but George Bacon, the Mayor of Ipswich, became very concerned that they would lead to trouble as there were 300 Irish soldiers stationed in the town. He banned the lectures and used the police to prevent people from entering the hall.

The police force for Ipswich had been founded in 1836 and had gradually evolved into a weak, but more disciplined, force under the direction of Superintendent William Carrington Mason. On 5 November 20 policemen tried to control a crowd of several hundred who had gathered to hear Baron de Camin speak. Entry to the hall was blocked and so a number of young men went off to stone the Mayor's house. Disorder spread around the town with many windows being broken. Father Kemp and his curate barricaded themselves inside their house while it was attacked by a mob. By midnight, the town was quieter. The following night there was further trouble with over 2,000 people thought to be involved. The Mayor enrolled about 200 special constables to help the police to quell the riots. Some arrests were made and the disorder was ended. Those arrested were brought before the magistrates who were drawn from the wealthy. Some offenders were cautioned but others were fined and given short periods of hard labour. In the most serious case, Henry King was tried for slashing the coat of a policeman but he was later acquitted.

In the aftermath of the riot, Father Kemp moved to new parish at East Bergholt. Baron de Camin was exposed as a fraud and a liar. He left Ipswich. The damage to the town had been largely superficial and was repaired. The event itself was almost forgotten until Linda Sexton came across reference to it in newspaper archives.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 22 August at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Frances and Michael Holmes will give a talk about the old courts and yards of Norwich. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy