

The Guildford Guy Riots



BY
PAMELA JOHNSON



Left: Mayor P. W. Jacob. Photograph by Norman Button from an original in Guildford Institute.

Far left: Police Constable Sutton, who was thrown on the Guys' bonfire in 1863.

Below: Police Constable Davis, who was injured in the final riot in 1865. Photographs from originals in Guildford Reference Library.

DISORDER AND RIOTS, when opportunity was taken to punish by terrorism and the destruction of property, any persons who may have become unpopular A description of Bonfire Night in Guildford during the 1850s and 1860s. Partly because those in authority lacked leadership, this 'annual saturnalia of mob rule' went on for over ten years. Also the Guys who organized it had many supporters, for they provided colour and excitement when the days were dull, even if they did 'make the teeth chatter at times'. One Guildfordian later recalled how he enjoyed making masks, squib cases and mixing gunpowder and iron dust - 'given by the smiths to any schoolboy who asked civilly for it'. Then rushing out of school on 5th November, seeing men waiting 'each with a bag carrying his disguise and a supply of fireworks to tuck up his blouse'.

The town looked as if in a state of siege as people tried to protect their property, by barricading windows and heaping wet straw and manure nearby. For there was no fire brigade in those days and twelve to fifteen inch squibs loaded with gunpowder could easily start a fire. As it grew dark the Guys' rallying cry 'Phillaloo Muster' echoed round the town - 'a deep throated war-cry that roared through the streets and peaceful folk fled for their lives'.

They met outside the town to put on disguises, then made a flamboyant entry. Marching in with burning torches and fuel for the bonfires - fences, gates, carts, barrels - 'anything that spite or fancy prompted them to make a raid upon'. Even the grandstand from the race course on Merrow Down was added one year.

This was no haphazard mob thrown together for the evening but a well organized group. Some observers said that those in full costume were members of a Guys Society - mainly tradesmen's sons and others 'who ought to have known better,' while the

rougher elements of the town joined during the evening. It was a period of national unrest - the French revolution of 1848 acting as a warning to some and an example to others. Different groups agitated for various reforms and there were always people 'ready for riot and bloodshed, if only the opportunity were given'. In Guildford, this feeling of unrest - mixed with a desire to settle old scores and youthful exuberance - found an outlet on 5th November.

A HUGE BONFIRE was traditionally lit in the High Street, by the steps outside Holy Trinity Church. Round it a 'great and lawless crowd' collected and when more wood was needed, the Guys gave a signal on a horn. While looking for fuel windows would be broken, insults shouted and most people would not protest if their gate or fence was taken. The fire was fed until midnight, when apparently the Guys stopped and sang the National Anthem.

One year, a bonfire was lit on the opposite side of the town as a feint. The police went to investigate and at a signal were stoned by men and youths hidden in alleyways. Completely outnumbered, the police retired to their headquarters where the mob smashed the windows and shouted insults.

In 1851 the Borough police consisted of a superintendent and three constables, and even after amalgamation with the County later that year, there were still only a handful of men carrying truncheons to face an excited mob armed with crude but effective weapons. As well as stones many rioters carried home-made bludgeons. These had long pointed spikes, hob nails and tenterhooks round the sides and, as a parody of the official staff, V.R. carved in the wood. One can sympathize with George Vickers, the superintendent from 1855-1863, who, according to his successor, locked his constables in the police station on 5th November and left the Guys undisturbed. It

was not until after the Guys made an unexpected appearance in 1863 that those in authority began to take action.

10th March was the Prince of Wales' wedding day and a public holiday. Official celebrations included a big procession, games and refreshments for the children and a public dinner for 'all persons over 45 years of age'. The day was to end with fireworks but no bonfire. The young men who made up the Guys, or Loyal Masquerade Corps as they were then calling themselves, felt left out and made their own plans.

The Bugler circulated some verse which began:

*'Now come you Guildford lads
As is under forty-five,
On Tuesday tenth of March, and make
Old Guildford all alive;*

. . . and goes on to describe how they would mark the event, drinking beer they did not intend to pay for. There was also a warning . . .

*Now Mayor and Corporation
Town Clerk and Coroner tu,
We beg you'd give a caution
Unto your lads in bloo;
Not with us loyal subjects
For to dare to interfere . . .*

On the day, fifty or sixty Guys marched 'in true military fashion' down the London Road into the town. They carried banners, some with patriotic slogans 'Long live the Queen' and 'God bless the Princess Alexandra'. Others showed their resentment and read 'All persons under 45 not to enjoy themselves'. It was about half past seven and many people had gone to the official firework display, but the sound of the Guys soon collected a large crowd around the bonfire. They celebrated for several hours, then ended the evening by attacking the High Street home of Dr Eager, house surgeon to the Work House and a man active in local politics. His house had been damaged before but this time the Guys

battered in his large, brass door plate as well as breaking windows.

AFTER THIS UNEXPECTED appearance of the Guys, preparations were made for the coming November. Mr Weale – a magistrate – announced at the Mayor's dinner that the War Office had been asked to send troops and on 3rd November about three hundred special constables were sworn in. The police still wore top hats and the son of one special remembered how his mother stuffed his father's hat with brown paper 'in case he got a crack on the head'.

Troops arrived and on 5th November the specials patrolled from 5.30 pm until one in the morning but the Guys stayed away. To be safe the specials continued 'parading the damp and dismal streets for hours,' night after night. A most important change was made on 9th November when a new mayor was elected unanimously. He was Philip Whittington Jacob, a former ship's surgeon with a reputation as a linguist – also a man prepared to take vigorous action. There was still an air of excitement in the town but as nothing had happened by the 21st November the troops were sent home. A few hours later the Guys took the town by surprise.

They turned out in force and at once paid back Mr Weale for calling in troops. He owned a large draper's shop in the High Street which had plate glass windows and the destruction of these was remembered as one of the more spectacular incidents. Fireworks were thrown through the broken windows and afterwards Mr Weale issued a writ of summons against the 'inhabitants of the Town of Guildford'.

After settling this score the Guys went to the home of Mr Piper, the mayor who had just left office. Here the elderly man and his invalid wife were attacked by a grotesquely dressed mob, who not only smashed their windows but broke into the house, damaging furniture with fireworks and bludgeons. Back in the High Street, rioters nearly killed P.C. Sutton by throwing him on the bonfire. The new Mayor was called out of bed to read the Riot Act, which he had to do in three different places before order was restored.

Shocked, the Corporation offered a reward of five hundred pounds for information leading to the arrest of the ringleaders. A vast sum for the ordinary citizen but never claimed, probably from fear of reprisal, as the identity of many Guys was known. Years later a Guildfordian referring to them wrote, 'one is a well known figure as he saunters along the sunny side of the High Street'. Police and corporation had formed a guard of honour at the funeral of a former Guy and another 'wore the aldermanic gown with credit,' which shows that many rioters later became sober citizens.

MAYOR JACOB next appointed a new Head Constable. He asked the Chief Constable of the County Police to recommend a man and he named an inspector stationed at Witley, John Henry Law. On 11th December, 1863 Mayor Jacob told the Watch Committee that Mr Vickers had resigned and Law's appointment was confirmed. Vickers resigned under pressure for he was paid twenty one pounds 'in lieu of

notice to quit the Police Force'. At another meeting P.C. Sutton was granted twenty pounds compensation for his severe injuries.


The town now had two men of action, working together. When giving his own account of events, Superintendent Law said that the first thing he had done was to pay off the specials and get six constables added to the Borough Force. Then assisted by an ex cavalry sergeant he drilled the men and realizing that small battens were no match for the Guys' clubs, issued them with cutlasses.

Because of the cost, troops were not used in November, 1864 but specials were enrolled. One bonfire was lit and Law found 'a lot of these fellows in fantastique dress were dancing round the flames' but on seeing the well drilled police the Guys made off. In fact the year passed so peacefully that in June 1865 the Watch Committee discussed reducing the police force. Luckily the motion was withdrawn, because that winter the last and perhaps most violent riot

took place. The Guys made a couple of unsuccessful attempts to celebrate in November. The danger seemed past but Superintendent Law still kept his men well drilled and with cutlasses sharpened 'in proper condition for service'. On Boxing Day, 1865, P.C. Stent was on duty at the bottom of the town when he was suddenly stoned by a group of about fifteen to twenty Guys. He gave the alarm and ran up the High Street but was soon knocked down and beaten, to shouts of 'Murder him'.

Law and his men were nearby. They were still outnumbered, but well drilled and armed. Superintendent Law had also warned them 'When the order is given, if any man attempts to turn back, let his comrades cut him down'. And at his command 'Double', his men drew their cutlasses and formed a line across the street. A street battle followed in which several policemen were injured but finally the rioters were overcome and ran off, some trying to escape by ferrying themselves over the river, but four were caught.

Constable Stent had been carried, bleeding, into a chemist's shop. When the men were charged in January, Stent had recovered and gave evidence, although still heavily bandaged and moving with difficulty. He was later paid twenty pounds compensation for 'severe injuries'.

The four men were sent for trial at the County Assize and in spite of an attempt to threaten witnesses, three were found guilty. The judge, when summing up commented that a great deal of blame lay with those who had not stopped the rioting at the outset. This was the only charge Superintendent Law had to make, although police and specials were on the alert in November for some years. In 1867 the Borough police were reduced but there was 'not a Guy to be seen'. Men gathered in the High Street, 'waiting like Mr Micawber for something to turn up' but apart from a few squibs it was quiet. On 9th November a new mayor was appointed and thanks were given to Mayor Jacob for his 'zealous and efficient conduct'. For as one observer of the riots commented – without him Guildford might not have 'recovered the right to be called a law-abiding and well-ordered town'. 



Left: The official staff and one of the weapons used by the Guys. Both items are now in Guildford Museum.

Below: The traditional site of the bonfire outside the Trinity Church in Guildford.

Illustrations from the author unless otherwise stated.

