

ON THE VISIT OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Stephen Cooper

In his *Journal*, the American Jonathan Williams recorded that Benjamin Franklin visited Wentworth House (as it was then known) at the end of May 1771: 'The next day they changed carriages at Wakefield, stopped for a tour of the Marquis of Rockingham's country estate, and arrived that evening in Sheffield'.¹ In his *Autobiography*, Franklin mentions that he visited an ironworks in Rotherham at this time, possibly Samuel Walkers at Masbrough:²

In the afternoon [we went] to inspect the ironworks and manufacture of tin-plate at nearby Rotherham to visit an ironworks where we saw them melting the iron ore and casting pots etc., which is performed as in America. The labourers received 14d per day, their work was extremely hard and in summer time must have been very disagreeable.

Franklin is also said to have previously visited the Rectory of Thornhill, near Leeds, where he had stayed with the Reverend John Michell, the vicar appointed by Sir George Savile, a close associate of the 2nd Marquis of Rockingham, the owner of the Wentworth estate.³

Did Franklin visit the Marquis, when he visited Wentworth estate? It is tempting to think that he did, and speculate that the two may have talked politics, since this was a time of great turmoil in Britain and America, when the Marquis was the leader of the most important group of Whig MPs, and Franklin was a representative in London, not only of his own Pennsylvania, but of the Colonies in Massachusetts, New York, and Georgia. However, I think it unlikely that the two men ever met, either in Yorkshire or in London; and, certainly, a meeting is not mentioned in any of the above accounts. Franklin was a polymath and an inventor, as well as a politician, and the journey he made to the North of England in May 1771 seems to have been undertaken with a view to seeing the results of the Industrial Revolution, rather than for any political purpose.

What if Franklin had met Rockingham that year? The conclusion there is that it is unlikely that they would have seen eye to eye, though they had been political allies at one time. In 1765 the government, headed by George Grenville, had enacted

¹ Journal of Jonathan Williams: see wwwFOUNDERS.archives.gov; and Papers of B.F., William Willcox, New Haven and London, Yale 1974, pp 113-116.

² Isaacson, p.253; *Autobiography*, p.68.

³ Thornhill still has the ruins of the old Hall, the rectory and a plaque to John Michell.

a Stamp Act, taxing all documents produced in the American Colonies, for the purpose of recouping some part of the costs of the Seven Years War (1756-63). However, this was strenuously resisted in America, because it was indeed 'taxation, without representation'; and the American Colonists were also imbued with "fierce spirit of liberty". Edmund Burke, successively M.P. for Wendover, Bristol and then Malto, agent for New York between 1770 and 1775,, and secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham, put this down to (1) English descent; (2) longstanding government by popular assemblies; (3) a strong Dissenting tradition in the northern colonies; (4) the slave-owning mentality in the South; (5) education; (6) and remoteness from Britain. After all, it took six weeks to sail from the Colonies to Britain.

In 1765, Franklin had worked closely with the Rockingham Whigs to convince Parliament that the stamp tax was unnecessary, counter-productive and divisive. The campaign for repeal was successful, and when Rockingham became Prime Minister and presided over the necessary legislation, Franklin had joined many Americans in hailing his success; but the Marquis's success was limited. Firstly, the repeal had to be linked, for domestic political reasons, to a Declaratory Act, which preserved the right of the Westminster Parliament to legislate for the Colonies in all spheres; but this was not something which Franklin could accept, even at the time. In his evidence to Parliament, he had drawn a distinction between internal and external affairs, arguing that a stamp tax was not legitimate, because it related to internal American affairs, but conceding that there could be no similar objection to the imposition of customs duties.

The second limit on Rockingham's success in 1765 was temporal: he lost office the following year and subsequent governments were headed by the Earl of Chatham (1766-68), the Duke of Grafton (1768-70) and Lord North (1770-82), not by the Whigs. The new ministers introduced customs duties on goods imported into America, but backtracked when these too were resisted by the Colonists in Massachusetts. Indeed they repealed most of the duties, but kept that on tea. When the Colonists responded with the Boston 'Tea Party' of 1773, the government introduced the Coercive Acts, known in America as the 'Intolerable Acts.' This led to war.

Franklin was a realist and knew that, once Rockingham's first administration came to an end in 1766, he had to deal with the government of the day, not with the Whig Opposition. In any case, his views changed. He came to regret the concession he had made about customs duties, because many Americans back home clearly thought that all taxation by the Westminster Parliament was wrong in principle. Likewise, he originally thought that the Boston Tea Party was a deplorable attack on private property, but changed his mind about the need for active resistance by the time of the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the sacking of Charleston, in 1775.

In that year Franklin returned to America and was elected to the Continental Congress, set up to co-ordinate resistance in the Thirteen Colonies. By 1776, when Tom Paine published *Common Sense*, Franklin had come to agree with him about the evils of monarchy, and the need for a republic. He helped to draft and then signed

the Declaration of Independence, which not only condemned George III as a tyrant, but also accused the British Parliament of being 'deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.'

There had been clashes between British customs officers and troops and American mobs and militias as early as March 1770; but relations between Britain the Colonies reached a new low when Franklin was sent to Paris at the end of 1776, to negotiate a treaty of alliance with Britain's hereditary enemy. The alliance that resulted enabled the Americans to cut off supplies to the British forces operating in America, courtesy of French sea-power.⁴ No less than two British armies had to surrender as a result, at Saratoga (1777) and Yorktown (1781), while in 1779 the Spanish joined the Alliance, and Britain was threatened with invasion.⁵

Rockingham predicted that the war in America would be unwinnable; but as a loyal subject of the Crown, he had no choice but to participate in it. So it was that he and Franklin ended up on opposite sides of the barricades. When Franklin was 'American Ambassador' in Paris, Rockingham was organising the defence of the port of Hull against attack by the American privateer John Paul Jones; and the Marquis deployed cannon cast at 'Walker's forge' in Rotherham for the purpose.⁶ Whether this forge was at the ironworks visited by Franklin in 1771, at the time he visited Wentworth Park, we cannot be sure.⁷

Rockingham did not become Prime Minister again until March 1782, and he died in the July. It fell to Lord Shelburne to conduct the negotiations, in Paris, for a peace treaty. Even so, Rockingham remained widely hated by the Tories in England for his repeated advocacy of conciliation - which they regarded as appeasement. He was, however, admired by the Whigs at home, and in some parts of North Carolina, New Hampshire and Virginia. Franklin died in 1790, after peace had been concluded and the Constitution of the new United States had been ratified. He has been regarded as one of the Founding Fathers of the U.S.A. ever since.

⁴ In 1777 a British spy named Paul Wentworth (who was a remote relative of the Marquis) was in Paris, spying on the activities of the American delegation (which included Franklin). His presence was counter-productive, and hastened the signing of a full alliance between France and the infant United States

⁵ See Bloy and Butterfield.

⁶ See Rockingham's letter to wife in *Albemarle* vol II pp 381-3. Samuel Walker had an ironworks in Masborough, Rotherham which became famous for making cannon, and also made Southwark Bridge around 1815, the year of Waterloo.

⁷ www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/wentworth-paul.

Sources

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