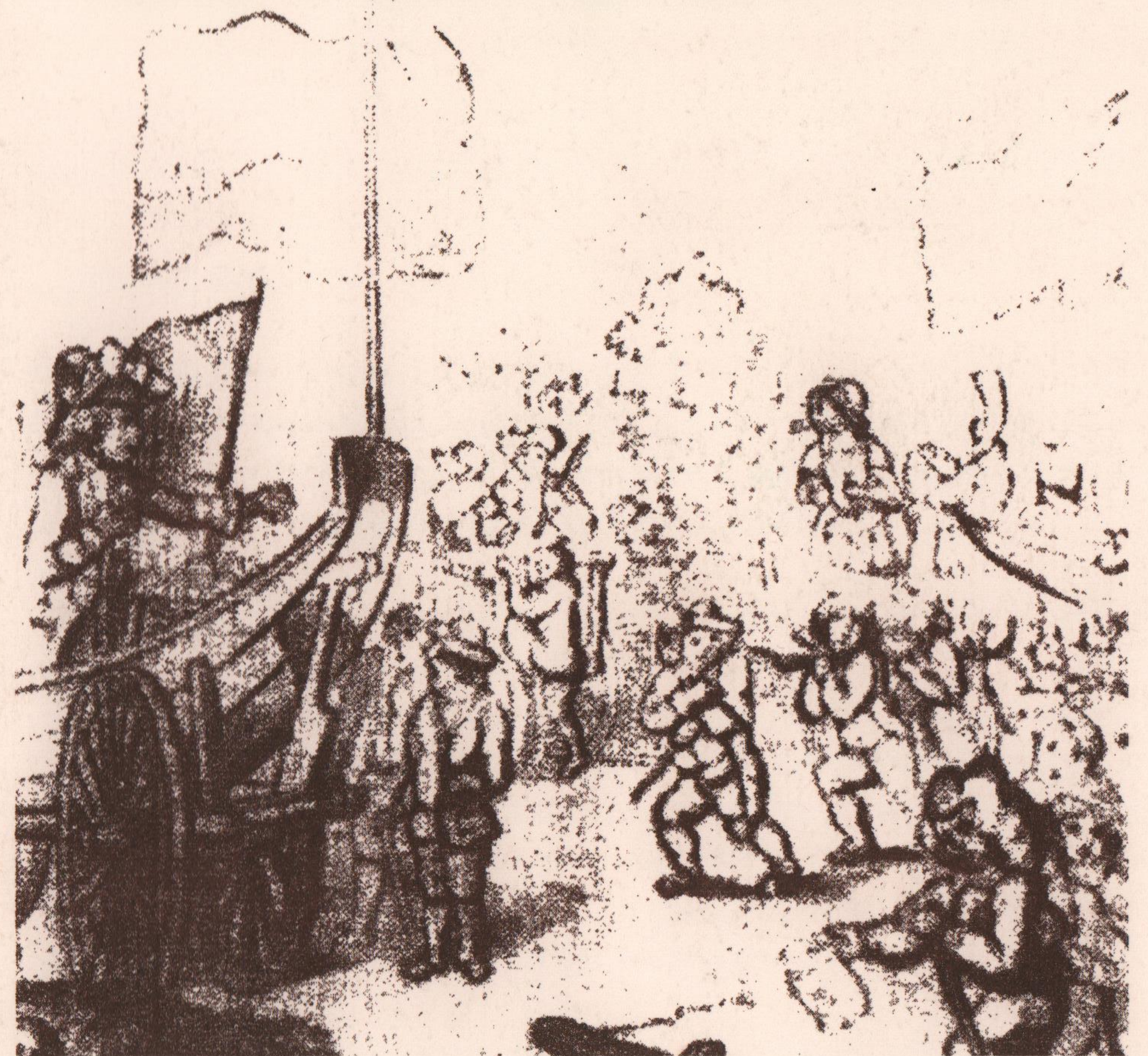


In the 18th Century mock elections for the fictional office of Mayor attracted huge crowds to the tiny South London hamlet of Garratt. The candidates were always poor tradesmen, usually with a drink problem. Thousands of people flocked to a huge rowdy satirical pisstake of the election process of the times.

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THE MAYOR OF GARRATT



*Mock Elections in 18th
Century South London*

THE MAYOR OF GARRATT

Mock Elections In 18th Century South London

In the eighteenth century, Garratt was a tiny village in the fields between Wandsworth and Tooting, now part of South West London. It had little political significance whatsoever and certainly no parliamentary representative. But from the 1740s to the 1800s mock elections for the fictional office of "Mayor of Garratt" attracted huge crowds to this tiny (now vanished) South London hamlet.

Garratt Green, and its Leather Bottle Inn, were the centre of a huge rowdy satirical pisstake of the election process of the times. Elections normally coincided with actual parliamentary elections and, at first, two Mayors were elected each time.

Eighteenth-century elections were noisy, chaotic and often violent. Only a tiny percentage of the population, the property-owning upper class and small numbers of the middle classes were eligible to vote. Many areas had no representation in Parliament, while many rotten boroughs with little or no residents elected MPs. There was huge pressure for reform of this farcical system, especially from the rising middle class, who were pushing for political clout to go with their increasing economic power.

Despite lacking the vote, huge crowds would often gather at election platforms, to cheer or jeer, fight, drink and generally take the piss...

Popular candidates were often feted and pulled around the streets in procession... Not so favoured would-be MPs might be pelted with mud or dung and chased out of town!

The whole electoral process overflowed with riot, drunkenness, theatre and an element of farce, which all classes appreciated and took part in. Elections were the subject (and were themselves riddled with) satire.



An 18th Century Election dinner, as satirised by Hogarth

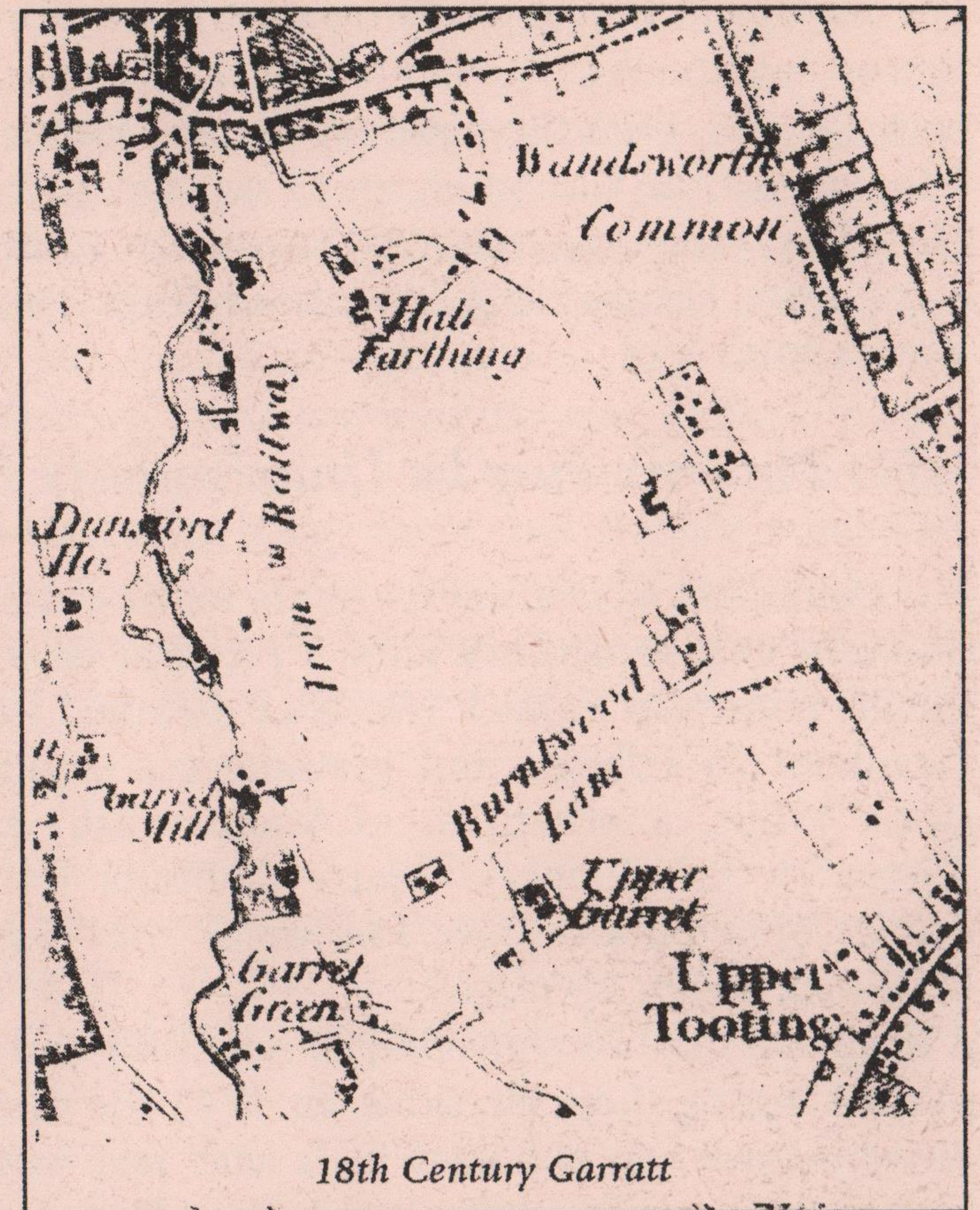
"the storm in a tea pot"

This found its most extreme expression in the bizarre ritual of the election of the Mayor of Garratt, where the world turned upside down for a day to allow comic speeches, vulgar banter and political impersonation.

In its heyday up to 80,000 people assembled to take part in or enjoy the fun.

The first recorded election was in 1747. There are disputed views as to how the event originated... According to a 1754 account by

a leading local Quaker, the first Mayor had been elected in about 1690 by some watermen who were "spending a merry day at the Leather Bottle". But a 1781 account of the election claimed they had begun about 30 years earlier as a result of successful local opposition to the illegal enclosures on Wandsworth Common, the leader of this



18th Century Garratt

opposition becoming known as the Mayor of Garratt.

"The inhabitants of the hamlet of Garratt, situated between Wandsworth and Tooting, in Surrey, had certain rights in a small common, which had been encroached upon; they therefore met in conclave, elected a president, resisted, and obtained their rights. As this happened at the time of a general election, it was determined that their president, or mayor, should hold office during parliament, and be re-elected with a new one. It was impossible that the ridiculous pomposity of the whole affair should not be felt and joked upon. When, therefore, party-spirit ran high, its effervescence was parodied by 'the storm in a tea-pot' of a Garratt election."

This fits with the date of the first recorded election, though there

doesn't seem to be any surviving evidence of a 1740s campaign against enclosures. Garratt elections thereafter were held to coincide and mock the national General Elections.

The fame of the Garratt elections was spread by Samuel Foote's farce, *The Mayor of Garret* (1764), and after 1768 candidates often came from London and its surroundings rather than just the Wandsworth area.

"this Phaenix may be Unanimously Chosen..."

The candidates were always poor tradesmen, usually with a drink problem and sometimes with a physical deformity. The main qualification was a quick wit. They assumed such titles as Lord Twankum (a cobbler and gravedigger), Squire Blowmedown (John Willis, a waterman of Wandsworth) and Sir Trincalo Boreas (a fishmonger), Squire Gubbins (James Simmonds, keeper of a public-house known as the 'Gubbins' Head,' in Blackman Street, Borough).

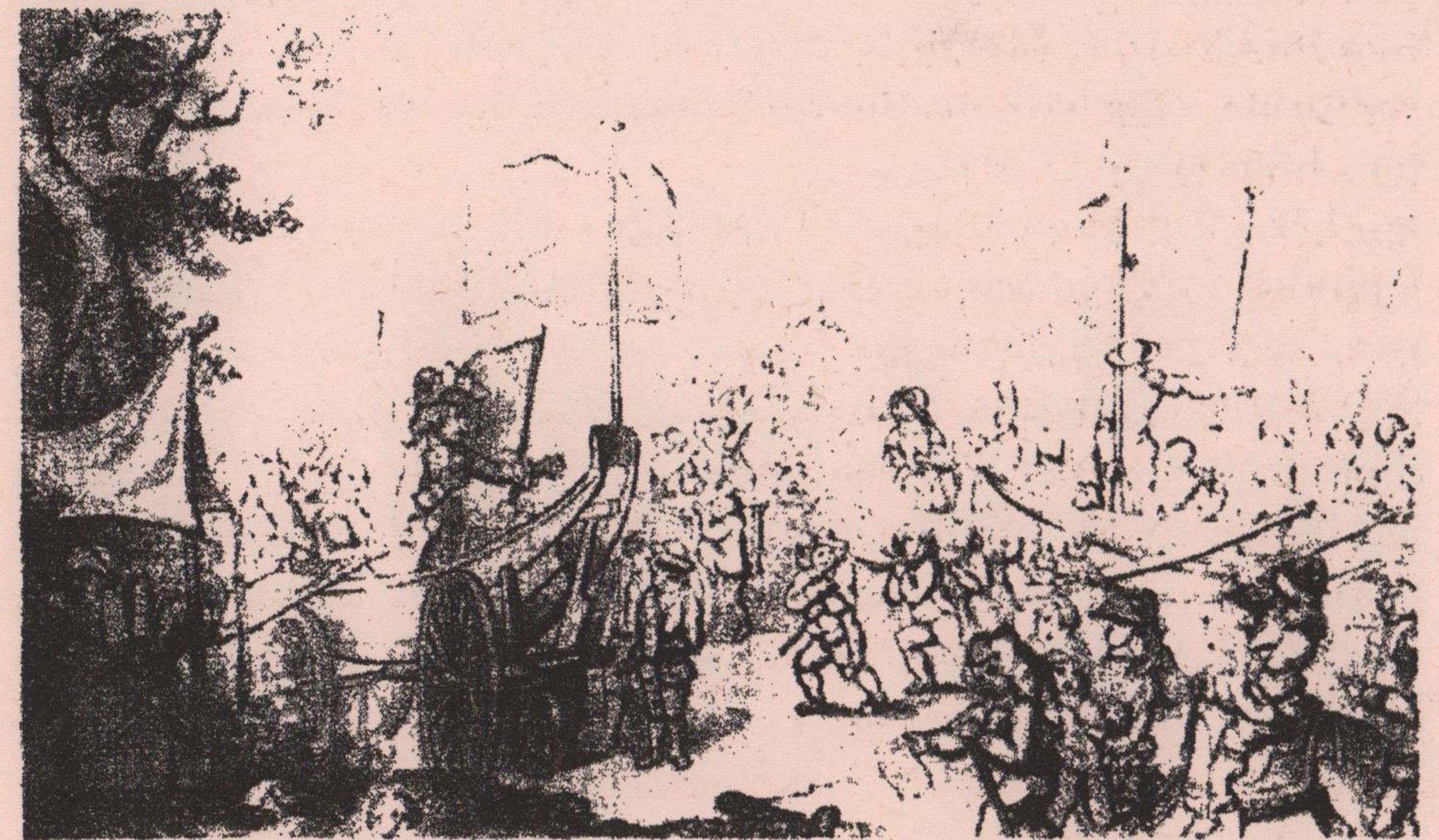
A large and curious collection of handbills and broadsides were printed during these elections. In 1747 the campaign of Squire Blowmedown was endorsed in "a letter sent from an elector of the borough of Garrat to another," and dated from St. James's Market, in which we are assured that "the greatest stranger must look upon himself as void of reason, entirely barren of wisdom, extinct of humanity, and unworthy the esteem of men of sense and veracity, should he neglect any opportunity to testify how ardent his wishes are that this Phaenix may be unanimously chosen" - listing the Squire's qualifications for office eloquently: "if drinking largely, heading a mob majestically, huzzaing eloquently, and feeding voraciously, be merits in any degree worthy the esteem of the good people of this land, a Garrat, I must ingeniously confess, is too mean an apartment for such a worthy; for Envy herself must confess, if the above qualifications are of any efficacy, the universal voice of the whole realm of Great Britain would not be equivalent to his wondrous deserts."

The candidates first walked or rode in procession from

Southwark, and then paraded in Wandsworth, sometimes in carts shaped like boats.

"None but those who have seen a London mob on any great holiday," wrote Sir Richard Philips, "can form a just idea of these elections. On several occasions a hundred thousand persons, half of them in carts, in hackney coaches, and on horse and ass-back, covered the various roads from London, and choked up all the approaches to the place of election. At the two last elections, I was told that the road within a mile of Wands-worth was so blocked up by vehicles, that none could move backward or forward during many hours; and that the candidates, dressed like chimney-sweepers on May-day, or in the mock fashion of the period, were brought up to the hustings in the carriages of peers, drawn by six horses, the owners themselves condescending to become their drivers."

In 1747, the "clerk and recorder" from a nonexistent town hall announced an election contested between Squire Blowmedown and Squire Gubbins (in fact a waterman and pubkeeper, respectively). Both candidates issued handbills full of their own



The Mayoral procession... "a boat drawn by four horses and filled with many emblematical devices."

merits and deriding those of their opponent, in the style of political leaflets of the day. These two candidates fought the next election in 1754, again abusing each other and their supporters in their handbills.

In 1761 the number of candidates rose to nine; in addition to Gubbins and Blowmedown, there were Sir John Crambo, Kit Noisy (waterman), Lord Lapstone (shoemaker), Lord Paxford, Lord Twankum (cobbler), Lord Wedge and Beau Silvester. The candidates promised prosperity if they were elected and foreseeing disaster if their opponents should be favoured instead. Beau Silvester cannily stood on a platform of resisting extra tax on ale and giving orders to increase the number of local pubs.

From the 1760s the elections were associated with radical politics, and the hero of the bourgeois reform party and darling of the "London mob", John Wilkes, and his supporters wrote some of the candidates' addresses. The candidates usually stressed their patriotism and loyalty to the King, while protesting economic hardships and the lack of liberty for the labouring classes.

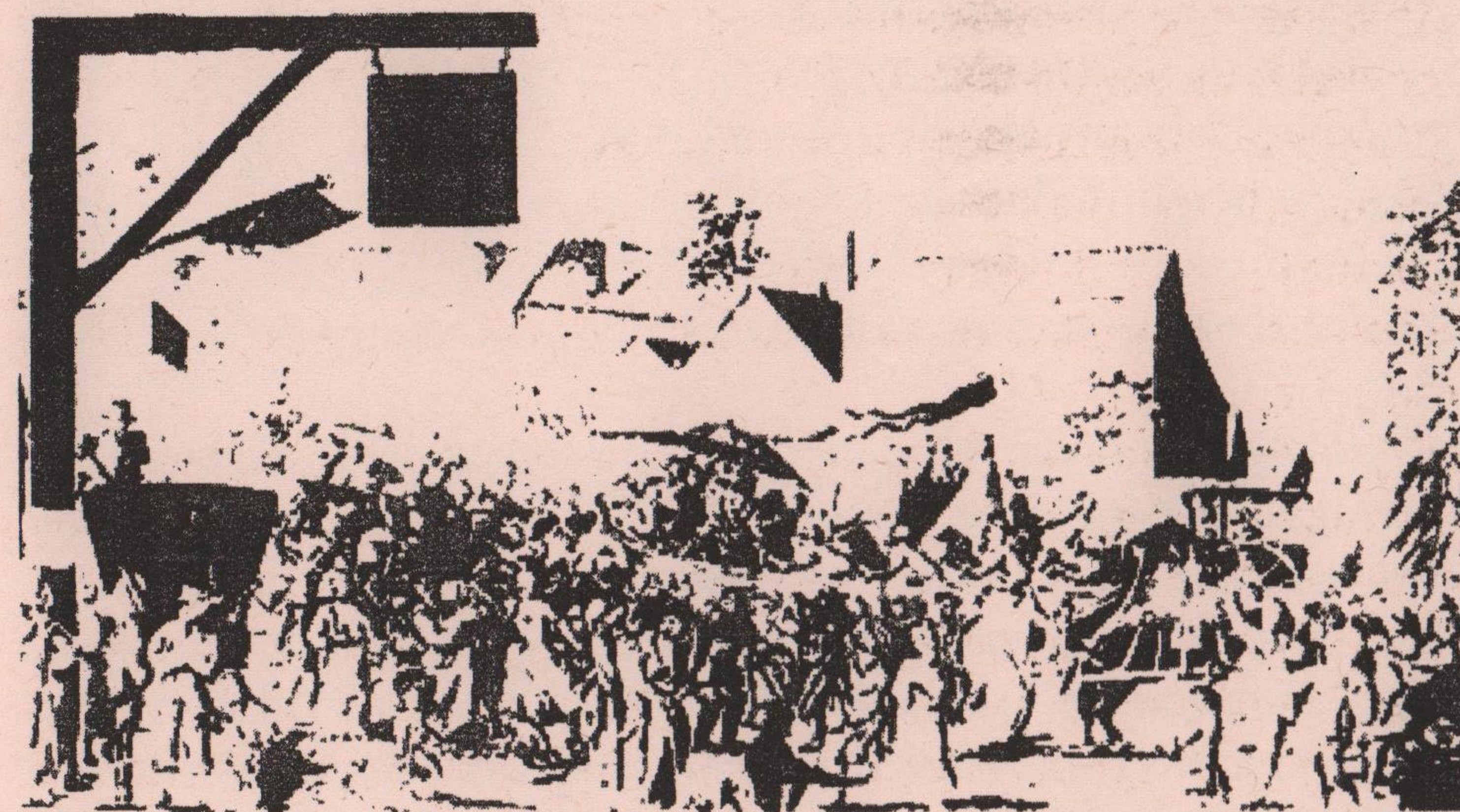
Gradually the Mayoral election became more and more seditious, especially in the turbulence of the increasingly radical and rebellious 1790s.

In 1763 candidates Lord Twankum, Kit Noisy and Sir John Crambo mocked each other in electoral contest. In 1768 there were seven candidates; Lord Twankum, Sir Christopher Dashem, Sir George Comefirst, Sir William Airey, Sir William Bellows, one "Batt from the Workhouse", and Sir John Harper - the last being elected. Lady Twankum promised a huge party to entertain the populace. The 1775 election introduced Sir William Blaize, "Nephew to the late Lord Twankum" and Sir Christopher Dashem.

"full of activity and noise"

In 1781 there were "scaffoldings and booths erected in Wandsworth at every open space; these were filled with spectators to the topmost rows, and boys climbed to the topmost poles, flags and colours were hung across the road, and the place was crowded by a dense population full of activity and noise". The candidates then rode in procession along Garratt Lane, accompanied by the Clerk, the Recorder and the Master of Horse, who in 1781 rode at the head of the 'Garratt Cavalry', a troop of 40 boys mounted on ponies. At the hustings, on Garratt Green, each candidate had to swear an oath (their right hand resting on the sign of the mob - a brickbat!), "handed down to us by the grand Volgee, by order of the great Chin Kaw Chipu, first Emperor of the Moon".

This oath was too rude to be repeated by Victorian folk



historians; it scrutinised voters' property qualifications (the test to see if you had enough property to be eligible to vote) in the language of sexual innuendo:

"That you have admitted peaceably and quietly, into possession of a freehold thatched tenement, either black, brown or coral, in hedge or

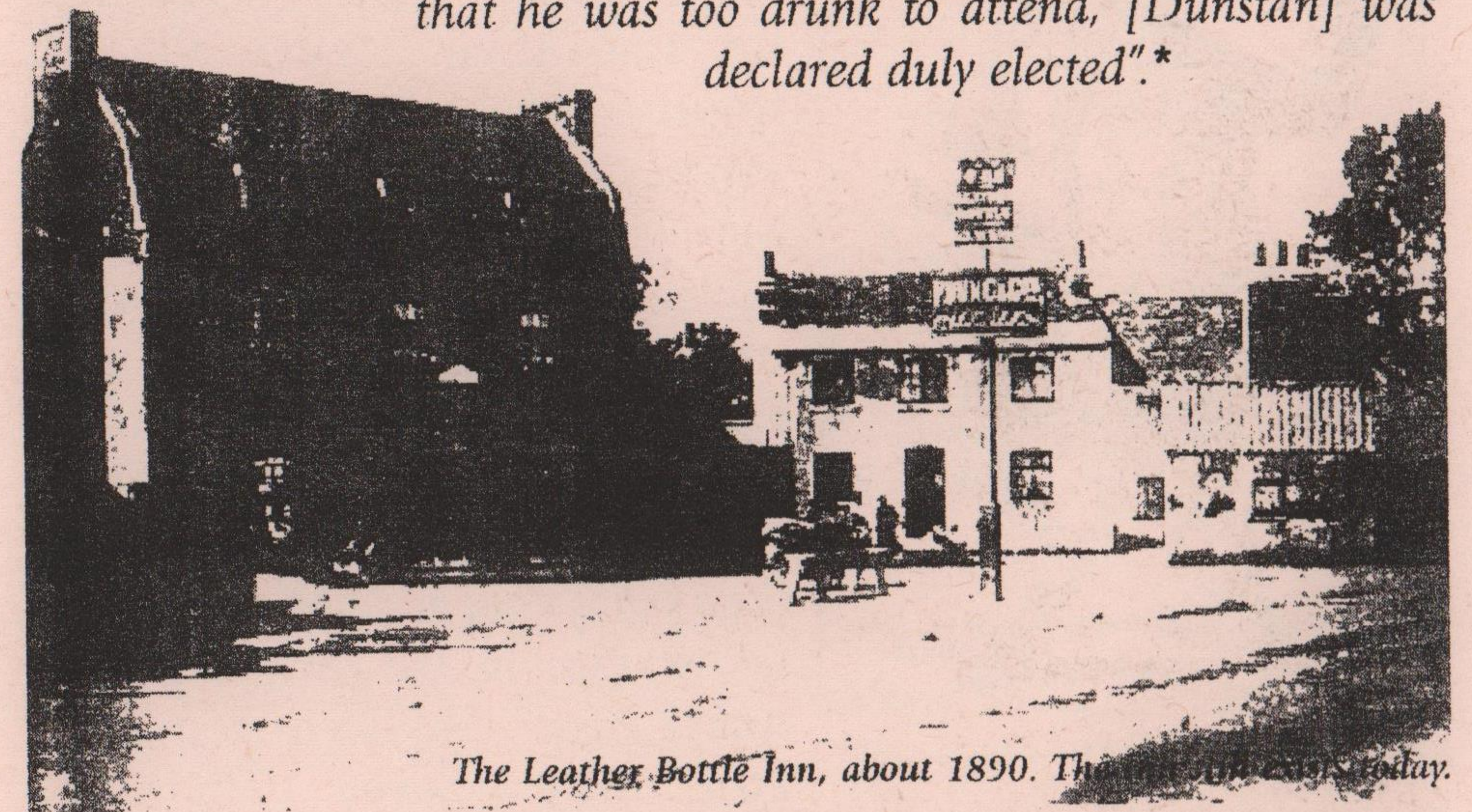
ditch, against gate or stile, under furze or fen, on any common or common field, or enclosure, in the high road, or any of the lanes, in barn, stable, hovel, or any other place within the manor of Garratt; and, that you did (Bona fide) keep (ad rem) possession of that said thatched tenement (durante bene placito) without any let, hindrance, or molestation whatever; or without any ejectment or forcibly turning out of the same; and that you did then and there and in the said tenement, discharge and duty pay and amply satisfy all legal demands of the tax that was at that time due on the said premises; and lastly, did quit and leave the said premises in sound, wholesome and good tenable repair as when you took possession and did enter therein. So help you..."

The huge crowds, said in 1781 to be 20,000, but at other times to have been as many as 100,000, blocked the streets for hours. Pub landlords donated funds to provide the candidates' lavish costumes, and were well-rewarded: on one occasion the pubs ran dry and only water was left, selling at 2d per glass. Local and later London publicans also sponsored candidates and supported the event, to boost their own profits.

In 1781 there were nine candidates:

"About three o'clock the candidates proceeded with their several equipages towards the hustings; his Lordship [Lord Viscount Swallowtail, a basketmaker] was elegantly seated in a wicker cage, which was mounted on a cart and driven by a servant in a laced livery. The next in order was Sir John Harper [in reality James Anderson, a breeches-maker & inkle-weaver] who rode uncovered in a phaeton drawn by six horses, and was dressed in white and silver, with a blue ribband round his shoulder; this worthy knight recruited his spirits every furlong by a glass of Geneva [gin] ... After him came Sir William Blaize [a blacksmith] mounted on a cart-horse, with a pack-saddle and halter, and paper ears reaching to the ground. Sir Christopher Dashwood [a waterman] rode triumphantly in a boat drawn by four horses and filled with many emblematical devices." Also

standing were Sir Buggy Bates (a chimney-sweep), Sir John Gnawpost, Sir Thomas Nameless, Sir Thomas Tubbs (a waterman) and Jeffrey Dunstan (a wig-seller). Swallowtail and Buggy Bates were accused in their rivals' handbills of holding government contracts, to supply baskets and remove soot, respectively! The press of carriages, wagons and horses prevented several candidates reaching the hustings, but Dunstan, "proceeding without noise or ostentation", arrived at the Green on his own and proceeded to address the electors until interrupted by the hustings platform collapsing. The other candidates then not appearing, and a message being received from Sir John [Harper] that he was too drunk to attend, [Dunstan] was declared duly elected".*



"marked by irresistible humour"

Dunstan, the most celebrated of the Mayors, was a second-hand wig seller in the West End. He was a foundling who took his name from the parish of St Dunstons-in-the-East in the City of London, where, in 1759, he was discovered on the step of the

* In fact both Harper and Dunstan were elected. Two Mayors were usually elected in the early Garratt elections: again this mocked General Elections of the time, in which some constituencies returned two MPs.

churchwarden's house. He was brought up in the workhouse, had knock-knees and a disproportionately large head, and only grew to a height of 4 feet ... He had *"a countenance and manner marked by irresistible humour, and he never appeared without a train of boys and curious persons whom he entertained by his sallies of wit, shrewd sayings and smart repartees"*. Dunstan's lively sallies made him popular with the crowd, who twice more returned him to office. He became a close friend of populist MP John Wilkes*.



Jeffrey Dunstan

Fond of his drink, Dunstan became too outspoken against the establishment and in 1793, at the height of the French Revolution, he was tried, convicted and imprisoned for seditious expressions. Dunstan remained Mayor until 1796 and died the following year, allegedly as the result of a drinking spree.

Dunstan's successor was Henry Dinsdale (Sir Harry Dimsdale), described as *"a deformed dwarf, little better than an idiot, who used to sell muffins in the streets about St Anne's Soho"*. He lived in a small attic near Seven Dials (a notoriously poor and rowdy area north of Covent Garden). He was almost as deformed as Dunstan, *"but by no means so great a humorist. The most was made of his appearance, by dressing him in an ill-proportioned tawdry court suit, with an enormous cocked hat."*

* Wilkes: A radical MP in the 1760s and '70s, a cynical populist and self-seeker, for a while hero of the reformers and the 'London Mob', who rioted in support of him several times. He was barred from taking his seat in the House of Commons due to his libels on the king, and repeatedly imprisoned. Allowed to take his seat, he gradually joined the establishment, taking charge of soldiers in the 1780 Gordon Riots and giving them orders to shoot down his former supporters in the rebellious crowd.

In 1804, Dinsdale stood as the Emperor Anti-Napoleon, addressing his subjects as the 'Emperor of Garratt'.

"a natural death?"

Dinsdale died in about 1810. *"He was 'the last' of the grotesque Mayors, for no candidates started after his death, the publicans did not as before sub-scribe toward the expenses of the day, and the great saturnalia died a natural death."*

The Garratt election seems to have declined in popularity from the 1790s, losing both its patronage by the aristos and its support from political radicals. There were several reasons for this. In its heyday, the whole grand show had been a spectacle for people of all backgrounds: many of the better-off to come and enjoy the rough and tumble of lower-class rowdiness: and even sponsored the candidates. The wealthier classes were attracted to the rowdiness and the edginess of mingling with the plebeians at Garratt or the many local popular fairs; at least while there seemed to be no political implications to the gatherings (although middle class and even aristocratic reformers wrote speeches and used the Mayoralty to further the cause of reform). Like many carnivals, festivals, fairs Garratt had become a letting of steam, a release for social and political tensions in a relatively harmless satirical free for all. This wasn't unusual for the times, according to long-established codes, even a certain level of violence and direct action could be acceptable, as in bread riots, when crowds forcibly redistributed bread at times of high prices.



Henry Dinsdale

This has been labeled a 'moral economy' by some radical historians, who identify the prevailing paternalistic social system as allowing for a certain amount of ritualistic rebelliousness - to keep food prices reasonable for example, or curb anti-social, adulterous or marginal behaviour - as long as it stayed within traditional and expected boundaries. Exceed these limits and the powers that be would crush you: as striking and rioting silkweavers and coalheavers found out in the 1760s.

As the 18th Century went on however, not only did pressure for reform from below grow, but the authorities fear of "the Mob" and plebeian rebelliousness increased. The riots of the 1760s in support of Wilkes' campaign against corruption in Parliament, increasing economic violence, and above all, the shattering events of the Gordon Riots in 1780, when rioting crowds virtually took over the city and drove the rich into flight, terrified the upper class. Any occasion for crowds to come together became a potential riot situation. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and the violent social upheaval it created, inspired many radicals in England - and further alarmed those in power.

Certainly from 1793, the year of the height of the radical violence of the Revolution, the Garratt elections were frowned upon: Dunstan was jailed for sedition in '93. Through 1794-5, radical reformers like the London Corresponding Society (as well as many similar societies in other cities) were holding mass rallies and pressing for changes in political structures - and often this was linked to economic actions by the growing working class, as well as rioting in times of hardship (especially during the long war with France 1792-1815). Popular protest was increasingly vocal and repression increasingly violent. In this context Garratt was less of a harmless show and took on a more threatening aspect.

Hand in hand with this of course, a moral trend was developing which was aimed at driving society, especially the poor, away from rowdiness and drunken troublemaking, and towards hard

work, sobriety, respectability. This found its expression in the mass growth of Christian sects like the Methodists, but also in the springing up of repressive middle class societies such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and many local campaigns which were set up to press for the banning of Fairs and closing other local trouble spots. Between 1768 and 1855 most of the large London Fairs, as well as many further afield, which were traditionally held once a year, and often became rowdy, bawdy riotous free for alls, were restricted or banned. Morally Fairs and other licentious gatherings were a danger to the working classes because they distracted them from the true path of hard work, religion and sacrifice; the cost of policing and repressing the riots that erupted was also falling more and more on the ratepayers who controlled the local Vestries. Even the very open spaces where such events were held were disappearing, as London spread into the surrounding fields, profitable developments replaced commons and Greens where such events could be held; to the relief of the gentry who often identified un-landscaped open spaces as immoral in themselves, requiring fencing, landscaping and ordering if they were to remain unbuilt on - an ordered park was held to have a civilizing effect on the disorderly poor in its own right.

Not only were the authorities keen to get rid of fairs, mass gatherings etc where the plebs' baser passions could break out, but reformers and radicals themselves also more and more internalised the drive for a respectable, sober, orderly and educated movement for change. Artisan radicals increasingly saw such unruly traditions as embarrassments to their properly directed political efforts to improve their lot.

This movement developed into the powerful London artisan radical scene, which produced the London Corresponding Society, Owenism, the Cooperative Movement and the Chartism. Although these were strong and important manifestations of the self-organised working class, you can't help feeling that leaving behind wild outbreaks of carnival and satire like the Garratt Elections, something was lost...

Interestingly many radical artisans and working men did in fact use the structure or name of a 'Parliament', in the Working Men's Institutes and Radical Clubs, to describe their debating societies and political discussions. This seems to have been more of a gesture towards respectability and legitimacy, not questioning or mocking the institution of the Election but affirming it and seeking to extend it into their own political experience.

What with repression and changes in working class culture, there were no more Mayor of Garratt elections after 1804, apart from an unsuccessful attempt to revive the custom in 1826:

"After a lapse of thirty-four years, when the whim and vulgarity of a Garrat election was only remembered by a few, and recorded by Foote's drama, the general election of 1826 seems to have induced a desire to resuscitate the custom. A placard was prepared to forward the interests of a certain 'Sir John Paul Pry,' who was to come forward with Sir Hugh Allsides (ono Callendar. beadle of All Saints' Church, Wandsworth), and Sir Robert Needall (Robert Young, surveyor of roads), described as a 'friend to the ladies who attend Wandsworth Fair.' The placard, which may be read in Hone's Every-Day Book, displays 'a plentiful lack of wit.' The project of revival failed; and Garrat has had no parliamentary representative 'out-of-doors' since the worthy muffin-seller was gathered to his fathers at the close of the last century."

Appendix:

THE MOCK-ELECTION IN THE KING'S BENCH PRISON, 1827

"Nothing during the last year excited more curiosity than the Mock Election, which took place in the King's Bench Prison; as much from the circumstances attending its conclusion, as from the astonishment expressed that men, unfortunate and confined, could invent any amusement at which they had a right to be happy."

Satirical elections did not end with the dying out of the Garratt tradition... In July 1827, just a year after the failed revival at Garratt, the inmates of the King's Bench Prison, in Borough, South London, organised a fantastical mock hustings, to elect an MP to represent 'Tenterden' (a slang name for the prison, said to be dervied from the name of a Chief Justice of England!) in Parliament. Three candidates were put up, one of whom was a

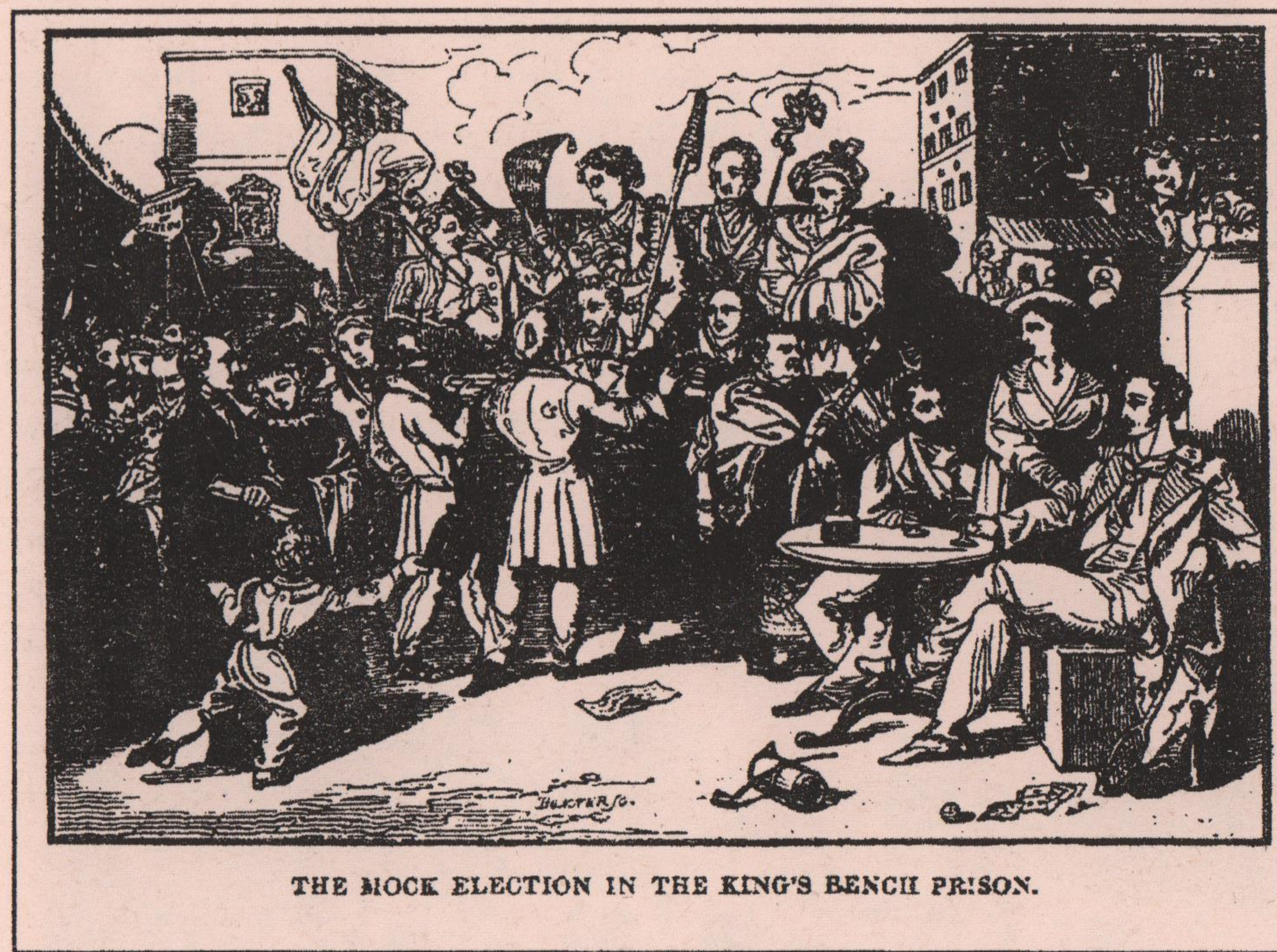


The Yard of the Kings Bench Prison, late 18th Century. Located on the modern Borough Road, SE1, 'Tenterden' was famous for "buffoonery, scoundrelism, riot and confusion".

Lieutenant or Colonel Meredith, an eccentric naval officer.

"...As I approached the unfortunate, but merry, crowd, to the last day of my life I shall ever remember the impression... baronets and bankers, authors and merchants, painters and poets... dandies of no rank in rags and tatters... all mingled in indiscriminate merriment, with a spiked wall, twenty feet high, above their heads..."

All the characteristics of a regular election were parodied. Overseeing the events, a Mr Murphy posed as the High Sheriff wearing a chain of office made from old bed springs, other "election officers" were chosen to oversee the proceedings "properly"... pretty soon hustings were erected in the courtyard



THE MOCK ELECTION IN THE KING'S BENCH PRISON.

and various prisoners went from cell to cell canvassing and assuring votes for themselves. Addresses from the candidates to the 'worthy and independent electors' were printed and posted up around the prison; contending parties wrote broadsheets & sang songs attacking their opponents; there were processions with flags and music, to take the several candidates to visit the

several 'Collegians' (i. e., prisoners) in their rooms; speeches were made in the courtyards, full of grotesque humour; and the electors were invited to 'rush to the poll' early on Monday morning, the 16th of July.

It was later suggested that Colonel Meredith actually believed that the vote was for real... The Colonel assembled a fine uniform from a piece of old carpet and wore roses in his hair. At the end of polling day, with an impromptu band playing all the candidates waltzed with each other. In the end, the Colonel happily won by 175 votes to the others - 144 for Mr Stanton and 75 for Mr Birch.

"Hitherto it had been a mere revel; but on the latter day the frolic assumed a serious aspect, from the interference of the marshal of the prison."

Worried about the disorder that might arise (and that the inmates might be enjoying life in a manner non-profitable to him and other warders?!), Mr. Jones, marshal of the prison, put a stop to the whole proceedings on the morning of the 16th. Apparently the proceedings were halted violently, exasperating the prisoners. They resented the language used towards them, and opposed the treatment to which they were subjected, leading to a mini-riot; until a squad of Foot-guards, with fixed bayonets, forcibly drove some of the leaders into a filthy 'black-hole' or solitary confinement. Prisoners then got up a 300 strong signed petition for their release and also sent a second petition to the Chief Justice to have Marshall Jones removed for 'barbarously and wantonly bringing into the prison a company of soldiers with fixed bayonets'.

"The three candidates, and other persons who were active in the election, were for some time kept in close confinement, and a sergeant's guard was introduced, and remained in the prison all night. The result was pacific; but the conduct of the marshal has been much censured and threatened with a parliamentary investigation."

Quotes from an account of the Mock Election by Benjamin Haydon, imprisoned in the Kings Bench for debt, July 1827.

Kings Bench was of course no stranger to disorder... The original Prison, (off Borough High St, on the south side of Mermaid Court) was attacked & burned by rebellious Kentish peasants in 1381 (Peasants Revolt) & 1450 (Jack Cade's Rebellion). In September 1649, after a bill for the relief of prisoners committed for debt (an important demand of Levellers & other reformers of the time) was rumoured to have been defeated, a number of prisoners rioted & tried to break out. A troop of soldiers shot & killed one woman. In 1758 the Kings Bench was rebuilt off Borough Road where the Scovill Estate now stands. In 1768 jailed populist MP John Wilkes was held here: his supporters attacked and set fire to the jail in an attempt to rescue him. Daily riots took place around the prison for weeks until he was released. Bits of the prison were gradually demolished. On 10 May 1768, the day of the opening of parliament, 20,000 assembled... A wall paper had been fixed to the wall:

*"Venal judges and Ministers combine
Wilkes and English Liberty to confine
Yet in true English hearts secure their fame
Nor are such crowded levies in St James
While thus in prison Envy dooms their stay
Here' o grateful Britons, your daily homage pay
Philo Libertalis no. 45."*

Magistrate Justice Gillam ordered it torn down, the crowd stirred, the Riot Act was read, and Gillam was stoned by a man in red... Captain Murray and three grenadiers chased and shot publican's son William Allen dead in a cowshed at the Horse Shoe Inn, but this was quickly discovered to be mistaken identity. Weeks of rioting followed.

On 7 June 1780, like all London's other prisons, the Kings Bench was burnt out by the Gordon Rioters. In the days following the riots, recaptured prisoners and rioters were held in sheds here.

*re-published 2007,
reworked from the original edition
published 2004 by past tense*

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