



Heritage Statement
for
Parker House
2, Church Street
Leek
Staffordshire
ST13 6AB

Heritage Statement for Listed Building Application for 'Blue Plaque' Scheme at Parker House, 2, Church Street, Leek, Staffordshire.

Introduction

Parker House is situated within the Leek Central Conservation Area and is classified as a Grade II Listed Building – a copy of the listing is attached within this statement. It sits at the top of the Market Place on Stockwell Street and is part of an important grouping.

According to recent dendrology the property is dated from 1512-1514 and under the auspices of Dieulacresse Abbey, situated nearby, served as a moot house and possibly for wool storage, which was one of the main industries of the time. The accuracy of the dendrology was undertaken under the supervision of Dr Faith Cleverdon.

Very few changes appear to have been made to the buildings structure since Thomas Parker was born here in 1667 (after which it takes its name), except at street level where the former front rooms have become shop premises. A copy of Thomas Parker's dynamic life story and references is attached to this statement.

Leek and District Civic Society have assessed this building (and its immediate neighbours) as being an important part of Leek's built heritage and history (given its former occupant).

Proposal

The proposal is to affix a 400mm diameter resin plaque, using the bed joint for the two screw fixings – its position is shown on details contained within this statement, using a photograph superimposed with a sample plaque.

The wording of the plaque will be: 'The birth place of Thomas Parker 1667-1732 1st Earl of Macclesfield Lord Chancellor of England 1715-1725'.

Design Issues

The position of the plaque has been assessed given the existing openings on the front elevation - It is felt that the fixing of the plaque will not affect the significance of this listed building.

PARKER HOUSE, 2 CHURCH STREET, LEEK

SHOPS

This substantial stone-built house incorporates the remains of a 16th century timber-framed building. (1) The house, pictured here was built by Thomas Parker, who retained what was structurally sound of the old house and rebuilt round it. (2) The house had four rooms on the upper floors and three on the ground floor. There was also an access passage to the stable yard leading to a purpose built stable. (3)

Parker's son, also Thomas, was born here in 1666; he was called to the bar in 1691 and was appointed Lord Chief Justice in 1710. He was created Baron Parker of Macclesfield in 1716 and became Lord Chancellor of Great Britain in 1718. Created Earl of Macclesfield in 1721, he was impeached for corruption in 1725 and found guilty. (4) Thomas Parker was removed from office, taken to the Tower and sentenced to pay a fine of £30,000. (5) The house remained one property until at least 1881 when members of the Critchlow family had lived there for several years. By 1891 a lock-up shop adjoined the house. In 1908, no. 2 was still a family home while no. 4 was an accountant's office.

Arthur Cecil Parker, grandson of the 6th Earl of Macclesfield, was at no. 4 in 1912, where he ran the estate office. This handsome house has been divided into two shop premises for almost a hundred years.



Lord chief justice

No sooner had these proceedings ended (which now awaited the verdict and sentence of the House of Lords) than it was announced on 11 March that Parker had been appointed lord chief justice following the recent death of Sir John Holt. The announcement, made even before Holt's burial, caused much surprise, but it was an opportunity shrewdly seized upon in order to signify the queen's approval of the impeachment and dispel rumours that she secretly supported Sacheverell. Parker's superbly executed brief for the ministry made him the obvious choice for this most senior place on the judicial bench, and the recommendation for his appointment appears to have come from two leading ministerial figures who were also personally acquainted with him, the dukes of Somerset and Devonshire. He was sworn in to office on 13 March, thus relinquishing his seat in the House of Commons, and on the 29th he was sworn a member of the privy council.

It was perhaps ironic that the only crown case of any significance over which Parker presided as lord chief justice arose from the whigs' prosecution in April 1710 of three men who had been ringleaders in the Sacheverell riots. He was subsequently criticized for delivering an overtly partisan summing-up that led to verdicts of high treason against two of the men, but he later took pains to secure their pardon. Parker's personal conduct on the bench did not endear him to members of the bar. Barristers whose arguments he found flawed or pedestrian were often the butt of his notoriously sharp temper, while others were exasperated by his open courtesy and favouritism to a privileged few, such as the young Philip Yorke and John Fortescue-Aland, who impressed him with their arguments.

Quite apart from his preoccupations with the law, Parker was a man of vigorous intellect. His fondness for scholarly enquiry took radical and unexpected directions, and his generous patronage of clerics, scholars, and authors, many of whom in their various ways were free-thinking controversialists, gave him an 'aetheistical' reputation. He took particular pleasure in the conversation of Bernard Mandeville, whose cynical vision of society, *The Grumbling Hive*, had first appeared in 1705. He was drawn to the writings of the deist John Toland, as also to those of Thomas Burnet, who subjected Old Testament texts to radical new interpretations, and of David Wilkins, a pioneer in oriental studies and the study of Anglo-Saxon texts. Other scholarly acquaintances included the nonjuring minister George Hickes, the Huguenot journalist Pierre Desmaizeaux, whom for a while Parker employed as tutor to his son, and Zachary Pearce, whom Parker later appointed as his personal chaplain. Parker's interests also extended to science and mathematics and in March 1712 were publicly acknowledged in his election as a fellow of the Royal Society. Chief among his scientific friends was the astronomer-mathematician Edmond Halley, whose appointment as astronomer royal he was to procure in 1721.

Parker was said to have resisted Robert Harley's invitation to become lord chancellor in the new tory ministry after the resignation of Lord Cowper in September 1710, preferring the securer status of lord chief justice, which he technically held *quamdiu se bene gesserit*, the principle which had been laid down for senior judicial commissions by the Act of Settlement of 1701. He thus found himself able to assist his party, both by defending whig pamphleteers who came under tory prosecution, and by punishing high-church journalists, though when Jonathan Swift roundly attacked him for this in his *Public Spirit of the Whigs*, published in 1712, no action was taken. For the most part, Parker was excluded from the business of the cabinet council, but at the formalities connected with the peace settlement in April 1713, and in the presence of the queen, he antagonized the tory ministers by criticizing the terms; at the end of the month it was rumoured that the ministry was to seek his removal from office by parliamentary process. But it was his intervention in June 1714 that struck a defining blow against the badly divided administration of Lord Oxford. On being approached by Lord Wharton with evidence that Jacobite agents were arriving in England to recruit support, Parker issued a warrant for their arrest, a turn of events which forced the secretary of state, Lord Bolingbroke, to issue a proclamation offering a £5000 reward for the Pretender's arrest if he should land in Britain. By this particular act the government publicly set its face against a Jacobite solution to the succession question, of which it had been widely suspected, and helped to weaken Viscount Bolingbroke's power base in the Commons and signify the ineffectuality of any ministry he might attempt to lead.

Following Queen Anne's death just weeks later, in August 1714, Parker was one of the seven lords

justices appointed by virtue of his office (under the 1706 Regency Act) to carry on the government until the arrival of her successor, George I; and when the new king landed at Greenwich on 18 September, Parker was among the chief officers of state who greeted him. With the inauguration of a whig administration, Parker was now able to participate fully in the enjoyment of office both as a politician and as a courtier. He was especially popular with the senior members of the king's German retinue, and on 10 March 1716 he was made a peer, a rare honour for a lord chief justice, taking the title of Baron Parker of Macclesfield. As a further mark of favour he was also given, on top of his recently augmented salary, a pension of £1200. Already an acquisitive purchaser of land, it was only a matter of months before he matched his new social status with the purchase of the Shirburn estate and its castle in Oxfordshire for £18,350. At court he was seen as a desirable, and perhaps more amenable, alternative to Lord Cowper as lord chancellor, and Cowper himself grew increasingly apprehensive on this account, complaining of 'the remarkable manner in which Lord Townshend [secretary of state] has raised Lord Parker to be a kind of coadjutor to the [lord] chancellor'; not only had Parker's 'craving nature' obtained material honours, but he had secured for himself a regular place at cabinet discussions, unprecedented since the days of the infamous Lord Jeffreys (Cobbett, *Parl. hist.*, 9.169).

On those occasions when he spoke in the Lords, Parker was a stalwart supporter of the Sunderland–Stanhope ministry. In his maiden speech, upon the repeal of the Triennial Act in April 1716, he expressed contempt for the electorate, stating that 'it was not fit they should trust the choice of the House [of Commons] to such brute beasts and drunken country esquires' (Stuart Papers, 2.124). Parker's further, but unrecorded, remarks on this occasion apparently forced Cowper to intervene. At the impeachment proceedings against Lord Oxford in June 1717, while at pains to remind his fellow peers of their duty to observe the rules and forms of hearing evidence practised in all other courts of judicature, he concluded that, in Oxford's case, this would be a mere formality. More important, however, was his role in the unseemly dispute between the king and his heir, George, prince of Wales, out of which had arisen the painful question of whether the king had the right to direct arrangements concerning the prince's children. In January 1718 Parker was instrumental in obtaining support from most of the judges for an opinion that the king did indeed have control over the education, upbringing, and marriages of the prince's children (although not over their care), an outcome which established Parker still further in royal favour.

Lord chancellor

Parker's appointment as lord chancellor on 12 May 1718, following Cowper's not unexpected resignation the previous month, caused some surprise, given his lack of experience in the chancery court. He struck a particularly shrewd, not to say financially advantageous, deal: in addition to the £4000 salary and the usual £2000 for his 'equipage', he was given a cash sum of £14,000 by the king, plus the promise of a tellership of the exchequer for his son. Parker immersed himself in his new office with his usual industry, and those who doubted his suitability were quickly proved wrong. The verdict of the nineteenth-century jurist Lord Campbell upon Parker as lord chancellor was that not only was he 'entitled to the equivocal compliment that none of his judgements were reversed, but his authority upon all points, whether of a practical or abstruse nature, is now as high as that of Nottingham, Somers, or Hardwicke' (Campbell, 4.523).

One of the distinctly political aspects of Parker's new position was his supervision of the commissions of the peace, and it was here that he made an appreciable contribution to the whig supremacy of the early and mid-Hanoverian years. He was far less willing to retain tory justices than Cowper had been, and by the time he left office in 1725 most of the commissions were dominated (though not totally monopolized) by whig gentlemen. Furthermore, he greatly simplified the procedures for remodelling commissions, and he revived the use of summary powers to oust justices guilty of misconduct. Parker, of course, shared his ministerial colleagues' keenness to crack down on political dissension. His own specific concern was with the universities, which he saw as 'infected with principles of sedition' (Williams, 456). In 1717 he had drafted a bill to place them under the direct control of the government, but Cowper, who was still lord chancellor, had advised against it.

Parker continued to enjoy close ties with George I, and in 1719 he performed a further significant service for the king when he chaired a special committee of legal experts to consider the constitutional position

regarding the king's wish for the future dissolution of the dynastic union between Britain and Hanover. The committee was forced to conclude, however, that such an expedient, though theoretically desirable, could not possibly be achieved without risking the future security of the protestant succession. The ministerial reconstruction of March–April 1721 in the aftermath of the South Sea Bubble left Parker in a secure position, and in September he felt no compunction in asking the king for advancement to an earldom. On 15 November he was duly created earl of Macclesfield. Among his ministerial colleagues he remained a committed member of the faction led by Lord Sunderland, and after Sunderland's demise in April 1722 he showed similar attachment to his successor, Lord Carteret. The new first lord of the Treasury, Robert Walpole, eyed him cautiously, however, envious of the chancellor's great intimacy with the king and the Hanoverian ministers. Initially, Macclesfield's greatest difficulties appeared in the Lords, where the deep enmity between himself and his one-time patron Cowper, now leading the opposition peers, was openly demonstrated in several unpleasant clashes. His latitudinarian religious views were exhibited in January 1722, when he spoke in favour of the Quakers' Affirmation Bill.

The factional rivalry within the administration, between Carteret and his followers on the one hand and the Townshend–Walpole group on the other, intensified during 1723, and by the end of the year, as Townshend and Walpole appeared to gain ground, it was widely reported that Macclesfield was soon to be displaced. At first the removal of Carteret from the secretaryship of state to the politically less important office of lord lieutenant of Ireland in April 1724 seemed to strengthen Macclesfield's position once more. But the respite was only temporary. Having successfully sidelined Carteret, Walpole was now anxious to engineer the removal of the most prominent of Carteret's followers from the cabinet council. Macclesfield was one of several obvious targets, and in his case a pretext was conveniently at hand.

Impeachment and last years

For some time there had been disturbing rumours that the masters in chancery had been misusing suitors' money in their custody, a practice which Macclesfield himself was believed to have encouraged. In November 1724, seemingly in response to what had developed into a public outcry, Walpole instigated an inquiry by committee of the privy council and by mid-December had produced a report. Its exposure of considerable financial abuse in several of the masters' offices implicated Macclesfield deeply and unequivocally. Walpole was now only too willing to assuage the rising tide of public indignation by discarding Macclesfield, and there was emphasis upon the ministry's wish to avoid being seen to harbour or 'screen' a corrupt colleague. It was in any case clear on less partisan grounds that Macclesfield could not remain as lord chancellor in the light of such grave accusations. He himself quickly acknowledged this, and on 4 January 1725 he surrendered his seals of office. But amid pressing demands for the restitution of missing funds, estimated at £60,000, the ministry's opponents ensured that he did not escape parliamentary trial. The ministry was ready to assist in this process, anxious that further investigations be kept within acceptable limits. A petition to the Commons on 23 January complaining of the disappearance of large sums placed in chancery belonging to the estate of one of the suitors, the dowager duchess of Montagu, commenced the process that led to his impeachment.

No fewer than twenty-one articles of impeachment were exhibited against Macclesfield by the House of Commons. He was portrayed as having a particular lust for wealth, and, despite generous rewards from the king, was said to have misused his office to amass further sums of money. It was alleged that he had sold vacant chancery masterships; received hefty bribes for agreeing to the sale and transfer of offices; and admitted to office several masters of insufficient financial means whom he had allowed to pay for their places out of suitors' money. Macclesfield resolutely asserted his innocence, however, continuing to enjoy royal goodwill, and claiming that his 'constant disinterested services to the King have exasperated one set of men' (Various Collections, 8.380). His response to the articles, in which he insisted he had done no worse than his distinguished predecessors, was indignantly rejected by the Commons on 23 April as a subtle attempt 'to disguise the crimes laid to his charge' (JHC, 20.503). The trial at the bar of the House of Lords lasted from 6 to 25 May. Its managers presented evidence establishing beyond doubt that not only had Macclesfield sold masterships, but that he had maximized his gain by selling to the highest bidders, while suitors had suffered as a consequence of their money being used by masters in investments in order to recoup the exorbitant sums paid. Macclesfield's counsel denied that the lord chancellor had acted criminally in taking 'presents' of cash during these transactions, on the premise that he had merely

conformed with what he took to be the usual practices of his office. Macclesfield himself concluded with an intricate refutation of each of the articles, but his masterly performance could not conceal the fact that his defence had failed to establish that the sale of masterships under his two immediate predecessors had been as regular a practice as Macclesfield claimed and had not, therefore, been legitimized by prescription.

On 25 May Macclesfield was found guilty by a unanimous vote of ninety-three peers, and two days later he was sentenced to pay a fine of £30,000 and to imprisonment in the Tower until the sum was paid. Macclesfield's cleverly argued disclaimers were generally regarded as specious; evidence, even, of his generosity and patronage to poor scholars in mitigation of his apparent avariciousness made no impression on his fellow peers. Lord Campbell, considering whether Macclesfield had been too severely judged, and whether the faults of the system over which he presided had been unjustly loaded upon him, reminds us that 'his contemporaries could form a more correct opinion than we can, and we should be slow to accuse them of harshness' (Campbell, 4.555). Instead of carrying on the process begun by his predecessors lords Harcourt and Cowper, of divesting themselves of some of the more flagrant money-taking perquisites of the Lord Chancellor's Office, Macclesfield had taken advantage of the scope offered for additional gain and had exploited his prescriptive rights to the full. It was here that Macclesfield's particular guilt was seen to lie.

Macclesfield's public disgrace was completed on 31 May 1725, when his name was struck from the roll of privy councillors. He remained in the Tower for six weeks until the money for his fine was raised. During his remaining years he resided chiefly at Shirburn, where he pursued his literary and scientific interests, visiting London only occasionally, as he did in March 1727 when he was pallbearer at the funeral of Sir Isaac Newton. He was noted for his hospitality to young scholars, several of whom he employed in his household as chaplain or librarian. George I had been most reluctant to part with him from the ministry, and had promised to refund from the privy purse the sum he had been fined. At the time of the king's death in June 1727, however, only £1000 had been paid. In 1730 George II, whose wrath as prince of Wales Macclesfield had incurred, restored to him his pension of £1500.

Macclesfield died of strangury at the house of his only son, George, in Soho Square on 28 April 1732, and was buried at Shirburn. George, well known in scientific circles for his interest in astronomy, succeeded him as second earl.

A. A. Hanham

Sources

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