THE 'MEN OF KENT' AND THE PENENDEN HEATH MEETING, 1828

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In recent years much historical debate has centred on questions of identity, a reflection of the tensions and uncertainties in contemporary society. National, gender and ethnic identities, for example, have all come under scrutiny. A feature of recent work by historians of the nineteenth century has been to highlight the subjectivity of such identities, dependent as they were on momentary reactions, shifting political alliances and the sheer transient nature of what conduct, appearance or belief was held to be 'English', 'masculine' or any such other categorisation at any particular moment.[1] An era of interest has been the late 1820s and 1830s, a period which encompassed the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, and the Great Reform Act in 1832, the first of the three acts of the nineteenth century that widened the (male) franchise. During these years, what it was to be a citizen, to hold a stake in the government of Britain and the Empire, was hotly debated in provincial and metropolitan societies, meetings and newspapers, as well as in the formal arena of Parliament. Political claims made by hugely diverse groups and individuals, from conservative anti-Catholic agitators to radical reformers, were framed in the language of 'Englishmen' or 'Britons', categories that implied a sense of national belonging and a right to political agency for those who wielded them. At the same moments, such notions were defined against those who could not, or would not, be established as such: 'other' groups such as women, Catholics, the colonised people of the Empire, or merely their political rivals who, inevitably, were far less 'manly' or 'English'! However, the language of 'Englishness' and English identities was not generic. Any analysis of the debates in Kent in 1828 and 1829, leading up to the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act, can but highlight the importance of regionally specific language, particularly the notion of the 'Men of Kent', to the establishment of regional, national and gendered identities, and related notions of citizenship and subject-hood, in the county as this time.

Most historians who have done research related to Kent are aware of the

TO THE

MEN OF KENT.

(From the Kent Herald.)

Do not suffer yourselves to be duped! Do not allow yourselves to be made the tools for avenging the quarrel of a rapacious Clergy, and a few rancorous Politicians! Think who they are, that invite you to meet on the 24th?—Reflect on their *past conduct* and judge from it how they would act, at this time, if the question were to petition for the *redress of your grievances*,—or the *remission* of taxation? Have they ever given a vote in *your favour*? Have they ever asked for a repeal of *those taxes*, which now grind you down to the earth?—are they not *tax eaters themselves*?—What have *you* to do with Ireland? What with the miserable Catholics of that miserable country? If after *Centuries* of *misrule* and *oppression*, Government have at length resolved to better the condition of that unfortunate country, are the Men of Kent to be the first to raise their voices against an act of tardy justice?

If the Clergy, who spare you not in the Tithes, preach "Fire and Faggot," and give you exaggerated statements of the horrors of bloody Queen Mary, tell them not to "bear false witness against their neighbour." The Catholic clergy built and repaired the Churches, and *maintained the Poor*, out of their tithe—say to your intolerant Parson, "Go thou and do in like manner." The Protestant Bishops were deprived of their seats in the House of Lords, in the reign of Charles the 1st; they were restored in the reign of Charles the 2d—for which restoration *twenty-six Catholic Peers voted!* But mark the contrast! At this time about half a dozen Catholic Peers petition to be restored to their *hereditary seats*, and but *one or two* Protestant Bishops possess justice or gratitude enough to advocate their cause!

Your Catholic ancestors instituted the "Trial by Jury," and wrung from the hand of a tyrant "Magna Charta," which teaches to temper *justice with mercy*. Your Brunswick leaders do not blush to avow their desire of "*opening the trenches*" upon their fellow subjects, and "*fighting up to their knees in blood.*" You were persuaded by these humane gentlemen to bear the taxes and privations of the late war, in order to avert from your homes and fire-sides the horrors of the French Revolution. You are now invited by those *same persons*, to visit an unoffending portion of your fellow subjects with these very horrors! But "my Lord this," and the "Duke of that," have been shut out of the Ministry—therefore the Men of Kent are to call upon the King, either to dismiss his Ministers, or to oblige his Premier to imbrue his hands in the blood of his innocent countrymen. Should the Duke of Wellington be either weak or wicked enough to do such an act, is it to be at the bidding of the Men of Kent?—Will the world believe, until they see the fact, that the Men of Kent, who could formerly repel an enemy from their very doors, are (in these degenerate days) to be the first to express alarm at imaginary dangers, whilst they of all Englishmen are the farthest removed from those dangers? Will you allow such a degrading comparison to be made between your valour and that of your Catholic forefathers? "Men of Kent," better things are hoped for from you. Let your motto "Invicta," which you achieved of old for defending your homes from an open enemy, on this occasion, serve you as a shield in defence of your characters, assailed by the insidious advances of pretended friends.

PUBLICUS.

Ashford, October 14, 1828.

C. WOOD, PRINTER, (HERALD OFFICE) HIGH-STREET, CANTERBURY.

Fig. 1 A poster, in favour of the 'Catholic claims', addressing the Men of Kent shortly before the meeting. (Sandwich borough collection: Sa/2P2. Collection on deposit at East Kent Archive Centre.)

'Men of Kent' and the meanings and histories associated with this term (and, indeed, of 'Kentish Men', although this distinction is not regularly made explicit in the source material the writer has analysed). Stories about the 'Men of Kent's' historic role as the warrior-like defenders of the nation in times of crisis are well-known now and were deeply ingrained in early nineteenth-century culture, in Kent and beyond. Indeed, as William Wordworth's famous sonnet illustrates, the 'Unconquered Men of Kent' could be used as a symbol of the nation that could be drawn upon in times of crisis, not unlike John Bull in one of his more positive guises, or a masculine version of Britannia:

Vanguard of Liberty, ye Men of Kent,
Ye children of a soil that doth advance
Her haughty brow against the coast of France,
Now is the time to prove your hardiment!
To France the words of invitation sent!
They from their fields can see the countenance
Of your fierce war, may see the glittering lance,
And hear you shouting forth your brave intent.
Left single, in bold parley, ye of yore,
Did from the Normans win a gallant wreath;
Confirmed the charters that were yours before, -
No parleying Now! In Britain is one breath;
We all are with you now from shore to shore:-
Ye Men of Kent, 'tis Victory or death.[2]

This stirring poem tells the story of the 'Men of Kent' as a group of exceptional bravery and 'hardiment' who had stood between the rest of the country and defeat in the past, and would do so again in the present. The 'Men of Kent' and their county, its white cliffs turning a 'haughty brow' defiantly against the visible shoreline of France, were quite literally, a 'Vanguard of Liberty'. In the 1820s, with the Napoleonic Wars still within most people's living memory, the metropolitan and local press stood alongside poets, writers and public speakers in paying tribute to the knowledge that the 'Men of Kent' had stood between the English and defeat by countless enemies. It was often proudly noted that both William the Conqueror and the Romans had landed in Sussex![3] So, while other counties foundered, 'Kent made no submission'.[4] The 'Men of Kent's' motto, 'Invicta', stood testimony to this.

This paper intends to start to question who it was who claimed to be 'Men of Kent', these most independent, manly, assertive and, indeed, 'English' of all 'Englishmen'? On what terms did they stake their claims, what political causes were they associated with, and what competing groups of 'Men of Kent' can be identified? It focusses on the debates surrounding one event, the Penenden Heath meeting of 1828 where the headlining agenda was for the 'County of Kent' to address the prospect

of parliamentary concessions to Catholics, or the 'Catholic claims' as the issue was then described.

The Great County Meeting on Penenden Heath

Although practically unmentioned in most national – and indeed Kentish – histories of the period, the Penenden Heath meeting was one of the largest mass meetings of the early nineteenth century. On the morning of 24 October 1828, people from all over Kent, gathered at this, the county meeting place a mile north of the centre of Maidstone. The excitement of the day got underway early, and started for many while they were still on the roads, travelling from all the major towns of the county – from Rochester, Chatham and Sevenoaks, and from as far as Tunbridge Wells, Canterbury and Dover. Banners, placards and pamphlets were distributed in the wagons and 'rural bands'[5] accompanied the walkers. The Heath itself was busy by nine o'clock in the morning, and by ten o'clock it was a seething mass of people, the more humble travellers having been joined by a 'large cavalcade of carriages and horses'[6] containing the elite of the county. The crowd was socially diverse, containing 'wagonners, labourers, and ploughmen' and, on the margins 'a number of well-dressed ladies'.[7] According to the *Kent Herald*, the women present were 'enchanting' and 'elegantly attired, on whom the rays of sun produced additional attraction, without any detriment to the complexion'.[8] More dominant in accounts however, was the 'agricultural aspect'[9] of the gathering, with many farmers and rural labourers present, most conspicuous among them being the 'yeomen' farmers. Although estimates of the total number present range from 20,000 to 100,000, most lie between 30,000 and 60,000.[10] It was an exceptionally vast public gathering for its time, comparable in size to radical social protests such as the events in Manchester in 1819 which culminated in the 'Peterloo' massacre.

The meeting itself was conducted along the lines of a political club or society, or even a parliament. A large space of 'about a quarter of a mile'[11] was enclosed by wagons and a variety of other vehicles, and the areas around and within this were filled with the densely packed crowds on foot and horseback, the latter being formed in several lines of 'perfect order'.[12] The overall appearance of the gathering was said to have been like that of a 'large amphitheatre'.[13] In the centre was the wagon of the High Sheriff, Sir Thomas Maryon Wilson, and on either side of him the vehicles of the two main opposing parties, those for and against the 'Catholic Claims'. To the right, and arguing for emancipation, were the 'liberal' elite, mainly adherents of the Whig parliamentary party who were resident in or had some sort of association with Kent, such as the Lords Darnley, Radnor and Teynham , and Thomas Law Hodges, a future county MP.[14] The group to the left of the physical centre were,

rather conversely, the followers of the parliamentary 'Ultra-Tories' and members of the recently formed Kent Brunswick Constitutional Club. This faction basically opposed any changes to the 'constitution of 1688', the state of affairs that had been settled at the Glorious Revolution, and believed any incursion into the 'Protestant Constitution', such as by admitting Roman Catholics to Parliament, would lead to irrevocable national decline.[15] Led by the charismatic George Finch-Hatton, tenth Earl of Winchilsea, the 'Brunswickers' as they became known, included one of the current MPs for the County, Sir Edward Knatchbull, and MP for Maidstone, Sir John Wells. They also counted among their number many established county names, including the Marquis of Camden and members of the Filmer and Barham families.

The 'Brunswickers' and the 'Whig-liberals' were without doubt the two most powerful contingents on Penenden Heath. Nevertheless, other voices were heard. Most notable among these were the radical journalist and rural campaigner, William Cobbett, who initially viewed both sides critically and forwarded his own agenda, to draw the attention of the people of Kent to problems such as tithes; and Richard Lalor Shiel, an Irish journalist and lawyer and close associate of the Daniel O'Connell, the leader of the Catholic Association whose victory in the Clare election the preceding July had pushed the issue of Catholic Emancipation to the top of the parliamentary agenda. An area was also fenced off for the 'gentlemen of the press', who were attending from the London as well as the Kentish newspapers.[16] Indeed, the outcome of the meeting was seen by many as an important indicator of the nation's feelings about a matter of great import.[17]

At midday, the High Sheriff opened proceedings by declaring the object of the meeting, a resolution by one Mr Gipps of the Brunswicker faction, 'to prepare a petition to Parliament, praying that the legislature would adopt such measures as appeared best calculated to support the Protestant establishment of this kingdom in church and state as by law established'.[18] The meeting was then conducted in the nature of a debate, with speakers from the various parties claiming the attention of the audience, or at least that of those near enough to hear, in turn but not without disputes over precedence. At dusk, after many lengthy speeches, Gipps' resolution was passed by a show of hands. According to papers with Brunswicker sympathies, such as the *Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser*,[19] *Kentish Gazette*,[20] and *The Standard*,[21] it was done so by a vast, respectable and exultant majority; according to the more 'liberal' journals, such as *The Times*,[22] *The Morning Chronicle*[23] and the radical *Kent Herald*,[24] the majority was less clear, or was so bolstered by the support of 'disreputable' attendees, as to be highly questionable. An amendment, put by the pro-emancipationist Thomas Law Hodges, that 'whilst (the assembly) sanctions the free right of petitioning, (it) recognises no other authority than that of Parliament, and of the King

acting on the advice of responsible Ministers…', was overshadowed by the general 'noise and confusion' that characterised the closing stages of the meeting.[25] Most accounts agree, however, that the Brunswickers carried the day. Not only did they have the most successful speakers on their side, notably the Earl of Winchilsea who brought proceedings to a climax by crying 'three cheers for PROTESTANT ASCENDANCY',[26] but also much of the crowd, particularly those from rural backgrounds, were said to be behind them. The 'yeomen' and 'middling ranks of farmers' swelled the ranks of the Brunswickers,[27] although the sheer numbers present, and their social status, meant that not all were able to fully participate on Penenden Heath. According to the *Kentish Gazette*, this did not dampen their enthusiasm: 'Great numbers of the yeomen on horseback, unable to hear what was going forward, assembled on the rising grounds and loudly seconded the cheers which proceeded from the Brunswickers'.[28] Many accusations were levelled at landowners such as Winchilsea for organising, and even bribing or coercing their tenants and labourers into supporting them, but it seems that their success in gaining support exceeded even the Brunswickers' expectations: an initial meeting of the Brunswick Society was to be held in a room at the *Bell Inn*, Maidstone, but so many people turned up to show their 'determination to uphold the principles which placed the House of Brunswick on the British Throne', that the meeting had to be adjourned to the Town Hall.[29] A celebratory dinner to be held on the evening of Penenden Heath also had to be postponed, through fear of the respectable Brunwickers being swamped.[30]

The Brunswickers and the 'Men of Kent'

Above all, the briefly notorious meeting of 'the 24th' was to become perceived by participants and contemporary observers as an act of the 'Men of Kent'. Their presence was made visible through addresses, meetings and literature, which regularly referred to their histories and actions. The speeches made the 'Men of Kent' their audience, posters and pamphlets and bombastic editorials in the press appealed directly to them, often declaring their name in bold, capital letters. Both of the main factions drew heavily upon such rhetoric, although the Brunswickers undoubtedly were the side that became the most strongly associated with the notion.

All kinds of Brunswicker propaganda, from popular songs, posters and handbills to the speeches of the elite, drew upon stories of the 'Men of Kent', relying upon the common knowledge of their 'unconquered' legacy, and their relative superiority in terms of greater independence and assertiveness to other races and even other 'Englishmen'.[31] Thus, actively defending the 'Protestant Constitution' was argued to affirm the 'Men

of Kent's' historical position as defenders of the nation in the present. For example, special verses of the popular jingle 'The Man of Kent' were penned for the occasion, equating the 'Men of Kent's' current defiance of 'Popish faction' to their resistance in 1066:

When Harold was invaded
And falling lost his crown
And Norman William waded
Through gore to pull him down,
The counties round, with fear profound,
To mend their sad condition –
Their lands to save, they homage gave,
But Kent made no submission.

Then sing in praise of the Men of Kent,
All loyal, brave, and free:
Of Britain's race, if one surpass,
A man of Kent is he.

And now when Popish faction,
Uplifts its impious head,
And rebels into action
O'Connell dares to lead –
Bold Kent began and formed the van,
In Brunswick's name invited,
And counties round, with echoing sound,
Their general efforts plighted. [Then sing in praise etc.] [32]

The link between the defence of the 'Protestant Constitution' and the maintenance of the 'Men of Kent's' superior status was also underlined by many of the Brunswickers' speeches. As Winchilsea stated at the opening of his lengthy and much lauded spiel: Kent 'was the last to surrender its liberty to a foreign monarch' and so it would be 'the first to support the Protestant Constitution', so 'inseparably united with civil and religious liberty'.[33]

One of the most distinctive features of the Brunswickers' 'Men of Kent' was the militaristic and often violent language that was used to describe them. Basically, the Brunswickers liked to imply that they were ready to physically fight for the 'Protestant Constitution' if they had to. The most notorious example of this was when Sir John Wells MP declared that he was prepared to fight 'in defence of the glorious Protestant Constitution' until he was 'up to his knees in blood'.[34] Local newspaper editorials also regularly took on incredibly provocative and militaristic tones. On the eve of the meeting, the *Maidstone Gazette and Kentish Courier* addressed the 'Men of Kent', echoing a very famous battle cry from the then not so distant past: 'England expects that every man will do his duty'.[35] Nelson's rallying call was used on numerous occasions in Penenden Heath propaganda but, despite their evident relish at the prospect, the

Fig. 2 Print by HB (1830) depicting Lord Winchilsea, holding a firebrand and thereby showing his leadership qualities, beckoning on the other 'Ultra Tories'. The figure in the chair is Lord Wellington, with whom Winchilsea and his party were still angry for allowing the Catholic Emancipation Act to pass. (© The Trustees of the British Museum. Catalogue ref. 16302.)

'Men of Kent' did not like to be seen 'picking for a fight'. Indeed, the instigators of any conflict were usually alleged to be their favourite antithesis: the Irish Catholics. The juxtaposition was constantly set up between the heroic 'Men of Kent', defending their land against external threat, and the aggressive Irish, both menacing and pitiful. An address by Sir Edward Knatchbull highlights well this dual conception. In one paragraph they are seen as in need of paternal protection, loved with a 'brother's love' and pitied with the 'pity of a friend'. In the next they are portrayed as the more obvious aggressor: they are 'menaces', 'bullies' and 'traitors' against whom the 'Men of Kent' must act.[36]

The vision that emerges of the 'Men of Kent', as bold, independent and warrior-like if provoked, was far more to its exponents than abstract imaginings in writings and speeches. Many of the leading Brunswickers saw their own actions in defence of the Protestant Constitution as indicative of their status as 'Men of Kent', particularly their involvement at the Penenden Heath meeting. One young local politician, John Plumptre, wrote that if he had not done his duty there, he would have been 'unworthy of the name of a Man of Kent',[37] a name he henceforth hoped he truly deserved. Secondly, it becomes evident that there were certain people and groups that were seen as particularly embodying the qualities of the 'Men of Kent'. Certainly the most prominent such individual was the Brunswickers' aristocratic leader, the Earl of Winchilsea. In the excitement surrounding the Penenden Heath meeting, Winchilsea was literally hailed as a 'Conquering Hero' and became something of an iconic 'Man of Kent'. But, he did not achieve this status by just talking about being such a figure. He also acted, appeared and sounded like one. In his account of the meeting, the Irish lawyer R.L. Shiel (who was unable to speak for being heckled), described Winchilsea as follows:

> He is a tall, strong built, vigorous-looking man, destitute of all dignity or grace, but with a bluff, rude, and direct nautical bearing, which reminds you of the quarter-deck, and would lead you to suppose that he was the mate of a ship... Before the chair was taken he was actively engaged in marshalling his troops, and cheering them on to battle, and it was manifest that he felt all the excitement of a leader engaged in a cause....[38]

Although Shiel's portrait is, understandably, not a positive one, the very masculine nature of Winchilsea's figure and demeanour are never in doubt. His militarism is emphasised, and the naval imagery may be more than just a metaphor, as Winchilsea was controversially said to have had quite a following from Chatham dockyard.[39] William Cobbett was rather more complimentary, reporting that his manner was 'bold and frank and even able' and his 'demeanour was the best that could possibly be conceived'.[40] All accounts agree that Winchilsea's speech was a great success. As he drew to a conclusion 'ten thousand hats...waved in the

air' and there was 'loud and long continued cheering'.[41] According to the *Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser*, the 'Men of Kent' then bore off their champion in triumph.[42]

Winchilsea's image as an iconic 'Man of Kent' was re-enforced in the local newspapers and in his supporters' accounts. He was lauded for his 'sturdy appearance', willingness to act, and his 'straightforward and honest' voice and demeanour.[43] These are very similar to the qualities that repeatedly signified the elevated status of another, rather different image with which the 'Men of Kent' became associated: the 'Independent Yeomanry'.[44] It is rather harder to find the voices of the 'Yeomen of Kent' than of Winchilsea, but it is not so hard to gain an idea about the qualities they exuded physically: in a vivid description in the *Maidstone Journal*, this group were rendered 'conspicuous' by their 'sturdy' appearance',[45] but also by their waving of equally sturdy oak branches. The symbolic 'oaken boughs', which refer to the legend of the 'Men of Kent' disguising themselves behind oak branches in an attempt to ambush the Normans at the time of the Conquest, struck several other account writers. The *Maidstone Journal* makes explicit the close association between the 'natural' manifestations of the Kentish countryside and the perceived independent spirit of the 'Men of Kent': the combined appearance of the 'sturdy yeomen' and the 'boughs of oak...bore testimony to the truth of the expression: 'the tree of freedom is the British oak'.[46] *The Times* also saw the 'Men of Kent', together with their oaken boughs, as an important part of the 'imposing' appearance of the Heath.[47]

It becomes evident that the notion of the 'Men of Kent' was made particularly resonant through its physical incarnations, and this extended beyond just the people with whom they were associated, and even the stories associated with the unique location of the county, to the environment and landscape that was seen as their origin. A brief survey of literature of this period points to the power of imaginings of Kent as the 'garden of England', an 'English Eden'; Kent persisted in English imaginations as the epitome of all that was fertile, green and free, an image that survived into the late 1820s despite the realities of agricultural hardships and economic uncertainties.[48] The following account from the *Maidstone Journal*, which is preceded by a description of the pan-class crowd, particularly noting the 'respectable farmers' and 'sturdy yeomanry', is evocative of the blending of imaginings of the Kentish people and landscape:

> ...The band of the Constitutional party received the distinguished individuals, who took their places on that side, with the National Anthem, 'See the conquering hero comes', the 'Men of Kent' and other spirit stirring airs, while the air resounded with the applauding shouts of the multitude. In the rear of the place of meeting is situated the romantic village of Boxley, and the majestic chain of hills which intersect the

> whole of the county, formed a fine background to a scene such as no other county in the kingdom could equal. In itself it was beautiful and pleasing, but when the mind contemplated the assembled thousands with the idea that they were met to adopt measures for the security of our Protestant Constitution, the hum of the congregated masses, the distant shouts of applause, and the swelling tones of martial music, conveyed through the ear to the heart sensations which no tongue can describe.[49]

To the reporter, the overwhelming atmosphere of the meeting, and the seemingly harmonic union of people and place, momentarily embodied what it meant to be English. It was a gendered, exclusively masculine, culturally and geographically specific 'Englishness', the 'Englishness' of the 'Men of Kent'. In the knowledge of their glorious history, and their unique, geographically literal and figurative position as defenders of the nation, they were making their stand as only they could, in a 'beautiful' rural setting only Kent could provide. A brief but vivid moment, frozen in a passage of text, it allows us to glimpse at one of many competing conceptualisations of 'Englishness' in the late 1820s.

Competing 'Men of Kent'

Even at their apogee upon Penenden Heath, under the favourable circumstances of a Brunswicker majority gathered on a bright autumn morning in the Kentish countryside, the Brunswickers' 'Men of Kent' were far from uncontested, both internally and externally. The voices of other 'Men of Kent' could still be heard, going through the processes of constructing alternative definitions of English manhood; making sense of the world and their place in it, using subtle and sometimes radically different ways. Three other groups or individuals besides the Brunswickers emerged as the most enduring. While using local channels of communication, including giving speeches at meetings and writing to newspapers, the pro-Catholic aristocracy and gentry also spoke of themselves as 'Men of Kent' and addressed their audience as such. Less audible at the meeting, but loud and clear in print, was the voice of the radical, pro-reform *Kent Herald*, the county's most widely circulated paper, written for and to represent the artisans of Kent's market towns, such as the retailers and craftsmen and those involved in the small-scale industries such as papermaking and brewing.[50] Lastly, there can be found the opinions of William Cobbett, not a 'Man of Kent' himself, but someone who showed himself to be a great believer in the qualities of sturdy, independent and 'unpurchasable' manhood, which he attributed to them.

The striking consistencies in language and rhetoric between both the urban radical *Kent Herald* and the 'liberal' aristocracy, and even between them and the Brunswickers, needs to be emphasised. The common

landscape of stories about their 'unconquered' past, and illustrious present, were drawn upon to give meaning and status to their political causes. Likewise, similar notes of pride can be found in their independent and warrior-like status as defenders of the nation. Thunderously, as was typical of the Ultra-Tory and pro-Brunswicker *Maidstone Gazette*, the radical *Kent Herald* declared on the eve of the meeting: 'You, Men of Kent, will by your triumphant opposition to the 'Brunswicker conspirators', vindicate the honour of your country, win the gratitude of Ireland forever, and secure the admiration of the whole world. ON TO VICTORY!'.[51] In a slightly more reserved tone, even the Whiggish Lord Darnley was prepared to draw upon their battling heritage: as a 'Man of Kent' himself, he was '...as ready as any of them to shed my blood, if necessary, in a just cause'.[52]

Where the differences lay, beyond the political beliefs, were in the characteristics and codes of behaviour that defined 'Men of Kent' to these various groups and individuals. For cosmopolitan Whig politicians with purported 'liberal' beliefs, 'Men of Kent' should certainly not charge into battle but prove themselves in a moderate, considered manner and leave the decision-making in the hands of parliament. As Lord Teynham urged, 'Should the government call on the men of Kent for assistance and support, I have no doubt they would instantly obey the call; but they are not called upon, nor is it likely they will be'.[53] Not all of the pro-Emancipation parties echoed Teynham's total trust in government, in which he of course had a stake,[54] but they did share his belief that it would be unworthy of the 'Men of Kent' to oppose the changes. It was for the 'Men of Kent' prove their benevolent manliness by fairer treatment of Catholics, and particularly of the Irish, for whom they expressed a paternal interest, in contrast to the Brunswickers often-hostile evocations. Thomas Law Hodges expressed such sentiments at the meeting. 'I trust, however, it is resolved for Englishmen of the nineteenth century, and especially for the Men of Kent, to entertain juster and kinder sentiments towards that oppressed and unhappy country'.[55] In his own speech, Lord Teynham concurred: 'if they did justice to Ireland, then would the Empire be able to assert and maintain the motto of the county of Kent, Invicta'.[56]

The writers of the *Kent Herald*, on the other-hand, used the 'Men of Kent' as a rallying cry, publishing stirring rhetoric, songs and poems, more in the style of the Brunswickers than of the 'liberals'. However, the accents of their appeals were very different. Theirs was a provincial, urban version of the 'Men of Kent', influenced by news of the Manchester radicals for whom they had great admiration, and driven by their own calls for reform. There were still references in the *Herald* to Kent's fertility and beauty, such as songs that refer to the 'land of the Hop', but they were not so prevalent as in the descriptions of the Brunswickers. More significantly, the strident physicality of the Brunswickers' rhetoric, the pride in the appearance of the 'brawny' yeomen and their almost

symbiotic relationship with the land and its produce, all of which defined the Brunwickers' 'Men of Kent', were missing. Indeed the 'dunderheads' and 'Rustics' from the 'Mud Country' or the 'Wild of Kent', as the Brunswickers' farming followers were referred to, were seen as more brawn than brain, led astray by the dangerous 'drivellings' of Winchilsea:

> We have great respect for the yeomen of Kent; right stalwart wights are they; but we fear their physical will far exceeds their intellectual power, if they be headed and represented by such persons as Lord Winchilsea, Lord Sydney, Mr Wells (the fighter up to his knees) and Sir John Bridges.

They represented themselves and their readers as enlightened advocates of progress and reform, as can be shown in the following verses, published on the eve of the Penenden Heath meeting:

Rise ye freeborn men of Kent
Ye whom Conqueror never bent,
This conspiracy resent
'Gainst your liberty
...
But Kent! Proud Kent! Shall never sink
In darkness and degradation
The first to rise – the last to shrink
From reformation!
...
Who's so base as be the slave
Of a Tory tool, or Knave,
Who would not our freedom save
From frantic Bigotry?
Let the proud Patrician know,
What to Men of Kent they owe,
Who are still oppression's foe,
And who will be free.

To these urban 'Men of Kent', independence and intelligence, not the physical power needed to fight or work the land, were premium. Implicitly forwarding their own political agenda, the extension of the franchise and the rights of citizenship, the *Herald* championed their readers' abilities to 'think for themselves' as the characteristic which defined them as 'true Men of Kent'. Never, they declared, could the pamphleteering of the 'No Popery' crowd lead the 'middle and lower classes' into a 'spirit of bigotry', which 'good sense and charitable feeling have extinguished, we trust, forever in this country'. The country bumpkins may have been easily led, but the intelligent town-dwellers were not: 'certain Brunswickers may as well refrain from attempting to intimidate their Tradesmen in Canterbury – it may do in their villages, but not in the Towns of Kent'. Thus, the intelligence of these 'Men of Kent' was integral to their battle cry:

> Come the, from the East and the West – from Chatham – Thanet – Dover – the Weald – the Coast – be there Men of Kent – and show the 'Agitators' that while they have stood still and gained no wisdom for the last half of the century, you are not the ignoramuses they suppose…

Also identifiable is a strong sense of brotherhood with the Irish and their struggles for change. The *Kent Herald* railed against keeping an army in Ireland of thousands of men '…and all to keep down our fellow subjects who pay their taxes and shed their blood in common with ourselves'. Thus, the writers of the *Herald* saw the Irish as their downtrodden, less fortunate kin, but certainly not as the marauding menace that the Brunswickers saw in O'Connell and his 'army'. Indeed, Ireland's troubles were seen as something which could become real in Kent if the Brunswickers were allowed to stir too far and reform did not come soon: 'Is our happy and contended County to be made a second miserable and unfortunate Ireland? (Alas! Poor Country!)'.[57]

William Cobbett's 'Men of Kent'

The writers of the *Kent Herald* shared some common ground, in terms of reforming zeal, with the only 'radical' who managed to get his voice heard on Penenden Heath: William Cobbett. However, Cobbett's 'Men of Kent' were very different again, his passion being firmly focussed upon the battle for reform in the countryside rather than the towns. William Cobbett was not a 'Man of Kent'. He travelled the county extensively for his *Rural Rides* and to attend political meetings, but he never lived in Kent, and never thought of the county as home. He was born and lived at the beginning and end of his life on a farm in neighbouring Surrey. As a farmer himself, he had much empathy with the rural workers of Kent, and during his recent travels that would culminate in the publication of *Rural Rides*, Cobbett had spent years observing the conditions, good and ill, of such people. Throughout his writings and speeches regarding the Penenden Heath meeting, he remained firmly on the side of the rural folk, appealing to the 'Men of Kent' legend, and perpetuating it himself in various, sometimes rather surprising, forms.

On the eve of the Penenden Heath meeting, William Cobbett travelled into Kent. He had plans for a multifaceted campaign that would capitalise on the influx of politically interested people in Maidstone occasioned by the county gathering. Above all, he hoped to draw the attention of local agriculturists to the real problems that he believed faced the 'Men of Kent' and their Irish counterparts: tithes and the church system. His intention was to speak at the meeting, to make sure that the farmers and labourers present did not become unduly influenced by either of the high-class factions.[58] In anticipation, he had prepared a petition 'from the people, praying for the abolition of tithes, and some sweeping measure of

ecclesiastical reform'.[59] He also intended to take the opportunity to show a specimen of Indian Corn to the farmers of the county, and explain how its cultivation could be of benefit to them.

As was typical, Cobbett worked tirelessly to spread his messages. He 'sowed' copies of his pamphlet, '*Facts for the Men of Kent*',[60] all along the road from Deptford to Rochester, and then from Rochester to Maidstone. Ten thousand further copies met him on his arrival there, half of which he immediately circulated around the market town, which was buzzing with activity. The other five thousand he sent on for distribution in the Tonbridge direction.[61] In it, he entreated the 'Men of Kent', to 'vote for themselves', on Penenden Heath: '...be not their tools: you never were, and I trust that you will now maintain your character for good sense and public spirit'.[62] However, although Cobbett never wavered from his commitment to his own agenda, his experiences on Penenden Heath appear to have propelled him further towards, if not the cause of the Brunswickers, to the almost irresistible power of their conceptualisations of the 'Men of Kent', which it seems were not so far from his own ideals of what it was to be 'English' and 'manly'. As he illustrated in his *History of the Protestant 'Reformation'*, Cobbett was no Anglican apologist, and he described the transformations following the 1530s as having 'impoverished and degraded the main body of the People in England and Ireland'.[63] Neither, however, did he see much benefit to the oppressed people of rural England or Ireland in allowing more power to such unworthies as Catholic bishops and Irish lawyers. Particularly when Darnley, Teynham and the 'liberal' press of London loaded Winchilsea and his rural following with accusations of 'bigotry' and claimed that ignorant country people knew nothing of politics,[64] Cobbett stepped rather unexpectedly to their defence.

Cobbett was clear who was *not* worthy of the noble title of the 'Men of Kent'. Situated on the day near the wagons of the 'liberal party', he was disgusted by their arguments, and by their behaviour and conduct. His hostility to the aristocracy was well known and he applied it with full force to Lord Darnley, who he dismissed as an 'Irishman' and therefore a weak, ineffectual speaker,[65] and the other high-class pro-Emancipationists. These 'wretched sycophants', he stated, were of 'no more weight at the meeting than the ragged boys that were got at the back of the Sheriff's booth, at the tops of the larches and the fir trees'.[66] However, he reserved his most violent verbal assault for another 'Irishman', Shiel. In a vitriolic exchange of letters with the editor of the *Morning Herald* after the event, he made it known that a four-column speech by Shiel, allegedly given at the meeting and which had been printed in the paper, was never uttered on the Heath. Shiel had been rendered inaudible by the hostile shouts of the pro-Brunswicker crowd. However, rather than turning on the Brunswickers, Cobbett laid the blame firmly with Shiel himself. He

graphically described how the Irish lawyer used 'wild' gesticulations and foamed at the mouth in a revolting, animalistic manner. Shiel, contended Cobbett, did 'as much mischief as it was possible for a man to do in so short a space of time to the character of his own country, and to the cause of his religion'. Thus, having implied that they were justified by this man's general behaviour and appearance in doing so, he then relayed how the Penenden Heath crowd shouted out a series of degrading appellations: 'mountebank, posture-master, wild Irishman, monkey'. 'There, now', cried one enthusiastic spectator, 'he'll bite somebody'.[67]

Set up against the weak ineffective 'liberals' and the simianised Irishman, Cobbett's descriptions of the Brunswickers could not have been more different. Whereas before he distanced himself, now he took their part: 'we, the radicals', wrote Cobbett in one lengthy correspondence, 'agreed fully with the Brunswickers in hostility to Catholic emancipation'.[68] He regretted his petition had not been a greater success, but he was impressed by the way in which the 'county of Kent' made their feelings about the issue of Catholic Emancipation known. It was 'manly' and it was 'honourable'. That he had been there with them to defeat 'mean, shuffling, Whiggish spite' would be, he wrote: '...a reflection most pleasing to the last day of my life'.[69] The aristocratic earl of Winchilsea was certainly spared any verbal battering. Indeed, in contrast to his descriptions of the 'liberal' aristocracy and his degrading portrait of Shiel, Cobbett's accounts of Winchilsea are barely concealed praise. In addition to his compliments on Winchilsea's 'sturdy' appearance and demeanour,[70] he did not see fault in the matter that the earl's character and popularity had allegedly given the Brunswickers an unassailable advantage: '...if they had the good fortune to have the really 'greatest captain of the age' at their head, there was no blame to be imputed on them on that score,' concluded the famous radical. 'I perceived nothing unfair on the part of Lord Winchilsea or any of this people, and if they did triumph, they triumphed as fairly as any men ever triumphed in the world'.[71] Thus, the militarism and 'sturdy manliness' of the Brunswickers 'Men of Kent', had a similar resonance for Cobbett as positive attributes for an Englishman.[72]

One might conclude from this that relations between Cobbett and the Brunswickers had been good on Penenden Heath. However, held back until the tail end of the meeting by the pro-Brunswick organisers, he never really obtained a hearing. Cobbett blamed this on the 'Whig-Liberals' for taking up too much time.[73] By all accounts, his participation was characterised by interruption, hostile opposition and inaudibility, and he was soon forgotten as the Brunswickers pushed through their resolutions and Winchilsea once again seized centre stage, evoking euphoric cheers from his devoted followers. But this was a scene that Cobbett does not seem to have had it in his heart to deride. In defiant defence of the 'Men of Kent', Cobbett wrote to the *Morning Herald*:

> Now, sir, this meeting presented to my eyes the finest, the grandest, the noblest sight that these eyes ever beheld. there were not less than 2000 men on horseback, more than a hundred post-chaises, and other carriages of that description. The meeting was held on a beautiful smooth piece of green sward, on the side of a very gently rising hill...there was not, during the whole time, a single broil...or a single act of violence. IT WAS AN HONOUR TO THE COUNTY AND AN HONOUR TO THE COUNTRY.[74] [Cobbett's capitals]

This description is somewhat resonant of that which appeared after the meeting in the pro-Brunswicker *Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser* (see above). The appearance of the Brunswickers and their farming followers, combined with the beauty of the Kentish landscape produced a vision of 'Englishness' that had great resonance with William Cobbett. But then, his love of the small-scale vistas and cultivated landscape that the scene at Penenden Heath provided is well documented in his *Rural Rides*. Indeed, he cited the particular countryside near Maidstone as the finest in England, describing its appearance and cultivation in detail, and giving us a good idea of his, and the locals', notion of a beautiful scene:

> This is what the people of Kent call the *Garden of Eden*. It is a district of meadows, corn-fields, hop-gardens, and orchards of apples, pears, cherries and filberts, with very little if any land which cannot, with propriety, be called good. There are plantations of Chestnut and of Ash frequently occurring; and as these are but long enough to make poles for hops, they are at all times objects of great beauty...(of the seven miles from Maidstone to Merryworth) these are the finest seven miles that I have ever seen in England or anywhere else.[75] [Cobbett's italics]

The appearances of the landscape and people were thus highly to his taste. In the light of his life's work championing the lot of the rural man, it is unsurprising that he was swayed by the appearance of the 'yeoman farmers' and their environment, or that he saw them as a symbol of national pride.

Therefore, the behaviour, appearance and even the countryside associated with the Brunswickers 'Men of Kent' had, just for a short while, won William Cobbett over. Cobbett clearly shared similar visions of rural, sturdy, even militaristic masculinity that, envisaged as the 'Men of Kent' on Penenden Heath, embodied the peak of 'Englishness'. Also like the Brunswickers, Cobbett's imaginings cannot be properly understood without the presence of the Irish antithesis, so important in underlying the 'qualities' of the 'Men of Kent' on Penenden Heath.

Conclusion

The 'Men of Kent' have often been a relatively unproblematic subject

of comfortable histories and stories about the county of Kent. But, from all the poems, songs and biographical accounts, through the numerous societies, to the briefly published *Invicta* magazine, they have been described and embodied in countless, different ways. By analysing the multiple meanings attributed to them at just one moment, the writer has shown their historical specificity, and their usefulness in illustrating the complexity of the language and rhetoric of 'Englishness' at moments such as the Emancipation Crisis when it was used to stake claims to political rights, or to deny them to others. Despite the inevitable transience associated with all notions of identity, the dominant discourse of the 'Men of Kent' on Penenden Heath can give us a momentary glimpse of something that had import: rurally generated notions of masculine 'Englishness' associated with assertive, 'manly' action, the perceived superiority of the body closely linked with that of the land. The language and rhetoric of the Brunswickers resulted in one set of ways of articulating this ideal, one that had reference to the unique folklore and geography of the region, but which also had resonance to those who came from elsewhere, as the evidence of William Cobbett shows. This vision was briefly 'embodied' on Penenden Heath, through the stirring militaristic language, assertive actions and 'sturdy' appearance of the Brunswickers and the 'yeomen', the wider knowledge of their 'unconquered' history and fortress-like location, and perceptions of the actual, physical appearance of the 'fertile and beautiful' landscape. But, as the evidence from the pro-Catholic party and the *Kent Herald* shows there were many other ways in which the language of the 'Men of Kent' could be used, and other kinds of 'Englishmen' with which it could be associated. The legends of the 'Men of Kent' had as much resonance to the radicals at the *Kent Herald* as to the Brunswickers and, although they may not have held sway upon Penenden Heath, their's was a conception of the 'Men of Kent' which would have much resonance in the not so distant future. Furthermore, the various incarnations of the 'Men of Kent' can only be understood in the context of imaginings of who they were not, such as the Irish. Ireland was an almost constant, shadowy 'Other', hiding behind every confident avowal of the 'Men of Kent's' virility and Kentish beauty, just as accounts of Daniel O'Connell and his followers filled the columns of the papers next to stories of the latest exploits of the 'Men of Kent'. With one eye on the local landscape and one eye on the wider world, understanding the 'Men of Kent' can break down monolithic accounts of 'Englishness' in the nineteenth century and suggest new directions in thinking about Kentish culture.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For the main debates that inspired this paper see L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707 - 1837* (Newhaven and London, Yale University Press, 1992); C. Hall, *'The Rule of Difference: Gender, Class and Empire in the making of the 1832 Reform Act'*, in I. Blom, K. Hagerman, C. Hall (eds), *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and gender order in the long nineteenth century'* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2] William Wordsworth, *Sonnet to the Men of Kent*, 1803.

[3] The Editor has brought to the writer's attention to contemporary debates among local archaeologists about whether the Romans first landed in Kent or Sussex, the Kentish protagonists now strenuously advancing the case *for* Richborough!

[4] A line from a version of 'The Man of Kent' issued in the local press in 1828 and reproduced in *The Times*, 24 October 1828.

[5] *Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser (hereafter MJKA)* 28 October 1828; *The Times*, 25 October 1828; *Morning Chronicle*, 25 October 1828.

[6] *MJKA*, 28 October 1828.

[7] *Kentish Gazette*, 28 October 1828.

[8] *Kent Herald*, 30 October 1828.

[9] Richard Lalor Shiel, *Sketches, Legal and Political* (London, 1855), 203.

[10] *The Times*, 25 October 1828; *MJKA*, 4 November 1828; *The Standard*, 27 October 1828.

[11] *The Times*, 25 October 1828.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *MJKA*, 28 October 1828.

[14] Thomas Law Hodges was elected in August 1830 as a County member.

[15] This argument is outlined in many of Lord Kenyon's and Lord Winchilsea's speeches, including Winchilsea's address on Penenden Heath found in all newspaper accounts of the meeting.

[16] *MJKA*, 28 October 1828.

[17] *Standard*, 22 October 828; *Spectator*, 1 November 1828.

[18] *The Times*, 25 October 1828.

[19] *MJKA*, 28 October 1828,

[20] *Kentish Gazette*, 28 October 1828.

[21] *Standard*, 27 October 1828.

[22] *The Times*, 25 October 1828.

[23] *The Morning Chronicle*, 25 October 1828.

[24] *Kent Herald*, 30 October 1828; 6 November 1828.

[25] *MJKA*, 28 October 1828.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *The Times*, 16 October 1828, *Spectator*, 18 October 1828.

[28] *Kentish Gazette*, 28 October 1828.

[29] *Maidstone Gazette and Kentish Courier*, 23 September 1828.

[30] *MJKA*, 4 November 1828.

[31] The 'Protestant Constitution' was basically asserted to be a cornerstone of the exclusive rights and liberties of Englishmen and, furthermore, of the actual, physical security of the nation. For a summary of current debates on the meanings of constitutional rhetoric in the nineteenth century, see J. Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the Constitution* (1996).

[32] This version of the song was reported in *The Times* to have been issued from the Maidstone press for distribution on the eve of the Penenden Heath meeting. It was sung by the Brunswickers themselves, performed by ballad singers on the streets of Maidstone and by 'rural bands' on the way to the meeting. *The Times*, 24 October 1828; *MJKA*, 28 October 1828.

[33] Speech of the Earl of Winchilsea, Penenden Heath, 24 October 1828; *MJKA*, 28 October. Similar accounts of this speech can be found in the *Morning Chronicle*, 25 October; *John Bull*, 26 October; and *The Times*, 25 October.

[34] *MGKC*, 23 September 1828. John Wells made this statement at the inaugural meeting of the Brunswick Society. It was much applauded at the meeting but much derided by rival politicians in the House of Commons and in the more 'liberal' press, especially *The Times* whose writers were 'thunderously' amused and made fun of 'John Wells of the bloody knees' for months to come.

[35] *Maidstone Gazette and Kentish Courier*, 14 November 1828.

[36] *An Address to the Freeholders of the County of Kent by Privatus* (Sir Edward Knatchbull). *Kentish Gazette*, 7 October 1828. Also printed in poster form.

[37] *MJKA*, 4 November 1828.

[38] Richard Lalor Shiel, *Sketches, Legal and Political* (1855), 202.

[39] *Hansard*, 13 February 1829, 299-303.

[40] *Cobbett's Political Register*, 25 October 1828.

[41] *MJKA*, 28 October 1828.

[42] *MJKA*, 1 November 1828.

[43] For example, *Maidstone Gazette and Kentish Courier*, 21 October; 4 November 1828.

[44] By dictionary definition, a 'yeoman' is a smallholder who owns and farms his land, as such not typical of the Kentish farming scene. The description of the Brunswicker followers as 'yeomen', suggests this term had wider meanings in contemporary usage.

[45] *MJKA*, 4 November 1828.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] *The Times*, 25 October 1828.

[48] The writer's MPhil/PhD upgrade thesis contains a more detailed assertion of this point, including an exploration of the relevant works of William Cobbett and Charles Dickens.

[49] *MJKA*, 4 November 1828.

[50] According to Kenneth J. Eaton's unpublished thesis, *Newspapers and Politics in Canterbury and Maidstone, 1815-1850: Opinion in two Kentish Towns* (University of Kent at Canterbury, 1972) the *Kent Herald* was financed by an 'unknown group of shareholders' and edited by John Chalk Claris, who supplemented his income with teaching and was active in local politics. His writings were sympathetic to the Manchester radicals, franchise reform, modifying the Corn Laws and Catholic Emancipation.

[51] *Kent Herald*, 23 October 1828.

[52] *A report of the speeches delivered at the Kent County Meeting Holden on Penenden Heath, October 24th, 1828 with Prefatory Remarks* (Chatham, 1828), in *Tracts 1798-1838*, British Library.

[53] *MJKA*, 23 September 1828.

[54] Lord Teynham was not an office-holder at this time but a backbencher of the House of Lords who took part in a discussion on the Brunswick clubs on 19 February 1829. *Hansard* (vol. 20, 6 February -19 March 1829), p. 417.

[55] *A Report of the Speeches* (1828).

[56] *The Times*, 25 October 1828.

[57] The section above on the opinions of the *Kent Herald* is based on its issues of 9/10 October, 18 October, 23 October and 6 November 1828.

[58] *Cobbett's Political Register*, vol. 66, no. 17, 25 October 1828.

[59] *A Report of the Speeches* (1828), p. 30.

[60] William Cobbett, *Facts for the Men of Kent*, 1828, British Library.

[61] *Cobbett's Political Register*, vol. 66, no. 18, 1 November 1828, 567.

[62] William Cobbett, *Facts*.

[63] William Cobbett, *A History of the Protestant 'Reformation' in England and Ireland*, 1824. First edition, frontispiece.

[64] This was the line predominantly taken in *The Times, The Spectator, The Morning Chronicle* and other examples of the 'liberal' and 'radical' press.

[65] *Cobbett's Political Register*, 8 November 1828, vol. 66, no. 19.

[66] *Cobbett's Political Register*, 1 November 1828, vol. 66, no. 18, 570.

[67] All quotes are from a letter by William Cobbett to the editor of *The Morning Chronicle*. Reprinted in *MJKA*, 11 November 1828.

[68] *Ibid.*

[69] *Cobbett's Political Register*, vol. 66, no. 18, 1 November 1828, 572.

[70] *Cobbett's Political Register*, vol. 66, no. 17, 25 October 1828.

[71] Letter to editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, reprinted in *MJKA*, 11 November 1828.

[72] For more details on Cobbett and masculinity the writer has been analysing works such as *Advice to young men and, incidentally, to young women in the middle and higher ranks of life. In a series of letters addressed to a youth, a bachelor, a lover, a husband, a citizen or a subject.* (London, *c.*1830).

[73] *Cobbett's Political Register*, vol. 66, no. 18, 1 November 1828, 572.

[74] Letter to editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, reprinted in *MJKA*, 11 November 1828.

[75] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 1830 (Penguin edition, 1967), p. 211.