SELECTED PAPERS OF SAMUEL WHITBREAD, 1807-1815

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1. PROVENANCE

The Whitbread papers remained at the Whitbread seat at Southill until November, 1958 when they were deposited by the family at Bedfordshire Record Office. The papers were sorted and catalogued by Major Montagu Duberly before they were deposited at the Record Office. It is assumed that the papers relating to Samuel Whitbread's suicide and to various disputes with Grey and others were destroyed when Grey and William Wilshere went through the papers soon after the death of Samuel Whitbread.

2. SAMUEL WHITBREAD, 1764-1815

Samuel Whitbread, whose father founded the Whitbread brewery, was born at Cardington, Bedfordshire in 1764 (not 1758 as given in D.N.B.) He was educated at Eton, where he made friends with Charles Grey (later Earl Grey) whose sister he married in 1787. After Eton he went up to Christ Church, but for reasons that remain unexplained he moved to St. John’s College, Cambridge, from which he graduated as a B.A. in 1785 (not 1784 as in D.N.B.) In the general election of 1791 he was elected for Bedford in the Whig interest and became a close friend of Fox. He remained a Member of Parliament for the rest of his life and soon made a name as a spokesman for causes connected with civil and religious liberties and as a passionate – at times an intemperate – opponent of successive administrations.

Whitbread denounced slavery and pleaded for the amelioration of the condition of Negroes. In foreign affairs, to which he gave much of his time, he always urged negotiations with France, a theme on which he harassed the administration in 1800 and to which he returned in 1808 with a vehemence that divided the opposition; he failed to carry Grey with him and found himself in a small minority. In 1806 he had led the unsuccessful impeachment proceedings against Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville on charges arising from abuses in the navy department. Whitbread’s concern for social reform was shown when he introduced a complicated poor law bill, which included plans for the establishment of an educational system, the equalisation of the county rates, alterations in the law of settlement, and a strange plan to distinguish the deserving poor from the undeserving by making them wear badges.

Whitbread, who believed in the usefulness of publicity in attacking abuses, is said to have spoken in the House more often than any other member. His outspokenness and the
intensity of his feelings made him something of a lone wolf and especially after 1808 he perused a line of his own, often in isolation from the rest of his party. He was a vigorous opponent of the Orders in Council by which British administrations pursued economic warfare against France, with adverse effects on the foreign trade of the United States and on British merchants trading with America. Whitbread was a friend to the United States, tried to get the offensive measures repealed, and opposed the war that broke out in 1812.

It is well known that he gave too much time and money to rebuilding the Drury Lane Theatre after it had been destroyed by fire: it is perhaps less well known that he opposed the establishment of rival theatres.

Whitbread, who was deeply worried by the problems of administering his estate and was a prey to private anxieties, died by his own hand in 1815.

3. THE WHITBREAD PAPERS, 1807-1815

On this reel the bulk of the collection consists of political papers between December 1807 and Whitbread’s death in 1815. Nearly all are “in” letters; many accompany printed reports, in addition to which Whitbread filled a large number of other official or printed reports from newspapers, pamphlets and trade records. These items reveal his close and continuing interest in the commercial consequences of economic warfare; examples occur in printed lists of the prices and sales of cotton and cotton wool at Liverpool in 1808 (3768), an extensive statement of exports and imports to and from America to 5 January 1809 (3757) and a broadside entitled “Considerations on the State of the Linen Trade with Ireland” (3757). The British licensing regulations also raised problems that attracted Whitbread’s interest; item 3875 is a 95-page pamphlet by Joseph Phillimore, LL.D., entitled Reflections on the Nature and Extent of the Licence Trade (London, 1812).

The cuttings sent to Whitbread by his correspondents helped to keep him informed not only of the problems of the merchants in Liverpool and other British cities but also of politics in the United States. A number of American public statements, most of them in American newspapers, inform us that Whitbread followed the financial reports of Albert Gallatin, U.S. Secretary to the Treasury (item 3792), congressional publications of diplomatic correspondence (3884), and certain presidential and other public papers. This interest as known and appreciated in the United States, for on February 26, 1811 (3822) Mr. William Pinkney (U.S. Minister in London) presents his compliments and seeks a meeting with Mr. Whitbread, while near the end of the War of 1812, Thomas Mansfield seeks to introduce two United States “deputies” who appear to be the negotiators for the treaty of Ghent (3936). One possibly significant memorandum (3923) contains the
statement that on August 25, 1812, Mr. Russell wrote to Castlereagh offering an armistice
on condition that Britain repealed the orders in council and put an end to impressments.
Jonathan Russell was a United States chargé d’affaires who remained in London.

The letters give a continuing stream of information about the distressing effects of
British policies on British trade; almost all the reports are adverse and the generally
assume that British policy is to blame; Whitbread was kept informed by men who shared
his point of view and looked to him to speak for them in the Commons. Some of his most
consistent correspondents, among whom Thomas Mullett is the most informative are no
longer easy to trace; the members of Parliament represented in this collection are: Henry
Brougham, William Roscoe, (Whig M.P. for Liverpool, 1806-1807, opponent of the slave
trade, historian of the Medici, and banker); William Wilberforce, and Thomas Erskine, the
Whig lawyer who became Lord Chancellor. Other correspondents of Whitbread’s include
George Joy, the American-born son of a Tory émigré, who was a strong defender of
Jefferson and Madison and wrote pro-American pamphlets; and J.L. Witz, an American
Federalist who wrote from New York in 1811 and told Whitbread he was “universally well
spoken of here”.

The microfilm does not however include the whole of the Whitbread collection; the
series 4088-4425 and a few others have been omitted, the microfilmed portion being
almost entirely political and commercial. The letters of R.B. Sheridan to Whitbread are not
part of the microfilm and any researcher who wants to find out about personal, financial
and theatre business should consult the original material.