

Fathers, Sons and Brothers

Two Victorian Families

by R. H. Evans

Two brief letters, one relating to the Biggs and the other to the Paget family, are published for the first time. They provide some insights into relationships within these important business 'dynasties' of Leicester and might well be read in connection with Dinah Freer's sociological study 'The dynasty-builders of Victorian Leicester' (*TLAHS*, 53 1977-8). The second letter moves into wider cultural territory with the light it throws on John Paget (1811-98), police magistrate and writer. An attempt is made to set the letters in their historical context.

William Biggs, letter to his sons, 19 April 1859
(preserved in one of his Scrapbooks)¹

Dear Boys

April 19th 1859

Yours is to hand – Ian Partridge is annoyed at Danns story about the plain feet, & insists upon it that he, Dann. distinctly ordered plain feet, & said that it was a sine qua non – I am glad you are so well satisfied with your show – there are next to no orders coming in here, & business is very quiet–

We shall send you a few samples to night – we sent you some things you ordered Hart to send last night —

The folks here cannot agree a Mayor, they have had 2 meetings, & Ballotted half a doz times, & cannot agree, & have adjourned till this mng, [& again till to night, & will again meet tomorrow morning & finally decide if they can – S. Stone called in at our House last night, on coming away from the Council meeting, & said that]

¹/₂ past 10 – A deputation has called upon me consisting of A. Burgess, Angrave & G. Toller – from the Council to ask me to undertake the office of Mayor – so under the circumstances, I have felt it better to accede & have been accordingly sworn in & am now Mayor of Leicester for the third time

Your affectionate
Father
William Biggs

(N.B. The passage of the letter enclosed in my square brackets was crossed through, presumably by the writer when he took up his pen again after being interrupted by the arrival of the deputation. He began the letter as an Alderman and finished it as Mayor.)

¹ The letter reproduced and discussed here survives in a Scrapbook of William Biggs that is in private possession. I am indebted to the owner for the very kind permission to inspect the contents of the Scrapbook and work through them at my leisure. I regret that because the pages are not numbered and there are many loose papers it is not possible to provide exact references to the material. Apart from this source, the greater part of my commentary is derived from my chapter 'Parliamentary History since 1835' in *VCH Leicester* iv 201-250, and my article 'The Biggs Family of Leicester' in *TLAHS* XLVIII, 1972-3, 29-58).

This artless and engaging letter from a father to his sons is of particular interest as it was written by one of the leading citizens of Leicester. William Biggs was a successful hosier, who, in partnership with his elder brother John, directed one of the largest manufactories in the town. Like his brother he was an active politician. Born in 1805, he was still a young man when his energetic contribution to the Reform agitation of the 1830s won him a place among the Liberal elite who subsequently dominated local politics. By the time he wrote this letter he was one of the elder statesmen of the municipality, having been a town councillor continuously since the Reformed Corporation came into being in 1835 and having already served twice in the office of Mayor. In addition he had been M.P. for Newport (I.O.W.) for five years from 1852 and would probably have still occupied the seat if the determination of his brother John to stand for Leicester and the needs of the business had not persuaded him to resign in 1857.

The first part of the letter, which is concerned with the hosiery business, would not on its own justify publication here; yet some elements are worthy of comment. The 'boys' to whom it is written were evidently well acquainted with the family firm and its personnel. Partridge and Hart would appear to have been responsible for making-up and dispatching orders; and a reference elsewhere in the Scrapbook shows that Dann was the firm's London agent.² It is also evident that the boys were themselves actively engaged in the business and had been exhibiting samples of the firm's wares, probably in London, as the reference to Dann suggests.

William Biggs had four sons, born at two-year intervals from 1840 to 1846. Too many sons could be an embarrassment to a family firm, but in 1859 this was hardly a problem. The two youngest, Russell and Arthur, were only 15 and 13, still schoolboys.³ Only the two eldest, William and John, were likely to have been actively introduced to the trade at this time. An entry by John in the Scrapbook shows that he returned from school in Paris in August 1856 to join the business and in Jan. 1857, being, as he writes, 'sufficiently grown up', received the charge of a department. It is therefore to the two eldest boys that the letter is most probably addressed.

In the light of future events the reference to the lack of orders might seem to sound a note of alarm. That would probably be an exaggeration, but unease about the firm's future must have played some part in the decision, possibly taken the previous year, to diversify, at considerable expense, into the manufacture of footwear. On the other hand the decision may have been influenced by the need to provide scope for the sons coming into the business. At any rate the changes were made with characteristic boldness. The Scrapbook records new agents in London and Manchester, and agencies established in Dublin and Glasgow, with the possibility of new connections being sought in Canada. The most ambitious of these developments was an attempt to expand trade with Europe by setting up an office in Paris. The Scrapbook contains examples of two handsome trade cards (with text in English, French and German) designed to publicize the *Maison de Commission* of *J. Biggs et Fils* at *Rue d'Hauteville 21 Paris* and announce the presence of *Mons. W. W. Biggs* (the eldest son) as their agent. It may be that this venture was encouraged by the recent Free Trade treaty with France; but whatever the success of the enterprise it was not sufficient to avert the collapse that was to overtake the firm in 1862.

The care that William had taken for his sons' education (a sound foundation at Franklin's Academy – Stoneygate School – in Leicester, followed by a stint at a French boarding establishment called the *Académie de Paris*), together with practical experience

² The Scrapbook refers to Dann's appointment in Sept. 1857

³ The Biggs boys were of course privileged. Their father was said to have been working as a 'winding boy' at their age; and at the time of writing this letter he was employing boys of 12. *TLAHS* as note 1, 39: *Children's Employment Commission 1862, 1st Report*, 1863, 289.

in the hosiery trade, equipped them to survive the disaster.⁴ Three of them succeeded in establishing themselves as cotton brokers in Liverpool, where eventually their parents were able to join them. The third son, Russell, took a different course but also profited from his father's concern for education. The Scrapbook shows that he studied at University College, London, then became a law-student in Liverpool and qualified as a barrister.

When we turn to the rest of the letter, about the mayor-making, we find the account overtaken by events as it was being penned. Having begun to tell the boys about the difficulty of agreeing on a mayor, Biggs was evidently interrupted by a municipal deputation; and that intervention so changed the situation that he crossed out (without effectively deleting) the whole of that particular passage and started afresh, leaving us tantalisingly uninformed about what Samuel Stone, the distinguished Town Clerk, might have been saying. When he resumed the letter it was to announce not only that the choice had fallen on him but that, by 10.30 in the morning, he had already been sworn in and was now Mayor – for the third time.

The evident pride with which Biggs describes this offer of the mayoralty was fully justified by the exceptional circumstances. He had not offered himself as a candidate. Indeed he had already been asked to stand but had refused; then, in his own home, like some modern Cincinnatus, he had been supplicated by an all-party delegation that had been empowered not just to renew the offer but to declare him elected and, with the Clerk of the Peace (Toller) accompanying them, to swear in the new Mayor on the spot. He had every reason to be proud.

The immediate explanation of this exceptional procedure lies in the unexpected resignation of the previous Mayor, Dr. Noble, before completing his term of office. A new mayor had to be found at short notice and, unusually, in April instead of the normal November. However, these facts do not in themselves explain the tensions and divisions that made the choice of a replacement so difficult. What created the crisis was the political purpose of Dr. Noble's resignation. This was connected with the General Election which was to be held in May 1859. Dr. Noble had been persuaded to stand as a candidate for Leicester; and it was for this purpose that he had to abandon his mayoralty. Noble's candidature was of considerable significance: he was a Radical; and, what is more, he had been chosen to partner another Radical, William Biggs's elder brother John, who had first been elected to one of the two Leicester seats in 1856.

Those of us acquainted with the term 'Radical Leicester' might not be surprised at the determination of the Radicals to secure both parliamentary seats and so monopolize the representation of the borough; but the term can convey a misleading impression of local politics. Leicester was not at all solidly Radical. The Reformers or Liberals had always been divided in some degree between Moderates and Radicals and there seems to have been an unwritten understanding that the borough representation should be shared between the two groups. In 1847, however, any such understanding had been repudiated by the Radicals and for the following 15 years local politics were dominated by a sort of civil war between the two factions. At one stage the Radicals seemed to be on the point of making 'Radical Leicester' a reality as in three successive elections they secured both parliamentary seats; but this success was soon undermined by a formidable backlash. The Moderates organized themselves and in 1857 recovered one of the seats. When the election of 1859 was announced it was wisely suggested that the time had

⁴ The Scrapbook contains a school report from the *Académie de Paris* signed by both William Biggs and his wife, probably in 1856. The Scrapbook has also several references to the activities at Stoneygatge School, especially debates and school plays.

come to call a truce and to revive the old agreement. This was unacceptable to John Biggs, a leader with a sanguine temperament and a fighting spirit. His invitation to Noble to resign the mayoralty and stand with him in the Radical cause was a declaration that the civil war would be continued.

In the light of this it is easy to understand the deep divisions in the Town Council which made it so difficult to agree on a new Mayor in 1859. On the other hand it is at first sight less easy to understand the offer to William Biggs, brother of the man who had instigated the crisis. The explanation must be that William was known not to share his brother's intransigent temper. In the Forties he had tried to compromise with the Chartists; and he had such a local reputation as a moderator that on one occasion when the Liberals of Derby were deeply split they invited him to arbitrate and attached such value to his services that they ordered a special train to speed him to Derby in the evening and another to return him to Leicester by 6 o'clock the following morning. With this reputation William Biggs was acceptable to both factions.

This brief letter shows us William Biggs at the height of his fortunes and reputation. Yet, with hindsight, we can already find hints in it of the financial and political disasters that were shortly to overwhelm the ambition of both brothers. The reference to the lack of orders and the need to expand the business to accommodate his sons allows us to see how the firm was led to overstretch its resources and, within three years, forced to go out of business. Equally we can see how the challenge offered to the Moderates when Dr. Noble threw his mayoral hat into the electoral ring split the Liberal factions more deeply than ever and set John Biggs on the road to political oblivion. Although Biggs and Noble won both seats for the Radicals in 1859 their majority was too slender for comfort and should have sent them a warning signal. But it was left to the Conservatives to bring the Liberals to their senses.

When the sudden death of Dr. Noble in 1861 led the factions to do battle again the by-election resulted in the unthinkable – victory for the Conservatives, their first since 1835. This at last provided the necessary shock. It was clear that Leicester could be neither purely Radical nor purely Moderate. Neither faction was strong enough to control the borough on its own. The humiliation of defeat destroyed the credibility of John Biggs's policies. He felt bound to resign and immediately abandoned public life. The way was open for Liberal reconciliation and for William Biggs's moderating talents. He helped to negotiate the settlement which was agreed not long after the by-election. It restored the old compromise between the factions, dissipated the dream of 'Radical Leicester' and laid the foundation-stone for the 'Liberal Leicester' of the next sixty years. That done, William packed his bags and went, eventually, to join his 'boys' in Liverpool.

John Paget, letter to his son Guy, 3 Sept. 1867.
(preserved in Leicestershire Record Office)⁵

46 Euston Sq. N.W.

3rd Sept 1867

My dear Guy,

[the letter begins by warning Guy against a certain George Melly] . . . impulsive, hasty, inaccurate, mere wax in the hands of such a man as your uncle Tertius & his judgment is, in no degree, to be relied upon. His account of Grandmother may have some foun-

⁵ LRO DE/4795/49. The letter survives in the form of a typewritten copy, to which notes have been appended, presumably by Reginald, Lord Paget. The first few lines have been omitted.

dation in fact (because of her age). As to your Aunt Geraldine she has played for £20,000 a year, she has got it & may possibly now find how very little mere money may do. Let us look back at the facts. Your Grandfather promised me an equal share in his property with your uncle. Your grandmother, your Uncle and your aunt Geraldine practising on his fears and his enfeebled intellect induced him to leave almost the whole of his property to your Uncle Tertius and that made his latter years miserable with remorse for the injustice he had inflicted on me, on your mother, your sister and yourself.

Finding himself compelled to devise some excuse for thus appropriating my property to himself your Uncle invented the most abominable slander on my conduct & character & though repeatedly challenged either to prove their truth or to admit their falsehood he does neither. Is it possible for you with a fitting regard to the respect due to me & to yourself to take any step towards the renewal of intercourse with such a man?

By your Grandmother's desire I went to Hastings in April (last year) & had a long interview with her. She feels no interest in me, in your mother, your sister or yourself. Every feeling is centred on your Uncle Tertius and she desires a renewal of intercourse because she feels that whilst we stand aloof her great wealth is no protection against the contempt of the world.

The great desire of your Uncle has been to create dissension amongst us. Hitherto he has failed. I hope he will continue to do so. I cannot conceal from you that if you were to go to Humberstone it would place me in a position of great difficulty & discomfort. You & I should then be pursuing antagonistic lines of conduct. Your Uncle Tertius would immediately say – 'You see as soon as Guy is a free man he takes the first opportunity of repudiating his father & marking his disapproval of his conduct'. Others would impute to you (falsely I know) a desire to make up with your Uncle for the sake of his wealth.

When I talked these matters fully over with Sir John McNeill & asked him if he would give me any advice or suggestion he said 'The only advice I can give you is to do nothing that shall fetter the future action either of yourself or of Guy. It is impossible to foresee what may occur. DO nothing'. Upon this I have acted, & I have felt the wisdom of the advice. If you were to take the step you suggest you would greatly fetter my future actions.

My very earnest advice is that you should not go to Humberstone.

If after reading this letter & reconsidering the matter you do not agree with me at any rate do nothing until you have seen me. On a matter of so much importance you might possibly ask for leave of absence for a day & as one that concerns me so it is not unreasonable that I should be fully consulted before you act.

I sit at the Thames Thursday, Friday & Saturday in this week.

I have very good accounts of your Mother.

Let me hear from you.

Believe me, always my dear Guy, most affectly. yrs.

J.P.

This letter was written by John Paget who was born in 1811, the second son of Thomas Paget of Humberstone, then a village on the outskirts of Leicester.⁶ He had much in common with William Biggs. Both the families were wealthy, among the elite of Leicester, both were connected with the Leicester Unitarian congregation, the Great Meeting,

⁶ *D.N.B.* XXII offers a convenient but not comprehensive, account of John Paget, omitting, for example, any mention of his son and grandson. John's son, Thomas Guy, to whom this letter is written, was born 17 Aug. 1843 and died, before his father, 19 June 1894, according to an inscription in St. Mary's Church, Humberstone. At the time of this letter, according to Lord Paget, Guy was in the army; hence the mention of the need for leave of absence.

which contributed substantially to that elite, and both took an active part in politics.

John Paget's father had been the acknowledged leader of the Reformers in their struggle against the old Corporation, then served as the first Mayor of the reformed Corporation and until his death remained a respected figure among the Liberals of Leicester. However, when the divisions in their ranks deepened, Thomas Paget's sympathies lay with John Biggs's opponents.⁷

There was also some difference in the social standing of the families. The wealth of the Biggs brothers was very obviously new wealth. Their hosiery father had taken the first steps but the brothers were, to a large extent, self-made men, who had known physical labour. Thomas Paget's would not have been considered so tainted. He was a banker; and although the bank was relatively recent, having been founded by his father, it had developed out of the older and respectable Pares Bank, and Paget had married into the Pares family. Further, the Pagets were not exactly 'new men'. They could trace their origins back to the sixteenth century and had a wide connection in the county. They not only possessed a manor-house in Humberstone but a family vault in Ibstock, which provided the family with its territorial marker.

This brings us back to the letter. The differences between Biggs's hurried little note and Paget's calculated missive are obvious at the first reading. Much, of course, can be explained simply by the differing circumstances and purpose; but one might reasonably doubt whether William, in Paget's place, could have penned so sophisticated and literary a piece. It reads like a passage extracted from some lost novel by Anthony Trollope. Apart from its rhetorical flourishes and rhythms it pursues a cunningly contrived argument intended to put the unfortunate Guy in the position of having to choose between loyalty and treachery. The reader will not be surprised to learn that John Paget was a lawyer.

As a young man John had served for a few years in Paget's Bank, but in 1835, having either found banking unpalatable or discovered that the rewards were to be reserved for his elder brother Tertius, he decided to take up the Law. On becoming a barrister he moved to London; and having married (his wife being a Rathbone, one of the most eminent Unitarian families of Liverpool) and apparently in need of a steady income, became secretary to two Lord Chancellors in succession. When he reached his fifties he settled down as a stipendiary magistrate in various London Police Courts (among them the Thames) which he served until his retirement.

This amounted to a sound but hardly brilliant career. What makes John Paget one of the most interesting figures to come out of Victorian Leicester is the literary activity that occupied his leisure hours. For some twenty-five years he produced a flow of essays and articles over a wide range of subjects, judicial, literary, historical and even artistic. What distinguished them was his originality, his readiness to take a fresh look at problems, and the sharp critical edge which did not spare established reputations. The papers published in his *Paradoxes and Puzzles* best display his versatility, but historians are most likely to remember him for *The New Examen* in which he savaged that hero of Victorian historiography, Lord Macaulay.

So much for the writer of this letter. Let us now turn to the letter itself. Though its general character is clear enough some explanation is required. The letter is of course addressed to John's only son, Thomas Guy Paget, then aged 24. A note attached to it at a later date by John's great-grandson, Reginald, Lord Paget, explains that the letter was prompted by Guy's proposal 'to visit Humberstone on excuse of seeing his grand-

⁷ R. H. Evans, 'Parliamentary History since 1835', *V.C.H. Leicester* IV 201-250.

mother, who was growing old'. Guy's grandmother was the widow of Thomas Paget the banker, who had died five years before this. To visit her might seem innocent enough; but John suspected that this was merely a cover for Guy to meet Thomas Tertius Paget and his wife Geraldine⁸, and perhaps even to try to end the rift between the Paget brothers. This prospect was clearly intolerable. A reconciliation would merely legitimize the injustice which John considered he had suffered.

We are left in no doubt about the depth of John Paget's feelings on this subject. He is clearly obsessed with it. No one is to be trusted. Melly, who is perhaps an agent, is a mere tool. John's own mother is besotted with Tertius and only wants a reconciliation for the sake of her reputation. Tertius and Geraldine are scheming villains who took advantage of Thomas Paget's senility to rob John of his promised share of the property and now hope to drive a wedge between Guy and his father. The only person accorded any respect is Sir John McNeill, who tells John what he wishes to hear.

It is difficult to know what truth there is in John's accusations. Certainly John did not become rich. He had to continue working for his living. Certainly Tertius took over the bank; and when he died in 1892 he left £589,000, a very large sum indeed in those days.⁵ But that does not make him a villain. He seems to have been a conscientious politician who fought hard to win and keep his parliamentary seat in South Leicestershire.⁶ The only really adverse account of him is provided by Penn Lloyd in his *Anecdotes of Bygone Leicestershire*.⁷ There he states categorically that Tertius was a mean man, hated by everyone; and that at his death, when the funeral cortege had to pass through Leicester on the way from Humberstone to the family vault at Ibstock, people could only be got to line the streets by the promise of good ale. Unfortunately the book, while rich in good stories, is poor in documentation and can hardly be relied upon.

Even if John was deprived of his promised share of the inheritance it might not have been as a consequence of Tertius's machinations. It could be that at some point he had brought his troubles on himself by offending his father. There were two occasions when he might have appeared to push himself rather brashly into the political scene.⁸ The first was in the general election of 1852 when the Moderates were trying to recover from the gains the Radicals had made in the previous election. Though now based in London, John had sprung into action and quickly conjured up a candidate. It happened that the Lord Chancellor to whom he was secretary, Lord Truro, had a nephew, James Wild, who was not only appropriately moderate in his politics, but tolerably happy to be nominated. This was useful but it was also brash and one wonders how well his act of electoral prestidigitation was really received by John's elders, especially as Wild was singularly unsuccessful.

The next occasion, in the by-election of 1856, provided an opportunity for an even brasher initiative, which this time involved John in pushing himself to the front of the stage. In spite of being egged on by a chorus of Dissenting ministers calling for a crusade against the godless Radicals, whose proposal to open the Museum on Sunday afternoons would give the English Sabbath its death-blow, the Moderates remained strangely hesitant to act. As if reproving their supineness John threw himself into the breach and

⁸ Katharine Geraldine Paget, 4th d. of Marcus McCausland, of Co. Derry, wife of T. T. Paget, b. 21 June 1826, d. 5 April 1869 at Humberstone: memorial inscription, St. Mary's Church, Humberstone.

⁹ F. Boase, *Modern English Biography* III, 1965

¹⁰ J. Jenkins, 'Hush-a-by Tories, don't you cry . . .' Thomas T. Paget and the 1867 South Leicestershire By-Election, *Leicestershire Historian*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 1997, 2-12.

¹¹ Penn Lloyd, *Anecdotes of Bygone Leicestershire*, 1977, 27-8.

¹² *Leicester Chronicle*, 29 May, 3 Apr. 1852; 7, 14, 21 June 1856.

offered himself as a candidate. However, he found himself a general without any troops. When Nomination day arrived he abandoned the field to the enemy without so much as calling for a show of hands. It is difficult to believe that this episode did much for John's reputation. He had failed to rally the Moderates behind him and had exposed their weakness. Perhaps his action did more than that. It may have flouted the decisions of the Moderate leaders who seem to have resolved to save their ammunition for the next General Election rather than waste it on an impregnable opponent like John Biggs, whom John had tried to challenge. If so, John's judgment and his own respect for parental authority might have been put in doubt. These efforts might also have created or intensified ill-feeling between the brothers. In view of Tertius's own political ambitions John's interventions might have appeared threatening and even offensive. This brings us back to the theme of fathers, sons and brothers.

If we compare the two families the contrast between them is striking. The Biggs brothers made an effective partnership; and their loyalty to one another was well demonstrated when William agreed to resign his parliamentary seat and give his full time to the management of the business, in order to give John his turn in Parliament. It is difficult to imagine either of the Paget brothers making a similar sacrifice. Similarly the easy relationship that appears to have existed between William Biggs and his children contrasts strongly with the heavy-handed tone adopted by John Paget towards Guy and with the harsh treatment that John himself seems to have suffered at the hands of his father. Perhaps we should not be too ready to generalize about Victorian family relationships or about the rules for successful 'dynasty-building'. William Biggs raised a family which was bonded well together, well-educated, and trained to continue the business, but appears to have over-extended his resources in his attempts to provide a place for his sons. By contrast, Thomas Paget seemed likely to have provided more wisely for his bank by respecting the rule of primogeniture and concentrating the bank's capital in the hands of his elder son, especially since Tertius proved to be a capable man of business. Yet this exercise in 'dynasty-building' also failed. Tertius had no son and the business was eventually incorporated into Lloyds Bank. John Paget might have proved a better bet.

To return to the letter by way of conclusion: what was Guy's response to his father's letter? A note by Reginald Paget attached to the letter provides the answer. Guy did not go to Humberstone. So did the letter achieve its purpose? The answer is, not completely. Reginald Paget goes on to note that instead of going to see his aunt and uncle he wrote to Geraldine to congratulate Tertius on his recent electoral success – 'a most foolish action on Guy's part,' Reginald comments, 'which he did not communicate with (sic) his father'.

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