

Biography of Sir William Curtis (1752-1829)

(This article was written by Henry Morse Stephens and published in 1888.)

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Sir William Curtis

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Sir William Curtis, Lord Mayor of London and Minister to Parliament (M.P.), was born in London on 25 January 1752. He was the third son of Joseph Curtis of Wapping, a London borough on the north bank of the Thames River. Both his father and grandfather had been the owners of a business in sea-biscuits in Wapping, to which William and his elder brother, Timothy, succeeded. They largely extended their business, and in 1785 Curtis was elected alderman of the Tower ward, though only thirty-three years of age and not yet a freeman of the city. He had already made some successful ventures in the Greenland fisheries, and established a bank which was at first known as Robarts, Curtis, Were & Co. His speculations were very successful, and he served the Office of Sheriff in 1789 with Sir Benjamin Hamett, and in 1790 was elected M.P. for the City of London, a seat which he held for twenty-eight years continuously. He was a supporter of Pitt and of the war, and acted as colonel of the 9th regiment of London volunteers and as colonel of the Honorable Artillery Company (1803-1817), and president (from 1795 until his death). He served the Office of Lord Mayor of London in 1795-1796, and was awarded a baronet for steady voting on 23 December 1802. He was a man of great importance as head of the Tory Party in the city, though he was a pitifully bad speaker, very badly educated, and the constant butt of all the Whig wits. His Toryism caused him to be elected only at the bottom of the poll in 1806, and his staunch support of the war and all Tory measures made him at last so unpopular that he lost his seat for the city in 1818, when he was offered a peerage as Lord Tenterden, a place to which his wife's family belonged. He refused the honor, and in 1819 was elected M.P. for Bletchingley, Surrey.

He was partly compensated for his defeat by a great meeting in the Drapers' Hall, of which company he was a liveryman, where he was presented with a gold snuff-box, an address, and two hundred guineas, and in 1820 he was once more elected M.P. for the city. King George IV was always intimate with him, and stayed at his house at Ramsgate in 1821 when on his way to the continent. Curtis was fond of the sea and the Whig and radical wits were never tired of laughing at the sumptuous fittings of his yacht, in which the king often accompanied him in his cruises. In 1822 he accompanied George IV to Scotland, where he appeared in a kilt, and was presented by the king with a portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence, inscribed 'G. R. to his faithful and loyal subject Sir William Curtis.'

In 1821 he became father of London, in the place of Sir Watkin Lewes, and exchanged the representation of the Tower ward for that of Bridge Without, which used to be always held by the senior alderman; and in 1826 he refused to stand a contested election for the city, and took his seat in the House of Commons for Hastings. This seat he resigned, however, on account of ill-health in December, and retired to his house at Ramsgate, where he died on 18 January 1829. Every shop in Ramsgate was closed on this occasion, and his funeral cortège was followed by an immense crowd halfway to Canterbury, on its way to Wanstead in Essex, where he was buried. He left a fortune of £300,000 behind him, a legacy to his friend Lord Sidmouth, and mourning rings to every member of the court of aldermen. No man of his time was ever the subject of some much ridicule, of which Peter Pinder's "The Fat Knight and the Petition" was a good example.

The Rev. Charles Curtis, his brother, rector of Solihull and of St. Martin's, Birmingham, who died only six days before him, was also a well-known man in his day, and is chiefly famous for his controversy with Dr. Parr, who had attacked and, as he asserted, insulted Sir William. There is a well-known portrait of Curtis by Sir Thomas Lawrence, which was engraved by W. Sharpe.

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(CFS Note: It does not appear Sir William Curtis had any close Curtis relatives who immigrated to America. If anyone has other information, please inform our society using our home page CONTACT US.)



King George & Billy Biscuit

A BBC article

King George IV hated his estranged wife. And it was this hatred of Princess Caroline of Brunswick, a cousin he married in 1795, which gave Ramsgate Harbor, [in the County of Kent] its unique Royal title.

In 1820 George inherited the title of King of Great Britain and Hanover. Needing to visit Hanover in September 1821, he decided that he would sail from Ramsgate instead of Dover. He didn't much like Dover after the people had given his wife such an amazing welcome home when she returned to England for the coronation. The couple had lived apart since the birth of their daughter Princess Charlotte. "Multitudes met her on the beach at Dover with loud acclamations, banners and every sign of popular enthusiasm."

So he sailed from Ramsgate. The citizens did not disappoint him with their reception and send off. Thrilled to bits, he "denominated" Ramsgate to be a Royal Harbor. An obelisk was erected there to mark the King's visits and it soon became known as the Royal Toothpick.

Before setting sail, King George stayed with his very good friend Sir William Curtis in Cliff House overlooking the west pier of the harbor [at Ramsgate].

Sir William was born in 1752, the son of a baker who, among many other products, made ships' biscuits. [One of their biggest customers was the British Navy.] And after inheriting the business, expanding it and making a whole pile of money, satirists came to call him Sir Billy Biscuit. But despite his obvious business nose and keen ability in the political arena, Sir Billy was nearly illiterate. It is said that, "It was Sir Billy who thought Reading, Writing and Arithmetic all began with the same letter – thus

inventing the phrase “the Three R’s.” The phrase is attributed to a toast given by him around 1825.

Sir Billy Biscuit was a generous and hospitable man and in later years he became known as the “Father of the City.” When he died in 1829, every shop in Ramsgate closed in his honor and an immense crowd followed his funeral cortege. He'd had quite an effect on the place.

(Special thanks to the BBC Online-Kent for their permission to reprint this article.)