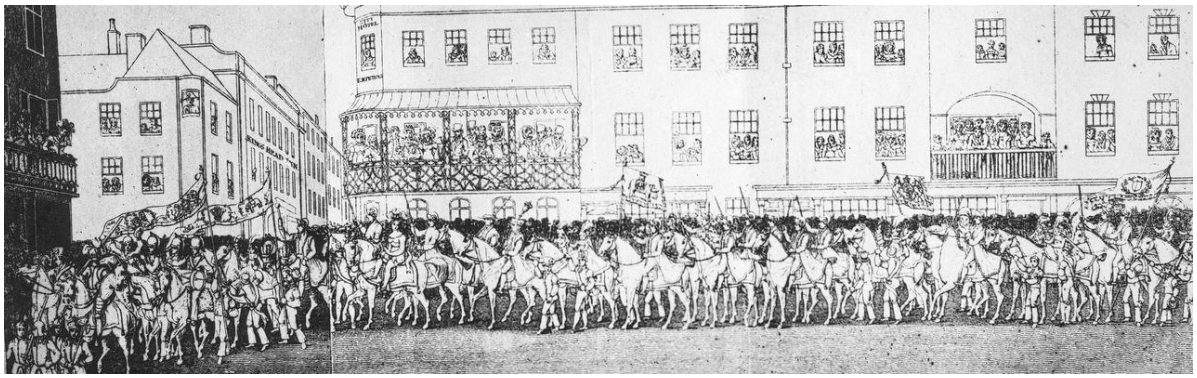
Coventry – Lady Godiva & The London & Birmingham Railway

Coventry city council was only four years old in 1839, yet it was a city steeped in centuries of tradition. It was home to the parliament on two occasions in the middle ages and the Royal Court was moved there during the War of the Roses. However as Birmingham grew Coventry's former status began to stutter.

Back in 1217 Henry III granted the Charter for the Great Fair of Coventry. This eight day event included a parade of civic authorities. However in 1677 someone decided to spice things up by having the semi mythical figure of Lady Godiva lead the procession. How the choice was made is not clear but honour fell to the son of a one James Swinnerton.



It would seem that the procession grew particularly in the 1820s and in 1839 was conceivably near its height. The 'actor' playing the part or 'actress' by this date taking a prominent role in the procession. This was to cause a few problems later.

"It is intended this year to revive the ancient of Lady Godiva at the annual fair at Coventry, and we understand that the subscriptions towards the expenses have been so liberal as to enable the committee to make arrangements for producing the same in superior style'".[1] Indeed newspapers published the lists of those who had contributed.

When the London & Birmingham railway was built there was a lot of consultation with the city showing that it was still thought important enough to be kept 'onside'. The first railway station however was small with lots stairs and no freight facilities. This under estimate of how much the station would be used would result in its complete rebuilding within two years of opening. However as the crowds arrived on in June of 1839 it is difficult to imagine a scene of greater chaos of all those people squeezing up the long narrow stairs.

"As time drew near for the arrival of the first train from Birmingham a great number of persons were seen making their way to the Warwick road station to witness its arrival, as a greater number of persons than ordinary were expected on account of the lady riding." [2]

[1] 'Coventry Show Fair' Oxford Journal - Saturday 08 June 1839 p4
[2] 'Country Show Fair and Lady Godiva', Coventry Standard, Friday 7th June 1839 p4

Despite the funding, the promises of lavishness, and a full compliment of 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards, a couple of things dampened the passing of the procession. The weather was gloomy, and in fact the Lady didn't put in an appearance on her cream charger until half an hour in to the afternoon. "While the procession was making its way through the city, many persons were eased of their cash and several pick-pockets were apprehended.'[3] Mr William Orton Roulston, was one of the lucky ones. His 'easer' also known as 'feloniously picking the pocket' , of some £13 and 17s, one Patrick Farley was evidently caught and was 'committed' for trial.[4]

Further problems

It may disappoint some, although it would be quite extreme if it was otherwise, but no actress or appointed lady performed the Lady Godiva roll in an exposed way. However after a few years into the revival problems arose. At this time she wore a tight fitting, flesh coloured dress, this caused unruliness amongst the crowd with spectators jostling to get a better view which also resulted in fighting.

By 1845, Lady Godiva was to be seen in a white, a tunic and satin and girdle. Much more respectable.

The involvement of the London & Birmingham Railway

In 1845 the railway company was important enough to be asked to join to campaign to against the procession going ahead. Thomas Collins who was spearheading the campaign to have the procession abandoned it appears was a Wesleyan Minister but didn't speak for everyone it would seem....

Coventry, April 12th 1845

To Directors of the London & Birmingham Railway.

Gentlemen,

There is a general desire as far as I can sense on the part of the orderly and decent inhabitants of Coventry to be relieved from the annoyance of a certain gross and disgusting exhibition well-known to be connected with the Show Fair.

The Innkeepers and others, for their private gain, make representations and obtain subscriptions and perpetuate that bad old custom.

Were you fully aware, Gentlemen, of the revolting circumstances of that show, and its demoralising effects upon Society, especially upon the youthful part, I am assured that the name of your respectable Company would not again stand on the printed list of contributors as it now does.

---

[3] 'Country Show Fair' Staffordshire Advertiser - Saturday 15 June 1839 p2
[4] 'Coventry Police Office' Coventry Standard - Friday 07 June 1839

Would you make enquiry before giving any further sums, the result would be, if I do not greatly misunderstand your character, that your patronage and funds would not again be extended to an object which offends a large and worthy part of the inhabitants of Coventry, your constant supporters-you would with them, and with eminent persons with whom I have been in communication, I may name the Bishop of Worcester, Judge Pothen(?), Chief Justice Tindal and Mr. Ellis M.P. who will not repeat his subscription - that the affair is of too odious a character to be sanctioned in these times.

There is an argument of perfect (?) certainty, the ale sellers argument. I hope, however, Gentlemen that you believe the Book of God which says "Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished!

A very small matter might in the retributions of providence draw back the gains of such a day and leave necessary reflections were you to allow the desire of gain to make you the patrons of immorality!

Gentlemen I am respectfully,

Yours

Thos. Collins.

The Directors reply (probably by Richard Creed, Secretary).

8 May.

Sir,

'On receipt of your letter of 12th insta. the Directors desired me to address the Mayor of Coventry on the subject of your remonstrance.

The copies of his reply and my letter are herewith enclosed The Directors not considering themselves as constituting judges of the morality or immorality of customs which the Authorities of Coventry give their sanction to, at least do not feel called upon to interfere with, have on their part contributed the same sum which they paid on the last occasion to the Fund.*

Whenever the Magistrates think it necessary to put a stop to the Cavalcade the Directors will withdraw this Company's subscription'.

*Not now available

13 May 1845

R. Creed Esq.

Sir,

I am sensible of the courtesy of the Company of the Directors of the London and Birmingham Railway in communicating to me the correspondence on the announced Godiva Procession, In

return, I copy the Mayor's answer to the requisition of the Clergy of Coventry for the perusal of the Company!.

To the Clergy of the City of Coventry.

Rev. Sir,

'I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your memorial respecting the anticipated procession of Lady Godiva and I am glad to find the subject is taken up by so influential a body of gentlemen as the Clergy of this City.

I quite agree with the sentiments expressed in your memorial and you may depend upon my using my authority, as Chief Magistrate, to prevent the procession taking place.

My brother magistrates, I feel assured, will unite with me in using every means to put down this exhibition which has too long disgraced our City'

I have the honour to remain [your humble servant]

Rev. Gentlemen

Yours most respectfully;

William Clark Mayor.

If the Mayor has changed his mind I am sorry, and the more, as it has continued the respectable Company of Directors in influential connection with a most abused and vicious custom of this city.'

Sir I remain obediently

Thos. Collins.

Reply.

Sir,

"I will take an early opportunity of laying your letter of the 12th inst. before the Directors.....matter of regret that they were not made sooner acquainted with the reply of the Mayor of Coventry to the resident Clergy on the subject of the objectionable procession!

I am [your most humble and obedient servant]

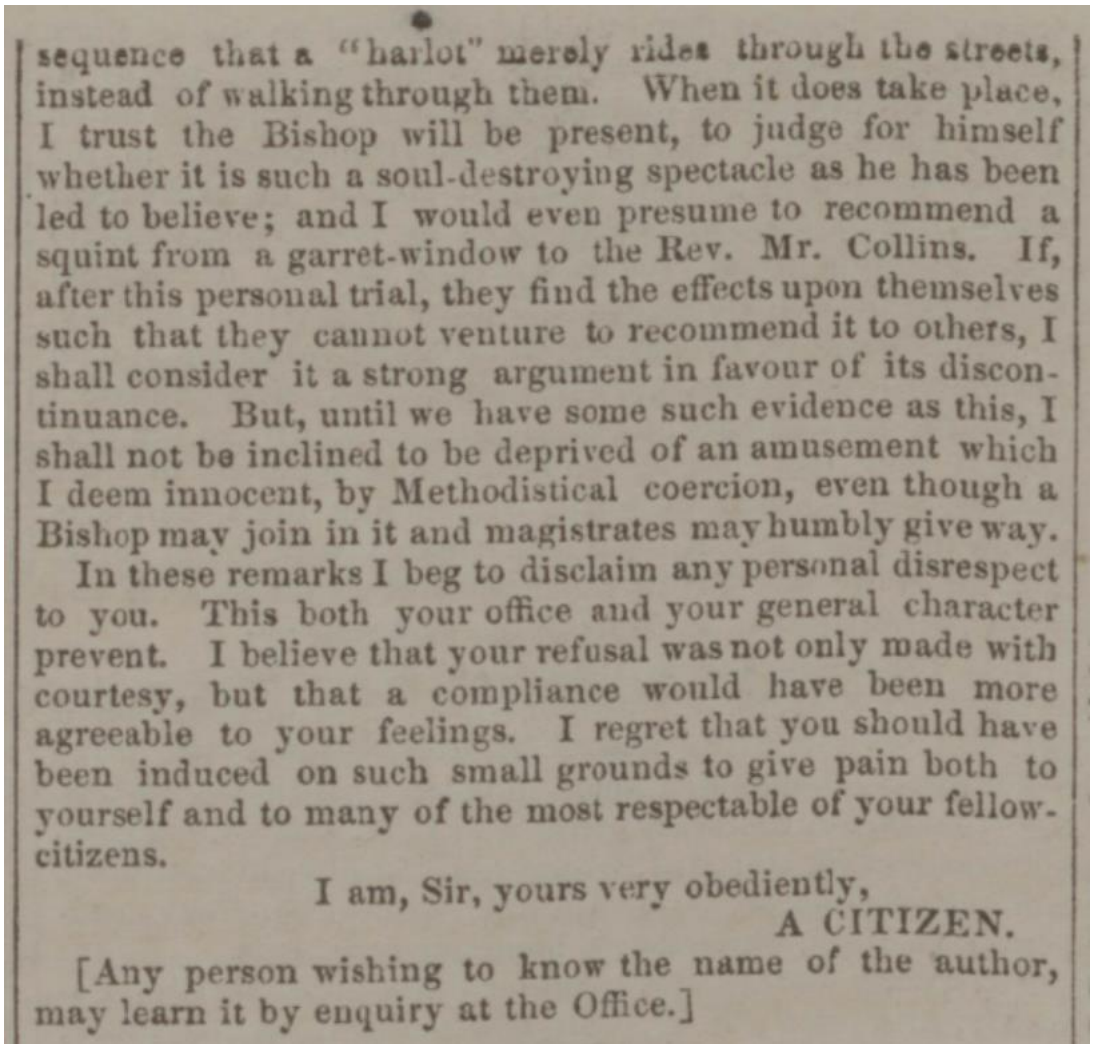
Thomas Collins, his campaign and his pamphlet, a replay by a citizen - Coventry Standard - Friday 25 April 1845, P.3

To the Editor of the Coventry Standard. Dunchurch, April 21, 1845.

Sir, —I understand that you have refused the use of St. Mary's Hall, and of such articles as are in your custody, for the purposes of the Procession contemplated the ensuing Fair. In a case in which the inhabitants are somewhat divided opinion, it would, I think, have been more wise and prudent of you to remain neutral. As one favourable to the continuance of the procession, and therefore among those whom the step you have taken has placed under the ban of immorality and irreligion, I trust you will pardon my offering to your notice the following observations : The new Peter the Hermit who has gone about preaching a crusade against this procession, is Mr. T. Collins, styling himself Wesleyan Minister." From the few specimens of Wesleyan Ministers" I have had any opportunity of judging of, I should say that the system which this community adopts of continually marching and countermarching its spiritual officers, and therefore continually offering the excitement of novelty, is an excellent one to avoid the ennui and indifference which could scarcely fail to arise from the long-continued ministrations of persons so prosy, dull, and ignorant as many, if not most of them, are. But though this may be a very good method of keeping the steam up, it must evidently have the ill effect of constantly severing the connections which ministers have formed with their congregations, and of constantly throwing them into new scenes, and among persons whose feelings and circumstances they are totally ignorant of. That persons of narrow minds should be ambitious of using the brief period of their stay in a particular place to create an effect, by means unnatural; and Mr. Collins seems to have thought his stay in Coventry excellent opportunity of distinguishing himself. Having heard of the procession which took place last year at Sponstreet Wake, he publishes a pamphlet the subject, which, under the affectation of a paternal zeal and anxiety for the welfare of the people of Coventry in general, and of his own flock in particular, is almost as virulent and uncharitable production it is possible to conceive. It is tedious, dull, and miserable affair, only enlivened by an occasional burst of indignation against ale-sellers, Antinomians, Papists, and philanthropists; and, if left to its own merits, would have been forgotten in a week, even those who had the patience to wade through it. But Mr. Collins had no idea of leaving his literary offspring to itself. Like a nursing father he tended and fostered it in every possible way, and even introduced it to the notice of the Lord Bishop of the Diocese. The reception was gracious; and Mr. Collins had the happiness of receiving a letter, under the right reverend hand and seal, approving of his production. This was, indeed, a triumph, before which the applause of Sunday school teachers, pious parents, and God-fearing church-members sank into insignificance; and, accordingly, the next edition of the Brief Reflections" came out with the stamp of Episcopal authority duly appended to it. Were this procession anything like what Mr. Collins describes it, it would, indeed, be enough to rouse the disgust and indignation of every right-feeling mind; but, however much the Bishop of Worcester might be deceived, there was not the same excuse for your giving the sanction of your office to such a vile and scandalous libel upon your fellow citizens. You acknowledge the truth of the assertion that the thousands who crowd the streets and windows of Coventry at such time, are brought together only for such a vile purpose as to look upon a naked strumpet?" Or if adopt Mr. Collins's qualification of this expression, one with a dress calculated to expose her the better." Do you confess that the people of Coventry are such a worthless, degraded crew that Mr. Collins, or any other sanctified Pharisee, can be justified in saying to them—" you led the degraded being through your streets; you crowded to feast your eyes upon her exposed person; and when the last throb of proper feeling died within her, when she was lost to shame, you exulted and called her your lady. Can you admit that the disgusting feelings partly described, partly insinuated in his pamphlet, are prevalent on this occasion. Or, if you can admit that the men of Coventry come fairly within the scope of these accusations,

surely its women might have been exempted. One, as you are well aware, has taken a greater interest or pleasure in this sight than they have. Can you admit that our mothers, wives, and sisters, (I will not say yours,) have, for years, encouraged an exhibition of which the great attraction was "a naked strumpet" and of which the chief pleasure was an obscene gloating upon her "exposure ?" You have lived in Coventry your whole life; you have witnessed many of these processions; you know by whom they have been countenanced and supported; and feeling of truth and justice ought to have prevented you from giving currency to such calumnies. If modern authorities are to be believed we have been living in sad ignorance of our real condition; and it was not till Mr. Collins came to tell us of our moral, and Justice Maule of our physical, impurities, that we had even a dream of the pestilential atmosphere that both our souls and bodies have been immersed in. Of the one, it seems, you have become convinced ; and had the same means been as perseveringly used, it is quite possible you might have been convinced of the other. Justice Maule's absurdities found but little echo; but had they been bawled from pulpits, repeated by bishops, embodied in clerical memorials, and drummed into your ears by pious brother-magistrates, I dare say you might, at last, have been brought to believe that there is infection in the very air of Coventry, and that the house in which you and your family dwelt so long is a pestilential den, only fit for the choking of delicate-nosed judges. The principal ground of your refusal seems to be the letter of the Bishop, and the memorial of the clergy. At the head of the latter appears the name of the Rev. Robert Simson, man who has grown patriarch in the situation of Vicar of St. Michael's, amidst the respect and esteem of all his fellow-citizens. I do not know a man of more exemplary life or more charitable disposition ; yet, although he has held his office so long that it may almost be said," the memory of man runneth not to the contrary," never before heard from him anything of the shocking nature of this spectacle. But soon after Mr. Collins comes to Coventry, and runs a-muck" against Lady Godiva and all her followers, we have remonstrance from Mr. Simson and his pastoral brethren against it. Whence comes this late and sudden perception of its iniquity. How is it that the eyes, which for fifty years could see no harm in it, have their scales removed at so protracted a period, and that this new light displays a sight so hideous? If this procession be what this memorial calls it, how must Mr. Simson have neglected his duties till now. If vice has thus paraded the public streets, —if drunkenness, debauchery, riot, and obscenity have been engendered in the way described by the opponents of this procession, where was the slumbering watchman, whose voice was silent for half a century? where was the careless shepherd who so long saw, unconcerned, these ravages among his flock ? But the explanation of this is easy enough. It is not any new light that has broken upon Mr. Simson—it is right reverend instigation that has done it all. Mr. Collins moves the Bishop, the Bishop moves the Clergy, the Clergy move the Mayor; and all this long array of puppets is set in motion by a canting Methodist Parson. The fact is, that this inquisitorial and dictatorial opposition has made the supporters of this procession determined to carry out their object. For my own part, I feel too much disgusted with the misrepresentations of the reverend libeller who has set this agitation on foot, to give way tamely. lam not conscious of having countenanced vice and immorality in the way that charges upon us; nor, I am sure, are my fellow-citizens. If it were anything like what he represents it, I would give my voice for putting it down as readily and as strongly any thumper of the drum ecclesiastic." But if there is one thing I hate more cordially than anything else, it is the cant of those who thank God that they are better than their neighbours, and clothe slander and intolerance in the language of Christian love. I admit myself, and it is generally admitted, that with regard to the Lady the last procession at the Fair, there were some circumstances of an offensive nature about it, but these things will be avoided in future; and it is the intention of the Committee that

nothing shall occur calculated to give pain to any well-regulated mind. If there is nothing shock the feelings decent persons, it can be of little con-



sequence that a "harlot" merely rides through the streets, instead of walking through them. When it does take place, I trust the Bishop will be present, to judge for himself whether it is such a soul-destroying spectacle as he has been led to believe; and I would even presume to recommend a squint from a garret-window to the Rev. Mr. Collins. If, after this personal trial, they find the effects upon themselves such that they cannot venture to recommend it to others, I shall consider it a strong argument in favour of its discontinuance. But, until we have some such evidence as this, I shall not be inclined to be deprived of an amusement which I deem innocent, by Methodistical coercion, even though a Bishop may join in it and magistrates may humbly give way.

In these remarks I beg to disclaim any personal disrespect to you. This both your office and your general character prevent. I believe that your refusal was not only made with courtesy, but that a compliance would have been more agreeable to your feelings. I regret that you should have been induced on such small grounds to give pain both to yourself and to many of the most respectable of your fellow-citizens.

I am, Sir, yours very obediently,

A CITIZEN.

[Any person wishing to know the name of the author, may learn it by enquiry at the Office.]

Godiva by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Tennyson' original version of this poem was published in Cambridge General Advertiser - Wednesday 01 October 1845, p4. The full length includes the journey from Coventry by train.

I waited for the train at Coventry;

I hung with grooms and porters on the bridge,

To watch the three tall spires; and there I shaped

The city's ancient legend into this:

Not only we, the latest seed of Time,

New men, that in the flying of a wheel

Cry down the past, not only we, that prate

Of rights and wrongs, have loved the people well,

And loathed to see them overtax'd; but she

Did more, and underwent, and overcame,

The woman of a thousand summers back,

Godiva, wife to that grim Earl, who ruled

In Coventry: for when he laid a tax

Upon his town, and all the mothers brought

Their children, clamoring, "If we pay, we starve!"

She sought her lord, and found him, where he strode

About the hall, among his dogs, alone,

His beard a foot before him and his hair

A yard behind. She told him of their tears,

And pray'd him, "If they pay this tax, they starve."

Whereat he stared, replying, half-amazed,

"You would not let your little finger ache

For such as these?" -- "But I would die," said she.

He laugh'd, and swore by Peter and by Paul;

Then fillip'd at the diamond in her ear;

"Oh ay, ay, ay, you talk!" -- "Alas!" she said,

"But prove me what I would not do."

And from a heart as rough as Esau's hand,

He answer'd, "Ride you naked thro' the town,

And I repeal it;" and nodding, as in scorn,

He parted, with great strides among his dogs.

So left alone, the passions of her mind,

As winds from all the compass shift and blow,

Made war upon each other for an hour,

Till pity won. She sent a herald forth,

And bade him cry, with sound of trumpet, all

The hard condition; but that she would loose

The people: therefore, as they loved her well,

From then till noon no foot should pace the street,

No eye look down, she passing; but that all

Should keep within, door shut, and window barr'd.

Then fled she to her inmost bower, and there

Unclasp'd the wedded eagles of her belt,

The grim Earl's gift; but ever at a breath

She linger'd, looking like a summer moon

Half-dipt in cloud: anon she shook her head,

And shower'd the rippled ringlets to her knee;

Unclad herself in haste; adown the stair

Stole on; and, like a creeping sunbeam, slid

From pillar unto pillar, until she reach'd

The Gateway, there she found her palfrey trapt

In purple blazon'd with armorial gold.

Then she rode forth, clothed on with chastity:

The deep air listen'd round her as she rode,

And all the low wind hardly breathed for fear.

The little wide-mouth'd heads upon the spout

Had cunning eyes to see: the barking cur

Made her cheek flame; her palfrey's foot-fall shot

Light horrors thro' her pulses; the blind walls

Were full of chinks and holes; and overhead

Fantastic gables, crowding, stared: but she

Not less thro' all bore up, till, last, she saw

The white-flower'd elder-thicket from the field,

Gleam thro' the Gothic archway in the wall.

Then she rode back, clothed on with chastity;

And one low churl, compact of thankless earth,

The fatal byword of all years to come,

Boring a little auger-hole in fear,

Peep'd -- but his eyes, before they had their will,

Were shrivel'd into darkness in his head,

And dropt before him. So the Powers, who wait

On noble deeds, cancell'd a sense misused;

And she, that knew not, pass'd: and all at once,

With twelve great shocks of sound, the shameless noon

Was clash'd and hammer'd from a hundred towers,

One after one: but even then she gain'd

Her bower; whence reissuing, robed and crown'd,

To meet her lord, she took the tax away

And built herself an everlasting name.