

Silk for Posting: Sir Francis Burdett's Address to
The Constituents of The City of Westminster,
6 October 1812

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The essential purpose of the present note is—following on from previous notes in these pages on silk as a medium for printing—to suggest another circumstance in which silk may have been used in place of paper, *viz.* for the printing of posters.

Among the significant limitations of paper is that when exposed to a moist environment its life is relatively limited. Just *how* limited is obviously a function of the composition of the paper in question, of the precise conditions to which it is exposed, and of the length of that exposure. None the less, as a broad generalisation, it is clear that paper is not especially suited to the printing of posters for display outdoors, except perhaps where their contents are of no more than transitory application. Modern papers, of course, may be produced specifically to withstand exposure to the elements, but in the early years of the nineteenth century a more durable medium than paper might well have been sought in order to ensure the survival of posters of particular importance, whatever the span of their intended life. Short of engraving in wood, stone or metal, or perhaps of printing on vellum, a fabric would seem to be called for, and, given the precedent of whole books having been printed satisfactorily on silk (or satin) in the eighteenth century,¹ that could well have been regarded in the early years of the nineteenth as a viable alternative to paper for posting (i.e., pinning up).

The basis for this assumption is a copy held at the British Library [Cup.651.e (19)] of what seems to be one such poster printed on silk, an engraved piece measuring 595 x 432mm, which, on the basis of what I take to be pin holes in the top corners, I assume to have at one time been posted, despite its fine condition. It is Sir Francis Burdett's address to his Westminster constituents ahead of the 1812 General Election.²

Sir Francis Burdett (1770–1844) succeeded his grandfather as fifth baronet in 1797, having in 1793 married Sophia (1775–1844), daughter of the banker Thomas Coutts.³ He entered the House of Commons in 1796 as the member

¹ See, for example, Philip Gaskell, *A Bibliography of the Foulis Press*, 2nd ed. (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1986), silk issues of items 181 (1751) and 274 (1754), both brief 32mos in eights; item 552 (1773), not seen by Gaskell, is an issue advertised as being printed on satin. Printing a book on silk was, I suppose, merely a means of creating a rare (and therefore desirable and expensive) object.

² Parliament was prorogued 30 July 1812 and was due to resume sitting 2 October, but it was dissolved 29 September, and the new parliament sat for the first time 24 November. I have not established the length of time that the poster would have been expected to remain in place.

³ Hence the origin of the "Burdett-Coutts" family name.

for Boroughbridge, a seat in the pocket of the Duke of Newcastle purchased for him by his father-in-law, and he was to remain a member, virtually without interruption, until his death, representing successively Middlesex, Westminster and North Wiltshire. In politics he was an apparent contradiction: "*He was a Tory-Radical, but he was never a Whig.*"⁴ He espoused various causes involving injustice or inhumanity, such as flogging in the army and the treatment of those confined in Cold Bath Fields prison; and he opposed what he considered as the unjust Continental war; but he was distinguished (and is still remembered) for his attempts to reform Parliament—by removing place-men and sinecurists, establishing annual parliaments, widening the franchise, instituting electorates of a uniform size, and so on, while still maintaining the prerogative of the monarch. Hence the content and tone of the 1812 poster. The assertion that he does not wish to be re-elected stems from his experience at the 1802 and 1804 elections, when he spent at least £60,000 campaigning for the seat of Middlesex: by the fiction of not being a candidate he shifted the financial burden⁵ onto the committee of electors who sought to secure him as their member, as opposed to his seeking their support for his election.

The address comprises seven long lines of narrative, followed by fourteen capitalised objections and then a further fifty-four lines of narrative. Its nature may be conveyed by partial quotation:⁶

SIR F. BURDETT
TO HIS
Constituents

Gentlemen,

In addressing so enlightened a portion of the community as the Electors of the great metropolitan City of Westminster, it would ill become me to adopt the hacknied style of congratulation & profession usual on occasions like the present. I cannot congratulate the People on the opportunity afforded them for redressing their manifold grievances by a due exercise of their constitutional right to appoint their Representatives in Parliament: well knowing, & that too, they know full well who cause this cheating appearance of an Election to take place, that no such opportunity is in point of fact, or is intended to be, afforded the People.—You, Gentlemen, are too well informed of the real condition of your Country, not to regard such language as deceptive, and to treat it with the merited contempt; neither can I with truth, profess

⁴ M. W. Patterson, *Sir Francis Burdett and His Times*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1931), 2:669 (Patterson's italics). Patterson continues: "He went back for his principles to the reign of Queen Anne, when the Tories had stood for the Monarchy, the landed interest, the people, and for opposition to the Whig war with France." In addition to Patterson's discursive biography, which contains a considerable amount of detail on both Burdett and his times, see the much more manageable account afforded by Marc Baer's entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁵ Said in fact to be less than £800 in securing his election for the seat of Westminster in 1807.

⁶ Patterson quotes from the poster at greater length (*ibid.*, 1:321–24), but by reducing the text to continuous prose, with the capitalisation reduced, he destroys its effect.

that I shall be highly, or at all, gratified by being returned a Member of an Assembly where corruption is acknowledged to be as "notorious as the Sun at noon day," and where "practices which would have made our forefathers startle with indignation, in utter oblivion of every former maxim & feeling of Parliament," have been impudently avowed, & shamefully justified. This has brought us into a situation almost impossible within the limits of an advertisement, to depict.

NINE HUNDRED MILLIONS OF DEBT
 INLAND FORTRESSES, UNDER THE NAME OF BARRACKS
 AN ARMY OF GERMAN AND OTHER FOREIGN MERCENARIES
 AN ARMY OF SPIES AND INFORMERS
 OF TAX AND EXCISE AGENTS
 AN INQUISITION OF PRIVATE PROPERTY
 A PHANTOM FOR A KING
 A DEGRADED ARISTOCRACY
 AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE
 A CONFIDING PARLIAMENT
 IRRESPONSIBLE MINISTERS
 A CORRUPT AND INTIMIDATED PRESS
 PACKED JURIES
 VAGUE AND SANGUINARY LAWS

[Then follow the final fifty-four lines of narrative: reiterating the corruption of Parliament; giving examples of sinecures etc.; advocating annual parliaments and free elections to ensure justice, peace and security to the community at large; evoking the spirit of Hampden; demanding reform; and concluding with the assertion that he does not wish to be re-elected.]

Your humble servant,
 Francis Burdett.

Oxford, October, 6., [sic] 1812.

Another copy of this address, also printed on silk, was known to Patterson, who reached a quite different conclusion about its purpose: "I have before me his election address, printed with beautiful distinctness by the Clarendon Press on a white silk handkerchief. These handkerchiefs were, I suppose, distributed among the ladies of Westminster."⁷

My assumption about posting is based solely on the apparent pin holes in the BL copy, but since Patterson does not mention holes in the copy before him it seems likely that that particular one had not been put to such a use. That printing on handkerchiefs *was* practised is confirmed by Maurice Rickards, who refers to scarves and handkerchiefs among the many varieties of souvenir that have been printed

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:321.

on silk.⁸ Patterson's observation that his piece of silk was—given its dimensions—designed as a handkerchief is readily accepted; and that printed handkerchiefs were distributed among the ladies of Westminster may well in fact be capable of confirmation from contemporary evidence, be it written, printed or visual. My reluctance to accept wholeheartedly that the address was printed off as a souvenir⁹ is a consequence of the nature of the text itself: printing it on silk does not seem to be of the nature of a commemoration. Rather, I venture that it served a primary purpose which was more utilitarian: posting.

Clearly the intended or primary purpose of printing Burdett's address on silk remains to be established conclusively. My suggested explanation¹⁰ would perhaps be supported if it were known that in the early nineteenth century posters were indeed customarily (or even occasionally) printed on silk. Are there known examples, surviving or not, other than the Burdett? And is the 1812 address Burdett's only piece of writing to have been printed on silk?¹¹ One might also wonder whether silk itself, though undoubtedly superior to paper for posting, was sufficiently durable to withstand extended exposure to the elements. Further one might wonder whether materials or substances other than silk were ever used for printing posters on, given that, apart from its possibly limited durability, silk might have been considered too valuable to use for such a utilitarian purpose.

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⁸ Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (London: British Library, 2000), s.v. "Silk."

⁹ Earlier notes in the *BSANZ Bulletin* have recorded items printed on silk which seem to be of the nature of souvenirs of specific events, be it an opera performance, the opening of a mental hospital, or the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria.

¹⁰ The silk copies may have constituted only part of the print run, with the remainder on paper, but I know of only the two copies on silk. As far as I have been able to determine, if any copies were in fact printed on paper none have survived.

¹¹ I myself have not discovered anything else by Burdett printed on silk.