

CHAPTER VIII

A HARPOON IN THE SIDE OF FREE TRADE

Tom Sandars's father-in-law, Ebenezer Collett, and two uncles were Members of Parliament and as well as this political connection, Tom's cousin George Sandars, was also an M.P. At the time when George was standing for election for a borough in the North (which had only recently been awarded a seat by the Reform Act) Tom was staying at an hotel with him. After breakfast the candidate invited Tom to come upstairs and see some of his supporters. They went upstairs where they found beds in all the attics, in rows, after the fashion of a hospital, each one occupied by a voter; and these "voters" were, they found, hopelessly drunk. Tom asked his cousin what could be the use of such persons as none of them could speak to which the candidate calmly replied, "We keep them like this today, and tomorrow morning ease off the liquor a bit and then, I think, if ice is applied to their heads, they will be able to remember my name at the hustings".

This story, amusing though it is, can hardly have been fact, even in the days shortly after the passing of the Reform Act. But of one thing there can be no doubt - that George Sandars, M.P. was a singularly determined business magnate and politician. A portrait of him painted in 1832 by William Scott shows him, aged 27, determined and defiant, self confident and poised. By this time he had already been in business, independent of his father and family for nearly ten years.

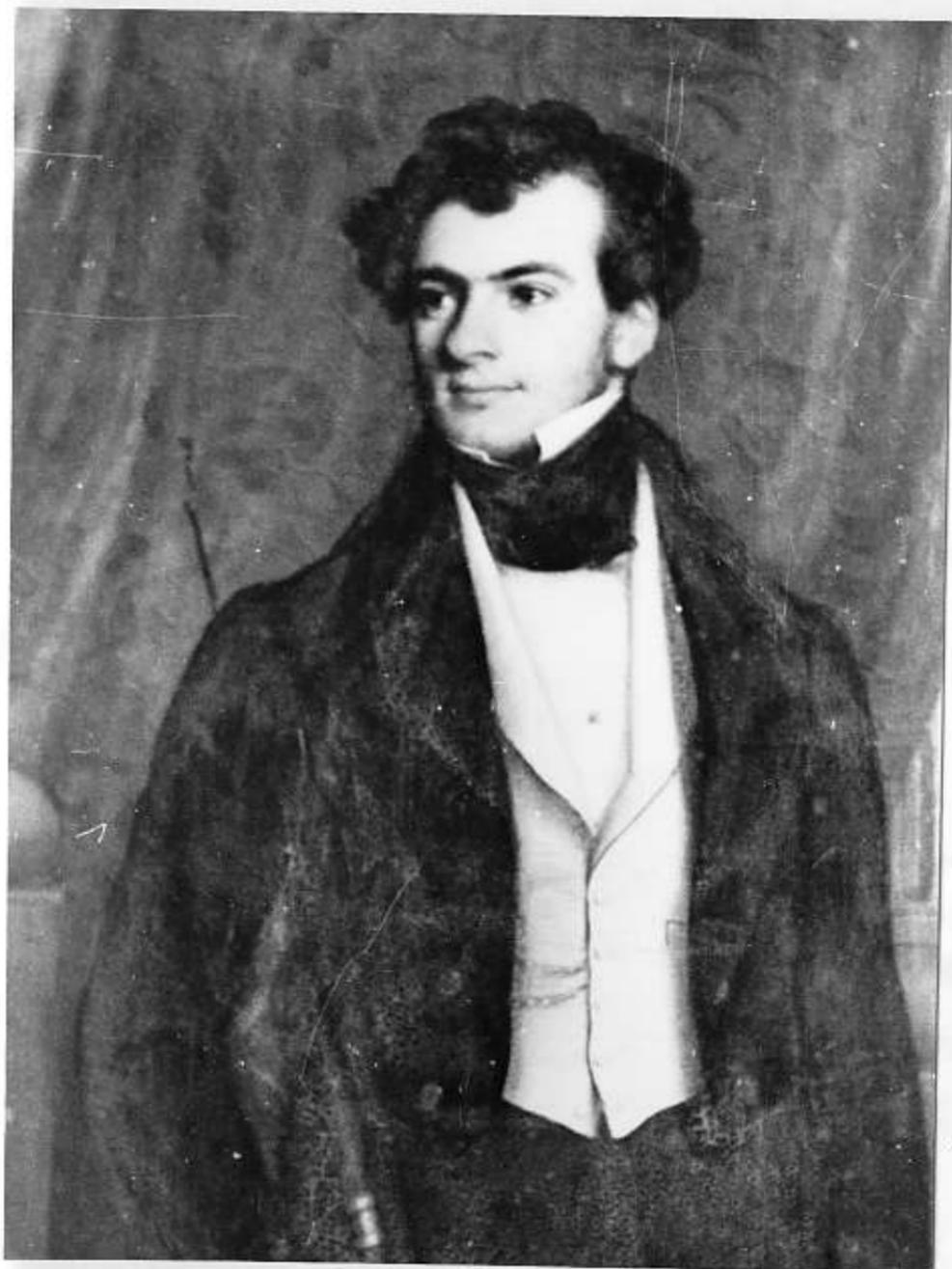
George Sandars was the youngest son of Samuel Sandars of Gainsborough, who had founded the Gainsborough dynasty of Sandars and the family malting business. Both his house on the bank of the Trent and his

business remains there to this day. Bridge House bears on its southern wall a sundial commemorating this tycoon, who had been one of the largest corn factors in the country, of whom it is said that during the Peninsular War he at one time had 50 vessels on the high seas, engaged in government shipping contracts, no doubt very profitably.

Samuel's eldest son, Edward, lived in Cheltenham, married Anne Gray of Calceby in Lincolnshire; and from him are descended the present Lincolnshire branch of the Family. His second and third sons died young and the youngest son, George, went to Manchester at an early age, and entered the corn business. Here he came to know and met frequently his cousin, Joseph, who, as has been seen, was a substantial Liverpool businessman. With him to Manchester went his elder sister Jane, to keep house for him.

In 1829 he married Mary Neden, daughter of George Neden of Ardwick near Manchester, and they spent their honeymoon in Wales and Ireland. Not surprisingly, a letter of his written during the trip asks Anne to tell their mother that he thinks the married life is very comfortable and happy; but he also spares a thought for his devoted sister Jane, hoping she would not be too lonely in Manchester now that he had left there for a while. The couple's first child was born in 1830 at Manchester and their eldest son, Samuel, at Southport in 1837.

By this time George Sandars had already made a considerable name for himself, as well as a substantial amount of capital, from his corn factor's business. In 1834, the year before his father died, he had converted his business into a partnership for his surviving sons. During the next ten years the combination of his own business and his share in his late father's



business made George Sandars into a man of much greater substance than either his brother was or his father had previously been. By 1847 he had ceased living permanently in Manchester and was living in Yorkshire, at Alverthorpe Hall, Near Wakefield. The house has since been demolished but from records of it which exist it can be told that it was a large place, fitting for an ambitious and hard-working businessman of the early Victorian period. Apart from his corn-business, he also shared, as did his cousin Tom, Joseph Sandars's interest in railways and was a director of both the Trent Valley Railway and the Manchester and Birmingham - one of the next Major railways to be built after the Liverpool to Manchester railway.

He was later Deputy Lieutenant for the West Riding and in 1847 stood for Parliament for the new borough of Wakefield. His statement of his political views, used as a poster for the election, declares: "For Progress I have contended and do contend - Progress in civil privileges, keeping pace with progress in intelligence. I am an advocate for extending the franchise to all my fellow subjects, as they shall be prepared by education for its safe and proper exercise A churchman and a Protestant from conviction, I am a decided friend to the fullest religious liberty of all denominations ... a staunch supporter of the best interests of the people ... an unflinching friend of the diminution of the hours of labour." Having introduced his declaration with a categorical denial of being a Tory, he finished it with these words: "These are my principles, and whether I am called Tory or Whig, Conservative or Radical, I must beg to disclaim the opinions ascribed to me by parties, who must have other objects in view besides forming a political creed for so humble an individual as, gentlemen, your obedient servant, George Sandars."

What an admirable idealistic intention! To advocate progress, the education of the Million, civil privileges, without the cumbrous need to be dogged by a political label or to struggle under the weight of a party policy. The candidate was successfully elected and served in the House for ten years. He meticulously kept the newspaper cuttings of his speeches and from these it appears that he kept to his principles of remaining unattached so far as possible, to any Party dogma or inflexible principles. As a businessman of greater experience than most Members, he concentrated his attention on economic and business questions, on trade agreements, the corn laws and tariffs.

George Sandars entered Parliament as a free-trader. In March 1850, on Budget night he made a speech in the House that created a sensation among traders and especially those dealing in corn. Though an advocate of Free Trade he agreed to the wisdom of a small fixed tax on foreign imported corn and pointed out in his speech that prices are always reduced when the market is greatly extended. The Times held up his arguments to ridicule, arguing apparently without fully understanding the matter in discussion. George Sandars was able by the statement of plain facts taken from his own practical experience set the House right upon important points of this controversial question. The "Circular to Bankers" of March 29th 1850 comments: "Mr. Sandars has become a person of political as well as commercial importance; out of 656 members of the House of Commons, he is the only one at once able and willing to expound the truth on the great question of the Corn-trade."

In the speech, after demonstrating the truth of his argument, he said "upon the debate which ensued on the Budget last year, I expressed an opinion which has since been

confirmed and strengthened by the opinions of others at home and abroad, connected with the corn trade, that a moderate fixed duty on the import of corn, though it would bring a large sum into the Exchequer, would not in usual seasons enhance the price to the consumer --- and (would) enable the Chancellor of the Exchequer to repeal taxes which press on the poorer classes, viz. those on soap, tea, sugar and beer." He continued "I shall give as I before said the great experiment of Free Trade a full fair trial, but should the fitting time come to impose that duty, should the Chancellor of the Exchequer ever impose that duty it will have, if I have the honour of a seat in this House, my most cordial support."

Mr. Sandars's argument that prices are always reduced when the market is greatly extended caused astonishment to his hearers. The Morning Herald was dramatic: "Mr. Sandars' speech still sticks like a harpoon in the side of Free Trade and the plunges and flounderings of the Times sufficiently prove that a vital part has been touched."

During his time in Parliament George Sandars had made a remarkable name for himself, entering as an unwilling outsider, soon his expertise in business matters pushed him to the fore. In May 1850 the Wakefield Journal published a detailed resume of the hon. member's political career.

"Wakefield has now been a parliamentary borough since 1832. It has been represented by four members, the first a kind-hearted and estimable man, the second the son of a worthy sire, honest and straightforward in his conduct, the third, an excellent landlord a practical man of business - in a word a fine specimen of a real English gentleman.

"Now after having three such representatives, it required some moral courage to presume to represent Wakefield. Mr. Sandars was asked at the last election to come forward as a candidate - he declined over and over again, and it was only when he found that Mr. Gaskell declined and that every resident gentleman declined that he could be induced to offer himself. Though his opponent was a man of well-known benevolent views, he was returned to parliament by a large majority. At that time as a politician he was unknown - some were well aware of his great business interests and of his powerful mind; still the great majority were ignorant of George Sandars except as a corn merchant and railway director. His first address paralysed his opponents and staggered his friends - neither one nor the other imagined he was so liberal; and when after that printed address he accepted to become the candidate, he was looked upon with fear by one party and suspicion by the other. But Mr. Sandars has proved himself what he professed to be - a man of business habits, moderate in his politics, cautious in his movements and slow and deliberate in his resolves - let every speech he made before his election be carefully scanned and it will be found that no pledge he ever made has been broken. The gorgeous pageantry of court, the allurements of society, nor manoeuvre of party have had any effect upon him.

"Mr. Sandars is always at the call of his townsmen, without reference to party or religion. We might have a man supercilious in his manner, difficult in his approach and haughty and austere in his demeanour. In our present member these are not to be found. We find many men very agreeable, very affable and very friendly before an election, who scarcely deign to give a distant nod after.

"Apart, however, from these matters, we come now to Mr. Sandars's public professions as a statesman and politician. Before his election he told electors he would give free trade a fair deal. And has he not done so? Though he has propounded a scheme in the Commons by which a revenue of some millions per annum could be raised from a small fixed duty on grain he has never urged it on the House, always saying that free trade had not had a sufficient trial until the country had more experience. In this course we think all unbiased men must concur. No doubt Mr. Cobden has been annoyed at the hon. member for Wakefield's conduct; but Mr. Sandars went to Parliament as a free and independent man, and as well capable of forming his own opinion as Mr. Cobden or any other man in that house.

"On many questions affecting the ministry he has voted with them; but on others he has been opposed to them - and on one occasion we were sorry to see his vote against Lord Palmerston's foreign policy. As a foreign secretary we think the country will never see his equal, but Sandars on that occasion exercised an independence which we respect him for, though the result of his vote might have deprived his country for a time, of the services of a great man.

"Whenever he has spoken in the House, it has always been upon some question with which he was fully acquainted, and consequently was listened to and his views and opinions respected."

In the event there was no general election that year, but Mr. Sandars did stand again, and was re-elected in 1852. He retired from politics in 1857, removed to the south and resorted to a domestic, but not very comfortable retirement living with Arabella Walker, his second wife, in London

and at Tunbridge Wells. His granddaughters account of his life, written some years later describes him as a generous and popular grandfather.

"In 1852 George Sandars had bought Little Chesterford Park in Essex about 12 miles from Cambridge, a large, rather ugly house with good shooting. From then on he divided his time between Chesterford and his house 27 Sussex Square, entertaining in both places. In 1858 he added to the property the adjoining Little Walden Park. There was a beautiful old farm-house, easily adaptable to modern requirements and George wanted his son, when married, to live there. But his wife was so completely a Londoner, that she would not hear of life in the country and the idea was regretfully abandoned. Later on Arabella considered that the air of Essex was bad for her and she gave her husband no peace until in 1868 he sold all the property and bought a house instead at Tunbridge Wells - an overgrown villa type rather disappointing after Little Chesterford Park. The ornate house had only a few acres surrounding it and to the delight of my brothers, a 20 acre wood! Arabella saw to it that the house was very comfortable not to say luxurious, and provided she was satisfied all was well, George was spared from nagging complaints.

"He was always generous, and lent money to his less fortunate relations (who were not always grateful). Towards the end of his life he was not wise over his investments, and one company with unlimited liability, which threatened bankruptcy gave him much anxiety; indeed his fears became so acute that he sent for his son Samuel to come to Beechwood, Tunbridge Wells, in a hurry and made over to him most of the rest of his estate, so that in case of the worst happening a substantial amount of his capital would be safe. I remember him at

17 Queensborough Terrace delighting us children with "yellow boys" as he called the transparent lozenges resembling golden sovereigns that seemed to be always in his pockets. And after his death, his daughter unpacking and folding away his Court suit (he had been deputy Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of Yorkshire) found two or three of them in the embroidered waistcoat pockets."

Continuing the description of George, his granddaughter writes about a visit to what she calls the overgrown villa at Tunbridge Wells:-

"I only once stayed at Beechwood as I was one of the younger ones of the family, but my three brothers went there constantly and at tea three large plates of very thin bread and butter, one plate for each boy, provided a very different meal to what they got at home. It was a point of honour between the boys to make sure if possible all the tea cakes and bread were finished before the end of the meal. My sister May on her last visit to Beechwood was so ill-advised as to develop Scarlet Fever, and as she was a delicate girl, every care had to be taken. She was isolated at one end of the house and kept there with a nurse until she was well enough to go to the seaside.

Arabella visited on her all her ill-temper and spleen, and treated her as though she had planned the whole thing and grumbled loudly over every requirement of the sickroom.

"The following year (1879) George Sandars died. Arabella Sandars, his widow, lived a few years longer than her husband and I remember being taken one day to see her by my Father in Cleveland Square. The room was very hot, but in spite of it she wore over her widow's cap of white crape

with two long tails of crape hanging down her back, a white woollen shawl that she held together below her chin, and yet another shawl over her shoulders. It was a strange fate that this old woman, after living for many years in terror of fresh air, was taken to Menton by her brother's widow when quite old; serious earthquakes drove everyone to live in tents for a while until they could escape, and she, for several days, had to live practically out of doors. It did her no harm and being childish she probably never realised the enormity of what she was suffering."

Thanks to the account of his granddaughter Norah, George Sandars's personality and family life are fairly recorded for us. Undoubtedly the greatest tragedy to mar the life of this successful and ambitious man was the death of his first wife Mary at the very moment he began his career in Parliament. Although he married again shortly afterwards, his second wife, Arabella Walker, was not an easy companion, and was not popular with his family. She was responsible for causing her husband to sell his delightful house and estate at Little Chesterford, and perhaps she was also behind his decision to retire from an eminent career in the Commons. Maybe, however, it was not this but his innate dislike for the increasingly authoritarian system in the House which decided him to leave Parliament and return to business. There is still in the family a fine silver inkstand presented to the M.P. by the Maltsters of Newark on Trent in recognition perhaps for securing the passing by the Commons of measures which he alone as a corn merchant could understand.

Apart from this tribute, a tablet in the Parish Church at Gainsborough records his life, and his portrait is still in existence. His two houses also remain, the

first now being used as a fertiliser research station and the Tunbridge Wells house as a convent, which gives some idea of its size.

George's only son Samuel, went to schools at Hemel Hempstead, at the time of his mother's untimely death, then at Cheam and Harrow. From there he went to Trinity Cambridge, where he became greatly interested in the buildings of the university and town. During two of his vacations he wrote and later published, in 1869, his Historical and Architectural Notes on Great St. Marys. Samuel's great wish and ambition was to become an architect; but his father had ideas of a more gentlemanly career for his only son, so it was that he was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple in 1863. However he was not greatly suited to the competition or life of the Bar. He practised briefly on the Eastern Circuit, and his one and only brief was said to have been to prosecute a lad for arson of a hayrick.

Samuel was a great deal more interested in art and architecture than law. At Cambridge he had become keen on architecture while preparing his study of Great St. Marys, and as he was not far from home at Chesterford Park he also prepared grand designs for extensive alterations of the house there.

Although George would not give way to his son's wish to become an architect, preferring the more respectable career at the Bar, he did give way to his son's wishes for marriage, even though several of his influential friends in Cambridgeshire had marked the shy but eligible Samuel down as a suitable match for their daughters. At first his father was adamant, but later realised that a marriage with their London neighbours, the Russells, would after all be

desirable. Samuel had long since been attracted to the Russell's eldest daughter, Lizzie. Mr. Russell was also an M.P., an Irishman and a great horse lover; he and George Sandars had a wager (which was carried through) to drive through the archway at the top of Constitution Hill normally reserved for Royalty. Gradually the two families became more and more friendly and eventually Samuel did marry Miss Russell. Since then the name Russell has been given to several Sandars' sons.

Not practising at the Bar, Samuel had plenty of time for his own interests in particular his books, manuscripts and paintings. He collected rare books and prints and also inherited a fine collection of paintings from his mother's sister, Mrs. Faulkner. His gifts and bequests to Cambridge University, Trinity College and the Fitzwilliam Museum are legion. There is a Sandars Bequest at the National Gallery and his portrait is to be found in Trinity College Library to which he gave the first Caxton books it had acquired for nearly 180 years. He also presented several new windows to Great St. Marys Church. Apart from his great productivity as a benefactor, he also raised a large family.

After his father's sale of Chesterford Park and Little Walden Park Samuel bought Chalfont Grove in Buckinghamshire, which was set in a small park with three or four farms attached. It was a suitable family house at the time, but it is now too large and is used as offices and studios of a film corporation.

Samuel's daughter, Norah, continuing her account of her grandfather's life, described how Samuel became the object of great amusement to their neighbour at Chalfont Grove, Colonel Phipps, when he moved fully grown trees around the park.

This work was carried out on several occasions by Baron, a contractor who specialised in this, and caused great excitement to his children by heaving up huge pines with his horse powered tractors and depositing the tree somewhere more suitable in the grounds.

Samuel Sandars became High Sherriff of Buckingham, but died at an early age, only 15 years after his father, in 1894. His three sons became respectively a clergyman, a solicitor and a soldier, and his eldest daughter May, became well known as a biographer, particularly of Balzac. Samuel had three sons, four daughters, ten grandchildren and eighteen great grandchildren, this accounting for nine tenths of the modern Sandars family.