# Assemblies and Polite Leisure in East Anglia 1715-1825

by Angela Dain

A feature of the development of the eighteenth century provincial town was the enhancement of cultural provision through the organisation of assemblies. Before the Restoration, assembly-going was limited to a small proportion of the élite, and Defoe may be correct in claiming that 'the keeping up of Assemblies among the younger Gentry was first set up' in York[1] as there is evidence that as early as 1633 assemblies were being held in the King's Manor.[2]

The establishment of assemblies as a countrywide practice occurred during the second decade of the eighteenth century. One of the factors which brought this about was a dramatic alteration in philosophical anthropology whereby the self was perceived to exist only as it appeared to others.[3] This intensified the pressure for social intercourse, particularly amongst women, who, apart from church-going were denied a public social life. Assemblies enabled women of the upper and middle ranks to enter a new public world they had not previously enjoyed.[4]

It was Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, who fashioned a series of politically charged cultural models for the upper classes to govern public social behaviour, known as 'Politeness'. The essence of politeness was natural sociability, the art of pleasing in company, and conversation was seen as having a central position in public meeting places.[5] The later seventeenth century witnessed the appraisal of discursive and cultural spaces; philosophy and learning were taken from solitary environments and put into worldly and sociable ones. Joseph Addison outlined the institutional dimension for the socialisation of knowledge in an early issue of *The Spectator*:

> 'It was said of *Socrates*, that he brought Philosophy down from Heaven to inhabit among Men; and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs, and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and in Coffee houses.'[6]

To fit themselves for conversation, John Locke (1632-1704) advised gentlemen to look to natural philosophy.[7] By the second decade of the eighteenth century, courses and lectures in natural philosophy were being held beyond the confines of the capital and universities. Their popularity was recorded by Benjamin Martin, (1704-82), an itinerant lecturer, and former schoolmaster at Chichester.

> 'Knowledge is now become a fashionable thing and philosophy is the science à la mode; hence to cultivate this study is only to be in taste, and politeness is an inseparable consequence.'[8]

Just how far natural philosophy had become diffused through Georgian society can be seen from the entertainments John Barker, a surgeon, had on offer in 1739 to coincide with the race meeting at New Buckenham in Norfolk.

> ' ... for the further Diversion of the Gentlemen and Ladies, between the Hours of Three and Four a Clock in the Afternoon, will be performed many of the Philosophical Experiments that were performed in Gresham College in the

> time of the famous MR BOYLE;[9] and likewise will be shown many experiments that are now performed by the ingenious Mons. Des Aguier,[10] the next Day, at the Assembly, will be shown the same experiments.[11]

The formation of formal scientific societies was the culmination of a long tradition of lecturing that came into being as a result of the adoption of the cultural ideology of politeness and, as Porter has argued, the industrially utilitarian aspects of provincial science have been overstated.[12]

Although Shaftesbury had addressed his ideology to the social élite, periodicals such as the *Guardian, Tatler* and *Spectator,* disseminated politeness to a broader audience, as the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume acknowledged in 1742, when he praised these journals for elevating the notion of 'the conversable world' to a position of centrality in the newly commercial world.[13] Learning, which had become 'a most welcome guest at Tea-Tables and Assemblies'[14] was now a species of social competence and a means for self display. Knowledge had become assimilated into the social world and forms of cultural life already in existence, such as clubs, walks, coffee houses and assemblies, expanded in number and their organisation and practice was determined by the cultural ideology of politeness.

Since conversation was fundamental to politeness for gentlemen of birth, as well as those seeking the status through cultural refinement, the eighteenth century witnessed a move towards linguistic uniformity. Polite society aimed to communicate through standardised received English and a high priority was accorded to the elimination of local and regional accents.[15]

Sources of cultural diffusion which taught speaking English correctly, such as dictionaries and grammar books, were supplemented by peripatetic teachers like Samuel Angier, who arrived in Norwich in the summer of 1751.

> 'He proposes to teach the Art of Pronunciation; the Learning of which will enable any Persons, if diligent, to speak, or read in an elegant Manner in One Month ...'[16]

As the century progressed, those who ignored or neglected their speech became increasingly vulnerable to ridicule. J. Collins concluded a lecture on "Modern Orators and Modern Oratory" at the Assembly Rooms in Norwich, in 1775, with a comic exemplification of provincial accents.[17] Some chose to speak French in public places to hide their provincial accents.[18] That English preserved its regional dialects, even among the polite,[19] is exemplified by Robert Hobbes, a Stratford attorney, in an account of an assembly he attended with his wife, Betsy, in 1802;

> ' ... a most famous Assembly. 32 couples of grandees. I welly tired off my legs - did not get to bed before past 3'.[20]

Far from confining himself to the mind, Shaftesbury stressed deportment as indicative of moral and intellectual poise.[21] Thus, no genteel education was complete without dancing. John Essex repeated the sentiments expressed in *The Spectator*[22] when he wrote of the benefits of dancing, in 1722:

> ' ... although the other Arts and Sciences have their peculiar Use in Life, and are valuable in Education, yet few, if any, are so necessary and Advantageous as this especially under a good Master ... So much therefore of Dancing as

> belongs to the Behaviour, and a handsome deportment of the Body is, not only useful, but absolutely necessary.'[23]

The eighteenth century was the age of the dancing master. Judging from a *Treatise on Dancing* written by Francis Lambert, a Norwich dancing master, the role of the profession changed little over the century.

> ' ... the intention and use of the dancing room is to improve the manners and external appearance; the etiquette of it obliges a respectful behaviour ... The objects of learning steps and dances is perhaps the least part of it. It is to improve the carriage and give a confidence in entering and quitting a room.'[24]

Dancing increasingly constituted the main activity of assemblies. The dances were fully integrated into eighteenth century culture and reflected the spirit of the age with unerring accuracy. Until the early 1790s, the opening dance at the most prestigious assemblies was the minuet, which, by the early eighteenth century had taken the place of the courants as the ceremonial dance at court. The minuet with its measured movements and ceremonial formality embodied the social ideals of eighteenth century polite society. The ritual of this dance lasted up to two hours, during which time the rest of the company walked about the room or watched the performance of the dancers. The experience was sometimes one of apprehension, especially for a debutante, as Lady Bristol wrote of her daughter, Betty, at Bath, in the early eighteenth century.

> 'About six in the evening, all the Company made the best appearance as they could at Harrison's room; at seven the ball began where the most extraordinary thing of all was Betty to make the greatest compliment she could to the day dancd 4 minuets; the first time she trembled and was so out of countenance I thought she would not have been able to go thro' with it; but the second time she performed well.'[25]

James Oakes lamented the decline of the minuet at Bury assembly between 1789 and 1792.[26] This virtuoso, open-couple dance, originally a rustic folk dance of Poitou in triple time, had, by the end of its career, suffered corruption into a slow, almost highly unnatural form of movement which reflected the artificial courtesies of the age. Despite this, however, the minuet continued to be taught by dancing masters well into the nineteenth century, not only because its characteristic step, the pas de menuet, became incorporated into many other dances, but because the movements of the dance were identified with those required in all social intercourse.[27]

Throughout the eighteenth century country dances increased in popularity and always followed the minuets. As with the minuet, the country dance was associated with rigid etiquette.[28] Although one's place in the set was determined by rank, the country dances provided communal enjoyment, as the participants danced with everyone in the set. After the Napoleonic Wars class distinctions became more accentuated and it can be argued that such egalitarian dances declined in popularity because the cotillion, quadrilles and waltz offered dancers the opportunity of being more selective in their choice of partners, since in many of the figures it was only necessary to dance with the opposite or facing partner.

Politeness was as much a question of material acquisitions as social competence.[29] Dress and accessories were perceived as a kind of discourse, an outward

manifestation, like dance, of the inner self. This aspect of politeness is exemplified in the report of the race assembly at Swaffham, in 1789.

> 'Among the beautiful and lovely, none can claim our regard above *Mrs. Coke,* a beautiful bandeau of diamonds properly displayed adorned the head, a lappet bound with silver fringe and purple ground, decorated a shape that the kind hand of Nature had made to display taste; and the whole of her dress was enriched with a variety of diamonds; but this lady is more eminently distinguished for the excellent qualities of the mind than any ornaments of either taste or fashion.'[30]

Clothes and accessories were inseparable from the culture of politeness and were especially important in an urban society where people were less well-known. Attention paid to clothing and appearance by both men and women was a feature of assemblies. Clothing and accessories were seen not only as a tangible sign of wealth, but, equally important, as reflecting the philosophical understanding of the wearer.[31] When the proprietors of Witham Spa, in Essex, began to organise commercial assemblies from 1741, it was decided, after two seasons, to restrict admittance to subscribers so as 'to exclude improper Company'. However, a codicil enabled ready admittance to non-subscribers 'of a genteel Appearance and Behaviour.'[32]

Apart from women, the other main group to benefit from having a public life for the first time was children, who, because they had few institutions of their own, shared the same cultural establishments as their parents.[33] Lady Mary Wortley Montagu expounded the generally held belief when she wrote of the benefits of assemblies to young people.

> 'I do not doubt the frequency of assemblies has introduced a more enlarged way of thinking. It is a kind of Public Education, which I have thought as necessary to Girls as Boys.'[34]

The impact of politeness on the provision of education was considerable. Young people, in increasing numbers, were now being educated to take their place in a world of fashionable leisure, where proper enjoyment and appreciation of pleasure was seen as indicative of a person's status.[35]

In an age when arranged marriages were on the wane and people permitted a relative freedom of choice in their marriage partners, assemblies provided a venue for heterosocial mixing and intrigues. John Macky found the weekly assemblies at Salisbury, Winchester and Stamford,

> '….very convenient for young people ... by means of these assemblies matches are struck up, and the officers of the army have had a pretty good success, where ladies are at their own disposal, as I know several instances about Worcester, Chester, Derby and York.'[36]

The dramatist and architect, Sir John Vanbrugh, (1644-1726), met his wife, Miss Yarborough at the York Assembly Rooms,[37] as did the novelist, Laurence Sterne, (1713-1768), who married Elizabeth Lumley after a four year courtship only to find her 'a tempest of a woman.'[38] The eighteen year old Lord Tankerville eloped and married Miss Colville, a butcher's daughter, whom he met at an Assize ball in Newcastle.[39] The following description of the Sessions ball at the Assembly Rooms,

Chapel Field House, Norwich, in 1815, shows that assemblies continued to function as marriage markets well into the nineteenth century,

> ' ... crowded for three to four hours through a genteel mob of 700 persons ... it struck me as a sort of market for stale as well as fresh goods ... so many mothers leading their bare-necked daughters about. The whole affair went dully and the market was certainly overstocked, besides, there was not half room for showing the goods off.'[40]

As the trend throughout the eighteenth century was for marriages to take place with only a few near relations present,[41] the world at large often learned of unions at assemblies. In 1778, the minuets at the Norwich Assembly were begun by 'Mrs. Martineau the Bride.'[42] Mrs. George Round appeared as a bride at the Colchester Assembly in 1801,[43] while it was anticipated that the forthcoming Race Assemblies at Ipswich would be graced by two or three brides of distinction.[44]

The cultural ideology of politeness, which promoted harmonious sociality, was, in part, a reaction against seventeenth century party and religious differences, which had proved so destructive of cultural institutions and practices.[45] However, it proved a difficult, if not impossible task, at times, to put party ferment at rest, even in places of polite, public resort. The Grantham Assembly was dominated by Whigs, with Tories systematically excluded, as the subscription list for 1737 attests. The two assemblies at York, one Whig, the other Tory, had, by 1724 made approaches towards an appeasement, the result of which led followers of both parties to appear on the subscription list of 1731, to finance the new rooms in Blake Street. Whigs dominated this assembly, however, for at times of political unrest they asserted their supremacy when balloting for the twelve directors, chosen annually, to administer the rooms on behalf of the subscribers.[46]

Although Whig and Tory sat on opposite sides of the room at Lincoln,[47] political differences manifested themselves in more subtle ways. Patches, universally worn at assemblies throughout the eighteenth century, were, at times, worn on the right cheek only by Whigs and on the left by Tories.[48] Fans, the traditional accessory of the élite, and indispensable in the poorly ventilated assembly rooms, were sometimes decorated to indicate party preference.[49] In Manchester, political animosity surfaced at the weekly assemblies when 'dancing down' the Hanoverian regime was attacked by John Byron, a Whig pamphleteer, in 1746. He records the popularity of the country dances, 'Dancing Down with the Rump' and 'Sir Watkin's jig', named after Sir Watkin Williams Wynne, a Jacobite. Such seditious gestures were difficult to combat and culminated in 1749/50, in a series of disturbances between army officers and the organisers of public balls.[50]

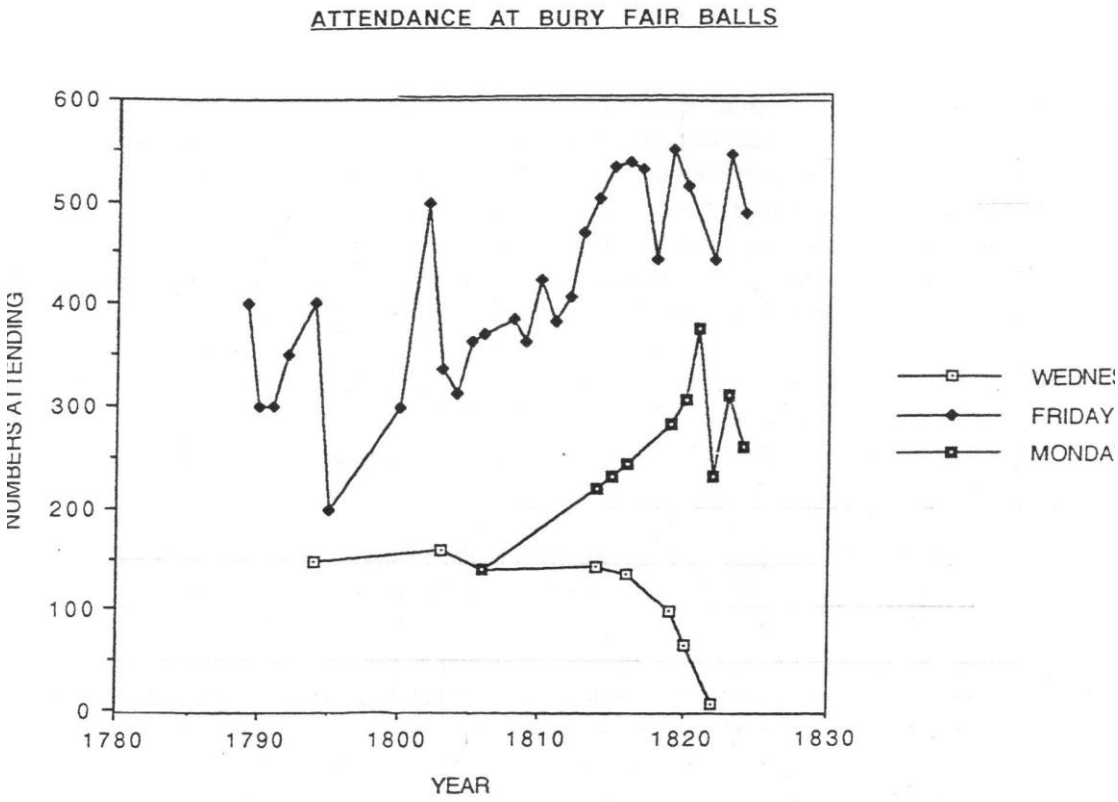
Assemblies did provide a forum for political canvassing and were used not only by men, but by women too, who enjoyed an increased involvement with election campaigns as the century progressed. In 1719, when Lady Bristol was trying to get her son Jack elected M.P. for Aldeburgh, she wrote to her husband at the time of the Bury Fair;

> ' ... the coming of the High Suffolk gentlemen to Bury happens very lucky upon this occasion, and 'tis the only one that could make me wish you to be at the Assembly.'[51]

When canvassing Hull during the 1784 by-election, Spencer-Stanhope was advised to attend the assembly in Dagger Lane and warned it was 'composed of a set of partial proud people ... you must be all things to all the women.'[52] The behaviour of candidates came in for scrutiny and could have a detrimental effect on their chances of election as was illustrated in a letter from Mrs. Bedingfield, after attending the summer Assize assemblies at Chapel Field House:

> 'but how the representative of the country can answer for not dancing with the high sheriff's lady, and a pretty woman, the next election will show.'[53]

In 1846 Sir John Peter Boileau, (1794-1869) avoided the January Sessions Ball in Norwich, '... fearful of getting committed about elections and Corn Laws'.[54]




Several assemblies and clubs, however, promoted themselves as neutral. In 1771, the Swaffham Philharmonic Society announced 'Swaffham concert is no party concert'.[55] When access to the walks at Christ Church, Ipswich, were to be restricted to keyholders in 1773, it was announced, ' ... no distinction of party will be made in the distribution of keys,'[56] while in 1820, it was reported that the assemblies in the town, 'continue ... for the general amusement of all parties.'[57]

Polite society sought to improve amenities within their towns, alleviate distress, as well as encourage and support local industry. In 1757, the first Crepe Ball was held at Chapel Field House to promote the Norwich Stuffs, at a time when the city's staple industry was again coming under increasing pressure from printed calicoes.[58] Another such ball, in 1826, produced a profit of £79 which was donated to a fund to afford relief work by macadamizing Ber Street.[59] The primary intent of the Ball,

however, was for the Norwich Crepe industry to benefit from the marketing of the evening dress designs in London. Other assemblies promoted the staple industry of their town, notably Lincoln, where the Stuff Ball, inaugurated in 1785 to encourage the local manufacture of woollens, became, after 1787, an annual event and the most exclusive social occasion in the county.[60]

Generally as the eighteenth century progressed, benevolence in the form of institutional, organised charity was preferred.[61] Between 1746 and 1776, £2495 was donated by the Edinburgh Assembly to the Royal Infirmary, an equal sum to the Charity Workhouse, and £l,439 to the Directors for their private charities.[62] At Hadleigh, in Suffolk, an assembly was held in 1786 for the benefit of the Sunday school, lately established in the town[63], while assemblies were held at Beccles to support the Sunday School[64] and the Dispensary.[65] However, spontaneous responses to individual hardship were still forthcoming. In 1764, an assembly was held at Bury St. Edmunds, which raised £10 for the benefit of Rebecca Parssery of Newton. She and her husband, John, had been married eleven years and produced 13 children - all girls![66]

The first reference to assemblies in East Anglia was contained in a letter, dated 1688, from Martha Chamberlayne, of Bramerton, near Norwich. In it she described Assize Week in Norwich when 'all ye Catholic of any quality in ye contry was in town' and held impromptu assemblies at Chapel Field House.[67] From 1717, when Abraham Catherall, a pastry cook from London, started organising assemblies in Norwich, 'in the same Manner as at Bury and other Places,'[68] the principle assemblies, for most of the century, were those held during the summer Assize. This was the case in other circuit towns, since the number of cases heard was seldom large, the social aspect of the occasion grew as the century progressed,[69] as testified by a Salisbury attorney in 1764:

> 'the judges [Yates and Gould] out of 15 causes left 6 untryed. Scandalous to go to the Assembly and neglect business they are so well paid for.'[70]

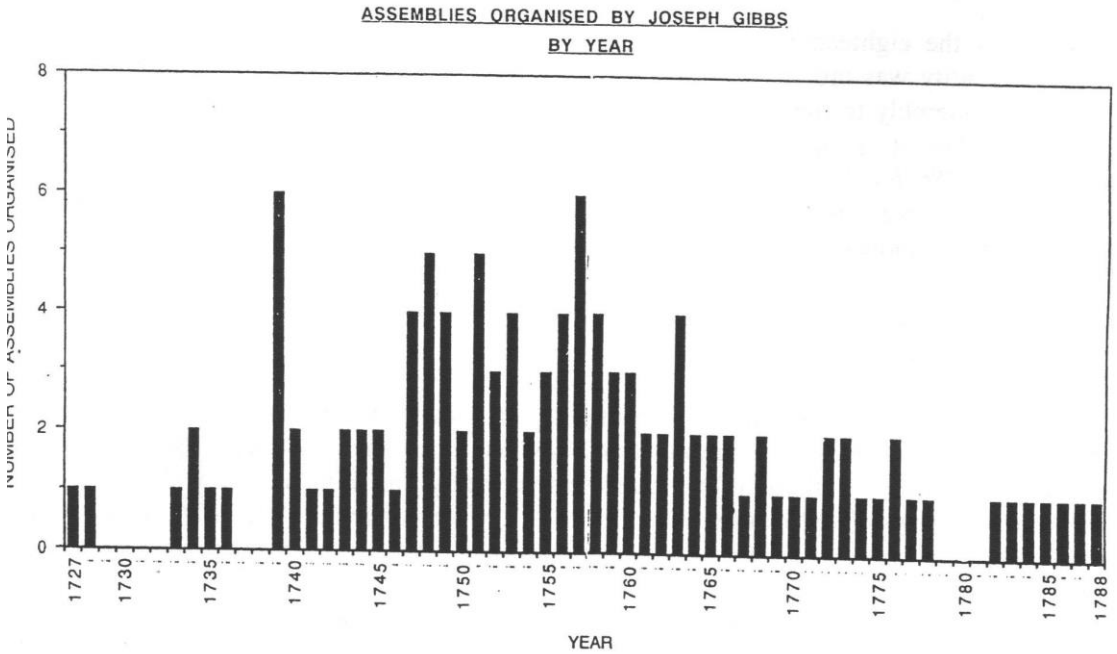
Although Assize Balls were held in Bury, they were never so fashionably or numerously attended as those during the Fair. Attendances at four assize balls held between 1786 and 1793 were between 80 and 120 persons, while those present at the Fair Balls for the Monday and Friday nights invariably exceeded that figure.[71]

Bury was the first town in the region where regular commercial assemblies were organised by James Eastland, a dancing master, from the "New" or "White House" on Angel Hill, from 1715.[72] He appears to have been an adept promoter because in 1721 he was called on to arrange assemblies in Swaffham, to coincide with the race meeting;[73] while in 1723, he was organising race assemblies at the Cock Pit, in Newmarket.[74] In 1724, he took a house in St Andrew's, Norwich, where he hosted assemblies, while retaining control of the monthly assemblies at Bury.[75] His son, Edward Eastland, another dancing master, who kept a boarding school in King's Lynn, is the first known organiser of assemblies in that town, from 1721, till his death in the early 1740s, after which they continued to be arranged by his widow, Elizabeth, until the mid 1760s.[76] The first known assembly at Ipswich was organised by a dancing master, John King, at his house in St. Peter's, from 172l.[77] Dancing masters were important entrepreneurs of assemblies in the early eighteenth century. The

earliest surviving example of a purpose-built assembly room was built by a dancing master, Askew Kirk, in St. George's Square, Stamford, in 1725.[78]

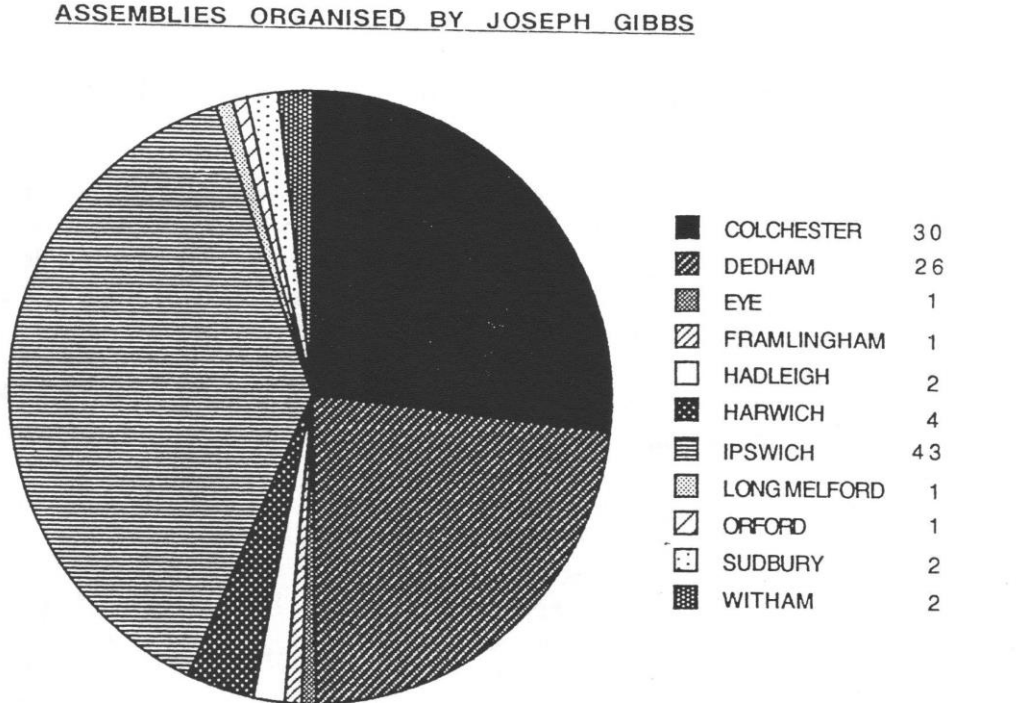
Organists were another group well placed to organise assemblies. The first recorded assembly at Colchester was in 1727 for the benefit of John Gibbs (senior) and his sons Samuel, Joseph and George.[79] It is likely that Gibbs had been organising assemblies, whose format comprised of a concert followed by a ball, well before this date, as the commercialisation of concerts predates that of dancing assemblies. The three sons were to become organists in Suffolk; Samuel at Eye, George at Bungay and Joseph at Ipswich, a post he held for forty years between 1748 and 1788 at St. Mary Tower, after spells as organist at Harwich and Dedham. All three brothers organised concerts followed by balls in the towns where they were the resident organist, as well as in neighbouring towns of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex.

Pre-eminent was Joseph Gibbs, a musician of national repute. At his death in 1788, he was described in the *Gentleman's Magazine* as 'eminently distinguished both as a composer and performer.'[80] Figure 1 shows the years in which he organised the 115 concerts and balls he staged in the region between 1727 and 1788, while the pie chart illustrates the centres in Suffolk and Essex where he staged the assemblies that he advertised in the *Ipswich Journal*. Charles Reinhold, a singer at Ranelagh Gardens in London, was another renowned organist. He came to Suffolk in 1745 to perform at a concert in Mrs. Mary Locke's Great Room in Halesworth for the benefit of Samuel Blogg.[81] After 1760, when Reinhold became organist at St. Peter in Colchester, Gibbs ceased to organise concerts and balls in the town.[82]



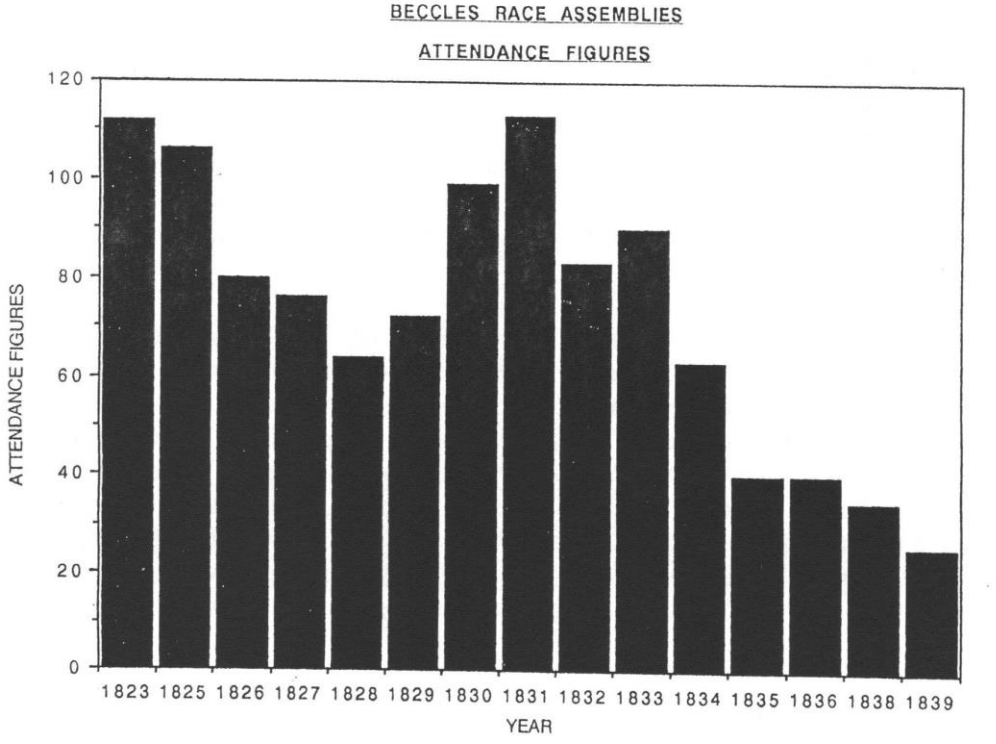

Norfolk, too, was able to attract eminent musicians who organised assemblies. Charles Burney, one of the most fashionable music masters of the eighteenth century and later, an acknowledged writer on the history of music, held the office of organist

at St. Margaret's Church, King's Lynn, for a decade during the eighteenth century[83], during which time he organised concerts followed by balls at Lynn[84] and Swaffham[85]. He retained links with the county, returning in 1774 to perform at a concert and ball at the town hall, Gt. Yarmouth, for the benefit of William Mully and Henry Chicheley.[86] Dr Musgrave Heighington, a composer whose works were popular at the Vauxhall Gardens, London,[87] and described by Bishop Pococke in his 'Tour' as a 'very eminent musician',[88] made a significant impact on the cultural provision in Great Yarmouth.[89] In August, 1733, Heighinton was 'unanimously chosen' organist of both churches, with a salary 'suitable to so great a master' and gave his first public concert in the town.[90] He founded the Yarmouth Music Club in 1736[91] and two years later established monthly card assemblies in the town hall.[92] His connection with Yarmouth continued till 1745 when it was decided to reduce the organist's annual salary from £60 to £40.[93]




These early entrepreneurs of commercial assemblies in the region have been highlighted in an attempt to redress the balance between the quality of provincial culture vis-à-vis that provided in the metropolis, as much of the former was far from being 'rude; unpolished.'[94] The fact that the Suffolk gentry retained strong links with the county also enhanced the prestige of cultural provision. The duties performed by steward at assemblies varied according to the articles adopted by each assembly. Their main functions were to welcome the guests and regulate the dancing. Stewards needed to be accomplished dancers as it was part of their role to coordinate the tunes called, with the steps and figures of the dance.[95] Thomas Sherlock Gooch was one of the most popular stewards in the county, serving at Bury,[96] Ipswich,[97] Beccles,[98] Saxmundham,[99] Hadleigh,[100] Southwold,[101] Bungay,[102] Wickham Market[103] and Yarmouth in Norfolk.[104] Some assemblies in market towns in Suffolk were patronised by stewards of higher social standing.

Lord Rendlesham was a steward at Wickham Market as well as Saxmundham.[105] The Marquis of Salisbury[106] was also a steward at Saxmundham, as was Lord Huntingfield,[107] while Lords Brome[108] and Henniker[109] were stewards at Eye.




Figures compiled from Beccles Borough Records: Box Containing Meeting of the Racing Committee A31/1 Account Book, Beccles Racing Committee, except 1823 which was taken from the Diary of J.B. Scott.

The prestige of a Royal Plate at the Ipswich Races attracted royalty, nobility and gentry to enjoy the sport and off-course diversions. In 1797 Prince William of Gloucester, the Duchess of Gordon, the Marquis Salisbury, Cornwallis and Huntley, Lord Chadworth, Lord and Lady Rous, Lord and Lady Brome, Sir Charles Bunbury, Sir John Blois, Sir William Rowley, Sir Robert Harland and General Garth, all attended the Race Assembly.[110]

The Three Tuns, Bungay. The Assembly Room is on the first floor to the left of the pedimented entrance

The first advertised assembly at Beccles was held in the Guildhall, in 1721, to coincide with the race meeting.[111] The 'Ipswich Musick', or waits, were in attendance at the assembly, from 1741, by which date the whole event, on and off course, had become increasingly commercialized.[112] There were 200 people present at the Race Assembly in 1765.[113] Although the races did not have an uninterrupted history, it was not until the 1830s that the assembly irrevocably declined in popularity.[114] The first advertised assembly at Bungay was organised to coincide with the race meeting.[115] Here assemblies were held at the three major inns; the King's Head, Crown and Three Tuns. Assembly rooms at inns, often referred to as 'long rooms', were usually situated on the first floor.[116]

Initially the promoters of assemblies utilized existing facilities rather than enjoy the benefits of purpose-built accommodation. At Framlingham for example, the assemblies were held at the Great Hall in the Castle[117] and in the Priory at Sudbury,[118] while nearby Melford Place, the home of Sir Roger Martin, was the venue for the first assembly associated with Long Melford.[119] Boarding houses, such as the "New" or "White" House on Angel Hill in Bury, and Chapel Field House in Norwich, were later converted to meet the needs of the assembly more effectively. Chapel Field House was remodelled in 1754-55[120] while the rooms on Angel Hill were rebuilt with two storeys in 1789 and further refurbished and remodelled in 1801.[121]

Most purpose built assembly rooms contained three essential rooms, ballroom, cardroom and tearoom, modelled on the provision of the rooms at Blake Street, York, built to the design of Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington. Although the three rooms were separate, they were interconnected to encourage the free-flow of guests as any attempt to create private space was discouraged. The rooms were usually designed with a minimum of obstacles to interfere with the vision of those using them. The pattern for their interior design was set by Lindsay's Rooms opened in 1730, where the ballroom contained a row of chandeliers and mirrors to reflect the candles and company, at least two fireplaces and a musicians' gallery.[122] The musicians' gallery at Eye, like that at Norwich, was placed over the entrance to the room.[123] Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, they began to move down from the gallery and were placed on a raised platform at one end of the ballroom, or in a recess to one side of it, as was the case at Bury. Such was the magnificence of the Rooms at Bury, with the double flight of stairs linking the ballroom with the supper room, that when improvements were made to the assembly room attached to the Coffee House, in Ipswich, this circular arch was copied, linking the card and assembly rooms.[124] Ipswich continually sought to emulate the cultural facilities provided by its neighbour in the west of the county. In 1818, when plans were finally adopted for the New Assembly Rooms in Northgate Street, the *Ipswich Journal* announced that the design 'bids fair to rival the elegant and universally admired rooms at Bury.'[125]

The concept of Zeitgeist prevailed at centres of polite leisure in the final decades of the eighteenth century. The loose fitting chemise dresses of the 1780s and the Empire-style high-waisted garments of the 1790s which imitated the draperies of pictures and statues, mirrored the vogue for neo-classical designed rooms.[126] Accessories worn to assemblies in the 1790s, such as fans and jewellery, copied the designs of classical antiquity, creating an impression of learning and leisure by the wearer.[127] It is no coincidence that amid this indulgence for neo-classical fashions, the cotillion rose in popularity during the 1780s, eventually sweeping the courtly

minuet from the ballroom. The cotillion, with its advancing and retreating elements had its origins ascribed to the ancient Greeks.[128]

Most assembly rooms were financed by individuals, or groups of individuals, pooling their resources. Examples of the former occurred in 1753 when Ipswich got its first purpose-built assembly room, erected by Josiah Harris, a deal merchant,[129] while Charles Lloyd, Mayor of Orford, built the first rooms in the town in 1764.[130] The contribution of public authorities to assembly rooms was limited, either through insufficient funds, or a restricted perception of their duties, or a combination of the two factors. The Corporation of Beccles, however, appreciated the benefits to the town in seeking to diversify the town's economy:

> ' ... An Assembly Room and Play House would conduce to the benefit, advantage and prosperity of the town in as much as it would be an inducement to persons of independent fortune to settle and reside there.'[131]

In 1786 the modest assembly room was built on land belonging to the Town Estate Trust. It was financed by 25 tontine shares of £25 value which yielded 5%,[132] a comparatively good rate of return, as interest rates fell throughout the eighteenth century. Sir Edmund Bacon, Sir Thomas Gooch, Sir William Beauchamp and the Rev. John Amyas each took two shares, nominating family members on whose life the annuity depended. Raising money through tontine bonds was a popular means of attracting investment because of the element of gambling attached, as it was a lottery of lives. There was the possibility of an increased dividend, as with the death of any annuitant, the annuity was divided among the others until the sole survivor enjoyed the whole income. It was popular with Corporations and other bodies who did not want to alienate land because with the death of the last survivor the annuity lapsed and the building became the property of the ground landlord.

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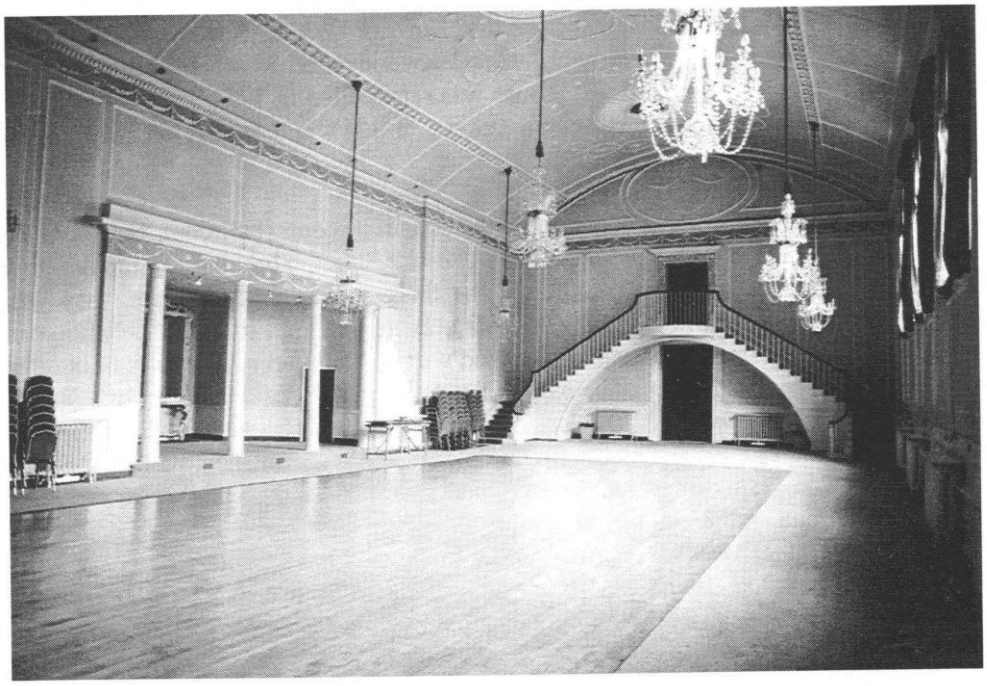
The mid- eighteenth century ballroom, the White Lion, Broad Street, Eye, now a theatre.
t contains a musicians' gallery above the entrance to the room and an Adam style fireplace.

Another means of financing the building of assembly rooms was by investors purchasing income yielding shares, with no benefit of survivorship, as was the case with Chapel Field House.[133] The legality of these companies was dubious since only a few obtained the Act of Parliament or Royal Charter, required by law, for the setting up of joint-stock companies. The subscribers circumvented difficulties over legal matters by authorising a board of trustees, or a management committee, to act on the shareholders' behalf, as happened at York and Ipswich when New Assembly Rooms were built in the town.[134] Shares in assembly rooms were usually in the range of £1 to £100, though denominations of £25 and £50, the latter being the case at Ipswich,[135] ensured that investors were from the middle and upper classes.

One of the purposes of this research has been to contribute to the debate among urban historians as to the nature and changes that occurred in the provincial town after the Restoration. Peter Borsay has termed the period 1660-1770 as witnessing an 'urban renaissance' and has, in part, supported his thesis by citing the number of spas and towns, sixty in number, which by 1770 had 'experimented with assemblies or assembly rooms, and there must have been many more'.[136] Of the sixty, he records



The Ballroom decorated in neo-classical style has a curved Adam ceiling. The recessed musicians' gallery and the flights of stairs to the tea and card rooms are unusual features.

four in Suffolk, at Bury, Beccles, Bungay and Eye. Although Angus McInnes believes there was a renewal and transformation of the urban landscape, he has argued that Borsay's term 'urban renaissance' implies a wider diffusion of leisure within the urban system than was, in practice, the case. To support his thesis, he cites the large number of towns where no evidence exists of assemblies.[137] McInnes' view is not supported by the Suffolk evidence where an analysis of advertisements placed in the *Ipswich Journal* show that between 1720 and 1825, thirty towns in Suffolk experimented with assemblies. Here indeed was Borsay's 'urban renaissance' demonstrably illustrated.

Mark Girouard has stated that few assembly rooms flourished for more than a few decades,[138] but it is to be hoped that this article has shown that the longevity of assemblies should not be restricted to the years when the practice of assembly-going became institutionalized in purpose-built accommodation.

It has been claimed that between 1730 and 1830, most building expenditure for cultural purposes was confined to the larger provincial towns, and to the rising spas and resorts among the smaller towns.[139] The market towns of Swaffham and Beccles with their own purpose-built assembly rooms testify that market towns also shared in investing in cultural provisions. Certainly there is ample evidence in East Anglia that the cultural ideology of politeness contributed to an enhancing of the urban environment in the century following the Restoration.

Angela Dain

Appendix: Venues of Assemblies in Suffolk:

[Earliest known dates are given. Populatons, in brackets, are from the 1801 Census Returns]

| | |
|---|---|
| BURY ST EDMUNDS (7655) | 1715, The White House, remodelled 1789 and 1801-3, Ballroom 73 x 37 x 29 feet; Guildhall; Angel Inn. |
| IPSWICH (10,845) | 1721 John King's Assembly Room St Peter's parish; Town Hall; Great Room, Cross Tavern; Coffee House, 1753, 60ft x 14ft 8ins; Great White Horse: New Assembly Rooms, 1821, 54 x 27 x 23 feet, adjacent to and inter-connecting with the Great White Horse. |
| BECCLES (2788) | 1721 Race Meeting. Town Hall; White Lion; King's Head. Purpose built Assembly Room, 1785, 25ft x 23ft 6 ins. |
| BUNGAY (2439) | 1725 Race Meeting. Mr. William's (draper) Great Room? The Crown; the King's Head; The Three Tuns: Assembly Room, 1773, 57ft 4ins x 25ft 8ins x l2ft 2ins |
| EYE (1734) | 1731 Stuston Hall; 1739 New Room at the White Lion. |
| WOODBRIDGE (3020) | 1732 Town Hall; Crown Inn Assembly Room 40 feet long. |
| LONG MELFORD (2204) | 1739 Melford Place, House of Sir Roger Martin; 1784 The Ram Inn; The Bull Inn 60 x 18 feet. |
| YOXFORD (851) | 1740 Mr Freeman's New Room (The Tuns?). |
| SAXMUNDHAM (855) | 1742 Mrs Denish's, The Blue Bell. |
| HADLEIGH (2332) | 1743 'Hall near the Church'; 1746 Large room in the market place (Keymer's Draper Shop?); 1760 New Assembly Room (The George?). |
| HALESWORTH (1676) | 1745 Mrs Whall's Great Room, probably at The Three Tuns. |
| SUDBURY (3283) | 1747 The Crown; 1748 The Rose and Crown; 1751 The Priory; 1754 The Swan: Assembly Room 50 feet long; White Hart: Assembly Room 43 feet long. |
| BOXFORD (636) | 1748 The Fleece?; 1770 The Fleece Inn. |
| FRAMLINGHAM (l854) | 1751 Great Hall, Castle, 72 feet long |
| ALDEBURGH (804) | 1759 The White Lion. |
| LOWESTOFT (2332) | 1763 The Queen's Head: new Room added 1812, 42 x 20 feet; Assembly Room added to Bath House, 1824. |
| STOWMARKET (1761) | 1763 The White Hart. |
| ORFORD (751) | 1764 Assembly Room built by Mayor, Charles Lloyd; from 1812, at Orford Hotel. |
| DEBENHAM (1215) | 1768 The Cherry Tree, room 32 x 16 feet. |
| MENDLESHAM (1051) | 1773 Long Room, The Royal Oak. |

| | |
|---|---|
| BILDESTON (744) | 1781 The King's Head. |
| LAVENHAM (1776) | 1784 The Swan. |
| MELTON (501) | 1787 The Green Man. |
| WICKHAM MARKET (896) | 1791 The White Hart |
| BENHALL (533) | 1793 Race Meeting: 'as usual', indicating previous Assemblies. |
| MILDENHALL (2283) | 1797 The Cock Inn; The Bell Inn. |
| CLARE (1033) | 1807 The Half Moon Inn. |
| STRADBROKE (1215) | 1814 The White Lion. |
| SOUTHWOLD (1054) | 1817 The Swan Inn. |
| BOTESDALE (565) | 1843. |

The Assembly Room, Bury St Edmunds. The Queen Anne facade was modified between 1789 and 1804 when the top storey was removed. It consists of seven wide bays with a parapet raised over the centre and a low dome behind. At the back is the ballroom, with six arched windows overlooking Crown Street.

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