

Austen Chamberlain and the Highbury bull; a misadventure in animal husbandry

Like most of the estates on the outskirts of Birmingham in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Chamberlains' family residence at Highbury had a small farm, whose main purpose was to provide the household with fresh produce. In May 1894 this modest enterprise achieved a mention in the national press, when Austen Chamberlain – then a young Member of Parliament – was injured by his own bull.

On Tuesday 8 May 1894 the *Times* newspaper published a short article, which reported that:

A rather serious accident occurred yesterday to Mr. Austen Chamberlain, M.P., at Highbury. Attached to the house is a small dairy farm, where eight or nine head of cattle are kept, including a fine Guernsey bull. Mr. Austen Chamberlain, who takes considerable interest in the farm, was leading the bull out of the yard by a stick attached to the animal's nose when his foot slipped and he fell to the ground. The bull immediately turned on him, and gored him savagely in the thigh. Mr. Chamberlain was able to spring to his feet and get out of the animal's way before it renewed the attack, and he walked to the house, where it was found that a wound between two and three inches long had been inflicted. It is not expected that any serious consequences will follow, but Mr. Chamberlain will certainly not be able to resume his Parliamentary duties for some days.

A rather longer article was published on the same day in the *Birmingham Daily Post*. This contained a few additional details, including the fact that Austen had received prompt medical attention from a 'Dr Ballance of Hagley Road', who had happened to be visiting a patient at nearby Moor Green Hall at the time of the accident. It also noted that the injury had not affected any of the main blood vessels, largely because 'Mr. Chamberlain at the time of the accident was wearing garments of rather more than ordinary thickness'.

Austen Chamberlain had assumed responsibility for the farm on the Highbury estate soon after 1888, when he returned to Birmingham from Germany, where he had been studying. He began to prepare for a political career, and was elected as the Liberal Unionist M.P. for East Worcestershire in 1892. Like his father Joe, who represented the Birmingham West constituency, Austen divided his time between Highbury and London. On the weekend of the accident he had been accompanied on his visit to Highbury by Joe and his wife Mary. Joe's daughters Beatrice and Hilda, who had remained at the family's London house, first heard of the incident from the morning newspapers. A letter from Mary soon followed, full of reassurances that Austen was not badly hurt.

The Chamberlains were most indignant that the press had got hold of the story so quickly. Hilda blamed the tradesmen who had been present at Highbury at the time of the accident for blabbing to reporters. 'The papers have been perfectly intolerable about it', she wrote to her brother Neville. 'The *Westminster Gazette* got out a huge poster: "Mr A. Chamberlain gored by a bull", which nearly frightened the unfortunate

Amy [probably one of the Chamberlains' servants] into a fit. She was just travelling in an omnibus when she caught sight of the horrid thing'. Neville was working in the Bahamas at the time, and the family were concerned that news of the accident would reach him before their letters: 'we are much afraid lest some idiot will telegraph a sensational account to the Bahamas', Beatrice wrote on 8 May. The story did indeed spread with surprising rapidity, though not always with accuracy: the *South Australian Register* reported on 9 May – evidently misunderstanding the term 'Guernsey bull' – that 'Mr Joseph Austen Chamberlain ... whilst on a visit to Guernsey has been gored by a bull'.

The publicity given to the story by the newspapers meant that the family was deluged with telegrams, notes and cards of sympathy – which they saw as evidence of Austen's popularity as a politician. The Chamberlains' opposition to proposals for Irish Home Rule was well known, but Hilda told Neville that 'even the Irish' had made tender enquiries about Austen's welfare. Nevertheless, she was afraid that he would be teased about the incident in parliament. This in fact turned out to be the case, as the newsworthiness of the story was prolonged by an arcane issue of parliamentary procedure. Before going to Highbury, Austen had arranged a parliamentary pairing for an important Budget debate the following Thursday. The pairing system meant that two M.P.s on opposite sides of the House agreed not to vote, thereby cancelling each other out. It assumed that both members were otherwise able to attend the House, and when Austen's pair, a certain Mr Storey, learned from the newspapers that Austen was seriously injured, he felt entitled to break the pairing agreement. This led to all sorts of recriminations, culminating in a debate in the House of Commons on 24 May, when the story of the bull was recalled, to the accompaniment of much parliamentary mirth. Finally, Mr Dane, the M.P. for the Irish constituency of North Fermanagh, stood up and enquired of Austen: what was 'the nationality of the bull referred to'?

Stoic – as the bull was called – was not of course Irish. The newspaper accounts referred to him as a Guernsey bull, but Mary Chamberlain, in a letter to her mother on 8 May, described him as 'the young Jersey bull we bought last autumn'. It seems most likely that Stoic was indeed a Jersey, since Austen was at that time trying to improve the quality of his herd by purchasing pedigree Jersey cows. The Chamberlains were quick to defend Austen against any suspicion that he might have been irresponsible in taking the bull into the farmyard on his own. They assured their correspondents that Austen had previously taken the bull out, with no ill effects. 'It was such an unforeseen accident', Mary wrote to her mother, 'for the creature has always been quite quiet and has shown such a friendly disposition that we often have had him out – and the other day he held his head quite still for me to scratch his neck. It is a lesson not to tamper with bulls, however peaceable they may seem, and we shall be very wary in future'.

If Stoic had previously been tame and biddable, his character certainly changed on 7 May. In the account which Austen himself sent to Neville, he described how that morning the bull had 'at once showed signs of temper' when he was let out. After Austen managed to make his escape, three estate workers tried unsuccessfully to get the bull back into his shed. Eventually Wileman, the farm stockman, 'came running back from the plough field, took the bull in hand and gave him a good thrashing, after which the bull followed him as meekly as possible!'. The deterioration in Stoic's

temperament proved to be a permanent one. At the end of May Wileman wrote to Austen that the bull had charged him when he had turned him out into a field. Wileman had given Stoic 'a good hiding', but concluded that the bull was not safe with strangers. The animal was shut up again, but Austen took visitors to see the notorious creature in his pen, and apparently challenged them to exercise him. 'I did not care to take him out myself', Beatrice wrote to Neville on 11 June, adding that one of their house guests, a Mr Holland, 'was anxious to do so, but restrained his ardour'.

The end came in November 1894, when Stoic attacked one of the farm workers, who was fetching him to service a cow. Austen decided that the bull was too dangerous to keep. He ordered him to be slaughtered, although he felt that the farm hand was himself largely to blame, as he had gone in to the bull's shed alone, in spite of Austen's 'clear instructions'. Wileman, who seems to have been genuinely sorry to lose the animal, gave Austen's youngest sister Ethel a 'touching account' of Stoic's last moments: 'how quietly and sweetly he went to the slaughter'. The carcass was sold by weight, for 4½d. per lb. They received £10.17.6 for him, Ethel told Neville, 'so you can work out for yourself exactly what he weighed'.

Austen soon replaced Stoic with 'a young and very pretty Jersey bull' from Lord Rothschild's pedigree herd at Tring. The new bull was called Billy Button, and Ethel told Neville that his only real fault was his silly name. Billy Button did not last long at Highbury, however. In April 1895 Ethel reported that Billy had been 'sent back' – presumably to Tring – but she did not explain the reason. He was replaced by a new little bull, very dark in colour, who was evidently more satisfactory than his two immediate predecessors, since mishaps with bulls do not feature in the subsequent family correspondence.

His teasing in parliament about the incident with the bull does not seem to have damaged Austen's political career; after the general election of 1895 he came to hold a succession of senior government posts. In spite of his attempts to live the story down within the family, however, he continued to be reminded of it for some time. His Christmas card from his sister Ida in 1894 depicted a long procession of cows, with verses – parodying 'Taffy was a Welshman' – which included the lines:

I went to Austen's house:
Austen was away:
They said the Bull had broken loose
And he did not care to stay.

Austen came to my house
Looking very pale
And when I asked about the bull
He said that joke was stale.

Maureen Perrie