

Thomas Guy of Tamworth

I've reflected before now in this column how politicians - particularly the 18th-century variety - used every kind of financial inducement to get electors to vote for them. Be it a slap-up dinner, or a judicious piece of philanthropy, it could pave the way to a seat in the Commons and all the advantages that ensued from that.

But not every generous gesture produced the anticipated wreath of laurel. Take Thomas Guy, for example. You may not have come across the name before, but you will surely have heard of the hospital named after him. You will also know that it's not in Tamworth.

Thomas Guy was the son of a London lighter-man, born in Southwark in around 1644. More importantly for us, Thomas's mother hailed from Tamworth, and when her husband died (when Thomas was about eight years' old) she brought her family back to Staffordshire.

Here Thomas was educated at the local grammar school, before returning to the capital to serve his apprenticeship to a bookseller. It was in this trade that Thomas Guy made his first fortune. Thomas became not only a bookseller, but also a printer, and in 1679 won the contract from the Stationers' Company to produce cheap bibles, a deal that came to be worth an estimated £15,000.

It was said at the time that Guy's profits were made partly on the back of the niggardly wages he paid his staff, but let's park that remark for later.

This reputation for being tight with his money never quite went away. Who knows whether it affected what Guy did with his wealth towards the end of his life? But in the 1680s he was still accumulating it, and doing so with a sure and steady eye to the growing potential of the stock market.

Guy's profits from the book trade were ploughed into South Sea stock and government bonds, and the earnings from these went into real estate in Staffordshire and Warwickshire, whose two counties Tamworth straddles. By now Guy was worth £200,000 and rising.

But money alone did not satisfy Thomas Guy; he craved political respect too. In 1690 he stood unsuccessfully for one of the two seats in Tamworth, returning five years later to triumph as the Whig candidate.

It was in these years that Thomas Guy began to lavish his considerable bounty upon the folk of Tamworth. In 1700 he rebuilt the town hall in the middle of the High Street, a gesture that cost him some £1,000.

This fine building - a hall above and an open market below - still has pride of place in the town today, though it has been subject to a few alterations - notably the inclusion of an internal staircase - since its sponsor's day.

He also built almshouses in Lower Gungate - initially for six poor women and later extended to fourteen men and women of the town - as well contributing to the grammar school and the workhouse. It was his way of telling the people of Tamworth that this Guy's in love with you. Thomas could surely expect a place in their hearts forever more.

Come the election of July 1708, however, the ungrateful voters of Tamworth put their wealthy benefactor out on his ear. It was a decision that the town has lived to regret ever since. Thomas Guy turned his back on Tamworth in dramatic style, first threatening to tear down his town hall and then to exclude the townsfolk from his almshouses. Then off he went in a huff (pulled by several horses) to London.

By now Thomas Guy was in his sixties, and turning his attention to matters posthumous. Thomas died unmarried in 1724, leaving a will that carved up his considerable assets. There were legacies to his friends and family, drawn from the income of his considerable estates, and further sums left to London debtors and to Christ's Hospital.

But the greater part of his wealth - more than £200,000 - went to found Guy's Hospital for 400 'incurable' sick persons, along with a ward for the insane. Guy's foundation, recently merged with St Thomas's Hospital, is one of the country's major teaching hospitals, standing on the South Bank of the Thames, not far from London Bridge.

Almost three centuries after its establishment, Guy's Hospital remains indelibly stamped with the personality of its founder. The man himself lies interred in the hospital chapel, and a bronze statue of him stands in the square in front of the main entrance. And, at 479 feet, Guy's Tower was for many years the tallest hospital building in the world.

It was, and is, a remarkable legacy from a man with a reputation for meanness.

But London's gain has been, to a great extent, Tamworth's pain. Although he never succeeded in pulling down the town hall, the limitations Thomas Guy placed on his almshouses remain, in spite of a later rebuilding.

The plaque above the archway in Lower Gungate still reads: "Guy's almshouses for relations and hamleteers". That is, if you come from one of the hamlets (now mostly suburbs) of the town, you may seek support here. But if you are one of those pesky, ungrateful Tamworthians, I'm afraid you must look elsewhere. Thomas Guy has not forgiven you yet.