

Brass Crosby

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Brass Crosby was born in Stockton to Hercules and Mary Crosby in 1725. His unusual christian name was in fact his mothers surname before she married Hercules.

After a good education locally he went to Sunderland to work for a solicitor there, and then went down to London, as Stockton's own Dick Whittington to seek fame and fortune.

He served several years as an attorney and rapid succession became a member of the common council of Tower Ward, the City Remembrancer, Sheriff of the City of London, Alderman of Bread Street Ward, MP for Honiton and in 1770 was elected as Lord Mayor of London. When sworn in as Lord Mayor he assured his fellow citizens that "at the risk of his life he would protect them in their just rights and privileges.

Being Lord Mayor meant that he was also Chief Magistrate. He had already made his name by standing up to the naval press gangs by refusing to back the press warrants and urging the use of the City Bounty instead. In this way the navy recruited the men that really wanted to serve, and they were paid properly for doing so.

In 1771 a printer of a newspaper called Miller was in deep trouble with Parliament for daring to publish the proceedings of the House of Commons. Previously debates had been published under false titles such as "debates of Lilliput" and fictitious names were given to the MPs who spoke. This time the MPs had been named and they were furious. As part of a long legal wrangle a messenger was dispatched with a warrant to arrest the printer, and he was brought before Brass Crosby for sentencing. Crosby refused to do any such thing, saying that the citizens of our Country had the right to know what those who represented them and made their laws were saying



Brass Crosby as Lord Mayor of London



Chatham Place and Blackfriars Bridge

and doing. Not only did Crosby refuse to punish the printer, but he charged the messenger with assault and wrongful arrest as the "general" warrant did not properly describe its power, whom it was for, or what the offence was.

Parliament was livid! Brass Crosby was taken before it. He argued that London Charters granted him the role of protecting the rights of the people, and that it was his duty to uphold these rights, and it was his first duty. He was sentenced to imprisonment in the Tower of London. King George III ordered that he be taken there by boat to avoid him being rescued on the way.

Whilst he was in the Tower there were rallies in support of Crosby and his actions, not only throughout London, but around the whole Country. Effigies of leading members of parliament were burned on Tower Hill and cups and other crockery were inscribed with slogans demanding his release. Messages of support came from many towns and cities around Great Britain.

When he was released 6 weeks later there was great jubilation - bonfires were lit, there was a 21-gun salute and his carriage was escorted by 53 others. Towards the end of its journey people replaced the horses pulling it. From that day on, verbatim reports of the House of Commons have been published, and there has never been any attempt again to stifle the freedom of the press in reporting the proceedings.

It is where the saying "Bold as Brass" originates - because Brass Crosby had the courage to stand up to the parliament of the day. We owe him a lot. Interestingly, there have never been any "general" warrants issued again since then, either.

He married in 1772, and lived in a house in Chatham Place, which at that time stood between New Bridge Street and Blackfriars Bridge.

He died in February 1793. An obelisk was constructed in his honour in St George's Circus in Blackfriars Road. A great debt is owed to him for his contribution to our democracy.



Brass Crosby

Additional notes

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Sources: Article “As Bold as Brass’ – The life of Brass Crosby’, Heritage Stockton, <https://heritage.stockton.gov.uk/> April 2024 (with permission)

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