The Triumph of Toryism in Oxfordshire Politics, 1754–1815

By DAVID EASTWOOD

SUMMARY

In the wake of the bitterly fought and ruinously expensive Oxfordshire election of 1754, a pact was forged between the Duke of Marlborough and the tory gentry of the county to divide the county's two parliamentary seats between them. Many independent gentlemen were deeply opposed to this electoral pact which severely limited their rights as freeholders and confirmed their worst suspicions of the aristocracy's aspiration to subvert the delicate balance of the electoral system in favour of a virtual aristocratic hegemony. In 1784 there was a spirited but abortive attempt to undermine the Duke's electoral influence in Oxfordshire. During the next two decades the gentry increased their organizational efficiency, and in 1815 they successfully challenged the Duke of Marlborough's monopoly over one of the county's seats. This article traces the revival in the electoral fortunes of Oxfordshire's tory gentry, and sheds light on electioneering and political debate within the county.

There can be few historians of post-medieval Oxfordshire who know nothing of the election of 1754. Its notoriety is well deserved. It offers a case study in the passions, patronage, and power-broking which could dominate 18th-century elections. In a frenzy of excitement, the two tory candidates squeezed home in a desperately close poll only to find the result overturned by a still whig-dominated House of Commons. The details of that election are too well known to need repetition here, but what is much less familiar is the pattern of Oxfordshire politics after the upheavals of 1754.[1] The events of 1754 had torn the county asunder politically, and with both sides apparently evenly matched there was every possibility that the next general election would see a repetition of the rancour and expense which had characterized the 1754 contest. In the wake of the election, therefore, an uneasy calm descended on the politics of the county. The potential stalemate was broken by a unilateral initiative by the duke of Marlborough who offered the tory gentlemen what amounted to an electoral pact whereby they would nominate one member whilst he would enjoy the privilege of nominating the other.[2] Neither the tory gentry nor the Duke's fellow-whigs had any great enthusiasm for the proposed arrangement which would, after all, deny the tories the possibility of carrying both seats whilst simultaneously ensuring that whig interests would be forced to rally

[1] For a full-length survey of the 1754 contest in Oxfordshire see R. Robson, *The Oxfordshire Election of 1754* (1949). There is a concise account in L. Namier and J. Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754–1790*, i (1964), 59–60, 356.

[2] Robson, op. cit. note 1, 167–9; L. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2nd edn., 1957), 308–10; I.R. Christie, *The End of Lord North's Ministry, 1780–1782* (1958), 49, 74.

behind the Duke's candidate who, in the event, invariably turned out to be a member of his own family. But the events of 1754–5 had diminished both side's will to fight, and against this background an electoral pact seemed preferable to the prospect of another fiercely contested and ruinously expensive election.[3]

In the mid-eighteenth century such electoral arrangements, whereby the leading interests within a county would settle the representation of a county without having recourse to the expense and bitter divisions of a contested election, were not uncommon. Similar electoral arrangements emerged in many surrounding counties, notably Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, and Gloucestershire.[4] The politics of oligarchy and electoral pacts may have been objectionable from various points of view, but they were at least cheap and recognised electoral realities. Influence, whether direct or indirect, was a fact of political life, and when magnates spoke of electoral influence they dealt in realities not in abstractions.[5] The electoral agreement forged in Oxfordshire election rested upon the deference of freeholders to a politically-active landed elite.

The Oxfordshire election of 1754 had seen the vote split rigidly along party lines, with only 73 of the 3,937 freeholders polling splitting their two votes between the tory 'Old Interest' and the whig 'New Interest'.[6] This sharp polarization reflected the partizanship of the county elite, and the closeness of the poll suggested that party interests in Oxfordshire were fairly evenly matched.

Result of the Oxfordshire Election of 1754:

Wenman (tory)	Dashwood (tory)	*	Parker (whig)	Turner (whig)
2,033 (25.9%)	2,014 (25.6%)	*	1,919 (24.4%)	1,890 (24.1%)

Source: *Oxfordshire Poll Book* (Oxford, 1754)

The victorious tories were unseated by the House of Commons in April 1755 after a rancorous scrutiny of the poll and a fiercely contested petition to parliament on behalf of the defeated candidates.[7] The outcome was hardly satisfactory to those tories who had subscribed £8,595 towards the expenses of Wenman and Dashwood, but to renew the

[3] In the 1761 general election Sir James Dashwood, one of the tory candidates unseated in 1755, and Lord Charles Spencer, the younger brother of the Duke of Marlborough, were returned unopposed. Spencer sat for Oxfordshire between 1761 and 1790 and again between 1796 and 1801, during which time he was never formally opposed: see W.R. Williams, *Parliamentary History of Oxfordshire* (1899), 76–77.

[4] E.G. Forrester, *Northamptonshire Elections and Electioneering, 1695–1832* (1941), 61–77; R.W. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity 1760–1885. A Buckinghamshire Study* (1972), 38; J. Cannon, 'Gloucestershire Politics, 1750–1800', *Trans. Bristol and Gloucestershire Arch. Soc.* lxxix (1960), 293–7.

[5] D. Eastwood, 'Toryism, Reform, and Political Culture in Oxfordshire, 1826–37', *Parliamentary History*, vii (1988), 98–100; F. O'Gorman, 'Electoral Deference in "Unreformed" England: 1760–1832', *Jnl. Modern History*, lvi (1984), 391–429; F. O'Gorman, 'The unreformed electorate of Hanoverian England', *Social History*, xi (1986), 38–52.

[6] *Oxfordshire Poll Book* (1754), *passim*. The number of electors who went to the poll in Oxfordshire in 1754 was remarkable. In the bitterly contested election of 1831 only 2,934 electors voted, a *fall* of 25.5 per cent on the 1754 turnout. Also, even with the passions stirred by the question of parliamentary reform in 1831 the number of electors splitting their votes across parties still reached 11 per cent, compared with 1.9 per cent in 1754; cf. *Oxfordshire Poll Book* (1831), 74; Eastwood op. cit. note 5, 116.

[7] Robson, op. cit. note 1, 136–53, 158–9.

context in 1761 would have been a reckless political gamble.[8] Sacrificing one seat to the Duke of Marlborough at least saved the other for the tory gentry.

Thus Oxfordshire fell victim to an aristocratic offensive in eighteenth-century politics.[9] In 1766 the Duke concluded a similar agreement with Oxford city corporation which led to the corporation's endorsing the Duke's nominee to one of the city seats until 1812.[10] With the two Woodstock seats also in the Duke's gift and the corporation of Banbury more than willing to return the Earl of Guildford's nominee as their M.P., all but two of Oxfordshire's seven seats were controlled by aristocratic patrons.[11] To some tory critics this aristocratic primacy in Oxfordshire's electoral affairs threatened to unbalance the constitution by permitting peers to 'obtain a Power of Control, where the Constitution only allows them the power of a check'.[12] The tory objection was less that the pattern of Oxfordshire politics explicitly denied the independence of freeholders – 'Indepencence' was, as we shall see, always more a political slogan than a political reality; rather their anxiety was to defend the distinct interests of the country gentry from an overweaning aristocracy which already enjoyed a privileged and decisive influence in parliament. The consequence was that between 1784 and 1815 Oxfordshire politics were punctuated by attempts to overturn the electoral pact of 1761 and re-establish the political authority of the gentry by reasserting the 'rights of freeholders'.

The realignment of parliamentary politics between 1782 and 1784 impinged directly upon Oxfordshire. The downfall of the Fox-North coalition provided Lord Charles Spencer's opponents amongst the tory gentry with a cause – loyalty to the crown; and a platform – the general election of 1784. Spencer gave unflinching support to the Foxite cause, and on 16 January 1784 he moved the motion that the continuation of Pitt's administration was contrary to constitutional principles.[13] By way of response, a petition supporting the King and his Prime Minister was circulated throughout Oxfordshire, and on 20 March a county meeting adopted an Address unreservedly critical of the Opposition. Only the Vice Chancellor of the University made any serious attempt to defend Spencer from the Pittite majority, and he rested his case on an ill-judged attack on the principle of making Addresses, which he reprobated as a mean party devise, and dwelt on the unfitness of mere freeholders to judge public measures. Replying, the earl of Abingdon dismissed these 'unconstitutional doctrines' insisting that 'The Times exceedingly require of an address'. With only five hands raised against the Address the feeling of the meeting was decidedly against the Fox-North opposition and thus, by extension, Spencer's support for it.[14]

Following the county meeting, leading tories briefly entertained the idea of running

[8] J. Townsend, *The Oxfordshire Dashwoods* (1922), 28. The fund to defray the tories' election expenses received contributions from independent country gentry throughout England. Although the cost of the election to both sides was formidable, the often cited figure of £20,068 for the tory side alone is almost certainly an exaggeration: see Namier op. cit. note 2, 309.

[9] For an illuminating discussion see J. Cannon, *The Aristocratic Century. The Peerage of Eighteenth-Century England* (1984), 105–10.

[10] Williams op. cit. note 3, 127–9; Namier and Brooke op. cit. note 1, i, 357–9.

[11] Oxon. R.O., B.B. xix/iv/1–10; Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 101, Bound Vol. of Election Bills etc. for Banbury; W. Wing, *Parliamentary History of the Borough of Woodstock* (1873); R.G. Thorne (ed.), *The House of Commons 1790–1820*, ii, (1986), 321–5.

[12] J. Coker, *Letter to the Hon. Thomas Brand on Parliamentary Reform . . .* (1811), 15.

[13] *The Parliamentary History of England*, xxiv, 360–1; J. Cannon, *The Fox-North Coalition* (1969), 160, 169.

[14] *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (hereafter *J.O.J.*), 20 March 1784. A similar motion was put in Buckinghamshire, ibid. 27 March 1784. See also D. George, 'Fox's Martyrs: The General Election of 1784', *Trans. Royal Historical Soc.* 4th ser. xxi (1937), 152.

a candidate against Spencer. Although no challenger actually emerged, the possibility of opposing Spencer was actively canvassed by Sir Christopher Willoughby (Chairman of the Quarter Sessions, 1778–1808), Lord Harcourt, and John Coker.[15] Spencer's opponents were defeated by the lack of time available to mount an effective campaign. Lord Abingdon, who in principle supported the idea of an anti-Spencer campaign and believed it could have been successful if launched sooner, was adamant that at this late stage any attempt to challenge Spencer at the poll would be 'an uphill and fruitless game'.[16] At the last minute therefore, tory leaders switched their tactics and attempted, in effect, to mandate county members to support Pitt. At the official return John Coker formally proposed 'The persons elected to represent this county in parliament be instructed and directed to support, with the best of their abilities, the sentiments of this county as lately expressed in the Address to the Throne'. This radical attempt to control parliamentary behaviour through resolutions at county meetings was generally regarded as an unacceptable limitation on the independence of M.Ps., and was attacked as such by Spencer's supporters.[17] Although Spencer survived the chill winds of 1784, his critics had fanned the growing hostility towards an electoral arrangement which they regarded as now demonstrably contrary to the declared opinions and preferences of freeholders.

By contrast the Marlborough faction drew encouragement from their opponents' failure, and for a further twenty-one years continued to regard their right to nominate their own candidate for one county seat as absolute. In 1790 the representation passed effortlessly from Spencer to the Marquis of Blandford. Blandford, however, found little time to devote to his parliamentary duties, and in 1796 the seat reverted to Spencer.[18] When Spencer accepted the Paymaster Generalship in 1801 he resigned his seat in favour of his nephew Lord Francis Spencer, the younger son of the duke of Marlborough.[19] There were rumours that Spencer might be challenged by John Coker at the by-election in 1801 and by George Frederick Stratton at the general election of 1802, but whispers of contests faded away well before polling days.[20] Like Blandford, Lord Francis Spencer was a lacklustre M.P., and Joshua Wilson noted laconically in 1808 that 'the name of Lord Francis occurs but seldom either in debates or in divisions'.[21] This indifference towards parliamentary duties and constituency obligations was bad politics. It lent credence to opponents' charges that the prerogatives of freeholders had been usurped by a clannish interest bent only upon furthering its own ends. As John Coker put it in 1815, 'Whenever one member of that Family had got is bellyful of places and pensions, another thrust himself forward, and was very desirous of imposing on the generosity of the County'.[22]

After the abortive campaign of 1784, tory organization in Oxfordshire became more efficient, and by 1796 John Coker had emerged as its leading figure. Coker, a Fellow of New College with seats at Bicester and Maidstone, was active in both county and university politics, and from 1808 until shortly before his death in 1819 he chaired the

[15] Oxon. R.O., Thame Papers II/ii/I, Lord Abingdon to Lord Wenman, 3 April 1784. In informed political circles a contest was not expected, see *The Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson, 1774–1874* (Camden Soc. 3rd ser., 1922), 69.

[16] Oxon. R.O., Thame Papers II/ii/1.

[17] *J.O.J.*, 10 April 1784.

[18] Ibid. 12 and 26 June 1790, 21 May 1796; Williams op. cit. note 3, 78–9.

[19] J.M. Davenport, *Oxfordshire, Lords Lieutenant, High Sheriffs and Members of Parliament* (1888), 129–31; Williams op. cit. note 3, 79.

[20] Thorne op. cit. note 11, ii, 320. In 1802 G.F. Stratton in fact stood unsuccessfully at Eye.

[21] *Biographical Index to the Present House of Commons* (1808), 459.

[22] *J.O.J.*, 5 August 1815.

Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions. Throughout his public career he remained a prolific pamphleteer and an acerbic defender of rights of the gentry and the privileges of the Anglican establishment.[23] His electoral strategy appears to have been to await a propitious moment to challenge the Blenheim interest, and in the meantime to consolidate tory support by attempting to influence public opinion and disciplining the faithful.[24] Coker's tactical authority was tested in 1796 when Viscount Wenman, who had sat for the county since 1768, declined to seek re-election and a potentially divisive contest appeared unavoidable.[25] Henry Curzon declared himself a candidate, promptly issuing a manifesto in which he promised support to Pitt and opposition to 'the increase in the Prerogatives of the Crown . . . [and] the progress of Democratical Principles';[26] whilst Sir Christopher Willoughby appeared eager to capitalize on his local standing and existing connections with the Ministry by offering himself as a candidate.[27] Coker insisted that both men stand down, and that John Fane of Wormsley be returned unopposed.[28] With Spencer having defected with the Portland whigs in 1794 he was probably immune from challenge in 1796, and therefore Coker and other tory strategists deemed it imperative that the gentry agree on one candidate rather their fragment their votes and dissipate their energies in a three-way contest for 'their' seat.[29]

Coker meanwhile seized every opportunity to reinforce tory ideology, and throughout the years of the French Wars he proclaimed the virtues of orthodoxy and patriotism. His central premise was 'an anxiety for the welfare of those Establishments, the preservation of which I consider as absolutely essential to the best interests and happiness of my country'.[30] In practice this led him to insist upon the maintenance of penal laws against Roman Catholics. He was scandalized by the election of Lord Grenville, an advocate of Catholic emancipation, as Chancellor of Oxford University,[31] and he argued 'that the progress of our freedom was in proportion to the decline in the influence of the Roman Catholic Religion on the minds of the people of this country'.[32] In 1806 Coker easily persuaded an Oxfordshire county meeting to adopt a fiercely anti-Catholic address opposing all further measures of Catholic relief.[33] From 1793 he

[23] J. Dunkin, *History and Antiquities of Bicester* (1816), 20, 133–43; Davenport op. cit. note 19, 139; D.S. Eastwood, 'Governing Rural England. Authority and Social Order in Oxfordshire, 1780–1840', (Unpublished Univ. of Oxford D. Phil. thesis, 1985), vii, 34.

[24] There were clear signs of support for the idea of another challenge to the Marlborough interest as early as 1790; see Oxon. R.O., Thame Papers, II/ii/10, Francis Page to Lord Wenman, 14 June 1790.

[25] Viscount Philip Wenman (d. 1800) sat for Oxfordshire from 1768–96. From a tory family, he was described in 1781 as 'independent . . . and inclined to opposition', and thus he was perfectly consistent in supporting Wilkes in 1769. From 1784 until his retirement from the Commons he gave firm support to Pitt's government. In 1766 he married the daughter of the third earl of Abingdon. See Oxon. R.O., Thame Papers, II/ii/7; Namier and Brooke op. cit. note 1, iii, 623; Williams op. cit. note 3, 78.

[26] Bodl. G.A. Oxon 4° 49, Bound Volume of Newspaper Cuttings, p. 225.

[27] As well as being chairman of the Oxfordshire Quarter Sessions, Willoughby was a member of the Board of Agriculture and an advisor to the Home Office on penal policy: Oxon. R.O., Willoughby Collection, Wi IX/2a & 3; P.R.O., Home Office Papers, HO 42/51/30, Willoughby to Duke of Portland, 3 Sept. 1800; Eastwood op. cit. note 23, vii, 34, 74–86, 198–202.

[28] *J.O.J.*, 21, 28 May, 4 June 1796, 12 Aug. 1815. John Fane, of Wormsley Park near Stokenchurch, was M.P. for Oxfordshire from 1796 to 1824. He was a noted agriculturalist and a leading advocate of agricultural protection. In 1773 he married the eldest daughter of the third Earl of Macclesfield.

[29] F. O'Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (1967), 252.

[30] J. Coker and J. Hinton, *Letters on the Crusade of the Nineteenth Century* (1812), 26.

[31] J. Coker, *Some Reflections on the late Election of a Chancellor of the University of Oxford* (1810); Bodl. G.A. Oxon 4° 49, 159–60.

[32] J. Coker, *Remarks on the Considerations of Sir John Throckmorton* (1806), 6–7.

[33] Ibid., 15–17.

had been to the fore in establishing Loyalist Associations to counter the spread of radical and Jacobinical ideas by organizing demonstrations and the dissemination of loyalist propaganda.[34] Five years later Coker rushed into print to defend Pitt's wartime income tax as a necessary patriotic levy on the rich in a moment of national crisis.[35] One theme which ran throughout Coker's pamphlets concerned the corrosive dangers of excessive aristocratic influence in the politics of the nation. Liberal aristocrats with their enthusiasm for Catholic relief and their indifference to the rights of freeholders figured largely in Coker's political demonology, and he was even willing to entertain a modest measure of parliamentary reform in order to open up constituencies 'too liable to an unconstitutional control'.[36] By no means all Oxfordshire tories would have endorsed Coker's political position uncritically, and many would have shrunk from the violence of his language, but he did succeed in raising the level of political awareness and giving country toryism an ideological cutting-edge. This, coupled with political discipline and electoral organization, would carry them to victory.

In 1815 Lord Francis Spencer was elevated to the peerage as Baron Churchill confident that his nephew Lord Sunderland would be returned in his place.[37] However, with the war over and agricultural depression focussing the minds of many freeholders on the need for a vigorous member sympathetic to their claims for high levels of tariff protection, circumstances were uniquely favourable to opponents of the Duke of Marlborough's electoral influence.[38] Within days of Spencer's resignation, William Henry Ashhurst declared himself a candidate for the vacant seat. Ashhurst was the ideal tory gentleman: able, urbane, a widely-respected magistrate, and an improving yet sympathetic landlord.[39] Perhaps more important than Ashhurst's personal virtues was the quality of his campaign managers. Coker controlled strategy and propaganda, whilst the actual canvass was organised by George Frederick Stratton who, as he was to demonstrate in 1826, was probably the most able electioneer in the county.[40] Ashhurst's vastly more effective organization was to prove a decisive advantage, and his campaign received additional encouragement from endorsements by the sitting member John Fane and by John Atkyns Wright, M.P. for Oxford City between 1812 and 1820 and Coker's successor as chairman of the Quarter Sessions.[41] By early August Ashhurst was well-placed, his canvass was prospering, most of the leading gentry and magistrates had associated themselves with his challenge, and he easily carried the nomination on a show of hands.[42]

Ashhurst concentrated on the single issue of emancipating the freeholders from the tutelage of the Duke. Coker's opening salvo, in a pamphlet dated 24 July, set the tone: 'It is now . . . fifty years, that one half of the Representation of this County in Parliament, has been, as it were, surrendered into the hands of one noble family'. The consequences had been dismal: 'instead of governing their conduct by a respect for your opinions, [they] have . . . converted the trust reposed in them, to the purpose of their own private

[34] Dunkin op. cit. note 23, 182–3, 263–5; *J.O.J.*, 19 Jan. 1793.
[35] J. Coker, *Letter to the Freeholders and Inhabitants of the County of Oxford* (1798), esp. pp. 16–18.
[36] J. Coker, *Letter to Thomas Brand . . . upon the Subject of Parliamentary Reform* (1811), 7–8, cf. 23.
[37] *J.O.J.*, 27 July 1815.
[38] Ibid., 25 Feb. 1815; Bodl., Henley Papers, dep. d.86, W. Halliday to J. Henley, 26 July 1815.
[39] Anon., *The Late Elections: An Impartial Statement* (1818), 250–1; Eastwood op. cit. note 23, vii, 34–5, and *passim*.
[40] Eastwood op. cit. note 5, 101–3.
[41] *J.O.J.*, 5 and 12 Aug. 1815; Anon., *The Effects of Sabbath Breaking* (1815), 2.
[42] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15, Volume of Election Bills and Cuttings, nos. 54 and 56; *J.O.J.*, 5 Aug. 1815.

advantage and emolument'.[43] Ashhurst's propaganda went on to list the state pensions enjoyed by Sunderland's family and noted Lord Spencer's support for them.[44] This inability of the sons of the aristocracy to 'divest themselves of the partiality of their birth right' rendered them incapable of vigorously representing the distinctive interests of their constituents.[45] Thus freeholders were urged 'to submit no longer to the painful and mortifying humiliation of seeing your highest privileged perverted to the mean and unworthy purposes of administering to the self-interested objects of a single Family'.[46]

Sunderland's campaign managers made some attempt to counter this clarion call to independence, but for the most part they found themselves on the defensive.[47] They made an early tactical error in publishing Spencer's resignation and Sunderland's candidature simultaneously with apparently scant regard for any rights of freeholders;[48] and throughout August there were persistent rumours that Baron Churchill was blocking moving the writ for a by-election simply in order to give his nephew time to make up lost ground.[49] Nor did Sunderland's youthful frolics do much to help his cause. His opponents gave wide publicity to his involvement with his brother in a drinking bout at Watlington which culminated in their battering down a landlord's door in a drunken frenzy. A poster signed by a pro-Ashhurst 'eye witness' affected understanding: 'Boys will be boys, but then a boy is not a proper person to be a Member for a County'.[50] By late August, with Ashhurst's lead apparently unassailable, Sunderland's campaign fell into disarray. His campaign manager T.H. Taunton launched numerous ill-founded inculpations against Ashhurst and his supporters.[51] Coker was, absurdly, accused of profiteering on the county rates, whilst Ashhurst himself was caricatured as a rapacious landlord, whereas, in point of fact, he enjoyed quite the contrary reputation.[52] As the campaign dragged on with ever-increasing bitterness, some leading families publicly dissociated themselves from the contest.[53] In this overheated atmosphere Coker became paranoic, even contacting Sidmouth, the home secretary, to accuse unnamed ministers of intervening to support Sunderland.[54]

As polling day approached, all passion and cash were spent, and both sides were virtually paralysed by penury. Supporters were urged to make their own way to the poll, and all other expenses were pared to a minimum.[55] Ashhurst even considered withdrawing for lack of funds, but was persuaded to continue the fight by friends' subscriptions to cover his costs. Sunderland was ultimately crippled by his grandfather's

[43] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (51), pp. 1–3; *J.O.J.*, 29 July 1815.
[44] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (78); *J.O.J.*, 26 Aug. 1815.
[45] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (63), Poster signed 'Probus'.
[46] *Ibid.*, (15), p. 3.
[47] See *The Effects of Sabbath Breaking*, *passim*.
[48] *J.O.J.*, 22 July 1815.
[49] Ibid., 9, 16 Sept. 1815; G.A. Oxon b. 15 (64).
[50] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (92 & 102).
[51] The Tauntons were the Duke of Marlborough's solicitors, and at the time of the election T.H. Taunton was deputy county clerk, an office in the gift of Marlborough as Lord Lieutenant. Soon after the contest the Duke nominated him to replace his father as Clerk of the Peace, *J.O.J.*, 28 October 1815.
[52] Ibid., 9, 16, 23 & 30 Sept. 1815; Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (91 & 101). By a delicious irony, in the 1830s an investigating committee of the Quarter Sessions found evidence of maladministration and financial incompetence, if not exactly of corruption, during the Tauntons' terms as clerks of the peace: see Eastwood op. cit. note 23, 36–7.
[53] *Gloucester Journal*, 9 Oct. 1815.
[54] British Library, Official Corres. of 2nd Earl of Liverpool, MS Add. 38 262 f. 49, Coker to Sidmouth, 6 Sept. 1815; cf. f. 47, Sidmouth to Liverpool, 10 Sept. 1815.
[55] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (107 & 120); *J.O.J.*, 7 Oct. 1815.

financial embarrassments, and by the eve of polling the Duke was firm in his determination not to foot further bills for a contest he saw every prospect of losing.[56] Sunderland therefore had no option but to withdraw before polling began. Ashhurst was duly returned, and the tory gentry were triumphant. Ashhurst attributed his success to 'a union of gentlemen truly zealous . . . for the independent spirit of the county', and he claimed that his canvass returns had predicted a majority of around 800.[57] Although Sunderland claimed that Ashhurst was home by the much narrower margin of 150–190 votes, his failure to contest the county at the 1818 general election, despite earlier promises to do so, suggests that he regarded the outcome of the 1815 contest as a decisive defeat for the Marlborough interest in particular and for aristocratic influence in county politics more generally.[58]

Thus in 1815 the pattern of Oxfordshire politics was transformed without the electors actually going to the poll. The electoral arrangement which had governed the representation of the county since 1761 was in tatters and an elite group of tory gentry who already controlled the internal politics of the county through their dominance of the Quarter Sessions now established themselves as brokers of the county's parliamentary representation.[59] The realignment of Oxfordshire politics in 1815 removed the most glaring usurpation of the rights of freeholders, but it incidentally created new distortions in the county's representation. Sunderland's supporters had pointed out that one effect of an Ashhurst victory would be to leave the representation of the county in the hands of agriculturalists from the more sparsely populated southern half of the county whilst the more populous and economically-diverse northern area of the county was denied the benefits of a sympathetic and locally-resident spokesman in the House.[60] In an era of agricultural protection, retrenchment, and government-inspired deflation this was a matter of some significance. But new patterns were slow to emerge. In 1826 G.F. Stratton broke with Ashhurst and offered himself as a liberal tory candidate and a spokesman for the distinctive interests of the northern areas of the county, but only in the heat of the conflict over parliamentary reform in 1831 was the new mould of Oxfordshire politics shattered.[61] For a decade after 1815 the tory gentry held sway, managing the returns at the general elections of 1818 and 1820 and at a by-election in 1824 when the John Fane was succeeded by his son without a hint of formal opposition. 'Independence', the victorious slogan of 1815, seemed in practice to mean little more than passive obedience to a tory landed elite.

The Society is grateful to the Greening Lamborn Trust for a grant towards the publication of this paper.

[56] 'Tit-for-Tat', *Account of a Subscription . . . to Defray the Expenses for L-RD S-ND-RL-ND* (1815); W. Wing, *Oxfordshire Elections in the Present Century, 1802–78* (1878), 4. For the parlous state of Marborough's finances see A.L. Rowse, *The Later Churchills* (1958), 197–201.

[57] *Gloucester Journal*, 16 Oct. 1815.

[58] *J.O.J.*, 14 & 21 Oct. 1815. Ashhurst's committee estimated the number of freeholders at 3,300, whilst Sunderland's committee put the total at 3,266. This slightly lower and apparently more precise estimate would give a total electorate in 1815 which was some 17 per cent lower than the number actually turning out to vote in 1754, itself a dramatic demonstration of the effects of the electoral atrophy which had gripped the county since 1754. Sunderland's campaign managers claimed that 1,373 were definitely promised to Sunderland and 103 were positively neutral. 349 had not declared their intentions to Sunderland or his agents. Assuming two-thirds of those undeclared would have supported Ashhurst at the poll, Sunderland's committee projected the probable result as: Ashhurst 1,674 (51.3 per cent); Sunderland 1,489 (45.6 per cent); Abstentions 103 (3.1 per cent). As the turnout in 1826 was only 2,295, Sunderland's estimates should be treated with considerable caution: see Eastwood op. cit. note 5, 116.

[59] Eastwood op. cit. note 23, 13–20 *et passim*.

[60] Bodl. G.A. Oxon b. 15 (53). Fane was resident at Wormsley Park and Ashhurst at Waterperry.

[61] Eastwood op. cit. note 5, 100–107.