

# JOHN HAMPDEN - THE RISE FROM OBSCURITY 1594 - 1636

by  
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When I was given the title for this talk today I was somewhat surprised. I wondered if there had been some confusion and that it should really have read *Oliver Cromwell - The Rise from Obscurity*. Compared with the family of his cousin John Hampden, the future Lord Protector's background was much less impressive. His great-grandfather was an unknown Welsh yeoman - Richard Williams - who came to the court of Henry VII in the previous century and adopted the name of his maternal uncle Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's great minister. Although Oliver's grandfather Sir Henry Cromwell owned Hinchbrook and Ramsey Abbey, Oliver's father was a younger son, and Oliver inherited very little in the way of property and was therefore little known outside East Anglia. In a speech to Parliament in 1654 he said, "I was by birth a gentleman, living neither in any considerable height, nor yet in obscurity". So if 'obscurity' is the wrong word to describe Oliver Cromwell's background, how much less so is it for his cousin.

The Hampdens had owned land in Buckinghamshire since before the Norman Conquest and had somehow held on to it afterwards. Within a hundred years of the Conquest Robert de Hampden was knighted, and from then on it was a story of service to the Crown and acquisition of land through inheritance and marriage. Many of the Hampdens were sheriffs not only of Bucks but also Bedfordshire; Members of Parliament; and Royal courtiers. Sir Edmund Hampden became an Esquire of the Body and Privy Councillor to Henry VII; Sir John Hampden 'of the Hill' as he was known, was one of the Queen's attendants at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 and he later commanded a Royal ship, *The Saviour*. His daughter Sybil, an ancestress of William Penn of Pennsylvania, was nurse to the future Edward VI. Griffith Hampden was an MP, served as High Sheriff of Bucks, and entertained Queen Elizabeth I in lavish style at Great Hampden. There is a story, almost certainly apocryphal, that he had the avenue known as 'The Queen's Gap' cut through the beechwoods overnight to improve the Queen's view.

So by the time Griffith's grandson John was born in 1594, the Hampdens had long been established as a powerful and influential family in the Chilterns and surrounding areas. They owned manors not only in Bucks, but in Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Bedfordshire, Essex and Hampshire, and there is a doggerel rhyme which suggests that one of the Hampdens lost some of this land by quarrelling with the Black Prince over a game of tennis.

**Tring, Wing and Ivinghoe  
Hampden of Hampden did forego  
For striking of the Prince a blow  
And glad was he to escape it so**

There is no evidence that this quarrel ever took place or that the Hampdens owned these manors, but even such a loss would hardly have diminished their wealth. John was later estimated to have an annual income of at least £1,500 - a enormous sum, putting him in the multi-millionaire class by today's standards. If the rhyme has some basis in fact, it indicates the status of the Hampdens.

All this huge inheritance became John's at the age of 3, when his father William died., and he and his brother Richard were raised by their mother Elizabeth, who was the sister of Oliver Cromwell's father. Shrewdly she secured the wardship of her son for the sum of £800, thereby avoiding the revenues of the estate going to the Crown. Elizabeth sent John to Lord Williams's Grammar School here in Thame, where according to Anthony a Wood, "the Hampdens while young had been mostly bred in the said school in Thame and had sojourned either with the Vicar or the Master".

The Master was a much respected scholar, Richard Bouchier, who ensured that his pupils had a firm grounding in the disciplines that they would need in later life. Up at 5 am for prayers and breakfast, then lessons in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, Bible readings and oratory, before finishing at 5 pm with more prayers. On Sundays the boys attended morning and evening services at the nearby parish church and were required to discuss the subjects of the sermons on Monday morning.

In 1609, when he was 15, Hampden left the Grammar School and entered Magdalen College in Oxford. It was either here or at Thame that he met his lifelong friend Arthur Goodwin of Lower Winchendon. Together they wrote verses for *Luctus Posthumus*, a collection to mark the death of Henry, Prince of Wales, in 1612, and a year later some more verse for *Lusus Palatini*, which celebrated the marriage of Henry's sister Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine.

From University Hampden went to the Inner temple to study law; a common practice for such landed gentlemen. He would be destined for a lifetime of administering the wide estates which he owned, and therefore legal training was essential. Only 2 miles from the Inner Temple was the Palace of Westminster, where the Law Courts sat, and we can imagine this young man walking along the river to Westminster Hall and witnessing the practical application of the

law he was studying, and which would play such an important part in his life. He may well have visited St Stephen's Chapel, where the House of Commons sat, and acquired the ambition to be a member, like so many of his forebears.

Hampden was at the Inner Temple for 2 years, from 1613 to 1615, and, having reached maturity, probably took over the management of his estates. His mother appeared to still have her finger very much in the pie, because in 1620 she wrote to Anthony Knyvet, "If ever my son will seek for his honour, tell him now to come, for here is multitudes of lords a making.... I am ambitious of my son's honour, which I wish were now conferred upon him, that he might not come after so many new creations".

John Hampden was not interested in this. Perhaps he was aware of the debased court of King James I and wanted nothing to do with it; perhaps he was aware that political power would shift to the House of Commons; or perhaps he was far too happy with his new wife. He had married Elizabeth Symeon of Pyrton on Midsummer Day 1619 and the couple settled down at Hampden House. 2 years later he entered Parliament as Member for Grampound in Cornwall.

Hampden entered Parliament at what was probably one of the most significant period in its history. It had already been in existence for over 300 years, and had mostly been viewed by the various monarchs as a convenient way of persuading the populace to finance the Crown and of ratifying Royal decisions. It could be called or dissolved at the whim of the Sovereign, so there were long periods when no Parliament was in session. Queen Elizabeth I knew how to manage her Parliaments; mainly because they were composed largely of Protestant gentlemen who loved her as their champion against the tide of the Counter-Reformation which was sweeping Europe. Her successor, James VI of Scotland, possessed no such hold, and held firmly to the idea of the Divine Right of Kings and that "a King and subjects are clean different things". When the Commons presented James with a Protestation that their liberties were 'the ancient and undoubted birthright and inheritance of the subjects of England', he dissolved Parliament and tore the Protestation out of the Commons' Journal with his own hands.

Although Hampden had been an MP for a only few months, he had served his apprenticeship. He had sat on a number of committees and learned the way in which the House did business. Equally importantly, he had come to know and respect such individuals as Sir Edward Coke, John Pym and Sir John Eliot. He had also witnessed the behaviour of the new Stuart monarchy at first hand. It is doubtful if he was impressed.

Another Parliament was called in 1624, but Hampden did not sit in this one initially. He withdrew from Grampound and promoted a scheme to re-enfranchise three Buckinghamshire boroughs - Amersham, Marlow and Wendover. It is an indication of Hampden's wealth and status that he employed a lawyer, William Hakewill, to carry out all the legal work and submit the petition to Parliament. King James objected to having any more MPs from radical Buckinghamshire, but the writs were issued and Hampden became MP for Wendover.

James died the following year, and was succeeded by his son Charles. It was said that, had his brother Henry become King, Charles would have been Archbishop of Canterbury. He was certainly a great exponent of the Church of England, and it was his efforts to restore some of the dignity and ceremony to the Church, as well as his foreign policy and his marriage to a French Catholic that caused many Protestants to believe that he was leading England back into the fold of Rome. More so than his father, Charles also interfered in finance and trade by granting monopolies on such essentials as salt and soap.

So when his first Parliament assembled in June 1625, the seeds of dispute were there. Both Houses were composed largely of gentlemen and peers who had become wealthy by acquiring monastic lands at the Dissolution of the Monasteries. They were determined to enjoy that wealth, and they believed that they had a right to be consulted on how much should be allocated to the Crown and how it should be spent. When the House of Commons voted far less in subsidies than the King expected, he issued a demand to each county for a compulsory loan. John Hampden's share was assessed at £13. 6s. 8d, and one of his neighbouring MPs wrote, "I do think Mr John Hampden to be £13. 6s. 8d and his mother £10 a harder rate than I find on any other". Hampden appealed and the assessment was reduced to £10, but the business could hardly have endeared the King to him.

The leadership of the House now devolved upon Sir John Eliot, and he started proceedings to impeach the King's favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, for his corruption and incompetence as Lord Admiral. Eliot asked Hampden to list the possible charges against the Duke, which he did, but before the impeachment could proceed the King again dissolved Parliament. Still short of money, Charles tried to raise a large sum by means of a forced loan. John Hampden was one of those who refused to pay, and was summoned before the Privy Council, where he is said to have answered, "I would be content to lend as well as others, but I fear to draw upon myself that curse in Magna Carta which is to be read twice a year to those who infringe it".

Like so much of Hampden's life, this is based on hearsay or later reports. It is said that he was imprisoned in the Gatehouse or in Hampshire throughout 1627, but it may be that he was confused with his cousin Sir Edmund Hampden, who was imprisoned together with Sir John Eliot. In any event, such activities on the part of the King could only have reinforced Hampden's opposition to such arbitrary government.

Charles's third Parliament assembled in 1628; all the 76 prisoners having been released. Many of Hampden's closest colleagues and relations were among the new members, including a certain Oliver Cromwell from Huntingdon. Eliot was again the leading light, and if Hampden had been imprisoned with him, they had obviously learned to like and respect each other. Hampden served on 15 committees in this Parliament; 8 of them concerning religion. He earned a high reputation among his colleagues as a manager of business and a negotiator, rather than an orator. He was a good listener.

It was this Parliament that passed the famous Petition of Right, that cornerstone of English liberty, which made illegal:

**LEVYING OF ANY TAX OR CHARGE WITHOUT THE CONSENT OF PARLIAMENT.  
IMPRISONMENT OF ANY CITIZEN ON THE KING'S WORD ALONE.  
BILLETING OF SOLDIERS WITHOUT PAYMENT IN PEACETIME.**

Following this, the Commons voted the King a grant of £350,000, but he wanted more, and decided that the ancient tax of tunnage and poundage was not covered by the Petition of Right. The House launched a counter attack against the Royal customs officers, in which Hampden made his first recorded speech. Charles also appointed William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury and encouraged him to re-introduce elaborate ceremonial into the Church of England. The opposition, led by Eliot, decided on a protest against those who made Popish or Arminian innovations in religion on one hand, and against those who advised the illegal taking or paying of tunnage and poundage. The Speaker, who was a King's man, refused to allow any speeches, but Denzil Holles and Benjamin Valentine held him down in his chair, with Holles roaring, **"God's wounds. You shall sit till we please to rise!"** The protest was read out, and the House dissolved. It was not to meet again for 11 years.

Within days 9 members of the House were imprisoned in the Tower. Hampden was not among them, but Eliot was, and so began a correspondence between them which is both illuminating and moving. Fifteen letters from Eliot to Hampden, and 9 from Hampden to Eliot survive. Their deep regard for each other shines out in their writings, which, despite the dire circumstances, abound with good humour. In one letter Hampden wrote:

**"Sir, I write indeed rather to let you know that you are frequent in my thoughts than for any business that at the moment requires it; and if those thoughts can contrive anything that might conduce to my friend's service, I should entertain them with much affection".**

When Eliot wrote to say that the Lieutenant of the Tower had been appointed as an emissary to Brussels, Hampden replied good-humouredly, **"You were far enough above my emulation before; but, breathing now the same air with an ambassador, you are out of all aim".**

Hampden also kept a fatherly eye on Eliot's two sons while they were at Oxford University, and frequently entertained them at Great Hampden.

The conditions of his imprisonment affected Eliot's health, and he steadfastly refused to submit to the King. Eventually, in November 1632 he died, and even then Charles would not let his body be taken back to Port Eliot for burial, but ordered it to be buried in the Tower.

This action must really have affected Hampden deeply, and confirmed his opposition to the King. One contemporary wrote that, after his imprisonment in 1627, "his carriage was much fiercer", but it seems more likely that this change was the result of Eliot's ill-treatment and death.

John Hampden was now back in the same situation as when he was first married; living at Great Hampden, with no political responsibilities; running his estates; and acting as a Justice of the Peace. Now however, he had 9 children, and had acquired a large circle of contacts as an MP. Like them, he had interests in two colonial enterprises in the New World - the Massachusetts Bay Company and the Providence Company, and he probably owned some land in Connecticut. All these shareholders were Puritans and opponents of the King when in Parliament, and so under the guise of shareholders' meetings, what was, in effect, the Parliamentary opposition met at places like Broughton Castle, where there was a turret room impervious to eavesdroppers - The Room That Hath No Ears. Matters other than the Americas were certainly discussed.

Sadly, in 1634, Hampden's beloved wife Elizabeth died. That theirs had been a love match is evident from the epitaph he composed for her memorial in Great Hampden church, and he obviously felt her loss very deeply.

So here we have this able and talented man, deprived of his wife and companion, deprived of his work in Parliament, kicking his heels in the Chilterns, with little to occupy himself. True, he had the Hampden estates to run, but I imagine that by now he had got that down to a fine art. True, he had his work as a JP, such as seeing to the maintenance of highways and bridges, and regulating the sale of corn in the market towns, but was this enough? There is a story that at this time he and Cromwell decided to emigrate to America, and were actually waiting on the dockside in London when they were prevented by an order of the King. It seems unlikely that Hampden would abandon his estates and responsibilities in this way, especially as his son was still a minor. It is possible that after the loss of his wife he may

have decided to make a visit to the New World to get away for a while. If the emigration story is true, the King made a grave tactical error!

And then, in 1635, occurred the event that was to propel John Hampden into the national limelight. Ship Money! This was an ancient tax on the coastal counties to provide ships in times of national emergency. Charles had tried to impose it in 1628 but it proved so unpopular that he abandoned it. In any case, Parliament was sitting then, and he probably thought he could get the money by more conventional means. Now that he had no Parliament (and no intention of calling one if he could help it) he was advised in 1634 to try again. And it worked! There were grumblings, but because the tax was something hallowed by precedent, everyone paid up.

So the following year the writ was extended to all counties, and provoked a storm of protest. Such a tax was in clear contravention of the Petition of Right, and there was no national emergency. Buckinghamshire was required to provide a fully-equipped ship of 450 tons with provisions for 6 months, or £4,500 in money. One can imagine how disappointed Charles would have been if he had got the ship, since it was the money he was after!

In the event, he got no ship and only about half the money, so the next year he issued a third Ship Money writ. Many refused to pay, including John Hampden. Lord Saye and Sele tried to get the King to prosecute him, but instead the King settled on Hampden, probably because he was a quiet, inoffensive commoner whereas Saye and Sele was a noisy and aggressive peer. Another tactical error!

Hampden had obviously been assessed on all his lands, and I don't have the total amount, but the important assessment was the 20 shillings on his Stoke Mandeville property. As Edmund Burke was later to say, **“Would twenty shillings have ruined Mr Hampden's fortune? No! but the payment of half twenty shillings, on the principle it was demanded, would have made him a slave”**. And that was the point. Irrespective of the amount, the tax was illegal. Furthermore, Hampden was objecting on behalf of his tenants, many of whom were farmers and smallholders who could not afford to be mulcted by the Crown at will. In Great Kimble church is a copy of the roll listing the freeholders who met there to affirm their opposition. Hampden's name is at the top, with the 20 shillings charge against his name, but there are many others with much smaller amounts. He was fighting for them.

So in February 1637 a writ was issued against Hampden requiring him to show cause why he had not paid the 20 shillings assessment. When the case commenced in the Court of Exchequer Chamber in the autumn, Hampden's counsel Oliver St. John addressed the judges for 3 days, after which the Solicitor General responded for another 3 days. Robert Holbourne then spoke on Hampden's behalf for another 4 days, after which the Attorney General summed up. There is no record of how long he spoke, but the 12 judges then adjourned until the Hilary term of 1638, when their verdict would be given.

This case became nationally famous. Englishmen of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were fascinated by the law, and always ready to resort to it, so there was enormous interest in the proceedings. Hampden's name was on everyone's lips.

In his *History of the Great Rebellion*, the Royalist Clarendon wrote of Hampden at the trial: **“Before this he was rather of reputation in his own country (meaning Bucks) than of public discourse or fame in the kingdom, but then he grew the argument of all tongues, every man enquiring who it was that durst at his own charge support the liberty and property of the kingdom, and rescue his country from being made a prey to the court”**.

And he added that Hampden's **“carriage throughout that agitation was with that rare temper and modesty that they who watched him narrowly to find some advantage against his person, to make him less resolute in his cause, were compelled to give him a just testimony. And the judgement that was given against him infinitely more advanced him than the service for which it was given”**.

That judgement, when it was finally delivered in June 1638, was 7-5 in favour of the King, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Clarendon wrote that the decision **“left no man anything he could call his own”**. Resistance to the tax increased, and in 1639 no one in Buckinghamshire appears to have paid anything.

I don't want to trespass too far beyond my allocated date or onto the content of subsequent speakers, but it is worth mentioning that within 2 years the King was forced to call Parliament again. Clarendon wrote of Hampden, **“When this parliament began, the eyes of all men were fixed on him as their *Patriae pater*, and the pilot that must steer their vessel through the tempest and rocks which threatened it. And I am persuaded his power and interest at that time was greater to do good or hurt than any man's in the kingdom, or any man of his rank hath had in any time; for his reputation for honesty was universal, and his affections seemed so publicly guided that no corrupt or private ends could bias them”**. In 1640 Hampden occupied the same position as that of his descendant Winston Churchill exactly 3 centuries later. And it is, of course, from *Patriae pater* that we get the word Patriot, by which name John Hampden has been known ever since.

What of the character of this remarkable man? We in the John Hampden Society who admire Hampden tend to look upon him as an a flawless character who embodies all the virtues and none of the faults. In his biography of Hampden, Professor John Adair writes that **“he seems to have inherited a good nature, so that people found him easy and**

**pleasant in conversation. He carried himself well in society and attracted people into friendship with him".** Professor Adair also writes of Hampden's "**flowing courtesy to all men**". The Royalist Sir Philip Warwick said of Hampden, "**He was certainly a person of the greatest abilities of any of that party. He had a great knowledge both on Scholarship and in the Law**", while Clarendon believed that he had "**the most absolute faculties to govern the people of any man I ever saw**".

But whatever his qualities, Hampden was no plaster saint. There is a story about a quarrel he is supposed to have had with another landowner over a bridge for which they were jointly responsible for the maintenance. Apparently, Hampden stood on his side of the boundary shaking his stick in rage at his opponent. I like that; it makes my hero somehow more human.

And what would have happened if John Hampden had not been mortally wounded at Chalgrove? My wife Annabel has a rather simplistic answer when the subject crops up and someone asks, "Who was John Hampden?" She replies, "If he had lived, he would have been Oliver Cromwell!"

I can't say I totally agree with this. John Pym, who was the leader in Parliament, died in late 1643, so Hampden may well have given up all military involvement and taken on Pym's mantle. They had, after all, worked closely together before the Civil War, and Hampden was not a natural soldier. In view of the respect and admiration in which Cromwell held his cousin, Hampden may have been able to restrain Cromwell's support and encouragement of the religious Independents within the Army, and been better able to negotiate with the King. In such a case, I don't believe Charles would have been executed.

Dr Paul Hooper thinks differently, and believes that Hampden never forgave the King for Eliot's death. In a recent article he wrote that, at the time of the passing of the Grand Remonstrance, it is said that Hampden remarked, "**The King must put himself and his family entirely into our hands**". I think the operative phrase here is, 'it is said'. Like so much concerning John Hampden, there is no firm evidence, just hearsay. In any case, such a statement does not necessarily signify a desire to execute the King. I prefer to think of Hampden's fair-minded behaviour during the Act of Attainder against the Earl of Strafford, when he insisted that the Earl's counsel be heard, and then abstained from the vote. To me, Hampden resembles men like Fairfax, Waller, and Massey, who all turned away from the Army's extremism.

John Hampden's life was not really a rise from obscurity; more a case of the hour producing the man.