

THE DEATH OF JOHN HAMPDEN

by

John Adair

‘Poor Hampden is dead ... I have scarce strength to pronounce that word.’ So wrote Anthony Nichol, M.P., on hearing that John Hampden had died of wounds received on Chalgrove Field on Sunday June 18th, 1643. ‘Never Kingdom received a greater loss in one subject, never a man a truer and faithful friend.’

Colonel Arthur Goodwin, Hampden’s fellow M.P. for Buckinghamshire, wrote on June 26th in a similar vein to his daughter:

‘I am here at Hampden doing the last duty for the deceased owner of it, of whom every honest man hath a share in the loss, and therefore will likewise in the sorrow ... All his thoughts and endeavours of his life was zealously in this cause of God’s, which he continued in all his sickness, even to his death. For all I can hear the last words he spake was to me, though he lived six or seven hours after I came away as in a sleep. Truly, Jenny, (and I know you may easily be persuaded to it), he was a gallant man, an honest man, an able man, and take all, I know not to any man living second. God now in mercy hath rewarded him. I have writ to London for a black suit, I pray let me beg of you a broad black ribbon to hang about my standard ...’

Clarendon, who did not conceal an admiration for his old opponent Hampden, reported the universal wave of grief that swept through London, Parliament and the people throughout the land, one so great that it was ‘as if their whole army had been defeated: his private loss is unspeakable’.

Why did the death of one man cause such a poignant sense of bereavement among so many? The great Ship Money trial of 1637 had made Hampden a national figure, but it was his qualities as an Englishman and as a Puritan gentleman that won him the love of those whom he met or who set eyes on him from afar. These qualities had given Hampden pre-eminence in the Long Parliament. He was a good listener, an attribute his first cousin Oliver Cromwell may well have learnt from him. A humorous and pleasant man, he possessed a will of steel and an intelligence of exceptional keenness. In the House of Commons his leadership was exercised largely behind the scenes.

Yet Clarendon, who coupled his name with that of John Pym as the leaders of the Commons, pointed out that he had a popularity in the country at large denied to Pym; so that in November 1640 ‘the eyes of all men were fixed on him as their Patriae pater, and the pilot that must steer their vessel through the tempests and rocks which threatened it...’

Unfortunately, few of Hampden’s papers and letters have survived; nor can his portrait convey his charm. There are several testimonies, however, to his self-mastery, which made him a calming, steadying influence in the hour of crisis.

For example, during the debate on the Grand Remonstrance in the small hours of November 23rd, 1641, in the dim candle-lit chamber an eye-witness compared to the Valley of the Shadow of Death, for it seemed the members would sheath their swords in each others’ bowels ‘had not the sagacity and great calmness of Mr Hampden prevented it’. As Clarendon perceived, Hampden was more than a party man; he was a great Englishman. A new word, introduced from the French language during his lifetime, summed him up: he was a patriot.

During the Civil Wars Hampden threw himself into the cause, and displayed much courage and practical ability. As a wealthy Buckinghamshire landowner, and one of the Five Members (all of whom received commissions as colonels with the exception of Pym, who was no soldier), Hampden raised a regiment of Greencoats in his own county; and, having energetically helped to secure Buckinghamshire for Parliament, he re-joined the main army of the Earl of Essex.

When the Battle of Edgehill opened, on October 23rd, 1642, he was some miles away escorting the artillery train; but he pressed forward and arrived as dusk fell at the head of a brigade. He urged a further attack; but the Earl of Essex heeded the advice of senior professional officers and broke off the fight.

Again at Brentford, November 12th, it was Hampden who reached the village in time to reinforce the two regiments that had borne the brunt of the sudden Royalist thrust on London.

The following spring he divided much of his time between the army at Windsor and Parliament, using all his considerable powers to prevent a split between the two, as the 'hawks' at Westminster became more vocal in their criticism of the lethargic, incommunicative Lord General. Hampden, trusted alike by the 'violent spirits', not least by his cousin from Huntingdon, and by the Earl of Essex, did more than any other to hold together that coalition of interests which made up the cause in 1643.

His efforts could not have been helped by a report on April 11th, in the Royalist newsbook *Mercurius Aulicus*, 'how it was noised in the City that the Earl of Essex was to leave the place of General unto Mr Hampden, as one more active and so by consequence more capable of the style of Excellency'.

Hampden and others urged the Lord General to attack Oxford; but instead he marched on Reading, which fell after an inglorious siege on April 27th. In early June the Army at last set out towards Oxford and took up quarters in east Oxfordshire.

Hampden laboured to build up its strength for the impending great battle, as his last extant letter from Stokenchurch on June 9th witnesses. But, late on Saturday June 17th, Prince Rupert led a flying column of a thousand troopers and dragoons on a raid into enemy territory. After attacking quarters at Postcombe and Chinnor in the night, the Royalist column turned their weary horses homewards.

On Chalgrove Field, three miles from the bridge at Chislehampton over the River Thame, they faced about to confront the various Parliamentary troops of horse that were in close pursuit of them. One of them, a troop belonging to Captain Crosse and quartered in Thame, had cheerfully accepted Hampden's offer to lead them; and he rode at their head.

Prince Rupert arrayed his regiments in line behind a long hedge. After some galling fire from the parliamentary dragoons, he could contain himself no longer and crashed over the hedge at the head of his startled lifeguard. In a short time the Cavaliers had advanced and engaged the eight parliamentary troops, who had just time to fire their pistols before receiving the full force of the first charge. To the surprise of their opponents, the Parliamentary horse stood their ground re-forming and fighting vigorously with sword, pistol and carbine.

But the superior numbers of the Royalists began to tell; and the Roundhead officers could be heard shouting above the din to get their men to withdraw in good order towards their reserves, who stood watching near Warpsgrove House. Yet the Cavaliers pressed hard on their heels and broke the newly-rallied troops; so that they scattered each man for himself over the sloping fields of Oxfordshire.

Hampden suffered his fatal wound at the first charge in the fight. The newsbooks published in London within days of his letter, following the Earl of Essex's despatch, said that he was 'shot into the shoulder'. Clarendon's account mentions 'a brace of bullets which broke the bone'.

A Parliamentary trooper, taken prisoner later that day, told his captors 'that he was confident Mr Hampden was hurt for he saw him ride off the field before the action was done, which he never used to do, with his head hanging down, and resting his hands upon the neck of his horse, by which he concluded he was hurt'.

Tradition relates that Hampden rode towards his father-in-law's house, Pyrton Manor, three miles away from Chalgrove Field, before turning his horse's head northwards and riding five miles to Thame, where he took to his bed.

At first, it looked as if he would recover. An account of the fight, printed in London as he lay at Thame, reported that it was 'certain that Colonel Hampden, that noble and valiant gentleman, received a shot with a bullet behind in the shoulder, which stuck between the bone and the flesh, but is since drawn forth, and himself very cheerful and hearty, and it (through God's mercy) more likely to be a badge of honour, than any danger of life'.

Alas, it was not to be. Inflammations, spasms and possibly gangrene caused much concern; and on June 22nd a letter-writer in London noted that three more physicians had been sent to his bedside. In Hampden's quarters the London doctors joined a Mr Delafield, surgeon to the soldiers in Thame, who later lived in Aylesbury.

A descendant of his compiled a family memoir, which mentions that Hampden died after 'receiving a musket shot in the shoulder'. It is possible that this represents a piece of family tradition handed down from father to son.

If Sir Philip Warwick, a gentleman volunteer in the King's Lifeguard at Oxford, is to be believed, the King offered to send one of his own physicians. Warwick met Dr Giles, the parson of Chinnor, in an Oxford street and learned from him the news of Hampden's fever. Warwick blamed it on the poor quality of Hampden's blood, which 'in its temper was acrimonious, as the scurf on his face showed'.

Instructed by the King, Dr Giles sent a messenger to enquire about his condition. It was not so much a humanitarian gesture, for the King looked upon Hampden's support 'if he could gain his affection, as a powerful means of begetting a right understanding betwixt him and his two Houses'. Although Hampden was 'in a high fever and not very sensible', he was 'much amazed' to hear of this messenger from Oxford.

Hampden died on Saturday June 24th, which happened to be his wedding anniversary; and he was buried, probably two days later, at Great Hampden Church, which stands a stone's throw from his manor house high on the escarpment of the Chiltern Hills amid the Buckinghamshire beechwoods. A gold medal, which bears an engraved portrait of Hampden on the face and a battleaxe on the reverse, with the motto *Inimica Tyrannis* (Enemy of the Tyrant), was struck to commemorate his name. Yet those who were his contemporaries needed no medallion to remember him. As late as 1659, Richard Baxter could recall John Hampden as 'having the most universal praise of any gentleman that I remember of that age'.

Much as the Tories revered King Charles as a blessed martyr, so their opponents the Whigs - the political heirs of the 'good old Cause' - looked upon Hampden as their perfect martyr, the man who had laid down his life to preserve the essential liberty of all true Englishmen against the inroads of royal despotism. For his spirit, although usually it remained dormant, was in every English breast. Thomas Gray would see among those 'rude forefathers' in the country church yard of Stoke Poges

Some village-Hampden,
that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood.

This transformation of Hampden into a universal image of the English patriot found its most elegant expression in Macaulay's review of Lord Nugent's biography of John Hampden, a work that was received with such acclaim that it ran through four editions. George Grenville, Lord Nugent, was a passionate Whig, who sat in Parliament for Aylesbury from 1812 until 1832, and died in 1850. As second son of the first Marquis of Buckingham, Grenville was steeped in the Hampden tradition. Moreover, his connections gave him a rare opportunity. When he heard that the floor of Great Hampden Church was being relaid, he asked his elder brother, the Marquis of Buckingham and patron of the living, for permission to open Hampden's coffin.

The purpose of the disinterment was to establish the exact cause of Hampden's death. Henry James Pye, an undistinguished Poet Laureate, had reproduced in print the following story which purported to have come from the Harley family. Two of the Harleys and a Foley had dined with Sir Robert Pye at Faringdon House in Berkshire. Their host told them that Hampden had died because his pistol burst and shattered his hand in a terrible manner. From his deathbed Hampden sent for Sir Robert Pye, then a young captain of a troop of horse, who had married his daughter Anne when she was seventeen.

When Sir Robert stood by Hampden's bedside, the story continues, the dying man exclaimed, 'Ah, Robin, your unhappy pistol has been my ruin'. Sir Robert assured Hampden that the brace of pistols he had given him he had bought himself in Paris from an eminent maker, and that he had proved them himself. On examining the other pistol, he found it was loaded to the muzzle with several charges, owing to the carelessness of the servant who was ordered to see the pistols were loaded every morning, and who had done so without drawing out the previous charge.

In order to disprove this story, Lord Nugent set out from London on Saturday July 19th, 1828, accompanied by his friends William James Smith and the Common Serjeant of London, who later became Lord Denman. The party halted at Chalfont to see the church and the house where Milton had once resided, and then journeyed on to Aylesbury where they visited the county gaol. 'Upon that occasion', recalled Smith some thirty-five years later, 'I made my first, and I hope my last, appearance on the treadmill, in company with the future Lord Chief Justice of England'. That evening they stayed at Lilies, Lord Nugent's house.

On Monday morning, they arrived at Great Hampden Church and were met by the rector, Lord Buckingham's steward and a handful of invited guests, servants and grave-diggers. Nugent was in a buoyant

mood; he regarded it as a 'foregone conclusion' that the exhumation would disprove the Pye story. Probably he expected he would find a clearly named coffin in a family vault, with a skeleton inside to corroborate the contemporary news-letter accounts that Hampden had died from enemy bullets that had shattered his shoulder. From the various reports of the exhumation on July 21st we can piece together what actually happened. To begin with, there was no family vault. After examining several of the initials and plates on the coffins under the chancel floor, the party came on one bearing a plate so corroded that the name could not be read, which had originally been covered with wood and velvet. One account suggests that some thought it to be older in style than those of Hampden's period; but Nugent and his friends resolved to open it. The coffin lay four feet below the surface, on one side of the chancel, probably somewhere close to the wall between the memorial to Elizabeth Hampden and the Communion table.

The parish plumber descended, cut open the lead and peeled it back. Then Nugent took his place in silence and unwrapped the numerous folds of cerecloth, a material impregnated with wax used commonly as a winding-sheet. It was full of sawdust, which had evidently helped to preserve the corpse. Although the features were somewhat flattened by the pressure of the cloth, Nugent could see the firm white flesh of the face, the blood vessels still etched upon it. The eyes were filmed over; but the teeth looked perfect. The auburn-brown hair hung down some seven or eight inches long, fastened on top with a black ribbon. It came away from the skull when lifted and revealed the worms at work. A small brownish moustache could be seen, and a light stubble on the shaven chin. As Nugent could not examine the shoulders, the coffin was raised and laid on tressels in the chancel. After measuring the corpse, it was concluded that 'he was five feet nine inches in height, apparently of great muscular strength, of a vigorous and robust frame; forehead broad and high; the skull altogether well formed, such an one as the imagination could conceive capable of great exploits'. The body was placed in a sitting position, with a shovel to support the head; and a careful examination of the shoulders revealed no sign of gunshot wounds. In order to satisfy himself, there being no surgeon present, Nugent borrowed Smith's pocketknife and made several incisions, but found no fracture or displacement. Nugent was evidently disappointed, Smith recalled; for 'he did not care to establish the fact that Hampden's death was occasioned in any other manner than by a shot from the King's troops'. Smith himself had favoured the tradition as related by Sir Robert Pye; and so he examined the hands of the corpse:

'When I took up the right hand it was contained in a sort of funeral glove like a pocket. On raising it I found it was entirely detached from the arm: the bones of the wrist and hand were much displaced, and had evidently been splintered by some violent concussion, only the ends of the fingers were held together by the ligaments. The two bones of the fore-arm for about three inches above the wrist were without flesh or skin, but there were no marks of amputation. The left hand was in a similar glove, but it was firmly attached to the arm, and remained so when the glove was drawn away. There were slight portions of flesh upon the hand; the bones were complete, and still held in their places by the ligaments which supported them.'

Believing that his discovery had confirmed Pye's account, Smith, with the rest of the party, walked from the church early in the afternoon, to a meal in the adjacent manor house. The corpse was left propped up by the shovel, and not re-interred until the following day, having been seen by several hundred sight-seers in the meantime. Some, like Smith himself, cut off locks of the reddish-brown hair. Two years later, when a writer named Mrs Grote visited the parish, she was able to purchase three or four samples from the sexton and the neighbouring inn-keeper's daughter. Robertson, a servant in Great Hampden House, returning from the exhumation, claimed to have seen a portrait on 'the best staircase' that he recognised as the face in the grave. On being taken down, it was found to have inscribed on the back 'John Hampden, 1640. A present given to Sir William Russell, and afterwards given to John, Lord Russell'.

Smith would state categorically in 1863 that no other amputations took place in his presence; but reports in *The News* and *The Gentlemen's Magazine* that summer mentioned amputations of both arms to see if any dislocation had taken place - apparently a discoloured socket in one arm suggested that there had been one. By 1832, however, when Nugent's *Some Memorials of John Hampden, his Party and his Times* appeared, the author made no allusion to the exhumation. In a footnote on Hampden's death, he mentioned the two traditions of how it occurred and declared that 'of the veracity of the first named statement (i.e. that the patriot was shot in the shoulder) no-one now entertains a doubt'. Clearly Nugent had decided to ignore the evidence of the corpse and stick to contemporary reports, and felt entitled to dismiss Pye's version as 'a groundless story, told upon the authority of a nameless paper, by Horace Walpole, and by Echard'. On first reading the story, H.J. Pye had announced in the *St James's Chronicle* for 1761, that his father 'sent to

enquire of Baldwin, the printer' of the paper, how he met with the anecdote, who informed him that it was found written on a loose sheet of paper in a book that he, or some friend of his, bought out of Lord Oxford's family. My father always questioned the authenticity of it, as my grandfather was bred up and lived with Sir Robert Pye [who died in 1701] until he was eighteen years old, and he never mentioned any such circumstance'.

As for the corpse, Nugent seems to have fallen back on the fact that the coffin bore no inscription to proving it beyond doubt to be that of Hampden. Forster, who knew Nugent and wrote a memoir of him for the 1854 edition of the Memorials, quoted there Lord Denman's reply to Nugent's invitation to attend the unveiling ceremony of the memorial on Chalgrove Field: 'I cannot resist your company in attempting to give just honour to the great patriot, whose very identical body I am sure we saw.' But Nugent no longer shared his conviction. In a letter to a friend, wrote Forster, Nugent had said: 'I certainly did see in 1828, while the pavement of the chancel of Hampden Church was undergoing repair, a skeleton, which I have many reasons for believing was not John Hampden's, but that of some gentleman or lady, who probably died a quiet death in bed, certainly with no wound in the wrist.' Nugent may well have hoped that the Pye story was now utterly discredited. Yet, in 1863, Smith, the last but one surviving eye-witness, responded to the third edition of the Memorials with his own account of the exhumation as quoted above. He also made it plain that Nugent had certainly believed on the day that the corpse was that of John Hampden. On the inscription that Nugent wrote for the Chalgrove Monument erected in 1843, he noted, the cause of death was so vaguely worded that it cannot be questioned: 'he received a wound of which he died'. Under the circumstances, it was a very safe and prudent conclusion.

With regard to the cause of Hampden's death, it remains to be decided how far - if at all - the exhumation favoured one alternative or the other, or indeed both, as the press reports indicated. Having begun to write this article as a firm believer in the contemporary version that death was caused by a shot in the shoulder - I must admit that I am now inclined to believe that the Pye anecdote may point to the truth; and my reasons, in brief, are as follows. The overloaded pistol story is inherently possible, as such accidents are known to have happened. Hampden was roused at night before the Chalgrove skirmish; in the confusion, his servant may well have wished to make doubly sure that his pistols were well loaded, and have added another charge to each. The Parliament Scout, on June 27th, 1643, had stated that Hampden was hurt in the battle at the first charge, when he would naturally have drawn and fired one of his pistols. Nor is Sir Robert Pye's comparative silence about it to be wondered at; for it was hardly a story that he would have liked to have handed down.

Several bottles of claret may have been necessary to elicit the confession, especially as he may have maintained a prudent silence during his years of service as a colonel in the New Model Army, or as a member of Cromwell's parliaments. Oliver, as he must have known, always professed the highest regard for Hampden, and the unwitting cause of his cousin's death would hardly have been popular with him. The discovery of a male corpse of approximately the right period, in a coffin near Elizabeth Hampden's memorial, with a right hand in the condition that Smith described, is not insignificant. It is quite possible that an exploding pistol would dislocate a shoulder, if indeed evidence was found of that during or after the initial examination. Or perhaps Hampden fell off his horse more than once before reaching the safety of Thame.

Lastly, Lord Nugent inspires little confidence as an historian, and none as an archaeologist. It is true that he did search for and use contemporary evidence while he was writing his life of Hampden; but he was, first and foremost, a Whig politician who could allow nothing to tarnish the image of his hero; and the idea that Hampden had met his death by an inglorious accident, not at the hands of the Royalists, he would have found wholly unpalatable. Nor was he beyond describing what should have happened - as opposed to what did happen. In 1847, for example, he published anonymously his True and faithful relation of a worthy discourse between . . . JH [John Hampden] and . . . O Cromwell, a work of pure fiction purporting to be historical fact. It is also worth recording that A true and faithful narrative of the death of Mr Hampden, supposedly by a contemporary called E. Clough, which Nugent used as a source, has been dismissed by C.H. Firth as an 'impudent forgery', a view shared by most later historians. The true author of it remains unknown; but Nugent must be the first suspect. My own theory is that Nugent was convinced that the corpse belonged to Hampden, and that he saw the evidence of the severed right hand. Later, however, he persuaded himself otherwise. He had an emotionally powerful reason for doing so. His Memorials of the great patriot

earned him fame as an author in his life time; but the memory of the corpse, which he so rudely disturbed and left propped up against a spade that July day in 1828, has lived to question his renown.