

# FIRM FOUNDATION

## How the John Hampden Society began

This year marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the John Hampden Society, and it has been suggested that the occasion should be marked with an account of how the Society came into being.



Hampden House, venue for the Society's inaugural meeting

I have been an admirer of John Hampden since, as a small boy ill in bed and reliant upon the radio as a source of entertainment, I listened fascinated to a BBC Children's Hour programme called 'Jennifer's Journeys'. This was a series about an American girl travelling around Britain and learning about our history and traditions, and I vividly recall two particular programmes in which Jennifer was exploring my native county of Buckinghamshire.

In one of them, Jennifer learned of a Buckinghamshire landowner called John Hampden who stood out against the dictatorial policies of King Charles I and was killed at the Battle of Chalgrove. My hero worship for this fellow-countryman (using the word in its original 17<sup>th</sup>-century sense) was instantaneous, and has continued to this day.

Over the years I continued to take an interest in Hampden, and researched his life whenever I had the opportunity. I visited Hampden House when it was a girls' boarding school, and was kindly allowed by Mrs Leslie, the Headmistress, to peek into the Great Hall. In the 1970s, when Purnells published Winston Churchill's *A History of The English-Speaking Peoples* as a partwork, I persuaded them to let me write a short piece about John Hampden for the biographical supplement, and I also raised a troop of horse bearing his name within the Sealed Knot. Although the title was a historical inaccuracy, John Hampden's Troop of Horse was kitted out in smart green uniforms and had a guidon bearing the Talbot or dog from the Hampden crest. We took part in a number of battles, and my most cherished memory of those days is of leading my

troopers in a cavalry charge at Cropredy Bridge over the same ground as the 1644 battle.

But the real genesis of the John Hampden Society was the celebrations in 1992 to mark the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War. Apart from being intensely irritated at the way in which the whole event was portrayed by the media as a clash between Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, I was aware that the following year would be the same anniversary of Hampden's death, and that something should be done to mark it. The best way to do this seemed to be to start a society to organise some sort of commemoration. There were historical societies such as the Cromwell Association and the Richard III Society, and I thought that it would

be no bad thing if there was also a John Hampden Society, where like-minded persons could get together and commemorate Hampden's death.

Fortunately my interest in Hampden over the years had given me some useful contacts. Dr John Adair had been Lord General of the Parliamentary Army ('The Man in Black') in the Sealed Knot in the '70s and I had met him on a number of occasions. I was aware that he had written a superb biography of Hampden in 1976, so I contacted him with my idea. He was not over-enthusiastic; feeling that, because Hampden was so little known generally, such an organisation would attract little support, but he promised to do what he could to help. It is a measure of the man that he has since freely admitted that he was wrong.

Rather more enthusiastic, to put it mildly, was Dr Frank Hansford-Miller. He had founded the John Hampden New Freedom Party in the 1960s and later stood (unsuccessfully) for Parliament under that label. He also had written a biography of John Hampden in the 1970s; albeit a much

smaller work than John Adair's, and he kindly sent me an inscribed copy when he heard of my interest. I started a correspondence with Frank in mid-1992, and we arranged to meet in London in early September, where he was attending an exhibition of his paintings.



Setting up the Hampden funerary helm

The venue for this historic meeting was a rather uninspiring café near Moorgate tube station, and over a cup of tea I explained my idea to Frank. 'A great idea', he exclaimed enthusiastically. 'Let's form the society here and now!'

'Hang on', I replied. 'I think we can do better than that. Let's inaugurate it either at Hampden House in Great Hampden or in the Hampden Arms pub there'. He agreed.

The third recipient of my importunities was Miles Hobart-Hampden, 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Buckinghamshire, a direct descendant of John Hampden. I had never met Lord Buckinghamshire, but I wrote to him and we arranged to meet at the Chequers Hotel in Newbury when he was passing through. Miles (as everyone in the Society has come to know him) was interested and promised his support, but admitted that he had always taken more interest in the Hobart side of his family. Someone else who later changed his mind!

Since its days as a girl's school Hampden House had passed into the ownership of a financial group under the chairmanship of Tim Oliver, and had been extensively and expensively renovated as its headquarters. I made an appointment to see Mr Oliver, and seated in the elegant drawing-room in John Hampden's ancestral home drinking excellent coffee (a far cry from the Moorgate café!) I outlined my proposal for a John Hampden Society.



Lord Buckinghamshire welcoming the guests in the Great Hall

'So what do you want me to do?' Tim asked. Taking a deep breath, I said, 'I don't suppose you would let us have a contribution of £250 to get the Society off the ground?'

'You're quite right', he replied pleasantly. 'I wouldn't!'

'In that case', I said, 'will you allow us to hold the inauguration ceremony here?'

'Yes', he replied without hesitation, 'but if so, I want to get something out of it, so I would want the organisation to be done through my PR company'.



**Dr John Adair addressing the meeting, flanked by (left to right) Dr Frank Hansford-Miller, Lord Buckinghamshire and Roy Bailey. Derek Lester (second from right) commands the Guard of Honour**

As I am always happy for someone else to do my work for me, I readily agreed, and Tim put me in touch with Philip Vincent, who ran a small but efficient organisation from a top-floor office in Oxford High Street. Philip immediately took over most of the arrangements which included persuading Buckinghamshire County Council to loan us John Hampden's funerary helm and organising the production of a commemorative cake (below). I supplied Philip with a list of persons and organisations whom I wanted invited, to which he added a number of others from his extensive database.



Together with potted biographies of the four prospective founders, these details were formed into a press pack and sent out. I wrote to such societies as the Cromwell Association and the Richard III Society for advice on how they set up and ran their organisations, (receiving some useful advice), and to the Secretary of Col. John Hampden His Regiment of Foote of the English Civil War Society, asking if they would be able to supply a guard of honour for the launch of the John Hampden Society.

The launch date was set for Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> October, and I arrived at Hampden House to find the Great Hall full of seating with the

big table arranged at the far end. A gratifying number of people, together with local press and television, had turned up, and we were just thinking about starting when a stentorian voice bellowed from the entrance, 'Have a care!' and a file of soldiers dressed in green Civil War uniforms and armed with swords and halberds tramped into the Hall and arranged themselves on either side of the high table. This was the promised detachment of Hampden's Greencoats led by Captain Derek Lester.

The four founders had decided to allocate themselves certain posts for the inauguration, which would be confirmed (or otherwise!) at the first AGM.

Miles Buckinghamshire (Patron designate) opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and thanking those people and organisations who had given their help and assistance. These included Tim Oliver; Betty Boothroyd MP, Speaker of the House of Commons, who had written a splendid letter of encouragement; the Earl of St Germans, who had given the Society the rights to use his portrait of John Hampden; Bucks County Council, for loaning the Hampden funerary helm which was sitting on a box in front of the top table; and the members of the Greencoats who were in attendance.

My task, as self-appointed Honorary Secretary, was to point out that the Society was intended to correct one of the iniquities of history, whereby John Hampden had sunk into relative obscurity, and to outline how we intended to put him back in his rightful place.

In his part as President designate John Adair gave a brief sketch of our subject's life and career and, as befits the author of books on leadership, stated that he considered Hampden to be a good leader and a leader for good.

Frank Hansford-Miller told the meeting how his political career had been stimulated by the character and achievements of John Hampden, and how this had led to him writing his book. There was much laughter when Frank said that his position as an unelected Honorary Treasurer asking for subscriptions made him feel like Charles I demanding illegal taxes!

After Miles Buckinghamshire declared the Society in being, the founders were interviewed by press and TV, and a buffet lunch with wine, kindly provided by Tim Oliver, was served in the King John's Tower. The iced cake was ceremonially cut to mark the occasion.

A guided tour of the House by Tim Oliver, and a visit to St Mary Magdalene Church to admire the Hampden memorials, ended the inauguration, at which about 20 members

signed up. The Steering Committee held its formative meeting in the Boardroom, under the gaze of a portrait of John Hampden's cousin Oliver Cromwell, and Tim Oliver was elected as the Society's first Chairman. The four founders were confirmed in their posts, and the Committee also welcomed The Hon. Ian Hope-Morley, another descendant of John Hampden and owner of the Hampden Estate; The Hon. Julian Byng, brother to the Earl of Strafford; and Raymond Jones, Chairman of Great Hampden Parish Council and churchwarden.

Even before the inaugural meeting was finished - indeed, even before the Society was actually in being - it had proved its usefulness.

Earlier in 1992 Great Hampden Parochial Church Council had also decided to mark the anniversary of John Hampden's death the following year by a series of activities centred around the church; one of which would have been a lecture by Dr John Adair. Two months later it was discovered that two of the Hampden memorials in the church were badly affected by damp and were in danger of coming away from the wall. It was estimated that £14,500 would be required to preserve them.

I knew nothing of this when I contacted John, but he mentioned the problem and put me in touch with Raymond Jones. As a result of our conversations, the aims and objectives of the as yet unborn Society were expanded to include, 'to encourage and assist, where possible, in the preservation and/or renovation of the monuments and artefacts associated with John Hampden'.



**The four founders and the Guard of Honour posing for photographers in the porch**

At the inauguration Raymond took the opportunity to discuss the matter with Miles and Ian Hope-Morley, who lost no time in contacting various members of the family and other influential people for help. They were so successful that, together with contributions from three charitable trusts, the bulk of the money was quickly raised and work commenced on the restoration of the two memorials the following February.

It was a very propitious beginning to the John Hampden Society.

**Roy Bailey**