

# Marlow's Members of Parliament - 1564 to 1775

New legislation, likely to be implemented in 2018, will require the size of parliamentary constituencies in the UK to be 76,641 +/- 5%. This will involve significant boundary changes. Marlow, with a population of around 14,000, represents less than one fifth of this target, so it is almost beyond belief that Marlow could ever have had its own MP. Yet, between 1301 and 1307, and then again between 1624 and 1868, Great Marlow elected not just one but two Members of Parliament. Even when some reforms took place in 1868 Marlow still returned one MP up until 1885, when the constituency was finally abolished.

Little is known about the situation between 1301 and 1307, but in the 17th century a solicitor named William Hakewill of Lincoln's Inn discovered ancient writs confirming that Great Marlow, as well as Wendover and Amersham, had sent members to Parliament in the early 14th century. He must have been a very persuasive character, because in spite of strong opposition from James I he managed to get the three constituencies reinstated, and he himself elected as the new MP for Amersham in 1624.

One interesting feature of the Parliamentary representation of Marlow is the way the power was maintained within a few families, particularly the Borlase, Williams and Clayton families. Here I will focus mainly on the Borlase MPs, and leave the Williams and Claytons for a later date. One problem in writing about the Borlase family is that they had a habit of

calling their male children after their father, for several generations. So the history is full of family members called William Borlase and John Borlase, and unraveling them has been quite challenging! One thing though is certain; the Borlase family originated in Cornwall, so in keeping with Cornish tradition, the emphasis should be on the second syllable of the name; it should be borLASE not BORlase!

The local parliamentary history of the family starts with Sir William Borlase (1564-1629) who was not MP for Great Marlow, but was MP for Aylesbury, and later for Buckinghamshire. It was he who founded the school in Marlow, in memory of his son Henry. Sir William was a knight not a baronet, so there was not yet any inherited title. His son Henry was Marlow's first MP in the 1624-1885 era. Like his father, he had previously been MP for Aylesbury between 1621 and 1624. Unfortunately Henry Borlase died aged just 34 only a few months after being elected to Parliament. His father founded the school carrying his name as a memorial to his son.

The other of Marlow's first two new MPs was Sir Thomas Cotton, 2nd Baronet of Connington. Cotton has two claims to fame; firstly he placed his house in Westminster at the disposal of Parliament, and Charles I slept there during his trial. Secondly he was heir to the Cottonian Library created by his father, and which later became the nucleus of the British Library.

Upon Henry Borlase's death in 1624 Thomas Cotton continued as an MP, but now alongside John Backhouse, who

was the son of Samuel Backhouse of Swallowfield Park and Elizabeth, daughter of Sir John Borlase of Little Marlow. The Borlase name appears again! Backhouse sat as MP until 1629 when King Charles decided to rule without a Parliament for 11 years.

When Parliament was restored in 1640 the first MP was John Borlase (1619-1672), son of Sir William Borlase, but a different William from the one who founded the school. John Borlase would later become the 1st Baronet. However this was the 'Short Parliament' as it only lasted three weeks. The Long Parliament was finally formed later in 1640 and lasted until 1660. John Borlase was re-elected, but his election to the Long Parliament was declared void, and instead he was returned as MP for Corfe Castle in 1641; Corfe Castle was in effect a 'rotten borough', having just 14 resident voters, yet returning two MPs! Later he would represent High Wycombe from 1661 until his death in 1672. The new MPs for Great Marlow in 1640 were the rather splendidly named Bulstrode Whitelocke and Peregrine Hoby.

Then, between 1653 and 1659, during the so called Barebones Parliament and the first and second parliaments of the Protectorate, Great Marlow was not represented at all. When the town's members of parliament were restored in 1659 William Borlase (1620-1665) was elected, and stood until 1666. He was the son of Wycombe's MP William Borlase (1588-1630), and the grandson of Sir William Borlase of the school.

The next Borlase to represent Marlow was John Borlase, another son of the Wycombe MP William Borlase, who stood between 1679 and 1685, at which point he was replaced by yet another Borlase, Sir John Borlase, the 2nd baronet and son of John Borlase, the 1st Baronet. The 2nd Baronet died unmarried, and the baronetcy came to an end, as did the presence of Borlases in parliament...well, almost! Because in 1774 John Borlase Warren was elected for Great Marlow, and in 1775 the lapsed baronetcy was revived and awarded to him.

Of course Marlow was not unique in returning MPs under rather unusual circumstances. When James VI of Scotland took over the English throne in 1603 as James I he brought with him some peculiarly Scottish traditions. One of these was having universities elect MPs. James thought the workings of government had a particularly strong impact on universities and their intellectual staff, and visa versa, and so believed universities should, as had been the case in Scotland, return representatives to Parliament. And so from 1603 right up until 1950 Cambridge and Oxford Universities each returned two MPs to Parliament, voted on by graduates rather than local inhabitants. Various other universities, some collectively, also returned MPs between 1868 and 1950, when the whole system was abolished.

Today the parliamentary system is maybe more rational, but not necessarily more successful!