

PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION IN MEDIEVAL ALRESFORD

by

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Edward 1
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Early in October 1295, the sheriffs of each county in England received a letter bearing the royal seal. In the usual legal latin it informed them that the King, wishing to consult "...the earls, barons and other great men of our kingdom concerning the measures to be taken against the perils threatening that kingdom.." had accordingly summoned these magnates to Westminster on "the Sunday next after the Feast of St. Martin,,," (11th November). The writ then ordered the sheriffs ..."to choose without delay from your county two knights, and from each city two citizens, and from each borough two burgesses, (all),,men of discretion and able to perform their duty". So, for the first time, Alresford sent two members to parliament. Their names were William de Owton and William de Alayn,

The shire-reeve or sheriff was the royal officer who presided over the county courts which had developed from the Anglo Saxon shire moots. During the 12th century he had become well accustomed to calling on substantial men, knights in the county and burgesses in the towns, for the assessment and collection of special or extraordinary taxes, outside the customary feudal dues. These were the men now to be summoned to parliament.

"The perils" mentioned in the writ were largely the result of the machinations of Philip IV of France. . He had stirred up trouble in Edward I's French lands, chiefly Gascony, with a view to taking them over. The English king had done homage for the Duchy of Gascony and, in respect of these lands, was Philip's vassal. Feudalism being a system of mutual obligation between lord and vassal, either could go to war if the other failed in his obligations. So in 1293 Philip IV seized on the excuse of a violent quarrel between English and French seamen to take possession of Gascony, promising to restore it when the quarrel had been settled. When that time came, he refused to give it up and Edward angrily broke off negotiations and went to war with Philip to reclaim his duchy, Philip prepared to invade England but continued to stir up trouble by encouraging the Welsh to rise in revolt. Edward was forced to use against the Welsh the army he had raised to recover Gascony. It was only after some hard fighting during which Edward incurred great personal danger that the Welsh rebellion was put down.

Next Philip IV stirred up more trouble, in Scotland. Here a nasty civil war arising, from a disputed succession to the Scottish throne had been avoided when the claimants accepted the arbitration of the King of England, The new King of Scots, John Baliol, had done homage to Edward I as his overlord but in 1295 the factious Scottish nobles had deprived Baliol of nearly all his authority, had broken off relations with Edward I and had concluded an alliance with France, the beginning of the "auld alliance" that endured up to the 18th century. Edward I therefore was determined to go to the aid of his vassal, Baliol. He formed alliances abroad with the Emperor and the Count of Flanders but to pursue his warlike policy, he needed not only money, but the goodwill of his subjects. He therefore summoned parliament towards the end of 1295.

Parliament had a feudal, origin as a meeting of the King's tenants-in-chief, although some nineteenth century historians even traced its beginnings to the Anglo-Saxon Witanagemot or Council of Wise Men. Speaking of William the Conqueror, the Peterborough Chronicle says "He was very dignified. Thrice he wore his crown every year as often as he was in England: at Easter

in Winchester; at Pentecost in Westminster, and at Christmas in Gloucester", It adds that there were present "all the great men of England, archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, thegns and knights". These were the tenants-in-chief who held their land directly from the King and received a personal writ or summons to attend what became known as the Great Council, with penalties for non-attendance. The Council's meetings were not confined to the three traditional crown-wearings but took place where and when the King wished. In 1164 for example, the restless Henry II summoned the bishops, earls and barons to Clarendon. Here great business was done and the magnates thus performed their feudal duty of owing and offering counsel to their feudal overlord, the King. Our modern parliament is the child of the feudal Great Council which, in the course of time and with the addition of representatives of the communes of the shires and boroughs, found the means to enforce its advice and make its criticism effective. Much later, the claim to be a hereditary member of the House of Lords depended upon whether or not one's ancestors had received an individual personal writ; of summons and not a summons through the sheriff.

Just such a personal writ of summons to the parliament of 1295 was received by the Bishop of Winchester, John de Pontissara. He was commanded to join the other great men in deciding how to overcome the dangers threatening the kingdom, because, said his summons, "What effects everyone must be approved by everyone". Nineteenth century historians made much of this phrase as a landmark in the development of the modern parliamentary system and although the importance of the phrase has been played down by some modern historians, the fact remains that Edward I did try to involve "the community of the realm" in these great matters, as the presence, of the two Alresford men and the other burgesses in this parliament clearly shows. Indeed, the year 1295 was not the first occasion that representatives of the shires, cities and boroughs had been summoned for consultation. In 1213 John had summoned through the sheriffs in each shire "...four discreet knights to speak about the business of the realm", in 1226 Henry III had summoned four knights from the shires to settle disputes on the interpretation of Magna Carta, while in de Montfort's Parliament of 1265 were summoned two knights from each shire, two citizens each from York and Lincoln and two burgesses from a few towns,

However, the Model Parliament of 1295 to which the Alresford men were summoned was the most fully representative that had yet been called. In addition to the Alresford men, from the rest of Hampshire were summoned two citizens from Winchester and two burgesses each from Alton, Andover, Basingstoke, Overton, Portsmouth and Southampton, with two each from Yarmouth and Newport in the Isle of Wight. We may well believe with Jolliffe, that in summoning the knights and burgesses, Edward's purpose was more than merely financial, he sought their moral as well as their financial support for the royal policies. The sturdy burgesses of Hampshire probably knew very little about the national crisis, and were doubtless over-awed by the presence of the King and all the great men of the kingdom, but were ready to give their approval to a levy of one-seventh of the value of their moveable goods and chattels.



The Alresford representatives were chosen by their fellows from those who paid quit-rents to the Lord of the Manor, the Bishop of Winchester. We can imagine their excitement and misgivings as they prepared for the longest journey they had ever made, probably never having travelled further than Winchester or perhaps Southampton, Living as they were long before the days of mail coaches calling at The Swan the preparations for the journey would require much thought and enquiry. If they were very fortunate they might attach themselves to the Bishop of Winchester's retinue or perhaps join a party made up of the burgesses from Alton or Andover, They would travel on horseback, or even on foot, with a pack-horse for their luggage, Trevelyan tells us that Southampton ".....flourished as a port serving London. Certain classes of goods were regularly unshipped at Southampton and sent by road to the capital to save vessels from the necessity of rounding Kent". This busy road came through Alresford from Beauworth, across Godfrey de Lucy's Great Weir completed 90 years before, and on through the Candovers to Basingstoke. That is the road our burgesses would take.

They would not. always be so fortunate. In later years burgesses from Alresford were summoned to York, Lincoln and Carlisle, formidable distances from Alresford in an age notorious for the badness of the roads, with dust in summer and deep mud in winter. Any proper organisation for the building of new roads was lacking to travellers who used the. ancient trackways or the long enduring Roman roads. Each. parish through which the highway passed was supposed to maintain it by six days of unpaid labour a year but little was done except temporary patching.

But at least our burgesses would travel in relative safety, Powicke points out that "By the middle of Edward I's reign, obligations that were to grow into the 'privileges of Parliament' were well established. Persons who came to parliament were to come unarmed; they were on the King's business no less than their own, hence they were under special protection and were immune". Yet in spite of the extension of the king's peace under the fine government of Edward I, any lengthy journey must have been uncomfortable and hazardous.

Nothing is known of these early Alresford M.P.s apart from their names and even these details are lacking for the two who went to the parliament at Lincoln in 1301, In 1306 William de Overton was the sole representative at Westminster; in 1307 John de Byketon (Bighton) and William Bury went to Carlisle, and in 1310 John de Byketon once again represented Alresford at Lincoln, accompanied this time by Roger le Alblaster. An anonymous manuscript written c1320 called "Modus Tenedi Parliamentum " throws light on the organisation of these early parliaments and says "the daily allowance for the expenses of two burgesses together should not exceed ten shillings and there are times when it should not rise beyond half-a-mark (i.e. six shillings and eightpence), When the daily wage of an artisan was two or three pence one can understand why the burgesses of Alresford were unwilling to pay more than two shillings to their representatives for every day travelling or in attendance at parliament. Parliamentary representation was an expensive duty and not the privilege it later became. It was left to the discretion of the sheriffs to determine which boroughs were fit and able to send representatives. If ancient boroughs became poor and unable to pay the expenses of their representatives or had none fit to choose the sheriff could excuse them, adding a note to that fact to his return.

It must have been for these, reasons that the Alresford franchise was lost some time during the reign of Edward III because, there was a sharp decline in Alresford's prosperity after the Black Death and the removal of the wool staple from Winchester to Calais. According to Duthy "...either from disinclination or inability to defray the expenses of their burgesses during their attendance....(they)...prayed to be released from the burden of sending representatives to the common council of the realm". Alresford never regained the expensive privilege of sending representatives to parliament.

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