

1690: HOW NORTH OXFORDSHIRE VOTED

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As readers will be aware, last year I discovered, transcribed and published a quasi-pollbook which showed how those entitled (forty shilling freeholders) cast their votes – Tory or Whig – in the 1690 election for Oxfordshire’s two ‘Knights of the Shire’.

Space did not allow me to discuss the varying support for each party in different parishes and parts of the county, nor has there yet been comment on this from reviewers. Oxfordshire was well-known for being predominantly Tory, and in this election the two Tory candidates had votes in the 900s compared with their Whig rivals in the 500s. In 1698 Tories polled in the 1500s against the Whigs just over a thousand each. But this was not reflected by voting in ‘Banburyshire’.

The 1690 turnout in any case was low, around 1500 against 1698’s over 2,500. Any analysis is bedevilled by the contrasts of numbers of those eligible to vote in different parishes or places. In ‘closed’ villages, where only a very few landowners predominated, the incumbent, with his parson’s freehold, might be the only other qualified voter (and the clergy almost invariably voted Tory). It was only in ‘open’ villages, with rather more small freeholdings just qualifying with 40s. income, that there could be a sizeable (for the times) electorate. As the figures below will show, this was still tiny even by post-1832 reform standards.

Banbury borough had its own MP and franchise restricted to the eighteen corporation members. By 1690 the influence of the North family at Wroxton Abbey had been established, though due to Sir Dudley North’s ill-advisedly close association with James II the family had for the time being been supplanted by another Tory royalist, Sir Robert Dashwood. He had become the owner of Wickham in Banbury parish and was credited with being one of the wealthiest men in the country – the corporation members found it politic to back him, and, to give them their due, they did expect financial help for the town in return.

With the town’s puritan reputation it is hardly surprising to find that the townsfolk who owned property providing an annual income of 40s. or more in the extensive parish outside the borough, disfranchised from electing their very own M.P., expressed their views in the County election. Twenty-four votes were cast for the Whig candidates, and only nine for the Tories. Of those Tory votes, one was from Sir Robert himself;