‘Parliamentary Elections in the reign of Henry VI Revisited – Some New Perspectives on an Old Subject?’

The story of the codification of the conventions governing medieval parliamentary elections, mostly under the Lancastrian Kings, has long formed the staple of any consideration of the choice of pre-modern Members of Parliament. Crucially, what the body of statutory legislation put in place over the course of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries did not do, was to establish a uniform system for the conduct of parliamentary elections. Rather, it fixed a series of financial penalties that an aggrieved party could exact from a sheriff or other returning officer deemed guilty of wrongdoing. What the statutes failed to do of themselves, was to unseat a wrongfully returned MP, although they deprived him of his remuneration at the common expense.

The statutes were also principally concerned with the elections of the knights of the shires, and some highly limited provisions relevant to the selection of the representatives of the cities and boroughs were only introduced at a late date. The parliamentary elections in the English constituencies thus remained subject to a wide variety of practices that cannot be discussed in detail in this paper. Even in the shires, however, did the statutory provisions for the conduct of parliamentary elections leave much of the detail to the discretion of the sheriffs as returning officers. Nevertheless, compared with the urban constituencies, the process of the elections in the shires themselves was relatively uniform. It was understood that in order for all counties to

be able to hold an election in an ordinary meeting of the shire court (which in most counties met every four weeks) the writs summoning a Parliament needed to be issued at least 40 days before the first day of the proposed assembly. This was the figure suggested by the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum*, and it matched fifteenth-century reality. A minimum of 40 days elapsed between the summons of every one of Henry VI's Parliaments and the date specified for their assembly, and for almost half of them the period of notice was substantially longer – in the case of the Parliament of 1435 extending to more than three months.

According to the statutes, the sheriff was to conduct the election in the first shire court scheduled to be held after he had received the writ, and some sheriffs carried out their duties with considerable alacrity. Among the returning officers to hold their elections most promptly were the sheriff of Herefordshire in 1459, who did so just four days after the writs were issued (although he had a head start, since, unusually, the writs for that particular Parliament were issued only a few miles away, at Leominster, rather than in distant Westminster), those of Suffolk in 1422 and Worcestershire in 1432, who executed their writs six days after their issue, and those of London in 1426 and Staffordshire in early 1449, who conducted their contests seven days after the date of the writs. Even allowing that news of an impending election seems to have circulated in some shires prior to the arrival of the writs, this left little time for consultations among the county elites over suitable candidates. Nevertheless, these quickly-held elections probably owed as much to the fortuitous coincidence of a writ promptly delivered to the sheriff and a county court scheduled

to be held imminently, as to any particular diligence on the part of the sheriff. If a writ arrived very shortly after a meeting of the court, the sheriff had no option but to wait for the next meeting in the normal four-week or six-week cycle, thus leaving ample time for wider consultation.

Normally, the writs should have been despatched to the shires by royal messengers, but on some occasions (for instance when the sheriff or undersheriff was present at Westminster) they might be handed to them directly. In other instances, however, there could be a degree of delay before the writ reached the sheriff or undersheriff in their locality, and officials periodically recorded this in order to excuse their tardiness, or other irregularities in making a return. Thus, in 1425 the sheriff of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, Sir Richard Vernon, stated that the writ, issued on 24 February, had only been delivered to him on 12 April, the day on which he held the Derbyshire county court. He had thus missed the last meeting of the Nottinghamshire court (on 9 April) before the scheduled date for Parliament to assemble (30 April), and had to convene a special meeting on 25 April for the election. A similar excuse was put forward by the sheriff of Bristol a few months later in 1426: he claimed to have received the writ on 4 February (almost four weeks after its issue), and to have held an election on the same day, as no further meeting of the county court was scheduled to be held in time for the assembly of the Commons a fortnight later. The roads into the south-west evidently presented particular problems: the writs for the Parliaments of 1431 and 1453 respectively reached the sheriffs of Cornwall 17 and 32 days after their issue, while the writs for Devon for those of 1431,

1449 (Nov.) and 1453 took 18, 24 and 29 days to come to their recipients' hands. It is unclear how the messengers went about locating the sheriffs, for while the writs for Devon were generally delivered to the sheriffs at Exeter, those for the sheriffs of Cornwall in 1431 and 1453 were delivered to their addressees respectively at Okehampton and Exeter in Devon, rather than in their own county at Lostwithiel or their places of residence. In some cases, indeed, a delay could be caused deliberately by the sheriff or other interested parties, as was clearly the case with the writ for Suffolk in 1453 which was supposedly delivered (about 19 days after its issue) to the sheriff, Thomas Sharneburne, by James Butler, earl of Wiltshire, in London, and the extremely late delivery of the south-western writs of that same year may likewise point to foul play. By the second half of the sixteenth century a claim that a writ had arrived too late for an election to be held in a timely fashion had become a device routinely employed by sheriffs seeking to subvert the normal electoral process, and there is evidence to suggest that had on occasion also been the case a century earlier.

It stands to reason that it took longer for the writs to be delivered to the further-flung parts of the realm, and the conduct of timely parliamentary elections thus presented particular problems for the sheriffs of three of the northern counties, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Northumberland, and also, more surprisingly, of Lincolnshire and of the shire-incorporate of Lincoln, who held their shire courts only every six, rather than every four weeks. These particular sheriffs rarely had at their disposal more than a single meeting of the county court at which to elect MPs, and any delay in the delivery of the writ could mean that this meeting was scheduled to be

held so close to the date set for the Commons' assembly that it became impractical for the Members to reach the meeting-place of Parliament in time. The sheriffs' response was pragmatic: on more than one occasion they simply convened what seem to have been extraordinary meetings of their shire courts outside the normal cycle, as the sheriffs of Bristol and Nottinghamshire had done in similar circumstances. This happened in Lincolnshire in 1426 and 1429, in Northumberland in 1429 and January 1449, and in Lincoln in 1426, 1429 and 1433. In Lancashire there was a further systemic delay, as the royal writ was customarily addressed to the chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster who in turn then issued a writ under the duchy seal to the sheriff. Frequently, this was done without any sense of urgency: in 1429, 1431, and 1432 respectively 19, 22 and 16 days were allowed to lapse between the issue of the writs to the duchy chancellor and of those to the sheriff, while in the autumn of 1436 and that of 1449 a staggering 36 days went by before the chancellor acted. Small wonder, then, that extraordinary election meetings had to be held in the county palatine in 1423, 1427, 1429 and 1433.

Nor was it just the counties with less frequent meetings of the shire court that convened elections outside the normal cycle of their courts: it is not surprising to find the north-western shires of Cumberland and Westmorland doing so on more than one occasion, and, as the examples of Bristol and Nottinghamshire demonstrate, the practice was not restricted to the far north. A factor in this was clearly the length of time allowed between the issue of the writ and the assembly of Parliament, and many of the 'emergency' elections were thus held in years when the interval was notably

short. This was the case with the elections to the first Parliament of 1449, for which exactly 40 days were allowed between the issue of the writs on 2 January and its opening on 12 February The sheriffs of the ten counties scheduled to hold shire courts between 6 and 13 January presumably did not receive their writs before that date, and the first to act was Thomas Ferrers, sheriff of Staffordshire, who, curiously, held his election on 9 January, even though the shire court was due to meet just nine days later. The identity of the men returned for the shire on this occasion does not point to any irregularities in the elections, unless the suggestion that something was amiss is implied by the selection for a county seat of the duke of Buckingham's comparatively low-ranking legal counsellor William Cumberford. A week later, the sheriff of Rutland, Hugh Boyville, also conducted his election seven days early and outside the normal cycle of county courts, but here also there is no other obvious sign of any irregularity. Finally, the sheriff of Northumberland, who had probably not received his writ by 9 January, took the pragmatic step of holding an election on 28 January, at the half-way point between that date and the next shire court scheduled to meet six weeks later on 20 February.

Interestingly, in 1453, when 44 days were allowed between the issue of the writs and the assembly of Parliament at Reading on 6 March, and, as we have seen, several writs took more than three weeks to reach their recipients, there is little evidence of formal irregularities. The exception was the Rutland election, which the sheriff, having missed the normal county day on 15 February (presumably on account of a late-arriving writ), conducted a week later on 22 February. It is nevertheless

probable that the circumstances of the elections more generally had an impact on the proceedings of the Commons in the early days of the assembly, for no fewer than six shires and one shire-incorporate held their elections only a day before the Parliament opened, three others (Derbyshire, Oxfordshire and Staffordshire) made their returns on 8 March, and the counties of Herefordshire, Suffolk and Westmorland were tardier still, respectively holding their elections on the 10th, 12th and 15th. Of these latter three, the Suffolk elections, so a later statement by the sheriff shows, had been delayed because proceedings at the shire court on 12 February, when they had originally been meant to take place, had been disrupted, and there may have been similar problems in the two other shires. In addition to these presumed late arrivals in the ranks of the knights of the shire, the burgesses for Derby, also elected on 8 Mar., must have missed the opening days of the first session.

In the summer of 1455 the issue of parliamentary writs just four days after the battle of St. Albans may have caught sheriffs and county communities unawares. If two years earlier wintry weather conditions may have played a part in delaying the delivery of the writs, the evidence for what happened on this occasion is less clear. Once again, just 43 days were allowed between the date of the writ and the opening of Parliament. The first sheriff to hold his elections was the sheriff of Northamptonshire, whose indenture was dated 6 June, a mere eight days after his normal county court on 29 May; as the next court was scheduled to be held on 26 June, it is not clear why he felt it necessary to hold an emergency election. Conversely, it seems clear that the sheriff of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire for one

reason or another was unable to hold elections in his county courts on 23 and 26 June, and thus in each instance convened election meetings a week later. Similarly, the Cambridgeshire elections missed the court of 12 June and thus had to be brought forward by a week to 3 July in order for elected representatives to be in place for the opening on 9 July. Even so, the MPs from Cambridgeshire and Derbyshire are more likely to have reached Westminster in time than their counterparts from more remote Westmorland, also elected on 3 July, or indeed those from Bristol, Dorset, Kent, Norwich or Kingston-upon-Hull, all of whom were elected on 7 July, just two days before the Commons were due to assemble.

A further factor that could have a bearing on the timely conduct of elections or its delay was a change-over of sheriffs during the period between the issue of the writs and the meeting of Parliament. Under normal circumstances, this took place every year in early November, but there were a number of occasions in Henry VI's reign when the appointments of new sheriffs were postponed. In several instances, these delays were instrumental in ensuring that the handover did not fall within the period assigned for elections: this was the case prior to the Parliaments of 1422, 1449 (Nov.) and 1450. In 1426, however, the long delay in replacing the sheriffs first appointed in the autumn of 1424 had the effect of placing the handover little more than a week after the issue of the writs, and on three other occasions, in 1436, 1439 and 1459, the normal November date of the shrieval appointments fell squarely in the election period. The consequences of such administrative changes may be examined more closely. In 1426 the issue of the writs on 7 January, just 41 days before the date

fixed for the assembly at Leicester, was followed just eight days later with the replacement of the sheriffs in most counties. As far as it is possible to tell, only Lincolnshire had held its elections before the shrievalty changed hands. Most other counties held their elections at the only shire courts available before the assembly of the Commons, but whether by virtue of the change-over or the late arrival of the writs, Cumberland and Westmorland each held their election meeting at the half-way point between their shire courts, while the sheriff of Herefordshire brought his elections (which would otherwise have occurred just two days before the opening of Parliament) forward by a week, and the sheriff of Northumberland (encumbered by the six-week cycle of his shire court) convened an election a week after the normal county day on 31 January. In 1439 and 1459, likewise, the changeover of sheriffs fell within the election period, although the loss of the returns for the former year makes it impossible to tell what impact this had on the elections. On the latter occasion the Crown demonstrated some recognition of the problems that the timing of the shrieval replacements, combined once again with a short election period of just 41 days between the summons on 9 October and the opening of Parliament on 20 November, might cause. On 3 November, four days before many of the shrievalties were to change hands, the government took the unusual step of sending letters under the privy seal to all serving sheriffs, instructing them to hold the elections, even if the county court in question fell after the day of their discharge. By this time, several counties had already held their elections, but there was clearly justified concern whether the writs – unusually issued at Leominster rather than at Westminster – would reach the

sheriffs, old or new, in time. The sheriff of Herefordshire held his county court a few miles from Leominster just four days after the writs were issued, but the sheriff of Rutland had not received his writ by 18 October, and held an extraordinary electoral meeting a week later, perhaps considering the next regular county court of 15 November too close to the opening. The sheriffs of Sussex and Hertfordshire had not received their writs by the time their county courts met on 25 October and 1 November respectively, and neither they nor their successors thus ever held elections to this Parliament. The sheriffs of Berkshire, the city of York and Shropshire were reduced to holding their elections after Parliament had assembled, in the case of Shropshire as late as 29 November.

Limited periods of notice, and changes of returning officer apart, on three occasions during the period under review (for the Parliaments of 1429, 1437 and 1447), the normal electoral process was affected by a change in the intended meeting-place of the assembly or by an alteration in the date the presence of Lords and Commons was required. In 1429, the original writs summoning Parliament to Westminster for 13 October were issued on 12 July, but less than a month later, on 3 Aug., fresh writs brought the date of assembly forward to 22 September. The unusually long period allowed between the issue of the writs and the meeting of Parliament made it possible to do this without undue disruption. As far as it is possible to tell, not a single county had held its elections by the time that the writs precipitating the assembly of the Lords and Commons were issued, and it was only from the second week of August that the sheriffs began to conduct them. It is

interesting to note that among the first sheriffs to do so were those of Northumberland, Lancashire, Lincolnshire and the city of Lincoln who on account of the six-week cycle followed by their shire courts probably had had no earlier opportunity to do so. Moreover, all four election indentures were dated to days that were not, in the normal course of events, shire days, even though the regular meetings of the four county courts scheduled to be held between 1 and 12 Sepember should have allowed sufficient time for any Members elected there to reach Westminster. It is possible that rumours of an early assembly of Parliament had circulated before the second writs had arrived confirming the precise date, and spurred the sheriffs into action. In a majority of counties it is not possible to be certain of how the arrival of the two writs related to the meetings of the shire courts, but it is probable that at least some of the counties that could have held their elections in the first two weeks of August delayed them on the pretext of the new writ. Indeed, in a small number of shires where the elections were held in the second or even third week of September earlier elections may have been set aside. This was certainly the case in Huntingdonshire, where the elections originally took place on 20 Aug., but following protests over their conduct the sheriff availed himself of the ongoing hiatus before Parliament opened to set the controversial result aside and to hold fresh elections in the next regular shire court on 17 September, and in Cumberland, where the sheriff set aside the original elections held on 30 August, and convened an extraordinary electoral meeting two weeks later on 13 September, substituting one of the previously elected Members.

By contrast with the experience of 1429, there is no indication that the change of the meeting-place of the Parliament originally summoned on 14 December 1446 to assemble on 10 February 1447, from Cambridge to Bury St. Edmunds, had any impact on its elections. By the time the writs announcing the change of venue were issued, at least 15 shires had already chosen their representatives, and none of the rest had more than one further meeting of their county court at which to hold the elections if they were to take place before the opening of Parliament. The only ostensibly irregular election was that in Oxfordshire which was held by the sheriff, the courtier Edward Langford, on 12 January, a week before the normal county day, but the irregularities cannot be connected directly with the change of venue which was not announced until the 20th.

On no occasion during the reign, however, was the electoral process subject to quite the same level of disruption, much of it official, as in the case of the Parliament of 1437. Writs were first issued on 29 October 1436 summoning Parliament to meet at Cambridge on 21 January. By the time that, ten days later, new sheriffs were appointed, only the sheriffs of Huntingdonshire and Lincolnshire had already conducted their elections. Several more did so before, on 10 December, fresh writs announced a change of venue from Cambridge to Westminster. In the absence of evidence of when either these or the earlier writs were delivered to the sheriffs, it is impossible to be certain about their impact on the electoral process, but it is perhaps significant that as many as 16 counties allowed not one but two scheduled shire courts to pass after the issue of the original writs before they made their returns.

While it is unlikely, if not impossible, that the writs announcing the change of venue reached any of these sheriffs before 14 December, it is tempting to suspect in the light of some anomalies with the returns that some at least of their number set aside an earlier election. In Devon, where according to the endorsement of the writ the election had taken place on 18 November (a Sunday, two days before the normal county day), the sheriff's indenture, supposedly counter-sealed by those who had made the election, was dated more than a month later, to 28 December (ten days after that month's county court which was, indeed, held on the 18th). Similarly, the Buckinghamshire return dated the county elections to 14 December (rather than 12 December, the county day in the normal cycle). Here also there has to be a suspicion that the elections had originally been held on 14 Nov., the previous month's county day. A different kind of return suggests irregularities in the Cambridgeshire elections. In that county, the writ of 29 October was returned by Robert Stonham, who had assumed the shrievalty on 8 November. Stonham's endorsement of the writ stated that he had received it from his predecessor, Laurence Cheyne, complete with his response that its execution appeared from the attached indentures. Yet, while Cheyne had indeed held the Huntingdonshire elections on 3 November, he had in fact left office by the time the Cambridgeshire indenture, dated 20 November, was sealed, even if it also bore his name. While the evidence is, once again, circumstantial, it seems clear that there was some irregularity: in December 1436 the Cambridgeshire county day fell on the 20th.

In spite of the rigid letter of the law, there were of course legitimate reasons why a sheriff might delay the elections for one, or even two shire courts. In the first instance, the attendance of a credible electorate needed to be ensured. While there is clear evidence that news of an impending election circulated in the shires for some time before the event, a degree of notice must have been needed to allow men from all parts of a county to make their way to the court. Moreover, unless the identity of the constituency's representatives was a foregone conclusion, a period of time was probably necessary to organize the election, that is to ensure that the principal individuals of political consequence in the shire were in agreement with the choice that was to be made. Finally, some allowance had to be made for the time needed to inform the chosen men of their election and to allow them to make preparations and set out for Parliament.

As an afterthought, we might note that a further duty that the sheriff had to carry out was to send precepts to the authorities of the cities and parliamentary boroughs in his bailiwick, ordering them for their part to select representatives and to certify their names to him, so that he might include them in his return to the royal writ de eligendo. There could be a considerable delay in the issue of such precepts. Even allowing for a hiatus between the issue of the writs at Westminster and their delivery to the sheriffs, some returning officers were less than prompt in sending out these instructions. The records of the city of Salisbury demonstrate that between 1425 and 1432 and 1455 and 1460, successive sheriffs of Wiltshire did not issue the precepts to their cities and boroughs for at least 22 days, and in 1425 William

Fynderne took a full 39 days to do so. The urban constituencies reliant on shrieval precepts were thus doubly affected by the tardiness in the delivery of the documents triggering the electoral process which, as we have seen, also beset some county elections. Their saving grace was that any cities and boroughs that did not enjoy county status were not required to choose their representatives in a court that only met every few weeks, and they could therefore usually respond to the sheriff's orders without major delay. Late arrival of such instructions nevertheless took its toll: in 1433 Chipping Wycombe did not make its return until several weeks after Parliament had opened, and elections were also held late at Cambridge in the autumn of 1449, Leicester in 1450, Derby in 1453 and 1455, and at Arundel, Bridgnorth and Nottingham in 1459.

To return to the electoral process in the shires, there was originally no stipulation what place the parliamentary elections should occupy in the regular business of the shire court, but the statute of 1445 gave them a degree of priority, laying down that they should be conducted between 8 and 11 o'clock in the morning. (This, at least, was the intention of the statute, but it seems that even in the 15th century faulty copies of the statute giving the required time for the election as between 8 and 9 o'clock were in circulation.) The sheriff or undersheriff presiding over the election opened proceedings with a proclamation stating the opening date and meeting-place of Parliament. Then, he proceeded to the actual election. What happened next depended in the first instance on whether there was any contest for the two county seats. For much of Henry VI's reign this was probably still the exception

rather than the norm: as a rule, the county communities arranged the elections, that is, picked their two representatives by agreement, rather than facing an open conflict between two factions on election day (a practice which remained common into the nineteenth century), and the few county elections in this period that were not merely contested but actively disputed, either during the elections or after the event, are symptomatic of the factional troubles that marred the reign of the last Lancastrian.

Whether or not there was a contest may have been apparent, or even known, to the sheriff in advance of the meeting of the county court, but it seems that a form of acclamation was used in the nomination of the Members in the first instance. At Warwick in 1427 some of those present in the county court were said to have shouted unreasonably in nominating Sir William Mountfort and Sir William Peyto for election as knights of the shire, and in the Norfolk elections of 1461 some were said to have shouted for two of the four candidates and others for the other pair. If there were more than two candidates, the sheriff might proceed to examine those present as to their eligibility to participate in the election. After 1429, this meant questioning each intending voter individually under oath as to whether he met the necessary 40s. income qualification, but a similar procedure may have been followed before that date, as the inhabitants of any cities or boroughs that returned their own representatives were also deemed ineligible to participate in the county elections. Then, the sheriff needed to determine which candidates to return: the statute of 1429 laid down that they should be the individuals who commanded the support of a

majority of the eligible voters, suggesting that prior to that date the presiding officer might have taken other factors into account.

While the individual examination of the intending voters probably entailed a head count, and precise figures for the numbers of supporters of individual candidates could sometimes be cited in subsequent litigation over disputed elections, a sheriff could initially seek to establish the relative support of each candidate by less precise means, such as acclamation, an (uncounted) show of hands, or a view (a physical separation of the supporters of each candidate), before proceeding to an actual poll, if the difference was too small to allow for a certain determination. Uniquely during Henry VI's reign, a record of such a poll survives for the Nottinghamshire election of 1460, when the four candidates, Sir Robert Strelley, John Stanhope, Richard Sutton and William Babington respectively secured 160, 150, 56 and 44 votes.

Once the election was complete, the sheriff and his clerk made out the return in the form of an indenture counter-sealed by some of the electors who had participated in the choice of Members, as the statutes required. One copy of this indenture would be returned to Westminster with the writ *de eligendo*, while the other would be entrusted to the MPs to take with them to Parliament by way of credentials. Nominally, all electors should have been listed in the indentures, but often the size of the electorate clearly made this impractical. In a majority of cases, the indentures were attested by a selection of electors only, the formula '*et multis aliis*' being added to comply with the letter of the law. If the statute sought to impose some degree of uniformity on the returns, there was nevertheless scope for considerable variation in

the way in which this was done. In the 1420s, the shire house at Gloucester was a particular bastion of individualism. Rather than drafting indentures of a contractual character between the sheriff and the electors, as elsewhere, here the clerks generally wrote out lists of names, often without further comment, and simply cut the document into the requisite shape of an indenture. That of 1427 took the form of a long list of 187 names, some five feet in length. Under the terms of the statute of 1445, there should, in addition, also have been separate indentures with each parliamentary borough or city within a given sheriff's bailiwick, but in many cases joint indentures certifying the names of the county and borough MPs were compiled, many of which did not even distinguish between the different bodies of electors. In the multi-borough counties of the south and south-west the sheriffs would compile lists of all the borough members from their shire or shires and attach them to the indenture as a schedule. Only in the 1450s did the practice of sealing separate indentures with each borough become more prevalent in these shires.

It is generally accepted that in all but a few rare cases the men listed in the county indentures do not provide a complete picture of the electorates participating in any particular election; indeed, as already noted, the documents themselves often state that the election had been made by those named 'and many others'. Only occasionally do the far more substantial numbers of names recorded in a single indenture suggest a somewhat more complete picture: examples of such cases, sometimes thought to reflect contentious or hotly contested elections, include the Gloucestershire election of 1427, with its 187 attestors, those held in Herefordshire in

1432, attested by 170 named men ‘and others to the number of 200’, the Cornish election of 1442, attested by 196 men, the Nottinghamshire election of October 1449, attested by 223, and the contest in the same county in 1460 in which each of the winning candidates polled over 150 votes. The Yorkshire return of 1442, which named over 450 men, stands alone. Nevertheless, even these seemingly substantial figures represented at best a fraction of the freeholders entitled to participate under the terms of the statute of 1429. On the basis of taxation returns, Simon Payling has calculated that the Nottinghamshire electorate may have run to over 600 men and that in the wealthiest counties more than 1,000 individuals might have qualified to participate in the choice of the knights of the shire.

It is probable that in some cases only the partisans of the successful candidates set their seals to the indentures. Certainly, it is sometimes possible to connect large proportions of the witnesses to a particular election with particular parts of a county. Thus, in both October 1449 and 1460 a large proportion of the electors named in the Nottinghamshire returns came from the county’s northernmost and largest wapentake of Bassetlaw, from whence John Stanhope, elected on both occasions, also hailed; while on occasion unusually high numbers of electors from the different parts of Lincolnshire would on occasion turn out to support candidates from their own locality, as was the case when the Lindsey men Walter Tailboys and Patrick Skipwith were elected in 1427, the Kesteven men Geoffrey Paynell and John Pigot in 1432, and the Holland man Richard Welby in 1450.

While a wider discussion of electoral patronage lies beyond the scope of this paper, it will be clear from what has been said that, as the electoral statutes recognized, it was the county sheriffs who were perhaps best placed to influence an election, either in their own interest or that of another party. If in this period sheriffs only rarely abused their office to secure seats in the Commons for themselves, they could bring their influence to bear in other ways, perhaps by returning of a son or other close relative. Among the most interesting cases of such shrieval activity are the Berkshire elections of 1453. While until 1433 the shire court of that county had normally met at Grandpont on its boundary with Oxfordshire, and thereafter usually at Abingdon, in 1453 the elections were uniquely held at Chipping Lambourn, the residence of the sheriff of the day, John Roger, who promptly returned his own son and heir, Thomas (an inexperienced young man), as one of the knights of the shire. While the 11 men who attested the election indenture included one of the county coroners, John Parker, and may not have constituted the entire electorate, only two of the named individuals are known to have participated in county elections on a regular basis, and six of them were, as far as it is possible to tell from the surviving returns, novice voters. The unusual procedure appears to have caused the county's veteran MP, John Norris, who in the event secured the other Berkshire seat, sufficient concern as to make him seek a possible alternative return in distant Truro.

There were two other groups of officials who fell outside the purview of the electoral statutes, but who could have a decisive influence on the conduct of the elections over which they were called to preside. The first of these were the

undersheriffs. In the fifteenth century the undersheriffs of most of the counties of England, including the ten cities and boroughs incorporated as shires before the end of our period, were personal appointees of the sheriffs, who delegated specified tasks to them. Undersheriffs might thus carry out the full duties of a sheriff, but it is often hard to know whether and when they did so, as in the official records their actions were frequently ascribed to the sheriff in whose name they were taken. One such task that might be delegated to an undersheriff was the conduct of a parliamentary election, as the detailed descriptions of some disputed elections demonstrate. Across the period under review the return of a serving undersheriff to Parliament was the exception, rather than the rule, although, since only fragmentary lists of undersheriffs can be compiled for the period, it is likely that the names that have been found represent only a small proportion of the actual total. Moreover, in all but two instances the undersheriffs known to have been returned to Parliament while in office represented urban constituencies. There were reasons beyond possible official misconduct why this should be so. Fifteenth-century undersheriffs were normally drawn from the same class of jobbing lawyers as some county coroners, and made their living in the simultaneous employment of a range of private clients. These frequently included urban authorities, and it stands to reason that some boroughs might also be readily prepared to entrust their parliamentary representation to the same men on whom they otherwise relied to defend their interests in the law courts. Similarly, the regional focus of many such lawyers explains why in the majority of documented cases an undersheriff was returned for a borough within his own county, although it cannot be

denied that by virtue of his office a serving undersheriff was uniquely well placed to find himself a seat in the Commons, should he so desire.

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It is hard to get a sense of the character of a late medieval election day in the shire court: the few descriptions available are at pains to describe procedural flaws, and thus place perhaps undue emphasis on the riotous behaviour of some of those present. Allowing that in their majority elections went uncontested, it is probable that decorum usually prevailed, and that at times something of a festival atmosphere prevailed. This is certainly the implication of the occasional glimpses of the communal aspects of elections in the urban constituencies afforded us by local records. At Dover, parliamentary elections, like those for the mayor and other officials, involved 'hornblowings', that is, they were presumably announced by the blowing of a horn in the streets of the Port, and the same may have been true at Exeter, where mayoral elections were announced in a similar manner. After, and sometimes during, the election, refreshment could be provided at communal expense. At Exeter, wine was drunk at the mayor's house, and at Launceston bread and wine were consumed by the electors, while at Rye a quart of romney was downed at the 'selyng [of] the comyssion for the parlement'. Perhaps it was the resultant jollity that induced the Wiltshire county clerk to leaven his schedule of Members' names with rhymes about Robin Hood and other verses.

May 2021 H.W.K