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KNIGHTS OF THE SHIRE
for

BEDFORDSHIRE

During the Middle Ages

BY

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- "E vus ne poez ren fere outre
le record ke est vostre garant."
Louth: Hereford Eyre, 1292.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

This work was originally undertaken for the Committee on the History of Parliament, and was made possible by the generosity of His Grace the late Duke of Bedford.

INTRODUCTION

An housholdere, and that a greet, was he;
Seint Julian he was in his countree

At sessionns ther was he lord and sire;
Ful ofte tyme he was knight of the shire,

A shirreve hadde he been, and a countour.
Was no-wher such a worthy vavasour.

In his description of the franklin who journeyed with the other pilgrims to Canterbury, Chaucer has aptly summarised the main characteristics of the majority of the men who represented Bedfordshire in parliament during the middle ages. They were essentially local men: substantial landowners whose property was often scattered through several shires, and whose co-operation was necessary to keep the machinery of local government running. In the wider field of national affairs they played little part except to fight the king's battles and occasionally attend at court on ceremonial occasions. Such a group of men have naturally left little record behind them except as representatives of the royal authority in the county, and it is almost impossible to find out the things we would most like to know about them—their reactions to political developments, their attitude to social and economic problems, and their religious impulses. Their biographies have a monotonous similarity; and an analysis of their activities, as far as we can piece them together, serves only to emphasise the meagreness of our knowledge.

The first question which naturally arises with regard to the knights of the shire is that of determining how many of them were actually knights. Was the king's order to return "*duos milites*" always carried out? It is a difficult question to answer because their titles are not always given in the records,¹ and it is possible that there was often some doubt as to who

1. For a full discussion of the difficulties arising from the question of knight-hood see K. Wood-Legh, *Sheriffs, Lawyers and Belted Knights in the parliaments of Edward III*, *E.H.R.*, xlvii (1931), 382-3.

had been formally admitted to the degree of knighthood.² Of the 124 known Bedfordshire representatives, 75 seem to have been knights either on their first return to parliament or soon after.³ The other representatives are sometimes described as "esquire" or occasionally in the fifteenth century "gentleman" or "franklin." The term "*duos milites*" seems gradually to have become a formality. For instance, during the reign of Edward 1, 13 of the 15 representatives appear to have been knights at the time of their election and the other two later on. Similarly 15 of the 19 new members returned during the following reign were knights when elected, and another was knighted later. Under Edward III the number decreases, only 24 out of 37 new members being knights.⁴ A further falling off is apparent in Richard II's reign, when only 9 of the 16 representatives seem to have been knights. The records for the fifteenth century are too scanty to make any estimate. Only 11 representatives have been identified as knights, and it would seem that by this time knighthood was no longer a determining factor in choosing the county representatives.

Once elected to parliament, the knights of the shire seem to have undertaken their duties with commendable seriousness, for the writs *de expensis* show that few either shirked attendance or left before the end of the session.⁵ For the most part, they seem to have been middle-aged men.⁶ While their ages cannot be reckoned with absolute certainty, it is possible to make approximate estimates for about one quarter of them. Only 13 out of 73⁷ were under 30; 18 were between 30 and 40;

2. In 1366 for instance John Bekering and John Cheney were returned by the sheriff as holding land to the value of £40 without being knights (P.R.O. Chanc. Misc. C.47/1/16/3), but both are styled 'knight' in official documents long before this date.

3. In comparison with the estimates given by Miss Wood-Legh this is a surprisingly high proportion; Cf. *loc. cit.* 385, where she estimates the following number of knights in the parliaments of Edward III:—Oct. 1339, 20 knights; Jan. 1348, 18 knights; 1361, 40 knights; 1368, 33 knights.

4. On those occasions during Edward III's reign when the writs definitely stated "*milites gladio cinctos*" should be returned, *viz.* Jan. and March, 1340, 1353, 1355, 1358, 1371, 1373, 1376, 1377, knights were actually returned by Bedfordshire on all but one occasion (Cf. K. Wood-Legh, *loc. cit.*, 385).

5. Writs *de expensis* are known to have been issued on 104 occasions for parliaments held between 1299/1300 and 1413/14. After 94 of these both knights collected writs *de expensis*; after 6 only 1 knight; after 1 a knight whose name was not returned by the sheriff; and after 3 there is no enrolment for Bedfordshire on the close rolls.

6. This conclusion would probably be found to be true of all the knights of the shire. For Staffordshire the average age during the fourteenth century was 46. During the fifteenth century, however, considerably younger men seem to have been returned. See *Will. Salt Arch. Coll.* 1917, xxxiv, xlii.

7. This number includes re-elections.

29 between 40 and 50; and 13 were over 50 at the time of their election. Most of them therefore had considerable experience of county affairs before they were returned to parliament. They do not seem to have found parliamentary service particularly irksome, for over one half⁸—64 out of 124—served more than once, as the following table shows.

Number of M.P.'s re-elected	26	14	7	5	4	2	2	1	1	2
Number of times re-elected	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Some of these men served in several consecutive parliaments; Sir John Ragon for example sat in seven parliaments without a break. Many of them, especially in the fourteenth century, were returned for other counties as well, and some have parliamentary careers of considerable length. There is little indication, however, that any sort of tradition regarding parliamentary service grew up even in the leading local families. Of the 87 families which are known to have produced county representatives, only 16 produced 2, 7 families 3, and 2 particularly distinguished families—the Mordaunts and Braybrooks—4 knights of the shire.

Among the knights of the shire one small group of 16 stands out from the rest. They tended to be re-elected rather more frequently than the other representatives—6 being returned only once, 5 twice, and one 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 times respectively. They all had local connections but their main interests were centred outside the county. For the most part they were either retainers or minor household officials such as coroners of the marshalsea and clerks of the king's market, marshals of the hall of the household and ushers of the king's chamber. A few were connected with the central government. William Gedney was a clerk of the signet and acted as secretary first to the widow of Henry V and later to Margaret of Anjou. Sir John Morris was deputy lieutenant and chancellor of Ireland under Edward III. The only men who may have had any real influence in the government, however, were three of the four Speakers produced by Bedfordshire—the lawyer Roger Hunt, baron of the Exchequer, the diplomat Sir John Wenlock, chamberlain to Margaret of Anjou, and the privy councillor Sir John Mordaunt.

8. Prof. J. G. Edwards has shown that in the parliaments of Edward I and II 507 knights of the shire were elected more than once, as against 657 who served once. (J. G. Edwards, *The personnel of the commons in parliament under Edward I and Edward II, Essays in medieval history presented to T. F. Tout*, 204). According to Miss Janet Muir 36 per cent of the county representatives in the reign of Henry IV sat in more than one parliament (Janet Muir, *The personnel of parliament under Henry IV*, London M.A. Thesis (1926), 63).

Since all these men were local landowners it is impossible to say whether their outside connections had any influence on their being returned to parliament. As their duties kept them at court it was presumably not inconvenient for them to attend parliament, and it may have been advantageous for the county to be represented by men who were familiar with the governmental machine. On the other hand they seem to have kept up their connection with Bedfordshire, even if only by sitting on local commissions from time to time. At least half of them had a much more intimate knowledge of local affairs, for 6 served as sheriff at some time and 2 as escheator. These men would undoubtedly be very well equipped to represent the county in parliament.

Another small group of professional men and merchants also stands out from the majority of the knights of the shire. It includes two local men: Walter de Woburn, bailiff of Henry, Bishop of Lincoln, who represented the county three times, and Walter Poul, chief clerk in the sheriff's office, who represented Bedford county once, the town three times and Buckinghamshire once. There was also Sir John Trailly who belonged to a very old Bedfordshire family. He became governor of the office of seneschal of Aquitaine, mayor of Bordeaux, and on the death of John of Gaunt one of the commissioners for the government of the duchy. In the years before he became completely absorbed in Gascon affairs, he sat in parliament twice for the county. A man of similar interests was John Curtis, a prominent wool merchant who bought the manor of Wymington in Bedfordshire and settled there. He was constable of the Staple at Westminster and finally mayor of the wool Staple at Calais. Sir John Rotherham, brother of Thomas, Archbishop of York, who settled at Someries near Luton may also have been a merchant. He held extensive property in Canterbury in the right of his wife, and took a great interest in that city which he represented in parliament. A lawyer John Hervey "an ancient apprentice of the common law" completes this group. All these men held property in the county and seem to have been closely connected with it in spite of the fact that their outside activities absorbed them so that they had little time to devote to local administration.

The main interest of the rest of the knights of the shire—about five-sixths of the total number—was centred in the land, and it was upon these men that the government of the county largely fell. They appear most frequently on the