

## HARLEY family, of Brampton Bryan and Wigmore, Herefordshire, later earls of Oxford and Mortimer

their chief seat, though not in Wales, lies immediately outside north-east Radnorshire, and they were for a long time dominant in Radnorshire politics. Further, Brampton Bryan was, for a short period, an important focus of early Welsh Puritanism.

The Brampton family, said to have been domiciled there (on **Mortimer** land) as early as Henry I, emerges from obscurity with a Brian de Brampton, *temp.* Edward I, who married Maud (Matilda), daughter of **William (II) de Braose** (see **Braose**) and widow of **Roger Mortimer, 6th lord of Wigmore**. Their daughter, Margaret, married Sir ROBERT DE HARLEY, sheriff of Herefordshire, in 1302, who held of the **Mortimers** in Herefordshire and Shropshire. In fact, this connection with the Mortimers was the foundation of the Harley influence in the later shire of Radnor, for the **Mortimers** were from very early times in possession of Maeliennydd and Elfael, the main components of that shire. In 1399, we find BRIAN DE HARLEY, Sir Robert's son (who had fought at Créci) acting as 'custos' of Dinas and Blaenllyfni in Brecknock, during the minority and absence of **Edmund de Mortimer** (1391 - 1425). The temporary forfeiture of the **Mortimer** lands, and still more their permanent absorption (when Edward IV, a **Mortimer**, became king) into the lands of the Crown, gave the Harleys their opportunity of advancement within Wales - and later on (1601), they bought the old **Mortimer** manor and castle of Wigmore. Not only did manors in Radnorshire come into their possession, but the stewardship of the hundred of Maeliennydd (north Radnorshire) was, at various times, granted them - first in 1671, then continuously from 1691 till 1714, and afterwards for a time after 1768. The stewardship brought them not only an annual 'fee' (increased specially by £100 for 'prime minister' Harley), but all the courts within the stewardry, with their fees; and the courts of the boroughs were convened for the sole purpose of electing burgesses (i.e. parliamentary voters) so that the Harleys were able to secure the representation of the shire from 1698 till 1713, and the borough seat in 1604, 1614, 1647-8, 1660-79, and 1690-1715.

Their chief rivals in Radnorshire politics were the indigenous Lewis family of Harpton (pedigree in **Jonathan Williams, Hist. Radnorshire**, 404-6) strong in 'Old Radnor' (Pencraig, in Welsh), and after 1650 owners of the manor of Radnor Forest. In the 19th century this family was to produce two eminent men, **Sir T. F. Lewis** and **Sir G. C. Lewis**, but it seems in general to have been rather undistinguished. The Lewis es had held the borough seat as early as 1545 and 1547, and the shire seat in four Elizabethan parliaments, but during the whole period between Elizabeth and George I they had been eclipsed by the Harleys; however, they emerged again (as far as the borough seat was concerned) after the fall of 'prime minister' Harley, and held sway again till after the middle of the 18th century. The electoral history of Radnorshire in this period should be studied in **W. R. Williams, The parliamentary history of the principality of Wales**, and (on the election of 1761) in Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*. Harleys (Tories) and Lewis es (Whigs) were at times actively hostile, as in 1693, when the future 'prime minister' and two of the Lewis es drew words in the streets of New Radnor, but at other times amicable, as when a Lewis accompanied a Harley to Hanover in 1714.

The Harleys, on the other hand, were sufficiently distinguished to call for seven articles in the *D.N.B.* The present notice, however, will deal primarily with their connections with Wales. THOMAS HARLEY (1548? - 1631) was a member of the Council of the Marches, made a vain attempt to get the stewardship of Maeliennydd, but in 1601 bought Wigmore, where his son, Sir ROBERT HARLEY (1579 - 1656) was born. This Robert (Member of Parliament for Radnor borough, 1604-11) was at Oriel College, Oxford, where his tutor was Cadwaladr Owen (1562 - 1617) of Maentwrog, Meirionnydd - on him, see the article on his son, Richard Owen, in *D.N.B.* Robert was knighted 1603; was on the Council of the Marches, and was Master of the Mint, 1626-35 and 1643-9. In the Long Parliament (in which he sat for Herefordshire), he was on the Puritan side; a zealous Presbyterian and iconoclast, Pym's successor (1643) on the Committee of the Assembly of Divines, and president of the Radnorshire committee for the sequestration of royalist estates. He thus became a mark for royalist attack; in his absence in London, Brampton Bryan was twice besieged; for six weeks, unsuccessfully, in 1643, when it was defended by lady Harley, and then (after her death) in 1644; it fell, and the castle (as well as that of Wigmore) was burnt. However, Harley, like other Presbyterians, could not go the whole way with the Puritan left wing, and was indeed imprisoned at the end of 1648 for voting to treat with the king, and dismissed from the Mint in 1649 for refusing to mint coins not bearing the royal portrait. He died 6 November 1656, and was buried in Brampton Bryan church, which he had rebuilt after its destruction in 1644.

His third wife, BRILLIANA (CONWAY) - she had been born at Brill in the Netherlands, c. 1600 - whom he married in 1623, is well known in her own right, as a letter-writer. Harley had made Brampton Bryan and its neighbourhood a sanctuary for expatriated Puritan ministers, and had thus become the patron of **Walter Cradoc**, **Morgan Llwyd**, and **Vavasor Powell**. Brilliana Harley, fully at one with her husband in opposition to the Elizabethan Establishment and all its works (as is proved by her stubborn defence of Brampton, where she died in October 1643), seems to have felt that at least **Cradoc** (perhaps the only one of the three Welshmen with whom she was personally acquainted) was going much too far. The connection between Brampton Bryan and early Welsh Puritanism has been discussed by **J. H. Davies** in the preface to his edition of **Morgan Llwyd** (1908), by **Thomas Richards** in his *Hist. of the Puritan Movement in Wales* (1920), and more recently and more fully by Geoffrey F. Nuttall in the first chapter of his book *The Welsh Saints, 1640-60* (Cardiff, 1957).

Sir Robert was succeeded by his eldest son, Sir EDWARD HARLEY (1624 - 1700), Member of Parliament for Radnor borough, 1661-79, also a Presbyterian during the Civil Wars; he served under Waller in 1642 (and was wounded), and was general of horse for Herefordshire and Radnorshire in 1646. But he made his peace with Charles II, was knighted in 1660, became governor of Dunkirk, and sat either for Radnor borough or for Herefordshire in all the parliaments of Charles II. Though he conformed, he opposed the Clarendon Acts and was popular among the Dissenters; he welcomed William of Orange. He died at Brampton Bryan 8 December 1700. He was the author of some religious books.

Of Sir Edward's four sons, the second, EDWARD (1664 - 1735), wrote religious works. The eldest, Sir ROBERT HARLEY (1661 - 1724), afterwards earl of Oxford and Mortimer (1711), born in London 5 December 1661, was, of course, by far the most famous member of the family - Member of Parliament for Radnor borough, 1690-1711, thrice Speaker, Chancellor of the Exchequer (1710), Lord High Treasurer (1711), inexactly described as 'prime minister' - but his public career (on which see *D.N.B.* and the *Life* by E. S. Roscoe, 1902) is not matter for the present work; it ended in 1714 with his dismissal by the queen; he was imprisoned in the Tower in 1715, and an abortive attempt to impeach him followed in 1717. He died 21 May 1724, and was buried at Brampton Bryan. Unlike his father and grandfather, he was very far from having Puritan leanings, yet he was regarded by Dissent as a friend in court, and, in fact, had little love for the Schism Bill of 1713. Indolence and intemperance would seem to have been his chief weaknesses; though given to nepotism, he was not pecuniarily corrupt. His patronage of men of letters and his love of books led him (among other results) to the formation of the great Harleian collections now in the British Museum - he employed the great antiquary Humfrey Wanley (see in *D.N.B.*) as cataloguer and librarian. The Harleian manuscripts have laid students of the history of Wales under a very heavy debt - they include, e.g. the famous 'Harley 3859,' containing **Nennius** and the *Annales Cambriae*; there are also masses of Welsh genealogical material, such as the papers of the herald, **Hugh Thomas**. The whole of part ii (1903) and much of part iii (1908) of the Cymmrodorion Society's *Catalogue of the Manuscripts relating to Wales in the British Museum*, by **Edward Owen**, are taken up by accounts of Harleian manuscripts. The earl's Welsh chaplain, **Timothy Thomas** (1694 - 1751), and his Welsh secretary, **Timothy's** brother, **William** (fl. c. 1685-1740), are separately noticed.

The 1st earl's only son, EDWARD HARLEY (1689 - 1741), 2nd earl, a friend of Pope and other men of letters, was Member of Parliament for Radnor borough from 1711 till 1715, when he was defeated by Thomas Lewis of Harpton. He took little part in public life, but made many additions to his father's library - his widow sold it to the nation in 1753. The peerage would have ended in 1741, had not the original patent provided for its reversion to the heirs male of the first Sir Robert Harley (above). The 3rd earl's third son (by Martha Morgan of Tredegar), THOMAS HARLEY (1730 - 1804), a merchant and afterwards a banker, Member of Parliament for the City (1761-74) and lord mayor of London in 1767, got into trouble with the supporters of John Wilkes; it may be noted that his name appears in the lists of the Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion in 1762 and 1778 - **Richard Morris**, who has three references to him, styles him 'a wine merchant and underwriter, who served his time with Mr. Boheme the merchant.' Apart from this membership, and his lord-lieutenancy of Radnorshire (1791-1804), nothing known of him indicates any special interest in Wales. The peerage became extinct on the death of the 6th earl, in 1853; but the estates remained in the possession of his sister, who devised them to another Harley.

### Editorial note 2023:

The wife of Brian de Brampton was not in fact the widow of Roger Mortimer (who has been confused with a Maud de Braose who married Sir John de Brampton in the 12th century), but rather Eleanor, daughter of Robert de Hereford.

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## Sources

*The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain, and the United Kingdom (1887–1898)*

and other sources indicated in the text

Information from Robin Wilmington (2023)

## Images

Peter Oliver, Sir Robert Harley: Knight of the Bath, of Bramton Castle, in the County of Hereford

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