

HENRY MARTEN – REGICIDE

Bjorn Watson, a local historian, spoke to the Faringdon Peace Group in May about his fascination with the 1640s and in particular with local radical Parliamentarian Henry Marten.

Henry was the son of Sir Henry Marten, wealthy trader and landowner, a pillar of the establishment, who bought Beckett House in Shrivenham as well as other large estates in the Vale including Longworth and Eaton Hastings. Young Henry became a barrister, built up a shipping business and ran the estates, but rebelled against his overbearing father to become the inspirational leader of the radical republicans in Parliament.

He first entered Parliament in 1640 as member for West Berkshire, serving in the ‘Short’, ‘Long’ and ‘Rump’ Parliaments. In this time of religious intolerance and political upheaval, he was a star performer with verbal dexterity, wit and passion, a social revolutionary and popular hero who polarised opinion. He was described variously as a ‘faithful lover of his country’, ‘cultor of justice’ taking the part of the oppressed, but also a ‘rascal’, ‘whoremonger’ and ‘lover of pretty girls’. He was against all tyranny, hating Cromwell even more than the Royalists. The banner of his Berkshire battalion in the civil war read ‘For People’s Freedom Against All Tyrants Whatsoever’. Despite their personal enmity, both Marten and Cromwell signed King Charles 1’s death warrant in 1649

Despite inheriting great wealth, by 1653 Henry Marten had descended into bankruptcy. In addition to financing his reprobate brother and his own extravagant lifestyle, he had put a huge amount into the Civil War effort, Beckett House had been ransacked and other estates badly managed and unproductive during the war years. He was arrested in 1660, tried with other regicides and sentenced to life imprisonment. He spent the rest of his life, along with his partner Mary and their daughters, in Chepstow castle where he died in 1680. When his wife died, their son inherited all that was left of the vast estates - just one farm.

Bjorn painted a vivid picture of the turbulent 1640s and its cast of colourful characters as an extraordinary time, the ramifications of which have had a profound effect on history which is felt even today: Parliamentarians, upholding the sovereignty of Parliament and the people, won the Civil War; the New Model Army, the people’s army, became the model for modern meritocratic, disciplined armed forces; the Putney Debates laid the foundations for modern democracy and universal human rights; the trial and execution of Charles 1st, God’s appointed King, shook the nation and showed that the monarchy could never be safe again.

Bjorn feels that Marten’s true place in history has never been acknowledged and admitted he would love to go back in time to hear all his stories over a beer or two!