

## 1 THE MAN FROM HUNTINGDON

Why was Oliver Cromwell elected as MP for Cambridge in 1640? This simple question continues to perplex historians. Cambridge was a prestigious constituency, seat of one of the two English universities, and its townsmen had always found it easy to attract prominent public figures to represent them. Instead the voters in 1640 chose a little-known country gentleman for whom the highpoint of his political career had been a brief and undistinguished stint in the 1628 Parliament. Some might have thought of him as a bit of a failure. Cromwell was not even really a local man. The most that could have been claimed for him was that he was originally from Huntingdon in the neighbouring county and that in recent years he had been living at Ely, the cathedral city fifteen miles to the north. He seemed to offer them none of the qualities usually sought in a candidate, such as detailed knowledge of the town's affairs, extensive parliamentary experience, useful political contacts, a big name or promising prospects. One has to wonder how many of the Cambridge voters had so much as heard of him before he stood. Even so, he was elected. Not once, but twice.

This is why John Morrill, the leading authority on this period of Cromwell's career, has admitted that the elections of the future lord protector at Cambridge in 1640 remain 'the greatest of all puzzles of his early life'.<sup>1</sup> All the other experts agree. What one might expect should be a significant, formative episode in the life story of one of the towering figures of the seventeenth century, a man whose career continues to be the subject of much passionate debate, is a large, embarrassing biographical gap. It does not help that most of what evidence there is seems fragmentary and uninformative. Historians really only know that Cromwell was elected, first on 25 March 1640 for the Short Parliament and again on 27 October 1640 for the Long Parliament. With so little to go on, doubt and mystery seem inescapable. Why after all should we expect that an answer can be found at all? Might this not be one of those historical questions that must remain unanswered?

This uncertainty has not meant that writers have passed over the issue in silence. Biographers, whether of Cromwell or any other historical figure, are not exactly known for their restraint in discussing what they cannot substantiate.

Bold speculation, their favourite ruse when faced with an apparent absence of evidence, has regularly been used to fill this most obvious of gaps. Over the centuries various theories have been suggested, none of which can be considered wholly convincing. Some have assumed that Cromwell was an important local figure after all, while others have seen his opposition to the draining of the Ely fens as the crucial factor. His possible disapproval of other royal policies, such as ship money or Laudian ceremonialism, has also been cited. More often than not his biographers have hedged their bets by running all these explanations together. Sometimes they seem desperate to make Cromwell's early life appear more interesting than perhaps it was.

The apparent narrative arc of Cromwell's career has also imposed its own distortions. Such is the power of hindsight that it has been difficult to see his electoral successes at Cambridge as anything other than the first steps on his rise to greatness. When biographers have speculated about the Cambridge elections, they have mostly done so based on what is known about his later life. This has, if nothing else, made for a neater story. A further distorting narrative device has been the assumption that the Cambridge elections must have reflected the national results of the two 1640 general elections. Historians have found it easier to discuss the results at Cambridge in terms of what may have made them typical rather than to consider what it was about them that may have been distinctive. They have tended to play down or ignore the local context. The temptation to construct the story so that the events of Cromwell's life exemplify wider national developments has always been a strong one. It has been all the more so, the less evidence there appears to be to go on. Unconsciously or not, the implication can be that what happened to Cromwell before he became famous had some larger significance.

All this has come to look very dated. Historians' ideas about Cromwell's life before 1640 have begun to shift. Now, where once confident assumptions were glibly repeated by each successive biographer, doubts prevail. The older explanations no longer convince. That Cromwell was an important local figure, that he opposed the draining of the fens or that he disapproved of any of Charles I's other policies are facts that may not be facts at all. Morrill's careful re-examination of what little evidence there is has dissolved many of the old certainties. Basic assumptions have been challenged. Historians are now far less confident than any of their predecessors that they know who or what Cromwell was in 1640.

The most important conundrums have therefore become, if anything, all the more puzzling. Who was Cromwell and what did he stand for? What were his political and religious views in the 1630s? How did he embark on his journey to greatness? Can the real Cromwell be found by looking for him in the records before he became famous? These are all valid questions. But to answer them we must look beyond what we think we already know.

Historians have failed to explain Cromwell's elections in 1640 – and thus misunderstood much about his early life – mainly because they have overlooked lots of the relevant evidence. It is not that previous scholars can be accused of failing to search the records. On the contrary, many fine historians have devoted much effort to combing a wide range of archives and what they found there remains the indispensable foundation for any study of Cromwell. Only a handful of new references to him will appear here for the first time. Instead what will be revealed will be plenty of fresh material about those around him. Too often earlier historians made the mistake of searching the records only for references that explicitly mentioned Cromwell. In the case of the standard editions of documents compiled by Thomas Carlyle and W. C. Abbott, that was pretty much the benchmark used to determine which documents got included and which were omitted.<sup>2</sup> Neither Carlyle nor Abbott ought to be criticized for having adopted that approach; the work of compilation would have been even more heroic had it not been limited in that way. The more serious fault has been that, by relying so heavily on those editions, later historians have unwittingly perpetuated that limitation. Biographers, naturally enough, tend to be more interested in documents that actually mention the person whose biography they are writing. But the results can be rather boring. Almost without exception, historians since the mid-nineteenth century have discussed Cromwell's early life only on the basis of the same limited number of documents, all of which have been easily available in print.

Then there has been understandable pressure always to foreground Cromwell himself. Too much of what has been written about Huntingdon, St Ives and Ely in this period has been based on what little we know about Cromwell. Even less satisfactorily, those conclusions have then been fed back into the biographies to construct backgrounds against which Cromwell is supposedly to be understood. A little material has been made to go a long way. This, it is true, has been less of a problem with respect to his later career. Not only was Cromwell by then a genuinely central figure, the immense quantity of research by historians on so many other aspects of the Civil War and Interregnum has helped ensure that he can no longer be seen in isolation. A start has also been made by Morrill and others in properly contextualizing his early life. That process can now be extended much further. By uncovering the lives of those individuals Cromwell knew, whether as friends, relatives or colleagues, we can discover much more about his world before he took his seat in the Long Parliament. The facts that can be recovered about him during those years are not quite so few as has hitherto been supposed.

It may even be that this will help us understand more about the man himself. One reason why Cromwell continues to fascinate is that he seems to resist simple interpretation. Few would claim to understand his complex character in its entirety. The archetypal man of action, his words were often opaque, his thinking seemingly muddled and the motives behind those actions, then as now,

open to wildly different interpretations. One of his more recent biographers has rightly complained that historians have been too quick to gloss over the complexities of his career with the lame conclusion that he and his achievements were 'paradoxical'.<sup>3</sup> For historians uncomfortable with notions of great men and of historical greatness, it has been easier to imply that Cromwell's greatness defies analysis and then leave it at that. They have either tried to explain too much or too little. Neither approach does him full justice. There have, it is true, been exceptions and those have been the historians who have produced the best of the recent work about him. Blair Worden, John Morrill, J. C. Davis and others have shown Cromwell to have been a man who struggled to understand and hold his own against the events of the 1640s and the 1650s.<sup>4</sup>

Cromwell, no less than his modern biographers, was engaged on a search for consistent meaning in his life. If he failed to comprehend the real significance of all the confusing events he was living through, not one of his contemporaries fully understood them either. What Cromwell arguably did do was to weather those events better than anyone else. In this he was helped by his strong providentialism, as his desire for decisive action existed in tension with his willingness to await God's verdicts. His search for meaning, for an understanding of his remarkable fate, gave his personality a stability it might otherwise have lacked. Success, instead of corrupting him, confirmed him in his conviction that he was no more than an instrument for God's hidden purposes. He never forgot how far he had come. That distance was the measure of how much he thought he owed to his divine benefactor.

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Even during Cromwell's lifetime others commented on the contrast between where he had come from and where he had ended up. This quickly became a cliché and the fall of the republic only made it a more attractive one. That Cromwell had been a nobody whose unnatural ambitions had upset the political order of the kingdom was too useful an interpretation of recent history not to be recycled again and again after the Restoration. This was the perfect warning to be used against those who sought to challenge the social hierarchy. In 1685 one of the prebends of Westminster Abbey, Robert South, a preacher most famous for his flippant wit, summed up the late Stuart view. South used the example of Cromwell to illustrate the unexpected effects of chance on human affairs.

And who that had beheld such a Bankrupt, Beggarly fellow as Cromwell, first entering the Parliament-House with a Threadbare, Torn Cloak, and a Greasy Hat, (and perhaps neither of them paid for) could have suspected that in the space of so few years, he should, by the Murder of one King, and the Banishment of another, ascend the

Throne, be invested in the Royal Robes and want nothing of the state of a King but the changing of his Hat into a Crown?<sup>5</sup>

South's former patron, the first Earl of Clarendon, had also been impressed by how Cromwell had been able to rise 'from a private and obscure birth, (though of a good family,) without interest of estate, alliance or friendships.'<sup>6</sup> Abraham Cowley thought it remarkable that 'a person of mean birth, no fortune, no eminent qualities of Body (which have sometimes) or of Mind (which have often raised men to the highest dignities)' should have been able to overthrow the monarchy.<sup>7</sup> This was less of a surprise to one of Cromwell's earliest biographers, possibly Nathaniel Crouch, who hinted at a link between Cromwell's financial condition and his political ambition. He was not so quick to play down either Cromwell's inherited position or his natural abilities.

For his private Fortunes they were competent, a Mediocrity betwixt Riches and Poverty; the one blunting the Edge of Wit and Industry, the other, by its Hardship, whetting it quite away. But what was wanting in his Estate, was supplied in the greatness of his Mind, which put him upon high Attempts, which proved so successful, that at last they placed him at the Helm of Government.<sup>8</sup>

It was easier to demonize Cromwell if he was seen as ambitious only for himself. Some took it for granted that he had favoured a vigorous conduct of the war against the king because any peace would have exposed his overstretched private resources.<sup>9</sup> If Cromwell had been merely power-crazed or grasping, more searching questions about the 1640s and the 1650s could be avoided.

In fact, Cromwell's obscurity before 1640 was stressed as much by those who wished to celebrate his achievements as by those who wanted to present him as an upstart. Whether they saw him as a hero or as a villain, both sides wanted to present him as extraordinary. Unsurprisingly, it was the positive interpretation which appeared the more dominant while Cromwell was still alive and in the immediate aftermath of his death. Andrew Marvell's broadly celebratory *Horatian Ode* exploited the idea of him as the reticent farmer who had since become the conquering soldier.

'Tis Madness to resist or blame  
The force of angry Heavens flame:  
And, if we should speak true,  
Much to the Man is due.  
Who, from his private Gardens, where  
He liv'd reserved and austere,  
As if his highest plot  
To plant the Bergamot,  
Could by industrious Valour climbe  
To ruine the great Work of Time,

And cast the Kingdome old  
 Into another Mold.<sup>10</sup>

Both Samuel Carrington and Edmund Waller compared him to David, the shepherd boy who had risen to rule Israel.<sup>11</sup> Cromwell himself had toyed with the idea that he was Gideon, that other Old Testament figure who had been called by God from his rural labours to historic greatness.<sup>12</sup>

This former insignificance served to throw into even greater contrast Cromwell's later achievements, although, for another of the poets who paid tribute, this was all just an optical illusion.

His grandeur hee deriv'd from Heav'n alone;  
 For hee was great e're Fortune made him so;  
 And Warrs, like Mists that rise against the Sunne,  
 Made him but greater seeme, not greater grow.

No Borrow'd Bayes his Temples did adorne  
 But to our Crowne hee did fresh Jewells bring;  
 Nor was his vertue poison'd, soone as borne  
 With the too early thoughts of beeing King.<sup>13</sup>

In writing these lines, Dryden, like Marvell, was invoking the well-established literary trope that seclusion from public life was a positive virtue. This meant that what some had seen as personal disadvantage could be turned into a moral advantage. In maintaining that Cromwell's greatness and virtues had been inherent, they were also implicitly denying that he had compromised those virtues by subsequently seeking a public role.

In keeping with seventeenth-century assumptions, the issue was as much about the quality of Cromwell's ancestry as the alleged lowliness of his birth. It was difficult for anyone to deny that the Cromwells had been a family of some prominence. This undercut some of the more extreme claims made about his background. It also helped that there was the tradition that his mother, Elizabeth Steward, was distantly related to the Stuarts. This was referred to in print as early as 1652 when it was mentioned by another Cambridgeshire gentleman, Sir Edward Peyton, in a book intended by him as a celebration of the republican rule of the Rump.<sup>14</sup> Other writers, while less specific, also stressed Cromwell's gentility. Milton's *Defensio Secunda* of 1654 picked up on the theme of Cromwell's previous isolation from public life, giving it a positive spin.

He had grown up in the seclusion of his own home, until he reached an age mature and settled, and this too he passed as a private citizen, known for nothing so much as his devotion to the Puritan religion and his upright life. For an occasion of supreme importance he had nourished in his silent heart a faith dependent on God and a mighty spirit.

Milton nevertheless took care to qualify these comments with an assurance that the lord protector was ‘sprung of renowned and illustrious stock.’<sup>15</sup> An anonymous work of 1656 sought to flatter Cromwell by arguing that ‘Though his Alliance and Kindred be not ranckt here in a pedigree with all their stems branches and Armes’

he is well born and of a Noble and Ancient extract, and hath so much Piety of his own, such Vertues and Honours of his own acquisition, and getting so much splendour and Glory, as might illustrate and dignify not only his Progenitors, had they been never so mean and Inferiour, but also his Posterity for all the Ages to come, should they be never so low and degenerate ...<sup>16</sup>

Oliver’s own personal greatness was thus to erase retrospectively any doubts about the standing of the Cromwell line.

Almost all these writers were exaggerating for effect. Even the anonymous biographer who spoke of Cromwell’s wealth as having been ‘a Mediocrity betwixt Riches and Poverty’ was making a rhetorical point. The reality was that Cromwell had always been a country gentleman, albeit a rather minor one and one whose social position had at times been insecure. He was never quite the nobody everyone wanted to believe he had been. Acknowledging this would have only muddled the simplistic moral messages so many were so keen to draw from his life. However, as we shall see, Cromwell’s life before the Civil War turns out to have been no less interesting without those moral messages.

The basic facts are not in doubt.<sup>17</sup> Cromwell was born at Huntingdon in 1599. His father, Robert Cromwell, was the second son of Sir Henry Cromwell of Hinchinbrooke. This hardly counts as obscurity, given that Sir Henry was then the richest and most powerful man in Huntingdonshire. The Cromwells had achieved that position as a direct consequence of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Sir Henry’s father, Richard, had started out as a minor Welsh gentleman with the surname of Williams. What transformed their fortunes was the fact that Richard Williams’s mother (Oliver’s great-great-grandmother) was the sister of Thomas Cromwell. That Williams–Cromwell marriage proved to be a very smart move. Thomas Cromwell, as Henry VIII’s principal secretary of state, became one of the commanding political personalities of the 1530s. His central achievement was to oversee the dismantling of English monasticism. Many well-connected court families benefited from the bonanza of former monastic lands that the Crown acquired in the process. As it was Thomas Cromwell who organized this confiscation, no family was better placed to benefit than his Williams in-laws. Between 1537 and 1542 his nephew, Richard Williams, was able to purchase many of the lands formerly owned by Sawtry Abbey, Hinchinbrooke

Priory, Ramsey Abbey, St Neots Priory and St Mary's Priory, Huntingdon. Within those six years Richard became the largest landowner in Huntingdonshire.<sup>18</sup> To complete the transformation, he changed his surname to 'Cromwell' – or rather, to be precise, 'Cromwell *alias* Williams' – to highlight the link with his uncle. He retained the change even after Thomas had been attainted and executed. What made the Cromwells *alias* Williamses doubly lucky was that they had gained so greatly from Thomas's rise and yet escaped disgrace at his fall. Their position at the top of Huntingdonshire society would remain undisputed until the 1620s.

Their connections were not confined to that one county. It was a mark of their high status that they regularly looked beyond Huntingdonshire for their marriage partners. Over several generations most members of the family made good marriages. Of Robert Cromwell's five sisters, three married knights and, as the wife of Sir Francis Barrington, one of them, Joan, became the matriarch of that great Essex dynasty, the Barringtons of Hatfield Broad Oak.<sup>19</sup> Another sister, Elizabeth, married a major Buckinghamshire landowner, William Hampden of Great Hampden, and thus became the mother of John Hampden. Robert's elder brother, Sir Oliver, married first the daughter of a lord chancellor, Sir Thomas Bromley, and then the widow of the wealthy Genoese-born financier, Sir Horatio Palavicini. Robert Cromwell's own marriage was not quite as impressive, but his wife, Elizabeth Steward, was the only daughter of William Steward of Ely and thus a member of another important family with connections throughout East Anglia. She also brought with her some jointure lands from her brief first marriage. What was then far from certain – although the possibility had already been recognized – was that her only brother, Sir Thomas Steward, would later die childless and so leave a valuable inheritance.

Robert Cromwell was only a younger son. It was Sir Oliver as his elder brother who inherited the bulk of the Hinchingsbrooke estates when their father, Sir Henry, died in 1603. Robert, in contrast, owned only some properties in and around Huntingdon. His income is said to have been £300 *per annum*, although even that may be something of an overestimate.<sup>20</sup> While this was no great fortune, it was still enough to make him one of the richer men in the town and he always had the added advantage of being a Cromwell in a town where the Hinchingsbrooke interest was all-powerful. He sat as MP for Huntingdon in the 1597 Parliament and took his turn holding the town's senior civic office when he served as joint bailiff in 1609. He may well have assumed that his only son would follow a similar sort of life.

Yet, in other respects, Oliver's upbringing was rather different from that of most sons of Huntingdon townsmen. In 1616 he not only went up to Cambridge to study at Sidney Sussex, but did so as a fellow commoner.<sup>21</sup> By paying extra fees, his family ensured that he was one of those privileged students who

lived in greater style than those from more modest backgrounds. The death of his father the following year probably made it necessary for him to return to Huntingdon to help his mother manage the family estates. At the time Cromwell inherited little from his father, whose will had first to make provision for his wife's jointure and for the dowries that would have to be paid to his seven daughters.<sup>22</sup> Any advantage to Oliver in being the only surviving son was offset by the disadvantage in having so many sisters. His own marriage took place in 1620, almost as soon as he had come of age. His bride, Elizabeth Bouchier, was the daughter of Sir James Bouchier, a London leatherseller who had prospered to become an Essex country gentleman. This is further evidence that Cromwell's social horizons were rather broader than those of most of his Huntingdon neighbours. His aunt, Lady Barrington, may have acted as the matchmaker.

During the 1620s Cromwell served as one of the twenty-four common councilmen who comprised the Huntingdon corporation. The inhabitants thought highly enough of him (or of his uncle) to elect him as one of their two MPs for the 1628 Parliament. Unlike many novice MPs, he did at least take part in one of the debates. When the Bishop of Winchester, Richard Neile, was criticized, Cromwell joined in the attack. He reported that some years previously Neile had prevented the local vicar in Huntingdon, Thomas Beard, from preaching against a sermon by William Alabaster advocating 'flat popery'.<sup>23</sup> Already Cromwell was lining up with those who opposed the anti-Calvinist trend within the Church of England.

At this time he would have been able to think of himself as a solid, well-respected citizen of his home town. That was all about to change. Already members of the Montagu family were trying to muscle-in on the town's affairs. In 1627 Sir Sidney Montagu had bought Hinchbrooke. He and his elder brother, the first Earl of Manchester, now expected to dominate the town in the way that the Cromwells had done until then. This was why Manchester's son, James Montagu, had been the other MP elected for Huntingdon in 1628. As a further complication, Richard Fishbourne, a local boy who had made good as a London mercer, had recently bequeathed £2,000 to the Huntingdon corporation. Some members of the corporation – possibly including Cromwell – wanted to use all the money to assist the poor, while others preferred to spend some of it funding a lecture in the town. That the corporation already funded a lecture was not seen as a problem by those who favoured the latter idea; they saw the bequest simply as replacement funding for that existing lecture. This plan was supported by Thomas Beard, no doubt because he was the clergyman employed to preach that lecture. Arguments over the exact deal dragged on for years, with Fishbourne's old livery company, the Mercers, wanting a new lecture given by someone other than Beard and with the king and the local bishop, John Williams of Lincoln, backing Beard. Only in 1631 was it finally agreed that a

new lecture be created to be held by another clergyman, Robert Proctor, but on condition that Beard be paid off by the Mercers with a one-off payment of £40.

In the meantime, the corporation had applied for and received a new charter. They did so almost certainly in the hope of resolving the divisions within their ranks created by the dispute over the Fishbourne bequest. When that new charter was delivered in July 1630, Cromwell found that he was not among those named as the twelve new aldermen. The faction on the corporation who had supported Beard and who were aligning themselves with the Montagus had outmanoeuvred him. Angered by this, Cromwell and another victim of the reshuffle, William Kilborne, publicly insulted the new mayor, Lionel Walden, and the recorder, Robert Bernard. Cromwell and Kilborne were then summoned before the Privy Council in London to be censured for their behaviour. The Montagus and their allies had succeeded in humiliating him.<sup>24</sup>

The years that followed were the lowest point in Cromwell's life. In May 1631 he sold the properties he had inherited at Huntingdon and moved the five miles to St Ives.<sup>25</sup> In the process, he ceased to be a landowner in his own right and became instead a tenant farmer. Some have seen this as evidence of financial difficulties. Even as early as 1627 he had been selling off property in Huntingdon.<sup>26</sup> His knighthood fine in 1631 may have been set low to reflect these difficulties.<sup>27</sup> However, it must be remembered that the sale of his lands in 1631 raised £1,800 and, although we cannot be sure what lands he leased at St Ives, he almost certainly became one of the more substantial tenant farmers in the town. While the decision to give up his own lands cannot have been an easy one, his reasons for leaving Huntingdon may have had more to do with his removal from the corporation or with his friendship with his new landlord, Henry Lawrence. Even so, Cromwell may have felt that his options were narrowing.

He was not the only member of the family who was having to adjust to changed circumstances. The decision by Sir Oliver Cromwell in 1627 to sell Hinchingsbrooke had been the most obvious indication that the senior line of the family was in serious financial difficulty. The spiral of debt confronting Sir Oliver was one that he and his son, Henry, never managed to escape. Sir Oliver had to move permanently to his other main house, Ramsey Abbey. What is not so obvious is whether, as has usually been supposed, he had been bankrupted by James I's regular visits to Hinchingsbrooke. The lavish hospitality provided by the Cromwells in 1603 – James is reputed to have said that it was 'the greatest feast that had been given to a King by a subject' – has tended to distort assumptions about the burdens involved.<sup>28</sup> Most of the later visits should perhaps be seen more as small-scale hunting excursions from Royston. James's rambling complex at Royston was not one of his greater houses able to accommodate the full royal household, making it more likely that he would have taken relatively few servants with him from there to Hinchingsbrooke. It was more probably Sir Oliver's own lifestyle that had proved to be unsustainable.

Sir Oliver's indebtedness was in all probability the reason why in October 1631 he granted the reversion to the leases on his lands at Upwood to Cromwell as his nephew for the nominal sum of 5s.<sup>29</sup> This was the latest in a complex series of transactions by which possession of those lands passed between different members of the family.<sup>30</sup> This grant was almost certainly no more than an elaborate legal fiction intended to protect Sir Oliver's property from his creditors. These difficulties faced by the senior line of the family had wider ramifications. As most of the members of the Huntingdon corporation had been so quick to realize, the Cromwells' dominant social position in the area was being usurped by the Montagus. It no longer counted for so much that Cromwell was Sir Oliver's nephew.

The death of his mother's only brother in 1636 brought about the next dramatic change for Cromwell. Sir Thomas Steward had been one of the wealthiest men in Ely and, even before he died, the fate of his fortune had divided the family. Cromwell, as his only nephew, was his closest male relative, but there were a number of Steward cousins who were also potential heirs. A move in 1635 to have Sir Thomas declared insane was possibly an attempt by Cromwell to prevent his uncle deciding this for himself. If so, the plan backfired as Sir Thomas was judged still capable of handling his own affairs. The risk now was that he would just leave everything to his Steward relatives. In the event, Sir Thomas did agree to leave much of his property to Cromwell, although the bequest did come with strings attached and it was one of the Steward cousins, Humphrey Steward, rather than Cromwell, who was appointed as the executor. After threatening litigation, Cromwell was also allowed to inherit the leases held from the chapter of Ely Cathedral.<sup>31</sup> This whole affair certainly revealed some of the less attractive sides to Cromwell's character. He must have known that this inheritance would be his only real chance of achieving financial security for himself and his family. Once it had been obtained, the Cromwells were able to move to Ely. As lay rector, he now had a comfortable income, the use of a substantial house close to the cathedral and a certain social standing within the local community. Without this marked change in his fortunes, it seems inconceivable that he could have been considered as a candidate at Cambridge in 1640.

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Cromwell would sit as MP for Cambridge until he dismissed the Long Parliament in 1653. In that time he was transformed from obscure backbencher into the most powerful man in the three kingdoms. Along the way he had won a string of military victories, executed the king and conquered the Irish and the Scots. His reputation was one that had been largely won on the battlefield. In 1642, when the arguments between the king and Parliament led finally to civil war, even obscure backbenchers got their chance to shine. Relatively few MPs on either side volunteered to fight in person. Most who did so made undistin-

guished soldiers. Cromwell was different; from the start, his vigour and zeal set him apart. In such circumstances, those most willing to commit everything to the fight stood out. It is easy to believe that even if he had not been an MP, he would still have come forward in the autumn of 1642 to volunteer as an officer in the newly formed parliamentary army. Even so, his position as MP did make it all the more natural that, once he did volunteer, he should take the lead in organizing recruitment in Cambridgeshire. Quickly promoted to the rank of colonel, he steadily built up a reputation as an effective cavalry commander. He was an obvious person to become governor of the Isle of Ely. By January 1644, when he was appointed as the lieutenant-general of horse and second-in-command to the Earl of Manchester within the Eastern Association, he was already emerging as a national figure. Then, less than six months later, his decisive contribution to the victory at Marston Moor elevated him to the status of hero in the eyes of the parliamentary army. That he was also an MP meant that his military career always had an extra dimension. His political importance at Westminster clearly increased as his military reputation rose. Had he not been an MP, he would not have been appointed in February 1644 to the Committee of Both Kingdoms, the powerful civilian body newly created to coordinate the war effort. From 1642 onwards he was always a soldier-politician.

It made a difference that Cromwell was an MP. Yet, as has already been suggested, there had been nothing inevitable about his election to Parliament in 1640. Twelve years earlier he may have considered himself lucky to have been elected as one of the MPs for Huntingdon. By 1640 there was no obvious reason why any constituency should have chosen him. He was a relative newcomer to Cambridgeshire and, although his place in the ranks of its gentry was secure, he was by no means a pre-eminent county figure. There were, as we shall see, other candidates for the town of Cambridge to choose from. It was, of course, always possible that one of his relatives or aristocratic patrons might have intruded him as a carpetbagger elsewhere, but it should not be assumed that any of these possible benefactors would have seen Cromwell's election as a priority. These uncertainties are, in essence, the reason why the fact that he was elected at all remains unexplained. Not every MP was an obvious candidate for a particular constituency, but many of them were and Cromwell was not one of them. His election was contingent on something. What that might have been is our more immediate subject for speculation.

What makes the continuing mystery about Cromwell's election all the more surprising is that there exists a near-contemporary source describing the event. Setting out its story at some length and in great detail, that source names names, pinpoints motives and supplies revealing background information. All the major questions seem to be answered by it. Unfortunately, this marvellous source is James Heath's *Flagellum*.