

# Henry Marten – Shrivenham’s Regicide

**Who was Henry Marten? Was he really a whoremonger and a drunkard who just happened to put his signature on the king’s death warrant? Or was this Royalist propaganda? What was his association with Shrivenham and what did he do for the village?**



History has not been kind to Henry Marten or Harry Marten as some would say. As a parliamentarian he was so vehemently against tyrants that he was detested in equal measure by both Charles I and Oliver Cromwell. Yet he was one of the most influential thinkers of his time who helped shape the concepts of parliamentary democracy and universal suffrage that we take for granted today. He owned vast estates not only in the Vale in west Berkshire as it was then but also in Shropshire and in Derbyshire. He was a ship owner and spymaster for parliament who he managed to lose his vast fortune so quickly that within a few years of victory in the Civil War he was in debtor’s prison. At the Restoration when Charles II pursued a bloody vendetta against those who had signed his father’s death warrant he escaped that most dreaded of executions, being hung drawn and quartered, and ended his days in relative comfort in Chepstow Castle. Why was he spared when he with Cromwell was one of the ringleaders? Oh, and did he really “have an eye for pretty girls”?

## Early Life

Harry was born Oxford 1602 and educated University College graduating with BA and admitted to Inner Temple in 1619. As a young man – he made a Grand Tour on continent; spent his time administering his father’s estates and building a shipping business in London using father’s contacts. He became a ship owner with his brother George. Together they owned the good ship “Marten” and set up sugar business in the West Indies but George turned out to be a disaster and a constant drain on the finances ending up involved in a disastrous venture to set up a colony in Surinam.

In 1635 “Something unwilling”(Aubrey records) Harry married Margaret Lovelace Staunton, daughter of Richard, Lord Lovelace, poet, staunch Royalist and close confidante of the king, and the widow of William Staunton, a rich merchant with close contacts to the City. Arranged by his father, this was a dynastic match. The couple were ensconced in the family home at Longworth but there is no evidence they spent much time together. After 1640, Harry lived adulterously with Mary Ward in devoted relationship for most of the rest of his life.

He was elected to the Short Parliament in April 1640 as member for West Berkshire and to the Long Parliament in November but when his father died in 1641 he inherited his enormous wealth and with it went influence. He had a meteoric rise in parliament including to the key Committee of Safety and acting as spymaster for Parliament.

## The War Years

In 1642, Charles makes another disastrous mistake enters Parliament and attempts arrest Pym and five other radicals who had already fled. For many in parliament this is the last straw. Charles flees London and raises his standard in Nottingham in August and the war had begun. At the beginning Marten uses his business connections to raise money and with his personal helps finances for war effort.

He famously scandalises the Earl of Manchester, one of the parliamentary grandees, by commandeering horses from Royal Mews. In addition, he raises a militia regiment in Berkshire and is briefly governor of Reading but has to flee when it is captured by the Royalists. Beckett and his Shrivenham Estates are ransacked several times by Royalist forces. Expelled from parliament by Pym for his radical views and sent to the Tower in 1643 for preaching the end of monarchy, he spends rest of war outside parliament - part of the time as governor of Aylesbury.

## Negotiation of Settlement

The first civil war ended in 1645 with the defeat of Royalist forces at the Battle of Naseby. Debate rages between monarchists and republicans in parliament as to how to deal with the king. By November 1647 Marten is de facto leader of the radical Republican faction in the Commons.

In December 1647, Charles secretly negotiates with Scots and second civil war breaks out. So in 1648, Marten raises unofficial regiment in Berkshire with motto emblazoned on their banners “For People’s Freedom against all tyrants WHATSOEVER”. This does not please Cromwell!

In August 1648 Cromwell triumphs at Battle of Preston and the King is recaptured. The army’s view now hardens against the king but Parliament votes to continue to negotiate. In December 1648, Colonel Pride invades Parliament. Known as Pride’s Purge, it is the only military coup in our history! All those who favoured accommodation with the king are ejected from the House. Those who remain are known as the Rump Parliament. In January 1649 came the fateful events that lead to the trial and execution of the king.

### Regicide!!!

It is impossible to overstate the trauma for the nation caused by the act of killing the king, God's appointed monarch.

Henry Marten with Cromwell and Ireton lead the Committee that selected the judges to try the king. All senior justices originally selected refuse to serve. Eventually 59 Commissioners agree to act as Judges egged on by firebrand preacher Hugh Peters. They included three Peers, 22 Baronets, 3 Generals and 34 Colonels. Only thirty-one of the judges ultimately sign the King's death warrant.

But Charles refuses to plead. He retorts to John Bradshaw, Lord President of the Court:

*"Prisoner, Sir! I am no ordinary prisoner!"*

*"Remember I am your king, your lawful king and what sins you bring upon your hand and the judgement of God upon this land."*

And there is a cry from gallery by masked woman "Not half, not a quarter of the people of England. Oliver Cromwell is a traitor" This is Anne, Lady Fairfax, wife of the Lord General who was the architect of the Parliamentary victory and who refused to have anything to do with the trial.

Cromwell and Marten are supposed to have gleefully splattered each other with ink after signing the death warrant.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1649 Charles I steps onto the specially constructed platform outside the window of the Banqueting Hall at Whitehall Palace in total silence.

His last words are "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbances can be, no disturbances in the world." Then he lays down on block and his head severed in one clean blow. There is no cheering, no laughter just a collective groan "Oh, He is gone and now hath left us here".



### Descent into Bankruptcy

By 1653 the unfortunate Marten has descended into bankruptcy. Extravagant living, backing the war effort, directing politics, financing his brother's extravagances, mismanaging his estates and servicing crippling debt has resulted in his arrest for debt. Marten remains an MP and he is dubbed a whoremaster in Parliament by Cromwell thereby earning Marten's abiding hatred. In same year, Cromwell loses patience and dismissal of Rump Parliament which signals Marten's final demise. In 1655, he is committed to Upper Bench prison in Southwark for huge debt of £35,000 (about £3½m today) but allowed to live on the outside with Mary and his family. On Cromwell's death in 1658 Marten returns briefly to Rump Parliament but he is a spent man. And did he really squander his fortune on loose women and drink, as his critics say?



### Lord of the Manor

Harry's father, Sir Henry Marten, amassed a vast fortune through practice of civil law and sought to invest in the land essentially to found a dynasty. In 1618 buys Beckett House and farm in Shrivenham for £5,800 but in 1622 buys an Estate at Longworth which although not as grand as Beckett, Longworth Lodge was set in 2 acres of gardens and orchards which Sir Henry preferred as it gave privacy. In 1628 purchases Manor of Eaton Hastings and by 1630's his estates were administered by sons Henry and George who added further to the land holdings including Hinton Waldrist and Inglesham. Henry inherited this huge landed empire from his father. He owned vast estates in the Vale and with landed wealth comes political power. However when he moved to London to establish himself in politics management of his estates was left in hands of agents and steward who mismanaged and swindled much of his fortune. During the war, Marten's estates in Vale are devastated. Beckett and Shrivenham Estates ransacked several times by Royalist forces and he receives he consequently receives no revenues. In addition he builds up considerable debts financing the war effort. But in 1649 Parliament rewards Marten with nearly 10,000 acres round Leominster and a further huge estate in Derbyshire. Characteristically he puts an old retainer Thomas Deane from Uffington in as his bailiff in Leominster. Deane was conscientious but knew little of the area and was soon being swindled left right and centre. To add to his troubles Marten became embroiled in battles with local landowners over titles to his newly acquired lands. As absentee landlord, he employed some Leveller friends as agents who badly mismanage his affairs. Rents were not collected and debts continued to mount. By 1655 he is imprisoned for debt owing the huge sum of £35,000.

### Character

So what can we say of Marten the man? Marten gave a voice to the London tradesmen who formed the core of radical support in the parliamentary cause at a time of rising political consciousness and religious intolerance. The 1640's was a time of unprecedented religious turmoil, political crisis and social upheaval. Politics was a dangerous business! In this environment, Marten was clearly a hard worker and a formidable parliamentary performer. A master of sarcasm and rhetoric, he made his reputation by verbal dexterity and argument and above all with his sense of humour. According to his biographer, Sarah Barber - "Marten's wit, his lifestyle and his politics made him a popular hero but also destroyed him". He was a staunch radical, leading Regicide and one of the founders of the Commonwealth that followed the death of

the king. As a one of the main proponents of the Republican Commonwealth, he wrote its constitution and designed its emblems and mottos. He developed implacable hatred for Cromwell as Lord Protector – a far more bitter sentiment than he ever had than for Royalists!

He was subject of unremitting Royalist propaganda as illustrated by the poster depicting the Sack of Market Harborough where he is depicted as a killer of women and children and a slaughterer of babies. The truth is that before taking the town he issued the following orders:

“...no souldier whatsoever shall dare to plunder or use violence against any, but that they behave themselves civilly, executing nothing contrary to order”.

“... no violence or wrong should be executed upon any, neither would they in the least disturb or hinder the market.”

His famous contemporary, John Aubrey – essayist, pioneer archaeologist and natural philosopher , wrote of Marten in his famous contemporary account in “Brief lives”:

*“He was a great lover of pretty girles, to whom he was so liberall that he spent the greatest part of his estate”.*

It is ironic that that this became Harry’s lasting reputation when he also said ....

*“He was a great and faithfull lover of his Countrey, and Never gott a farthing by Parliament. He was of an incomparable Witt for Repartes; not at all covetous; not at all Arrogant, as most of them were; a great cultor of Justice, and did always in the House take the part of the oppressed”.*

Certainly Harry enjoyed good living! He attended the races, ate and drank well. He also tended towards dandyism.

In 1650’s, his yearly beer purchases were 22 barrels 6<sup>th</sup> beer, 3 kinderkins 16<sup>th</sup> beer, 1 barrel strong beer cost £9-7s-2d av. of 20pts/day!

Royalist propaganda spread rumours that he spread the “French fire” around the capital and was supposed to have squandered his fortune on loose living, on frequenting stews, on many mistresses and on drinking to excess. More importantly he treated important matters shallowly in the company of libertine friends.

### **Marten – Social Revolutionary**

In truth, Henry Marten was ahead of his time, a social revolutionary. He was man who ignored the strict social hierarchy of the time and remained loyal to his close retainers at the expense of antagonising the establishment figures.

He was known by the poor in the parish as “kind Harry” or “Honest Harry”. He was a paternalistic and traditional landlord.

His concern for the poor made him reluctant to improve his estates by enclosure at the expense of profitability thus the antagonising local gentry and yeomen and, at a time of supreme religious intolerance, Marten preached tolerance ....

*“With good reason do I give it ye first place in my opinions because whatever hath bene said by any yet conceiving him, is but of opinion.”*

In other words, as his biographer, Dr Sarah Barber puts it “one person’s religious notions are no better or any worse than any other – this was Marten’s contribution to religious thinking”

### **What happened to the Regicides?**

After the restoration, the Indemnity and Oblivion Act exonerated all those who had fought on the parliamentary side.

Except the Regicides! They were pursued relentless by Charles II’s agents. Of the fifty nine signatories to the Death Warrant, fourteen were hanged, drawn & quartered including the firebrand preacher Hugh Peters who was dragged screaming to the gallows; nineteen were sentenced to life imprisonment, fifteen fled to continent, and some including Cromwell and Ireton were disinterred and their heads displayed on spikes. Colonels John Dixwell, Edward Walley & William Goffe fled to New Haven, Connecticut. The brave John Okey arrested in Germany by perfidious Sir George Downing and executed. Marten is also arrested and confined to the Tower. Exempt Indemnity and Oblivion Act in 1660, he is tried with other Regicides and sentenced to Life.

He famously said at his trial ...“he would not have executed the king if he knew he was paving the way for King Cromwell”

Why is he spared? Aubrey quotes Lord Falkland, the trial judge as saying:

*“Gentlemen, yee talk here of making a Sacrifice; it was the old Lawe, all Sacrifices were to be without spott or blemish; and now you are going to make an old Rotten Rascall a Sacrifice. This Witt tooke in the House , and saved his life”.*

### **Imprisonment in Martin Tower at Chepstow Castle**

Henry Marten is eventually imprisoned in Chepstow Castle where the tower is named after him. He lives in relative comfort with Mary and his three daughters for remaining 20 years of his life and dies in 1680 allegedly choking on his supper

His long suffering wife, Margaret also died in 1680 at Longworth. They left a son, Henry, who from all his father’s one time wealth only inherited a farm in Hinton.

### **Henry Marten – Rogue or Revolutionary? (Slide)**

History has not been kind to Harry Marten, a man before his time. Bon Viveur, certainly; renowned wit and lover of the ladies certainly but also devoted partner to Mary. Leading radical, parliamentarian, he hated hypocrisy and intolerance. Above all he couldn’t stand tyrants. His true place in our history has not been acknowledged.



**Last word by Robert Southey, the poet, in 1797 on visiting Chepstow Castle**

For thirty years secluded from mankind  
Here MARTEN linger'd. Often have these walls  
Echoed his footsteps, as with even tread  
He pac'd around his prison; not to him  
Did Nature's fair varieties exist;  
He never saw the sun's delightful beams;  
Save when thro' yon high bars he pour'd a sad  
And broken splendour. Dost thou ask his crime?  
He had REBELL'D AGAINST THE KING, AND SAT  
IN JUDGEMENT ON HIM; for his ardent mind  
Shap'd goodliest plans of happiness on earth.  
And peace and liberty. Wild dreams! But such  
As Plato lov'd; such as with holy zeal  
Our Milton worshipp'd. Blessed hopes! A while  
From man with-held, even to the latter days  
When CHRIST shall come, and all things be fulfill'd!