

## Look Back With Little

# 'A worthy recipient'

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**O**n Tuesday, March 15 history will be made in the Town Hall when Banbury Town Council confers the office of High Steward of the town on Sir Tony Baldry.

The position has been vacant since 1968 when it lapsed on the death of the father of the present Lord Saye and Sele of Broughton Castle.

On ceremonial occasions, the office of High Steward ranks third after the mayor and Hon Recorder and is the highest position that the council can bestow and once granted is usually for life.

The duties are not defined but in the past the High Steward would be expected to present petitions to the Sovereign on behalf of the borough.

In the middle ages the office holders had an overview of the administration of the borough courts on behalf of the lords of the manor.

The first charter of 1554 put the government of the town in the hands of a Bailiff, 12 Aldermen and 12 Burgesses all chosen from 'the better and more honest and discreet inhabitants' with powers to elect a High Steward.

This person would have been, as the Second Charter of 1608 puts it 'one honourable man that shall and may be Baron of this our Realm, or at least as Knight' with links to the royal court and went on to name Baron Knollys of Greys (Earl of Banbury 1625).

William Lord Knollys typified this by being treasurer at court and Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire and Berkshire in which he was linked to a system whereby local land-



William, first Viscount Saye and Sele, elected High Steward in 1632

owners had contact with the government of Banbury.

High Stewards were also involved with the Court of Record which met every three weeks 'before the Bailiff and two Aldermen and two Capital Burgesses and the High Steward or his sufficient Deputy'.

This court dealt with all actions and debts up to the value of £5, based on the laws and custom of Coventry.

Any review of the past holders of High Stewardship reveals the great importance of the Lords Saye and Sele of

Broughton Castle.

William, Viscount Saye and Sele, was elected High Steward of the Borough on the death of the Earl of Banbury in 1632.

The letter of invitation signed by the Mayor, Justices, Aldermen and Capital Burgesses survives.

After informing him of the death of the previous High Steward it goes on to say, 'We have met in Common Council and by one unanimous consent made choice of your Lordship to be High Steward

in his place, presuming of your honourable acceptance'.

Nicknamed Old Subtlety, William played a clever hand in his relationship with King and Parliament.

Above all he accumulated a range of powerful positions, which greatly extended his range of influence.

His two eldest sons were MPs, Nathaniel Fiennes as MP for Banbury in 1640. Beesley's 'History of Banbury' comments that William was 'in affairs of state and religion, the chosen leader of almost the entire population of the district around Banbury'.

When 'Old Subtlety' died in 1662 at the age of 80 he left a strong association between Broughton Castle and Banbury politics.

After the Reform Act of 1832 attention was focused on close Corporations such as Banbury, described as 'these chartered hogsties'.

Particularly obnoxious to the Municipal Corporation Commissioners was power to elect MPs, which since 1750 had been exercised under the direction of first the Earl of Guilford, and then the Marquis of Bute both of whom held the office of High Steward.

The new men dispense with this position.

It was revived in its present form in 1850 in the person of the Rt Hon and Rev Lord Saye and Sele.

Sir Tony Baldry has worked very hard for this town as a Member of Parliament.

In a pre-appointment statement he has promised to uphold the best traditions of the office.

Councillor Kieron Mallon was quite right when he said "Traditions are important and should be cherished."

We should applaud Banbury Town Council for reviving this long-standing honour and offering it to such a worthy recipient.