

The Political Parties: the English Commissioners

Sidney Godolphin, politician (1645–1712)

Sidney Godolphin was born in Breage in Cornwall. He entered politics in 1667 as MP for Helston in support of the Court Party. His career survived the reigns of James VII and William III.

Godolphin worked closely with Queen Anne, Marlborough and Robert Harley, and as Lord High Treasurer, he was the most powerful politician in England. In 1706, he negotiated a deal which brought Scotland into the united kingdom of Great Britain. He was rewarded with the title of Earl of Godolphin.

His career went into decline after 1707 as he lost his influence over the Queen and Harley stepped in as her closest adviser. Godolphin fell from power in the elections of 1710. He died aged 67, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Thomas Tenison, Archbishop of Canterbury (1636-1715)

Thomas Tenison was born in Cambridgeshire. He was a liberal churchman and a supporter of King William. In 1694, after two years as Bishop of Lincoln, he became Archbishop of Canterbury.

Less popular with Queen Anne, he still wielded influence, and was appointed to the commission on the union in 1706. During the debates on the union in 1707 he spoke out in favour of it. He drew up the bill which guaranteed the security of the Church of England.

William Cowper, 1st Earl of Cowper, politician (1665-1723)

William Cowper grew up in Hertfordshire. He rose to prominence in the 1690s as a barrister and entered politics as a whig MP. In 1705 he was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal.

He played a central role in leading the English commissioners in 1706, and declared that the union treaty had prevented war between England and Scotland. In November 1706, he was rewarded for his political loyalty with the title 1st Baron Cowper. On 4 May 1707, just three days after the union came into force, he became the first Lord Chancellor of Great Britain. In 1718, after serving a second term as Chancellor, he was created 1st Earl Cowper.

Charles Seymour, 6th Duke of Somerset, politician and courtier (1662-1748)

Charles Seymour was born in Wiltshire. He prided himself on possessing the second oldest dukedom in England, which meant he played a prominent part in Court ceremonial.

Queen Anne appointed him her Master of the Horse, and he remained a senior courtier until 1710. He was a Whig supporter and acted as a union commissioner in 1706. He also served as Chancellor of Cambridge University for 59 years from 1689 until his death.

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The Union of 1707

Charles Spencer, 3rd Earl of Sunderland, politician (1674/5-1722)

Charles Spencer entered the House of Commons as MP for Tiverton at the age of 21. His political influence grew and he was appointed an English commissioner for the union. In December 1706 after the treaty negotiations, Sunderland was appointed Secretary of State in England. He helped ensure that the treaty passed through the House of Lords. He was also heavily involved in negotiations for the management of Scotland after the union. He held many public offices during his career, including First Lord of the Treasury.

Thomas Wharton, 1st Earl of Wharton, politician (1648-1715)

Thomas Wharton grew up in Buckinghamshire. As a young man he led a wild life and was a well-known racehorse owner. He supported the Revolution of 1689, and in 1696 succeeded his father as Lord Wharton and entered the House of Lords.

He was appointed a union commissioner and was created 1st Earl of Wharton as a reward after the treaty negotiations. In 1708, he became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. He enjoyed good relations with his nephew George Lockhart of Carnwath, the controversial Tory and Jacobite politician, despite their different views.

John Somers, Lord Somers, lawyer and politician (1651-1716)

John Somers was born in Worcestershire. He became a lawyer and entered the House of Commons as MP for Worcester in 1689. He received government promotion during the 1690s, becoming Lord Chancellor and Baron Somers in 1697.

Somers was appointed a commissioner for union in 1706 and attended 40 of the 45 meetings held. His legal expertise was helpful in the negotiations, and he played a major part in the debates at Westminster which resulted in the Act of Union. He served in Queen Anne's cabinet as Lord President of the Council from 1708-1710. His career then declined as a result of poor health.

Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford, politician (1661-1724)

Robert Harley was born in London. He trained as a barrister, became an MP in 1689, and rose to be Speaker of the House of Commons and Secretary of State from 1701-1705. He was appointed a commissioner for union and employed Daniel Defoe as an agent to supply him with information about views on the union in Scotland.

He fell from office in 1708 but returned to power in 1710 when he became Chancellor and led a Tory government. The following year he became Lord Treasurer and was made 1st Earl of Oxford. He was dismissed from office shortly before Queen Anne's death in 1714.