**Sir William Coventry**

**One of the great public Englsih figures of the Restoration period (ie post 1660 restoration of the Monarchy & Charles II)**

**Baptised** 1627, so only a teenager when Civil War broke out in the 1640s. He was at Queen's College, Oxford, where he started his studies aged 15 in 1642, but Coventry left before completing his degree.

He joined the Civil War on the king’s side as a young subaltern, but crossed to France when things got tricky. He waited there to see whether the Royalists would be able to put together an army to wrestlye back control from Cromwell – but when it became obvious that was not on, according to the autobiography of Clarendon, the man who later became his great rival: ‘he returned into England, where he remained for many years without the least correspondence with any of his friends beyond the seas. (*Life of … Clarendon*, 2.348)

Coventry's endorsed a proposal made in 1649 to set up a royalist council to oversee the exiled king's affairs, but Charles’s supporters were full of internal rivalries. Clarendon, like others, was jealous of his closeness to the exiled queen mother, who favoured the policy of setting up Charles II as a covenanted king.

In September 1652 Charles sent Coventry to England, where he stayed. He was arrested in the aftermath of one failed Royalist revolt, but chose to keep his head down under successive ‘Interregnum regimes’, probably protected by his brother-in-law, Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, later first earl of Shaftesbury, who was well in with Cromwell.

Clarendon claimed that Coventry only threw his firm support behind the Restoration **after** the king's succession had been proclaimed – but he he had travelled to The Hague just beforehand to visit the royal princes, and was appointed by James, duke of York, Charles’s younger brother as his private secretary, almost certainly because of their high regard for Coventry’s brother, Henry.

It was in that capacity that he makes his first entrance in Pepys’s diary, when Pepys went over in a Navy ship to Holland, as private secretary to his mentor the earl of Sandwich, who was commanding the naval detachment sent to bring Charles and James back to England. The date is 22 may 1860.

[Extract 22 May 1860]

A week later Coventry was honoured by being asked to lead the royal entrance procession into the City of London. He became intricately involved in naval administration when his boss, James Duke of York was appointed as the Ffleet’s Lord High Admiral, a post he was to hold for 13 years: the Navy was one of the country’s most important institutions as by ruling the seas it provided the bulwark against invasion from Europe.

From the start Pepys was impressed by Coventry’s support in his attempts to clean up the Navy’s adminstration:

[Extracts 23 August, 9 October 1660; 14 March, 20 April 1661]

Later that same year, 1661, Coventry was elected to the Commons as MP for Great Yarmouth, a post effectively in the gift of James, duke of York, appointed Lord High Admiral of England’s Navy,

In 1662, the Duke of York went one stage further and appointed his private secretary as a full member of the Navy Board, at a salary of £300 a year. Samuel Pepys was a fellow member – there were only seven – as Clerk of the Acts, perhaps best seen as its Secretary, and the two began an even closer collaboration in the navy’s overdue reform.

[Extracts 7 , 10, 12, 13 June, 31 July, 8 August 1662]

Coventry told Pepys that he was determined to remain straight in a Court that was full of corruption

[Extract 30 October 1662, 24 June 1663]

The smooth progress of Coventry and Pepys’s reforms was to tested in 1664 by the looming threat of was with the Dutch over trade.

[Extract 29 May 1664]

Pepys reported on the first major engagement in 1665:

[Extract 8 June 1665] (2 days later Pepys reported the first outbreak of the plague in the City of London

After being present at this naval battle of Lowestoft – reported by Pepys as a great victory, but in truth inconclusive – Coventry was . was knighted and made a privy councilor.

During this period Coventry and his brother [Henry Coventry](http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/article/6477/?back=,6485) dominated the House of Commons – Bishop Gilbert Burnet in his *History* described him in 1665 as ‘a man of great notions and eminent virtues, the best speaker in the house, and capable of bearing the chief ministry’ - (*Bishop Burnet's History*, ed. Burnet and Burnet –

But beneath the surface, the inconclusive war was breeding tensions between the Courts of Charles and James – Pepys’s mentor Sandwich was on the opposite side to James and Coventry – and within the Naval Board where Coventry and the main commissioner, Sir George Carteret, were constantly at loggerheads.

Pepys records the first murmurs against Coventry a year later, in the middle of June 1666 – his mentor Sandwich claimed that Coventry’s much vaunted integrity was not all that it seemed – he had ‘feathered his nest’ in the handling of naval prize money and selling offices.

[Extract 25 October 1665]

Coventry later admitted that, like everybody else, he made money well beyond his salary at the Board - he estimated his income in his first four years of office at around £25,000, compared to his salary of £1,200.

Matters became worse when the Dutch were more successful in the summer of 1666 than they had been a year earlier. Coventry himself told Pepys that he was now under pressure from enemies close to the King:

[Extracts 24, 29 June, 18 July, 28 August 1666]

Within days the temperature was raised further by the outbreak of fire – the great Fire of London

[Extract 7 September 1667]

A month later money problems came to a head. After three years of facing the Dutch, the Navy needed a lot of money spent on it, but the King was short - Coventry, Pepys and the Navy Board thought at least £100,000 was needed to put things right, but felt they could not bid for more than £50,000; on 7 October 1666 they were told that they could have only £5-6,000. [see extract 7 October 1666]

Morale amongst the members of the Naval Board was sinking as low as it was already with the sailors.

[Extracts 16,19 December 1666, 4 April, 9 May 1667]

This was the unpromising run-up to a shock attack early in June by the Dutch fleet which succeeded in taking Sheernesse at the entrance to the Medway and was threatening the large Naval base at Chatham. Pepys reported the panic that followed in his diary on 11 June and days following:

[Extracts 11,12, 13,14 June 1667]

The blame game began straightaway. Coventry made the mistake of trying to pin it solely on the admiral commanding, the Duke of Albemarle, rather than himself and the Navy Board which was responsible for paying the fleet. He came under further fire:

[Extract 14 June 1667]

The admiral's supporters in the Commons joined up with Lord Chancellor Clarendon's men to pull him down a peg – Clarendon had the additional advantage that he was the father of James Duke of York’s wife. By September he had resigned from the Navy Board and a month later became instead a member of the less powerful Treasury Commission. Pepys recorded how he broke the news:

[Extracts 2,4 September 1667]

He continued as a member of the House of Commons, where his speeches contributed powerfully to Clarendon's own fall from power ?when – but Coventry was not given a more powerful position in the government reoganisation that followed - the duke of York resented Coventry's attitude to his father-in-law, Clarendon, and told him so.

Three days later Coventry decided to leave the duke's service, claiming that this was unconnected with his attitude to Clarendon. Nobody believed him. He told Pepys that he regarded Clarendon as incapable - but he had no wish to seek political advancement by identifying himself with a particular faction.

Coventry's frankness and independence had produced many enemies. Early in 1669 he was told that the duke of Buckingham and Sir Robert Howard were planning a caricature of him on the stage and he duly appeared in the in the play *The Country Gentlemen* in the mocking guise of Sir Cautious Trouble-All, the adjective already bestowed on Coventry by the king himself, who scorned his gloomy prognostications on state affairs.

Coventry challenged the duke to a duel – as Pepys related:

[Ectract 1 March 1669

As soon as the king heard, Coventry was sent to the Tower where pepys was one of the first to visit him:

[Extract 4 March 1669]

Coventry was stripped of his Privy Councilship and of his Treasury post:

[Extract 6 March 1669]

Within days he asked the king’s pardon as Pepys reported:

[Extract 9 March 1669]

The king took his time to kiss hands to show that all was forgiven.

[Extract 17 April 1669]

Having fallen from grace Coventry abandoned the court entirely - not without relief – he had no stomach for the pro-French diplomacy on which the government was increasingly set.

His popularity in the Commons remained high – he was credited with having sacrificed a promising career at court for the sake of principled opposition to the danger of falling into the clutches of the French.

Although personally disinclined to see protestant dissenters persecuted, he twice opposed the crown's power to suspend the Act of Uniformity and was a leading parliamentary opponent of the so-called Cabal.

He protected Pepys against his brother-in-law,the earl of Shaftesbury's allegations of popery in 1677 – but managed to remain high in his Shaftesbury’s estimation until he opposed exclusion, on the pragmatic grounds that it make the duke of York so desperate that his only hope lay with France and the Scots.

Coventry did not seek election to the first Exclusion Parliament, but was chosen anyway to sit for Great Yarmouth again. After Parliament’s dissolution in 1679, he finally retired to a country house at Minster Lovell, near Witney, Oxfordshire, interesting himself in local affairs. No offer of posts at court could draw him back to public life.

Coventry's political style is best known by its portrayal in *The Character of a Trimmer*, which came out in 1688 dedicated to ‘the Honourable Sir W. C.’. During his life Coventry admitted himself to be a trimmer, a title which he defines as ‘one who would sit upright and not overturn the boat by swaying too much on either side’ (Foxcroft, 2.275).

He died unmarried at Somerhill, near Tunbridge Wells, on 23 June 1686, and was buried at Penshurst.

Why Penshurst? Our archivist Christine Rose tries to explain.

Sidney Lee*, rev.* Sean Kelsey