

THE CAUSE OF THE DEATH OF HAMPDEN.

BY MR. R. GIBBS.

Two hundred and twenty years after John Hampden fell in Chalgrove Field, a discussion arises as to the actual cause of his death. The facts as accepted from Clarendon, Noble, Lord Nugent, Forster, Hume, Guizot and other historians, are shaken by the narrative (hitherto pronounced a fiction) of Sir Robert Pye. The point under discussion is this,—whether Hampden died from the effects of a shot from one of the King's troops, or from the bursting of his own pistol. Historians agree almost word for word that he was killed by two carbine balls which "entering the shoulder broke the bone."

This story of Sir Robert Pye relative to the cause of Hampden's death is presented in the following terms in the Earl of Oxford's papers: "Two of the Harleys, and one of the Foleys being at supper with Sir Robert Pye at Farrington House, Berks, in their way to Hertfordshire, Sir Robert Pye related the account of Hampden's death as follows:—

'That in the action of Chalgrove Field, his pistol burst, and shattered his hand in a terrible manner. He, however rode off and got to his quarters, but finding the wound mortal, he sent for Sir Robert Pye, then a Colonel in the Parliamentary army, and who had married his eldest daughter, and told him that he looked on him in some degree accessory to his death, as the pistols were a present from him. Sir Robert assured him that he bought them in Paris of an eminent maker, and had proved them himself. It appeared on examining the other pistol, that it was loaded to the muzzle with several supernumerary charges, owing to the carelessness of a servant who was ordered to see that the pistols were loaded every morning which he did but without drawing the former charge.'"

In 1828, the pavement of the Chancel of Great Hampden Church being under repair, the late Lord Nugent took advantage of the circumstance and applied for and obtained permission to inspect the (supposed) remains of

Hampden. His Lordship somewhat pre-judged the result of the inspection, for in a letter written prior to the exhumation he says, "the skeleton will be found with the shoulder broken." The examination took place, and a searching one it was; the details of it are somewhat repulsive, and much too lengthy to be given here, but an account by an eye-witness may be found in Lipscomb's History.* The result of the examination was that the shoulder bones exhibited no signs of ever having been broken; the bones of the left shoulder bore evidence of injury, but more like a bruise from a fall† than the effects of a pistol wound. Strange to say the right hand was severed from the arm, and for about six inches up the arm the flesh had wasted away. It was afterwards rumoured that this was not the body of Hampden, so that the whole question then turned upon the identity of the body.

The late Mr. Grace of Wardrobes, who was present at the exhumation, reports that the corpse had "a beautiful dead face."‡ Mr. W. J. Smith (who commenced the late discussion on "Notes and Queries") who was also present, says, "the hair was long and flowing as represented in the portraits of Hampden." The most remarkable circumstance relative to the identification of the body is the evidence of Mr. Robertson who was at the time of the exhumation a confidential servant at Hampden House, and was present. In a letter on the subject he writes.§—"The first time I went up stairs after the exhumation, a portrait which hung on the best staircase appeared to be looking at me, and I immediately recognised the face and the figure of the man I had seen in the grave at Hampden Church. The sight I shall never forget as long as I live.

* Lipscomb's History of the County of Buckingham, Great Hampden, vol. iii., pages 252, 253, 254 note.

† The common account preserved of the battle in the neighbourhood of Chalgrove, is that upon Hampden's receiving his wound he retreated in the direction towards Pyrton; and that on the spot where he fell from his horse, a tree was afterwards planted, to distinguish it, as the scene of that event.

‡ The body, when the coffin was first opened, was found to be in a fine state of preservation.

§ See "Once a week" of January 10th, 1863, "Notes taken at Hampden, concerning the greatest squire of that ilk," by Mrs. Acton Tindal.

On the arrival of my late employer, Lord Buckinghamshire, from France, I told him the impression on my mind, that the portrait on the staircase must be that of the patriot Hampden. He immediately gave me orders to have it taken down and examined, and on removing a piece of old canvas, to the great joy of his lordship and the satisfaction of myself, we found the patriot's name written on the canvas of the painting in a very legible hand." The inscription mentioned that the picture had been presented by one of the Bedford family; it is this—"John Hampden, 1640. A present to Sir William Russel, and afterwards given to John Lord Russel."

The result of the late discussion is the production of the evidence of the following eye-witnesses at the exhumation:—* Lord Nugent, Lord Denman, Mr. Smith, Mr. Robertson. In reference to the Lord Nugent's opinion, Mr. Smith states that he knew his Lordship's opinion at the time was that it was the body of Hampden.† Lord Denman, in 1843, (fifteen years afterwards) in answer to an invitation from Lord Nugent to attend at Chalgrove Field, at the inauguration of the monument to the memory of Hampden, referring to the exhumation, makes use of this expression, "whose very identical body I am sure we saw," Mr. Smith says, "this remarkable difference in the condition of the hands, sufficiently proves the truth of Sir Robert Pye's relation of the cause of the death of Hampden. Mr. Robertson's letter fully explains his opinion.

* Vide Notes and Queries, January 3rd, 1863, page 12.

† What a singular coincidence that the bodies of the two great adversaries should have been exhumed, that of Charles the First to prove the place of his interment, that of Hampden to prove the cause of his death.

[It is certain that whatever may have been the actual cause of Hampden's death, the Parliamentary Journals of the day attributed it to a wound in the shoulder, received from the enemy. THE CERTAINE INFORMATIONS, 26th June, 1643, simply says, *Colonel Hampden was Shot into the shoulder*; while THE PARLIAMENT SCOUT, 27th June, after referring to the Lord Generall's Letter for the full particulars of the skirmish, writes, *Colonell HAMB DEN, and Sergeant Major GUNTER were hurt at the first charge*:

Colonel URREY that Runegadoe crying that's HAMPDEN, thats GUNTER, thats LUKE, which made the enemy so fierce upon our commanders: "" Colonell Hambden who came by accident into this Skirmish, and Charged in Captains Crofts Troope was shot in the shoulder but is now dead."—But it is easy to understand that in the heat of a cavalry charge with exchange of pistol shots, those engaged would not observe the precise nature of the wounds inflicted, and that his comrades seeing Hampden "ride away with his arm hanging helpless by his side" would attribute his injury to a shot fired by a Royalist. The last mentioned Journal expressly states that he was "hurt at the first charge," the time, when of all others during the action, he would suffer from the bursting of a pistol previously overloaded. It is however probably impossible now to ascertain the cause of Hampden's death with undoubted accuracy.