Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 4th Baronet: An Unconventional Politician?*

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The political life of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 4th baronet has traditionally been seen in line with Sir Lewis Namier’s views of 18th-century politics and this article seeks to reinterpret his political life, taking into consideration not only his activities within parliament, but also his role within local government and his cultural activities. It will particularly consider the importance of his role within the concerts for ancient music, his lord lieutenancy of Merioneth and the central part he played in the 1778 treasury warrant crisis as well as his vigorous attempts to defend his interest during the 1774 Montgomeryshire election. This article will also argue that the cultural activities of back-bench country gentlemen within the 18th-century house of commons can shed new light upon their political views and activities.

Keywords: Sir Watkin Williams Wynn; concerts for ancient music; treasury warrant; elections; local politics; Wales; parliament

Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 4th baronet (1748–89), was the largest landowner in Wales, with estates extending across five Welsh counties including Merioneth, Denbighshire and Montgomeryshire, in addition to an estate in Shropshire. As such, he had the potential to wield significant electoral influence. He also had significant political connections through his second wife, Charlotte Grenville, who was the daughter of George Grenville, brother of the future Lord Grenville and cousin of Pitt the Younger. Sir Watkin refused to use these connections for political advantage, preferring to busy himself with local governmental roles and the arts. He was a director and treasurer of the concerts for ancient music, vice-president of the Honourable and Loyal Society of Ancient Britons, chief president of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorian,1 and a member of the Dilettante. In addition he was lord lieutenant of Merioneth from 1775, served as mayor of Chester, 1773–4, and was MP for Shropshire, 1772–4 and Denbighshire, 1774–89. In spite of this vigour for local politics, his cultural posts would have kept him in London during much of the parliamentary session. Despite being in town at this time he is not

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1 The Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion was founded in 1751 and its first incarnation was dissolved in 1787.
recorded as ever having spoken in parliament, whilst his voting record was unspectacular. In light of his poor record in the house of commons, it is unsurprising that the established view of the political life of the 2nd Sir Watkin, taken through Namier-tinted spectacles, casts him as a reluctant politician. Such studies have a tendency to largely ignore the political significance of an MP’s work outside the house of commons. Accordingly, we still have a long way to go in understanding how 18th-century back-bench MPs worked and what their main influences were. This article seeks to cast new light upon the political life of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 4th baronet, through an examination of his cultural and local political activities. It will also argue that there is a need to look further than an MP’s speaking and voting record in the house of commons when assessing their political activity. In addition, this article will also seek to locate the cultural activities and interests of the 4th Baronet Williams Wynn within the broader context of post-Namierite mid- to late-18th-century culture, whilst also demonstrating that in the age of the club, concert and pleasure garden, leading an active cultural life was not incompatible with having an active political life.

2. Historiography

The parliamentary history of 18th-century Wales, has been dominated by P.D.G. Thomas, whose work on politics in 18th-century Wales, with the exception of his article on the treasury warrant crisis, largely ignores extra-parliamentary activities. Instead, much of his work has focused upon electoral interests and contests. Parliamentary elections fill an awkward void between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activity, in part due to the fact that contested elections were costly and often only decided after parliamentary scrutiny of the result and process. Accordingly, many landowners and borough mongers sought to arrange the results without the need for a contest. The parliamentary history of 18th-century Wales, has all too often been eclipsed by studies of radical and popular politics, and studies on the social and religious history of 18th-century Wales, examining key Welsh figures such as Dr Richard Price and Iolo Morgannwg.

There has also been little work undertaken on the political life of the 4th baronet. Notable exceptions to this are P.D.G. Thomas’s work on 18th-century elections in Wales, and the treasury warrant crisis, as well as J.D. Nichol’s article examining the link between Wynnstay and the linked estates at Much Wenlock, in which Nichol argues that

3 The 3rd baronet, Williams Wynn, is also known as the 1st Sir Watkin or the Great Sir Watkin, with the 4th baronet also being known as the 2nd Sir Watkin.
the Wynnstay influence in Wenlock declined during the minority of the 4th baronet, and it was left to his son, the 5th baronet, to ‘pick up the broken threads of his father’s political interest in Wenlock’. Nichol’s argument conforms to the traditional narrative of the 4th baronet’s political career, indicating a greater attachment to art and music than to politics, and citing family considerations as being the key to his political engagements. Nichol also discusses an enquiry, ordered by the 4th baronet, into the ownership of land within the borough of Wenlock, which formed the basis for a challenge for supremacy within the borough. This challenge to the Forrester family influence in Wenlock continued for 50 years. Meanwhile, articles have also been produced on other aspects of Sir Watkin’s life with T.W. Pritchard focusing on the Wynnstay estates, whilst William Fairclough, Brinsley Ford, P. Hughes and William Weber, all focused upon his passion for the arts. Weber’s article is of particular interest as it paints a very different picture of Sir Watkin from that of Thomas and Pritchard, suggesting that he was, in fact, active in the world of politics and a source of political advice to his friends within the committee for the concerts for ancient music.

The second half of the 18th century has long been portrayed as a period of pleasure by historians such as John Brewer, Vic Gatrell, Paul Langford and Peter Clark, with an emphasis on the performing arts, club life, balls and masquerades. It would, therefore, seem fitting to place a considerable emphasis upon these parts of an individual’s life when attempting to write a post-Namierite life of an individual, as politics could be, and frequently was, transacted within these more relaxed social settings. This article will, therefore, limit its discussion of extra-parliamentary activity to campaigns conducted outside parliament against specific pieces of legislation or treasury policy, local and cultural politics. It will also consider electoral contests in which Sir Watkin played an active part, but was not standing within its reassessment of his political activity.

3. Sir Watkin – Early Life

At the time of Sir Watkin’s birth, 8 April 1749, his family was the largest landowner in Wales. There had been Williams’s and later William Wynn’s in parliament from the time of Charles II and being MP for Denbighshire and mayor of Chester had come to be viewed as a rite of passage for the head of the family.

9 T.W. Pritchard, ‘Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, Fourth Baronet (1749–1789)’, Denbighshire Historical Society, Transactions, xxvii (1978), 5–48; T.W. Pritchard, ‘Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, Fourth Baronet (1749–1789), Part II’, Denbighshire Historical Society, Transactions, xxviii (1979), 18–67. These articles were later reproduced in their entirety as chapters in his privately published The Wynns at Wynnstay, which had a limited run of 200 copies.
15 His grandfather, Sir William Williams bt, had served as solicitor general before becoming Speaker of the house of commons during the Glorious Revolution.
His father, Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 3rd baronet, in addition to being MP for Denbighshire from 1716 until his death in 1749, was one of the leading jacobites in Wales, whilst his electoral interest covered seven Welsh and four English counties. The 3rd baronet died on 26 September 1749, following a hunting accident near Wrexham, five months after his son’s birth. T.W. Pritchard points to this when arguing that: ‘to the fourth baronet [politics] was a duty forced upon him by the remembrance of the father he never knew and the estates and name he inherited’. He was raised by his mother, Lady Frances Williams Wynn (1717/18–1803), whilst his education was overseen by his father’s former friend and neighbour, Thomas Apperley of Plas Grono. The young Sir Watkin entered Westminster School in around 1760 and retained close ties with the school for the remainder of his life. Westminster was second only to Eton as a breeding ground for the nation’s future political leaders, with one in 50 of its pupils entering parliament between 1750 and 1832. On 9 May 1766, Sir Watkin went up to Oriel College, Oxford, a choice seemingly influenced by Apperley, a former gentleman commoner of the college, as both his father and grandfather were alumni of Jesus College, Oxford. Sir Watkin came down in 1768 without a degree. In 1771 he was created a doctor of civil law in honour of his father.

Like many of his contemporaries, having left university, the young Sir Watkin embarked upon a grand tour in order to complete his education. His tour took place between 1768 and 1769, costing £1,718 13s. 9d., and took him to Paris, Geneva, Milan, Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice. He was accompanied by Thomas Apperley and Captain Hamilton, who were charged with making the tour educational, engaging specialist tutors along the way to improve Sir Watkin’s dancing, fencing, drawing and linguistic skills, as well as arrange trips to the theatre and opera. According to his son’s memoirs, Thomas Apperley was selected by the friends of the Great Sir Watkin as ‘the most proper person to accompany him [the 4th baronet] on the Grand Tour of Europe’, presumably due to his background in education, having previously been employed as a private tutor. Five servants also accompanied the party, including Samuel Sidebotham, who was to act as paymaster for the trip, and Antonio Carara, who was employed as Sir Watkin’s valet at the express recommendation of the renowned Shakespearian actor, David Garrick. Whilst in Rome, Sir Watkin conducted a tour of Tivoli, with William Cavendish, 5th duke of Devonshire, employing the celebrated antiquarian, James Byers of Tonley, as their guide. Whilst the whig-tory split had little meaning by the 1760s, his decision to tour Tivoli with the head of one of the great whig houses is interesting, indicating a friendship which could have helped shape his future political sympathies. Indeed, Sir Watkin’s second wife, Charlotte Grenville, whom he married in 1771, came from another of the great whig families, her father being George Grenville of Stamp Act

16 P.D.G. Thomas, ‘Wynn, Sir Watkin Williams, Third Baronet (1693?–1749)’, *ODNB*.  
19 National Library of Wales [hereafter cited as NLW], Wynnstay MSS, Box 115/1, *passim*.  
20 *My Life and Times by Nimrod (Charles James Apperley)*, ed. E.D. Cuming (Edinburgh, 1927), 1–2; see also Nimrod, *The Life and Times of John Mytton, Esq. of Halston, Shropshire* (5th edn, 1890), 2.  
22 David Garrick would later be counted amongst the visitors to Wynnstay during the life of the 4th baronet.  

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fame, and a former first lord of the treasury, whilst her uncle, Lord Chatham, was another whig who rose to hold the highest office in the land. This was in stark contrast to his first wife, Henrietta Somerset, the daughter of the 4th duke of Beaufort, a leading Welsh tory and jacobite. It is probable, however, that this match was preconceived by his parents and arranged by his mother, requiring a special act of parliament, owing to the fact that Sir Watkin was not of age in 1769. This private act of parliament is interesting in itself, as it refers to his mother, the dowager Lady Wynn, as his natural guardian, an early reference to the notion of a woman being any kind of guardian.23

Two other early clues as to Sir Watkin’s political affiliation are the apparent invitation from John Wilkes to stand as the radical candidate in the 1770 Westminster by-election, and his election for Shropshire at the 1772 by-election. The first of these was reported in number 6624 of the London Evening Post, a well-known Wilkite mouthpiece, which reported on 24 April 1770 that: ‘a messenger was sent express on Sunday to Sir Watkin Williams Wynne, bart. at his seat in Wales, to solicit him to offer himself as a candidate to represent the City of Westminster in Parliament, in the room of the Hon. Edwin Sandys, now Lord Sandys’.24 It was later reported that Sir Watkin ‘politely excused himself’.25 The reason for this is unclear, but it is probable that political differences were the primary reason for his declining to stand. Other reasons include his having no significant property within the constituency, and accordingly, little or no direct influence over the electorate, as well as the fact that he came of age only in April 1770 and he would have been much employed getting to grips with the estates which finally came into his direct control.

4. Elections

Sir Watkin first sought election to parliament at the 1772 Shropshire by-election, which had been occasioned by the death of Sir John Astley. His Much Wenlock estate made Sir Watkin a significant Shropshire landowner. Shropshire was traditionally seen as a tory stronghold, but at this time the whig interest in the county was strengthening, thanks to the rise in influence of the Clive family.26 It is possible that with this situation in mind he decided to undertake a canvass, believing that his father’s reputation as a tory, combined with his more whiggish political outlook would give him a broad enough appeal, in conjunction with the votes already under his direct control, to mount a successful campaign. Sir Watkin offered himself for election in the generally-accepted manner of an open letter to the electorate published in a newspaper. Sir Watkin’s letter, in which he offered ‘the Gentlemen, Freeholders and Clergy’, his services, appeared in the London Evening Post on 11 February. The sheriff of Shropshire had formally given notice, of a county meeting to agree upon a candidate in the same newspaper, on 8 February. County meetings were a standard method for attempting to stave off the

23 Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PB/1/1769/9G3n43.
24 London Evening Post, 24 Apr. 1770.
25 London Evening Post, 26 Apr. 1770.
prospect of a costly and time-consuming contested election, as usually one potential candidate would gain the favour of the majority of those present at the meeting and the other potential candidates would stand down, paving the way for their unopposed return.

Sir Watkin’s nomination at the county meeting at the Shrewsbury Guildhall on 13 February was well received. He expressed his thanks to the voters for according him the high honour of their nomination to succeed the late Sir John Astley as MP for Shropshire in a letter, printed in the London Evening Post on 15 February, going on to express his hope that he could count on their support on the election day.27 On 20 February, the London Evening Post published an undated letter from local squire, John Mytton, in which he withdrew his candidature. Mytton explained that he decided against seeking election after the recent public meeting, before going on to thank those who had supported his bid to gain the favour of the Shropshire voters. This obstacle passed, Sir Watkin was duly elected unopposed at the by-election.

At the 1774 general election, Sir Watkin transferred to the Denbighshire seat won by his father. His election was uncontested but he faced a challenge to the Wynnstay interest in Montgomeryshire.28 Sir Watkin readily engaged in the contest, financially backing his cousin and sitting MP, Watkin Williams, against the Powis Castle candidate and local landowner, William Mostyn Owen. His candidate was eventually to lose the contest by 700 to 624, spending some £4,842 3s. 2d.,29 whilst Powis Castle’s total spending on the election was in the region of £5,300.30 It took until mid 1775 for the Wynnstay estate to clear the election debts, but Powis Castle declined to contest any further elections in Montgomeryshire during the 4th baronet’s lifetime, with Sir Watkin transferring his support to Owen during the 1780 election owing to his adherence to the Fox-North coalition.31 It is probable that the reason for the challenge by Lord Powis, who had recently come of age, was an attempt to restore the traditional Powis Castle dominance of the county. Elaine Chalus has argued, however, that this was due to Sir Watkin and Lady Wynn being unsociable. She cites a letter from Lady Granby to the duchess of Beaufort, in which Lady Granby suggested that Sir Watkin had ‘lost almost all his [political] interest in Wales’.32 This assertion is not borne out by the results of the 1774 general election, where it was only in Montgomeryshire that Sir Watkin failed to get a candidate returned in his interest.

The fact that Sir Watkin first sought election at the 1772 Shropshire by-election, rather than wait for the general election and seek election for Denbighshire, would appear to go some way to dispel the image of his being a reluctant politician, as does his involvement in the 1774 Montgomeryshire campaign. On the other hand, entering parliament at the early opportunity could also tie in with his inherent sense of duty, and belief that major landowners should represent their areas in parliament. Pritchard’s suggestion that Sir Watkin entered politics out of a sense of duty does not necessarily sit easily with the fact that he never recorded a speech in the house of commons, and could

28 For more information see Thomas, ‘The Montgomeryshire Election of 1774’, passim.
30 HPC, 1754–1790, i, 466.
31 HPC, 1754–1790, i, 66.
be seen to tie in to the suggestion that he was a reluctant politician. Sir Watkin’s lack of speeches in parliament, however, does not tally with his passion for amateur dramatics, which had led to him having a theatre built on his Wynnstay estate, owing to the fact that, during the 18th century, amateur dramatics was viewed as good oratorical training. Indeed, two of the leading parliamentary orators of their day, William Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox, both shared a passion for amateur dramatics in their youth. Sir Watkin’s reluctance to speak in parliament, however, was not untypical of the country gentlemen who represented the counties and viewed being an MP as a status symbol. Accordingly, their voting records were often unspectacular, whilst they seldom, if ever, spoke. Thus, the key to Sir Watkin’s political character lies in his activities out of doors. It is these activities which will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

5. Extra-Parliamentary Activity

One of Sir Watkin’s most important activities outside parliament, and to an extent, politics, was his involvement in the concerts for ancient music, which he and the 4th earl of Sandwich established in 1776 under the management of Sandwich’s private secretary, Joah Bates, and treasurership of Sir Watkin. These concerts were not only important for firmly securing Handel’s position within the musical canon, but also helped to preserve older pieces of music, at a time when songs composed for the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranelagh were increasing in popularity. With an impressive list of directors, including the earl of Exeter, Henry Paget, 1st earl of Uxbridge (second creation), John, 2nd Viscount Dudley and Ward, and Sir Richard Jebb bt, it is inconceivable that politics would not have been discussed at some point.

It was during his involvement with the concerts for ancient music that Sir Watkin found himself the victim of James Gillray’s etching needle in Ancient Music, in May 1787 (Figure 1). Strikingly, Sir Watkin was the only director of the concerts to be represented by Gillray in his Ancient Music, with Joah Bates, the only other figure connected with the management of the concerts to be represented. According to M.D. George, this print is ostensibly a social satire, based upon Peter Pindar’s poem Ode upon Ode, commenting upon the fact that George III chose to attend the concerts as a subscriber, rather than holding them by royal command, making a donation of £420 in both 1786 and 1787 according to the two surviving account books in the Wynnstay collection.

The fact that the other individuals depicted were politicians and officeholders in either Pitt the Younger’s administration, or the Fox–North coalition which it replaced, are indicative of another more overtly political reading of the print. William Weber, in his

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34 Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser, Issue 4977, 27 Apr. 1785; Issue 5273, 10 Apr. 1786; Issue 5623, 21 May 1787; St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post, Issue 4072, 5 Apr. 1787.
35 Henry, earl of Uxbridge went on to become one of Wellington’s generals at the battle of Waterloo and lord lieutenant of Ireland in Earl Grey’s administration.
36 British Museum, Dept of Prints and Drawings, item BM 7163, published by S.W. Fores, 16 May 1787.
38 NLW, Wynnstay MS L1333, pp. 2, 14.
article on the 1784 Handel commemoration alludes to the political significance and overtones within, and around, these cultural events. 39

The first clue as to the political nature of the print is that in the centre of the print, Charles James Fox, depicted as a fox with a pail in the shape of Lord North’s head tied to its brush by a ribbon bearing the word ‘coalition’, is being chased across the stage by the king’s hounds. This is a clear reference to the Fox–North coalition which George III dismissed after they lost a vote in the house of lords in December 1783, over their plans to reform the government of India. The use of the king’s hounds to chase off the coalition is a reference to the fact that George III made it known to the upper House, through Pitt’s cousin, Earl Temple, that he was opposed to the bill and would not look favourably upon any noble lord who voted in favour of the measure. In the wings, to the king’s right, half in shot and half out, is the figure of William Pitt the Younger. His presence in the wings is a reference to the fact that George III had lined him up to replace the duke of Portland as 1st lord of the treasury after the fall of the Fox–North coalition in 1783. The fact that he is playing a whistle and rattle indicates his holding of two government offices. 40 Sir Watkin, depicted as a stout goat, is seated in the front row

40 William Pitt the Younger served as his own chancellor of the exchequer from 1783 to 1801.

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of the audience, identified by a paper in his pocket entitled ‘Road to Wynnstay’. Sir Watkin’s portrayal as a goat is a clear reference to his Welsh roots, with Wales occasionally dubbed ‘Goatlandshire’ during the 18th century. His being asleep could be a reference to his perceived lack of interest in parliamentary politics. His sleeping could also refer to the fact that he did not seek office or preferment from Pitt, who was the cousin of his second wife, Charlotte Grenville, whilst her brothers also held office in Pitt’s administration. Given these filial connections, one might presume that Sir Watkin would have been supportive of the new ministry, as John Robinson was in 1783, supposing him to be in favour of removing the coalition and ready to support a new administration under Pitt the Younger. Whilst there is little evidence to test Sir Watkin’s view on the coalition government, it is clear from Donald Ginter’s work on the voting records of the house of commons, that Sir Watkin did not, in fact, vote with Pitt. The fact that he is sleeping, suggests that the scene being played out in front of him – the removal of the Fox–North coalition – was a matter of indifference to him, whilst another reading is as a commentary upon his lack of political ambition.

When seeking patronage and place, MPs would traditionally either apply to politicians with whom they had a personal connection, or offer the government votes in the house of commons or in the country in exchange for preferment. When, in 1775, Sir Watkin applied to Lord North, the then first lord of the treasury, for the lord lieutenancy of Merioneth which had just become vacant, he had no personal connection with him. Whilst, unlike most squires, he was not a habitual supporter of the government, Sir Watkin’s opposition to Lord North’s administration, having voted against them on several occasions, did not escape the notice of George III. The king provided a grudging assent to this request when approached by Lord North, remarking: ‘if he means to be grateful, otherwise favours granted to persons in opposition is not very political’. Sir Watkin appears to have accepted this bargain and was considered to be favourable to the government up until the treasury warrant crisis of 1778. From Donald Ginter’s work on voting lists for the house of commons from 1761 to 1820, Sir Watkin does not appear to have voted with the government. Whilst it is possible that Ginter’s records are incomplete, as many of the surviving lists were compiled by the opposition, and as such would not necessarily include the names of members voting in favour of the government, the fact that Sir Watkin never spoke in parliament renders it virtually impossible to ascertain the extent of his gratitude to the king and the North ministry. One should be careful not to read Sir Watkin’s lack of support in terms of speeches and votes as a sign of ingratitude. When his lack of speeches is combined with a conspicuous gap in his voting record between the division of 22 February 1775 on expunging the exclusion of Wilkes from the Journals, and the votes on the Contractors Bill of February 1779, and the forces supplied to Admiral Keppel in March 1779, both of which took place after his supposed split with the government over the treasury warrant, do beg the question of how genuine his gratitude was. This, in turn, raises the possibility that Sir Watkin was
unable to bring himself to vote with the government, and accordingly registered his
gratitude by not voting against them. Other explanations for his lack of activity include
his work on the board of the concerts for ancient music, as previously discussed, the
possibility of ill health preventing his attendance, and his devotion to local matters
detaining him in Wales.

Sir Watkin’s desire to be lord lieutenant of Merioneth, whilst not the action which
one would associate with the traditional view of him as a reluctant politician, is entirely
consistent with someone whose primary political interest lay in local governance. Sir
Watkin took an active role in local politics and, in his capacity as lord lieutenant of
Merioneth, was involved in a campaign to press more men into the ever-expanding navy
in 1787 at the request of the admiralty, the request coming in part from the duke of
Dorset, a fellow old boy of Westminster School, with whom he had once played in a
charity cricket match. T.W. Pritchard has argued that it was in roles such as mayor of
Chester or mayor of Oswestry that Sir Watkin felt most at home.46 Whilst it would
appear that Sir Watkin was more keenly involved in local affairs than in those in
Westminster, the idea of that being his primary occupation does not appear to fit in with
the fact that much of his time was spent in London, as was the fashion amongst members
of the upper classes; however, he also longed to be back at his seat in Wynnstay. Indeed,
during the height of the regency crisis, in one of his few surviving letters, dated 31
December 1788, Sir Watkin wrote to his steward, Samuel Sidebotham, ostensibly on
estate matters, explaining his uncertainty about how much longer he will have to remain
in London before returning to Wynnstay, as owing to the Speaker’s illness, they had been
unable to conduct any business in the house of commons all week.47 This letter is
significant, as it clearly demonstrates Sir Watkin’s commitment to his parliamentary duty
at the time of one of the biggest political crises of his career, but also provides evidence
of his commitment to Wales and a passion for his family and estate.

Whilst in London, much of Sir Watkin’s time was occupied with cultural activities. His
involvement with such high-profile organisations as the Dilettante, Jockey Club, Cym-
mrodorion and concerts for ancient music would undoubtedly have led him to rub
shoulders with leading political figures of his day and would have afforded him the
chance to discuss the leading events of the day outside parliament, at a time when there
was little time for back-bench members to speak in parliament, owing to the leading
orators such as Fox, Pitt the Younger and Burke frequently speaking for two to three
hours each.

6. London Welsh Societies

The Honourable and Loyal Society of Ancient Britons was the first London Welsh
society to be established,48 and Sir Watkin became vice-president in 1772 at the relatively
young age of 23 years.49 Little is known about his activities during his time in the

47 NLW, Wynnstay MSS, Box 115/13/21.
48 This society eventually merged with the Honourable Society of the Cymrhrodorion.
49 Thomas, ‘Wynn, Sir Watkin Williams, Fourth Baronet (1749–1789)’.
Society of Ancient Britons, and over the course of the second half of the 18th century it appears that the society was superseded by the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, with which it had a large crossover of membership. R.T. Jenkins and Helen Ramage have suggested that Sir Watkin’s benevolence as vice-president of the Society of Ancient Britons was a major contributory factor in his elevation to the post of Penllywydd or chief president of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion in 1778, on the resignation of his predecessor, William Vaughan. The role of Penllywydd was a purely honorary position, with a few ceremonial tasks attached which they undertook. These tasks were supposed to be conducted through the medium of Welsh. It is surprising, therefore, that Sir Watkin was approached as he was not known to have been a Welsh speaker. The offer does, however, recognize his position as a leading Welsh landowner, and reflect his attachment to Wales, and his patronage of the arts.

In addition to the Cymmrodorion’s aims of promoting and preserving the Welsh language and culture, the society also performed an important charitable role, and in concert with the Society of Ancient Britons supported the work of the Welsh Charity School in London, to which Sir Watkin made an annual donation of £100. This was not the only example of the 4th baronet’s benevolence towards schools and their pupils. Sir Watkin used to pay an annual visit to Westminster School on Saint David’s day, presenting a sovereign to all boys of Welsh descent as well as to Monitor Ostii, whatever his nationality, before declaring an early play, or whole holiday. Upon this declaration the boys would disperse to Battersea Fields to engage in ditch leaping. This visit displays not only Sir Watkin’s pride in his Welsh roots, but also a fondness for his days at Westminster, where he had formed a number of friendships which were destined to prove influential in his later political career, including Viscount Bulkeley and Robert Henley, 2nd earl of Northington.

The Cymmrodorion drew its membership predominantly from members of the middle and upper classes: although social status was not theoretically a barrier to membership, it is unlikely that people from outside the upper orders of society would have been able to afford the subscription of 10s. 6d. or necessarily have been successful in a ballot on their membership. In 1770, Richard Morris noted that ‘many great men are joining such as Watcyn Williams Wynn, Lord Bulkeley, Lord Grosvenor, Lord Paget, Sir Hugh

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50 Sir Watkin was only the second chief president of the society.
52 Thomas, ‘Wynn, Sir Watkin Williams, Fourth Baronet (1749–1789)’.
54 Monitor Ostii. In the days before there was a school porter at Westminster it was the ‘duty of one of the four school monitors to guard the gate and to prevent unauthorised persons from venturing up the steps. He was known as Mon. Os. . . . and was excused school during his week of office’: J.D. Carleton, Westminster (1938), 95.
55 Carleton, Westminster, 77.
57 Watcyn is a variant Welsh spelling of Watkin.
58 Lord Bulkeley was a contemporary of Sir Watkin at Westminster and was a figure who crops up a number of times during his career.
59 Lord Paget, who was later to become the earl of Uxbridge, was a fellow director of the concerts for ancient music.
Williams, John Pugh Pryse of Gogerddan etc. etc. and if God give me life, I doubt not that I shall see all the aristocrats of Wales among us'.60 This statement clearly demonstrates the importance, not only to the London Welsh but also to their political leaders and representatives, of maintaining links to Wales. Paul Langford has argued that during the mid to late 18th century, many members of the Welsh gentry, including Sir Watkin, sought to rediscover their Celtic origins and made extensive use of genealogies to prove their descent from the ancient Welsh princes.61 It is probable, therefore, that the Welsh aristocracy, many of whom spent large periods of time outside Wales, felt that membership of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion would not only add to their status back in Wales by demonstrating their commitment to their native land, but also reinforce their claims to be descended from the ancient princes of Wales.

In spite of its being based in London, the society continued to keep an eye on events in Wales. Indeed, during Sir Watkin’s tenure as Penllywydd, the members organised a fund, to which Sir Watkin donated £100 to support the parishioners of the Welsh-speaking parish of Llangwyfan, Anglesey, in their dispute with the church. The parishioners were taking legal action against the church owing to the installation of a monoglot English-speaking priest, who was 70 years old and generally in poor health, to a parish where only one of the 500-strong congregation spoke English. This case ‘made legal history, as being the only recorded case in which an incumbent has been arraigned, not by his bishop, but by his parishioners’.62 This case sums up the society and its aims very well, as it demonstrates not only its attachment to Wales, but also its commitment to the Welsh language and the benevolence of its membership. This sense of benevolence was common amongst 18th-century societies, and Peter Clark has argued that by the 1760s, the Honourable Society of the Cymrrodorion was actively campaigning to get Welsh bishops to install Welsh-speaking clergy into posts within Wales.63 Sir Watkin’s passion for Wales and interest in local affairs is evident from this episode.

It is clear that membership and high office in these two societies not only provided Sir Watkin with the opportunity to discuss important matters affecting Wales, both at local and national level, but also enabled the leading men in Wales to arrive at a joint strategy for lobbying and campaigning on these issues. In addition to the Cymrrodorion’s campaign on Welsh-speaking clergy, Sir Watkin was also heavily involved in the campaign against the 1778 investigation into crown lands in Wales. Both of these issues indicate a desire to actively engage with political issues affecting Wales.

7. Treasury Warrant Crisis

The catalyst for Sir Watkin’s involvement in the campaign against the treasury warrant of 1778, which provided for an investigation into the crown lands and revenue within Wales, was his old school friend, Thomas, 7th Viscount Bulkeley, who spearheaded an

attack through the press and at public meetings against this investigation. This crisis came amid wider concerns about ‘the apparent growth of royal influence’, whilst other reasons for this investigation include: the holders of annuities payable out of the revenue from crown lands in Wales being dissatisfied with their being in arrears, and the spiralling cost of the war in the American colonies. Thomas has suggested that as only crown lands within Wales were being investigated, the inhabitants of Wales had a sense of righteous indignation and a feeling of being downtrodden by a government far away in Westminster with little knowledge or interest in the principality, save when it came to extracting money out of it. The investigator, John Probert, had a close connection to Powis Castle. This connection has led historians to suggest that Lord Powis might have been behind the whole scheme, especially in light of his connection to the North ministry. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Sir Watkin was prepared to clash swords once more with Powis Castle and join his old friend at the head of the campaign.

The press campaign against the treasury warrant began in earnest with an open letter from Viscount Bulkeley to Wales’ parliamentary representatives and all those holding land in the principality. This letter appeared in the *St. James’s Chronicle* on 24 December 1778, although it is possible that it was published elsewhere previously. In it, he appealed to the Welsh gentry to attend a meeting in London in order to arrive at a collective response to this attack upon the Welsh landowning interest. This was quickly followed up by three open letters from Sir Watkin, dated 23 December 1778, in support of Viscount Bulkeley. Each letter was designed for a separate audience, and predictably one was to his own electorate in Denbighshire, one was to the noblemen, gentlemen, clergy, and those possessed of tenners under the prince of Wales or duchy of Cornwall, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, one was to the electorate of Montgomeryshire. These last two are of most interest. The first as Sir Watkin intimated that this attack could be the thin end of the wedge and that holders of land through the duchy of Cornwall would be the next logical target, especially as the prince of Wales and the duke of Cornwall were one and the same person. Indeed, Sir Watkin claimed to:

> have reason to apprehend all the Revenues of the Prince of Wales, annexed to the Crown, together with the Commons and Wastelands within the same Districts (and perhaps throughout Great-Britain) are meant to be ultimately made subject to the same Inspection, Scrutiny, and Innovation, and as your Tenures of that Sort may probably become the next Object of the like extraordinary Attention of the Treasury Board.

Here Sir Watkin was clearly making two accusations. First, he was critical of the government’s interference in the ownership and administration of land. Second, he

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64 Thomas, ‘A Welsh Political Storm’, 430.
67 In 1774, Sir Watkin’s candidate had been defeated by the Powis Castle candidate in the hotly-contested Montgomeryshire election.
69 *St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 24 Dec. 1778.
70 Tenants on the estates of the prince of Wales and duke of Cornwall.
71 *St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 31 Dec. 1778.

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suggested that Wales might only be the beginning and that political forces throughout Britain need to get together to prevent this inexcusable intrusion into the traditional role of the nobility from spreading further.

His letter to ‘the Gentlemen, Clergy and Freeholders of Montgomeryshire’, where his candidate had recently been defeated by the Powis Castle interest, is significant for a number of reasons. The first of these is the fact that by doing so he demonstrated his continued interest in the county, perhaps hoping that by taking the lead in this crucial matter it might help swing the next election in his favour. Second, the close connection between Powis Castle and Probert suggests that it was unlikely that the county’s MP would be particularly vocal. As MP for the neighbouring county, a major landowner in Montgomeryshire, and a leading member of the movement against the warrant, it is probable that Sir Watkin felt obliged to inform the inhabitants of the county of the threat they faced. It would be reasonable to assume that such a move could be calculated to renew hostilities between Wynnstay and Powis Castle, and raise Sir Watkin’s stock within the county, as it was he, and not Lord Powis, leading the call to arms against the treasury warrant. In addition to this letter he also called for a public meeting, so as to discern the general mood of the county in advance of the London meeting.

The Denbighshire letter, although predictable, does impart some useful information, as Sir Watkin thoughtfully provides a copy of the warrant, so that his constituents could see for themselves the nature of the threat which faced them. The fact that the origins of the treasury’s investigation into crown lands in Wales appear to lie in Flintshire, provides another clue as to why Sir Watkin chose to become active in the campaign against the treasury warrant, as his estate’s influence extended up into Flintshire and his cousin, Major Watkin Williams, had become MP for Flint Boroughs in the by-election of June the previous year.

There is a time lag between the initial production of the treasury warrant, which Viscount Bulkeley’s letter informs us was dated 20 November, and the first visible public response in the form of his letter dated 19 December.72 One can only suppose that this delay was due to the need for the warrant’s opponents to gather facts and arrange a meeting and generally organise themselves before going public in their opposition. This opposition was mainly conducted during the parliamentary recess. Accordingly it is, therefore, possible that the delay between the announcement of the warrant and Lord Bulkeley’s letter was due to a desire to wait and see if the matter was put before the House, and then when it was not, decide how best to force the issue. The public voice of opposition to the treasury warrant all but died out in the wake of the meeting of the gentlemen and parliamentary representatives of Wales, held at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand, on 23 January 1779. The meeting had been postponed from the eve of parliament’s resumption, owing to the fact that a number of county meetings had been scheduled to coincide with the quarter sessions.73 This meeting resolved to form a committee with the task of preparing a memorandum to be delivered to the government, outlining the objections raised at the meeting concerning the appointment of John Probert to investigate the situation and the powers with which he had been supplied.

72 St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post, 24 Dec. 1778.
73 St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post, 7 Jan. 1779.
The meeting was then adjourned for a fortnight, and that was very nearly the last word that appeared in the press about the crisis. The final word, as far as the press campaign goes, came from Sir Watkin Williams Wynn and John Lewis, who called for a meeting, again in the Crown and Anchor on 22 March, to discuss a letter received from Mr Moore, the deputy receiver of his majesty’s crown rents in north and south Wales. It would appear, therefore, that the memorandum written in the wake of an earlier meeting had met with a response, and that Sir Watkin Williams Wynn and John Lewis both held prominent positions on the committee appointed at the earlier meeting.

This opposition proved successful in blocking an in-depth enquiry into the crown lands in Wales and came at a cost to the North ministry. Not only had it been forced to backtrack from a decision in the face of mass unease and protest amongst the Welsh gentry, but his government also lost the support of several Welsh MPs, including Viscount Bulkeley, Sir Watkin Williams Wynn and William Mostyn Owen. In the aftermath of the crisis over the treasury warrant, William Mostyn Owen broke ties with Powis Castle and was backed by Sir Watkin in the general election of 1780. Another outcome of the campaign against the treasury warrant was that Edmund Burke consulted Sir Watkin and a number of other Welsh landowners on his proposed bill for ‘more perfectly uniting the Crown in Principality of Wales’. This episode, again, highlights Sir Watkin’s passion and commitment for local politics and issues affecting Wales.

8. Conclusion

Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, 4th baronet, in common with many of the country gentlemen who occupied the back benches in 18th-century parliaments, did not record a speech in parliament. Frequently there was a lack of time and opportunity for backbenchers to speak, with the leading ministers and opposition members often speaking for two to three hours each. Equally, the lack of an official record also contributed to back-bench speeches going unreported. Sir Watkin’s voting record, although modest, records votes on the major issues of the day, including the American war, regency crisis, votes to expunge Wilkes’s exclusion from the journals, making Grenville’s Election Act permanent and county petitions for reform. Historians from the Namierite school often point to voting and speaking records as key factors when assessing parliamentary careers. Whilst these data are important, local government roles such as county lord lieutenancies are equally significant areas of the political lives of the county gentlemen. Sir Watkin’s readiness to engage with local politics clearly demonstrates a willingness to devote time to politics. Equally, his appointment as lord lieutenant of Merioneth in 1775, could have had the result of effectively tying his hands in parliament, having to appear grateful to Lord North personally and more importantly, to the government of George

74 St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post, 23 Jan. 1779.
75 St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post, 18 Mar. 1779.
77 Thomas, ‘A Welsh Political Storm’, 448–9; see also Thomas, ‘Wynn, Sir Watkin Williams, Fourth Baronet (1749–1789)’.

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III. This would have impacted upon his freedom to vote and speak as he wished. It should also be remembered that unlike his father, Sir Watkin was not tory, instead siding with the opposition Foxite whigs against his second wife’s kinsman, Pitt the Younger.

It was Sir Watkin’s engagement with local and cultural politics which prevented him from fitting the Namierite view of the county member. Whilst many parliamentarians occupied county lord lieutenancies, which were primarily honorary positions, they were less inclined to enter local politics as town mayors, marking Sir Watkin out from his colleagues. His engagement in cultural politics, through organisations such as the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion and the concerts for ancient music, would have enabled him to involve himself in political debates in a way he was unable to in parliament. His active involvement in the 1778 campaign against the treasury warrant also indicates his ready engagement with politics, albeit within the context of a Welsh extra-parliamentary campaign. Through his activities within the Honourable and Loyal Society of Ancient Britons, Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, and involvement in the treasury warrant crisis, Sir Watkin’s passion for his native Wales clearly shines through and as a campaigner for Welsh issues he was in a class of his own during the mid 18th century, and, as such, an unconventional politician. The political career of the 4th Baronet Williams Wynn indicates a need for a broader post-Namierite revision of back-bench MPs, as well as a dynastic study of the Williams Wynn family.