

Political Pressures - Eighteenth Century style

Many years ago WG Hoskins pleaded for historians, and especially local historians, to leave their studies with their books and documents to get out and use their eyes and feet to learn about their area. A sunny Easter Day some years ago provided just such an opportunity. A "church crawl" fitted the afternoon, first to Barnack, so well-known for its Saxon tower and much more, and then to the apparently little regarded Bainton Church, a mile or so to the east.

Bainton Church, beside a busy country road and across the way from a medieval cross base of considerable proportions is nevertheless, as the guidebooks would have, "a haven of peace and quiet" with various interesting architectural features. What caught my eye, and awoke my interest, was a (relatively) simple mid-eighteenth century memorial on the wall of the north aisle to a member of the Henson family, a surname which occurs frequently in Stamford over a considerable period of time.

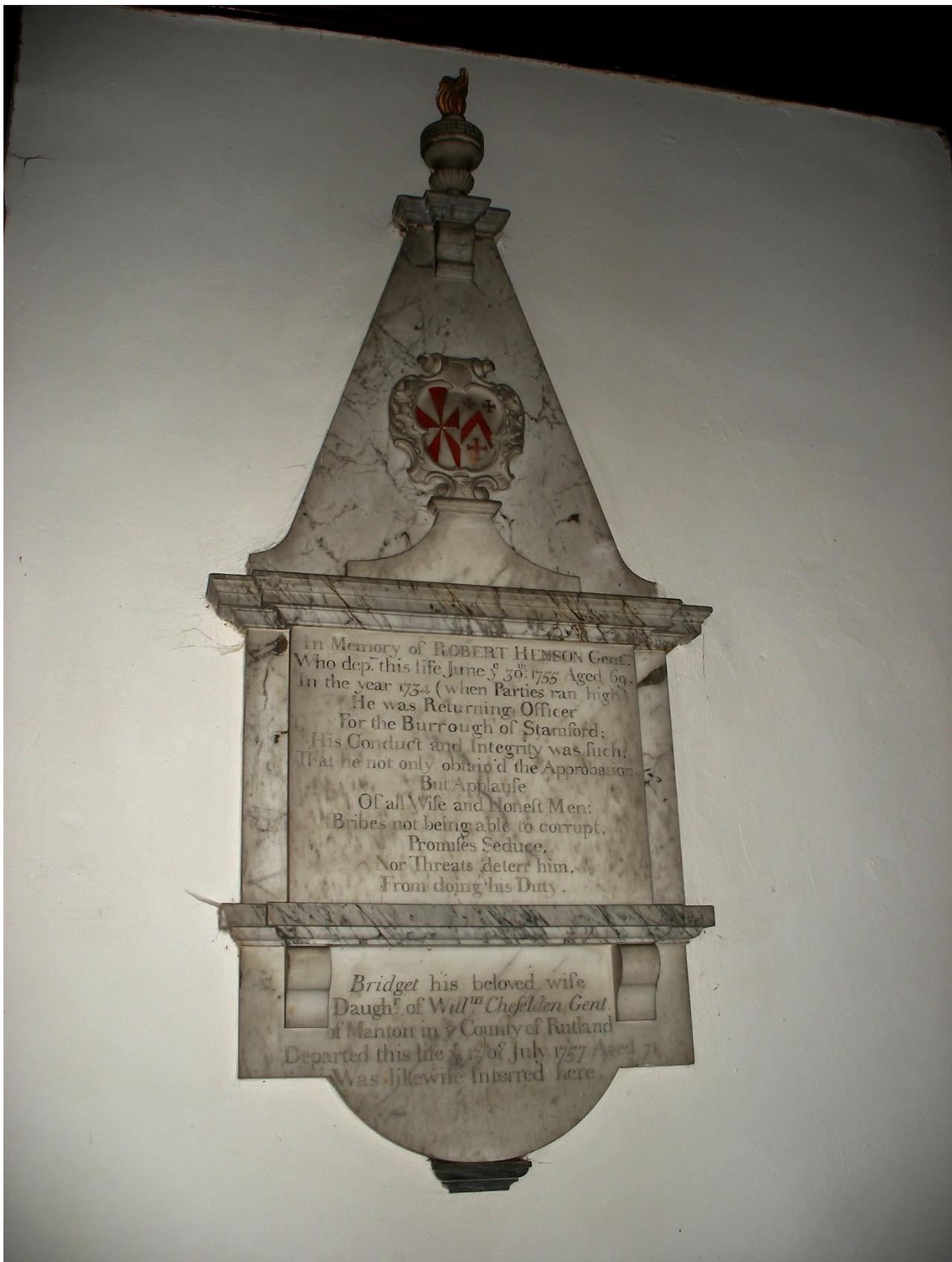
In 1734 there had been a hotly contested election to choose the two Members of Parliament to which the town was then entitled. Great efforts were made to make sure the 'right' candidates won; Alan Rogers's description (on p.75 of his *Book of Stamford*, Buckingham 1983) makes the situation abundantly clear: "The town was flooded with outsiders who were alleged to have the vote; bribes were paid and voters and officials were intimidated by both sides..." All this to ensure the successful election of "tory" candidates chosen by the Noels of Exton and the Cecils of Burghley rather than the Cust/Bertie "whig" axis representing the earls of Lindsey based at Grimsthorpe and Uffington. While there is plenty of evidence available about this election, including a fine printed Poll Book and significant correspondence, there has been no extended study; the fullest account so far may be found in Dr Till's *A Family Affair* [Rugby 1990] pp.33-5.

However, Till's account makes no reference to this memorial to Robert Henson in Bainton Church which so neatly sums up the 1734 situation which confronted Henson as Mayor, and therefore the Returning Officer for the town. As so often in memorials to public figures of the period there is no religious sentiment whatsoever in the inscription, just an indication that he "did his duty" in an exemplary manner.

The inscription reads:

In memory of ROBERT HENSON Gent./who dep. this life June 30th 1755 Aged 69/ In the year 1734 (when Parties ran high)/ He was Returning Officer/for the Burrough of Stamford./ His Conduct and Integrity was such / that he not only Obtain'd the Approbation / But Applause / Of all Wise and Honest Men: / Bribes not being able to corrupt / Promises Seduce / Nor Threats Deter him / From doing his Duty.

No doubt, by the standards of the time, Henson deserved this encomium – modern readers and writers might feel very differently!



Later an extra section was added to the inscription: Bridget his wife, daughter of William Cheselden gent of Manton Rutland, died 13 July 1757 aged 71 was also buried here. While there is no substitute for careful research, serendipity may help the historian significantly!

John Hartley

