

# Turncoats and Defectors during the English Civil Wars

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## Introduction

Why did people take sides during the English Civil Wars? The difficulty in answering that question satisfactorily has led recent scholars to examine the careers of those who switched allegiance during the conflicts - those often termed ‘turncoats’. In recent years scholars have been focusing their attention particularly on Yorkshire turncoats.<sup>1</sup> The most prominent of these were: **Sir Hugh Cholmley, Sir John Hotham, Captain John Hotham and James Graham, Marquis of Montrose**. Despite such work, the motives of many of these individuals remain shrouded in mystery. Why did such men take the often perilous decision to change sides during the conflict? Studying the careers of such people enables the historian to explore uncover an often striking array of political, familial, financial and religious motives.

## Aims

The main objective of this project was to examine the careers of turncoats during both the first and second English Civil Wars. These include: **Colonel Matthew Boynton, Colonel John Poyer** and **Colonel Henry Lilburne**. Such narratives were then analysed to uncover the motivations of these individuals, and to shed fresh light on the nature of allegiance in Revolutionary England. Comparisons would also be drawn to previously researched turncoats, mentioned earlier.

## Method

A number of detailed searches were conducted via the university library catalogue, JSTOR, EEBO, BBIH and A2A. This provided an accurate picture of relevant scholarship, what primary sources were available and where. **R.H. Tawney stated a long time ago that a serious historian needs a stout pair of boots. It has recently been stated that ‘that essential requirement has now come to include a British rail pass’.**<sup>2</sup> Travel and accommodation were booked to enable travel to the following archives: **Tyne and Wear Archive Services, Newcastle University Special Collections, Hull History Centre, The Parliamentary Archives and The National Archives**. After visiting each repository, extensive notes were taken to construct each case study in as much detail as possible. As well as analysing primary manuscript sources, contemporary pamphlets were just as revealing about the motives and behaviour of turncoats.

## Conclusions

With the case studies completed, many turncoats turn out to have been motivated by similar things, many of which have been noted by previous scholars. These include the roles of **pedigree, kinship** and **status**. New factors uncovered by this research, found in some but not all of the case studies, include **altruism, greed** and the **influence of royalty**. Some turncoats, in other words, changed sides simply because they were bribed to do so, or were over-awed by a personal approach from a member of the royal family. Others appear to have believed that changing sides would benefit those in their care.

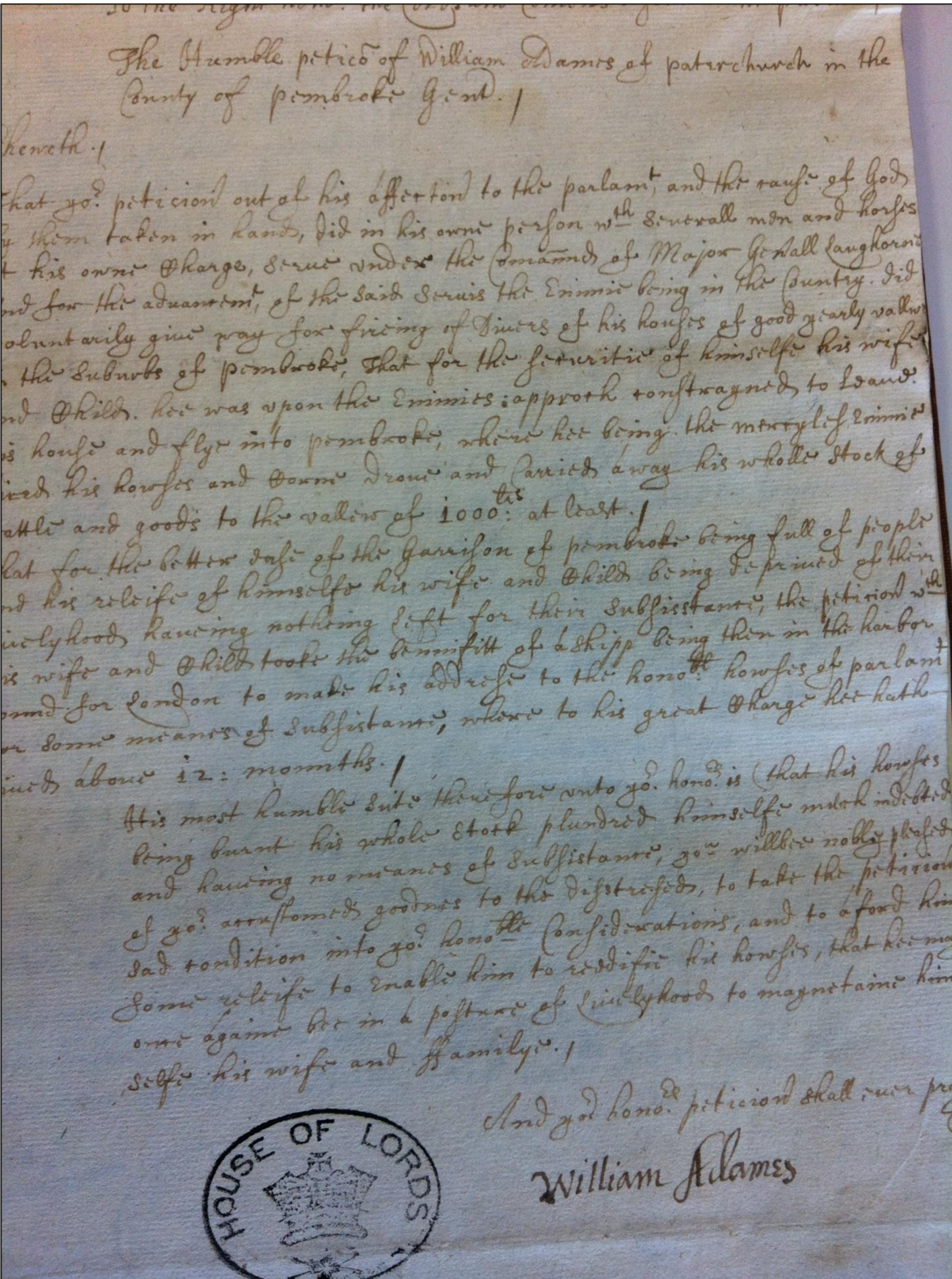
## Bibliography

- <sup>1</sup> Binns, Jack, *Yorkshire in the Civil Wars*, (Pickering, Blackthorn Press, 2004).  
Hopper, Andrew, ‘The Self-Fashioning of Gentry Turncoats during the English Civil Wars’, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 49, 2 (2010), 237-257.  
<sup>2</sup> Tittler, Robert, *Townspeople and Nation*, (California, Stanford University Press, 2001).

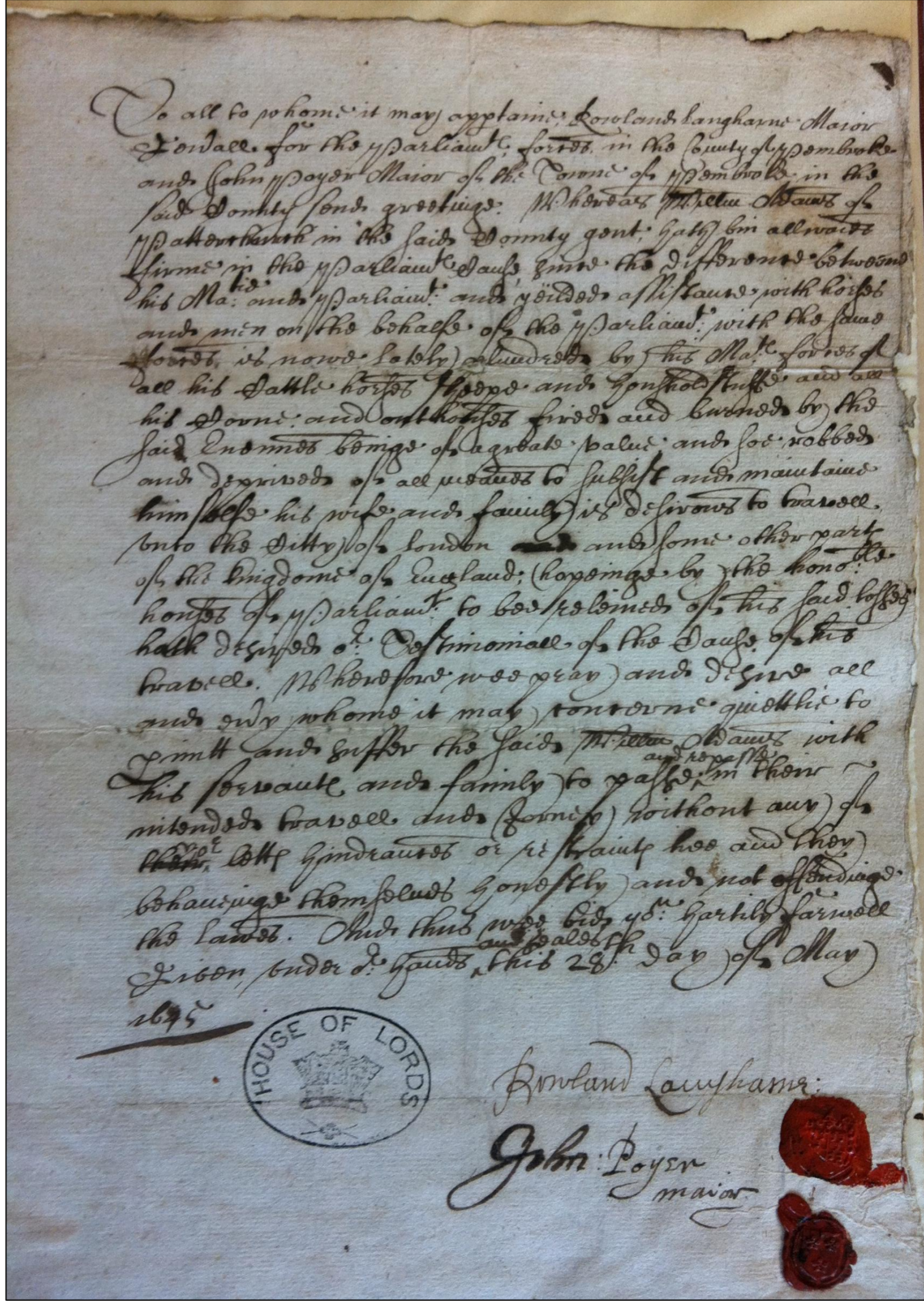


Above, The Siege of Scarborough Castle 1645, North Yorkshire. Reconstruction drawing by Ivan Lapper.

## ‘perfidious unfaithful wretch’



## ‘Judas Cholmley’



## Biography: Sir Hugh Cholmley

Sir Hugh Cholmley was a gentleman who resided in Whitby. He had many estates and great influence in the Yorkshire area and member of the ‘**Northern Gentlemen**’. He became MP for Scarborough, further strengthening his powerbase. When Civil War broke out Cholmley **originally** sided with **Parliament**. During the early stages of Civil War there was noted Royalist success. With Royalist forces drawing closer to his own estates, the option of defection seemed likely to preserve property and lives. Cholmley’s motives were clear. He feared for his own estates, wealth and family. He also considered the lives of others living under his influence. The destructive nature of the Civil War also led to his disillusionment with Parliamentary politics. After his defection he suffered numerous slurs to his name. Ultimately he was charged with exile from one of his parliamentarian kinsmen. After the civil wars he returned to Whitby to restore his plundered estates and establish Whitby’s mining and fishing community.



Sir Hugh Cholmley (1600-1657), c. 1640, artist unknown.

## ‘base treacherous apostate’

## Primary Sources

To the left are examples of the numerous primary sources found in many of the record offices visited. **Palaeographical** skills are needed in order to fully appreciate the importance of the sources. These two examples help illustrate one of the many **reasons for John Poyer’s defection in 1648**. The first letter is from a soldier to parliament, describing his many problems and requesting compensation. The second letter from Poyer and a leading local general was accompanied with the first letter. It describes how the soldier fully deserves compensation. To help put these sources into context Poyer sent multiple petitions to parliament for more money to pay his soldiers and reimburse himself. This is one of his more more emotive attempts. This is also a good example illustrating the transitional elements of local and national politics.