PRESS RELEASE:

PUBLICATION OF

*THE HISTORY OF PARLIAMENT: THE HOUSE OF COMMONS 1422-1461*. Edited by Linda Clark.

In April 2020 the History of Parliament published its volumes on the House of Commons, 1422-1461. The volumes, covering the long reign of Henry VI, contain biographies of all of the 2,844 men who sat in the Commons during the period, and accounts of the political history of each of the 144 English constituencies. The new volumes will be the thirteenth set published by the History, now reaching a total of 53 individual volumes containing over 30 million words.

The History of Parliament is one of the best known and most respected projects in British historical research, with a national and international reputation for the value and quality of its work. It has been able to create what is now one of the great resources for historians of all kinds, ranking at least alongside *The Dictionary of National Biography*: as a result of long-term funding originally from HM Treasury, and subsequently from the House of Commons and later the House of Lords as well. The project was initiated in the 1920s with cross-party support and has since 1940 been governed by Trustees who are mainly members and officers of both Houses, as well as by an academic advisory board. Most of the History’s publications are available free online at

[www.historyofparliamentonline.org](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org)

The period covered in these new volumes saw 22 separate parliaments, and they had to deal with a near-unprecedented series of crises. These began with Henry V’s untimely death, which left the infant Henry VI as king at less than a year old, and the consequent need to arrange the government of the boy’s dual kingdoms of England and France during a protracted minority. In spite of repeated invocations of the ‘spirit of Agincourt’, the English-held territory in France was lost bit by bit. The fall of the last parts of the duchy of Normandy in 1449-50 brought about a full-blown political emergency, accompanied by a popular uprising at home in England. The remaining English possessions around Bordeaux were lost three years later, and before long England and its Parliament found themselves drawn into the internal dynastic conflict between the partisans of the rival branches of the Plantagenet dynasty, the houses of Lancaster and York. It was a fresh Parliament that brought about a constitutional settlement that guaranteed the crown to Henry VI for his life, but thereafter settled it on the duke of York and his descendants.

While the broader political history that provides the backdrop to the lives chronicled in these volumes will be familiar to many, not least from Shakespeare’s histories, many of the themes that emerge are surprisingly topical today: England’s first (involuntary) exit from Europe, and popular responses to it; the role of women in the Yorkshire county elections of the first quarter of the fifteenth century (some 500 years before the introduction of limited female suffrage in 1918); attempts to hold parliamentary sessions away from Westminster, and Members’ resistance to them.

The Members’ biographies span a broad social spectrum. While many were trained lawyers, and some substantial landowners and members of the aristocracy, there were also artisans and manufacturers, as well as traders, both on a great and a small scale. The earliest university graduates to sit among the lay Commons rubbed shoulders with literary figures like Sir Thomas Malory, author of the *Morte d’Arthur*, and the lesser known poet George Ashby. Geoffrey Chaucer’s son Thomas would have encountered in the House men who owned copies of his father’s writings. Military campaigns and diplomatic missions, along with journeys inspired by religious devotions, such as pilgrimages to Rome, Santiago de Compostela and the Holy Land, gave many MPs of the age extensive experience of foreign lands and peoples. Naturalised second, or even first generation, immigrants, like the Danish-born courtier Sir Andrew Ogard, or the Salisbury merchant John Aport found their way into Parliament in these decades.

Statistics:

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7 volumes, 2,844 biographies, 145 constituency articles (144 constituencies plus a collective one for the Cinque Ports); estimated 5.25 million words.

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