



SIMON HARCOURT

ADM IT 1676; CALL 1683;
TREASURER 1702; RECORDER
OF ABINGDON 1683; MP FOR
ABINGDON 1690-1705 &
1708-9, BOSSINEY,
CORNWALL, 1705-8 AND
CARDIGAN 1710; SG 1702; KNT
1702; AG 1707 & 1710; LK
1710; PC 1710; LC 1713-14;
VISCOUNT 1721



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PROFILE

Simon Harcourt, solicitor-general, attorney-general and Lord Chancellor, was born in December 1661 at Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire, the son of Sir Philip Harcourt and his wife Anne. The family had been strongly Royalist during the civil war and throughout Cromwell's rule. Sir Philip was a Presbyterian, and Harcourt was educated at the nearby Shilton School, a nonconformist establishment. He was specially admitted to the Inner Temple on 16 April 1676 at the request of the previous term's Reader, Richard Holloway, and entered Pembroke College, Oxford, the following year, graduating BA on 21 January 1679. He then focused on his study of the law, and was called to the Bar on 25 November 1683. He quickly advanced in the profession, it being said that "he was scarce sooner admitted to plead than admired for his pleading"; in June 1687 he was made Recorder of Abingdon.

In 1690, Harcourt was elected MP for Abingdon, a seat which he held for fifteen years. He often obtained leave in the spring in order to go on circuit. Despite his Jacobite views, he took the oaths of allegiance to William and Mary; many supporters of the Stuarts did not consider such oaths binding. He was known for his skilled oratory: the Speaker of the House of Commons, Arthur Onslow, described him as having "the greatest skill and power of speech of any man I ever knew in a public assembly". When he was later made a baron, the preamble to his patent of peerage praised his "faculty in speaking", noting that "it is unanimously confessed by all, that among the lawyers he is the most eloquent orator, and among the orators the most able lawyer". In the House of Commons he spoke in defence of the principle of habeas corpus, and against a bill requiring an oath to abjure King James and his descendants. He was named as one of the ringleaders of the "non-associators", those who in 1696 resisted swearing the Solemn Association and pledging to defend the King and uphold the succession. In 1701 he was nominated by the Commons to conduct the impeachment of Lord Somers, the former Lord Chancellor.

In 1702 Queen Anne, whose sympathies lay with Harcourt's political party, the Tories, came to the throne. Harcourt was made Solicitor-General shortly after her accession, and was knighted on 1 June. The Queen expressed her satisfaction in having in her service a lawyer of whose principles she greatly approved. Harcourt attended her on a visit to Oxford in August of that year, and while

there was created LLD. He also was made a Bencher of the Inner Temple on 14 June, and the Inn's Treasurer later that year.

Harcourt remained a prominent political figure throughout Anne's reign. He was elected MP for Bossiney in Cornwall in 1705 and Cardigan in 1710, and took a large part in drafting the bill for the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland. In April 1707 he was appointed Attorney-General; he resigned the position in October 1708 when the Whigs gained power in Parliament. He was again appointed to the position in September 1710, and became Keeper of the Great Seal and a member of the Privy Council the following month. As Lord Keeper, it was not seen as appropriate for Harcourt to retain his seat in the House of Commons; he was raised to the peerage, becoming Baron Harcourt of Stanton-Harcourt. Shortly after his work on the negotiations preparatory to the Treaty of Utrecht, he was made Lord Chancellor on 7 April 1713.

In September 1714, the month following George I's accession to the throne, Harcourt lost his position as Lord Chancellor. He was removed from the Privy Council in October 1714. However, he remained a member of the House of Lords, and in 1717 helped to defend Lord Oxford against impeachment. He gradually became (or appeared to become) a supporter of the Hanover regime, and joined the Whigs. On 24 July 1721 he was created Viscount Harcourt, and he was named a Lord Justice and sat on the Council of Regency during the King's absences from England in 1723, 1725 and 1727.

Harcourt was married three times: first, in 1680, to Rebecca Clarke, the daughter of his father's chaplain, with whom he had five children. Rebecca died in 1687, and Harcourt married Elizabeth Spencer at some point after 1695. She died in June 1724, and Harcourt married Elizabeth Vernon three months later. Harcourt himself died, after suffering "an apoplexy and dead palsy", in the early hours of 29 July 1727.

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