



Oliver StJohn - Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

[MP](#) in the [Long Parliament](#) and [Rump Parliament](#), [Solicitor General](#), [Chief Justice of the Common Pleas](#), [Chief Justice of the King's Bench](#)

c1598 – 1673; Spouses: Johanna Altham, Elizabeth Cromwell

Sir Oliver St John (pronounced "Sinjun"^{[*[citation needed](#)*]}) (c. 1598 – 31 December 1673), was an English judge and politician who sat in the [House of Commons](#) from 1640 to 1653. He supported the [Parliamentary](#) cause in the [English Civil War](#).

Early life

St John was the son of [Oliver St John](#) of Cayshoe and his wife Sarah Bulkeley, daughter of Edward Bulkeley of [Odell, Bedfordshire](#). His sister, Elizabeth St John, married Reverend Samuel Whiting and emigrated to [Boston, Massachusetts](#) in 1636.^[1] He matriculated from [Queens' College, Cambridge](#) at Lent 1616, and was admitted at [Lincoln's Inn](#) on 22 April 1619. He was called to the bar in 1626.^[2]

St John appears to have got into trouble with the court in connection with a seditious publication, and to have associated himself with the future popular leaders [John Pym](#) and [Lord Saye](#). In 1638 he defended [John Hampden](#), along with co-counsel [Robert Holborne](#), on his refusal to pay [Ship Money](#), on which occasion he made a notable speech which established him as a leading advocate. In the same year he married, as his second wife, Elizabeth Cromwell, a cousin of [Oliver Cromwell](#), to whom his first wife also had been distantly related. The marriage led to an intimate friendship with Cromwell.

Political career

In April 1640, St John was elected Member of Parliament for [Totnes](#) in the [Short Parliament](#). He was re-elected MP for Totnes for the [Long Parliament](#) in November 1640.^[3] He acted in close alliance with Hampden and Pym, especially in opposition to the impost of Ship Money. In 1641, with a view of securing his support, the king appointed St John [solicitor-general](#). This did not prevent him taking an active role in the [impeachment](#) of [Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford](#), and in preparing the bills brought forward by the popular party in the House of Commons. As a result, he was dismissed from the office of Solicitor General in 1643. He defended the decision to proceed against Strafford by way of [attainder](#) on the simple ground that there are people who are too dangerous to be given the benefit of the law; he told the Commons : "it was never accounted cruelty or foul play for foxes and wolves to be knocked on the head." [Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon](#), although he is may have voted in favour of the attainder, later denounced St. John's speech as perhaps the most barbarous and inhumane ever made in the House of Commons.

On the outbreak of the Civil War, St John became recognised as one of the parliamentary leaders. In the quarrel between the parliament and the army in 1647 he sided with the latter, and was not excluded under [Pride's Purge](#) in 1649. Throughout this period he enjoyed Cromwell's confidence. Apart from Cromwell he had few close friends: his manner was described as cold and forbidding and he had little patience with those he regarded as less gifted than himself.

Judicial and other activities

In 1648 St John was appointed [Chief Justice of the Common Pleas](#) and from then on he devoted himself to his judicial duties. He refused to act as one of the commissioners for the trial of King [Charles I](#), and had no hand in the constitution of the Commonwealth. In 1651 he went to [The Hague](#), where he led the mission (alongside [Walter Strickland](#), with [John Thurloe](#) acting as his secretary) to negotiate a political union between England and the [Dutch Republic](#). The mission failed entirely, leading to the [First Anglo-Dutch War](#).^[4] In the same year he successfully conducted a similar negotiation with [Scotland](#), after the [Tender of Union](#). He became [Chancellor of Cambridge University](#) in 1651 and retained the post until 1660.^[2]

St John built [Thorpe Hall](#) at [Longthorpe](#) in Peterborough between 1653 and 1656. He was a member of the Council of State from 1659 to 1660.

Apologia and exile

After the [Restoration](#) St John published an account of his past conduct (*The Case of Oliver St John*, 1660), and this apologia enabled him to escape any retribution worse than exclusion from public office. He retired

to his country house in Northamptonshire till 1662, when he left England and went to [Basel](#), Switzerland and afterwards to [Augsburg](#), Germany.

Family

St John married firstly Johanna Altham, only daughter of Sir John Altham of Latton, Essex, and by her had two sons and two daughters. In 1638 he married Elizabeth, daughter of Henry Cromwell, with whom he had two children. After her death he married, in 1645, Elizabeth Oxenbridge, daughter of Daniel Oxenbridge.^[1] His son [Francis](#) was MP for Peterborough. His daughter [Johanna](#) married [Sir Walter St John](#) of Lydiard Tregoze^[5] and was the grandmother of [Viscount Bolingbroke](#). His third daughter, Elizabeth, married [Sir John Bernard, 2nd Baronet](#) and their daughter Johanna Bernard married [Richard Bentley](#).^[6]

St John belonged to the senior branch of an ancient family. There were two branches: the St Johns of [Bletsoe](#) in Bedfordshire, and the St Johns of [Lydiard Tregoze](#) in Wiltshire, both descendants of the St Johns of [Stanton St John](#) in Oxfordshire. Oliver St John was the great-grandson of [Oliver St John](#), who had been created [Baron St John of Bletso](#) in 1559, and a distant cousin of the 4th Baron who was created [earl of Bolingbroke](#) in 1624, and who took an active part on the parliamentary side of the [English Civil War](#), his son, the [5th Baron St. John](#), being killed at the [Battle of Edgehill](#). Oliver was a distant cousin of the King through [Margaret Beauchamp of Bletso](#), grandmother of [Henry VII](#), whose first husband was Sir Oliver St. John of Lydiard Tregoze (died 1437).

Fictional portrayals

Oliver St John plays a minor role in *Traitor's Field* by Robert Wilton, published in May 2013 by Corvus, an imprint of [Atlantic Books](#).

References

- [↑] **Jump up to: ^a ^b *A genealogical and heraldic history of the extinct and dormant baronetcies ...* By John Burke, John Bernard Burke**
 - [↑] **Jump up to: ^a ^b *"St John, Oliver (ST6150)". A Cambridge Alumni Database. University of Cambridge.***
 - [↑] *Willis, Browne* (1750). *Notitia Parliamentaria, Part II: A Series or Lists of the Representatives in the several Parliaments held from the Reformation 1541, to the Restoration 1660 ...* London. pp. *onepage&q&f=, false* 229–239.
 - [↑] Godwin, William (1827). *History of the Commonwealth of England Vol. 3*. H. Colburn. pps.372-382.
 - [↑] *Johanna St John* thepeerage.com
 - [↑] *Arthur Collins* *The English baronetage: containing a genealogical and historical account*
- See the above-mentioned *Case of Oliver St John* (London, 1660), and *St John's Speech to the Lords, 7 January 1640, concerning Ship-money* (London, 1640). See also:
 - [Mark Noble](#), *Memoirs of the Protectoral House of Cromwell*, vol. ii. (2 vols, London, 178-7)
 - [Anthony à Wood](#), *Fasti Oxoniensis*, edited by P. Bliss (4 vols., London, 1813)
 - [Edward Foss](#), *The Judges of England*, yol.vi. (9 vols., London, 1848)
 - [SR Gardiner](#), *History of the Great Civil War* (3 vols, London, 1886 1891), and *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate* (3 vols., London, 1894–1901)
 - [Lord Clarendon](#), *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (7 vols, Oxford, 1839)
 - Thurloe State Papers* (7 vols, London, 1742)
 - [Edmund Ludlow](#), *Memoirs*, edited by [CH Firth](#) (2 vols, Oxford, 1894)
 - [Thomas Carlyle](#), *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*
 - "St. John, Oliver (1598?-1673)"*. *Dictionary of National Biography*. London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1885–1900.

This article incorporates text from a publication now in the [public domain](#): Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). *"St John, Oliver"*. *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.