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Historians are agreed that Sir Robert Walpole should be accounted the first British Prime Minister, though he never held the formal title, and nor did any of his successors until Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in 1906–08. (The actual post to which Walpole was appointed, and for which he was paid a salary, was First Lord of the Treasury, a post held by all but two of his successors – Lord Chatham and the Marquess of Salisbury). It was George I, the first Hanoverian king, who chose Walpole in 1721, but both he and all his royal predecessors had previously employed ministers (not always known as such) who had advised them and helped in the administration of the kingdom. For substantial periods, individual ministers had been able to eclipse their colleagues and effectively become the ‘chief minister’ of the monarch. Writing in the 1920s, Clive Bigham identified 27 individuals who had filled this role, between the reigns of Edred (946–955) and Anne (1702–14). They held various titles, including Justiciar, Chancellor, Treasurer, Admiral, High Steward, Lord President, Marshal, Lord Lieutenant and Lord Great Chamberlain. Bigham estimates that these men, whose average tenure was about 12 years, held power for rather less than half the nearly 800 years which separated Edred and Anne. ‘Strong rulers’, he writes, ‘such as William I, William III or Oliver Cromwell, could do without them; weak ones, like Stephen, Edward II or Richard II, could never maintain them’ (Bigham, 1925, p. 4). Although these men wielded considerable, and sometimes arbitrary, power, they – with the partial exception of the last two or three names in the list – lacked many of the attributes which later became associated with the prime ministership, perhaps being more comparable to the vizier of a Moslem ruler. It required the developments of the previous half century –

1 The 27 men were Dunstan, Godwin, Harold, Flambard, Roger, Becket, Marshall, de Burgh, de Montfort, Burnell, Stratford, Wykeham, Beaufort, Suffolk, Warwick, Morton, Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell, Somerset, Burghley (William Cecil), Salisbury (Robert Cecil), Buckingham, Strafford, Clarendon, Danby, Godolphin and Harley.
and particularly the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 – to create the conditions which enabled Walpole, a man of considerable talent and resource, to fashion a new role for himself and his successors.

Politically, and constitutionally, the key achievement of the Glorious Revolution was the concept of a limited monarchy. Henceforth, the King (or Queen) would still govern the country, but only through and with the consent of Parliament. Even as naturally authoritarian a monarch as William III recognized this: his three successors – Queen Anne and the first two Georges – had little option, but to do so. A series of other developments, some of them preceding the Revolution, also contributed to the growing importance of Parliament, and the necessity for ministers to secure consistent support from both Houses if they were to survive in office. Chief of these was perhaps the emergence of political parties. This effectively dated from the reign of Charles II, and the attempt to exclude the King’s younger brother, the Catholic James, Duke of York, from the succession. The opposition to James was led by the first Earl of Shaftesbury, whose Exclusion Bill failed to carry in 1680. His supporters were christened Whigs by their opponents, after the Whiggamores, Scottish Presbyterian rebels, who had opposed Charles I in 1648. The Whigs themselves happily accepted this appellation, claiming that Whig was an acronym for We Hope In God. They, in turn, branded their opponents, the supporters of the future James II, as Tories, after an Irish word meaning highwaymen or outlaws. It was largely the Whigs who presided over the replacement in 1688 of James II by his elder daughter, Mary II, and son-in-law William III, though the Tory Earl of Danby also played a significant role, and most Tories assented to the change. Party differences continued, however, mostly defined by attitudes to the monarchy, to religion and to foreign policy. It was the Whigs who were most in favour of limiting the monarchy, who believed most strongly in religious toleration, especially of Protestant Dissenters, and of prosecuting a warlike foreign policy, aimed at curtailing the ambitions of Louis XIV. The Tories retained a residual belief in the Divine Right of Kings. Though they accepted the accession of William, and later of Anne, they were divided about excluding the Stuart family from the succession after her death. They were fervent supporters of the Church of England, and opposed to any initiative to remove the disqualifications of Dissenters, let alone Catholics. Opponents of high taxation, they also emerged as the peace party, believing that the two long wars against France – the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–97), and the War of Spanish Succession (1701–13) – were ruinously expensive and were being fought more in the interests of the Netherlands than of Britain. There were social differences between the two parties – the Whigs were more aristocratic, while the Tories’ strongest support came from the country gentry. The Whigs were less cohesive, being divided between the dominant ‘court’ faction, more interested in securing ministerial offices and other ‘places’ and
the ‘Country Whigs’, whose interests often coincided with the Tories, though they were loath to cooperate with them.

Both Whigs and Tories lacked most of the attributes of modern political parties, but their development was fostered by the frequent electoral contests in the reigns of both William and Anne. Under the Triennial Act, passed in 1694, there were no fewer than ten general elections in the period up till 1715, after which the Septennial Act of 1716 brought the era of almost constant electoral activity to an end. Political activity was also fostered by the abolition of censorship in 1695, which led to the development of a lively periodical press, while the proliferation of coffee houses in London and the main provincial towns provided centres of debate for the growing intelligentsia. The fortunes of the parties fluctuated throughout the period – the Whigs gradually squeezing the Tories out of government during the reign of William III, but the accession of Anne, in 1702, giving the Tories a momentary boost. The largely apolitical Sidney Godolphin, who led the government until 1710, was supported predominately by Whigs, notably John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, by far his most forceful colleague, whose influence was greatly bolstered by his stunning series of military victories over the French. His wife, Sarah, was a longtime favourite and confidante of the Queen, and constantly used her intimacy with her to promote her husband’s interests, and those of his Whig allies. In the end, she over-did it, virtually browbeating Anne into appointing her son-in-law, Charles Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, as Secretary of State. Eventually, she fell out badly with Anne, who replaced her as her principal Woman of the Bedchamber by Sarah’s cousin, Amelia Hill, who became Lady Masham, and a rather more discreet advocate for the Tories. In June 1710, the Queen girded herself up to dismiss both Marlborough and Godolphin, and a predominantly Tory administration was appointed, led by Robert Harley, later Earl of Oxford. In the subsequent general election, the Tories won a large majority in the Commons, though the Whigs were in control of the Lords. Harley proceeded to negotiate the Treaty of Utrecht, of 1713, ending the war with France, which the Whigs were in favour of continuing. On Harley’s advice, the Queen took the unprecedented step of creating 12 new Tory peers in order to get the Treaty through the House of Lords.

The Tory triumph was short-lived: in the closing months of Anne’s life, both Harley and his Tory colleague and bitter rival, Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, compromised themselves by entering into secret communications with James II’s son, James Edward Stuart, the ‘Old Pretender’, trying in vain to persuade him to renounce Catholicism in order to succeed to the throne. On her deathbed, at the end of July 1714, Anne dismissed Harley and appointed the Duke of Shrewsbury as Lord Treasurer, who supervised the inauguration of the Elector of Hanover, George I, who arrived in England six weeks later. The Tories were irremediably tainted with Jacobitism, though most
of them declared their loyalty to the Hanoverian dynasty. George immediately appointed a Whig administration, led by James, later Lord, Stanhope, and the Tories were condemned to opposition throughout his reign, and that of his son, George II, remaining in the wilderness until 1762, when the young George III appointed the Earl of Bute as Prime Minister.

Partly due to the expense of the wars which raged almost continuously during the reigns of William III and Anne, there was a constant need for Parliament to meet in order to vote Supply, which meant that the days when it met only occasionally – sometimes with a gap of several years – were long past. The monarch now had the need of a chief minister who would defend the policies of the government on a regular basis either in the Lords or in the Commons, which added a large new dimension to the role of the chief minister. Another important change was the development of cabinet government. From being individual advisers to the monarch, ministers were now summoned increasingly to meet together to give their collective view in a Council normally presided over by the monarch in person, though this was increasingly not the case with the accession of George I. Speaking little English, and often absent in his Hanoverian dominions, the cabinet, as it became known, met more and more often in his absence, with a leading minister in the chair, and this became the normal pattern when Walpole became First Lord of the Treasury in 1721. The fact that Walpole led his government from the Commons, rather than the Lords where most previous chief ministers had sat, both reflected and reinforced the growing predominance of the lower House of Parliament, which the Glorious Revolution had made possible. Walpole’s long period in office – just short of 21 years – effectively bedded in the office of Prime Minister. Despite the fact that few of his successors were able to rival his qualities, all of them were expected to fulfill the various functions which he had accumulated – of being the monarch’s chief adviser and administrator, of presiding over the cabinet and of ensuring majority support in both Houses of Parliament of the polices which the King wished to pursue.

The nation over which they ruled, earlier regarded as being a rather peripheral power, was poised to play an increasingly important role on the European and even the world stage. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was still an overwhelmingly rural country. The population of England and Wales, in 1700, was probably under 6 million, 85 per cent of whom lived in villages or small market towns. The population of Ireland was about 2.5 million and of Scotland, just over 1 million, making a total of around 9 million. Half a million of these lived in London, the second largest English town being Norwich with around 30,000 inhabitants, followed by Bristol with 20,000 and Newcastle with 15,000. Future major cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, all had fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. In Ireland, Dublin had 60,000, while Edinburgh had 35,000 and Glasgow 12,000 inhabitants. The Act of Union of 1707 had
united the parliaments and administrations of England and Scotland, though Scottish law and many of its customs remained distinct, with Presbyterianism being the established religion. Ireland retained its own Parliament and administration, but was effectively treated as a colony of England, and was dominated by its largely absentee Protestant Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Economically, Britain was now a fast developing country, though large-scale industrialization was still in the future. It was, however, already a major commercial and trading power, the union with Scotland making it the largest free trade area in Europe, while the establishment of the Bank of England, in 1694, greatly facilitated the raising of loans, for both government and private activity. Urbanization was to proceed rapidly throughout the century, so that by 1800 one-third of the population were town dwellers, though the big population growth of the major towns and cities was only just getting under way by then.

In 1700, already, Britain was becoming a significant imperial power, with its 13 North American colonies, a scattering of islands in the West Indies, a settlement in Gambia and an important presence in India, at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The treaty of Utrecht, in 1713, brought Hudson's Bay, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, St Kitts, Gibraltar and Minorca under British rule, while the British Navy was probably already the most powerful in the world. Even its military strength was at its peak, with a large, standing army raised during the reigns of William and Mary, which was still nearly 150,000 strong at the accession of George I. It was then, however, rapidly run down, the country henceforth relying more on subsidizing the armies of its allies in the field, rather than employing large numbers of its own troops in the many European wars in which it engaged. Both politically and economically, Britain at the beginning of the eighteenth century was probably the most dynamic of the European powers. This was the inheritance that Sir Robert Walpole took over in 1721.

Works consulted

Part I

The 18th Century
Despite his many qualities, Robert Walpole was not a particularly nice man. This is hinted at by the somewhat unwieldy title of the latest biography of him to appear, *The Great Man: Sir Robert Walpole – Scoundrel, Genius and Britain’s First Prime Minister* (by Edward Pearce), and is amply corroborated by its text. But being nice has not been highly correlated with competence in high office: if it were, Lord Aberdeen would now rank higher than Gladstone, Baldwin higher than Churchill. Walpole was coarse, venal, ruthless and, at times, vindictive. Yet the fact that he was the longest serving, as well as the first, of Britain’s 53 prime ministers (to date) strongly suggests that he was also one of the more effective.

Walpole was descended from a long line of country squires, who had been landowners in North Norfolk for 400 years. It was never one of the more prominent Norfolk families, but Robert’s grandfather, Edward Walpole, a strong Royalist, was knighted at the restoration of Charles II in 1660 and was elected to the ‘Cavalier’ Parliament. He died prematurely, in 1667, leaving a 17-year-old son, Robert, to manage and extend the family estate, which he did to good effect, raising the annual rent-roll from £750 to £2500 over his lifetime. The elder Robert, usually known as Colonel Walpole because of his service in the Norfolk militia, was also knighted like his father, and for the last 11 years of his life represented the nearby constituency of Castle Rising in the House of Commons, thanks partly to the sponsorship of the Duke of Norfolk and his brother, Thomas Howard, who largely controlled the nomination for the seat. A man of some learning, he built up a notable library at his house at Houghton, and his wife, Mary Burwell, the daughter of another – more affluent – Norfolk squire, also had intellectual tastes. They had 17 children, 8 of whom died in infancy. The younger Robert Walpole, who was the fifth child and third son, was born at Houghton on 26 August 1676. Intended, as a younger son, for the Church, he was sent to board at the age of six, with the Rev. Richard Ransome, who ran an elementary school at Great Dunham,
Norfolk, from where he proceeded to Eton, as a King’s Scholar, at the age of 13, though his age was falsely listed as 12, so as to qualify for the scholarship. While at Eton, he became close friends with his cousin, Charles Townshend, the scion of a much grander Norfolk family, who inherited a viscountcy while still in his teens. Townshend was to marry Robert’s sister, Dorothy, and was later to become an important influence in his brother-in-law’s political career. In 1696, at the age of 20, Robert went up to King’s College, Cambridge, but resigned his scholarship two years later, when his elder brother Edward died, and his father summoned him home to run the family estates. He was now his father’s heir, the second son – Burwell, a naval cadet – having died in 1690, aged 14, at the Battle of Beachy Head, in which the French defeated the combined Anglo-Dutch fleet. All thoughts of entering the Church were now quickly forgotten, and when Colonel Walpole died suddenly, on 18 November 1700, his son moved quickly to ensure that he took over his parliamentary seat. Within a week he had secured the backing of Thomas Howard, for what was expected to be an early by-election. A general election intervened, however, and in January 1701, he and Howard were elected unopposed as the two MPs for the borough. Howard was a Whig, as Walpole’s father had been, and the new 24-year-old MP wore the same party colours.

Six months earlier, Walpole had got married to the 18-year-old Catherine Shorter, daughter of a Baltic timber merchant, from Kent, who had aristocratic connections through her mother. It was effectively an arranged marriage, Colonel Walpole having searched far and wide for a suitable consort for his son, who would bring in a sizeable dowry, and consolidate his social position. Yet Walpole was undoubtedly in love with his new wife, who was described by Walpole’s first biographer, Archdeacon Coxe, writing in 1797, as ‘a woman of exquisite beauty and accomplished manners’ (Taylor, 2004). It did not, however, turn out to be a successful marriage. Catherine’s extravagant tastes matched those of her husband’s, and he soon got deeply into debt, not least because soon after inheriting Houghton Hall from his father, he embarked on extensive improvements to the house, which he was later to pull down to erect a far grander Palladian mansion in its place. Most of the time, however, he spent in London, where the couple lived, initially, in an apartment in Berkeley Street, in the house of Catherine’s grandmother, Lady Philipps, where they entertained on an impressive scale. Catherine produced two sons and two daughters during the first six years of their marriage, but after that they drifted apart, both having numerous affairs. It was widely suspected that Robert may not have been the father of Catherine’s fifth child, Horace Walpole (the noted author and aesthete), born in 1717, though he acknowledged him as his son.

As a young MP, Walpole soon established himself as an up-and-coming man. He was rapidly accepted in leading Whig circles, largely through the influence of his schoolboy friend, Charles Townshend, already the Lord Lieutenant of
Robert Walpole, First Earl of Orford

No relax, and of his wife’s aristocratic relatives. He was also to benefit from his connection to Sir Charles Turner, who had married his elder sister Mary. Turner’s father, Sir John, a wealthy wine merchant, was the ‘proprietor’ of the two King’s Lynn parliamentary seats, which he jointly represented with his son, Charles. As a favour to the Turners, Walpole, who soon mastered the procedures of the House of Commons, undertook the arduous task of steering through Parliament a Private Bill establishing a workhouse at King’s Lynn. This proved a farsighted move, when, in 1702, he was forced to seek a new constituency. He desperately needed to raise money to pay his debts, and required the consent of his Uncle, Horatio Walpole, who was a trustee of his father’s estate, to sell family property in Suffolk. Horatio agreed to this only on condition that he could take over his seat at Castle Rising. To this, Walpole reluctantly agreed, even though Horatio was a Tory, but Sir John came to his rescue, standing down at King’s Lynn, which enabled Walpole to share the borough’s representation with Charles Turner. They were returned unopposed, as Walpole was on 16 subsequent occasions. At two general elections, those of 1701 and 1710, however, he also contested the much more prestigious county constituency of Norfolk, but lost each time to Tory opponents.

The general election of 1702 was consequent on the death of William III, and the accession of Queen Anne. Unlike William, who was predisposed to the Whigs, the new Queen was known to favour the Tories, who obtained a significant majority in the election, leading to the eviction of Whig ministers from the government, which continued to be led by the virtually non-party Sidney (now Lord) Godolphin, as Lord High Treasurer. As most of the more prominent Whigs – including the surviving members of the ‘Junto’ who had dominated the government for much of William’s reign* – were in the House of Lords, there was a dearth of talent on the Whig benches of the Commons, and Walpole soon assumed a prominent role. This was not only because of his superior debating skills and his easy mastery of parliamentary procedure but also because of his high popularity, which spread far beyond his core following of Whiggish Norfolk squires. As the historian Geoffrey Holmes put it:

The young Robert Walpole was a man of easy temper and almost limitless good humour, endowed with what James Brydges [Paymaster-General in 1705–13] once called ‘the most friendly nature I have known’. (Holmes, 1967, p. 231)

Walpole became a particular protégé of one of the ‘Junto’ lords,* Edward Russell, Earl of Orford, and his already close relationship with the steadily rising

*The five ‘Junto’ lords, three of whom were unsuccesssfully impeached by their Tory opponents in 1701, were the Marquis of Wharton, the Earl of Orford, the Earl of Sunderland, the Earl of Halifax and Lord Somers.
Lord Townshend was further consolidated when, in 1705, he and Catherine moved into larger premises, in Dover Street, and invited his younger sister Dolly, 20 years old and a noted beauty, to stay with them for the winter season. She immediately attracted the attention of a number of notorious rakes, including another ‘Junto’ lord, the Marquis of Wharton. Catherine quarrelled with her, and she took herself off to the Wharton household, where Lady Wharton was well known for condoning her husband’s infidelities. A furious Walpole raced round to Wharton’s house, and peremptorily removed his sister, lodging her instead with the Townshends. Lady Townshend died soon afterwards, and within two years Townshend made Dolly his second wife. Townshend was also responsible for enrolling Walpole into the exclusive Kit-Cat club, the apex of Whig ‘High Society’.

In the 1705 general election, the Whigs made extensive gains, finishing up on nearly equal terms with the Tories. Some prominent Whigs joined the Cabinet, and Walpole had his first taste of junior office, being appointed a member of the Council of the Lord High Admiral. This cabinet post was held by Prince George of Denmark, the Queen’s husband, though the fleet was actually commanded by Admiral George Churchill, the brother of the Duke of Marlborough who, as Captain-General was the most powerful figure in the government. This appointment carried a salary of £1000 a year, which – though welcome – did not go very far towards relieving the debts, which both Robert and Catherine had accumulated due to their continuing extravagance. However, it brought Walpole into closer contact with leading governmental figures, including both Godolphin and Marlborough, who were impressed by his appetite for administration, and the clear and forthright way in which he expressed his views. He also continued to be an effective debater for the Whigs in the House of Commons, though there was some cooling of his relations with the ‘Junto’, who resented their continued exclusion from the cabinet, and who feared that Walpole was becoming a mere creature of Godolphin’s. However, both Walpole and the Junto proved to be beneficiaries of the Act of Union with Scotland, forced through in 1707 against some resistance from the Tories. In the ensuing general election, in 1708, the Whigs were victorious, partly owing to their sweeping successes in the Scottish constituencies, and the Junto Lords returned to the Cabinet after an eight-year interval, while Walpole was appointed to the important post of Secretary-at-War, on the strong recommendation of Marlborough. In January 1710, he was appointed simultaneously to the post of Treasurer of the Navy, potentially a highly profitable office. This time – or so she claimed – it was at the strong urging to the Queen of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. Walpole thus assumed parliamentary responsibility for both the armed forces at a crucial period during the War of Spanish Succession.

Walpole took a prominent part in the impeachment proceedings against Dr Henry Sacherevell, a High Church and High Tory clergyman, who, in November
Robert Walpole, First Earl of Orford

1709, preached a fiery sermon in St Paul’s Cathedral in which he was held to have challenged the legitimacy of the Glorious Revolution and appeared to be advocating the claims to the throne of the ‘Old Pretender’, James Edward Stuart, the Catholic son of James II. Heavily applauded by his fellow Whigs, he made by far the most effective speech against Sacherevell in the Commons debate, which led to his trial before the House of Lords. A major *cause célèbre*, the move proved to be a serious miscalculation by the overconfident Whigs. A backlash soon built up in Sacherevell’s favour: the London mob rioted on his behalf, he was widely seen as a martyr and even his strongest critics regarded the Commons’ decision as an overreaction. When the case reached the House of Lords, which then had a strong Whig majority, their lordships took fright, and though they found him guilty, imposed only the mildest sentence. Public opinion swung against the Whigs, who were already losing support because of their insistence in continuing an unpopular war, and this finally emboldened the Queen to take decisive action against her increasingly over-bearing ministers. She had already replaced her long-standing friend and confidante, the Duchess of Marlborough, as her Chief Woman of the Bedchamber by the Tory-supporting Mrs Masham, and, in August 1710, she dismissed both Godolphin and Marlborough, forming a new and almost exclusively Tory government, led by Robert Harley (soon to become Earl of Oxford), with Henry St John (later Viscount Bolingbroke) as a Secretary of State. Walpole lost his post as Secretary-at-War, but continued for a few months more as Treasurer of the Navy, before resigning in sympathy with his fellow Whigs. No sooner was he in office, than Harley began secret negotiations with France, which led eventually to the Treaty of Utrecht, bringing an end to the war nearly three years later. A general election, held soon after, led to a crushing victory for the Tories, and Walpole, who chanced his arm by contesting, for a second time, the Norfolk county constituency, came bottom of the poll, though he was re-elected at King’s Lynn.

The Tory government, after having unsuccessfully tried to tempt Walpole away from his fellow Whigs, soon proved nasty, and launched an investigation into his financial probity. The commissioners of public accounts reported to Parliament that he had accepted bribes from a friend, the banker Robert Mann, to whom he had awarded, while War Secretary, two lucrative forage contracts for the army in Scotland. He was expelled from the House of Commons and committed to the Tower of London in January 1712, a fate which actually seems to have given his political career a significant boost, as the historian Stephen Taylor suggests:

Imprisonment turned Walpole into a national political figure and a Whig martyr. He was visited daily by the leading Whigs, a ballad composed in his honour described him as ‘the Jewel in the *Tower* ... and at the King’s
Lynn by-election he was triumphantly returned, defeating a local Tory. The Commons promptly declared his re-election void. (Taylor, 2004)

He was released from the Tower in July 1712, and remained out of Parliament until the general election of 1713, when he was returned unopposed for King’s Lynn. Whether he was guilty as charged is doubtful, but the fact that – like many other ministers in this period – he left office a much wealthier man than when he entered suggests that there were ample grounds for suspicion. On his return to Parliament, Walpole resumed his role as one of the leading Whig speakers, and was well placed to benefit from the discomfiture of the Tories, after the death of Queen Anne, in August 1714. The Tory leaders, including both Oxford and Bolingbroke, had compromised themselves by entering into correspondence with the Pretender, and George I was determined, from the outset, to govern only with the Whigs, pushing the Tories into opposition for a period which was to last for 48 years. His first administration was effectively headed by General James Stanhope, as one of the two Secretaries of State, the other being Townshend, Walpole’s brother in-law. Three of the ‘Junto’ lords, Wharton, Halifax and Sunderland, were included in prominent posts, while Marlborough regained his position as Captain-General, and sat in the Cabinet as Master of the Ordnance. Largely due to Townshend’s advocacy, Walpole secured the highly lucrative post of Paymaster-General.

The new government, with Walpole taking the lead, lost no time in settling scores with its Tory predecessors. Oxford, Bolingbroke and the Duke of Ormonde (who had succeeded Marlborough as Captain-General in 1710) were impeached for treason. Ormonde and Bolingbroke fled to France, where the latter served for some time as Secretary of State with the Pretender, but Oxford was committed to the Tower. He was eventually acquitted when he came up for trial in 1717. No sooner had the three Tory leaders been impeached, than the 1715 Jacobite rebellion, in support of the Pretender, broke out in Scotland and Lancashire. It was easily defeated – the Pretender attracting very little support in the face of his refusal to give up his Catholic religion. Six peers had, however, assisted in the uprising, and Walpole, who had been promoted to First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer in October 1715, strongly urged their attainment and execution. George I, however, was inclined to clemency, and eventually only two of their number, Lords Derwentwater and Kenmure, were beheaded. Walpole made his implacable opposition to Jacobitism a central theme of his political career, and in truth was something of a ‘witch-hunter’. He saw Jacobite plots everywhere, and cynically used the issue to discomfort his opponents, implying that all Tories – even those most publicly loyal to the Hanoverian succession – were Jacobites at heart.

Walpole remained a minister for three years – from August 1714 to October 1717 – during which time he accumulated a large sum of money, estimated by
Robert Walpole, First Earl of Orford

J.H. Plumb at over £100,000 (roughly equivalent to £20m today). He suddenly became one of the richest men in the country, paying off his enormous debts and later enabling him to pull down Houghton Hall and build a magnificent Palladian replacement, which he filled with a fantastic array of paintings and other artistic treasures. Most of these finished up in the hands of Catherine the Great of Russia, when his grandson, George, sold them off in 1779. Today, they form the core of the Hermitage collection in St Petersburg. Walpole was by no means the only minister in British history to make money for himself by managing the country’s finances. Yet he did it on a more exorbitant scale than any of his predecessors or successors, and of Britain’s 53 Prime Ministers, to date, he remains the only one who raised himself to plutocrat status by this means. During this period, Walpole was the principal ministerial spokesman in the Commons, especially after Stanhope took a peerage, becoming Viscount Stanhope of Mahon. Yet he was probably no higher than number five or six in the unofficial ranking order of ministers, coming behind Stanhope, Townshend, the Earl of Sunderland and perhaps one or two others. Due to ill health, he played little part in the passage of the Septennial Act, in 1716, though this legislation, which increased the parliamentary term of office from three years to seven, was later to prove a major factor in enabling him to remain in power as Prime Minister for a record 21 years.

Throughout his reign of nearly 13 years, George I, who remained Elector of Hanover, made lengthy periodic visits (seven in all) to his German dominions, causing some concern to his British subjects, many of whom felt he was subordinating British interests to those of Hanover. This was particularly true of the visit which he made between July 1716 and the following January, when he took Stanhope with him, and they were later joined by Sunderland. Hanover had joined Charles XII of Sweden in the Great Northern War against Peter I of Russia, Christian V of Denmark and Augustus of Saxony-Poland, as George was hopeful of annexing new territories to his Electorate. Anxious to protect his rear, he sought an alliance with Britain’s traditional enemy France, whose Regent following the death of Louis XIV, the Duke of Orleans, was happy to comply. Stanhope sent instructions to Townshend to negotiate such an alliance, which would also include the Netherlands. Townshend, who doubted the wisdom of the move, was somewhat dilatory in carrying it out. Stanhope, prompted by Sunderland, who lusted after Townshend’s position as Secretary of State, wrote to him saying that the King wished to relieve him of the post and offering instead the Lord Lieutenancy of Ireland. Townshend reluctantly accepted, but was dismissed from this post a few months later, in April 1717, when he voted against a government bill in the Lords. Walpole then resigned in sympathy with his brother-in-law; his post as First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer being taken by Stanhope, while Sunderland and the essayist Joseph Addison became the two Secretaries of State. This was
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