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Assassination papers go online to commemorate 200th anniversary

Documents from The National Archives relating to the assassination of the British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval have been published online ahead of the 200th anniversary of his death.

Spencer Perceval was shot in the lobby of the House of Commons on 11 May 1812 by the Liverpool merchant John Bellingham and died from his injuries shortly afterwards. He remains the only British Prime Minister to have died this way.

Papers at The National Archives, available to view online for the first time, include letters and court documents from the trial of John Bellingham at the Old Bailey.

Eye witness testimony, such as that of Henry Burgess, a Mayfair solicitor, paints a vivid picture of the events of that day:

“He saw a gentleman coming forward towards the door of the house staggering and at the same time he heard a cry of ‘murder, murder!’ This gentleman had his hand to his breast and exclaimed ‘oh!’ faintly and fell forward on his face.” ([TS 11/224](#))

Another witness, the MP William Smith (grandfather of Florence Nightingale), helped carry the stricken Prime Minister into the Speaker’s Secretary’s room in the House of Commons.

“The blood soon began to issue from his mouth and no sign of life remained but some convulsive sighs and sobs which together with his pulse in a few minutes ceased entirely.” ([TS 11/224](#))

The assassin John Bellingham was apprehended at the scene and although in a state of “extreme agitation” he explained the reasons for his actions as “want of redress of grievances and a refusal by government or words to that effect”.

Bellingham had been, in his view, wrongfully imprisoned in Russia for five years and felt badly let down by the British Government and in particular the British ambassador to St Petersburg, Lord Leveson-Gower, whom he blamed for not coming to his aid.

Indeed, Bellingham stated at his trial that it would have preferred to have shot Lord Leveson-Gower and not Spencer Perceval. Letters to Lord Gower in the aftermath of the killing and now available online, express some sympathy for Bellingham. One signed simply 'One of the fifty – Brutus' states: *"Dreadfully are you deceived in thinking Bellingham had no accomplice"*. ([PRO 30/29/6/11](#))

The assassination came amid general unrest in the country and the growth of Luddism. The news was even greeted by rejoicing in some quarters. One letter from Wolverhampton describes "marks of rejoicing" and "firing guns", while boys in the street had been taught to exclaim: *"Now the great man in the parliament house is dead we shall have a big loaf"*. ([PRO 30/29/6/11](#))

Despite this, Perceval is remembered today for his role in the abolition of slavery as well as the unusual circumstances of his demise.

Bellingham was tried and found guilty of the murder and executed on the 18th May, 1812, just one week after the assassination.

Spencer Perceval's will, completed only a month before his death, is also available to view online: <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/details/D208389>

For further information, interviews or images please contact The National Archives' Press office: t.020 8392 5277 or e-mail: press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

Notes to Editors

The National Archives

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