

SPENCER PERCEVAL'S ASSASSINATION

Spencer Perceval (1762–1812) became Prime Minister in 1809. On 11 May 1812, John Bellingham shot Perceval as the latter entered the lobby of the House of Commons.

12 May 1812

We have the painful duty to communicate to our readers a most atrocious and afflicting event—the assassination of the Right Honourable Spencer Perceval, under circumstances that find no parallel in history.

Yesterday afternoon at about a quarter past five, as Mr. Perceval was entering the lobby of the House of Commons, he was shot by a person of the name of Bellingham, who had placed himself for that purpose at the side of a door leading from the stone staircase. Mr. Perceval was in company with Lord F. Osborne,¹ and immediately on receiving the ball, which entered the left breast, he staggered and fell at the feet of Mr. W. Smith,² who was standing near the second pillar. The only words he uttered were, “Oh! I’m murdered!” and the latter was inarticulate, the sound dying between his lips. He was instantly taken up by Mr. Smith.

The report of the pistol immediately drew great numbers to the spot, who assisted Mr. Smith in conveying the body of Mr. Perceval to the Speaker’s apartments, but before he reached them all signs of life had departed. Mr. Perceval’s body was then placed upon a bed, and Mr. Lynn, of Great George Street, who had been sent for, arrived, but too late even to witness the last symptoms of expiring existence. He found that the ball, which was of an unusually large size, had penetrated the heart near its centre and had passed completely through it. From thence the body was removed to the Speaker’s drawing-room.

The horror and dismay occasioned by the assassination prevented attention being paid to other persons, and it was not until the Right Honourable gentleman had been raised from the floor that a person belonging to the vote office exclaimed, “Where is the rascal that fired?” when a person of the name of Bellingham, who had been unobserved, stepped up to him and coolly observed, “I am the unfortunate man.” He did not make any attempt to escape, though he had thrown away the pistol by which he had perpetrated the horrid deed, but resigned himself quietly into the hands of some of the bystanders.

When the assassin was interrogated he replied, “My name is Bellingham— It is a private injury— I know what I have done— It was a denial of justice on the part of government.” The criminal was searched, and upon his person were found a steel pistol loaded (the fellow to that with which he had effected his fatal purpose) and a bundle of papers.

Two messengers conveyed the prisoner to the bar of the House of Commons. Having been sent by the Speaker³ to a room where he could be examined before a magistrate—the Serjeant-at-Arms of the House of Lords⁴—the evidence of several witnesses was taken and the prisoner made the following statement:

I have admitted the fact. I admit the fact, but wish, with permission, to state something in my justification. I have been denied the redress of my grievances by government; I have been ill-treated. They all know who I am and what I am, through the Secretary of State and Mr. Becket, with whom I have had frequent communication. They knew of this fact six weeks ago through the magistrates of Bow Street. I was accused most wrongfully by a Governor-General in Russia in a letter from Archangel to Riga, and have sought redress in vain. I am a most unfortunate man and feel here (placing his hand on his breast) sufficient justification for what I have done.

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¹ Francis Osborne (1777–1850), Member of Parliament for Cambridgeshire and a younger son of the Duke of Leeds

² William Smith (1756–1835). Member of Parliament for Norwich

³ Charles Abbot (1757–1829), Speaker of the House of Commons (1802–1817)

⁴ William Watson, Serjeant-at-Arms of the House of Lords (1789–1818)