Spencer Compton, First Earl of Wilmington – ‘George II’s Favourite Nonentity’

The man usually credited with having been Britain’s second Prime Minister is a somewhat shadowy figure. No full-length biography of him has ever appeared, and most accounts of his career have largely depended on passing – and usually acerbic – references in the memoirs of
such contemporaries as Horace Walpole, Lord Hervey, Lord Chesterfield and Mr Speaker Onslow. The almost unanimous conclusion has been that he was not really up to the job, and that he owed his preferment almost entirely to the inflated view which King George II held of his abilities.

Spencer Compton was born in 1673 – the exact date is unknown – at the family seat at Compton Wynyates, in Warwickshire. His father, James Compton, was the third Earl of Northampton, his mother being his second wife, Mary Noel, daughter of the third Viscount Camden. Altogether, there were ten children from the two marriages, most of whom died in infancy. Spencer was the youngest child, and of his siblings only his elder brother, George (who became the fourth Earl) and a sister, Mary, who was to marry the sixth Earl of Dorset, reached adulthood. The third Earl came from a wealthy family, long established in both Warwickshire and Northamptonshire, who were strong Royalists during the Civil War and afterwards. A fervent Tory, he died in 1681, but subsequent events pushed members of his family in the direction of the Whigs. One of the Earl’s brothers became Bishop of London under Charles II, but joined in the movement to exclude the Catholic James, Duke of York, from the succession. When James II came to the throne, he suspended Bishop Compton, but he was reinstated under William III and Mary, and indeed was responsible for crowning the new King and Queen, when the Archbishop of Canterbury refused to take the oath of allegiance. Meanwhile, Spencer’s brother, George Compton, the fourth Earl, had married into a leading Whig family, becoming the brother-in-law of Henry Fox (later the first Lord Holland, and the father of Charles James Fox). So the young Spencer grew up in a family with strong Tory roots, but with some at least of his close relatives now having Whig connections.

Very little is known of Spencer’s childhood and youth. He was educated at St Paul’s School, and Trinity College, Oxford, and enrolled at the Middle Temple, becoming a barrister. Aged 22, he contested the 1695 general election, as a Tory, at East Grinstead, but came bottom of the poll. Three years later, while travelling on the Continent, in an early version of the ‘Grand Tour’, he was elected unopposed, still as a Tory, in a by-election in the Suffolk constituency of Eye. This was a ‘pocket’ borough controlled by the Cornwallis family, and Spencer continued to represent it until 1710, though in 1701 he switched his allegiance to the Whigs, soon hitching his wagon to that of the rising young star, Robert Walpole, three years his junior.