Oxfordshire has played host to some of the most striking anomalies in the English electoral system, according to a special place in the representational history of the United Kingdom. Most conspicuous of these was the existence of the university constituency at Oxford, for which both Peel and Gladstone served as MPs before becoming prime minister. Distinct from the city, and with a franchise based on the possession of a doctorate or MA rather than a property qualification, Oxford University elected two MPs from the early 1600s until 1918, and for a brief spell (1644–5) even accommodated Parliament itself. One of two such university constituencies before 1801, and even at the peak of university representation one of only nine such places, its elections rarely involved actual polling, but were usually settled in advance through pre-electoral campaigning. These uncontented elections without rival candidates – once the norm in most types of constituency but increasingly less common after 1832 – all but ceased in 1818, when the university, in an experiment, moved to the singular transferable vote, yet another electoral ‘first’, alongside postal ballots (1864) and expatriate voting (1918).

The university did not provide Oxfordshire’s only electoral novelty. Before 1832 Banbury was one of just five English boroughs (out of 205) that elected a single MP (one of whom was another prime minister, Lord North), and among a handful of places where a ‘modern’ first-past-the-post election might occur. Unfortunately, the influence of the earls of Guilford and their successors left few opportunities for a poll prior to the enfranchisement of the £10 householders by the 1832 Reform Act. Thereafter, lacking the usual 19th-century safety-valve of a second seat, Banbury became the scene of intense party conflict and electoral violence, the dynamics of which have been neatly captured by Barrie Trinder. In 1885 it was incorporated into North Oxfordshire by the Redistribution of Seats Act.

The role of multiple seats in providing opportunities for electoral compromise and enabling hard-pressed voters to satisfy both their landlord and conscience, at a time when all polling was performed in public, was well illustrated in Woodstock, another Oxfordshire pocket borough. The removal of Woodstock’s second seat by the 1832 Reform Act left its squabbling family patrons, the Duke of Marlborough and his estranged son, the Marquess of Blandford, with little option but to fight it out at the polls, as they did at both the 1837 and 1838 elections, leaving a trail of evicted tenants and harassed voters in their wake. Marlborough’s death in 1840 ended their feud for the solitary seat, which thereafter provided a safe berth for nominees of the Blenheim interest, most notably Lord Randolph Churchill, father of the 20th-century prime minister, before its absorption into Mid Oxfordshire in 1885.

It was the allocation of a third MP to the county constituency, however, that really singled out Oxfordshire. Just one of seven counties to elect three MPs from 1832, its additional seat considerably lessened the prospects for competition between candidates, of the kind that had resulted in intense polling in all three previous general elections and famously in 1754. (This election, one of the most notorious of the 18th century for bribery and chicanery, inspired Hogarth’s ‘An Election Entertainment’.) The third seat also made polling itself far more complex on the rare occasions when a contest took place. In 1837, for instance, four contenders stood for three seats, and since each elector could vote for any one, two or three of them, casting what were known as ‘plumpers’ or ‘split’ votes, they each had 14 different ways of voting. (Amazingly, the surviving pollbook shows that only one elector in a turnout of 4,120 messed things up, by choosing all four.) Just two general elections were contested like this, however, before the county was separated into the single-member divisions of Mid, North and South Oxfordshire in 1885.

Many of the names of the MPs for Oxfordshire’s constituencies – Harcourt, Norreys, Stonor etc. – will be immediately familiar to anyone acquainted with its historic houses and street signs. It would be wrong to assume, however, that Oxfordshire elections were simply muster-rolls of tenants on landed estates and that voters exercised no autonomy in their political choices, as David Eastwood has clearly demonstrated. Indeed, the more votes electors possessed – and in this county they possessed more than most – the more easily they could balance a range of obligations, to landlord, community, profession, and, of course, to all those without the vote, a group that before 1918 included all women. A lack of contests was no indicator of political inactivity. Canvassing and pre-electoral skirmishes could be intense, settling outcomes before a poll, whilst the registration system introduced in 1852 provided local parties with a yearly opportunity to enlist their supporters and object to their opponents on the electoral rolls. These local ‘battles of the registers’ made many results inevitable.

In the city of Oxford, the region’s only other constituency prior to 1885, more traditional means were deployed to win over electors, especially its notoriously venal freemen, who, despite the restrictions imposed on this ancient franchise by the 1832 Reform Act, still accounted for one-fifth of the electorate in 1868. After a succession of investigations into bribery, which exposed payments of £1 for a ‘plumper’, 10 shillings for a ‘split’ vote and the ‘treating’ of electors with pies and beer, the city was deprived of first one and then both of its parliamentary seats in 1881. Following its reinstatement as a single-member borough four years later the Conservatives, who had hitherto always struggled, more or less dominated until 1966, notwithstanding the addition of the industrial behemoth of Cowley in 1948.

Oxfordshire has long since ceased to display so many electoral curiosities and unique features, setting it apart from the rest of England, but in 2010 David Cameron, MP for Witney, became yet another prime minister to sit for one of its constituencies.