

**William Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland
(1738-1809)**



William Henry Cavendish Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland, KG, PC, FRS (14 April 1738 – 30 October 1809) was a British Whig and then a Tory politician during the late Georgian era. He served twice as Prime Minister (1783) and (1807–1809). The 24 years between his two terms as Prime Minister is the longest gap between terms of office of any British Prime Minister.

Portland was known before he inherited the Dukedom in 1762 by the courtesy title Marquess of Titchfield. He held a title of every degree of British nobility: duke, marquess, earl, viscount and baron.



William Bentinck, Duke of Portland was born on 14 April 1738. He was the eldest son and third of six children born to the second Duke of Portland and his wife Margaret Cavendish Harley. Portland's mother was the heir of the second Earl of Oxford. Portland was educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. He was awarded an MA in 1757, aged 19.

He was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford where he was awarded an MA in 1757, aged 19. As Marquis of Titchfield he was returned to parliament as member for Weobly in Herefordshire in 1761 at the age of 23. In May 1762 he succeeded his father as third Duke of Portland and elevated to the House of Lords. He gave up his seat in the Commons without making his maiden speech: Portland's 'claim to fame' is that he rarely spoke in Parliament.

He was only twenty-four, possessed of immense wealth, derived both from his father and his mother, of good, if not brilliant, parts, and of unblemished character, so that it was no wonder that his support was warmly desired by the various Whig cliques.

In 1764 Portland had a brief affair with Maria Waldegrave who went on to marry the Duke of Gloucester, precipitating the [Royal Marriages Act](#) of 1772. (This gave the King power to approve the marriages of the Royal Family.) The following year, Portland embarked on an affair with Anne Liddell, the wife of the [Duke of Grafton](#). It has been suggested that the Portland/Lady Grafton affair was the cause of the antagonism between the Dukes of Portland and Grafton in later years.

The young duke entered into a warm political alliance with the Marquis of Rockingham, and when Lord Rockingham formed his first cabinet in July

1765, the Duke of Portland was appointed Lord Chamberlain of the household, and sworn of the privy council until the fall of the government the following year. At 28, he further associated himself with the great Whig families by his marriage in November 1766 to 16 year old Lady Dorothy Cavendish, only daughter of William, fourth Duke of Devonshire .



They had four sons and three daughters - and all their sons were called William (William Henry; William Edward; William Charles Augustus; William Frederick).

The Duke of Portland returned to power in 1782 when the Marquis of Rockingham appointed him as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.

In April 1783, Portland was selected as the titular head of a coalition government, whose real leaders were Charles James Fox and [Lord North](#). He served as Prime Minister and [First Lord of the Treasury](#) in the ministry until its fall in December that same year. During his tenure, the [Treaty of Paris](#) was signed, which formally ended the American Revolutionary War.

The government was heavily concerned with the power of the East India Company and in 1783 Charles Fox attempted to persuade Parliament to pass a bill that would replace the company's directors with a board of commissioners. King George III was hostile to the vote and made it known to the House of Lords that he would consider anyone voting with the Bill an enemy. This was an obvious attempt to railroad the power of Parliament and Portland's government resigned forthwith.

William Pitt, a Tory, replaced Portland as Prime Minister and held office for the next eighteen years. In 1794, Portland and a group of the Whigs broke with the Whig leadership of Charles James Fox and entered a formal alliance with Pitt in the wake of the French Revolution.

Portland became Home Secretary and played an important role in the passing of the Act of Union in 1801, which gave Catholics legal equality with the

Protestant minority. He also served as Home Secretary under Henry Addington who was Prime Minister between 1801 and 1804.

Following Pitt's death in 1806, a coalition government was formed composed of the followers of Lord Grenville and Charles Fox. This collapsed in March 1807, and Pitt's supporters returned to power, and Portland was once again an acceptable figurehead for a fractious group of ministers that included [George Canning](#), [Lord Castlereagh](#), [Lord Hawkesbury](#) and [Spencer Perceval](#).

Portland did not speak in parliament during his second ministry, which started life under a cloud of military failure during the [French wars](#): [Napoleon](#) dominated most of western Europe and went on to conquer the Iberian peninsula. [George Canning](#), the Foreign Secretary, accused his colleagues of incompetence in the prosecution of the war; it was obvious that Canning was referring to [Castlereagh](#), the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, whom Canning wanted to be removed. Although Portland did nothing, other Cabinet members took sides - for or against Castlereagh and the Cabinet virtually ceased to function. When Castlereagh discovered what had been going on, he demanded 'satisfaction' and the pair fought their celebrated duel on 21 September 1809. Both resigned soon afterwards. In August 1809 Portland had had an apoplectic seizure and resigned on 4 October. He was succeeded by [Spencer Perceval](#).

Portland died on 30 October 1809 at the age of 71 after an operation for kidney stones. He was buried at St Marylebone Parish Church in London.

A Summing Up:

Few statesmen have suffered more obloquy than the Duke of Portland. He was not a great man, and was a very poor orator, but he deserves to be remembered rather for his administration of the home department from 1794 to 1801 than for his two premierships. In his home secretaryship he showed himself a good administrator, tolerant in his exercise of great and extraordinary powers, careful in details, and yet not wanting in broad statesmanlike views. In private life he was in every way admirable.

Other Interesting Items:

Portland was involved in a prolonged legal battle with Sir James Lowther over lands in Carlisle that they both claimed. The case began in August 1767 and continued sporadically until a final judgement in August 1776, by which time Portland was virtually bankrupt as a result of legal costs. However, the case was decided in Portland's favour. To add to his financial difficulties, in the same year Portland agreed to pay his mother a lease of £16,000 a year so he could continue to live at Bulstrode, his mother's property. Meanwhile, his mother continued to live at Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire. This was the family seat of the Portlands. Eventually, Portland had to sell the Cumbrian lands to save himself from bankruptcy.

In 1789, Portland became one of several vice presidents of London's Foundling Hospital and President in 1793. This charity had become one of the most fashionable of the time, with several notables serving on its board.

Portland was appointed as Chancellor of Oxford University in September 1792 but refused the Order of the Garter because it was also offered to Pitt.

He was Recorder of Nottingham from 1794 until his death in 1809.

He was Lord Lieutenant of Nottingham 1795 – 1809

The title of Duke of Portland became extinct in 1990.