The Rotten Borough of Milborne Port

Milborne Port is a lovely place to live but in 1831 it was declared a 'Rotten Borough'! This came about because elected members first attended parliament in 1275, when two elected representatives from each county and two from each town were called to attend. Over time, both parliament and towns changed but the right to send MPs remained static. By 1830, Old Sarum at Salisbury had two MPs but only seven voters, while boroughs in the rapidly growing industrial towns like Birmingham and Manchester had no MPs to represent them at all.

Towns like Milborne Port became a way for the wealthy landowners to gain political power. In Milborne Port, the Marquis of Anglesey (a Tory) bought estates here, including Ven, for the political power it offered. In 1802, out of a population of 953, only 99 men could vote. With no secret ballot, the voters were easily controlled; even so, the election results were frequently contested.

In 1818, Lord Darlington (a Whig) tried to gain control of Milborne Port. He bought land on the edge of Milborne Port from Mr Grimes and built Newtown. Anglesey's steward was told to remove uncooperative tenants from their properties, pay any necessary bribes, and purchase more land and property in the borough to ensure that the Whigs did not win. East Street and Waterloo Crescent were built to boost Anglesey's share of the vote and at the by-election in July 1819, Anglesey's candidate won by 54 votes to 36. Some voters had not done as they were told, so twenty tenants were evicted by Anglesey and those who remained became 'very zealous and firm supporters.'

By 1820, the population of the town was 1,440 and 111 men had the right to vote. The two Lords spent large sums over the next five years fighting for control of the borough before Darlington conceded defeat.

The building boom was not enough to prevent the town losing its MPs. Agitation for electoral reform had been gaining support since the middle of the eighteenth century and by the early nineteenth century it was clear that action had to be taken. By the new criteria adopted in the revised Reform Bill of December 1831, Milborne Port, which contained 383 houses and paid £211 in assessed taxes, was placed 48 in the list of the smallest English boroughs. This confirmed its disfranchisement. The Marquis of Anglesey sold Ven back to the Medlycott family and Philip Crampton and Richard Sheil were the last MPs to represent Milborne Port. They were returned unopposed in March 1831 but lost their seats when the Reform Act of 1832 abolished the constituency. Those in Milborne Port who had the right to vote did not lose it but they were now a small part of the East Somerset constituency.