

But for one matter:

Ralph Sheldon of Beoley and Weston 1537-1613

Introduction

Ralph's portrait, painted when he was 53, shows a slightly corpulent gentleman clad in expensive black, fingers resting on the pommel of his dagger; below a receding hairline his eyes engage the viewer, his lips slightly open as though he were about to voice a confident protest.

To many his name is known only in association with the four tapestry maps he commissioned around 1590 to decorate his large new house at Weston; they depicted a panoramic view across England from London to the Bristol Channel, focussed on the four counties in which he held land, had friends and family and knew well. But that is to illustrate only one side of this many-sided gentleman for whom plentiful material provides a very full picture of his daily personal pre-occupations.



Ralph Sheldon in his 53rd year; painted by Hieronymos Custodis, Market Hall Museum, Warwick. © Wikimedia Commons

Ralph was born in 1537 to a family on the rise and into a country doctrinally Catholic, albeit one which no longer acknowledged the supremacy of the Papacy over the church in England. The country's inhabitants were about to witness the removal of both the physical and the spiritual manifestations associated with that way of worship - the disbandment of the monastic communities, of the chantries and of the religious guilds. Their removal altered the appearance of church buildings and of the landscape, changed the balance of land ownership and, over a longer term, transformed political horizons. Demolition of their buildings marked the loss of social relief for the poor, of convenient stopping places for travellers, of schools and of skills. All of this could be, and came to be, replaced by laymen, enlarging secular power and influence. That increase was significantly assisted by the sale and dispersal of the huge amount of land owned by the religious institutions, estimated as around thirty-five percent of England's total area. His father took as much advantage of this fluid situation as he

could. The redistribution touched Ralph's material life, while the divisions in religious beliefs which Henry VIII's decisions introduced into England and the subsequent shake-up of foreign alliances influenced Ralph's 'political' and personal conduct.

Sometime JP and one time sheriff of Worcestershire, Ralph's birth had been into the gentry, the class who expected and were educated to hold administrative posts in the county. One of the largest landowners in the West Midlands, his business interests were extensive, going far beyond the sale of sheep and surplus produce. They included ownership of salt bullaries in Droitwich, of coal diggings in Leicestershire and agreement to continuance of a tapestry weaving venture planned by his father at Barcheston. His already wide circle of acquaintances, some of them influential men, was

enlarged by the marriages of his nine daughters and of his son. By curious accident he had the right to appoint clergy to the church established in England by Queen Elizabeth.

Ralph seems to have been a divisive figure. Locally he was viewed enviously as being with influence and 'well-friended'. On a wider stage one of the Queen's courtiers, Sir John Harington of Kelston, Somerset, remarked that he had heard that Ralph was one of the sufficientest wisest men, fit to be a councillor, but for one matter. Sir John's seemingly approving comment is little quoted. His praise has gone largely un-noticed. In recent accounts of Ralph's life Harington's undeveloped reservation takes precedence.

In his will Ralph wrote that wished to die as he had lived in the verities of the Catholic Church. He seems to have been able to live as he chose without hindrance. Almost no evidence supports his too frequent portrayal as a fined and prosecuted recusant. He paid fines for refusal to attend church as the law demanded for only three years. Otherwise his name is absent from the official records which noted those who openly refused church attendance. Nor can he be demonstrably associated with any of the many plots against the Queen; he knew himself to be a loyal English subject. So too did several members of the privy council, regarding him as a man well able to serve on local inquiries.

Nevertheless, that 'one matter', the question of his doctrinal allegiance was important to Ralph, to his contemporaries and for us. Up to a point his choice determined his social status; it might limit his freedom of action or at least hamper the achievement of his goals since the question of a Catholic's loyalty to the Crown was obviously a matter of importance. But it is hard to see in exactly what way and to what extent the lingering suspicions of his loyalty harboured by others exerted any negative influence on his activities or obligations.

An Elizabethan would have characterized him, scornfully and derisively, as a Church Papist; a man who came to church as the law demanded but without belief. The description was not a compliment certainly but it did not denote a man against whom the full force of the law should be deployed. Nevertheless suspicion of his preference for the Catholic faith lingered throughout his life. Attention focussed on him on four occasions: in 1580, 1585, 1587 and 1594, twice largely because of international events, twice for purely personal reasons. None of these episodes has previously been fully explored.

Almost every other aspect of Ralph's life is illustrated in the two years of an account book, the genesis of this book. Its 220 foolscap pages are dedicated to a record of Ralph's personal expenditure and receipts over a two year period 1586-1588. Clearly part of a wider accounting system, it was needed because of Ralph's frequent absences from home. Peripatetic for half the year – though resident in London for part of that time – it does not reveal income from rents, leases or from produce sales nor does it detail household expenses; it notes his very miscellaneous costs arising from legal business, London shopping and in particular his journeys far beyond his own locality.

<https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Sheldons-Account-Book-Described.pdf>

Its entries thus form a diary of his daily life, a rare item in Elizabethan England since, with few exceptions, the sixteenth century was not an age in which diaries were kept.¹ Ralph's daily

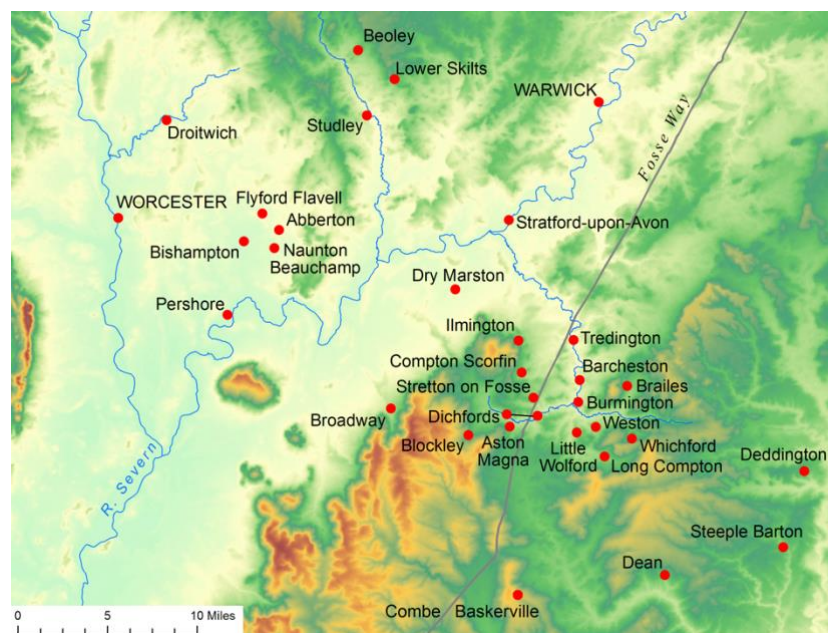
¹ Rowse, (ed), 'The Diary of William Carnsew, Country Gentleman'; Martin, (ed), *Journal of Sir Francis Walsingham*; Sutton (ed), *Iter Boreale*, at <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/eedes/> an early travel diary of a journey from London to Durham.

expenditure serves a similar end. The entries both reveal and link his different lives, providing a glimpse of the ways in which Ralph faced and managed the problems common to every member of the Elizabethan gentry, his actions affected by circumstances beyond his control.

The small episodes which disclose Ralph's more intimate moments between 1585 and 1589 took place against a tense political background nationally, internationally and in Ralph's personal life. He was experiencing the aftermath of a politically motivated legal attack against him, engineered by his former son in law. English military participation in the already long-running war between the Catholic kingdom of Spain and its Protestant-favouring 'colonies' in the Low Countries had begun in 1585 under the command of the earl of Leicester. The situation deteriorated steadily through the next year. February 1587 saw the execution of Mary Queen of Scots who had been supported by the Catholic powers of Europe for twenty years as a rival claimant to the Protestant occupant of English throne and used as a focus for plots; two Acts stiffening legislation against Catholics passed through parliament in May. Penalties for recusancy – refusal of attendance at church demanded by the law – were increased; the fine, already £20 per calendar month, was reinforced by threat of forfeiture of lands for non-payment. Late in July 1588 the Armada sent by Spain to attack England, long expected, sailed up the Channel only to be thrown off course by storms. Sheldon willingly contributed arms and men to the mustering English forces at Warwick early in August and paid meticulous attention to arrangements for provisioning the Queen's army. The death of the earl of Leicester in late August freed Ralph from old loyalties which had turned sour.

Information in other documents reveals the tangled threads in Ralph's life, many of the stories with beginnings long ago and fresh events which would rumble on over the next decades. The lively picture of Ralph's many varied activities and diverse concerns presented in the account book were constant themes in his life. Almost all the problems, and certainly that same pattern, can be traced in earlier years and followed also in years to come, giving expression to difficulties in existence long before the first entries and to the start of difficulties which would remain unresolved for many years into the future.

Its entries show us a man with widespread friends, family and obligations extending far beyond the core of the family's original estates round Beoley in north Worcestershire where he owned most of the land in the parish and, further south, a cluster of estates close to Evesham and Pershore. Much larger acreages stretched across south Warwickshire, from Brailes, Barcheston, Whichford, Weston in Long Compton and up the course of the Knee Brook valley from Tidmington towards Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire.



Ralph Sheldon's estates, extending north-south over approximately 35 miles. Differing geology allowed him a wide range of crops. © Hilary L. Turner, Mike Athanson.

In addition he rented a house and held a lease on land in Deddington, Oxfordshire, from the Duchy of Lancaster and owned an apartment in the Whitefriars, London.

Many of the surviving documents and much of the material contained in the accounts is connected in some way with this area of south Warwickshire and Gloucestershire where open fields predominated over forest. More particularly, his concerns focussed on the valley of a minor Warwickshire river, the Stour, the background to Ralph's life from 1580 onwards. Rising in Oxfordshire it flows west and then northwards through mostly rolling countryside to join the much larger river Avon just downstream from Stratford upon Avon. Sheer banks lined its course for only a few miles of the upper reaches, though high ground – Brailes hill, the steep slopes frowning over Shipston and sheltering the deserted village of Compton Scorpion - was not far off. For most of its sixteen miles the river served as a parish boundary and it powered the mills of the tiny settlements regularly positioned along the river's length, survivors of the concentrated drive by late fifteenth century landlords to enclose land for grazing. Alongside, the road southwards from Stratford upon Avon followed the higher bank on the river's east side, bridged twice, at Halford and at Shipston where the route split. Continuing south it led through Long Compton and on to Chipping Norton; heading south-west it crossed a tributary, the Knee Brook, before striking uphill towards the village of Todenham and across pasture land to Moreton in Marsh where it met the Roman road, the Fosse Way, connecting Lincoln and Exeter.

By the end of the sixteenth century much of this area was heavily under the influence of the Sheldon family and their relations. It was where, on a hill looking down the valley, Ralph chose to build his new fifty-two room house, then the second largest in the county and perhaps one of the best decorated thanks to the four tapestry maps depicting country he knew well. Perhaps prompted by Ralph's travels, they translated the county maps of Christopher Saxton into a three dimensional view of the area where Ralph's friends and family could claim influence.

Surprising, confusing and always challenging Ralph now reposes in some splendour above the tomb in the chapel he enlarged in the parish church at Beoley to honour his forebears as much as himself. Armour-clad, he lies peacefully beside his wife of forty-five years, the coats of arms of their ten children and their families carved and painted on the side panels beneath.



Ralph's tomb in Beoley church, © Hilary L. Turner

Ralph's life was in no way a bucolic or confined existence. His roots might lie in a small area of the Midlands, but, lifelong, his interests and his duties took him elsewhere and into contact with a wide range of men. In the two years where close study is possible he is almost as often found in London as on his estates. His contacts ranged from the great and the good, men in positions of authority, to an impressive team of lawyers; at home he knew the leaders of the county as well as the humbler residents of the Stour valley in addition to the members of his own family and those related closely enough to be due his protection.

SUMMARY

Year	Period	Weston	Away	Days
1586	3 months	59	34	93
1587	12 months	172	183	365
1588	9 months	156	117	273

Up to now, however, Ralph's modestly successful and certainly idiosyncratic life has been relegated almost to a footnote in both local and national history. He has long deserved a more ample biography than that offered in 1936 by E. A. B. Barnard.² That account barely covered his activities as recorded in the state papers. Far more emerges from abundant material not then known or not accessible. Following the death of the last member of the family the greater part of the family archive over four centuries was bought in 1903 by Birmingham Central Library, now Birmingham Archives. Copies of some, made around the same time, are now in the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive, Stratford upon Avon. In addition, this book draws on material not previously investigated, including the deposit of documents from a Banbury solicitor, Stockton-Fortescue in 1959, the two consecutive account books for the years 1586-88 purchased in 1987 by Warwick Record Office, twenty-two surviving business letters <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Sheldons-Letters.pdf> and the many law suits Ralph pursued through the Westminster courts preserved in the National Archives, Kew. Further material in the British Library, Lambeth Palace, Gloucestershire, Kent, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Surrey, Suffolk and Worcestershire Record Offices fills out an unusually well documented picture.

These documents, and this book, tell two stories, one of a landowner's difficulties and obligations, the other of one man's shifts to accommodate changes in doctrinal practice which he could not fully support even if he might do nothing to hamper their implementation.

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² Barnard, *The Sheldons*, Cambridge 1936.