

Chapter Eleven : Cousins, Colleagues and Contacts

Cousins and Consanguinity

Throughout his life the tentacles of Ralph's contacts spread far and wide, originating largely in his extensive cousinship and continued in the marriages of his nine daughters.¹ Familial obligation was taken more seriously, covered more circumstances and extended to far more distant members than is the case today.² Ralph strengthened and cemented those connections by offers of help with difficulties, financial, legal or personal; practical assistance including small loans was afforded to many, (Gybbes, Rudgeley, Knollys, Lyttleton). The dividing line between self-interest, obligation and a genuine desire to help might at times be narrow, but clearly there were situations, like the circumstances of the Bracebridge children, which touched his heart. Involvement in family matters as a trustee (Rotherham) or mediator is commonly recorded (Cornwallis, Babington); the only known occasion when Ralph was a god-parent is for John Talbot of Grafton, but almost certainly he was named more often than is known.

Few of those he knew were likely to lead him into danger; he quite clearly avoided contact with those who wished harm to Her Majesty even though some were relatives. The one potential exception was Thomas, 4th Lord Paget of Beaudesert, Staffordshire.³ Letters between them survive from May 1581 but almost certainly the link had been formed earlier; they shared a number of practical interests, including coal mines; their strongest link was, more significantly, religion. There is a strong probability that he and Sheldon played some part in helping the Papal missionaries when they landed in London in June 1580.⁴ Subsequent letters reveal moments of relaxation amidst the responsibilities of bigger business. <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Paget.pdf> Ralph thanked Lord Paget for the opportunity and the pleasure he had enjoyed of singing with William Byrd and members of Paget's household. They show a Ralph who enjoyed archery, hunting and greyhound coursing; though ashamed of his dogs he was not the least abashed to ask a loan of Paget's – and expect a positive response. Most of all he loved hawking, frequently mentioned in the account book. Games of skills such as bowls, games of chance – cards, dice and 'mawe' - and country roistering also found a place, moments of relaxation amidst the responsibilities of big business. The tone of the surviving letters is deferential, a record rather than an insight into a friendship, sprinkled with notes of cautious reserve and pretexts for absence. If for a time the two men were close, there is no indication that the acquaintance continued after Thomas fled the country at the end of 1583, perhaps fortunately, since Paget's brother Charles was prominent in the circles of Catholic plotters based on the continent.

¹ The importance of interconnections is brought out in Cogan, *Catholic Social Networks*, especially Chapter Six.

² Houlbrook, *The English Family 1450-1700*, pp. 18-26.

³ *ODNB*.

⁴ Turner, 'Cloaked in conformity'.

Sheldon's contacts placed him in a position from which he could seek help for himself from a wide range of influential men; in the judiciary from the Lord Chancellor Sir Christopher Hatton, from the Master of the Court of Requests, Sir Julius Caesar; he was acquainted with a number of those who adjudicated his cases in the law courts in particular with the Assize justices Sir Francis Wyndham and Sir Roger Manwood. In the background were men with connections to some of the less prominent but still important figures at Queen Elizabeth's court: Sir John Fortescue, Master of the Great Wardrobe, to whom Richard Hyckes reported, and possibly the former Oxford Fellow, later amongst the Queen's doctors, Roger Marbeck. A more formal and probably only transient connection existed to Thomas Sackville Lord Buckhurst with whom Ralph fought a law suit on behalf of the Dormer brothers before Buckhurst became a Privy Councillor, later Lord High Treasurer and eventually Chancellor of Oxford University.

Such contacts were not only of immediate and practical use; they reflected a man's status, as important as the fashioning of his own image. The account book provides the clues which reveal a clear picture of Ralph's social milieu: amongst the smaller landowners in the Stour valley, amongst family, amongst the county administrators and MPs of Warwickshire and more especially those of Worcestershire and with contacts amongst influential men close to members of the government.

Neighbours

Most of his immediate neighbours in the Stour were small landowners, enjoying adequate but not over-abundant prosperity. They lived peaceably, men possibly without much ambition; none had an interest in making trouble legal or religious. Their concerns were circumscribed, domestic – good marriages and comfortable living. The core, or at least the footprint, of their small houses often remains embedded in a later, larger structure, for example at Little Wolford, Todenham and Burmington.

William Moulton (d. 1614), commemorated by a brass showing a kneeling man, modestly dressed in older fashions facing his wife across a prayer desk, was a relative newcomer in Todenham. Lessee from the Petre family of an estate previously run by them but belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, William persuaded the two other freeholders to enclose the lands and mapped the result around 1590.⁵ Moulton was happy to let Ralph transport his rents twice a year to his London landlord rather than make the journey himself.⁶ William was kin. The first link was forged when Anthony Savage, son of Ralph's

⁵ Gloucester Archives, D1099/T14, leases of meadow near Ditchford Brook and 2 messuages and land in Todenham, 1566/7, 1611 (Petre family); maps at D 1099/P 1 the original; the seventeenth century copy, D 1099/P 2 enhanced the buildings.

⁶ CR 2632, ff. 6, 25, 61, 113, 135, 180. He was listed as owner of a petronell in 1608 *Men and Arms in Gloucestershire*, p. 133.

sister Anne, married William's niece, the daughter of his mother's second husband; William's daughter married Richard Savage, grandson of Ralph's sister Anne, around 1603.⁷

Downstream at Honington Ralph had friends in common with Anthony Gybbes, some fifteen years younger and member of the Middle Temple.⁸ When he died in May 1587, unmarried and still relatively young, in the house of a London woodmonger John Brian, Ralph provided mourning gear and arranged the burial before embarking on the duties of executor.⁹ He appears to have seen cases already under way in the court of King's Bench through to completion.¹⁰ Having proved Anthony's will written six months previously he then had to oversee the challenge to its provisions launched within a month by a half-brother, aggrieved because the property had passed to Anthony's younger brother and was in any case tied up in the marriage settlements of Anthony's three sisters in a network extending from Tysoe to Evesham.¹¹ One of Anthony's brothers in law, Nicholas Browne of Long Compton¹² acted as the Warwickshire intermediary, delivering legal papers to Sheldon's co-executor, Richard Hall of Idlicote. Sheldon's involvement may not have been entirely disinterested friendship. Payments made a year later suggest that Ralph owed money to both Brian and Browne only part of which they had laid out for Anthony Gybbes.¹³ Small, charitable loans were made to Mrs Gybbes, Anthony's mother and a debt of £19 2s.1d to a London tradesman was paid off.¹⁴



The brass in Todenham placed to commemorate William Moulton and his wife, kin to Ralph Sheldon. © Henry Warriner.

⁷ Richard's marriage, Barnard, 'The Savages of Broadway', pp. 43-57, p. 45; Barnard never substantiated his note, Barnard Miscellaneous Papers Birmingham 74a about the widow Moulton; *Vis 'n Warwickshire 1634*, p.87; *Vis 'n Gloucestershire 1623*, sv Croker, p.48.

⁸ Mr John Dormer of Thame and Fulke Greville (d.1606).

⁹ CR 2632, ff. 81, 83; PROB 11/70/327, 10 November 1586: Proved 24 May 1587.

¹⁰ CR 2632, f. 23.

¹¹ TNA C 2/Eliz/G14/63, June 17 1587.

¹² Buried at Tysoe, Dugdale, *Antiquities*, vol. 1, p. 545; will TNA PROB 11/128/487.

¹³ CR 2632, f. 189.

¹⁴ CR 2632, f. 31, 42, 191, 194.

Other Stour valley residents make occasional appearances, often in the context of a law suit. Anthony Ingram for example, living in Little Wolford, clashed with Ralph over land once formerly Sheldon's.¹⁵ From the same village Anker Brent, steward of Henry, Lord Compton, makes a fleeting appearance as Sheldon's steward in Brailes.¹⁶ There were arguments with the Tooley family at Burmington whose current owner, William, was a leather seller trading in Antwerp, married to the daughter of an Antwerp merchant.¹⁷ Better relations prevailed with two men from Idlicote. Thomas Rowley was a witness in the hearings about Barcheston in the Archbishop's Court of Audience; by 1591 Richard Hall, probably related to the Catholic priest Hugh Hall, had been a tax collector.¹⁸ A number of payments were made to Richard for unspecified reasons.¹⁹ He was to become kin; his daughter Elizabeth married Walter, son of Ralph's sister Anne.²⁰

Two men, both relatives by marriage, Ludovic and Edward Greville of Milcote, brought Ralph into contact with national events; their cousin Fulke Greville (d.1606) of Beauchamp's Court was a friend. The latter, overshadowed by and frequently confused with his more famous literary son of the same name, remains an elusive figure, despite being a JP since 1572, sheriff once and continuously involved in county administration. Sheldon made occasional luxury purchases for him in London; they met in October 1586 on county business and again at Stratford in August 1588, when with Mrs Sheldon and their long-standing acquaintance, the Clopton family, they all dined together.²¹ Eighteen months later Fulke Greville requested Ralph's help to settle a dispute between the bailiff and burgesses of Stratford upon Avon over disputed rights in common lands within the borough, a helping hand in Sheldon's rehabilitation after his quashed conviction as a recusant.²²

Far more difficult was the relationship with the younger branch of the Greville family living at Milcote into whom William Willington married his daughter Margaret around July 1531.²³ Their eldest son, Ludovic, inherited the obstreperous qualities of his paternal grandfather.²⁴ Despite a good marriage, into the Catholic Petre family of Ingatestone, Essex, former landowners in the area, Ludovic wasted money on grandiose building plans and was involved in four disputes which brought him to the notice of the privy council: tenant trouble at Welford, fraudulent land deals in Aston-sub-Edge, an attack which nearly killed a local

¹⁵ Law suits TNA STAC 5/S65/22, STAC 5/S8/4, STAC 7/15/22, STAC 5/S83/10; house plan in Wolford, *VCH Warwickshire*, 5, pp. 213-218.

¹⁶ TNA E 133/8/1317; E 133/9/1368, sheet 5.

¹⁷ TNA PROB 11/66/163; *CPR 1582-83*, L&I, vol 286, Jan 1583, no. 59.

¹⁸ Rowley, CR 2632, f. 81; Derbyshire RO, D156 M/CENT, Letter from W Burghley and J Fortescue to Robert Burdett of Bramcote and Richard Hall of Idlicote, collections of tenth and fifteenth for Warwickshire: should pay £643 16s 0½d due immediately, 1591.

¹⁹ CR 2632, ff.16, 42, 63, 78, 101, 106, 111, 113.

²⁰ Barnard, 'The Savages of Broadway', p.45; Barnard, 'The Halls of Idlicote', pp. 105-121', in *New Links with Shakespeare*; the marriage settlement (1582) is in the Hanley Court Collection, BAH MS 3312/10/1 Idlicote, co. Oxon, also MS 3312/9 Hundred of Kineton

²¹ CR 2632, ff. 15, 210; further information about relations with the Clopton family are in SCLA ER 3/270 and in the Folger Library, Washington DC.

²² SCLA ER 2/22, 5 October 1591.

²³ *VCH Worcestershire*, 4, pp. 9-10, 12 and Kent Record Office, U269/T1/61A/7/9

²⁴ *L&P Henry VIII*, 1540-41, vol. 16, nos. 1289, p. 596; 1315, p.607; 1391 (67), p.644; *L&P*, 1541, vol. 17, no 127,p.52 and g.442 (25), p.258; as JP no. 1154(55), p. 637.

landowner Sir John Conwey of Arrow in London in 1579, and finally the murder of the steward of a distant property to regain possession.²⁵ Now deeply in debt as well as in serious trouble the account book suggests that Ralph was prepared to lend money to discharge some of Ludovic's obligations; in the months before Ludovic's trial for murder, Ralph befriended his heir, Edward, perhaps aware of the potential which would make him far more successful than his father.²⁶ Condemned in November 1589, Ludovic found the courage to be pressed to death beneath stones piled on his body, a penalty which avoided forfeiture of his goods and ensured his assets could be passed on to his heir.

Indirectly these links were the intangible legacy of his father's kinship relationships opened up through William's marriage with a daughter of the wealthy wool trader, William Willington. But it was Willington himself who was the lynch-pin.

Willington had undoubtedly been the most prominent man in the valley for the first half of the century.²⁷ Born in Todenham, son of a small farmer, one of his first purchases was the run-down and already enclosed estate at Barcheston, its owners long absentee.²⁸ His wealth, supported by a network of financiers, was based on wool sales from



William Willington, Ralph's maternal grandfather, from his tomb at Barcheston
© Hilary L. Turner

estates stretching from north Oxfordshire to Leicestershire; estates now in today's Birmingham suburbs lay close to those of the Sheldon family. He had a London office and became a Merchant of the Staple, privileged to sell wool in the international market at Calais where he had premises and formed valuable, long-lasting connections.²⁹ He shared obligations for the defence of England's last continental port with men such as Sir Thomas Cornwallis, the territory's governor, and the Dormer family resident on the Oxford-Buckinghamshire border; it was Michael Dormer who offered to find Willington a second wife.³⁰ Like them, Willington was summoned for escort duty on the arrival of the German Ann of Cleves on her way to become King Henry's fourth wife.³¹ He exchanged letters and

²⁵ Dugdale, *Antiquities*, vol. 2, pp. 710-11.

²⁶ CR 2632, f. 190; Kent RO, Maidstone: U269/E223/1, 2, 3. [U269/E223/1, 1583-6; U269/E223/2; 1587 U269/E223/3; 1564-88. Either he or Mrs Sheldon seem to have met him at Stratford, CR 2632, f. 190.

²⁷ <http://tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/WilliamWillington.pdf>

²⁸ Turner, 'Reputational Damage...'

²⁹ TNA E 315/372, page no. 46 as numbered from the back of the volume.

³⁰ WaCRO, CR 580/17/5, testimony of Roger Morris of Shipston.

³¹ *L&P Henry VIII, 1539*, vol 14(2), no.572, p.202; *L&P Henry VIII, 1540*, vol. 15, no.14, p.6, with the rank of esquire.

did business with Thomas Cromwell and, until the latter's fall, had been appointed to county commissions.³²

He planned to establish a chantry chapel and to leave funds for his widow to pay a priest to sing masses for his soul; the south aisle in Barcheston's church housing his tomb marks the extent of his dream.³³ Willington's riches ensured that he would be able to improve the social status of his seven daughters by choosing husbands from a higher social class, the already established Warwickshire minor gentry.³⁴ Their husbands all came to occupy the local offices, as JPs and some as sheriff. However for himself Willington preferred to pay a fine rather than accept the knighthood offered by Queen Mary.³⁵

The alliances which gave Willington such pleasure proved much less pleasing to his grandson Ralph. He would later have dealings with several of the families, friendly but deeply respectful with Mistress Cave-Knollys, peace-making with Greville of Milcote and fractious rather than friendly with Basil Fielding, the consequence of William Sheldon's obstinate challenge to Willington's testamentary dispositions.³⁶ Despite continued contact Ralph was never tied closely into his maternal grandfather's Warwickshire social network. Though both William Sheldon and Ralph worked hard to help Robert Dudley, later ennobled as earl of Leicester, to establish himself in a county barely his own, and despite the kinship links with Ambrose Dudley, later earl of Warwick, created through Sheldon's second wife, Ralph never became a Dudley client.³⁷ Though Warwickshire had once been a gentry republic dominated by Ralph's closest relatives, those of his wife, the once influential Throckmortons of Coughton had by the mid-1570s been replaced in local office by reformist candidates favoured by Robert Dudley.³⁸ Even though Ralph was one of the largest landowners in the county, he occupied administrative positions only in Worcestershire where his own family provided many, though less prominent, links.

On the paternal side, the marriages Grandad Ralph arranged for his daughters were relatively un-ambitious, their husbands chosen from small landowners, not from holders of county office in Worcestershire.³⁹ Their children barely formed a network of any sort, but it was for these cousins that Ralph seems to have felt a much closer affinity and affection and to whom, when needed, he offered help; Washbourne at Wichenford, Ashfield in north

³² *L&P Henry VIII, 1539, vol. 14(2)*, no. 782, p. 322, 325; *L&P Henry VIII, 1539, vol. 14(1)*, g. 1192 (23), *vol. 14(2)*, g.435(5) and 619(13).

³³ WaCRO, CR 580/13.

³⁴ Their order of birth was listed in TNA C 3/89/94; Margery = (1) Thomas Holte of Aston, (2) Sir Ambrose Cave; Godith = Basil Feilding of Newnham; Elizabeth = Edward Boughton of Lawford; Mary = William Sheldon; Margaret = Sir Edward Greville of Milcote; Anne = Francis Mountford of Kingshurst; Katherine = (1) Richard Kempe (2) William Catesby of Chastleton (3) Sir Anthony Throckmorton, Dugdale, *Antiquities*, 1730, p. 601b.

³⁵ E.P. Shirley, 'Compositions to avoid Knighthood 1 & 2 Mary', *Herald and Genealogist*, V, 1870, 18-24.

³⁶ TNA C 78/14/36 and C 78/33/30 (Ditchford Frary); C 78/36/27, over the will, available on AALT.

³⁷ The possibility was mentioned by Simon Adams, 'Because I am of this Countrie...', p.47, n.232, but never substantiated. Its frequent repetition is unfortunate.

³⁸ Enis, 'Justices'.

³⁹ William Lench of Wick; John Fox and secondly Anthony Ashfield according to Bodl Ms Wood F.33, f.139; John Rugeley; William Gower of Redmarley; his youngest eventually married George Ferrers. The Rugeley marriage took place on 30 November 1542, WAAS, Beoley Par Reg; part of the marriage settlement is at SCLA DR 18/1/261.

Oxfordshire, Rudgeley in north Warwickshire and his cousin Anne Gower, second wife of the steward of the earl of Kent's lands in Bedfordshire, were all people with whom Ralph was in touch.

Worcestershire

It was in Worcestershire that Ralph became the social equal of his Willington relatives, following his father's example of service in administrative office. Ralph served first as MP (1563), as JP (1572-87) and once as sheriff (1576). Between 1580 and 1599 he acted as steward of a royal manor, King's Norton.⁴⁰ In 1575 his sister Anne Daston entertained the Queen at Elmley Castle.⁴¹

A pen portrait of the company Ralph kept comes from Edmund Freke, bishop of Worcester, describing the local JPs in a private memo for Cecil's eyes alone in 1587.⁴² Freke thought highly of Ralph, considering him to be very wise and a man of great sufficiency; he was actually the second richest JP. Of the other 23 men named six were his relatives (the Lyttletons father and son, Ralph's brother, two sons in law, Russell and Clare, Washbourne); two were men whose services in the law Ralph employed – Childe frequently, Salwey occasionally.

The richest and longest serving JP acting as *Custos Rotulorum* (Keeper of the Rolls) from 1574, Sir John Lyttleton, was accounted wise, his son, Gilbert 'well conditioned'. One of Sheldon's sons in law, Sir John Russell, was to be commended for forwardness in religion, but not so for his discretion, another, Francis Clare was 'an honest gentleman'. Ralph's brother William was considered to be religious, John Washbourne, also distantly related, was regarded as 'a very honest gentleman'. Arthur Salwey, amongst Sheldon's legal counsel, was thought to be 'very wise, honest and sound in religion'. William Childe, whose family had long been associated with the Sheldons, was said to be both wise and wealthy. Only Edward Pytte esq., a newcomer to the county, was deemed 'a man of no great account'. He had been a legal clerk in the Phillisars Office in London who made a good marriage amongst the London merchant class – and to whom Ralph lent money.⁴³

Despite considerable variations in income levels these men shared the duties of county administration; their backgrounds were similar; attendance at the Inns of Court in London rather than at one of the two Universities; religion; marriage usually within the county and similar tastes and aspirations for their domestic surroundings, not always newly built but comfortable. Money was freely spent on tombs.

⁴⁰ *CPR 1598-99, L&I*, vol. 328, no. 281, C 66/1499, m.39-40 for the grant.

⁴¹ Nichol, *The Progresses of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Elizabeth Goldring et al, vol ii, 349 n.629, 358; Mary Hill Cole, *Portable Queen*, pp.188, 227.

⁴² Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, London, in the 1725-28 edition, vol 3, part ii, p. 455, item no 24; the document is printed in *Worcester Recusant*, no 1 April 1963, pp. 35-38, ed. A. M. Hodgson.

⁴³ Chylde, (ed), *Kyre Park Charters*, no. 103. Pytte was employed in the Phillisars' Office in Falcon Court near St Dunstan's in the West, Fleet Street, *Charters*, nos. 116,120. Pytte repaid his loan in November 1586, CR 2632, f. 3.

The Lyttleton family, three times related to the Sheldon family, was perhaps the most influential and most important in Ralph's local life as it was in county affairs.⁴⁴ Three generations are mentioned in the account book; Sir John, his son Gilbert, a lawyer amongst several Worcestershire JPs with Catholic sympathies, and the grandson, another John, (b.1561). The family properties lay in north Worcestershire, at Frankley and Halesowen, not far from Ralph's house at Beoley.⁴⁵

Sir John of Frankley (1519-90) saw service in the government of Mary Tudor before becoming a powerful and experienced figure in Elizabethan county administration.⁴⁶ Ralph would have known him first as a colleague of his father as a Worcestershire JP and MP before Ralph served with him on the muster commission of 1569 to raise forces against the revolt of the northern earls.⁴⁷ By 1572-73 Lyttleton became sheriff for the third time. A year later they again served together, to raise forces in 1574 and to adjudicate on wrong-doing in a long running case of illegal enclosure.⁴⁸ A member of the council of the Marches in Wales, Lyttleton was a potentially useful ally when around 1583 Sheldon laid before its members a complaint of the mistreatment of his eldest daughter Elizabeth by her husband.

Sir John was familiar with this situation in his own family. His eldest daughter had been married to Francis Willoughby of Wollaton, Nottinghamshire, a great coup for the father albeit on steep terms. The consequences, however, were unhappy and the match ended in separation.⁴⁹ Marriages for his sons were more successful; Gilbert, the eldest, married into a Herefordshire family; his widow became the sister in law of Edward Greville of Milcote when Sir John's grandson John married Meriell, daughter of Thomas Bromley Lord Chancellor.⁵⁰ Sir John's younger sons married into Warwickshire families, Marrow of Berkswell and Smith of Shelford, Warwickshire. However, good connections could not save Sir John from difficulties with his eldest son, Gilbert, with whom, according to his grandson he had 'many great and grievous troubles and losses'; when Sir John died his heir neglected his responsibilities, giving his father only a mean funeral and failing to erect a tomb.⁵¹

Gilbert was only three years younger than Sheldon, MP for Worcestershire in 1570 and 1571 and a JP from at least 1576 when Sheldon was sheriff.⁵² The family's Catholic sympathies were revealed when, as sheriff himself in 1584-5, Gilbert offered illness as an excuse to delegate the task of furnishing details of recusants within his jurisdiction requested

⁴⁴ William Willington's second wife was born Anne Littleton, of the Staffordshire branch of the family at Pillaton Hall Middlemore, *Vis'n Warwickshire 1569*, p.96; not borne out by the Staffordshire Visitation of the same year; according to a genealogy drawn up by Henry Ferrers, British Library Lansdowne 860A, f.400v, cousin Richard Sheldon of Spetchley (d 1557) had married Catherine Littleton daughter of Thomas Littleton (d.1524); a fourth version records that John Alderford's first marriage had been to a daughter of Sir John Lyttleton's fourth son Anthony, Nash, *Worcestershire*, p. 472.

⁴⁵ Tonks, 'The estates of the Lyttletons of Frankley 1540-1640'.

⁴⁶ Bindoff, *House of Commons*.

⁴⁷ TNA SP 12/ 63, last folio, un-numbered; *CSPD 1547-80*, p.358.

⁴⁸ TNA SP 12/98, f. 1 and see Chapter 9.

⁴⁹ Cruz, (ed), *An Account of an Elizabethan Family...*, pp. 2, 86-7.

⁵⁰ *Vis Warwickshire 1619*, p. 29.

⁵¹ Tonks, 'Lyttletons', p. 47, 59.

⁵² Hasler, *House of Commons*.

by the privy council.⁵³ Though Sheldon paid only one visit to Gilbert, living in rented property at Bell End in Belbroughton,⁵⁴ they seem to have met elsewhere more often and more formally in connection with Ralph's own affairs. He was amongst Ralph's lawyers retained to defend the case against Rector Hyll in Tredington. Present, as a JP, at the Assizes which convicted Sheldon as a recusant in September 1587, he was apparently happy to play cards with Ralph immediately afterwards, a fact which would not have passed unobserved.⁵⁵

By then Gilbert was already closely involved in Sheldon family affairs, chosen as one of two trustees when, late in December 1578, after only four years' marriage, Sir John Russell of Strensham decided to exclude his wife, Sheldon's eldest daughter, and their children from any share in his estates.⁵⁶ In 1587, Russell reversed his decision with regard to his children but continued to ignore his wife.⁵⁷ It was clearly to Sheldon's advantage to stay in contact with Russell's former intimate; Gilbert might know something of Russell's intentions and be able to exert some influence.

The Lyttleton relationship was fostered by a series of small services offered, the same means Ralph had observed his father practise so often, a means to create an obligation which might later be turned to advantage, to cement cordial relations and to express gratitude for help offered. Boots with silver buttons were purchased in London for Sir John for 32s.; later a hogshead of wine was sent up to him, the cost subsequently repaid.⁵⁸ Small loans were made to both Gilbert and John Junior in addition to the much larger sum of £400 paid for Gilbert in London early in December 1587 and speedily reimbursed.⁵⁹ Ralph trusted Gilbert's son in law Thomas Bromley, to pay over a sum to Gilbert, while Edward Sheldon was given £40 to pass to Mr Lyttleton, probably John Jnr, his contemporary and budding friend – and MP for the county in 1584 and 1586.⁶⁰ Ralph's route to Wollaton where he had business in 1588 went via Frankley and may even have been undertaken partly to help Sir John, taking letters or presents to Lyttleton's daughter there; his household staff sold provender for the horses in Ralph's entourage.⁶¹ Presumably acceptance of Ralph's assistance implied that, in his turn, Ralph might hope if not for their overt support in the county, then at least for no open antagonism.

After Sir John's death Gilbert, free from parental control, spent recklessly, almost exhausting the family's assets; there is no sign of continuing contact during the disturbances

⁵³ *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 279, no. 51; TNA SP 12/183, f.57, October 24, 1585.

⁵⁴ Tonks, 'Lyttletons', p. 47-8.

⁵⁵ CR 2632, f. 67, May 1587; CR 2632, f.97, September 1587.

⁵⁶ The other trustee was Francis Russell, 2nd earl of Bedford in whose household he had been brought up, recited in C 142/241/126, printed in *Abstracts of Inquisitiones Post Mortem for the City of London: Part 3*.pp 210-219, now on-line British History.

⁵⁷ TNA PROB 11/92/96, written 24 April 1587; the older will was recited and the new provisions confirmed in the inquisition on his Worcestershire lands, C 142/239/124.

⁵⁸ CR 2632, f. 26, 174, 111.

⁵⁹ CR 2632, f.144, Paid £400 to Mr Thos Bromley for Mr Gilbert Lyttleton; f.144; repaid 13/12/1587 repaid, f. 107.

⁶⁰ CR 2632, f. 69, 26/5 1587 for John jnr; £20 was delivered to Mr Gilbert in mid-July 1587, f. 84. Hasler, *House of Commons*.

⁶¹ CR 2632, f. 165.

Gilbert's conduct provoked through the 1590s.⁶² Despite all Ralph's courtesies to the father and grandfather and even his willingness to ease John junior's own financial difficulties the connection faded and the friendship did not survive into the next generation. The Sheldons 'enjoyed' the boisterous assistance of John junior's strong men in the disputes at Steeple Barton in 1589-91,⁶³ but he later became involved with the unrest engineered in London early in 1601 by the earl of Essex. Though condemned as a traitor John escaped penalties, dying soon afterwards. His widow, however, mustered her tenants against the Catholic party supported by Ralph during the Worcestershire election of 1604.⁶⁴ The inter-generational friendship frayed still further when either their son, Humphrey, or John's brother Humphrey indirectly became mixed up in the Gunpowder Plot and, in fear of his life, alleged that Sheldon housed the priest Butler, possibly an alias of the Catholic Father Garnet.⁶⁵

The Great and the Good: Contacts

Friendship with the Lyttletons was only one of several kinship links from which Ralph benefited. Others opened the way to higher connections. At the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 William Sheldon, and by association Ralph, could, through Willington relatives, claim kinship with Sir Ambrose Cave, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and only slightly later through him with Sir Francis Knollys, Comptroller of the Queen's household; Ralph's cousin Margaret married to Knollys eldest son and his younger son, Sir William, would later interfere in Ralph's life. Through his second wife William Sheldon could – just – claim acquaintance with the Dudley brothers, the earls of Leicester and Warwick; his own links included Sir William Cecil and Sir Walter Mildmay, with both of whom he had shared years in the Parr household. All of them more than counter-balanced the loss of a previous ally from his own family, Nicholas Heath, former Archbishop of York and Lord Chancellor under Queen Mary, who slipped into quiet retirement in Surrey.

It is then no great surprise that Ralph was likely to be known by name to members of the privy council. Furthermore, as a JP, he was obliged to respond to their orders to resolve local disputes. In this capacity he was instructed in 1572 to disentangle a small knot in the complex, long running case concerning the mis-sale of lands at Aston-sub-Edge, Gloucestershire, to a friend of William Cecil, Roger Alforde, one of cousin Ludovic Greville's several misdoings.⁶⁶ Two years later, again at the request of the privy council, Ralph played a small part in what became major clashes between the Warwickshire JPs and the Queen's Justice Sir James Dyer. The first came over the eviction of a widow from her property when Ralph was appointed to the investigating commission;⁶⁷ in the second he was on the side-lines as a member with others of his family of a team attempting to pacify the

⁶² Tonks, 'Lyttletons', pp. 68-74

⁶³ TNA STAC 5/D35/27.

⁶⁴ Thrush and Ferris, *House of Commons 1604-1629*, vol.2, pp. 455-58.

⁶⁵ HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 18, pp. 34-36.

⁶⁶ Pleadings occupy two volumes of State Papers SP 12/78, 79; aspects were debated in the Commons, Hartley, (ed) *Proceedings in Parliament*, vol. 1, pp. 262,219-93. Ralph's sister Anne had a life rent in the Aston property from her husband, TNA PROB 11/40/349.

⁶⁷ TNA REQ 2/131/17, some 35 sheets in all; Dyer, *Lost Notebooks*, vol.118, pp. 312-318, at p. 317.

tenants of Sir John Conwey and Henry Neville Lord Abergavenny deprived of lands by Conwey's illegal enclosures.⁶⁸

The fact that he would at least be known to at least some its members by reputation may also have made it possible for him to pay some of the visits recorded in the account book; he would not have been calling as a complete stranger. But to what extent these may have been purely social occasions, by invitation, by summons or as a petitioner is never clear. Some of these men had been known to him for some time. Lord 'Abougavenie', for example, identifies as Lord Abergavenny, Henry Neville, the wronged party in the Inkberrow enclosure dispute which so annoyed Sir James Dyer in 1574, but there is no clear indication of a particular friendship or of any particular service rendered. Ralph used payment of a debt owed by Thomas Savage as an excuse to call on him in London and when Ralph dined on two occasions at the Savoy his host may have been Abergavenny.⁶⁹ Contact with the family endured into the seventeenth century when Barcheston manor house was the security for a loan from the then Lady Abergavenny.⁷⁰

Soon after his conviction as a recusant in 1587, Ralph had supper with **Sir Walter Mildmay**, probably in his house in Smithfield.⁷¹ It might have been no more than a courtesy call in the interests of maintaining relations with an influential older man once acquainted with his father when both had served in Queen Katherine Parr's household. Both sat in the parliament of 1547 so that Mildmay, appointed Lord Chancellor in February 1559, had been amongst William Sheldon's contacts in Queen Elizabeth's early years. An equally probable reason however may lie in the problems of land ownership in Brailes, an area with which Mildmay had long been familiar; there had been correspondence about affairs in Brailes in the 1550s and both men were now involved there again.⁷² Financial transactions were soon to exist between Ralph and a Mildmay son in law, Fitzwilliam of Dogsthorpe, Northamptonshire, perhaps eased by the long family connection.⁷³

Similarly high-level acquaintance, perhaps verging on real friendship, existed between Sheldon and **Sir Christopher Hatton**, a man of roughly his own age. Now high in the Queen's favour Lord Chancellor since April 1587, Hatton seems to be Ralph's own contact; there may have been a distant claim of kinship through Sheldon's brother in law Goodwyn and it seems probable that Ralph supported him against the influence of the earl of Leicester in Warwickshire. It was later reported that around 1590 Hatton had arranged to quash Ralph's conviction as a recusant.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ TNA STAC 7/11/15; C 3/132/6, undated but before 1574; *APC 8 1571-75*, pp. 194, 240, 243-4, 245.

⁶⁹ CR 2632, ff. 11, 12, 18, 195.

⁷⁰ Release of interest, etc., in the Manor of Barcheston by Lady Abergavenny to William Brent, BAH MS 3061/1/381, (former 167781), 1684.

⁷¹ CR 2632, f. 139.

⁷² Tennant, 'Brailes Grammar School', p. 23; *CPR 1583-84*, L&I, vol. 287, no. 398, 13 Dec 1583; C 66/1234/mm 19-20; more recently, awards of lands 1587 by advice of Cecil & Mildmay *CPR 1587-88*, L&I, vol 297, no. 513, 13-12-1587; *CPR 1587-88*, L&I, vol 300, no. 155(33).

⁷³ CR 2632, f.109.

⁷⁴ *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 545, no. 92; TNA SP 12/249 f.152-154v. See also Chapters Four and Thirteen.

Their first recorded connection came over the conclusion of legal business with Sheldon's cousin, William of Abberton, in November 1586.⁷⁵ Just after his summons to appear before the privy council for unknown reasons in summer 1587 Ralph tipped the Lord Chancellor's proctor 5s.⁷⁶ A more intimate note, suggesting a friendly relationship with the household, creeps in when Ralph bought a nag from 'the Lord Chancellor's man' and in the 20 shillings Ralph took with him when, only six weeks after his conviction as a recusant, he went 'to my Lord Chancellor's for supper'; it was the average sum Ralph carried when intent on playing cards.⁷⁷ For unknown reasons he tipped the Lord Chancellor's porter 7d in May 1588, possibly, though very tenuously linked to the submission of a bill of complaint to Hatton as Lord Chancellor the previous month.⁷⁸

An ally whose help may perhaps be inferred though it is nowhere documented is **William Cecil**, Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State since 1558, ennobled as Lord Burghley in 1572. He had certainly known Ralph's father when they both served in the Seymour household around 1548. The connection would have been strengthened when in 1561 Cecil's sister Margaret married Roger Cave, nephew of Ambrose married to Ralph's aunt, creating what, in Elizabethan terms, was a kinship link with its attendant obligations.⁷⁹ Close contact is nowhere obvious and probable only in the last decade of Cecil's life when Sheldon's help may have been invoked to secure the election of pro-Cecil candidates at Droitwich in 1589 and 1594; one might wonder whether Ralph had been a willing tool in the machinations of 1594, rewarded later by the grant of land at Whichford belonging to the earldom of Derby to whose present titleholder Cecil's grand-daughter was married. Friendship became overt, and surprisingly firm, only with Cecil's son, Sir Robert.

Other channels too led to the Cecil family. The Walter family, employed by William Sheldon's second wife, Margaret, were, like Cecil's eldest son Thomas, resident at Wimbledon.⁸⁰ William Walter senior, former steward of Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote, Warwickshire JP and sheriff, had been a trustee on Margaret's second marriage and remained in her service as her legal advisor; he was named as her executor. His eldest son took over his father's duties sometime in 1587. His younger son Robert, well thought of at Court and an unofficial Cecil adjutant, became a friend to Ralph through whose influence he may have gained a seat in parliament and to whom he bequeathed maps and music; in return Ralph erected a tomb to him at Steeple Barton.

Margaret, widow of William Whorwood,⁸¹ had not always enjoyed a secure position. Still with potentially valuable contacts her marriage to William Sheldon in November 1555 was something of a gamble, one in a series of protective alliances arranged in Warwickshire

⁷⁵ CR 2632, f.28, 31, 27.

⁷⁶ CR 2632, f.81, 3 July 1587.

⁷⁷ CR 2632, f. 79, 29 June 1587; CR 2632, f. 127, 6 November 1587.

⁷⁸ CR 2632, f. 172, 2 May 1588; TNA C 2/Eliz/R11/60, 1588.

⁷⁹ Alford, *Burghley, William Cecil at the Court of Elizabeth*, p. 117; TNA SP 12/20, fo. 61r-v, f. 69v, 14 and 26 Nov 1561.

⁸⁰ Katherine Walter, TNA PROB 11/72/84.

⁸¹ William Whorwood, Attorney-General of King Henry VIII, Bindoff, *House of Commons*.

after Queen Mary's accession and the shift in the county's balance of power.⁸² The influence of the already important Catholic Throckmorton family replaced that of the now disgraced John Dudley, duke of Northumberland, once Lord Protector of Edward VI. Sir Robert Throckmorton, already Steward of the bishopric of Worcester, became Constable of Warwick Castle. Margaret, past her child-bearing years and thus avoiding complications with a second family brought William, acting Lord Lieutenant of Worcestershire and a widower for two years, into the orbit of the sons of the disgraced Duke, whose fourth son Margaret's step-daughter, dead in childbirth in 1552, had married. But when, rather than if, the wheel turned, the Dudley brothers could once again be in power and there might be considerable advantages. Two months after Margaret's re-marriage her daughter by Whorwood married Sir Robert's son Thomas.⁸³

The Throckmorton Connections

Two years later Sheldon's heir Ralph married Sir Robert's daughter Anne, tapping into a range of contacts far higher than any William Sheldon might reasonably have hoped for.⁸⁴ Anne's mother had been Muriel Berkeley, daughter of Thomas, fifth Baron Berkeley; her step-mother was Elizabeth Hussey, one of the four daughters of Sir John Hussey and his second wife, daughter of the 2nd earl of Kent.⁸⁵ Elizabeth's sister Bridget married as her third husband Francis, 2nd earl of Bedford, giving Mistress Sheldon a kinship claim, albeit distant, with that family. Bridget's first marriage had been to the Henrician diplomat, Richard Morrison, owner of part of the Whitefriars in 1555, where Bridget still lived in the late 1590s, in correspondence with Robert Cecil, Burghley's second son, and on visiting terms with his wife.⁸⁶ The sisters' parentage also implies a kinship relationship with the very Protestant Henry Grey, fourth earl of Kent, unlikely to sympathize with either family. There is no evidence he made any move against them, but he might at any moment provide the State with a handle against them. Ralph's 'visit' in September 1587 immediately after he had been declared a recusant suggests a State reprimand, privately delivered. Equally, however, he might act as a means of protection for a known Catholic leaning family.

⁸² TNA WARD 7/13/135; Enis, 'Two Warwickshire Women', p.12 sees these weddings as linking the wealthiest Warwickshire family with the most influential. In 1553 Sir Robert Throckmorton's younger brother had married William Sheldon's sister in law, the widowed Catharine Catesby youngest daughter of William Willington, *Vis'n Warwickshire 1619*, p. 89.

⁸³ *CSPD 1547-80*, p. 41. The girl, another Margaret, had first been Dudley's ward, and, after his execution, of Sir Henry Sydney, later governor of Ireland. An unsubstantiated but plausible suggestion in Bindoff *House of Commons* sv Whorwood suggests the wardship passed to Sir Robert Throckmorton before the marriage, WaCRO CR 1998/box72, no.8, dated 30 Nov 1555.

⁸⁴ The marriage was performed in St Andrew's Holborn on 23 May 1557, TNA WARD 7/13/135.

⁸⁵ *ODNB*, Hussey; *Vis'n Warwickshire 1619*, pp. 87; Bernard, 'The Fortunes of the Greys, earls of Kent...' pp.671-686, esp. p. 672, 682.

⁸⁶ HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 7, p. 470, 5 Nov.1597; vol. 8, p. 27, Jan. 29 1597-8; vol. 9, p. 76, Feb. 21 1598-9; Her son, Charles Morison, married the step-daughter of a Cecil agent, Roger Alford, also lived there until his death in 1589, Hasler *House of Commons*; Overell, 'An English Friendship...', pp. 478-493; for her first marriage Sowerby, *Renaissance and Reform in Tudor England: the careers of Sir Richard Morison c.1513-1556*, pp. 146-164. Her second marriage had been to Henry Manners, earl of Rutland.



The only remaining part of Sudeley Castle, Gloucestershire, to survive the Civil War and familiar to Ralph. © Hilary L. Turner

Mistress Sheldon was related also to a third member of the House of Lords, Giles Brydges, Lord Chandos of Sudeley.⁸⁷ Despite having been a rather wild young man,⁸⁸ Giles was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Gloucestershire and entertained the Queen twice, in 1575 and 1592. His house and his influence both lay outside Ralph's own territory so the frequent forays over the Cotswolds to enjoy his hospitality, later commemorated in the depiction of his large house on two of the surviving tapestry maps, Warwickshire and Worcestershire, might suggest warm feelings, real compatibility and coincidence of interests combined with the courting of patronage.⁸⁹ It was almost certainly on a recommendation from Giles that Sheldon chose to be painted by the Flemish émigré artist Hieronimos Custodis.⁹⁰ Giles died in 1594, but his wife, Frances, daughter of Edward Clinton, earl of Lincoln, remained a friend, entering into a recognizance of £2000 to Edward and William Sheldon as

late as 1616.⁹¹ Financial dealings worked both ways; in July 1587 Sheldon had lent Lord Chandos £200.⁹²

Not all Mrs Sheldon's contacts were advantageous however. She also brought links to adherents of the Catholic faith, some of them potentially serious threats to her husband. A cousin, Francis, was executed for his alleged part in conspiracy against the Queen in 1583; two members of the Arden family, into which Anne's sister Mary was married, also died.⁹³ Anne's brother Thomas remained a staunch Catholic, well known to the government, paying fines he could not afford, and held in protective custody for long periods though never involved in plots. No trace of contact with the similarly treated, equally loyal and very vocal Catholic Sir Thomas Tresham, married to Mrs Sheldon's half-sister Meriel, remains.

⁸⁷ Her uncle George Throckmorton (c.1523-73) married Frances, daughter of Sir John Brydges (d.1557), Giles' grandfather; *Vis'n Warwickshire 1619*, p.89; Bindoff, *House of Commons* for Sir George and Edmund Brydges.

⁸⁸ *CSPD 1547-1580*, p. 545, no. 51, TNA SP 12/112 f.182.

⁸⁹ It was almost certainly shown also on the destroyed Gloucestershire tapestry, Turner, 'In Stately View'.

⁹⁰ Strong, 'Elizabethan Painting: An approach through Inscriptions - II: Hieronimo Custodis', pp.103-108.

⁹¹ TNA LC 4/198 f. 319v, 27 June 1616 for £2000, seemingly repaid next year, possibly connected to Edward's acquisition of land in Eisey, Wiltshire, see Chapter Five.

⁹² CR 2632, f. 80.

⁹³ Enis, 'Edward Arden'.

The fifth, more modest but very much present Throckmorton link came through the marriage of Mistress Sheldon's sister Elizabeth to John Goodwyn of Nether Winchendon, Buckinghamshire. Knighted in 1570, Sir John was the third generation of a family which had risen, not unlike the Sheldons, through trade to social acceptability and had their own links to the second earl of Bedford.⁹⁴ His four daughters made respectable marriages; Ralph may have acted as the intermediary in arranging the marriage of Goodwyn's third daughter, Meriel, to Philip Babington of Kiddington, Oxfordshire.⁹⁵

Family Friend: John Alderford

Real friendship and affection beyond that of family ties must account for the frequent contact between John Alderford of Abbot's Salford, and Sheldon, sometimes perhaps mixed with business. The relationship also demonstrates the complexity and interplay of familial links in the interconnections between Alderford, Willington, Lyttleton and Sheldon.

The connections stretched many years into the past.⁹⁶ John's father had married a daughter of John Sheldon, brother of granddad Ralph Sheldon. John's first wife had been a daughter of the Lyttletons of Frankley.⁹⁷ His second wife was Elizabeth, daughter of Peter Dormer of Shipton Lee, Buckinghamshire, youngest brother of Michael Dormer mayor of London in 1541 known to William Willington and already an old family connection.⁹⁸ The link to the Sheldon family continued in the next generation when Ralph acted as a trustee for Elizabeth's inheritance from her mother;⁹⁹ it was strengthened when he engaged alongside Thomas Sackville Lord Buckhurst, in a long drawn-out legal case on behalf of her nephews, Robert and John Dormer;¹⁰⁰ in turn they were associated with Ralph in his dealings with Thomas Horde. It was Buckhurst, later a member of the privy council and then Lord Treasurer, who in April 1600 pronounced in Ralph's favour against the claims of Brailes tenants united against him.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Shaw, *Knights*, II, 74.

⁹⁵ *Vis 'n Oxfordshire 1569*, pp.147-48; TNA C 2/Eliz/B15/21.

⁹⁶ Nash, *Collections*, I, 492; Salford Priors, *VCH Warwickshire*, 3, pp. 155-165; note 44 above. A genealogy traced by Henry Ferrers (BL Ms Lansdowne 860A, f.401) recorded that John Alderford of Knightwick, Herefordshire, married Lettys, daughter of John Sheldon of Pershore, the brother of granddad Ralph c. 1530. Their son, also John, married Frauncis, daughter of cousin Richard Sheldon of Spetchley; their son, another John, was the man Ralph visited. His first wife was Catherine Lyttleton, a daughter of the manor's former owner, Anthony Lyttleton (n. 44) fourth son of John Lyttleton of Frankley, through whom ownership passed to John Alderford. The record in *Vis 'n Warwickshire 1619*, pp. 58-59 is essentially the same.

⁹⁷ Cousins living at Pillaton Hall, the family of William Willington's first wife.

⁹⁸ *Vis 'n Buckinghamshire 1634*, p.41. Willington had rebuffed Michael's suggestion of a suitable second wife, WaCRO, CR 580/17/5, testimony of Roger Morris of Shipston.

⁹⁹ *CPR 1580-81*, no. 539.

¹⁰⁰ TNA C 146/9447, C 146/9450, C 146/9453, C 146/9406 and C 78/58/3 available on AALT.

¹⁰¹ BAH MS 3061/1/552, (former 167952), sixth sheet

Such close family ties made Alderford a man who could be trusted with family matters. He held an annuity of £66 13 4d payable out of Barcheston lands from 1564, released in August 1580.¹⁰² In the same year he acted as a trustee for land exchanges at Broadway between family members.¹⁰³ Alderford appears frequently in the two years of the accounts;¹⁰⁴ he was particularly active in the Exchequer Court where a case about Salford



The memorial to John Alderford and his wife, Salford Prior's church, © Hilary L. Turner

Woods and Salford Waters was in progress, but whether as Ralph's legal representative or as a witness with local information is not clear.¹⁰⁵ He was heavily involved on other occasions too, almost certainly 'the last trustee now dead' mentioned in a list of Ralph's financial liabilities made before his grandson's marriage to Elizabeth Petre in 1610/11. John's death in 1607 meant that 'everything' could be cancelled and the Petres need not fear unexpected liabilities.¹⁰⁶ Before his death, however, he arranged that his wife should hold the lands used as security for some of the transactions with Thomas Horde; she signed them over to Ralph on 21 April 1612.¹⁰⁷ Grant of the profits from her recusancy to a third party in 1607 suggests Catholic sympathies, at least on her side.¹⁰⁸ She outlived Ralph by only a few weeks and was buried in the south aisle at Beoley, commemorated later by a mural monument.¹⁰⁹

The two men, much of an age, shared similar experiences as landowners. Like Ralph at Brailes, Alderford had a dispute with his tenants over the enclosure of common land, and met armed resistance.¹¹⁰ He also pursued a tithe dispute against the vicar of Salford.¹¹¹ They met mostly in Warwickshire, though on one occasion Ralph paid a visit to Alderford's London house.¹¹² Shared doctrinal beliefs, shared family links and shared interests had all reinforced the friendship, further strengthened by the accident of geography. The Alderford house at Abbot's Salford on the western borders of Warwickshire, was conveniently located

¹⁰² WaCRO CR 580/14/22, 2 August 1580. Her mother's jointure may have passed to Ralph and Edward Sheldon and two others in April 1581, *CPR 1580-82*, no.539.

¹⁰³ SCLA, ER 3/2754, 25 October 1580.

¹⁰⁴ CR 2632, ff. 4, 10, 19, 27, 31, 37, 57, 60, 65, 70, 76, 79, 81, 82, 93, 105, 112, 113, 114, 133, 139, 158, 159, 164, 165, 179, 217, 220.

¹⁰⁵ In the Exchequer, CR 2632, ff. 65, 76; testifying against Hyll, f.81; associated with the lawyer Pagitt, f.76 June 1587.

¹⁰⁶ Essex RO Petre D/DP/E 165, c. 1611.

¹⁰⁷ TNA PROB 11/109/55; BAH MS 3061/1/758 (former168159) 21 April 1612. Her will was proved 16 April, PROB 11/121/337.

¹⁰⁸ Add Ms 34765, f. 4v 25 Feb 1606/07 to Mr Richard Lawe together with that of Thomas Brudenell of Dean, Northants, another family with whom Ralph had dealings.

¹⁰⁹ *VCH Worcestershire*, 4, pp. 12-19.

¹¹⁰ TNA STAC 5/A3/37, 1597.

¹¹¹ WAAS, Consistory Court Deposition Book III, ff. 280-81, 288-286v, 302-302v, 311v-312v.

¹¹² CR 2632, f. 27.

midway on Sheldon's route between Weston and Beoley, not far from the ferry across the river Avon at Priors Cleeve.¹¹³ Begun around 1605, the present house is now a hotel.

Conclusions

Just as he moved easily between the country and London, Ralph appears to move easily between differing social ranks and fit into differing roles as patron, client and benefactor. Restless energy and extreme fitness enabled him to maintain and renew relationships which extended far beyond the local and seem to exceed in range and number those of most of his immediate social equals.

Ralph's acquaintance with such a wide range of men contributes to an appreciation of Sir John Harington's remark that 'some considered Sheldon [one of] the wisest sufficientest men, fit to be a councillor'; they support the tribute of the Worcestershire historian Thomas Habington which eventually worked its way into the epitaph composed for Ralph's tomb. Writing only a few years after Ralph's death Habington remarked that 'Ralph deserved for his singular parts of mind which flowed from his tongue and pen a pre-eminent dignity'.¹¹⁴ Those judicious opinions explain why his services on local commissions had been requested by privy councillors in complex, thorny long-running disputes where Ralph was acquainted with the disputants and familiar with the local circumstances (Holcombe-Catesby; Conwey). Sir Thomas Cornwallis depended on that same fair-mindedness to help his daughter's separation from her trying husband and by Ralph's niece to resolve her step-son's claims after his father Rotherham's death.

Though Ralph's family acted as the starting point for advantageous connections, some of which took him to men at the heart of government, some of those links imposed responsibilities and obligations which might leave little room for manoeuvre. Not all relationships worked fairly; Ralph offered more help to his Willington relatives than he received. But immediately after he ceased paying recusancy fines in 1590 Ralph was supported by Fulke Greville and Thomas Markham who separately, both invited him to participate in the adjudication of long-running local disputes, (Hubaud/Stratford; Stokes). On the other hand Ralph probably had little choice but to back and work for the election as MPs of government candidates at Droitwich in 1589 and 1593 when relatives were the favoured government candidates – Thomas Combes and Robert Walter. Complex family inter-marriages in the Alderford and Throckmorton families laid obligations on Ralph which had little to do with, and even ran counter to, his own interests.

The surviving letters suggest calm competence, though some of the reports of impulsive, even violent, behaviour detract from that impression. But if Ralph was on occasion choleric the few clues to Ralph's reading material (*Mirror for Mathematiques* and the volumes of Luis de Granada), references to unidentified book purchases in St Paul's

¹¹³ WaCRO CR 2632, ff. 93, 158, 159, 165.

¹¹⁴ Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, vol. 1, p. 70.

churchyard, clear evidence of musical ability and the copying of Lassos' madrigals all suggest a man of taste who would make an agreeable supper companion. It is not too difficult to imagine that he must have been a man with courteous manners, confident in a strong sense of his own worth, giving respect where it was due though lacking respect for those he regarded as his inferiors. Where it was appropriate one might expect judicious gift-giving, though evidence is conspicuously absent in the account book and known only in the case of Sir Robert Cecil. <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Cecil.pdf> Not surprisingly, complaints against Sheldon came mostly from local men concerned to advance their own cause in situations in which they were not themselves blameless, enviously disparaging him as 'well-friended' and powerful.

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