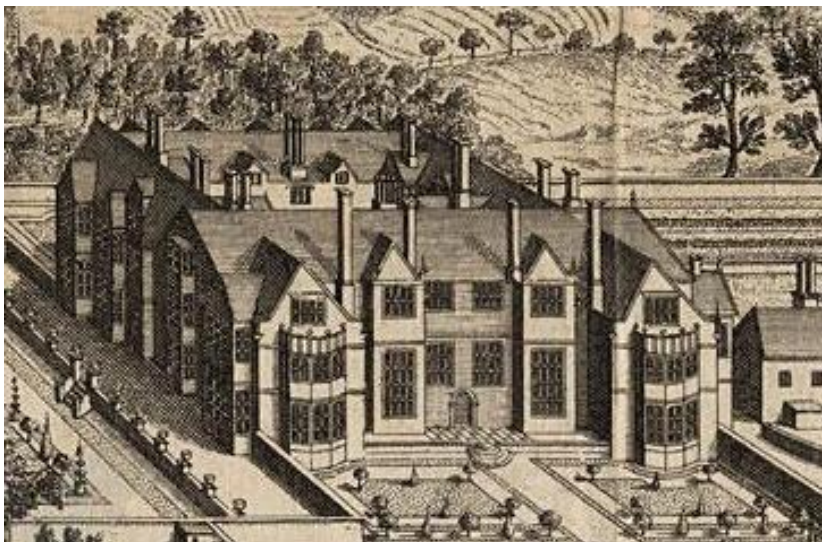


Chapter Twelve : Weston House and its household

The monumental house Ralph erected at Weston in Long Compton sat oddly with a Warwickshire location. Three days ride from London, the county did not attract moneyed settlers associated with City trading or with government. Queen Elizabeth's four visits failed to stimulate architectural projects and the county lacked the rash of new houses which ringed the capital.¹ Only sixteen properties were built between 1560 and 1600, two of them by the Sheldon family (Skilts and Weston); none, the earl of Leicester's Kenilworth excepted, rivalled the grandeur or expressed the sophistication of a Longleat, Theobalds or Holdenby; nevertheless each was an individual's claim to status, emphasizing the wealth and educated taste of its builder and his local prestige. For the Sheldon family their move there marked the southward expansion of their estates from the original core into Oxfordshire.

Described in the 1670s as Weston 'Pallace', the 'white house on a hill' had been the fourth largest Elizabethan house in the county, commended by Sir John Harington of Kelston, one of the Queen's godsons, for its size and magnificence, but condemned for lack of the flushing lavatories of his own design.² Henry Beighton's drawing of 1716 shows a 3-storey square-plan stone building arranged round an internal courtyard approached through parkland and beneath the archway of a decorative freestanding gatehouse.³ 52 rooms were described in the auction catalogue of its contents in 1781;⁴ 38 were counted in the Hearth Tax of 1676 as having fireplaces. Its internal layout can be reconstructed from the memories of earlier visitors, the auction catalogue of 1781 when the contents were sold and from a handful of drawings. Demolished in 1827 the house had seen only minor alterations since its erection so that combining this information provides a reasonably accurate idea of the interior layout.



Weston House, enlarged from Henry Beighton's drawing *The Prospect of Weston*, 1716,
© Hilary L Turner

Beighton viewed the house, sited on a hill top as Elizabethan fashion demanded, from the south-east, showing the south range and the east facing entrance façade, its central doorway flanked by two projecting bays. Visiting in 1768 Horace Walpole estimated its total length to be 160 feet; it seems likely that the central section would have been 80 feet

¹ Tyacke, *Warwickshire Houses*, 1974.

² Arkell and Alcock, *The Warwickshire Hearth Tax*, p. 200; Donno, *Harington's Metamorphosis of Ajax*, p. 239.

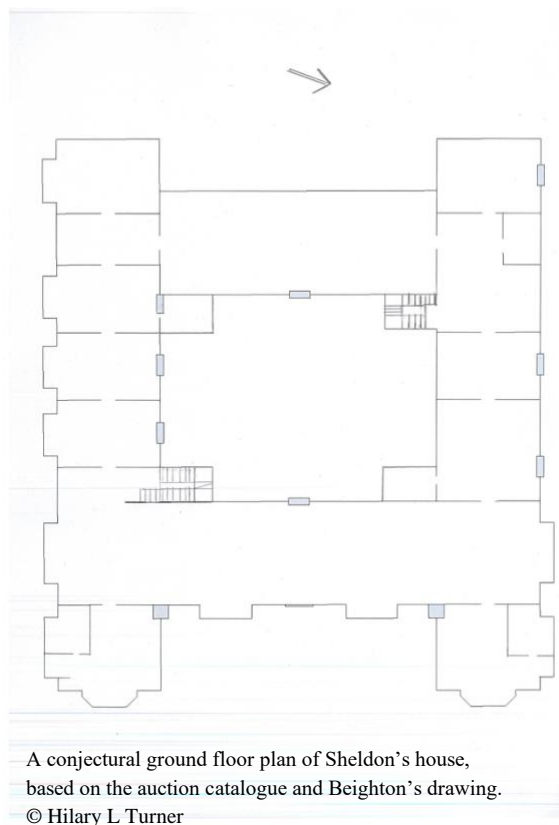
³ Dugdale, *Antiquities*, 1730, p.584n

⁴ Christie and Ansell, *Sale Catalogue August 28-September 11 1781*, henceforth Sale Cat 1781.

and the projecting bays each 40 feet wide.⁵ Unusually for the time, the entrance seems to have opened straight into the Hall, lit by full length windows on the east and by tall windows at either end, suggesting an undivided space similar in appearance to the Proscholium in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

In 1684 Anthony Wood said he had decorated the Hall, the Dining Room, the great stairs and the Great Chamber with banners and hatchments appropriate to dignify the funeral of his patron Ralph the Great; it is safe to assume that the rooms he named equate to the fashionable Elizabethan layout.⁶

Moving out of the Hall into the south side, the chimney stacks regularly spaced on the courtyard's inner wall indicate a succession of rooms with central doorways, lit by wide, tall windows apparently only on one side; they led to a large room known in the eighteenth century either as the Dining Room, the Great Parlour or the Great Drawing Room. Above this was Anthony Wood's 'Great Chamber', the later Library. It too was reached through a succession of south-facing rooms accessed by a staircase within a turret facing into the courtyard in its SE corner. The stair continued upwards to the Long Gallery running the whole length of the east front above the entrance. It was possible to walk round every floor to which a service stair, also constructed within an inward-facing turret located in the NW corner, gave access; both ground and middle floors had a room looking into the court in a matching turret in its south-west corner. The ground floor of the north corridor was occupied by the service rooms above cellars; the rooms above were always of lesser importance and less well heated, the spaces unevenly divided by chimney stacks on the outer, not the courtyard face, just possibly a clue to incorporation of an older building. In 1781 there are hints that a chapel existed between bedrooms on the south side; testimony in September 1587 suggests it was probably part of the original layout.⁷



Whether Ralph's building was the first on the site and entirely new or whether there had been an earlier structure is not clear. William Dugdale (1605-86), acquainted with the family, said that William 'liking well the situation...built a very fair house here.' Anthony

⁵ Toynbee, *Journals of Visits to Country Seats*, pp. 9-80, esp p.62, no. 33.

⁶ Clarke, *Life & Times*, vol 3, pp. 97-98.

⁷ *CSPD 1581-90*, p.449, no. 83; SP 12/206/, f.175.

Wood (1632-95) was very clear that it had been built in 1588 by his son Ralph.⁸ Securely dated documents and artefacts confirm Wood's information – though not his very specific date.⁹ However, the statements are not incompatible; Ralph's work might be only the enlargement of an older L- or even an E-plan house, expanded by the addition of a long frontage taking as much advantage as possible of a flattened hill top. There is no clue as to whether a 'plat' was drawn up or whether a master builder-cum-architect was employed. It is not clear whether Mistress Sheldon and the four daughters still unmarried lived in the house throughout the building period, but it sounds very much as though they had. It was, after all, Mistress Sheldon who paid for the celebration of the new foundations.¹⁰ The peripatetic Ralph certainly did not; two entries in 1587 refer to 'money left to pay workmen when I am in London'.¹¹

Construction

The accounts suggest that much of the structural work was complete and the shell was ready for the roofers by Michaelmas 1588. <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Weston-Building-Accounts.pdf> Entries are largely for payment of labour with few to purchase of materials. Though lead, timber and lathes were brought from Banbury haulage, frequently noted elsewhere in the accounts for the carriage of goods from London, barely figures, whether because this was accounted for separately or because materials had already been purchased and stored. The work was supervised by the omni-present but unidentified Raffe Richmond; his total earnings of at least £117.13.8 over the two known years was the second highest expenditure. In the twelve months 1586-1587 £300+ was spent on 'workemen', more than double what was spent the following year (£121+) when payments were made to three separate freemasons, Lytell (£46), Ansell (£8) and Offley (£1.13.0), all from Burford and to a free mason from Chipping Norton (£1), for specific, possibly internal, jobs. One obvious task would have been the fashioning of some of the highly decorated fireplaces. In 1781 'five marble slabs and sundry chimney pieces' were stacked in the passage between the Hall and the Great Stair (Cat. Day 3, p. 19). Some carried the Sheldon coat of arms; in a letter of March 1676 discussing the tricking of his arms Ralph the Great observed that 'all our chimney peeces at Weston have clusters of grapes'.¹² Sections of one, quartering the Sheldon arms with those of Markham, seem to have been incorporated into the later house and survive now in private ownership.¹³ Part of another, showing the arms of Ralph Sheldon and his wife Anne Throckmorton, which might also have been above a fireplace, now form the back wall of a drinking trough in Little Wolford; unfortunately the stones have been placed upside down.

⁸ Bodl., Ms Rawlinson D 807, f.15. A fuller discussion is given in [Warwickshire History, Volume XIX](#)

⁹ CR 2632, passim.

¹⁰ CR 2632, f. 50.

¹¹ CR 2632, 6 May, £53, f. 58; 22 October, £10, f. 122.

¹² Bodl Ms Wood.F.4, no. 52.

¹³ Eden, 'A Sheldon Mantel-piece', pp. 78-79.

The few payments for materials all occur in 1588; £2.12s was paid in July 1588 for ‘slatts’, 20d for the carriage of glass, £7 6s 8d for a ton of lead, £5 6s 4d to Mr Hall the plomer and £8 13s 4d to the joyner from Birmingham. Pitch and braces were delivered and four cartloads of stone brought from quarries at Quinton, Marston & Pepworth in May 1588. The previous May stone had been quarried at Chipping Norton and in September men had been paid for work at Guiting quarry; both payments were small. It looks as though materials were accounted for separately, probably by Raffe Richmond, unless they too had already been stockpiled. It is also possible that much of what was needed had already been used. The geographical range from which labour was drawn and materials sourced was narrow.

The progress of the building is impossible to trace and the unskilled workmen largely un-named. The accounts’ only direct mention of a specific room, boarding the great chamber in November 1586, seems out of step with stages to be deduced from other references.¹⁴ By the end of August 1588 the skeleton was sufficiently complete for a plasterer to be engaged, possibly by recommendation, certainly ‘on an earnest’ of £1, whether to start soon afterwards or in the more distant future is unknown. A single touch of luxury appears when in September 1588 a deposit of 2s was paid on a copper vessel; a further £3 followed up two days later ‘for the copper vessel for the hothouse and on the 17th along with foodstuffs the wayneman was paid 38s 7d ‘for carriage of a copper vessel and a pot for the ‘whot’ house’ down to Weston.¹⁵

This acquisition, together with purchase of seeds in London and mention of ‘nails for the vine’ in the London property are the only clues to suggest that Ralph probably gave at least some attention to developing an equally impressive garden. Beighton’s drawing suggests there might have been a banqueting house above the garden enclosure, but the garden layout he shows bears no resemblance to a typical Elizabethan layout.



The parkland setting of the house including the Gatehouse, from Beighton’s *Prospect*, 1716.
© Hilary L Turner

¹⁴ <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Weston-Building-Accounts.pdf>

¹⁵ CR 2632, ff. 214, 215, 218.

Interior Decoration

No inventories survive before the auction catalogue of 1781; details of the furnishing of most of the rooms are unknown though it was probably for Weston that Ralph commissioned his own portrait from the Flemish artist Hieronimos Custodis then working in London.¹⁶

However, two major decorative schemes, the frieze of portrait heads and the four unusual tapestry-woven maps have in part survived. Nothing is known about either their fashioning or whether the craftsmen engaged were local, Londoners or émigré settlers, ‘strangers’. The conception of both these magniloquent displays, one on each side of the building, may actually have influenced, even dictated, the plan of the house. The frieze in particular was unlikely to be moved from its original placing so, assuming they decorated the grandest spaces, their dimensions, each around 75-80 feet, correspond to, and serve to confirm, Walpole’s estimate of a façade length of 160 feet; its two projecting wings allow for a central section measuring 80 feet.

The four Elizabethan tapestries included the same design elements, creating a uniform visual effect. Each tapestry focussed on one of the four counties in which Ralph held land, had friends and family. Within each central county many of the houses belonging to his friends and family were drawn in some detail, few more than an inch square.¹⁷ Their presence can be read as a declaration of Catholic loyalty, an apposite gesture for one so recently conforming. The map area was framed by borders whose separate features derived from existing print sources; they show allegorical, biblical and mythological figures, celestial globes and, in one case, a map of Africa, set within an architectural framework decorated with flowers. Each lower corner shows a different example from the twelve Labours of Hercules, also print-based. The figure of Judith with the head of Holofernes dominated the vertical borders, clearly visible in the Worcestershire but fragmented in the Oxfordshire example. Panels, sometimes with verses, provided the orientation of each map. A long text based on William Camden’s recently published much reprinted historical account of English counties, the *Britannia*, encapsulated the history of each county. A scale and dividers, each different, occupied the diagonally opposite corner. The royal arms were displayed in the upper left corner, those of the family in the lower right, a different generation in each tapestry.



Hercules swings his club to subdue Cerberus in the right-hand border of the Gloucestershire tapestry; just visible (top), the word Meridies (south) oriented the tapestry. © Hilary L Turner

¹⁶ If there was a companion portrait of his wife it has not survived. That identified by Kathy Lynn Emerson, *A Who’s Who of Tudor Women* (on-line only), is a very tenuous and an inferior production. The web site is an update of her book *Wives and Daughters*.

¹⁷ Turner, *No Mean Prospect*.

It seems likely that the Elizabethan set was displayed first in the Hall as Richard Gough rather vaguely remarked.¹⁸ This was the position in which the panoramic view across England from the Bristol Channel to London they presented would make most impact.

For the equivalent space on the opposite (west) side of the house, the eighteenth-century Great Drawing Room, Ralph devised a scheme almost as magnificent. He ordered a frieze of painted portrait heads; twenty-two are listed in the catalogue and six are thought to survive. Each picture measured approximately 33 x 22 inches (838 x 584mm), much larger than most comparable examples.¹⁹ They depict the kings of England from Henry IV to Edward VI, which at first sight might appear to be a statement of loyalty to the Tudor dynasty. However, two Yorkist monarchs, Edward IV and Richard III, and Prince Arthur, the son of the Yorkist Queen Elizabeth, wife of Henry VII, great-grand parents of Mary Queen of Scots, rather contradict that interpretation.

Some faces are too vaguely described in the catalogue for certain identification though their inclusion is no less remarkable. The Queen Mother of France could be Catherine de Medici or Mary of Guise, Queen Regent of Scotland, and Queen of France; if Francis, King of France, is to be identified as the second Francis (1547-1560), and not the first (1494-1547), the viewer was looking at the husband of Mary Queen of Scots.²⁰ Individually the heads are found in other examples elsewhere; this combination appears to be unique.

With no apparent connection to each other and little to the family three English worthies were represented: Cardinal Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell, Sir Thomas More, together with Robert Devereux, 2nd earl of Essex. The Sheldon family had reason to honour only one of them, Thomas Cromwell former owner of lands at Beoley.²¹ More surprisingly still, however, a place was found for four commanders of the armies of Philip II in the Netherlands, the duke of Alva, (1507 – 1582), Count Egremont, the duke of Guise and the duke of Parma (1549-1586).

A measured drawing of one wall of the room, 19 feet 3 inches high, was made just before demolition.²² Its panelling was topped by the portrait frieze supported on long tapering Ionic pilasters on high pedestals, each supposedly charged with the family crest, a sheldrake. A central fireplace stood 15 feet high, its second storey armorial, divided into four

¹⁸ The C18 references to tapestries in the Great Drawing Room are to the later copies.

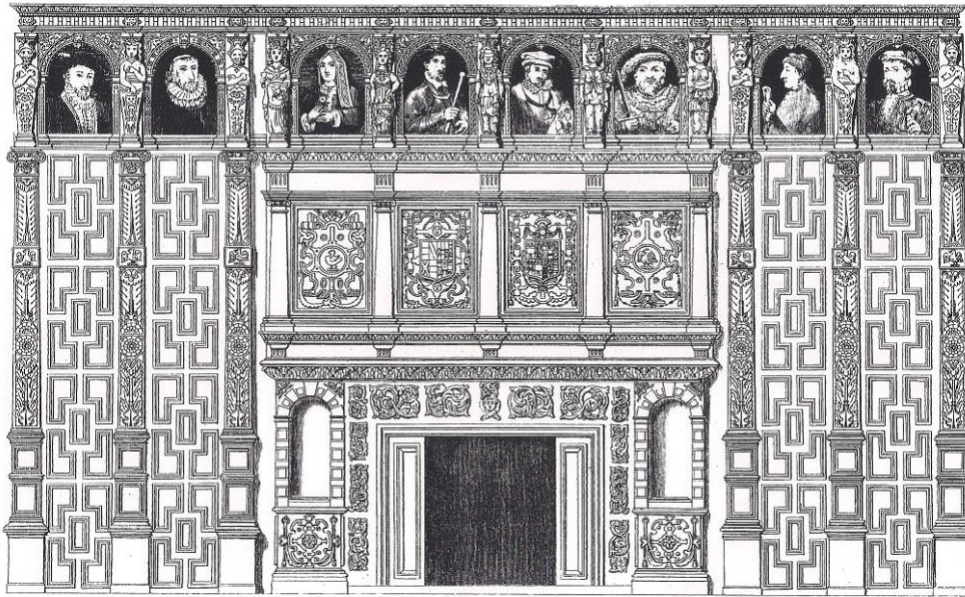
¹⁹ Turner, 'Glimpses of a Gallery' pp. 102-112. One of the portraits said to have been Ralph's, of Cardinal Wolsey, hangs in the NPG, (NPG 32); another is in a private collection. Two of them have made recent appearances in sale rooms, Richard III, exhibited Christie's King Street, London May 30-1 June 2012), and Edward VI, Sotheby's 5 July 2012, lot 195. Daunt, *Portrait sets in Tudor and Jacobean England*, vol 1, pp. 107-112, 134-141. Dendrochronological analysis has established a dating of 1589-1595, vol. 1, p. 124, vol 2, Appendix Table 6. Her musings on the meaning are vitiated by the belief Ralph went to France.

²⁰ For chronological reasons it is unlikely to be Henry Bourbon, ie Henry IV, 1589-1610, the man who had so spectacularly changed faith – 'Paris is worth a mass'.

²¹ *L & P Henry VIII*, vol. 19 (1), g 80(50), pp. 43-44.

²² Shaw, *Details of Elizabethan Architecture*, pp. 12-14; the original is V&A, London, Prints Department, Vos/43.

compartments; the central two panels carried, separately, the arms of Sheldon and of Markham. Working long after the 1781 sale, the artist could only guess at the appearance and placement of the portraits; surviving examples suggest he was incorrect.

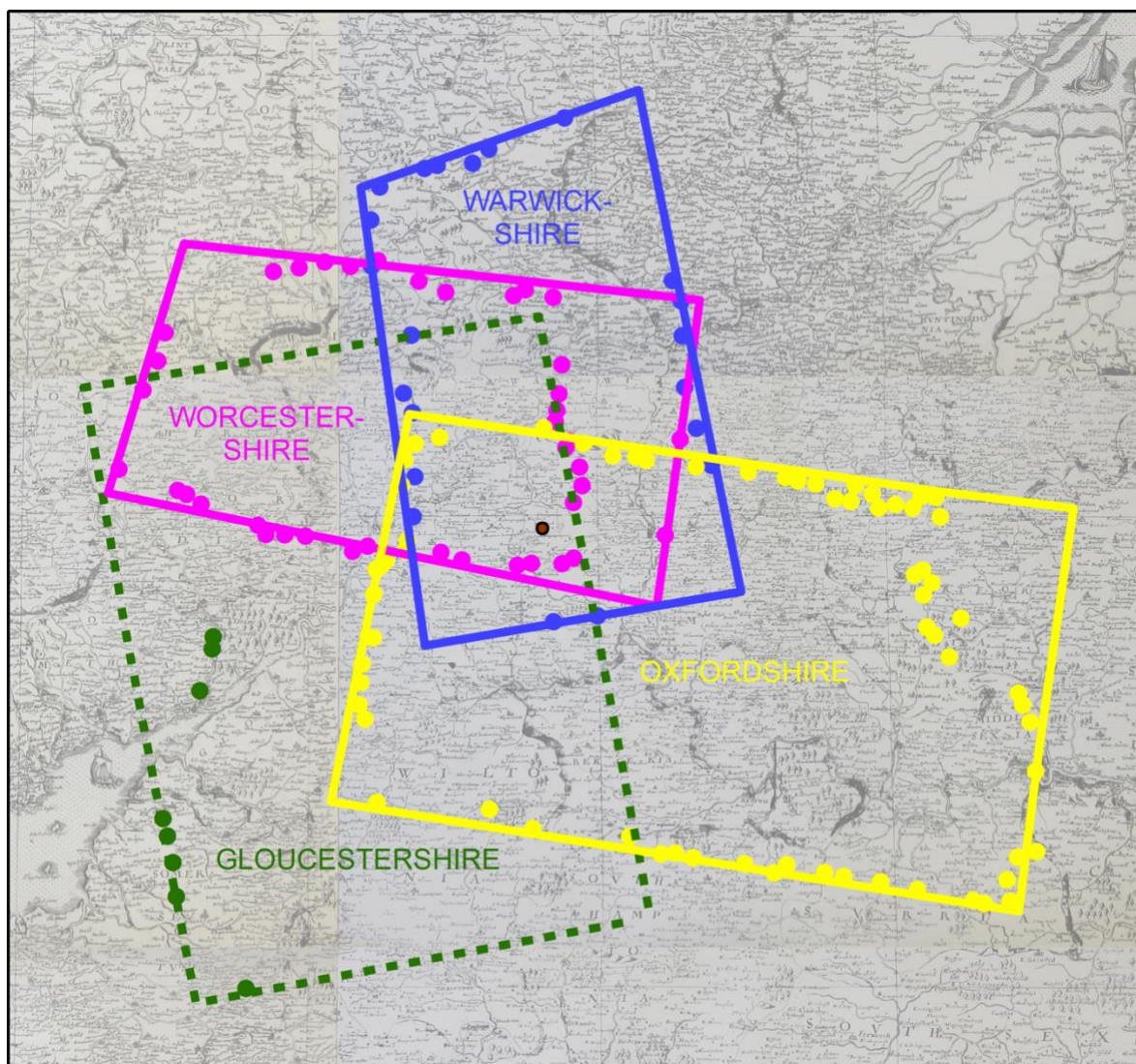


The fireplace, panelling and portrait frieze, said to be drawn by Richard Bridgens, published by Henry Shaw, *Details of Elizabethan Architecture*, 1839. © Hilary L Turner

The Significance of the internal Decoration

Despite being built with rubble-filled walls, making building as fast and as economic as possible, externally the large, showy house demonstrated Ralph's standing as he saw it; internally it showed off good taste and learning. Ralph's decision to choose the unusual subject of maps as a decorative theme suggests a fascination with the expanding and increasingly useful science of cartography, coming to be applied to ever more practical ends. It suggests also knowledge enough to appreciate the skills of a cartoon drawer who recognized the value of Saxton's wall map and was able to utilize it as a ready-made base for his preparatory drawing. Information on Saxton's detailed maps of each county was then amalgamated into those outlines, supplemented by historical or topographical references and details of Ralph's own choosing.

Though the elements in the tapestry borders in whose choice Ralph must at least have had some kind of say scarcely form a coherent iconographic programme, they credit him with rather more than adequate learning. In the lower borders the allegorical figures, Charity, Temperance and Envy, are found in the finest tapestries woven in Brussels indicating that Sheldon was familiar with the best examples of the craft. Episodes from the life of Hercules at each lower corner suggest an appreciation at least of classical knowledge and might be read as an allusion to strength, presumably his own; the figure of Judith and her maid with the severed head of the tyrant Holofernes introduces a jarring metaphor, possibly to be interpreted as an expression of Catholic feeling against Queen Elizabeth. Only the globes, celestial and terrestrial, surviving from one upper border can be connected to maps.



Christopher Saxton's wall map (1583) probably formed the basis of the cartoons for the tapestry maps. Dots represent towns on tapestry edges. © Hilary L Turner, Mike Athanson

Mistress Anne and the household

More than matching their status Weston became the Sheldon family's main residence sometime early in the 1580s, replacing Beoley which may already have been let, as it later certainly was, to other branches of the cousinship. The chatelaine of the large, new house was Mistress Anne Sheldon, probably born around 1540, daughter of Sir Robert Throckmorton of Coughton Court and his first wife. The family, extensive and far-flung, were already important and influential, nationally as well as locally. Her grand-father had been Chancellor of the diocese of Worcester; one of many uncles had been a counsellor to Henry VIII. Its members would eventually divide over doctrinal attitudes; Anne's uncle John remaining Catholic, his brother Clement and cousin Job Puritan. Her father, at least under Queen Mary, had enjoyed local power, both as diocesan Chancellor and as Constable of Warwick Castle, power and influence that was slowly lessened by the plans of the earl of Leicester in the county so that by Throckmorton's death in 1581 none remained.

When Anne married Ralph in London in May 1557²³ it is almost certainly safe to assume that she could read, write and count and would be capable of overseeing the management of the household she could reasonably expect. Her prime duty was, of course, to produce children; she gave birth to nine daughters, an heir and experienced at least one still birth, a second son.²⁴ Her child-bearing years came to an end around 1576-77. By the time the house was completed the four daughters still at home ranged in age from 10 to 16 or 17.

Only brief glimpses of her life remain, interestingly only after her fertile period was over and the children were beginning to leave home. In October 1580 her son Edward rode with her to London,²⁵ he to enrol in the Inns of Court and Anne to face the situation where her husband was imprisoned in the Marshalsea.²⁶ She made a plea directly to the privy council, the first of many Catholic women to do so, asking that Ralph should be released on grounds of ill-health. He was transferred into the custody of the Dean of Westminster, to be afforded as much medical assistance as was necessary, with his wife in attendance. Effectively therefore, and an unintended consequence, was that Anne too was under surveillance. Whether Ralph's illness was real or diplomatic remains an open question; his long days in the saddle suggest a robust constitution and the only indication of physical weakness is mention of preparations for a bath filled with milk and wine.²⁷

Mistress Anne's courage was not in short supply. In 1582 she summoned a Marian priest, John Felton, to Strensham, the house of her daughter Elizabeth, where he celebrated mass, delighted to find there the proper vessels and garments.²⁸ When Elizabeth's then absent husband Sir John Russell returned he reported the priest's presence to bishop Whitgift and, next year, made an attempt to present both his mother in law and his wife to the quarter sessions. He was unsuccessful, but two years later Russell mounted a case against Ralph in Star Chamber accusing him of dereliction of duty while sheriff.²⁹ That too failed. However Mistress Anne's Catholic beliefs did bring about her husband's removal from his position as JP in October 1587, and those same beliefs caused her daughter Meriel's husband, Francis Clare of Kidderminster, to forfeit his. It was a check, but not a stop, on the family's influence and social position.

From time to time Anne paid visits elsewhere, though none to her children are known. Her destinations were relatively local, most of them easy to reach within a day's ride from Weston. Deddington was a regular refuge; less frequently so too was Sudeley, home of her distant kinsman, Lord Chandos. In April 1587 she was with Ralph's widowed sister Anne Daston at Broadway and a year later at Toot Baldon with his sister Philippa Pollard.³⁰ While

²³ TNA WARD 7/ 13/135; a summary of the original settlement also exists in BAH, Barnard Miscellany 77/D/1 quoting deeds copied by Rees Price at Coughton Court, no. 811. The original is no longer with the Throckmorton archives in WaCRO, CR 1998.

²⁴ WAAS Beoley parish registers.

²⁵ Sturgess, *Middle Temple Admissions*, vol. I, p.47, 30 October 1580.

²⁶ See Chapter Nine.

²⁷ CR 2632, f. 24, November 1586.

²⁸ Webster, 'Two Marian priests', pp.20-24.

²⁹ TNA STAC 5/S15/38; STAC 5/R12/34; STAC 5/R41/32.

³⁰ CR 2632, f. 53 4.4.87 at Sudeley (with Ralph); f. 150 24.12.87 at Deddington; f. 151 4.1.88 at Somerton, Oxfordshire; f. 158 16.2.88 at Deddington; f. 164 23.3.88 at Mrs Pollard's (without Ralph); f. 188 26.5.88 at Skilts; f. 190 30.5.88 her horses at Stratford upon Avon; f. 190 18.8.88 at Stratford on Avon and at Milcote; f. 218 14.9.88 to Lord Chandos (without Ralph).

Anne had only experienced brief house arrest Philippa had been detained, then questioned by the vice-chancellor of Oxford University after Campion had named her amongst his hosts. She had agreed to conform and attended church escorted by Dean Goodman.³¹ Like other friends and relations she was eventually required to provide a horse for the army in Ireland.³² A gift of four lobsters sent to Weston by Philippa marked the friendship between two women equally courageous but with such very different lives.³³ Beoley was rarely visited though Anne played cards with her mother in law at Skilts, dined with Fulke Greville and the Clopton family in Stratford on Avon before staying with the Cloptons overnight and went over at least once to Mrs Shurley at Somerton in north Oxfordshire.³⁴ In 1594 she gave 20s to the poor in Stratford, whether in person or not is unclear.³⁵

Mistress Anne was buried at Beoley on December 15 1603 and an imposing tomb begun, finished before Ralph's own demise in March 1613.³⁶

Weston's Staff

The nature of the accounts makes it difficult to uncover the structure of Ralph's household. The man responsible for its smooth running probably held the title of chamberlain and was almost always referred to as Foliot.³⁷ In charge of provisioning the establishment he would have kept his own detailed accounts. The £10-15 he was allowed weekly, totalling only little over £500 a year, was regarded as niggardly by Ralph's long staying guest, his creditor Thomas Horde who considered his comforts would have been higher in any common lodging house.³⁸

Year round Foliot probably catered daily for around twenty-five people – indoor staff such as cooks, men and maid servants and the outdoor staff, for example stable hands, grooms and Daniel the falconer. Sheldon's secretary Robert Jones and his brother Griffith both instructed the children at least occasionally, rewarded by tenancy of a house at Beoley in 1602; until 1580 Edward certainly had tutors; one, Mr John Hopkins, was named in Rector Lane's will in 1571.³⁹ Thomas Walker, in charge of the building operations, probably died in 1601 to be succeeded by Thomas Robyns from Tanworth, in Sheldon's employment since at least 1586; his will of 1605 paints a gloomy picture of life at Weston.⁴⁰ Other members of the household might have included a gardener, a coachman and a washerwoman; occasionally Foliot needed

³¹ *APC 1581-1582*, vol. 13, p. 289-90, 15 December 1581; *APC vol. 13*, pp.185-86, 256-257, 267, 289.

³² She was assessed in 1585 for £8 6s 8d = 1/3 of a light horse, paid SP 12/183/ 33(i), SP 12/200/61; offers to compound for £5, SP 12/189/54.

³³ CR 2632, f. 169.

³⁴ CR 2632, f.151.

³⁵ Fox, *Minutes and Accounts of Stratford upon Avon Corporation*, vol. 5, 1593-1598, p. 24.

³⁶ Richardson, 'The Effigy Tombs of the Worcestershire Gentry 1500-1700', pp. 149-173.

³⁷ A Nicholas and a Michael were named, whether related or not is unknown. Nicholas was said to be of Beoley, WAAS Consistory Court Deposition Books, (BA 2102 794.052),vol. III, f. 310v, 1586)

³⁸ TNA E 133/111/20, 21, 22.

³⁹ TNA PROB 11/54/492.

⁴⁰ His will, listed by Fry in 1901, is now missing from WAAS; TNA PROB 11/102/280 is that of his son; Robyns will TNA PROB 11/106/186; CR 2632, ff. 34,139, 146, 211, 212.

to feed the bailiffs when they brought their accounts from the different estates, the occasional tradesman summoned for a specific job and messengers bringing letters or gifts.

Many of the most frequently mentioned names remain only shadowy figures; Florys (Floricius) Cowper on one occasion acted as witness to a deed and so cannot have been entirely below stairs:⁴¹ Augustine looked after the horses and was occasionally absent in London: Daniel the falconer sported a blue livery and had an assistant: Morris the boy was the public face of the household for those to whom he carried messages, his shoes permanently in need of repair or renewal.

Exactly how responsibilities were shared between Mistress Anne and the chamberlain is unclear; she clearly played a key role when Ralph was absent on his travels, receiving money due from livestock sales and making payments to both friends and family.⁴² Most importantly perhaps it was she who christened the foundations of the new house in March 1587, a landmark moment, and it was she and her daughters who experienced the disruption of the building operations.⁴³

Scarcity of entries concerning Beoley indicates declining usage of the house and its diminishing role in Ralph's life. It was too far from London to be a convenient base though useful as long as Ralph still had duties as steward of the royal park at King's Norton and friends at Frankley. Little is known about its layout; mention of a hall, buttery, gate and garden is too vague a description to form a real picture.⁴⁴ Even the site of the house is now unknown; it did not necessarily lie on the north side of the church, a location often considered because a north door – inserted into the Lady Chapel only in the 1890s – is often interpreted as giving Ralph surreptitious passage between the two. Its depiction on the Warwickshire, tapestry map, second in size only to the earl of Leicester's residence at Kenilworth, should be seen as a fantasy.

The estate certainly, and probably the house too, was in charge of Robert Harpur who, not mentioned in William's will, probably arrived after William's death, part of the staff change-over when Ralph, or perhaps Margaret, inherited and perhaps connected with a transaction in 1574.⁴⁵ He chose the rector on Ralph's behalf in 1579; his will suggests he enjoyed moderate wealth.⁴⁶ He was succeeded by William Man whose journeys to London suggest his service with Sheldon had begun at Weston by 1586. His children were born at Beoley where the bailiff was Robert Henshaw.⁴⁷ Early in the seventeenth century the parish registers show that members of another branch of the Sheldon family occupied the house.

[Back to Contents >>](#)

⁴¹ BAH MS 3069/10/110 (former 328869) Sheldon to Palmer 2 Nov 28 Eliz [1586] Grant by RS to John Palmer esq of Over Lemington for his life of an annuity of £100 out of the manor of Weston in the presence of Edward Sheldon, Thomas Sheldon, Nicholas Ffolyott and Florys Cowper, at Weston.

⁴² CR 2632, ff.86-88 for example.

⁴³ CR 2632, f. 50.

⁴⁴ TNA STAC 5/R41/32.

⁴⁵ Assignment of lease of the manor of Temple Broughton [in Broughton Green in Hanbury], co. Worc., from Robert Harper to Thomas Throckmorton and Ralph Sheldon, MS 3061/1/51, (former 167451), 1584.

⁴⁶ TNA PROB 11/92/51, 6 July 1598.

⁴⁷ CR 2632, f. 4, 16, 100, 159, 192.