

Chapter Eighteen : Epilogue 1606-1613

Restricted Circumstances

Ralph knew there was little likelihood he would escape the penalties Attorney-General Coke's judgement imposed; he would have to find a large part of the money he had owed his creditor, Thomas Horde. He could do nothing but wait for the next stages to develop, taking only cold comfort from the fact that Horde would make no profit. On August 6 1606 order was given to take Ralph's lands into the king's hands as security for the debt now to be paid to the Crown; they, along with the schedule of the recognizances, were passed to Queen Anne the same day.¹ She also held the benefit of Horde's recusancy – the income from his lands due to the Crown as fines.

Meanwhile the now forfeit lands Sheldon had used as security were valued by royal officials.² Their figures suggest that he had raised a reasonable, if not a substantial, income from them; a less flamboyant life style and more careful management might have enabled him to avoid the need to borrow. They also suggest it would be many years before the debt would be paid off so that the Crown's repayment plan looked very similar to those proposed earlier by the rent-charge holders.

Though Sheldon had not been Horde's only debtor, his was by far the largest debt. An undated schedule of money owing to Horde provides a comment on the scale of his operation and an illuminating picture of the Elizabethan's need for ready money.³ Drawn up sometime late in 1608 for the recently appointed Lord Treasurer, Robert Cecil, Lord Salisbury,⁴ it noted, albeit incorrectly, that Sheldon's forfeited recognizances totalled £24,000. The still outstanding sums *in nomine penes*, presumably penalties for late payment of those charges, stood at £7,000 and a further £10,000 was due for unpaid interest, described as 'interest forborne' (presumably on the rent charges).⁵ Sheldon's total debt to Horde was therefore recorded as £41,000. In fact Sheldon had acknowledged eight recognizances totalling £22,800; forfeit for non-payment, Sheldon was legally obliged to repay the total face value. The figure of £24,000 represented the *interest* Horde and Sheldon had agreed was to be

¹ TNA SO 3/3. The signatory was Sir Thomas Lake.

² TNA WARD 7/51/91 suggests a minimum of £1100; C 142 334/58, a much damaged document, reaches the lower figure of £737 6s 8d.

³ TNA SP 14/40, f. 479-479v; Lord Candish (Cavendish) owed £1000, Lord Chief Baron (probably Sir Lawrence Tanfield) £140; two smaller debtors owed £160 between them and Lord Saye £600, (Bodl Ms Tanner 283, f.166; Tanner 115, f.59, 72, still payable in 1609, TNA PROB 11/114/460) while Hendry was bequeathed an annuity payable from the deceased Sir Henry Lee, TNA PROB 11/ 118/327.

⁴ TNA SP 14/40, f. 479/ f.13. Cecil was appointed on May 8 1608. The scribe may be Christopher Keighley, later Salisbury's Receiver-General, (Stone, *Family and Fortune*, pp.130-31). I am grateful to Robin Harcourt Williams, long the Archivist at Hatfield House, for identifying his hand from a document at the house, Petitions 482, and for the reference. Cecil and Sheldon certainly had had some previous acquaintance, HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 16, p. 15.

⁵ TNA E 126/1, ff. 95-97, where the interest totals are given and Sheldon claimed he had received only £5,600. The annual interest on the rent charges appears variously as £1008, £1040, £1018.

repaid. Sheldon's actual borrowing had probably not exceeded £11,400, and perhaps not even so much, if, as he claimed, Horde had not paid over the full sum agreed. One recognizance, to Horde's brother Alan, was later removed from the obligations to the Crown, reducing the debt owed to £21,000.⁶ <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Recognizance-Holders.pdf> The debt was a sizeable sum, several times his probable annual income.

Once Sheldon's lands had been valued the complex mechanics of payments to the Crown could be worked out in laborious detail. The process can be followed at least in part through a series of decidedly intricate documents and discussions stretching through June and July 1607. Queen Anne had passed some of Sheldon's recognizances as a gift to one of her Gentlemen Ushers, John Elphinstone, amongst the many Scotsmen who had accompanied James VI across the border.⁷ In turn he seems to have passed them on, covenanting with 'Verney and others' for £11,000 'mentioned' to be paid to the Queen and £1000 at later, unspecified dates.⁸ Next day, June 5, Sheldon stood bound by recognizance for £15,000 to Coke, as Attorney-General and to the Master of the Rolls, the ennobled Scotsman Sir Edward Bruce.⁹

Ralph's Fight-back

Even before the details of payment were settled Sheldon was allowed to bring a case against the rent charge holders to force them to bring the paperwork for cancellation. It was first heard in November 1606 by some of the judges of the Exchequer Court.¹⁰ The battle was one which Ralph might possibly win. The point was important to him; he had good reason to worry. In law the rent charges stood independently of the recognizances. Those who held the documents could require continuing payment, a demand which would vastly increase Ralph's liabilities, almost certainly far beyond what he could pay. He risked having to sell at least part of his lands to meet his obligations, a situation that had to be prevented.¹¹

Horde, however, perhaps already genuinely ill, (he wrote his will in December 1606), was still playing games. He managed to delay proceedings for a further twelve months, completely ignoring the court order for cancellation.¹²

⁶ TNA SP 14/40, f.479/f.13.

⁷ TNA SP 14/60 f.65; written as Elvaston, he held bonds totalling £16, 600.

⁸ TNA SP 14/40, f.479v. The figures represent the value of the recognizances if forfeit, not the value of the loan. Verney may be Sir Richard, named with Sir Thomas Lucy, as farmers of the manor of Brailes in the 1607 Survey, Tennant, 'Brailes and the Survey of 1607' p. 28.

⁹ TNA LC 4/196 f.200, 26 June 1607. It was noted that this sum was the guarantee for payment of £10,000 to 'B', presumably Bruce, a condition which had been included in the defeasance, SP 14/40/f.13v, also 479v.

¹⁰ E 126/1 Michaelmas Term 4 James Thursday 6 November [1606] fo. 54v (ink), [57v] stamp.

¹¹ TNA C 54/1939, nos. 23, 24

¹² E 124/3 Easter 5 James 29 April [1607], f. 273v; E 126/1 Mich 5 Jas Thursday 15 October 1607 f. 76 (ink), [82] (stamp); Horde's will PROB 11/111/401. Documents available at http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Sheldon#Ralph_Sheldon_.281537-1613.29_and_Thomas_Horde_.281533-1607.29

At some point, probably early in 1607, Sheldon submitted a petition to the Queen, not only because she was now the titular beneficiary of the paperwork but perhaps hoping for sympathy from a co-religionist.¹³ He requested her to stipulate a fair sum for repayment since, as he explained, he had really owed Horde only £8000 by simple interest, instead of the compound interest of Horde's calculations, finally totalling almost £24,000 to which he had previously agreed.¹⁴ More pertinently, he beseeched the Queen's support to ensure the cancellation of the rent charges on the grounds that 'it was not fair in either equity or conscience' that he should pay twice.

Horde's death on 12 December 1607 allowed the case to proceed in the following month. The necessity for their annulment was sharpened for Sheldon by the fact that Horde's will assigned even higher repayments to the rent charges than had been agreed or included in the initial documents. Horde salved such conscience as he possessed by instructing his executor to pay the monies to named charitable purposes.

Hearings resumed in January 1608 when Sheldon's voice is heard directly for the first time; it had had no place during Coke's prosecution because that had been concerned with principle, not with details of the arrangements between the protagonists. Openly admitting for the first time that he had failed in his repayments, a courageous admission, he tried to put himself in the best possible light. A repayment plan had, he said, been agreed with Horde, only to be repudiated. Horde had only paid over £5,600, a quarter of the totals acknowledged and far less than the sum of £11,400 for which Sheldon was paying. Part of that he had repaid - £1,900. Moreover, he had hosted Horde and his servants for ten years at considerable cost and even more trouble but none of those costs had been deducted from the money now owed.¹⁵ It was unfair to expect him to make further payments to satisfy the rent charges.

His reasoning did him no good. The case was adjourned.

Sheldon returned to court in May, this time confronting Horde's executor, Alan Hendry of Thavies Inn. The latter offered to return the documents he held if Sheldon would drop his allegation of usurious dealings, a hint of wounded pride. Hendry also insinuated that the Queen was in part responsible for the delays, first instructing him to cancel the documents, then reversing her decision. True or not, the court felt unable to proceed beyond re-iteration of its previous order. Hendry, however, was reprimanded for slandering his sovereign and ordered to appear in court on that count.

There proceedings stalled. Once again Sheldon was the loser. Only two rent charges were returned to Chancery for cancellation – incidentally revealing to us the grip in which

¹³ BLib Additional Ms 36583, f.3, undated.

¹⁴ Sheldon stated in court that the annual interest was £1018, in this petition it was given as £1040.

¹⁵ Details in TNA E 133/111/20, 21, 22, Sheldon's estimate of costs, describe a household struggling to please their unwanted querulous, disgruntled guest. Horde estimated a figure of £500 per year which he regarded as miserly. A reduction of £5000, however, would have made a significant difference to Sheldon's repayments.

Horde and his representatives held Sheldon.¹⁶ https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Rent-Charges-C-54_1939_23_24.pdf Their holders, Sir Robert and Sir John Dormer and Humfrey Gifford of Brude (Brewood, Staffordshire) who spoke also for his deceased partner Francis Biddulph, must have agreed with Sheldon that his case was reasonable. Despite the fact Sheldon disclaimed any acquaintance with the holders, some were known to him, for example the Dormers. Never the direct beneficiaries of Sheldon's payments the rent charge holders entered into the arrangements on Horde's behalf; they were presumably bound by separate documents to pass over the money. Quite why any of them should have agreed to act substantially as a holding company for Horde's assets is unknown. Some were his relatives; one at least, Scudamore, had had previous financial obligations to Horde and was in no position to refuse. Others, for example the Dormer brothers Robert and John, may have been similarly placed.

Sheldon was still haunted by the matter in his will, presumably because in theory at least the holders could bequeath the debt to their heirs. There was now a contrast between Sheldon's status, protected in some measure by the court order for cancellation of the documents, with that of the surviving recognizance holders, debarred by court order from making claims. Rough justice pursued three of the holders. By January 1608 the benefit of the recusancy of Richard Brooke of Lapley had been given to Henry Myn, Queen Anne's coachman,¹⁷ followed in July 1608 by grants of those of Walter Giffard of Hyon and of Richard, heir of Francis Biddulph.¹⁸

Pressing Demands

There was not much that Ralph could do to alleviate the situation or produce ready cash. Sale of the right of presentation to the living of Tredington, Warwickshire, to a London mercer for £20 in 1607 was possibly no more than the settlement of a larger debt.¹⁹ Financial demands were still being pressed also by his second wife, Jane, Lady Tasburgh, beginning within a year of their marriage. Some were direct requests for money, others, often connected to affairs of her previous husband for which Ralph had no responsibility, took him again to the law courts in an effort to disentangle himself from the complex affairs she had brought to the marriage. She pursued every last penny, from Ralph as also from others.²⁰ One cause of contention concerned a property in Oxford, which she maintained had a connection - very tenuous - to her first husband, Richard Wenman, in which she was possibly claiming an interest for her son Richard Wenman II. Ralph had been involved in the property at one stage as trustee for his unreliable servant Edward Williams. Ralph shrugged off Jane's claims, saying in court that in the early 1590s he had approached one Matthew King of Clifton about a possible sale. Ralph told the unlikely story that he had been incautious enough to hand over

¹⁶ TNA C 54/ 1939, nos. 23, 24.

¹⁷ TNA SO 3/3, 29 Jan 1606/07.

¹⁸ TNA SO 3/4, n.d but July 1608.

¹⁹ TNA C 78/268, no. 6; C 2/JasI/H1/45; Thomas Horton the father's will PROB 11/137/64.

²⁰ TNA C 2/JasI/C12/77 (1617).

the deeds and had never troubled to re-possess them. But, if Jane could not produce the originals, her claim would be dismissed.²¹

Though financial problems were easily his most serious difficulty, they do not in any way appear to have restrained his daily activities. He remained highly visible in the law courts. In 1607 Ralph became entangled in a dispute concerning a sale of land between two Oxfordshire residents, Sir Thomas Bridges probably of Cornbury, and Sir Anthony Cope of Hanwell.²² Although Bridges had assured Cope that his land was free of any encumbrance, it turned out that there were several trusts, one of which involved Sheldon; witnesses said, correctly, that Sheldon had been amongst the trustees for Bridges' wife's jointure which included the much disputed manor of Langley in west Oxfordshire.²³ Ralph of course denied any knowledge of the transactions but was not above relaying 'what he had heard' about some of the other parties. Following the death of his cousin Margaret Knollys in April 1606 Sheldon was called as a witness when in 1608 Sir Henry Hobart, then Attorney-General and, incidentally, familiar with Sheldon's affairs, laid an Information against Thomas Bracebridge, a distant Sheldon relative.²⁴ Sheldon was summoned before Star Chamber to give evidence about transactions between them.

Ralph's circle was slowly shrinking. Two of his daughters had died, Mary Fowler and Frances Mayney, the latter probably in childbirth. His sister Philippa Pollard died late in 1606; her elaborate tomb now stands in the gardens of Nuneham Courtenay House, Oxfordshire.²⁵ Another of his oldest friends and distant relative, amongst those most often visited, John Alderford of Salford, died in 1607, followed next year by Ralph's son in law Clare, impoverished by debt.²⁶ John Talbot of Grafton, one of the most 'obstinate recusants' of the previous century, died in 1611.²⁷ Only Sheldon's brother in law, longstanding friend and committed Catholic, Thomas Throckmorton outlived him, dying in 1615; frequently imprisoned, usually at Broughton Castle, Oxfordshire, it is appropriate



The tomb effigy of Ralph's sister Philippa Pollard at Nuneham Courtenay, Oxfordshire. © Hilary L Turner

²¹ TNA C 2/JasI/S22/55, 5-13 June 1605.

²² TNA STAC 8/146/59; C 2/JasI/C9/1, November 1607; this Thomas Brydges may have been the son of Thomas, 2nd s. of Sir Giles Brydges brother of 1st Lord Chandos, *Vis 'n Gloucestershire 1623*, pp. 233-37.

²³ *CPR 1599-1600*, L&I, vol. 332, no. 982, 1 April 1600; *CPR 1594-95*, L&I, vol. 310, no. 18, 1594.

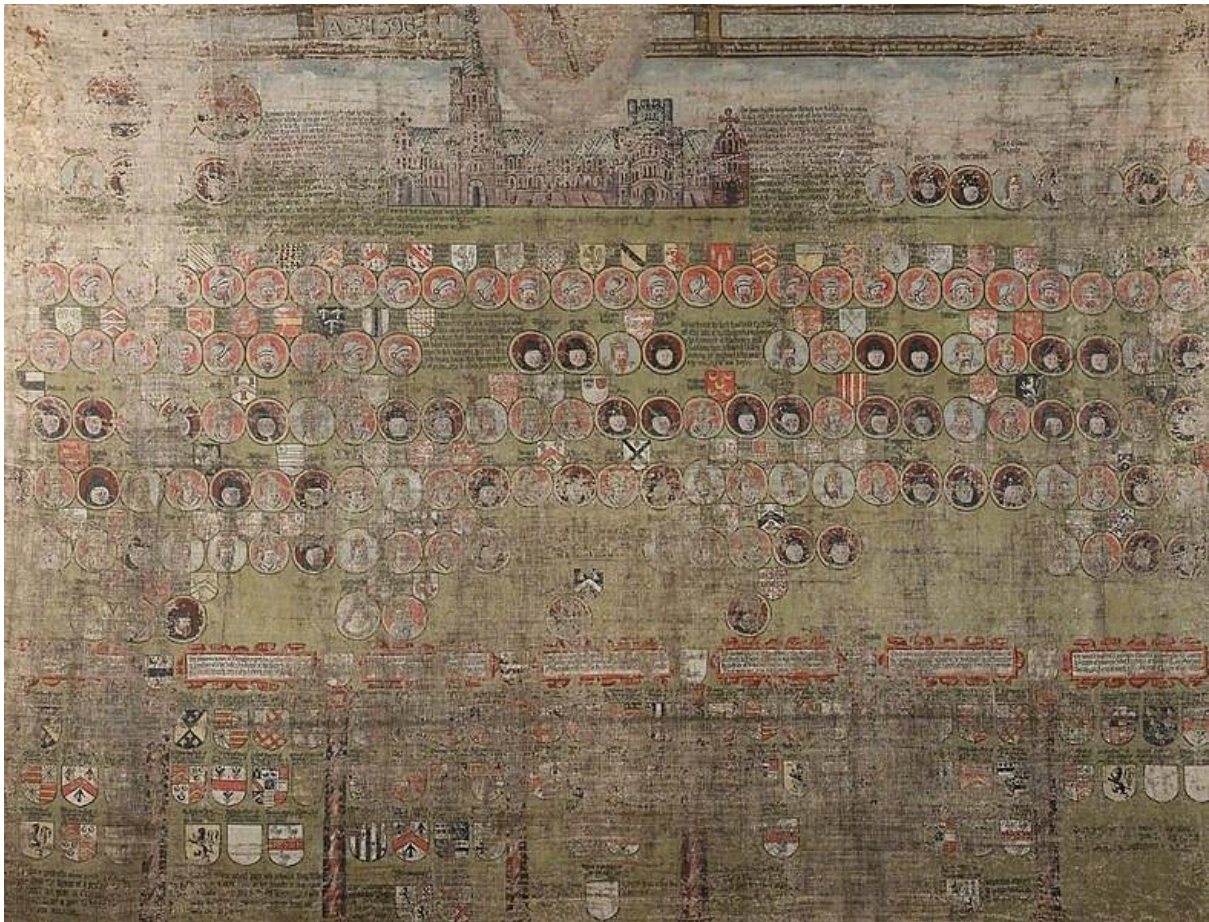
²⁴ TNA STAC 8/10/6.

²⁵ Nuneham Courtenay, *VCH Oxfordshire*, 5, pp. 234-249.

²⁶ TNA PROB 11/109/55; TNA C 142/341/54.

²⁷ Hasler, *House of Commons*.

that his home, Coughton Court, now displays the pictorial testimony to Catholic loyalties, the *Tabula Eliensis*.²⁸ Gloomy enough at a personal level, these natural deaths, also represent the attrition of first-hand memories of a wholly Catholic country.



The painted cloth known as the *Tabula Eliensis* now hangs at Coughton Court. Beneath a depiction of Ely cathedral the cloth shows the coats of arms of Catholic men imprisoned there for their faith. Image courtesy of The National Trust, Coughton Court & artuk.org <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Tabula+Eliensis&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image>

Contacts too were contracting. A back door to influence at Court closed when, at Weston on 21 July 1609, Ralph and his neighbour at Todenham, William Moulton, received the formal surrender of the post of ‘arrasmaker’ to the Crown from Richard Hyckes and his son Francis which they had held for the past forty years.²⁹ Whether or not Hyckes had successfully realized William Sheldon’s plans for training of weavers at Barcheston he had managed a department of the royal household since 1572, handing over to his son in 1588.

²⁸ Marshall, ‘Faith and Identity’, pp.37-41, published a contemporary obituary which reveals much about Throckmorton’s internal life; for the *Tabula Eliensis* see Williams in Kaplan et al, pp. 230-248. Below the date 1596 three unequal divisions showed first a depiction of Ely Cathedral, formerly a Benedictine abbey; the painted heads of former abbots and abbesses and the monarchs they served, interrupted by the coats of arms of the Forty Knights detained in the castle by William the Conqueror dominated the middle. The lowest section, further divided into panels, showed the coats of arms of each Catholic gentleman detained there by Queen Elizabeth together with an inscription recording each man’s term of imprisonment, his custodian and the conditions of his release. Throckmorton was only briefly held there.

²⁹ *CPR 1572-1575*, no. 3269, TNA C66/1136, m.16 verso.

They had been directly accountable to the Master of the Wardrobe, Sir John Fortescue, a Catholic sympathizer, who died in 1607.³⁰

The person who did most for the family, for his grandfather in particular, is grandson William. By May 1604, aged 15, his Oxford education was complete. He obtained a passport to travel abroad for three years, together with his cousin Francis Plowden, and Humphrey Berry, of Berry-narbor, Devon.³¹ His travels did not go un-noticed. A letter to the earl of Salisbury in late November 1606 remarked on the few English encountered at Angers, most of whom attended the mass, though only some of those ‘had left England as papists’.³² William, accompanied by his tutor Claiton was noted as present.³³ The passport must have been renewed because William was still abroad in August 1608. A secretary to the English ambassador in Brussels wrote from Spa, haunt of English exile Catholics in the Spanish Netherlands, to ‘his bedfellow’, William Trumbull, reporting that Sheldon had parted company from Mr Dr Blencowe, and was on his way to the city with his companions. Trumbull was instructed to hand over to William a jewel left for him by Mrs Brome in his safekeeping – adding that he should take a receipt for it in Sheldon’s own handwriting.³⁴ Presumably William would sell the jewel for cash to support him. William’s itinerary thereafter is not known but late in 1609 Sir John Throckmorton, a distant cousin, wrote from Flushing thanking Trumbull for his letter delivered by Mr Sheldon, ‘my near kinsman’ and for the courtesy Trumbull had shown the latter.³⁵

A grandson marries

When William finally returned he had reached the age when his marriage had to be considered. It was one of the reasons making it increasingly urgent to find a means to cancel Ralph’s debt to the Crown. Linked to this was the complication that if Ralph died before the debt was annulled, the heir could not inherit his father’s lands without taking the oath of supremacy, acknowledging the sovereign as head of the church in England.³⁶ Much helped by his eminent contacts Sheldon negotiated permission late in 1611 to end his debt by agreeing a composition, that is, the payment of a lump sum.³⁷ The forfeit lands were

³⁰ Turner, ‘Working Arras and Arras Workers : Conservation in the Great Wardrobe under Elizabeth I’ pp. 43-60, associated : with http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Arras_men

³¹ *CSPD 1603-1610*, p. 110, May 16 1604; TNA SO 3/2 (Docquet Book).

³² HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 18 (1940), p. 350, 1606 Nov 21/Dec 1; letter from Tibbot [Theobald] Gorges, bro of Sir Robert 1589-1648, sons of Sir Thomas of Langford and Helena née Snakenburgh, Marchioness of Northampton, *Vis’n Somerset 1623*, pp.42, 123. He considered that other Englishmen he saw had been ‘corrupted since their departure from England’.

³³ A James Clayton was a trustee for the marriage of Ralph Sheldon of Steeple Barton, d. March 1659, SCLA, ER 3/2756, 17 May 1621.

³⁴ HMSSC, *Downshire*, vol. ii, p. 68, 69, August 2nd and 3rd 1608, BL Additional Ms 72,248, f. 63r 3 August 1608.

³⁵ HMSSC, *Downshire*, ii, p. 196, 12 December 1609, possibly Sir John of Lipiatt, Gloucestershire.

³⁶ Questier, *Conversion, politics and religion in England, 1580-1625*, pp. 102-05.

³⁷ TNA SP 15/39, no. 135. This document is dated in a later hand and calendared incorrectly at *CSPD Addenda 1580-1625*, p. 527. Examination of the original indicates C19 attempts to restore the ink, making it only partly legible now; other examples in the same volume suggest the handwriting is that of a clerk in the Earl of

transferred to a trust of family members extended to include the Earl of Worcester, grandfather of the intended bride and an immediate guarantor of respectability. A man of considerable standing in Court circles, he had been appointed the king's Master of Horse almost immediately on James' accession, had supervised the coronation arrangements and, perhaps hoping for some measure of toleration for Catholics, had been heavily involved in the peace negotiations with Spain.³⁸ Sheldon and his son then went to court to challenge the fictitious ownership granted to the trustees and re-establish their legal ownership of the property. Payment of £2,600, possibly not repayment of the full total, was deemed sufficient to achieve the return of his lands, first publicly proclaimed on 8 November 1612.³⁹

Paying off the family's debt to the king had possibly been seen as a pre-condition by the Petre family to any negotiations for an alliance between their fifteen year old daughter Elizabeth and Ralph's 23 year old grandson, William. The only document to survive from the many which must have been generated before the settlement was finalized and consent given suggests that Petre's officers had become very familiar with Ralph's delicate financial position and tortuous arrangements; they made careful notes about, and summaries of, the liabilities attached to the family's lands.⁴⁰ Whether arrangements with the Crown were eased by the earl's influence or whether the choice of his grand-daughter was dictated by the need to cancel the debt is unknown. The Petres of Ingatestone, Essex, were old family friends who had once owned lands adjoining those of Sheldon in south Warwickshire. Their interest in mapping their own estates may have inspired the making of a highly decorative map of Brailes, part of the jointure lands, perhaps intended as a wedding gift.⁴¹ The wedding was celebrated in April 1612.⁴²

Despite his financial troubles Ralph donated to Sir Thomas Bodley's appeal for funds to enlarge and extend the renovated fifteenth-century building by adding the west wing of the future quadrangle, known now as the Proscholium. Described as 'noted and respected' (venerabilem et egregium vir) he made a donation of £50.⁴³ Ralph contributed also to the appeal launched in 1612 by the Dean and Chapter of Worcester cathedral after they had contracted with the skilled and exuberant Thomas Dallam, to build a two-manual organ.⁴⁴ The

Worcester's household. We know that Sheldon owed £21,000 not £21. It sits unhappily with the evidence of the earliest summary reporting of the case (Bryson, *Cases concerning Equity*, p.346) which states that Sheldon was required to pay his debt, agreed at £21,000, by instalments of £3000.

³⁸ Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage*, p. 240-41.

³⁹ TNA CP 25/2/386/10JasIMic Double Counties. Salisbury and Elphinstone agreed, SP 14/40, f. 479v, that Sheldon's lands should be forfeit and divided between them if the debt were not cleared by 1614. Sheldon's biographers in Hasler, *House of Commons* are incorrect in saying his lands were sold. The authors were perhaps confused between distraint as forfeiture, when lands were lost to their owner, and distraint for debt, when lands would be returned after financial obligations were met. Sheldon's inquisition post mortem, TNA C 142/334/58 and TNA WARD 7/51/91 make clear that he handed them on to his heir.

⁴⁰ Essex RO Petre D/DP/E 165, almost certainly later in date than catalogued.

⁴¹ Turner, 'An early map of Brailes', now on-line.

⁴² Briggs, 'William Lord Petre 1575-1637', p. 54, citing Essex RO D/DP A 33, William's account book.

⁴³ Macray, *Annals of the Bodleian Library*, p. 37n. and Oxford University Archives, Register of Convocation, former reference K, f. 52, now NEP/Supra/Reg K, f.52.

⁴⁴ Groves *Dictionary of Music* provides a technical description.

first instrument ordered by any English cathedral since the Reformation, there must have been a bitter-sweet irony for Ralph. He was just old enough to remember the destruction of the old organ in 1542/43, its replacement under Queen Mary and removal again in Elizabeth's early years.⁴⁵ Financed by donations from Catholics and conformists alike, the list provides a snapshot of the background to Ralph's life. Ralph gave £5, his grandson, Sir Thomas Russell £3 6s 8d, his widowed daughter Mrs Elizabeth Russell 5s and 10s came from a William Sheldon, either Ralph's grandson or a Broadway cousin.⁴⁶ Friends too were amongst the donors; Anthony Skinner of Shelfield, Francis, son of Richard Hyckes, both former royal arrasmakers, as well as the relative newcomers Rector Horton of Tredington and the JP Walter Jones of Worcester, recent purchaser of Chastleton House, Oxfordshire from Sheldon's distant cousin, the financially encumbered plotter Robert Catesby.⁴⁷ The Worcestershire historian Thomas Habington described the arms of each donor placed around the organ's frame.⁴⁸

The last glimpse of Ralph comes in September 1612, in his response to a letter from Sir Thomas Lake.⁴⁹ Their acquaintance stretched back at least to the mid-1590s when Lake had been in government office as a clerk of the Signet; he was, though a secret Catholic, now close to King James as his travelling secretary. Lake sought Sheldon's opinion, tapping into the memory of an old man with useful local knowledge, still valued, possibly a tactful, even a tacit, gesture of support following the settlement of Sheldon's debt with which Lake had dealt in an official capacity. <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Lake.pdf> The matter concerned rights over private land, the context the long drawn out dispute over Crown and private rights in Malvern Chase. A second query, about Crown rights in the Forest of Feckenham is more curious. The estate had been the property of the traitor Francis Throckmorton, forfeit to the Crown since 1583/84 and in its possession for almost thirty years. The answers should surely have been available in royal records.

Ralph Sheldon's will

Two months later Sheldon wrote a clean copy of his will.⁵⁰ Far from the formulaic phrases usually employed, it is a strangely emotional document. It opened with a fervently worded protestation of his wish to die, as he protested he had lived, in the verities of the Catholic Church. It soon passed to a controlledly angry resumé of the story with Thomas Horde, his wrath directed particularly at the holders of the rent charges, urging them to bring their

⁴⁵ MacCulloch and Hughes, 'A Bailiff's List and Chronicle from Worcester', pp. 235-254; MacCulloch in Collinson, pp.110-111.

⁴⁶ Hodgetts, 'Recusant Contributors to the Worcester Cathedral Organ, 1613', pp. 28-33. Hodgetts (p. 29) like many others follows the mistake of Fr Minney in thinking Ralph had a son William who predeceased him.

⁴⁷ Turner, 'Walter Jones of Witney, Worcester and Chastleton', pp. 33-43, now on-line.

⁴⁸ Habington, *Survey of Worcestershire*, vol. ii, pp.463-7.

⁴⁹ TNA SP14/70, f.151, *CSPD 1611-18*, p.148, no.75; biography in Thrush & Ferris, *House of Commons. CSPD 1623-25*, p.572, TNA SP 14/194, f.1, Survey of assart lands in Whichwood Forest held by Ralph.

⁵⁰ BAH MS 3061/1/423 (former167823) 20 November 1612; official copy TNA PROB 11/121/345,transcribed http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Probate/PROB_11-121_ff_221-3.pdf

documents for cancellation; their names were recorded in his 'book of debts'. He made a gift of a silver basin with a cover engraved with their coats of arms, worth £25, to each of his seven living daughters.⁵¹ The legacy was given to Walter Fowler instead; Mayney, now re-married, only received £10. John Flower's debts, more than £50, were written off. Extra gifts were made to his eldest son and daughter. Edward was to have his father's striking clock 'which I do usually carry with me'; his daughter Elizabeth was to have his 'little watch made by Samuel'.

Bequests outside the immediate family began with the practical: £30 for the mending of highways and for the marriages of poor maidens, both clauses included partly to round off the unfulfilled bequests intended by his father and grandfather. Household servants were to receive a year's wages, his secretary Robert Jones was to have all his wearing apparel apart from items where the outside was velvet, satin or silk; one might wonder how much this excluded. Ralph's finest black cloth cloak was also excepted and his remaining garments, together with all his gold buttons, were to pass to his grandson William. Jones was also to choose between a cash gift of £6 13s 4d or Sheldon's 'grey ambling mare'. John Boulton, his faithful solicitor, had apparently worked only for an annuity of £5; he was to choose either a lump sum of £20 or the tenure of a cottage property in Brailes for life – an irony considering how much trouble the villagers had caused him.⁵² Two still surviving close friends were also beneficiaries. Mr Thomas Allen, fellow of Gloucester College, Oxford, was to receive £10 and sufficient fine black cloth to make a long cloak; Mr Dr [Anthony] Blencowe was to have the best red (?roan) gelding or nag. Two Beoley residents were remembered; the rector, Sir Richard Aldwell, was to keep the house there which he enjoyed in the right of his wife even if she predeceased him and an Edward Henshaw, possibly sometime steward there,⁵³ was to keep certain lands in Suffields within the parish on certain conditions.

To his son and heir Edward Ralph left all the jewels, plate and household goods, also appointing him executor. In that role he was requested to assure those to whom leases had been made that the arrangements would remain valid, to arrange for a portion of the tithes of Abberton to be paid to Francis, son and heir of their cousin William resident there; Francis was given the right to the next presentation there if a vacancy occurred in his lifetime; Ralph's cousin Thomas, son of his uncle Francis, was to receive £20 annually and to have his diet and lodging with Edward the heir; presumably he was to be taken into the household. Another Thomas, son of cousin Thomas of Shenington, would receive £10 if he delivered the bonds made between his father and Ralph relating to some unspecified claims on Hewell Field in Bordesley or Tardebig or Beoley, the land given more than seventy years before by Grandfather Ralph's will for the education of his grandsons, those for whom provision was now being made. Ralph went on to settle disputed rights to the advowson of Flyford Flavell but retained possession.

⁵¹ John Sulyard bequeathed their bowl to his wife to make certain she, not the family, would have first claim on it after his death, SRO D641/4/B/2/6/1.

⁵² In the Birmingham copy the figure £20 was scored through, replaced by £30.

⁵³ In the copy parish registers the rector was named as William; for Henshaw, possibly CR 2632 f. 159 and also ff. 4, 16, 100, 192, 219.

Finally, and grudgingly, his wife Lady Tasburgh was to have £100 on condition she settled outstanding matters but to have no claim on the estate. The proviso is the only indication that the dispute begun in 1605 reached some kind of resolution.



The arms of Ralph Sheldon and his wife Anne Throckmorton which surmount their canopied tomb. © Hilary L. Turner



Ralph Sheldon, armour-clad, above the chest tomb in Beoley church, © Hilary L. Turner

Ralph's burial, in the tomb he had already prepared, took place quietly as he requested, without the ceremonies he had organized for his father or desired by his grandfather. It was recorded in Beoley parish registers on 30 March 1613.⁵⁴ Nearly six weeks after the event John Chamberlain briefly noted 'Old Sheldon of Beoley is lately dead', scant appreciation from a usually verbose commentator.⁵⁵ Sheldon's near neighbour, Thomas Habington, who would have known him, later wrote that 'Ralph deserved for his singular parts of mind which flowed from his tongue and pen a pre-eminent dignity'.⁵⁶ Beoley's rector recorded his own tribute in the parish registers:



Detail, Ralph Sheldon from his tomb in Beoley church. © Hilary L Turner

'Whose soule I praie God ever blesse Amen'.

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⁵⁴ WAAS, 987.92 BA 5686. TNA WARD 7/51/91 gives 30 March as the date of his death.

⁵⁵ McClure, *John Chamberlain*, vol. 1, p. 450, 6 May 1613.

⁵⁶ Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, vol. 1, p. 68.