

Chapter Eight : Daughters and Dowries

Mistress Sheldon gave birth at regular intervals to at least ten children, nine of them girls. Most were baptized at Beoley and the burial of the only other male child, Ralph, was recorded in its registers in 1562.¹ The three eldest were named with a tactful nod to the most recent sovereigns – Elizabeth, Mary and Edward.

So many daughters made difficulties. To ensure a life commensurate with their status Ralph would need to provide a dowry for each daughter on her marriage – money payable to the bridegroom’s family, intended for his wife’s support though not always used that way. The bridegroom’s family was required to settle certain named estates on the couple jointly in survivorship, to support the survivor, then to pass to the heir, the jointure. In practice, and in value, the arrangements usually balanced out unless the match was blatantly made for money.

Ralph was ambitious and few choices were available from local families. In the end only two daughters remained within Worcestershire; three others lived further north in Staffordshire, while four were at an even greater distance, in Rutland, Suffolk, Kent and Berkshire. Nor did he consistently select a husband only from strongly Catholic families, though the geographical spread of the alliances might suggest that this had been a consideration. The first arrangement, socially advantageous but the least successful, was to a professed supporter of the Anglican establishment; four others were to more committed Catholics. Two were to men conforming with little enthusiasm; only two were to regime supporters.

Unsurprisingly, with only one exception, Ralph chose the husbands of his nine daughters from the same social rank as that to which he saw himself belonging. The fathers were, or had been, JPs and sheriff in their county, the sons had, for the most part, attended the Inns of Court rather than the Universities. All could expect to inherit estates sufficient to keep them in a degree of comfort, the lands built up by their fathers or grandfathers from the dispersed possessions of the dissolved monasteries.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, his eldest, had been around 16 when her marriage took place in Beoley church ‘according to Anglican rites’;² the exact date of her birth is unrecorded but her name, not previously found in the family, suggests she might have been christened about the time of the Queen’s accession in November 1558. The husband proposed, Sir John Russell of Strensham, belonged to a family with long links to the Sheldons. Their grandfathers had collaborated on local matters including the suppression of the chantries. Arrangements were completed with

¹ WAAS Beoley parish registers.

² WAAS Beoley parish registers and Bodl Ms Wood F.33, f.139, give 13 May 1574; Sir John’s Inq p.m. C 142/239/124 dates it to 1 September 1573.

the groom's father, Sir Thomas, JP, MP and sheriff, a trustee of William's second marriage in 1555.³ Himself widely connected by two marriages and, by the same means well endowed, the Sheldons might well have viewed a union with the socially superior Russells as advantageous. One might wonder, however, why the alliance could have been considered likely to succeed at a personal level. The bridegroom, aged around 25, had been brought up in the Protestant household of the 1st earl of Bedford. It was later remarked that he was 'forward in religion but not so in discretion'.⁴ Despite the fact that Elizabeth held to Catholic rites the jointure settlement was agreed by 26 May 1573.⁵ When Sir Thomas composed his will early in April 1574 the dowry was said to be £850 (today's £202,500); part had already been paid (£300), but it was noted that Sheldon still owed £550, which the executors were charged to recover as a debt.⁶

Within four years the marriage was going badly. Late in December 1578, Sir John decided to exclude Elizabeth and their children from any share in his estates. He conveyed his property to trustees, the 2nd earl of Bedford and Gilbert Lyttleton of Bell End, Belbroughton, finalizing the document on 31 Dec 1578.⁷ Sir John then seems to have travelled abroad. On his return he discovered that his mother in law had seen fit to summon an elderly priest, John Felton, to the marital home where he had celebrated Mass, rejoicing in the vestments and other furniture secreted there. Dutifully, Russell informed bishop Whitgift of Worcester, who reported 'the old priest' to Walsingham on 24 December 1582.⁸ The following year Sir John attempted to present both his own wife and his mother in law to the Worcestershire Quarter Sessions for recusancy, presumably hoping for their indictment. Sheldon later shrugged off his son in law's efforts, saying that he thought 'the country gave little credit to Russell's information because of his malice or may be because of the 'defect' of information'.⁹

That failure, exacerbated by defeat in petulant quarrels with his stepmother over her dowry and in a dispute with neighbours over fishing rights in the river Avon, alongside increasing mental instability possibly inherited from his grandmother, brought matters to a head. Not unnaturally, perhaps, Sir John's building frustrations rebounded ever more harshly onto Elizabeth. Gradually her family learned that she had been beaten, starved and deprived of the company of maids of her own choice, presumably in the hope she would leave the house of her own accord, an action which would minimize what Russell would then have to

³ William Sheldon's Inq p.m, C 142/159/87 and WARD 7/13/135; biography of Sir Thomas in Hasler, *House of Commons*.

⁴ Bishop Freke's comment, printed J. Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, London, in the 1725-28 edition, vol 3, part ii, p. 455, item no 24; Barnard, 'Notes on some Russells of Strensham', pp. 42-5.

⁵ A half-share in the manors of Eastham Burnells, Westham Burnells, East Westham and Playes, Essex according to C 142/239/124, John Russell, taken 27 May 1594. These were the lands allowed to her on 12 February 1596 following John's death in 1593, *CPR 1595-1596, L&I* vol.317, no 527.

⁶ TNA PROB 11/57/83, proved 9 Feb 1575. He died on 9 April 1574 in Worcester, TNA C 142/172/169.

⁷ The printed Inq pm (C142/239/142 gives date 1578, but see also *CPR 1578-80*, no. 470, 1 May 1579.

⁸ TNA STAC 5/R41/32, q.7. Hodgetts, 'Elizabethan Recusancy in Worcestershire : 1', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 3rd series, vol 1, 1965-67, pp. 69-78 and part II, *ibid*, vol 3, 1970-72, pp.81-91, at p.89-90; Felton's confession, *CSPD 1581-90*, p.79, no.29, SP 12/156/29, ff.46-48v is reprinted at pp 89-90 from the transcription by Mrs Veronica Webster, *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol 1, April 1963.

⁹ TNA STAC 5/R41/32, Sheldon's Answer to Russell's Bill of Complaint, article 7.

pay for maintenance. When Sir John's behaviour could no longer be ignored, let alone changed, Ralph lodged a complaint to the Council of the Marches; its clerk, Sir John Lyttleton of Frankley, would probably speak in his favour. Its response was to order Russell to treat his wife well, an instruction he disregarded. Ralph then appealed to the privy council, which directed that Elizabeth should return to her father's house under escort. Russell failed to make arrangements. On the grounds that this transgression amounted to contempt of court Sheldon again approached the privy council as a court of appeal. Following Russell's decision that separation would be the best course of action, a financial settlement was drawn up by the Lord Chancellor and the Master of the Rolls on condition that Sheldon took no further legal action.¹⁰ Difficulties continued, however. When Sheldon's servants, his stewards Harpur and Nicholas Ffolliat, arrived to conclude the deed of settlement and collect the first payment of Elizabeth's allowance Russell scrutinized the accounts carefully, claimed the amount exceeded the agreed limit and refused to pay. He sent the representatives away, not without the exchange of abuse; they were subsequently recalled and the matter settled. Throughout 1584 Russell retaliated with violence; an ambush in Harewell Wood, an attempted storming of Sheldon's house at Beoley, an accusation that Sheldon had brought three hundred men to the Quarter Sessions and a personal assault on Francis Clare who evened the score by attacking Russell's London house on Ludgate hill.¹¹

Russell launched a personal attack on his former father in law in Star Chamber early in 1585.¹² The outcome, not otherwise recorded, is almost certainly reflected in his next actions. He joined up to fight with the earl of Leicester's troops sent to the Low Countries against the troops of the Catholic king Philip II, later receiving a knighthood for his service.¹³ Returning briefly in 1587 he re-wrote his will, re-instating his children's rights to inheritance, but not Elizabeth's, before departing again for the continent.¹⁴ Elizabeth, and possibly her daughter, returned to her family; her allowance, 100 marks per year, was paid at six monthly intervals in 1586, 1587 and 1588, first by Jasper Cholmley, a Russell relation, and then by a series of convenient go-betweens.¹⁵ In 1594 she was reported as being present at mass in the house, but she seems also have had support from her sisters.¹⁶ In the same year she was noted as being at Horsley, the home of her married sister, Peshall.¹⁷

¹⁰ Respectively Sir Thomas Bromley and Sir Gilbert Gerard. Another marital separation, that of Sir George Blount (1513-81) of Kinlet, formerly in Northumberland's household, took place in 1575, Hasler, *House of Commons*, Adams, 'Because I am of this countrye', p. 40; A. J. Perret, 'The Blounts of Kidderminster', pp. 10-18.

¹¹ First summarized in Hotson, *I, William Shakespeare*, pp. 2-23, 29-34 from TNA STAC 5/S15/38, Sheldon's interrogatories to Russell, which presents a chronology of the incidents but is not itself dated.

¹² See Chapter Nine.

¹³ He is listed as being at Flushing in January 1586, Adams, 'Because I am of this country...', Appendix II.

¹⁴ His action might have been prompted by the earl of Bedford's death in 1585; the older will is recited in C 142/239/124, the new is at TNA PROB 11/92/96, written April 1587.

¹⁵ CR 2632, f.3 8 November 1586; f. 8, 9 May 1587; f. 103, November 1587; f. 110, April 1588.

¹⁶ *CSPD 1591-94*, p.544, no. 87; TNA, SP 12/249, f. 145r-146r.

¹⁷ Bowler, *Recusant Roll 3 & 4, 1594-96*, p. 221.

Mary

Elizabeth was the least fortunate of Ralph's daughters; her younger sisters made more quietly comfortable alliances. Ralph's second daughter, Mary, aged 20, made a clearly Catholic marriage, around 10 March, 1580.¹⁸ Her husband, aged 36, was Walter Fowler of St Thomas's Priory by Stafford, and former student of the Middle Temple.¹⁹ Like Ralph, the bridegroom's father had held several local offices and served as a JP despite being a known Catholic.²⁰ Questioned after the departure of the royal Progress from Staffordshire in 1575, on a charge of non-attendance at church, it was observed that he was 'more learned than most'; several weeks 'conference' with leading churchmen failed to achieve any change of heart.²¹ Confinement followed.²² He was still under restraint at the time of the wedding and, caught up in the widespread surveillance after the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries, was not released till May 1581.²³

His father's reputation continued to shadow the marriage. Still within the government's sights he was assessed to pay 100 marks and to provide two lances for the army October 1585.²⁴ Even after his death two years later his reputation still stained the son when, early in 1588, Walter was listed amongst Catholics to be confined; he was committed to the care of Dr Adam Squire, Master of Balliol College, Oxford and archdeacon of Middlesex. Mary, specifically named, was at first to be sent with him 'for she is the more obstinate', but was later separated from him, 'being somewhat sickly' and placed in temporary custody at Tixall.²⁵ But by 1590, when another list of the county's recusants was made, Walter's name was absent.²⁶

The couple probably enjoyed a relatively easy life style in the altered and enlarged buildings of the priory of St Thomas, about two miles east of Stafford.²⁷ In 1577 the family's goods had been valued at 200 marks (£133.7s 4d.) their lands at £40.²⁸ A more detailed survey the following year indicated that they were worth £400.²⁹ Extensive estates, together with control of seven advowsons and tenements in Lichfield and Stafford were listed at Walter's death.³⁰ He also owned, as his father had before him, salt mines at Wick and had acquired two salt bullaries in Malham, Cheshire.³¹ Despite the demands for recusancy fines in

¹⁸ TNA C142/216/21 of Brian Fowler. Walter did not enter on his lands until 16 June 1589, *CPR 1589-1590*, L&I, 301, no. 12; Mary's baptism in Beoley Parish Registers May 30 1560.

¹⁹ Admitted Middle Temple 28 January 1572, Sturgess, *Admissions*, p.35.

²⁰ Bindoff, *House of Commons*; Bateson, *Original Letters of the bishops to the Privy Council*, 1564, pp. 40-41.

²¹ *APC 9 1575-77*, pp. 13, 15; *APC 9 1575-77*, p. 26.

²² *APC 9 1575-7*, pp. 57, 80, 213.

²³ *APC 12 1581-82*, p. 42.

²⁴ Landor, *Staffordshire Incumbents and parochial records 1530-1680*, pp. 377, hereafter SHC 1915.

²⁵ Petti, *Roman Catholicism in Elizabethan and Jacobean Staffordshire*, pp.24-28. 30 Jan, confirmed 15 Feb 1588.

²⁶ Petti, 'Roman Catholicism...', pp. 47-49

²⁷ Longden, 'The Fowlers of St Thomas, near Stafford', 1543-1738', pp. 91-111, esp. pp 91-4; Dickinson, 'The Priory of St Thomas by Stafford', pp. 2-13.

²⁸ Ryan, 'Diocesan Returns of Recusants 1577', p. 92.

²⁹ SHC 1915, pp. 373-75.

³⁰ TNA C 142/393/154.

³¹ TNA C 142/216/21.

his father's lifetime, and the occasional need to borrow from his father-in-law,³² the Fowlers were scarcely an impoverished family. Mary was not named amongst the legatees in her father's will and so presumably had died before November 1612.

Meriel

Towards the end of 1581 or very early in 1582 a marriage was arranged for Ralph's third daughter, Meriel, then aged around sixteen.³³ The arrangement had probably received careful thought before a prudent choice, the rather older, conforming Francis Clare of Kidderminster, already a JP, was settled on. Clare was a widower, previously married to Agnes Blike (d.1576), daughter of the under-steward to the earl of Leicester at Tewkesbury. Those links took Francis to the earl's household; like the Russells of Strensham, Francis would serve at Flushing in 1586 with the earl's forces in the Low Countries and he attended Leicester's funeral. Clare became closely involved with his wife's family; he actively, if perhaps misguidedly, supported Ralph in the quarrel with Sir John Russell, summoned to court in 1585 for attacking his house on Ludgate hill.³⁴ This marriage reveals a note of affection absent from the others; Ralph was frequently entertained at the substantial house in Kidderminster bought in 1587.³⁵ Nevertheless, Clare's resources may have been limited. A small loan of £10 was received in November 1587 and second, also £10, soon after;³⁶ he also delivered a pair of gloves bought in London to Mrs Sheldon.³⁷ He died in June 1608 leaving his lands in trust.³⁸ Meriel outlived her husband, dying around 1619. Obviously a feisty lady, she contested several law suits, perhaps of necessity; one was against her husband's cousin Sir Edward Blount, over land which Meriel claimed formed part of her jointure lands.³⁹

Their oldest son, Ralph, aged 28 at his father's death, went first to Oxford and was then admitted to the Middle Temple. He subsequently entered the service of Prince Henry, the heir to the throne, as a gentleman of his privy council (1610-12).⁴⁰ He was six times an MP; knighted in 1625, he survived the Civil War, dying in 1670, without heirs. Less is known of his siblings; his brother Henry was admitted to the Middle Temple in 1606; his sister Anne married John Acton of Elmley Lovett.⁴¹

³² A loan of £17 was received in 17 November 1587, CR 2632, f. 132; Fowler's debts to Sheldon were forgiven him in Sheldon's will.

³³ Beoley Par Reg. baptized in September 1566, settlement in Simon Clare's will, TNA PROB 11/63/330.

³⁴ TNA STAC 5/S15/38.

³⁵ CR 2632, ff. 53, 93, 120, 159.

³⁶ CR 2632, ff. 130, 142.

³⁷ CR 2632, f.131.

³⁸ TNA C 142/341/54.

³⁹ TNA STAC 8/97/14 ; C 2/JasI/C15/46.

⁴⁰ Thrush and Ferris, *House of Commons 1603-1629*.

⁴¹ *Vis'n Worcestershire 1569*, p.38; Acton's biography, Hasler, *House of Commons*.



Coats of arms of four of Ralph's daughters quartered with those of their husbands. © Hilary L. Turner
 Left to Right: Sir John Russell and Elizabeth Sheldon; Walter Fowler and Mary Sheldon; Francis Clare and Meriel Sheldon;
 John Flower & Jane Sheldon

Jane

Ralph's fourth daughter, Jane, baptized in November 1567, married into a staunchly Catholic family.⁴² Her father in law, John Flower of Whitwell, Rutland, had been a JP since 1564 and three times sheriff.⁴³ He was pulled in for questioning early in 1582 after being named under torture as his host by Edmund Campion, one of the two Jesuit missionaries in 1580, and was suspected also of harbouring the priest Edward Chambers.⁴⁴ Flower did not deny the charge, but his answers, not previously examined in detail, reveal a hatred for the married clergy of the English church, expressing the wish that a hundred masters' wives might go a-begging – but that his son John, had with 'his own consent and liking, gone overseas with Richard Griffiths'.⁴⁵ Whether John merely attended the seminary school at Douai, itself an illegal action and an act of defiance, or had possibly even considered the priesthood is unknown; his name does not appear in the admissions to either University or to any of the Inns of Court.

Jane's wedding probably took place around 1584-85; it had long since been concluded by July 1588 when Sheldon paid 7s 4d for a dinner with Mr Flower and his man at Warwick.⁴⁶ There may perhaps be a hidden aspect to this alliance. John Flower senior was related to Francis Flower, gentleman pensioner and a close and trusted 'servant' of Sir Christopher Hatton, Queen Elizabeth's devoted servant.⁴⁷ In view of the increasingly hostile attitude of the earl of Leicester Sheldon would seem to have decided to ally himself with Hatton, undoubtedly linked to the Catholic community and with his contacts and authority in Warwickshire increasing to the point of challenging the earl's influence.⁴⁸

⁴² WAAS, Beoley Parish Registers.

⁴³ Born around 1535, he had been described in 1564 as an 'earnest furtherer of religion' in Bateson, *A collection of original letters from the bishops to the Privy Council, 1564*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Chambers had warned Persons about the wavering detainees in November 1580, *Miscellanea II*, CRS vol.2, pp.179-80.

⁴⁵ *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 42, no.8; TNA SP 12/152, f.28. The arrival in Douai of 'a young man of the nobility, John Flower, in the company of Robert Whalley', a Cambridge master of arts, is recorded in May 1583; it is less clear that he is the same person as Knox, ed., *The First and Second Diaries of the English College, Douay*, p.179.

⁴⁶ CR 2632, f.202.

⁴⁷ John the father and Francis were probably first cousins once removed; I am grateful to Neil Younger for this information, personal communication. Biography of Francis Flower, Hasler, *House of Commons* and see also Younger, *Christopher Hatton*.

⁴⁸ Enis, 'Warwickshire Justices', pp. 1-35. Hatton had sat on the muster commissions since 1579, p.18.

The marriage seems to have been discreetly but definitely Catholic; by the date of the earliest recusant roll 1592-3, Jane and her servant stood convicted and in debt for £60.⁴⁹ In 1618 both Jane and John were named as recusants.⁵⁰ The couple's estates were small and their finances shaky. Money troubles seem to have dogged them.⁵¹ Loans were being sought as early as March 1589 and again in May 1590;⁵² in his will Ralph Sheldon forgave his son in law the £50 he owed and all his other debts. When John's father died *in April 1620*, the Inquisition post mortem, held in September 1621, described his possessions as 1320 acres, 1020 acres being pasture, lying in Exton, Little Hambleton and Whitwell, county Rutland.⁵³ There were also 3 acres of wood, a water mill, a dovehouse, 2 messuages, 7 cottages and the capital mansion house; even before John senior's death these had been mortgaged, in 1618, to Jane's brother Edward and his son William Sheldon and finally lost when the estate was sold to Baptist Hicks, transactions possibly linked to the recognizance between Ralph Sheldon and a major money-lender, Michael Hicks, Baptist's brother, in May 1611.⁵⁴

Margaret

The choice of husband for Ralph's fifth daughter, a man from the administrative classes, broke a clearly observable pattern of choices from gentry sons. The families were probably already on friendly terms before the progress of formal arrangements suggested by two substantial payments, possibly the dowry, the first in May 1587, the second a year later, both recorded in the account book.⁵⁵ A flurry of luxury purchases and unusual spending on clothes in London at the end of May 1587, including a taffeta hat for both Ralph and his wife, perhaps suggests the marriage celebration.⁵⁶ Margaret, presumably christened after her step-grandmother because the name does not otherwise appear in the family, was now aged around eighteen.⁵⁷ Her husband to be was William Standen; aged 14 he went up to Jesus College, Oxford before enrolling in the Middle Temple in 1585.⁵⁸ His father Edmund, 'late of Barnard's Inn', was one of the clerks of the Petty Bag, the men who administered Crown appointments and, more importantly, issued the paperwork which enabled the court of

⁴⁹ Calthorp ed., *Recusant Roll No. 1, 1592-3*, p. 239.

⁵⁰ In an archidiaconal visitation, quoted sv Whitwell, *VCH Rutland*, 2, pp 165-168.

⁵¹ Following Campion's admission, Flower's house was searched; he was questioned a second time thereafter. Four years later he was behind in the payment of a debt to a third party who owed the sum to the Crown, a matter which the Council took measures to resolve, *APC 13 1581-82*, 362: 21 March 1582, 396; 16 April 1582, *APC 14 1586-87*, p.371-72, 13 March 1586.

⁵² *CPR 1587-88*, L&I, vol. 300, no. 1102; *CPR 1592-93*, L&I, vol 282, no. 929.

⁵³ TNA C 142/766/80.

⁵⁴ Feet of F. Rutl. East. 16 Jas. I; Feet of F. Rutl. Mich. 18 Jas. I, now CP 25/2/341 summarized in IND 1/17231; LC 4/197 f.191, for £80, repaid by Edward Sheldon in November 1619.

⁵⁵ CR 2632, f. 63, 18 May 1587, payment of £50; f. 181, 17 May '88 payment of £100.

⁵⁶ CR 2632, f.70.

⁵⁷ She was baptized in May 1569, Beoley Par Reg.

⁵⁸ *Alum Oxon*, 2 August 1581; Sturges, *Admissions to ... the Middle Temple*, p.55, 10 Nov 1585, grandson of another Edmund, will 1571 PROB 11/53/561.

Chancery to function.⁵⁹ Former residents of the Charterhouse church yard, London, they had recently become lessees of lands at Molesey, Surrey, some twenty miles upstream.⁶⁰

In March 1588 Ralph wrote from Weston probably to Standen's parents offering unrestricted use of the Whitefriars house, where they seem to have been staying already, while their own was building.⁶¹ But when the Surrey Commissioners requested Standen to pay the levy on his recently acquired property towards the costs of raising forces he explained that he was leaving the house to Sheldon, perhaps a clue to the jointure arrangements, and declined further liabilities.⁶² The Commissioners therefore approached Sheldon; he replied from the Whitefriars explaining that he had already paid his contribution to the tax in Warwickshire, his usual county of residence, and was only temporarily staying at Molesey 'because he had business in London'.⁶³ The commissioners, however, looked on his letter with disfavour and pondered asking the Warwickshire lieutenants, Sir Thomas Lucy and Sir Fulke Greville the elder, for confirmation of Ralph's assertion.⁶⁴ Whether they ever did so is not known; prudence dictated that Ralph should tell the truth. Certainly, he willingly met his obligation to contribute towards the cost of providing 10,000 men to be conscripted within the City, levied on his London property. Trustingly, he left the money with a local tradesman for collection.⁶⁵ <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Standen.pdf>

Although the government post would be inherited by the bridegroom, there was an element of risk in the arrangement of this marriage. A seemingly respectable family, they were the relatives of the government spy Anthony Standen, already working abroad on behalf of William Cecil Lord Burghley though Anthony's withdrawal from the world of espionage soon after perhaps minimized any ill effects.⁶⁶ William purchased county respectability with an estate at Arborfield, Berkshire, in 1589, and subsequently became sheriff of Berkshire.⁶⁷ He offered financial help to later members of the Sheldon family, lending £2000 in November 1619, cancelling the bond in 1622 without repayment.⁶⁸ Margaret was still living at the time of her father's will (1612); the date of her death is unknown; William died in 1639 when his son, another William, inherited.

⁵⁹ Jones, *An Introduction to Petty Bag Proceedings in the Reign of Elizabeth I*, p. 51; Available at: <<http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/californialawreview/vol51/iss5/2>>.

⁶⁰ *CPR 1584-5*, L&I, vol 293, no. 99; *CPR 1586-87*, L&I, vol 295, no 312.

⁶¹ Surrey Record Office LM/COR/3/419, 22 March 1588.

⁶² Surrey RO LM/COR/3/421, 13 April 1588.

⁶³ Surrey RO LM/COR/3/427, 28 April 1588; CR 2632, f. 184; paid 20 May for passage between Hampton Court and Molesey, 4d.

⁶⁴ Surrey RO LM/COR/3/428, 2 May 1588.

⁶⁵ CR 2632, f.194; 20 June '88, the certificate for the discharge of payment of the subsidy demanded for his house at the Whyte Friars; *APC 15 1587-88*, p.428, 24 March 1587/88; a second payment was required, for more men, the next year, *APC 17, 1588-89*, p.118.

⁶⁶ Hammer, 'An Elizabethan spy who came in from the cold: the return of Anthony Standen to England in 1593', pp. 276-295

⁶⁷ Arborfield, *VCH Berkshire*, 3, p.201; TNA C 2/Eliz/S12/60; C 78/92/6; Robertson, *The Environs of Reading*, vol I, p. 155.

⁶⁸ TNA LC 4/199 f.148v.

The heir

The marriage of most importance to the family's future, that of Edward, his son and heir, must have taken place sometime in 1586 since payments to his wife are traceable in the account book. The negotiations which preceded it are lost. The bride's father, Thomas Markham of Ollerton, resident at Kirby Bellars, Leicestershire, was socially more eminent than the Sheldons. Like Thomas Cornwallis, he had been a loyal supporter of Queen Elizabeth during her confinement at Hatfield in her half-sister's reign – a 'Hatfield man' as they were known. The reward for his loyalty in the difficult days of the 1550s was appointment on her accession as a gentleman-pensioner, the body of men tasked with protecting the Queen's person. His duties required frequent and prolonged attendance at Court, an obligation which could turn out to be two-edged. Absence from his family, exclusion from the practicalities and decisions about estate management and from interaction in the social life of the county was balanced by the advantages of contacts in the upper circles of government, for example with men like William Cecil, himself a 'Hatfield man'. For Ralph, still under the shadow of Russell's recent attack, the offer might well have weighed as a considerable attraction; conversely, Markham's interest in, and acceptance of, the proposal are a comment on Ralph's standing. Even though Ralph still had to provide for four daughters younger than Edward, his financial position must have been considered solid and any reservations or misgivings about consequences from his religious beliefs inconsequential. In other words, the material benefits of his lands and supposed income outweighed the potential attentions of the privy council. That, apparently, was something which could be managed and could be discounted as a hindrance.

Moreover, the marriage chimed with Ralph's interests in the county, sheep farming at Knaptoft and coal digging at Cole Orton. From his point of view the alliance was an association with a family not dissimilar to his own; his sister Anne, his cousins at Broadway, even his own brother were not Catholic, and the Markhams too were a family divided between conformist and recusant. For some of the latter Sheldon's perceived Catholic sympathies might even have been seen as an advantage. Thomas himself might conform, but his wife was known for her adherence to Rome; her Catholic connections extended across Northamptonshire to the Brudenells of Deene and into Suffolk by marriage to the Timperleys of Hintlesham.⁶⁹ For Ralph the match represents a further, and considerable, widening of Catholic contacts at a moment when support was needed. But the alliance would not always play out advantageously in the future; the behaviour of Elizabeth's brother Gervase Markham in 1603 turned the relationship into something of a liability. Curiously, the circumstances surrounding the marriage of the heir are the reverse of those attendant on those of Ralph's earlier arrangements where two prospective fathers in law were under surveillance and attracting notice from the council. When it came to the heir's marriage it is Sheldon who was not free of suspicion.

⁶⁹ Tighe, 'A Nottinghamshire gentleman', pp. 30-45; Bryan and Redstone, *Timperley of Hintlesham*.

Conclusions

Overall the alliances of Sheldon's daughters do not come out of or immediately form an obvious network. No marriage was contracted within the family, to a nearby cousin for example, nor, with one exception to families already long friends. Equally, no arrangement was made with families of higher status while the objections to alliances with families of mercantile origin emerge clearly from the negotiations for the Sulyard match.⁷⁰ Despite the distance from her parents of the home in which she would live consideration seems to have been given to the future physical comfort of the daughter as well as to the social status of the groom, even in the ill-fated marriage into the Russell family. With the exception of the Standens all the chosen families had made good through purchase of monastery lands.

Connections emanating from the family selected certainly widened an already extensive network and enlarged the influence of both parties. Some opened new avenues at least for a time, for example with the Markham and the Trentham families, but none substantially raised the Sheldon family's social standing. By 1603 Ralph was head of a family, his own and his cousins, divided in doctrinal loyalties, an inevitable 'progression' perhaps simply because the social status of his sons in law depended on their own doctrinal tenets.

[Back to Contents >>](#)

⁷⁰ <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Sulyard-Marriage-negotiations.pdf>