

Afterword

Within fifty years of Ralph's death family fortunes, already impaired by his borrowing, were waning. By the time of the Civil War (1642-47) the family were known Catholics and supporters of King Charles I, were on the losing side in the War. Though the fine of £9650 imposed was overturned at the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660¹ the penalty's effects led to the sale of the estates at Combe Baskerville and the Ditchfords which had been in the family's hands for one hundred years.² Sheldon finances never fully recovered.

Other factors too may have played a part in these sales. The childless Ralph the Great (1623-84), aware that the line was about to die out, may have been unwilling to pass on an encumbered estate and his heirs, cousins, to welcome the liabilities. The original core, the Beoley and Weston estates were retained; so too was Steeple Barton though despite recent refurbishment of the house the heirs moved to Weston soon after they inherited. At an unknown date the Whitefriars apartments were abandoned and a move westwards to more fashionable parts of the metropolis was revealed when Ralph (d.1822) by then an MP since 1804, gave his address as Hanover Square.

Fierce support for the Catholic faith and equally relentless determination to retain advowsons, salt bullaries and coal diggings reveal the struggle to be self-financing. These assets were finally sold only as part of the major restructuring of the family's life style in the 1780s, the sale first of Beoley and Steeple Barton³ then of Weston's entire contents before the building too was sold in 1827 and the family moved to Brailes.⁴ The last of the line was buried there in



The tomb of the last Sheldon of Beoley and Weston, Henry James Sheldon (d.1901), erected by his sister in Brailes' churchyard © Hilary L. Turner

¹ TNA C 6/156/146; C 6/156/191.

² Combe Baskerville, Nether and Over Westcote were all sequestered in 1650, *Cal Cttee. for Compounding*, 2326, restored in 1654, BLib. Add. Ms. 36583, f. 231. Most of the estate had been sold off by 1676, TNA E 134/28 Chas. II East./2; SCLA DR 469/19; VCH *Gloucestershire*, 6, sv Westcote, pp. 172-178. One of the three Ditchford estates, Ditchford Frary, recovered from forfeiture in 1658, BAH MS 3061/Acc 1901-003/167671, was then mortgaged from 1679 until its sale in 1823, WaCRO CR 456, box 12 part (i)/ box 33. Upper and Lower Ditchford had been sold by 1678, BL Add Ms 34684.

³ VCH *Oxfordshire*, 11, pp. 59-75

⁴ Christie and Ansell, *Sale Catalogue August 28-September 11 1781*, William Sheldon of Weston, Warwickshire.

1901.⁵ In the nineteenth century particularly their position had been briefly restored to that which they had occupied in the sixteenth century as male family members gradually abandoned the Faith so long upheld, especially by its daughters.

The demise of this long influential family coincided with the earliest studies of specifically Catholic history, beginning with the great collection of records by Henry Foley, of Tierney-Dodd and the narrative of John Morris, *Troubles of Our Catholic Forefathers*.⁶ The Catholic Record Society founded in 1904 began the publication of key documents.

It was in one of these volumes that some episodes in Ralph's life were first noted. In 1913 a short biographical note to a list of Mary Queen of Scots' supposed adherents created the image of Ralph Sheldon as a Catholic.⁷ Its fifteen lines declared him to be 'an intimate friend of Fr. Persons SJ', amongst those prepared to shelter at least one priest. References to 'trouble' in 1587 were not elaborated; his removal from the bench and further problems in 1594 were not explored though allowed to strengthen the image of Catholic rather than conformist behaviour. The contradiction between Sheldon's detention in the Marshalsea in 1580 as a potential supporter of the Jesuit mission closely followed by his subsequent declaration of allegiance to the queen and willingness to attend church services – conformity – passed without comment.

Twenty years later E. A. B. Barnard, student of local archives and the Sheldon family's first biographer, wrote to honour successive generations of a long-established local family, Catholic for six generations.⁸ Though some local material from the family papers at Birmingham was included, his work did not extend much beyond Elizabethan state papers calendared and in print; he left much uncharted and, clearly finding them distasteful, played down at least one important episode – the allegations of 1594. The family's next historian, also covering every generation, was the Benedictine headmaster monk T. Brendan Minney, parish priest at Redditch between 1961 and 1967.⁹ Using largely catholic sources his information for Ralph was poor, heavily influenced by local mythology generated by enthusiastic imaginative historians at Beoley and by failure to check his facts from independent sources in print. He made no acknowledgement of Barnard's contribution or of

⁵ A brief account of the later generations is offered by Barnard, *The Sheldons*.

⁶ H. Foley, (ed), *Records of the English province of the Society of Jesus*, 7 vols. in 8, 1875–83; Tierney, M.A. *Dodd's Church History of England*, 5 volumes 1839-43 (known as Tierney-Dodd); John Morris, *The troubles of our Catholic forefathers related by themselves*, London 1872-77.

⁷ 'Two Lists of supposed adherents of Mary Queen of Scots, 1574 and 1582', ed. John Bannerman Wainwright, CRS, *Miscellany viii*, 13 (1913), at pp. 98-99.

⁸ E.A.B. Barnard, *The Sheldons*, 1936, p.30. K.Gill-Smith, 'E.A.B.Barnard MA FSA FRHist S Freeman of Evesham', *Vale of Evesham Historical Society, Research Papers I*, 1967, pp. 47-53 and again by Derek Watson, 'The Bibliography of Ettwell Augustine Bracher Barnard MA, FSA, FRHistS 1872-1953', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 3rd series, xvii, 2000, pp. 285-292. Barnard's archive notes are deposited in Birmingham City Archives, his letters and diaries in Worcester Record Office and, his greatest achievement, the newspaper column based on documents of local historical interest in the *Evesham Gazette* (1921-1951) in Evesham Public Library. Of greatest fascination there is a volume entitled Sheldoniana, a scrapbook of a family he clearly revered.

⁹ <http://minney.org.uk/webpages/brendan.htm> T.B.Minney, 'The Sheldons of Beoley', *Worcestershire Recusant*, 5, May 1965, pp. 1–17.

the careful work in the Worcestershire *Victoria County History*.¹⁰ Writing in the shadow of the martyr view of catholic history, he constructed a groundless picture of continuing Catholicism at Beoley throughout Elizabeth's reign presenting Ralph as a man hounded for his beliefs.¹¹

There the picture remained until the work of Alan Davidson, published between 1968 and 1972. His thesis on Catholicism in Oxfordshire was, and remains, exemplary.¹² Many of his conclusions have now been absorbed into current writing, though the one which may be the most important is ignored. Davidson considered that the Reformation was finally achieved only in 1688, an opinion which receives more favour today than when it was first voiced. In the course of this wider research he found references to Ralph Sheldon, which he published.¹³ Some look very much like scraps of information that caught his attention as he leafed through records for other purposes; presenting a one-sided picture, overall they strengthened the image of Sheldon as a Catholic.¹⁴ That material coloured Sheldon's biography as a briefly serving MP, now used as the standard description of his life.¹⁵ But once again documents went unread. The allegations against Ralph in 1594 were not examined but were interpreted, incorrectly, as a recusancy hearing. In fact he was cleared of the implied association with conspiracy against the queen. Recusancy fines were not imposed then as is commonly said.¹⁶ The story behind Sheldon's vitriolic remarks in his will against his creditor, the recusant money-lender Thomas Horde has only recently emerged, showing the statement that Sheldon's lands were sold to repay his debt to be incorrect. Taken temporarily into Crown administration as security for the payment of his debt, the lands were returned to him just before his death.¹⁷

These accounts were all written against the prevailing, uncomplicated late Victorian view of Catholics in Elizabethan England as men oppressed by Protestants or, from the opposite standpoint, as supporters of the religion of traitors who fully deserved persecution. Since then, however, Catholic history under Elizabeth has undergone academic

¹⁰ *VCH Worcestershire*, 4, pp. 12-19.

¹¹ Two further errors should be noted. The William Sheldon Minney claimed as Ralph's eldest son buried on 15 January 1571 was Ralph's father, accorded a heraldic funeral on that date. Ralph was succeeded by his eldest son, Edward, baptised at Beoley on 5 May 1561; his second son, Ralph, died in infancy in 1563. Minney was also incorrect about the acquisition of Barcheston, not by will but after a hard-fought dispute in Chancery with his brothers in law; (C78/36, no. 27 [62], C78/33, no. 30 [28]., now available on AALT.) and about Ditchford, where the family papers at Birmingham Archives tell the story of gradual acquisition of the Knee Brook valley, see Chapter Two.

¹² Alan Davidson, *Roman Catholicism in Oxfordshire from the late Elizabethan period to the Civil War (c.1580-1640)* Bristol PhD thesis 1970; Bodleian Library copy at Ms top oxon d.602.

¹³ See Bibliography.

¹⁴ His article titled 'The recusancy of Ralph Sheldon', *Worcester Recusant 12*, omits the final paragraph in an anonymous account of Sheldon's conviction at Worcester Assizes in 1587.

¹⁵ Hasler, *House of Commons*.

¹⁶ The statement in Hasler is unreferenced; before its publication it would have been perfectly possible to check the four printed recusancy lists, *CRS*, vol. 18, 1916, *CRS*, vol. 57, 1965, *CRS*, vol. 61, 1970.

¹⁷ TNA PROB 11/121/345; SP 15/39, fo.288, no. 135, calendared incorrectly at *CSPD Addenda 1580-1625*, p. 527. CP 25/2/386/10JasIMic Double Counties.

re-assessment.¹⁸ The long accepted account of near universal welcome for the sweeping away of institutions which represented the abuses of the medieval church and the speedy acceptance of, and adjustment to, doctrinal change has given way to a more complex picture; it recognizes that these changes were adopted at differing speeds in different areas of the country. By Elizabeth's death in 1603 the Settlement of 1559 was neither firmly established nor universally accepted.

Though attendance at church was the touchstone of loyalty recent scholarship has identified a body of men, known to Elizabethans as Church Papists, who would attend church and thus obey the letter of the law while maintaining the older ways in private. The scale of only lukewarm support for the Elizabethan Settlement might reach considerably higher numbers than formerly thought.¹⁹

It is into this background Ralph Sheldon quietly slips, explaining some of the seeming inconsistencies in his behaviour. He knew himself to be a loyal English subject, as witnessed by his avoidance of plots. If others tried to make out he was a Catholic of the worst sort, and if in private he attended mass – though it is by no means certain he did – their abuse was not his problem. Looking at Ralph in this light also explains why he might be mentioned in, and associated with, Catholic contexts.²⁰



The altar supposedly given to Ralph by Pope Gregory XIII, Beoley Church,
© Hilary L. Turner

Ralph may have failed to attract biographers, but he is one of those figures from the past to have caught popular imagination, starting in the eighteenth century with speculation about the map tapestries and the epitaph purportedly composed by his son but recording 138 descendants.²¹ Living, he may well have enjoyed at least some of the charisma which now surrounds him, but it turns him now into someone he almost certainly was not – a staunch catholic and persecuted follower of the old faith, recipient of a gift of a heavy stone altar from Pope Gregory XIII (1502-85), the Pope he defied. He basks in glory

¹⁸ Christopher Haigh, *English reformations: religion, politics, and society under the Tudors*, 1993; Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England*, 1993; M.C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580-1625*, Cambridge 1996.

¹⁹ The emergence of a body of unconvinced 'Protestants' represents the story of 'how a constitutional decision was translated into local, psychological reality' was uncovered by Walsham, *Church papists*, p.7.

²⁰ Turner, 'Cloaked in Conformity'.

²¹ That figure could barely have been reached even by 1781, see Chapter Two

reflected from the earnest but unsubstantiated efforts of the 1920s to attribute tapestries to a weaving venture planned by his father, recently re-assessed and found wanting evidence.²² Ralph is presented as being surrounded by its products at home, absorbed in choosing tapestry patterns and a powerful manufacturer of carpets; it goes forgotten that his father's will specifically excluded him from any part in the enterprise. Moreover, its existence went unrecorded by two seventeenth century historians, both acquainted with the family, Thomas Habington and William Dugdale. Most recently incorrect genealogy has bestowed on him a relationship to William Shakespeare. None of these hagiographical attributes is consistent with the facts.

Meanwhile, the more puzzling, possibly more powerful, image of who and what Ralph really was slips further into obscurity. As a landowner, business man, local administrator with wide connections Ralph can be seen to have worked with rather than against the government. Educated, energetic, fastidious and forceful Ralph's actions, attitudes and experiences recorded in the fresh information surveyed in this study produce a 'new look'. Set these against their background, political, economic and religious, and fresh insights emerge; all expand the picture of his life. Some mildly qualify what has been said before. Others modify and change the story, and even turn upside down an accepted account, too much of which depended on supposition.

Myths die hard and attempts to tell a different story meet disbelief, hurt feelings and even outright hostility. The fable is preferred to the matter and evidence that changes the narrative is tossed aside. Yet those changes are what the reader has been asked to consider.

[Back to Contents >>](#)

²² Elizabeth Cleland and Lorraine Karafel, *Tapestries from the Burrell Collection*, 2017; Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House and their influence on the tapestries called Sheldon', available at <http://tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP41Chastletonrevision.pdf> and Turner, 'Émigré weavers in Elizabethan London: People and Products', available at <http://tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/Emigreweavers.pdf>