

Salt bullaries and coal diggings: profit or patronage?

The most firmly established and the longest surviving of Ralph's inherited assets was his interest in salt production at Droitwich where springs with a very high salt content bubbled up at three sites in the town. He owned around sixty bullaries – the boiling houses where salt water extracted from springs was evaporated by boiling to leave only salt crystals.¹

A description by John Leland who visited around 1536 and a rough sketch map dating to c. 1700, allow us to picture the background.² Sheldon's holdings were largely in the Upwich pit, the largest and most productive because its saline content was the highest.³ Its site, near the now disused Bag Bridge in Vines Park, was excavated in the 1980s; a reconstruction of its appearance stands nearby.⁴

In 1519 grandfather Ralph concluded a hard bargain with William Child of Northwick, the first known transaction with a family who would have a long association with the Sheldons; in 1519 Child leased two bullaries to Sheldon for 80 years.⁵ Shortly afterwards *his grandson*, also William Child described as being of Blockley, borrowed £10 from Sheldon and, as a pledge for repayment, made a new lease of both bullaries, this time for 99 years; the agreement could be cancelled if the debt were repaid within ten years.⁶ About the same time Ralph still further increased his holdings, leasing two other bullaries at the Overwich pit in Droitwich from John Morris of Powicke, Worcestershire, for 40s per year and a quarter of salt.⁷ Ten years later he bought a bullary from Thomas Ruding which he had inherited from his father and he from the widow Isabel Crabb of Pershore.⁸ A second transaction with Ruding, purchase of another half share, was completed soon after.⁹ None of these possessions was noted in his will (1546).

Though he too omitted any mention of them in his will, William expanded the family's interests. He bought, and quickly sold, in 1562, four bullaries, in the Upwich and Netherwich pits, from Edward West of Smithfield, London, who described himself as gentleman; Sheldon then sold them to Walter Gower of Lygons Inn, London, possibly his brother in law, MP for Droitwich in 1558 and again in 1562 and member of a family which had owned vats since 1516; Gower may simply have been adding to his family's holdings.¹⁰

Four years later William sold twenty bullaries, three pits, the equipment and the woodland which supplied the fuel for the furnaces to well-established Droitwich names – Francis Buck, Elinor wife of Edward Corbet, George Wylde, George Davey, John Wheler

¹ No one in Droitwich worked with salt pans, solar evaporation, as stated throughout Hasler *House of Commons*.

² John Leland's Itineraries, (ed) Toulmin Smith vol 2, pp. 93-95; Habington, (ed) Amphlett, II, 296-73; Basset, 'The Earliest Map of Droitwich'.

³ Hopkinson, 'Salt at Droitwich', p.11-12.

⁴ Hurst, *A multi-period salt production site at Droitwich: ...* esp. p.11-12.

⁵ BAH MS 3061/1/277 (former 167677).

⁶ BAH MS 3061/1/206 (former 167606).

⁷ BAH MS 3061/1/53 (former 167453), Dec 1528, damaged.

⁸ BAH MS 3061/1/343 (former 167743). Thomas Ruding was almost certainly related to Joyce, wife of Ralph Sheldon in the time of Edward IV. His trustees were Humphrey Ruding and Richard Sheldon, probably cousin Richard of Spetchley. Isabel may have been Ruding's maternal grandmother.

⁹ BAH MS 3061/1/326 (former 167726) 6 January 1529/30 where John Fulwood, George Wells and Richard Sheldon are also mentioned. BAH MS 3061/1/314 (former 167714) 8 January 1529/30.

¹⁰ BAH MS 3061/1/268 (former 167668). A confused account of family relationships is offered in *Vis 'n Worcestershire 1569*, p. 61, a biography of Gower in Bindoff, *House of Commons*.

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and Walter Gower.¹¹ In 1574 Ralph was in a position to convey a life interest in twenty-one bullaries to Elinor wife of Edward Corbet.¹²

William had also, possibly not by the most straightforward means, acquired an interest in four other bullaries, their crybbes,¹³ furnaces and houses from Francis Brace of Rushock, Worcestershire, trustee for Richard Polsted who also had woods near the town. In 1570 Polsted brought a case in Chancery to reclaim his ownership from trustees and Sheldon. Unresolved by William's death, Polsted's persistence forced Ralph to give them back some years later.¹⁴

It may be that these references are only the tip of an iceberg and that Sheldon's assets were considerably larger. In February 1577/78 Ralph bought out the remainder of the lease of an Underwich pit from the grandson of the original lessee; the price was £73 6s 8d, a sum rather less than Sheldon would have paid to continue the lease.¹⁵ At much the same time he acquired a half share in two bullaries also in 'Underwyche', from Thomas Whitton of Lewknor, Oxfordshire, his wife Elinor and their son Christopher also in February 1578.¹⁶ This is the last indication of active Sheldon dealings, but two bullaries were leased in 1692 and were still in the family's ownership in 1772.¹⁷

Each bullary had a share in the water from the springs in the area in which it lay. Pumped to the surface, the liquid brine was measured in a unit known variously as a vat, 'phate' (fate) or bullary which represented the owner's share of a pit's content. By the mid-sixteenth century there were roughly 400 vats, each entitled to 6912 gallons of brine in each boiling season. The process of evaporation – to reduce the water and leave only the salt – was carried out in a simple open-fronted timber shed whose thatched roof covered the furnace capable of accommodating two boiling pans, the reason why a



A reconstructed brine pit in Upwich, Droitwich and the necessary simple tools – bucket, paddle, wooden pipe for transfer of liquid to sunken barrels before transport to the nearby bullaries, the open-sided roofed boiling sheds © Hilary L. Turner

¹¹ *CPR 1563-66*, p.361, no.2033, C 66/1019, m.66, 4 Feb 1566.

¹² *Rutland Magazine*, vol iii, no. 8 (October 1903), p.236; BAH MS 3061/1/419 (former 167819) 29 March 1574.

¹³ Defined as 'houses boarded in the bottom and sides, where the salt is kept until sold', Hopkinson, 'Salt ... at Droitwich', p. 34 & n. 261 quoting Rastell's 1671 account of then conditions.

¹⁴ TNA C 3/141/37, C 78/45/3.

¹⁵ BAH MS 3061/1/56 (former 167456). Morris's grandson was Oliver Christopherson of Weston Favell, Northamptonshire not Norfolk as in deed; BAH MS 3061/1/204 (former 167604) where clearly appointment of attorneys for Overwich included John Whitton and William Dethick.

¹⁶ BAH MS 3061/1/57 (167457), BAH MS 3061/1/342 (former 167742) and BAH MS 3061/1/484 (former 167884).

¹⁷ Leased by Ralph Sheldon to William Bookey, BAH MS 3061/1/449 (former 167849) 6 May 1692.

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half share in a bullary could be sold. Over the season each pan produced around 4 tons of salt so that the total annual production amounted to 1600 tons.¹⁸

Bullaries, or part shares, could be traded, whether for private gain or for the exercise of political patronage. Owners like Sheldon who held by inheritance enjoyed burgess status, not extended to those who acquired a bullary by sale or on lease. He would therefore have had some say in the strategic management of the pits administered jointly by the bailiffs and burgesses. The day to day decisions, and the sale of the end product, were made by the bailiffs; they instructed the officials who managed the technicalities of extraction, pumping, distribution and boiling.¹⁹

Before brine would be delivered for processing bullary owners were required to prove their title. Records of such proof are scanty and incomplete, making it unclear who owned the 400 vats at any particular point as are also records of revenues received. It is thus impossible to calculate what income Sheldon might have expected. One testator in 1585 anticipated an annual sum of £20.²⁰ Income was probably not very high because a large percentage of the overall profit went towards payment of the borough's fee farm. The greatest benefit to the individual was perhaps the avoidance of purchase on the open market; he could retain at least some of the coarser salt for use in his own households for the winter salting and sell, for a higher profit, only the fine-grained white salt for which Droitwich was renowned.

Possibly as important and useful to Sheldon as the product were the networking opportunities that participation in such a communally organized industry permitted. He would have known the bailiffs and come in contact with a wide circle because possession of bullaries spread far beyond Droitwich residents.²¹ Owners formed a relatively cohesive group of people, many of them living relatively close together within the same counties and almost certainly already acquainted by contact through administrative duties if not also by family ties. Thomas Peshall, father in law of Ralph's daughter Anne, had owned, and leased out, one bullary at the time of his death (1608).²² Most important of all, Droitwich residents, around 760 people in the 1560s, were entitled to vote for their own Member of Parliament. Several Droitwich members came from resident bullary owning families, amongst them Walter Gower and Francis Brace mentioned above, both related to the Sheldons; the latter's own patronage in the borough, whose voters' influence might be outweighed by the non-resident bullary owners, was perhaps exercised on behalf of John Russell, future husband of Sheldon's eldest daughter in 1572, for William Combe in 1588, and for Robert Walter in 1593, none of whom had immediate local connections.

Coal Diggings

Coal mines too are only sketchily documented, the subject of disputes in grandfather Ralph's time.²³ Brief mention in William's will suggests their development had been a joint

¹⁸ Berry, 'The borough of Droitwich and its salt industry 1215-1700', gives a total figure on pp. 50-52, Hopkinson, 'Salt...at Droitwich, n. 128 for figures per pan.

¹⁹ Berry, 'The borough of Droitwich...' esp. pp. 43-44, 46-48.

²⁰ TNA PROB 11/68/462

²¹ As Habington's list, both TNA documents and the 1566/67 list show, [WAAS, The Hive BA 1006, 455 a,b .] Habington listed 13 families in 1541, Habington II, 296.

²² TNA C 142/319/186.

²³ TNA C 1/892/23.

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enterprise with the earl of Huntingdon.²⁴ Whatever their extent, they were certainly functioning when in August 1587 Sheldon paid four shillings for dinner for the miners of Cole Orton at which he seems to have been present;²⁵ he still held the lands at the time of his death. Whether their profitability compared with that of the pits owned by the Willoughby family at Wollaton, however, is unknown. Sir Francis netted an income of £4,636 from five pits between 1549 and 1561; receipts from other sources, mostly agricultural, totalled only £3,178.²⁶ His profits were maintained until the mid-1580s, when receipts dropped dramatically.²⁷ Ralph's interest in his own assets must, at some level however shallow, have been practical, and, though only two visits are known,²⁸ it is likely they were an annual event. He was considered a good judge of quality; when Sir Thomas Cornwallis was 'in hand' with a mine in Yorkshire he sent a sample of its coal to Sheldon, seeking his opinion.²⁹

Recent archaeological investigations have revealed the techniques, and even the clothing, used; the Sheldons retained their interests until 1730 when Overton Sawsey was sold.³⁰

²⁴ TNA PROB 11/53/79.

²⁵ CR 2632, f. 94.

²⁶ Smith, *Sir Francis Willoughby of Wollaton Hall*, p.11.

²⁷ University of Nottingham Dept of Manuscripts, Middleton Collection, Mi A60/5 quoted from Durant, *The Smythson Circle*, pp. 72-74. Between April and October 1586 receipts dropped to only £276 10s 10d.

²⁸ CR 2632 ff. 94, 165.

²⁹ Scott-Warren, 'News, Sociability and Bookbuying...', pp. 380-402

³⁰ Hartley, 'Tudor Miners of Cole Orton, Leicestershire', pp. 91-101; Trevor Stewart, [A History of Coal Mining in Coleorton & the Local Area](#)".