

## Sheldon's account book CR 2632

The folio volume of 222 paper folio pages sewn into a contemporary vellum binding contains entries day by day covering two years, Michaelmas 1586 to Michaelmas 1588, then the start and end of the financial year. Entries were arranged in two separate sections dividing income from the expenditure which Ralph regarded as personal. Folios 3-13 and 101-117 record income; folios 15-100 and 119-220 expenditure; both sections are running accounts. Four pages were left blank, folios 14, 118, 221-2; four were written on paper an inch or so shorter than the other pages, ff.115-118. Several different hands can be distinguished, one of them Ralph's own, but the man responsible for their overall maintenance was his secretary, Robert Jones.

In 1586 entries begin only on 18 October, perhaps because both Sheldon and Jones had been at the Quarter Sessions at Bromsgrove on legal business connected to the assaults in June and July at Tredington.<sup>1</sup> Next year the entries began earlier (6 October) made by an assistant whose execrable hand takes up half of folios 101 and 119.

Entry after entry meticulously noted the date including the year of receipt or payment on an almost daily basis. The writer was less punctilious in providing the reader with means to identify individuals, many of whom must have been well known to him. Annual totals for income and for outgoings were cast up at the end of September in 1586-87 (ff. 13 and 100 respectively), and again in 1587-88 on ff. 117 and f.220, together with a balance for each year.

Only totals of large or long-term expenditure submitted separately were given; particulars or a bill might be mentioned, but no original survives, possibly destroyed. Marginal notes throughout suggest that the book was intended both as a record and for future use and reference. Most marginalia do no more than expand a name, suggesting there had at some point been a need to check through payments.<sup>2</sup> Some are explanatory, reminders for a later user or to himself; others appear to be almost memos as to how a payment was going to be met or had been dealt with, so that they must have been written soon after the event. Several are extremely informative, identifying the person or the purpose of the money more clearly or giving further details of where the money had come from and where it was going, for example the passing of bonds.

Figures focussed on the monies Ralph kept under his personal control and on his own personal spending, whether for business or pleasure. Income was derived from a variety of sources; entries note sums delivered to him for conveyance to a third party, loans received and loans made usually with a date of repayment. Most of what was recorded as income came from named individuals and not from his estates. Only a few rental payments and produce sales are recorded; there are no lease renewals and few stock purchases. Such transactions are

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<sup>1</sup> TNA STAC 5/H31/35, sheet six.

<sup>2</sup> Warwickshire County Record office, CR 2632, ff.106, 107, 123, 135, 145, 147, 165.

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rarely even referenced as 'particulars', the detailed accounts for sales, purchases or work executed, and would have been recorded in separate, dedicated ledgers which must have existed. Estate bailiffs' receipts and payments to Foliot, the chamberlain at Weston, for example are unlikely to have disappeared into thin air but will have been separately accounted for, just as Ralph kept 'my book of debts' mentioned in his will. Little of the recorded income of around £9000 (neatly balanced by outgoings of much the same sum) was his own money and the means by which his cash was accumulated remains largely concealed; it was not the purpose of the book.

The entries form a running account of the money passing through Ralph's hands. Although the entries relating to his travels possess a brevity and an immediacy which make it sound very much as though they had been made on the pages very soon after disbursement that cannot be the case. Entries are integrated into the continuous record of Ralph's personal expenditure whether on himself, as small short-term loans or on larger projects such as the construction of Weston. Each of the two years opens with a list month by month of larger sums received from a variety of sources. The composite record must therefore be a later making up of the books to make possible something like an audit. His absences were so frequent that it is almost inevitable that there should have been a way of keeping accounts of what was spent in that time, possibly a separate note book or set of papers which Jones took with him, later incorporated into the fuller record, a similar practice to that followed with the 'particulars' of a detailed account condensed into a total sum. Very occasionally there was a slip in the running record, detectable by an unlikely geographical sequence.<sup>3</sup>

Because income from rentals and produce sales is lacking the account book figures do not reflect Sheldon's entire income and are un-informative about household and estate matters; calculation of estate revenue and observations on estate management are therefore hard to make. No evidence comparable to that found in the series of account books which survive in the Petre family archives,<sup>4</sup> the more sporadic but still detailed rentals, receipts and expenditure found amongst Sir Thomas Tresham's papers,<sup>5</sup> the scribbled jottings amongst the Sulyard archive<sup>6</sup> or the long series of Cornwallis accounts,<sup>7</sup> survives to illuminate details of Sheldon's diverse interests and responsibilities.

Seen as accounts therefore the material is disappointing; it does not permit reconstruction of the fundamental structure of estates or household management. The book's content is better viewed as a record of Ralph's daily life over a two year period, a diary of his dealings with the world, whether personal, professional or pecuniary. Its entries bring to light hitherto unknown events, covering both personal concerns and more public matters to provide a snapshot of two years in his life, years in which, against high national and personal drama, his activities and duties as a landowner and father were little interrupted.

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<sup>3</sup> At Frankley in 1588, f. 165; entries concerning Goodwyn, f f.199, 201.

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, 'The economic development of the estates of the Petre family ..'; Edwards, *John Petre*., Both are based on archive material in Essex Record Office.

<sup>5</sup> Finch, *The Wealth of Five Northamptonshire Families 1540-1640*, pp. 72-76.

<sup>6</sup> Stafford Record Office D 641/4H/3/1/A-G, 1586-1592.

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, *The Wealth of the Gentry*, esp. pp. 142-178.

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The only previous account of this account book, written in a relatively short time for Sotheby's sale catalogue, presents a very pretty but frequently inaccurate picture.<sup>8</sup> Sheldon rarely moved with an entourage of ten horses, never sold sheep at Stratford and was neither a manufacturer of tapestries or a heavily fined Catholic. So little is known of Ralph's much misrepresented life that too many of those who have only briefly inspected the volume have jumped to improbable identifications, others to incorrect conclusions through lack of context and similarity of name.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the book's entries, many hard to read, are now indexed – [click here to view](#)

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<sup>8</sup> Sotheby's London, *English Literature and History*, 15 December 1987, Lot 228. A corrected copy has been deposited in Warwick Country Record Office.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the curious assumption by Kilroy, *Memory and Transcription*, p.211, that fish sent by Sir Thomas Cornwallis referred to priests, CR 2632, f. 18, (packed into baskets, f.19), when frequent references, 36 in all show Ralph's purchases, ff.24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 32, 34 37, 131, 138; the identification of one Harington (CR 2632, f.132) as Sir John Harington of Kelston is unlikely to be correct while John and Edward Danvers (f.92) are more probably the family of Calthorpe and Epwell, Oxfordshire (*VCH Oxfordshire* 10, pp. 42-49) than those of Wiltshire, as Donno, *Ajax*, 59.