

John Humphreys, 'Elizabethan Sheldon Tapestries': a critique

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This small work is the earliest survey of tapestries thought to have been produced in sixteenth-century England. It was first published in 1924 in the journal of the Society of Antiquaries of London, *Archaeologia* 74. Subsequently Humphreys was given permission to reprint it on a commercial scale at his own cost, the usual version to turn up on the secondhand market.¹ The consequence of this republication has been the wide dissemination of views now of antiquarian interest only, marred by 22 mistakes of fact.² The effect on accounts of the Sheldon tapestries has therefore been disproportionate because this account became accessible when a later, more accurate, study remained – and remains – confined to the pages of a limited circulation journal.³

Discovery and publication in 1908 of a will written by a wealthy Worcestershire gentleman, William Sheldon (1500-70), engaged antiquarian interest.⁴ It set out a scheme to introduce tapestry weaving at the family's manor house at Barcheston, Warwickshire. The success of the plan was unknown, un-remarked on by contemporaries or by later historians. Unknown too were any products that might have been made there although tapestry maps bearing the Sheldon family arms over four generations and showing the four counties in which they held land were considered to be strong candidates. Exhibited in 1914 they fired Humphreys' enthusiasm;⁵ it came to be thought, quite reasonably, that there must be other products.

Humphreys began a search for other possible examples. In 1919 he discovered five tapestries at Chastleton House, Oxfordshire, which he

¹ First published in *Archaeologia* 74, 1924, 181-202. Every reprinted copy contains the following notice on its first page: 'Read April 3rd 1924. Reprinted (with additions) from 'Archaeologia' vol lxxiv, by permission of the Council of the Society of Antiquaries.' The addition consists of one tapestry showing the Sacrifice of Isaac.

² See Appendix.

³ E.A.B. Barnard and A.J.B. Wace, 'The Sheldon tapestry weavers and their work', *Archaeologia* 78, 1928, 255-314. For a complete bibliography see

<http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p30_learn_read.htm>

⁴ <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p33_learn_ws_will.htm>

⁵ *Portfolios III, Tapestries*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, c.1915.

claimed, without firm evidence, as the work of the Barcheston looms.⁶ Much encouraged, he continued his investigations, resulting in this publication.

A number of general considerations underlie his conclusions. He assumed the venture was successful, writing in the incorrect belief that Sheldon's were the only looms in this country where tapestry was woven.⁷ He reinforced the assumed success of the venture by amassing some thirty-two examples of tapestries diverse in size and style, some of them displaying coats of arms of English families, few of them new discoveries. He thus conjured into existence a large and amazingly versatile workshop, apparently capable of attracting commissions from a wide range of clients, socially and geographically – an unlikely situation given that the weavers worked more than one hundred miles from London, already England's consumer capital. For only half the tapestries listed could a sixteenth-century provenance be claimed – based on the identification of woven coats of arms – but for none did (or does) a contract survive. There was therefore no firm basis for his attributions, many of which have since been dismissed.

There were also a large number of mistakes. Humphreys was dependent on others for transcriptions of Sheldon's will which recapitulated his plan to introduce weaving of tapestry, arras and cloth fabrics into Warwickshire. Firstly the two places chosen were named by Humphreys as Barcheston and Baddisley Clinton; the latter is a serious misreading,⁸ Sheldon established a loan scheme for those working there which Humphreys did not quote in detail nor even try to explain; the next stage, which Humphreys did cite, was to give one Richard Hyckes use of the manor house at Barcheston rent free on condition that he organized the venture. Little was then known about Hyckes other than the curious statement of the Oxford antiquarian Anthony Wood (1632-95) who wrote that⁹

the first Rich. Hyckes here mentioned was bound prentice to a Dutch arras worker in Holland by *Ralph* Sheldon [1537-1613]

⁶ John Humphreys, 'Some Recently Discovered Elizabethan Sheldon Tapestries', *Country Life*, October 9 1920, 463-4. For modern views see Hilary L Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House and their influence on the image of the tapestries called Sheldon: a re-assessment' *Antiquaries Journal*, 88, 2008, now on-line at

<<http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP41Chastletonrevision.pdf>>

⁷ W. Hefford, 'Flemish Tapestry Weavers in England:1550-1775', in *Flemish Tapestry Weavers Abroad*, ed.Guy Delmarcel, Leuven University Press, 2002, 43-61,available on google-books.

⁸ Barnard's reading was Bordesley, *Archaeologia* 78,261-62; for the implications see Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House...', p.330, note 99.

⁹ Bodleian Library Oxford, Ms Rawlinson D 807, f.15; *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, antiquary of Oxford, 1632-1695, described by himself*, ed A. Clark, 2 vols, Oxford Historical Society 1891, I, 477n.

(who built the great house at Weston in Com. Warw. anno 1588) and being out of his time, settled at Barston, a manour yt belongs to the Sheldons and made and weaved those fair hangings yt are in ye dining roome at Weston.

Like others before him, Humphreys interpreted Wood's words as though it had been William Sheldon (Ralph's father) who sent Hyckes abroad.¹⁰

Again like others Humphreys also ignored Sheldon's provision for the weaving of the more marketable cloth wares; instead Humphreys assumed that the luxury product tapestry took pride of place. The author's confident assertion that the 'reputation of the factory was widely established early in [Queen] Elizabeth's reign' is based on a single remark by the earl of Leicester who did no more than mention 'Sheldon's scheme' when approached by the town clerk of Warwick about the relief of the town's poor.¹¹ Sheldon's will, however, stated clearly that Hyckes should train 'youth' to whom the loans would then be available, an arrangement found also in merchants' bequests of money to time-served apprentices for use as set-up capital to establish their own workshop – an aspect which passed without comment here. No writer other than Wood so much as mentioned the venture until the 1780s and even then it was only the map tapestries which aroused comment.¹² Even as late as 1912 it was stated that William Sheldon's plans began under king Henry VIII.¹³

There is, however, no documentation for any surviving tapestry called Sheldon though there is some for pieces no longer extant. Humphreys quoted a reference to payment by Sir John Talbot of Grafton Manor, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, 'for his arms' to be woven at Barcheston, too brief to reveal detail about the finished product.¹⁴ That weavers could not be traced nor tapestries found after 1611 should surely raise doubts about the

¹⁰ W.G.Thomson, *A History of Tapestry*, London 1906, 260; A.F. Kendrick, *Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue of Tapestries*, London 1914, 16; Victoria and Albert Museum, *Portfolios III, Maps*; Humphreys, *Archaeologia* 1924, 183, though he also said Hyckes brought Flemish weavers with him, a matter still debated.

¹¹ *The Black Book of Warwick*, Warwick, ed T Kemp, 1899, 314-318.

¹² Richard Gough, *British Topography*, 1782 edition only, Bodleian Library, Gough Gen Top 363-366 (vol, 3, 309-310); Treadway Nash, *Collections for a History of Worcestershire*, (London, 1781), 2 vols, i, pp.69-72. Mention of the maps only was made by *George Vertue's Notebooks*, Walpole Society, vol. 24 1936, 140; H.Walpole, *Journals of Visits to Country Seats*, ed. Paget Toynbee, Walpole Society, vol 16, 1927-28, 62.

¹³ A.F.Kendrick, 'The Hatfield Tapestries of the Seasons', *Walpole Society Annual*, ii, 89-98.

¹⁴ 'The Elizabethan Estate Book of Grafton Manor', ed. J. Humphreys, *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, xlv, 1918, 1-124, 49, 83. Humphreys' reference to an order from Sheldon's creditor Thomas Horde omitted the last lines, see Appendix.

longevity of the project.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Humphreys concluded that the works functioned for eighty-six years 1561-1647.

Humphreys presented his findings in a lecture to the Society of Antiquaries in 1924. The discussion which followed has, unfortunately, been omitted from the reprint of 1929; it reveals clearly that his audience was not entirely convinced by his conclusions. One person commented that five or six styles could be distinguished amongst the examples shown; the unstated implication was that not everything originated in the same workshop.

This feeling, together with the many errors, inspired a second study. Undertaken four years later by a Worcestershire historian, E.A.B. Barnard, and a classically educated curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, A.J.B.Wace, it was published as 'The Sheldon tapestry weavers and their work', *Archaeologia* 78, 1928. Much was corrected but with such tact and discretion that few readers now appreciate the dramatic differences in the two accounts – most obvious in the reading of Bordesley (close to the Sheldon house at Beoley, Worcestershire) instead of Baddisley and the discussion of the value – if any – of Anthony Wood's remark. An effort was made to explain the terms of Sheldon's will based on this accurate and very different transcription¹⁶ and a search was made to find weavers – with only limited success. Wace attempted to establish criteria by which a 'Sheldon' tapestry might be recognized. The result was twofold; a number of Humphreys' suggestions were dismissed¹⁷ and so an entirely different image of tapestries called Sheldon was created, focussed on small scale furnishing items rather than large scale wall decoration. Its weakness was that the benchmark stylistic criteria were derived from Humphreys' tapestry finds at Chastleton, still not firmly linked to Barcheston by anything more than supposition.¹⁸

In fact, it now seems doubtful that Sheldon's plan was a great success. Names in Barcheston's parish registers are largely those of local families while tapestry weavers – with three exceptions - are absent from Worcester wills. Yet at least 110 émigré tapestry weavers are listed in London

¹⁵ The interpretation of these threads as a date is probably also mistaken, Joan Kendall, 'The Four Seasons tapestries at Hatfield House', *Text*, 39 2011/12, 18-23, p.22, views expanded by Michael Bath, *The Four Seasons Tapestries at Hatfield House*, Archetype, 2013.

¹⁶ See http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p33_learn_ws_will.htm and Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House....', 330-31, notes 99-103.

¹⁷ Wace, *Archaeologia* 78, 304-08; for other disputed examples see http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p32_learn_doubt_attrbs.htm

¹⁸ Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House....', 325-29, notes 66-86; see <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP41Chastletonrevision.pdf>

records,¹⁹ ignored by both Humphreys and Barnard though historians of other crafts were aware of the influence and contribution of these settlers.²⁰ Some of the identifiable weavers were employed by the royal household to conserve the tapestries owned by the Queen²¹ and evidence – which Humphreys could not have accessed – now shows that invitations to skilled émigré craftsmen including weavers were issued by a number of towns in depressed areas.²² Sheldon's plan was therefore far from original; he was doing little more than following the example of other individuals. The work of all three 1920s authors has recently been reconsidered in the light of many more tapestries so called – all of them small scale – and more plentiful historical evidence.²³

Humphreys' work is a 'period piece', written when tapestry studies in England were in their infancy. His most intriguing inquiry was to attempt a calculation of how much tapestry could have been woven – somewhat inconclusive since he did not know how many weavers were at work. Though he mustered a range of information, too much is – and always was – incorrect.²⁴ Opinions about the origins of many of the tapestries discussed have changed; some have been re-attributed.²⁵ As one would expect after the passage of ninety years much of the background historical knowledge has been amplified and augmented, thus altering the deductions which can be made. Nothing should be quoted from the article without checking against more modern scholarship. Only as the start of Sheldon historiography and for its illustrations recording the tapestries' condition ninety years ago can Humphreys' study still be considered to have any interest.

¹⁹ R. E.G.Kirk and E.F.Kirk (eds), *Returns of Aliens dwelling in the City and Suburbs of London from the Reign of Henry VIII to that of James I*, Huguenot Society of London, Quarto Series, vol 10 in four parts, 1900-1908. See also Turner,

<http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/Emigreweavers.pdf>

²⁰ For example L. Cust, 'Foreign artists of the reformed religion working in London c 1560-1660', *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, vol.7, 1903, 45-82; E.M. Jourdain, *English Decoration and Furniture of the early Renaissance (1500-1650)*, London, 1924; as silversmiths, W. W.Watts, *Old English Silver*, London, 1924.

²¹ T.P.Campbell, *King Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty*, Yale (Paul Mellon), 2007; Hilary L Turner, 'Working Arras and Arras Workers : Conservation in the Great Wardrobe under Elizabeth I', *Textile History*, 43(1) 2012, 43-60. With this is associated :

http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Arras_men and

<http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/WorkingArras.pdf>

²² N. Harte, *The New Draperies in the Low Countries and England*, Oxford, 1997; Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*, Oxford, 1978, 13-16, 181-184.

²³ Hilary L Turner, 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House...'

<http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP41Chastletonrevision.pdf>

²⁴ See Appendix.

²⁵ http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p32_learn_doubt_attrbs.htm

Appendix : Factual Errors in John Humphreys, 'Elizabethan Sheldon Tapestries', *Archaeologia*, 74, (1924), 181-202, reprinted 1929

The *Archaeologia* 1924 pagination is first, that of the 1929 reprint in brackets

183 [11] In 1545 **Wm Sheldon purchased Weston**

It was purchased in 1533 and emparked in 1546 - Warwickshire Record Office (WaCRO) CR 456 box 22,23; *Letters & Papers Henry VIII*, 1545, ii,846 (34).

183 [11] **William Sheldon sent Richard Hyckes to Flanders**

Inaccurate use of Anthony Wood's words (1632-95); see text.

184 [11] **Sheldon acquires Barcheston**

The date 1561 was reached by deduction from the date of the death of Willington's nephew Barnes in that year. Sheldon did not acquire the property by simple purchase. The story can be traced in WaCRO CR 580/21(2), CR 580/17/5, CR 580/14/6, 8, 9, 11, resulting from 'the articles' mentioned in C 3/122/71 and CR 580/15,16. The tale is best read at <<http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP33BIOGWmS.pdf> or Hilary L. Turner, 'Finding the Sheldon weavers; Richard Hyckes and the Sheldon tapestry works', *Textile History*, xxxiii, 137-161, p.149, on-line at <http://tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/FindingtheWeavers.pdf>

184 [11-12] **Humphreys uses an incorrect transcription of the will**, based on Victoria County History, Warwickshire vol 2, 1908, 263-4; E. Jourdain, 'The Tapestry Manufacture at Barcheston', in Alice Dryden, *Memorials of Old Warwickshire*, 1908, 30-38; or W. G.Thomson, *Tapestry Weaving in England from the earliest times to the end of the xviiiith century*, (London,1914), 47.

185 [12] **Nicholas Goodman** was not a Barcheston weaver but a Bedfordshire vagrant who claimed to be 'a weaver and arrasworker who had not wrought long'; he came before Warwick magistrates, T Kemp, *The Book of John Fisher town clerk and deputy recorder of Warwick 1580-88*, Warwick 1900, 176-7.

185 [12] **The initial transcription of the will, used by Humphreys, read Baddesley Clinton**, not, as Barnard correctly read, Bordesley near Redditch, Worcestershire.

185-6 [12-13] **Hyckes lived in Barcheston parsonage** - a dubious statement without obvious substantiation and none given.

186 [13] **That Barcheston was operational until the mid-seventeenth-century** and **That Francis Hyckes continued the works after his father's death** are both statements Humphreys did not substantiate.

186 [13] **Sheldon weavers working for Bess of Hardwick** - Humphreys seems to have copied this mistake from Thomson, *Tapestry Weaving*, 1914, 57 or Kendrick, *Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue of Tapestries*, 1914, 16; It was considered unlikely by Barnard, *Archaeologia* 1928, 279 and

proved incorrect, S. Levey, *An Elizabethan Inheritance; the Hardwick Hall Textiles*, London 1998, 33.

187 [14] **The witnesses to Hyckes will**, William Diston and Thomas Dowler were not employed in royal arras works in the Great Wardrobe, hence the inclusion of a list of names in Barnard and Wace, *Archaeologia* 78, 280-286; see also Hilary L. Turner, 'Working Arras and Arras Workers : Conservation in the Great Wardrobe under Elizabeth I' *Textile History*, 43(1), 43-60. With this is associated :

http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Arras_men

188 [14] **It is uncertain whether Beoley was burnt during the Civil Wars** but it was pillaged and robbed - Barnard, *The Sheldons*, Cambridge 1936, 49-50 and Philip Tennant, *The People's War in the South Midlands 1642-45*, Banbury History Society, 23 1992, 139.

189 [15] **Horde's demand is not quoted in full**. The document, Birmingham Archives and Heritage Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167897, reads

Whereas the said Thomas Horde doth demaund of Ralph Sheldon the some of threescore and odd pounds over and above the aforementioned some of £24,000 by him supposed to be due to him as part of arrearages of certain rent charges and also the delivery of certain hangings of Tapistire for the furniture of two chambers, and one bed thoroughlie furnished it is covenanted graunted and agreed by and betweene the said parties for them their heirs and assigns and either of them doth covenant graunte and agree each with the other by these presentes that the last mentioned premises shall be referred to the consideration and arbitrament of Thomas Throckmerton and Thomas Willford Esquires whose judgement and award therein the said parties do mutuallie promise and agree to observe and perform.

In other words, the demand for tapestries was considered overbearing and it was to go to family arbitration.

190 [16] **Richard Gough bequeathed to the Bodleian Library** in 1809 the fragments of maps he, Gough, purchased at the Strawberry Hill sale.

Gough did bequeath the Elizabethan map tapestries to the Bodleian, but the fragments sold at Strawberry Hill in 1841 (on death of Walpole) are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, T.61-1954 and T.61A-1954, see http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p11_discoveries_eliz_maps.htm

191 [17-18] **Weston Park** is usually considered to be in Staffordshire.

191 **Catesby's fine was £3000** It was 4000 marks, *Calendar State Papers Domestic 1601-03*, 45, no 91; Walter Jones presented an exemplification, not a grant of arms, *Harleian Society*, 86, 1925, 121-2; Eleanor Pope was the daughter of a German goldsmith (marriage contract, Oxfordshire History Centre E/24/5/D/1) and thus not likely to be a maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth; Henry Walter's son and heir married Anne Fettiplace of Childrey, OHC E 24/1/1D/34, 35 (1609). For Walter Jones see Hilary L Turner, 'Walter

Jones of Witney, Worcester and Chastleton: rewriting the past', *Oxoniensia* 73, 33-43, now on-line.

192 [18] **The initials given are incorrect** –WI and EI occur in two tapestries, MI and EI in two others; in the Judgement of Paris HI appears twice and it also has a woven date, 1595. It was the belief Jones owned Chastleton by that date that first caused Humphreys to posit a friendship with Sheldon, leading to purchase of tapestries from Barcheston. See <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/CompleteAnnotatedlist.pdf>

192 [18] Wrong owners even then, all of whom have since sold on.

195 [21] **Contradictory initials given for the Sudeley tapestry** – the correct initials are B I F not B I K

196 [22] **Dudley armorials thought to be typical of Sheldon work** – a view now much revised, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78831/tapestry/> and http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/p15_discoveries_leicester.htm

200 [26] **The date 1588 said to be in the Worcester tapestry**; it is in the Warwickshire tapestry map, see <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/WarwickshireTapestryMap.pdf>

200 [26] **Incorrect identification of arms**: Humphreys stated, incorrectly, that the Sheldon-Rocksavage arms were on the Warwickshire map. They are on the seventeenth-century version of the Oxfordshire map, see Victoria and Albert Museum, *Portfolios III, Tapestries*, 1914. That the two later versions were woven at Barcheston – Humphreys' contention – was contradicted on stylistic grounds by Wace in *Archaeologia* 78, 289-90. Wace's view is now accepted, see Wendy Hefford, *From Mortlake to Soho*, forthcoming, Cat. 4 and Peter Barber and Tom Harper, *Magnificent Maps*, British Library Exhibition Catalogue 2010, 56-59.

200 [30] **The cartoon [of Oxfordshire] considered to have been designed by Francis Hicks before his death** : No reason for this remark is given, but presumably it was inspired by the inscription on the later Oxfordshire map which carries Francis' name; much of that area is missing from the original but is likely to have been also on the Elizabethan map. However, Francis died in 1630, eighteen years before the marriage commemorated by the arms, which took place in 1648, WaCRO CR 4502/4.

This comment marks the start of the assumption that the Hyckes were both designers and weavers of the map set, a very improbable scenario.

201 [29] **Information from Mr Baird Wood** – three generations of Hicks in the Great Wardrobe as also Thomas Hoerd – this is not Humphreys' mistake but it is incorrect information, see comment at p.187 above, Turner 'Working Arras and Arras Workers': *Textile History*, 43(1), 43-60 and http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Arras_Men_The_Men_Employed_1558-1639