

## Biography & Epitaph of Ralph Sheldon c.1537, d.1613

### Early Years

Ralph, son of William Sheldon and Mary Willington, was born around 1537, the eldest son and fifth child. His life before his marriage to Anne, daughter of Sir Robert Throckmorton of Coughton Court, in 1557, is shadowy.<sup>1</sup> According to the epitaph, composed by his son, placed above the tomb Ralph built for himself in Beoley church, Worcestershire, he attended Oxford university, travelled abroad 'in France and other parts' and spent some time at the Queen's court.<sup>2</sup> The records of Oxford University, however, contain no entry of his matriculation while lists of Oriel College admissions do not include his name.<sup>3</sup> Only one, ambiguous, reference suggests he might have travelled, briefly, abroad, but it was the words of the epitaph which led E.A.B. Barnard to suggest that his companion was Richard Hyckes, later manager of the tapestry venture for which William Sheldon set out provisions in his will.<sup>4</sup> Ralph's attendance at Court remains undefined, but is at least as probably the court of Queen Elizabeth as of her half-sister Mary, for which Ralph would have been very young indeed. The one fact about his youth that is documented, his attendance at the Middle Temple, which he entered in 1556 and where he is likely still to have been

---

<sup>1</sup> Ralph was said to be aged 33 in his father's inquisition post mortem TNA C 142/159/87; his marriage was arranged on 16 May 1557, Birmingham Archives and Heritage (BAH), Barnard Miscellany 77/D/1 quoting deeds copied by Rees Price at Coughton Court, no. 811. The original is no longer in the Coughton papers at Warwickshire County Record Office, CR 1998. The marriage was to take place before the 30 June following; the dowry was to be 700 marks and the trustees were named as Edward Plowden, Francis Savage, Anthony Pollard and Robert Brayne, the sons-in-law of William Sheldon. The trustee lands were the manors of Brailes, Beoley, Combe Baskerville, Over and Nether Westcott and Weston and lands in Weston and Long Compton, for 60 years should Anne live so long; she died in 1603.

<sup>2</sup> E.A.B. Barnard, *The Sheldons*, Cambridge, 1936, p. 41, (reprinted 2103).

<sup>3</sup> J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*, 3 vols, London 1892; Oriel College Admissions.

<sup>4</sup> E.A.B. Barnard & A.J.B. Wace, 'The Sheldon Weavers and their work', *Archaeologia*, vol.78, 1928, p.259. Reference to 'young Sheldon' occurs in letters of 1555, *Cal State Papers Venetian 1555-56*, nos 284-5. The identification with Ralph is not clear and should not be regarded as fact.

in 1558, was omitted from the tomb inscription and is not mentioned in any biography.<sup>5</sup>



Whatever the truth, one way or another Ralph received at least part of the standard education of gentry sons. His marriage into an old-established landed family, staunch Catholics, can only have enhanced his own social standing at least locally. His father's astute gauging of the changing political scene on the accession of Queen Elizabeth (1558) and his second marriage around 1555, to the mother of the sometime wife of Ambrose Dudley, younger brother of Robert, later earl of Leicester, ensured useful political contacts at the highest level. They would have replaced those lost when Nicholas Heath, Ralph's great uncle, was deprived in 1559 of the Chancellorship and of the see of York.<sup>6</sup> One of Ralph's first tasks was to bring about his own father-in-law's resignation from the post of keeper of Warwick castle and hand the office over to Robert Dudley.<sup>7</sup> Possibly through the latter's influence Ralph was elected knight of the shire in 1563;<sup>8</sup> certainly he was secure enough in Dudley's favour to be able to call on his influence as Chancellor of Oxford University in 1566 when Ralph sought the lease of the manor of Dean, Oxon., from the Fellows of Oriel College. It was granted to him, reluctantly it would seem, only because of Dudley's intervention.<sup>9</sup> Little else is known about Ralph's activities for the rest of the decade; he was, presumably, still overshadowed by his father.

His independent, and his public, life began at the age of 33 on the death of his father in December 1570; the will laid down elaborate precautions for the preservation, as for the division, of the estates between the two sons, Ralph and

---

<sup>5</sup> Register of Admissions to the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, ed. H.A.C. Sturges, 3 vols, London 1949, vol. i, sv anno 1556.

<sup>6</sup> William Whorwood, in S.T. Bindoff, *Members of the House of Commons 1509-1558*, HMSO 1982; Nicholas Heath, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> S.L. Adams, 'Because I am of that Countrye and Mynde to Plante Myself There'; Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and the West Midlands', *Midland History*, 20, 1995, 21-74.

<sup>8</sup> P.W. Hasler, *Members of the House of Commons 1558-1603*, sv Sheldon; it contains several inaccuracies.

<sup>9</sup> The Dean's Register of Oriel College 1446-1661, ed. G.C. Richards and H.E. Salter, *Oxford Historical Society*, vol. lxxxiv, 1926, p. 156.

William, and for the portions allotted to the daughters and to Margaret their step-mother.<sup>10</sup> Licence to enter on his lands was granted on 5 June 1571 and almost immediately thereafter he became involved in the day to day administration of Worcestershire. He had already served on the commission of musters in 1569 for Worcestershire and, in the same county, on post mortem commissions.<sup>11</sup> In 1573 he was named along with a member of Leicester's household, John Tracy of Toddington, as an arbitrator in an inheritance dispute in a family to which he was related, the Catesbys; the next year he was amongst those ordered by the Privy Council to 'take some paines' to end the controversy between Sir John Conwey of Arrow and others about common land belonging to Sir John at Okenheath.<sup>12</sup> In 1576 Ralph was pricked as sheriff of Worcester and served on further commissions.<sup>13</sup>

## The Complications of Conviction

The question of Ralph's religious beliefs remains unclear. If he was truly a Catholic, it is perhaps curious that he was sent abroad in 1555. There is no reason to think, as is often said, that he converted on his marriage in 1557, when in any case it would have been politic to profess Catholicism; mixed marriages were far from unusual throughout the C16 and at least in the early years of Elizabeth's reign it was unnecessary for any man to reveal his true convictions.<sup>14</sup> It is perfectly possible that, like his father, he never made his position clear. Exactly when, and even if, conviction came to matter is unknown; his problems as a Catholic did not follow either the coming of Mary Queen of Scots in 1568<sup>15</sup> or the papal bull *Regnans* (1570), which

---

<sup>10</sup> TNA PROB 11/53.

<sup>11</sup> TNA SP12/63; *CPR 1569-1572*, no.2191, 3002, 3036.

<sup>12</sup> *CSPD 1547-80*, 458; *Acts of the Privy Council*, ed J. Dasent, viii, p.313, November 15 1574.

<sup>13</sup> B.Lib. Harleian Ms 1043, f.52-53; *CPR 1575-78*, no.353 (5.11.76); *Inquisition post mortem* nos.242,1922.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph's 'conversion' based on his marriage was first suggested by Barnard, *op.cit.*; see also S.L.Adams, "Because I am of that Countrey..", note 7.

<sup>15</sup> Reference to a Mr Sheldon as an agent of Mary Queen of Scots soon after her arrival in England - *CSPD Addenda 1566-1579*, p.236, HMSO 1871 - is almost certainly to a member of another family, possibly that living at Ashbourne, Derbyshire; a Sheldon family was in the service of the earl of Shrewsbury there, *Catalogue of Shrewsbury Papers in Lambeth Palace Library*, ed. E.G.W.Bill, 1966, *Derbyshire Arch Soc Record Series*, 1965, Ms 704, ff.104-110.

declared Elizabeth excommunicate and released her subjects from obedience to her; the arrival of the Jesuit mission may have prompted deeper introspection when in August 1580 Ralph was summoned to appear before the Privy Council at Oatlands.<sup>16</sup> Also summoned were the catholic Lords Paget and Compton and Thomas Throckmorton. By November Ralph was in the Marshalsea prison from which he was removed by his wife on the plea of sickness. He was placed in the care of the Dean of Westminster, Gabriel Goodman, who had been instructed to talk to Sheldon and bring him to the right way of thinking; in other words, house arrest and persuasion was to be used to bring him into the Anglican church. It seems that by January Sheldon promised ‘to yield himself dutiful and to repair to church’ The catholic account records the circumstances of his submission along with Paget’s; Sheldon’s decision to conform was, supposedly, celebrated in the streets of London by a libellous rhyming couplet which attributed his lapse from the faith to his liking for worldly wealth - ‘Sheldon is fallen and do you know why/Through oves and boves and pecora campi’ – ‘sheep, cows and the herds of the field’.<sup>17</sup>

His social position was not yet in jeopardy and his decision to conform at least outwardly may well have been dictated by expediency.<sup>18</sup> The depth of his beliefs must remain in doubt, even though the suspicion of recusancy hung over him for the rest of his life, sometimes little more than an insult, sometimes a serious threat to his way of life. In December 1583, caught in the arrests made as part of the Arden plot, a priest, Hugh Hall, confessed that he had said mass at Sheldon’s house and had for the past fourteen years been living in turn there and with John Talbot, Sir John Throckmorton and Lord Windsor.<sup>19</sup> Two years later, Sir John Russell of Strensham,

---

<sup>16</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council*, xii, p.166, 254, 301-02.

<sup>17</sup> *Catholic Record Society*, Miscellanea II, 1906, The Memoirs of Father Robert Persons, ed. Rev J.H.Pollen, p. 27 ; *CRS*, IV, 1907, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> A letter of 1579 sometimes said to be addressed to Sheldon from the priest George Williams then in France asking to be told if there were any ships that could transport him to Ireland or to Scotland, was actually directed to a Mr Shelton at Rouen, *CSPD 1547-1580*, p.633, SP 12/132, no. 10, f.22.

<sup>19</sup> *CSPD 1581-90*, pp. 128,129, 138, 142. Paula Henderson, *The Tudor House and Garden*, Yale 2005, p.115, notes Hugh Hall as the author of a gardening treatise, British Library, Ms Royal 18.C.III. Hall, supposedly a monk at Bordesley, is not listed amongst the monks at the Dissolution, *VCH Worcestershire*, ii, 154 and Patrick McGrath and Joy Rowe, ‘The Recusancy of Sir Thomas Cornwallis’, *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, vol. xxviii, 1961, 226-271, esp. p.244-

husband to Sheldon's eldest daughter Elizabeth, threw the charge of Catholic practices at him. Unafraid, Ralph answered, in court as he claimed to have done in life, that he was unashamed of his beliefs and thought himself as good a man as any other.<sup>20</sup> Russell's plan to ambush his father in law had misfired; only by abusing him as a papist Russell could even hope the authorities might take notice. They did not and Russell does not seem to have greatly weakened Sheldon's position in the county; certainly there were no penalties. It was not until sometime in 1587 that Ralph was examined before the Grand Jury of Worcestershire on the subject of his religion.<sup>21</sup> He was with some difficulty indicted for recusancy though bishop Whitgift's name was invoked in support of his having conformed. In the same year he was once again before the Privy Council; payment to the clerk to testify to his appearance is recorded in his personal account book.<sup>22</sup> Yet though he was the target of government attention he rarely suffered any penalties or restrictions. His only experience of house arrest was in 1580-81 and he was not amongst those 'interned' at Ely, Banbury, Wisbech and Broughton at the time of the Armada;<sup>23</sup> only between 1587 and 1589 are there any records of payment of fines for recusancy.<sup>24</sup> He more than complied with the orders that Catholics should supply at their own cost arms and a man for the defence of the realm, at least in his own county; he was less happy to fulfill the obligation on a house at which, he claimed, he was only briefly staying.<sup>25</sup>

---

47. In a similar context, it seems unlikely that Ralph was ignorant of the presence in Brailes around 1600 of Anthony Sherlock, the Appellant priest who betrayed Father Garnett, Philip Caraman, *Henry Garnett 1555-1606*, London 1964, p.342-3.

<sup>20</sup> TNA STAC 5/R12/34; STAC 5/S15/38; STAC 5/R41/32; L.J.Hotson, *I, William Shakespeare*, London 1937, pp. 29-34.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Davidson, 'The Recusancy of Ralph Sheldon', *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol. 12 Dec. 1968, 1-7; TNA SP 12/206, f.175, no.83.

<sup>22</sup> *APC 1587-88*, vol xi, p. 137; WaCRO Account book CR 2632 f. 76.

<sup>23</sup> In saying Sheldon was regularly under house arrest Jonathan Bate and Dora Thornton, *Shakespeare Staging the World*, London 2012, p.61 misquote Brendan Minney's now dated 'The Sheldons of Beoley', *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol. 5 May 1965, pp.1-17; Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth*, London 1960, p.421.

<sup>24</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council*, xi, p.137 (henceforth APC); TNA E 401/1842-1846, 1587-89, Pells Rolls; Sheldon's personal account book for the years 1586-88, Sotheby's London, 15 December 1987, lot 228, is at Warwickshire County Record Office, CR 2632, f.185 (in future Sheldon accounts).

<sup>25</sup> Sheldon served on the Worcestershire muster commission in 1569 (TNA SP12/65) but not on that for 1588 as Hasler, *The House of Commons*; BLib, Lansdowne, 56, f.168; he was, however, one of the six

The greatest question mark about Sheldon's loyalty was the accusation that he would be willing to finance a plot which came to light late in July 1594 when the confessions of Henry Young and two malcontents in the armies in the Netherlands, Richard Williams and Edmund Yorke, claimed that Sheldon was in touch with the Jesuit Cardinal Allen. One of Sheldon's servants, another Williams, was said to have left England on pretence of fetching hawks from Ireland to deliver letters. The plot extended to killing the Queen and offering the throne to the earl of Derby. Sheldon was examined and his house searched. The articles for Sheldon's interrogation were devised out of the accusations of Henry Young; he was to be asked about his intercourse with English fugitives, what books and libels against the state he had in his hands, what he knew of his former servant Williams to whom he is supposed to have declared that he wished the catholic religion restored, about priests at his house and the celebration of mass there.<sup>26</sup> It was also said that Sheldon, though subject to fines, had escaped more serious trouble by appealing to Lord Chancellor Hatton who stated that Sheldon had been seen at church in London.<sup>27</sup> Others in his circle were also named; Mr Thimbleby 'who was to have married Sheldon's daughter' (presumably the youngest, Philippa), Thomas Throckmorton and Bishop of Woford and his relatives at Brailes. The case collapsed and no charges were pursued.

---

highest Warwickshire contributors of arms in August 1588 when he provided a man and 3 lance and 2 light horse, together with £50 in cash, TNA SP12/214, Sheldon accounts, fo115, 207, 208 and T.C.Noble (ed.) *The Names of those...*(1886), p.66. An idea of his own small arms emerges from Sheldon accounts, fos. 31, 45, 64, 83; John Smith, *Men and Armour for Gloucestershire 1608*, Alan Sutton 1980, p.84. Both Griffith and his brother Robert Jones, keeper of the accounts, later tutored Edward's children, BAH Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167982, receiving lands in Beoley, Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167697. Protest against the levy from Molesey, LM/COR/3/419, 421, 427, 428. In 1600 and 1601 he was again required to furnish a horse and man, APC 30, 439, APC 32,282.

<sup>26</sup> CSPD 1591-94, p.531-2, 540-548; examination of Ralph, p.554, 555, 559. The family solicitor was also hauled in, Alan Davidson, 'Robert Atkinson, a famous lawyer', *Essex Recusant*, vol. 12 1970, pp.91-97. See also Vincent Burke, 'The Economic Consequences of Recusancy', *Recusant History*, vol 14, 1977-78, pp.71-77.

<sup>27</sup> CSPD 1591-94, p. 545 for his supposed links to Lord Chancellor Hatton and p. 548; Alan Davidson, 'Edward Williams of Oxford: a Sheldon servant', *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol. 25, June 1975, pp.2-4. No evidence substantiates the relationship as nephew of Sheldon.

It was not the last of Ralph's brushes with the law. In August 1603, close to the time of the visit of the Spanish ambassador Taxis, charged with making peace, Sir Richard Lewkenor, Chief Justice of Chester, received letters taken by an over-zealous bailiff at Ludlow from Francis Plowden, Sheldon's great nephew, which seemed to the Justice, because they were 'somewhat misticall and dark', to indicate another plot. If one existed, nothing is known to have come of it and, six months later without any further problems, permission to travel abroad was given to Plowden and to Sheldon's grandson, William.<sup>28</sup> Though it was the distantly related Robert Catesby who conceived the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 neither Ralph nor any member of his immediate family was ever mentioned in connection with it; Jane Tasburgh, Ralph's second wife, however, was examined.<sup>29</sup>

Sheldon seems to have been sufficiently well regarded to be considered above disloyalty, despite the fact that he maintained contacts with Catholic circles, some of them incautious. One such contact dogged him for years and may only have been resolved finally by the terms of his will.<sup>30</sup> Whitgift estimated sometime around 1576 that Sheldon's annual income was 1000 marks; he might have been in need of ready cash. Certainly he became entangled with the Catholic Thomas Horde, normally resident in London, who entrapped Sheldon with false promises of future gains into loans over a period of some fourteen years. Each of the eight loans was guaranteed by a recognizance acknowledged in Chancery to third parties for Horde's 'better securitie'; repayment was by rent charges on Sheldon lands. The account book notes outgoing for the paperwork together with receipt and repayment of various sums.<sup>31</sup> Horde's aim was to increase his own income and to keep his own fortune and estates hidden. Sheldon also sheltered Horde at Weston for twelve years from 1588/89. Not

---

<sup>28</sup> *CSPD 1603-10*, p. 26, 27, 110. In 1608 William met with William Trumbull, the English agent in Brussels, who had been instructed to hand over to him a jewel left in his safekeeping, for which he was later thanked by Sir John Throckmorton, *Hist Mss Comm Report on the Mss of the Marquess of Downshire at Easthampstead Park, Berks*, vol. ii, 1936, ed. E.K.Putnell and A.B.Hinds, p. 68, 69, 196.

<sup>29</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Gunpowder Plot*, 1997, p.188.

<sup>30</sup> Sheldon's version in his will, TNA PROB 11/121/ 345; for Horde, see *Victoria County History, Oxfordshire*, ed. A Crossley, vol. 13, p. 67, 1992 and *Recusant Roll 1592-3*, Catholic Record Society, vol 18, p.254; Whitgift's estimate Lambeth Palace, *Carte Antique*, IV, no.183, f.3.

<sup>31</sup> Payments in Sheldon accounts, f.103 et passim.

until 1599 did trouble start when Horde, having long defaulted on his recusancy payments, was finally declared a convicted recusant. A quarrel ensued and it seems that Sheldon ceased repayments, thus giving Horde the chance to declare the recognizances forfeit. Though repayments were agreed by the mediation of friends Horde repudiated the agreement; Sheldon took the case to Chancery. The matter came to the attention of Sir Edward Coke, Attorney-General, who then brought a case in the Exchequer Court against all the participants, arguing that Horde had attempted to defraud the Crown of revenues justly belonging to it and that the recognizances should be forfeit to the Crown.<sup>32</sup> Sheldon's lands were confiscated and he was required to pay to the Crown the monies he had owed Horde.<sup>33</sup> Payment of a composition of £2,600 was arranged in November 1612 and his lands returned.<sup>34</sup>

None of these accusations seems to have dented Sheldon's reputation or resulted in his being regarded as a serious threat to the realm. In 1596 Sir John Harington wrote in the *Apology for Ajax* that 'he heard one that was a great courtier say that he thought Sheldon one of the sufficientest wise men of England and fittest to have been made one of the Council, but for one matter' [his religion].<sup>35</sup> Sheldon's near neighbour, Thomas Habington, described him as a quiet, serious and studious man.<sup>36</sup> In 1603 Sheldon thanked Sir Robert Cecil for past kindnesses from himself and from his father, offering him a gift which was, presumably, accepted; Sheldon did not say what it was, describing it as a 'trifle'.<sup>37</sup> In the same decade Sir Thomas Bodley, through Sheldon's old friend Anthony Blencowe, Provost of Oriel College, Oxford, obtained the services of Sheldon's chainman as the smith who would

---

<sup>32</sup> [http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Sheldon#Ralph\\_Sheldon\\_.281537-1613.29\\_and\\_Thomas\\_Horde\\_.281533-1607.29](http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Sheldon#Ralph_Sheldon_.281537-1613.29_and_Thomas_Horde_.281533-1607.29)

<sup>33</sup> A brief account of the entanglement is outlined in Hilary L. Turner, 'An early map of Brailes', *Warwickshire History*, Summer 2001, vol.xi, no.5, 182-193. It is hoped to give a longer account elsewhere; previous notices are incorrect because they have not made use of all the documents.

<sup>34</sup> *CSPD Addenda 1580-1625*, p.527 = TNA SP15/39/135; TNA CP 25/2/386/10JasIMic Double Counties.

<sup>35</sup> John Harington, *An Apology for Ajax*, 1596, ed. E.S.Donno, *Harington's Metamorphosis of Ajax*, 1962, 240.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. John Amphlett, *Worcester Historical Society*, 2 vols., 1895 & 1899, ii, 68.

<sup>37</sup> *Hist. Mss Comm.* Salisbury xv, 60.



manufacture the chains to secure the books in Bodley's new library in Oxford to which Sheldon made a donation of £50.<sup>38</sup> He was also amongst the contributors to the cost of a new organ for Worcester Cathedral commissioned in 1612.<sup>39</sup>

## Artistic Endeavour

In this is seen the other side of the man. His interests, as also his social contacts, are revealed in tantalizing glimpses through the pages of the only surviving account books, for 1586-88; he purchased sheet music and virginals, a map and several books. Only one of the recorded titles can be identified, Robert Tanner's *Mirror for Mathematiques*. Its acquisition substantiates Sheldon's interest in surveying demonstrated by his repair of his 'dyall and glasse' and his expenditure of 40s. on a map, not described, in 1588.<sup>40</sup> His wider contacts began with his family alliances and his 'general knowledge' reached a high level. His aunt, née Margery Willington, had married as her second husband Sir Ambrose Cave, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, responsible for the series of drawings of Duchy properties made in 1561/2.<sup>41</sup> Her daughter married into the family of Sir Francis Knollys, Treasurer of the royal household, patron of the map maker John Blagrove and surveyor of Feckenham Forest, an area in which the Sheldons had land.<sup>42</sup> Another of Sheldon's relatives and near neighbours was Fulke Greville, father of the Fulke Greville who

---

<sup>38</sup> Alan Davison, 'Ralph Sheldon and the provost of Oriel', *Worcestershire Recusant*, no.21, June 1973, pp. 22-27; W. Wheeler, *Letters of Sir Thomas Bodley to Thomas James*, Oxford 1926, 17,40,47,133,135,138; Sheldon's gift, W.D.Macray, *Annals of the Bodleian Library*, 2nd edition only, 1890, 37n.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Hodgetts, 'Recusant Contributors to the Worcester Cathedral Organ, 1613', *Midland Catholic History*, no. 1 1991, pp. 28-33.

<sup>40</sup> Sheldon Accounts, ff. 135,156,174,177,182; another book 'gran ludo' remains unidentified although Arthur Freeman has suggested Luis de Granada as a possible author. His '*a memoriall of a christian life*' Rouen 1586, and '*of prayer and meditation*', Rouen 1584, were both translated by R. Hopkins. No five volume edition of Luis de Granada is known. See also Tanner Mss 285-6, Bodleian Library, cited by Jason Scott-Warren, 'News, sociability, and bookbuying in early modern England: the letters of Sir Thomas Cornwallis', *The Library*, seventh series, vol.1., no.4, December 2000. I owe this reference to Paul Grinke, studying the library of Ralph 'the Great' Sheldon, d.1684.

<sup>41</sup> H.M.Colvin, *The King's Works, 1485-1660*, vol.iii, pt.i, 179-180.

<sup>42</sup> S. Bendall, *Dictionary of Land surveyors and local Mapmakers*, 2 vols, British Library 1997, i, 24-26.

assisted John Speed and whose generosity both Camden and Speed acknowledged in their accounts of Warwickshire.<sup>43</sup> Sheldon made purchases for him in London and attempted to negotiate a lease.<sup>44</sup> The landlords in the parishes adjacent to Weston were the Petres of Ingatestone, into whose family Sheldon would marry his grandson, descendants of Queen Mary's chancellor and patrons of the mapmaking family the Walkers of Hanningfield.<sup>45</sup> William Moulton, lessee of nearby Todenham, was another friend. Sheldon may also have been acquainted with Raphael Holinshed, editor and compiler of a *Chronicle*, steward of the Burdett family who purchased Packwood from Ralph's father.<sup>46</sup>

Ralph was an indefatigable correspondent, certainly not afraid to beard the powerful and make his views known. Thus he requested the Chancellor of Worcester diocese, William Warmistry, to search records for evidence of his own rights to presentation to the living of Ditchford Frary;<sup>47</sup> he offered a private explanation of the rights and wrongs of a case concerning his actions at Brailes in advance of its hearing by Sir Julius Caesar, Master of the Court of Requests.<sup>48</sup> At a more domestic level he expounded his ideas on the suitable stones to make millstones to his cousin Margaret Knollys, offering his help with this and in matters concerning the wardship of Thomas Bracebridge's children which he shared with her.<sup>49</sup> He was generous to his friends, offering, for example, to lend the services of his mason, the otherwise unknown Ralph Richmond, to Sir Robert Pytte of Kyre Park Worcestershire,<sup>50</sup> and generous also to his family, keeping in touch with his sister Philippa Pollard and with his step-

---

<sup>43</sup> Sheldon Accounts f.69 & British Library Add Ms 36583 f.1; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1598-1601*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Greville, B.Lib Add Mss. 36583, f.1.

<sup>45</sup> Links to the Petres explored in Hilary L. Turner, 'Fit Symbolographie ? An early estate map of Brailes', *Warwickshire History*, vol. xi, no 5, Summer 2001, 182-193.

<sup>46</sup> William Moulton see *VCH Gloucestershire*, ed. C.R. Elrington, vi, 1965, 250-258; for Ralph Holinshed see *ODNB*.

<sup>47</sup> Birmingham Archives and Heritage (BAH), Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167885.

<sup>48</sup> B.Lib. Lansdowne 161, f.90.

<sup>49</sup> Knollys, B.Lib Add Mss. 36901, ff. 6,13, 28,33. Sheldon accounts fos. 24,33,44,60,74,85, 90,94,134,158,165.

<sup>50</sup> Mrs Baldwin Chylde, 'The Building of Kyre Park', *The Antiquary*, xxi, 1890.

mother.<sup>51</sup> He assisted the family of Ludovic Greville, condemned to death in 1587, who chose to be crushed to death under a stone to protect the inheritance for his young family rather than die as a traitor which would have led to forfeiture of his lands. Sheldon later acted briefly as one of several in a long line of mortgagees for Robert Catesby at Chastleton.<sup>52</sup>

Ralph was also the builder of the new house at Weston in Long Compton, Warwickshire. Sir John Harington commended the house for its hill-top site, though he regarded its plumbing as sub-standard; nevertheless, it should clearly rate highly amongst the new edifices of the period.<sup>53</sup> Construction began around 1586. Payments were made to quarrymen at Chipping Norton for the stone and other payments were made to two Burford freemasons, Anslett and Little, and to Ralph Richmond; 2000 ‘bordes’ were purchased secondhand from Sir Robert Pytte then rebuilding Kyre Park.<sup>54</sup> Nothing now remains; the house was demolished c.1827, though an assortment of decorative pieces survives. A fireplace is now in private ownership and

---

<sup>51</sup> Sheldon accounts, for Pollard fos.3,8,17,54,56,58,60,122,169,186; for his step-mother fos.34, 121,127,188.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. fos. 126,129 for Ludovic Greville; for help to Fulke fos. 69, 190. For Sheldon’s part in arrangements of the sale of Chastleton, Hilary L. Turner, ‘Walter Jones of Witney, Worcester and Chastleton: rewriting the past’, *Oxoniensia* 73, 2008, 33-43; see <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/WalterJones.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> John Harington, Apology for *Ajax*, 1596, ed. E.S.Donno, *Harington’s Metamorphosis of Ajax*, 1962, 238-40. The eighteenth-century antiquarian Nichols recorded an otherwise unsubstantiated visit by Queen Elizabeth in 1572 stating that in his own day an apartment was still called the Queen’s Chamber and that her coat of arms remained over the door. He too commented on the fine situation, now mapped as Weston Gardens; however, if Elizabeth’s visit took place, it must have been to the old house which Ralph replaced, John Nichols, *Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, 3 vols. London 1823, I, p.xvii.

<sup>54</sup> Sheldon Accounts, fos. 35,54, 56, 120; to quarrymen in May and June 1586; payments to Richmond, about whom nothing else is known, were made steadily from the start of 1588. Purchase of the ‘bordes’, see note 45. G. Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses*, 1994, pp. 216-219, and 264 for Skilts; this account made no use of the account book and so is incorrect in saying that purchase marked the start of Ralph’s building as is C. Dyer and C Richardson, eds., *William Dugdale, historian, 1605-1686: his life, his writings and his county*, Woodbridge, 2009, p. 237. Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire* 1656, incorrectly stated that the house was built by William, Ralph’s father.

an armorial shield is incorporated, half of it upside down, into the Victorian drinking fountain in Little Wolford.<sup>55</sup>



Shields in the Wolford fountain, © Hilary L. Turner

The picture drawn by Henry Beighton in 1716, published in later editions of Dugdale's *Warwickshire*, shows a three-storey house built round a courtyard with projecting wings on the façade, not unlike Chastleton.<sup>56</sup> Its Long Gallery was said to be 160 feet long and its detailed interior arrangement might perhaps be reconstructed from the room by room survey made for the auction catalogue of 1781; its layout makes it possible to suggest that the Elizabethan tapestry maps, each approximately 13 x 20 feet, showing Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire might very well first have hung in the hall forming a panoramic view.<sup>57</sup> When they were seen in the eighteenth century first by George Vertue in 1738, by John Loveday of Caversham in 1747 and by Horace Walpole in 1768 the Elizabethan Warwickshire

---

<sup>55</sup> Michael Warriner, *A Prospect of Weston in Warwickshire*, Roundwood Press, Kineton, 1978, p.24-5, and p. 30 notes also gateposts at Tidmington House, the altar frontal at Cherington. 'A Sheldon Mantel-piece', F Sydney Eden, *The Connoisseur*, vol. 100, no. 432, August 1937, 78-79, was rescued in 1934 from the demolition of the second Weston House, its site outlined now by the garden wall. Long Compton Manor House, now a guesthouse, has painted glass shields, commissioned in 1677 by Ralph the Great to commemorate the family marriages, Stratford Record Office, Bloom Collection, DR 41/108.

<sup>56</sup> William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 1730 edition; see also <http://www.search.windowsonwarwickshire.org.uk/> and search Weston House.

<sup>57</sup> Hilary L. Turner, *No Mean Prospect: Ralph Sheldon's Tapestry Maps*, Plotwood Press, 2010; Turner, "'A wittie devise": the Sheldon Tapestry Maps belonging to the Bodleian Library, Oxford', *Bodleian Library Record*, vol. 17, no 5, April 2002; <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/WarwickshireTapestryMap.pdf>

and the seventeenth-century copies of Oxfordshire and Worcestershire were recorded as hanging altogether in the Great Drawing Room where they were listed in the auction catalogue of 1781.<sup>58</sup> Both Vertue and Walpole also noted there a set of portrait heads depicting English monarchs; they too were sold in 1781.<sup>59</sup> At much the same time that he built the house Ralph's portrait was painted by Hieronimos Custodis, one of several Flemish painters working in London around 1590; a much earlier portrait, painted in the early 1560s, is now in a private collection.<sup>60</sup>

Sheldon's main occupation, after playing cards and 'mawe', (a piquet-like card game) was litigation and he was rarely out of the courts after his father's death. The story of his struggles against his tenants at Brailes is detailed elsewhere and lasted throughout his life; ironically he produced a highly decorative map of the parish.<sup>61</sup> His other long-running dispute was over lands at Ditchford Frary where he may have been pursuing the same enclosing policy he followed at Brailes.<sup>62</sup> He sought to exploit the advowsons of Tredington, one of the richest in the county, of Barcheston and of Stretton on Fosse, making use of Richard Hyckes, manager of the tapestry venture at Barcheston and the Queen's arrasmaker from 1569, as his

---

<sup>58</sup> George Vertue, *Notebooks IV*, Walpole Society, vol 24, 1936, p.140; *John Loveday of Caversham* (1711-8), ed. Sarah Markham, London 1984, p. 374. Horace Walpole *Journals of Visits to Country Seats etc*, ed Paget Toynbee, Walpole Society, 1927-28, vol. 16, pp. 9-80, esp p.62; Christie and Ansell, Sale Catalogue August 28-September 11 1781, William Sheldon of Weston, Warwickshire, pp. 36-37.

<sup>59</sup> Two of the portrait heads said to be those from Weston have recently come to light. One, Richard III, is pictured in *600 Years of British Painting*, introduction by Roy Strong, Denver Museum of Art, 1998, p.56 and plate; sold Christie's, London, British Pictures 1500-1850, 1 December 2000, Sale 6397, lot 12; displayed Christie's King Street 30 May-1 June 2012; the other, king Edward VI, Sotheby's London 5 July 2012, lot.1095. A third, Cardinal Wolsey, is National Portrait Gallery, London, no. 32, Roy Strong, *Catalogue of Portraits in the National Portrait Gallery, London*, plate 516. There is not yet any clear evidence that any of these came from Weston.

<sup>60</sup> Roy Strong, 'Elizabethan Painting: An approach through Inscriptions - II: Hieronimo Custodis', *Burlington Magazine*, vol 105, March 1963, pp.103-108; it hangs now in Warwickshire Museum. The earlier one is pictured in Roy Strong, *The English Icon*, 1969, p.126.

<sup>61</sup> The map is owned by Warwickshire Museum but is stored in the Record Office, CR 3231; pictured in A.Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration in England 1558-1625*, Yale 1997, 70, 73. See also note 32.

<sup>62</sup> B.Lib, Add Mss 36583, f. 62, 65, 231; BAH Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/.

representative in negotiations.<sup>63</sup> Like many other Catholics Ralph suffered from the malicious intentions of those who resented his wealth. His dispute with his son in law Russell has already been mentioned. A second instance where perhaps those who disliked his faith tried to get their own back on him is recorded in a Star Chamber case.<sup>64</sup> With his 'cousin' John Ashfield, Sheldon attempted to reclaim cattle which had been stolen, beasts which he had perhaps entrusted to Ashfield for safekeeping.

Sheldon, however, was not to be cowed and lived his life very publicly. The account books show him in nearly continuous motion, riding to London four and even five times a year, either directly, or via Worcester. While trouble with the authorities stemming from his religious beliefs did not destroy his way of life it did inevitably interrupt its rhythm and it affected the dispositions Ralph made for the future. He purchased property at Steeple Barton in Oxfordshire in 1596 close to his lands at Deddington, and in 1600-1602 assigned land in Beoley to men long in his service.<sup>65</sup> It has been suggested, with little firm evidence, that some attempt was made to protect his own estates, and therefore his son's inheritance, by putting the lands in trust.<sup>66</sup>

Despite not holding any county office, locally at least Ralph seems to have exerted influence and been a figure both respected and feared. In 1601 the Privy Council saw fit to write to him and to his lifelong friend, John Talbot of Bromsgrove, also a Catholic, telling them not to meddle in the election of Sir Thomas Leighton as MP; rumours that there was likely to be 'some opposition made out of faction' had reached London.<sup>67</sup> Three years later Sheldon again joined in the politicking to elect a Catholic candidate to parliament; though a candidate was found, his election was prevented by means not altogether fair by the sheriff who, as the electoral officer,

---

<sup>63</sup> TNA Req 2/66/15; Req 2/223/66, Req 2/121/32.

<sup>64</sup> TNA STAC 5/S58/35.

<sup>65</sup> Purchase of Steeple Barton 1596, *VCH Oxon* ed. A. Crossley, 1983, xi, 64; references to Deddington occur roughly every six pages in Sheldon accounts; also B.Lib Add Mss 36583, f.62. BAH, Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167982, receiving lands in Beoley, BAH, Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167697.

<sup>66</sup> Some of the many deeds in BAH, Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/ may well conceal such an aim; Michael Hodgetts, 'Elizabethan Recusancy in Worcestershire', part I, *Trans of Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, third series, vol 1, 1965-67, 69-78, part ii, *Ibid.*, vol 3, 1970-72, 81-91.

<sup>67</sup> Acts of the Privy Council, 1601-04, 251.

controlled the entry to the voting process of the limited number of people who made up the franchise and, without warning except to known supporters, changed both the time and place where the voting was to take place, thus successfully excluding the opposition.<sup>68</sup> Like many others, Sheldon may have had high hopes of a change in policies with the accession of James VI.

On 16 December 1603 his wife, Anne Throckmorton, was buried.<sup>69</sup> He was already occupied constructing tombs for his ancestors including one for his father in the chapel on the north side of Beoley church, beginning one for himself after Anne's death.<sup>70</sup> The unknown sculptor had considerable skill. His second wife was Jane, daughter of William Lord de la Warr, widow of the Protestant Sir Thomas Tasburgh, her third husband. It does not seem to have been a happy alliance and his choice of a wealthy widow soon turned sour; the couple were at law over the jointure provisions within a year of the marriage, which took place sometime around April 1604.<sup>71</sup> She received £100 in his will only on certain conditions.<sup>72</sup> There were no children and at the time of his death in March 1613, Ralph's first family, one son and nine daughters, were all married.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> See Ian D. Grosvenor, 'Catholics and politics: the Worcestershire Election of 1604', *Recusant History*, vol.14, 1977-78, pp.149-162; *The House of Commons 1604-1629*, ed. Andrew Thrush and John P. Ferris, 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Worcestershire Record Office, Beoley Parish Registers.

<sup>70</sup> An account of the church is to be found in *VCH Worcestershire*, iv, 1924, 12-19, especially p.16. The tale of the gift of a large stone altar to Sheldon from Pope Gregory XIII is repeated there, but no authority is cited, nor in *Associated Architectural Societies Reports*, xxi, 1891, p. li. The stone can scarcely be described as 'portable'. In any case, it is Ralph the Great who spent time at Rome, Ms Wood B.14, f. 50-66. Also Rees Price, Report on the Sheldon Chapel, Beoley Church, *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, vol. xlix, 1926, 54-56.

<sup>71</sup> Alan Davidson, 'The Second Mrs Sheldon', *Worcestershire Recusant*, December 1969 vol.14, pp.15-21 for some of her background. He did not know of TNA C 3/291/89 for their disputes; resolution of their differences appears in Ralph's will.

<sup>72</sup> TNA PROB 11/121/ 345 (Rape Sheldon).

<sup>73</sup> Ralph's son, Edward married Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Markham of Ollerton Notts; Elizabeth married Sir John Russell of Strensham, 13 March 1574; Mary, baptized May 1560, married Walter Fowler of St Thomas's Priory, Co Stafford; Muriel, baptized September 1566, married Francis Clare of Caldwell near Kidderminster, Worcs; Jane, baptized November 1567, married John Flower of Whitwell, Rutland; Margaret, baptized May 1569, married – Standen; Anne, baptized December 1571,

Many more details of documents concerning the management of Sheldon's estates are to be found by searching the Discovery Catalogue of The National Archives at Kew.



Ralph's tomb at Beoley as shown in Treadway Nash, *History of Worcestershire*  
© Hilary L Turner

© Hilary L Turner; first published on <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info> in 2009, revised 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016. Hilary L Turner is hereby identified as author of this work in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act of 1988

---

married John Peshall of Horseley, Staffs; Katherine married Francis Trentham of Rocester, Staffs; Frances married Anthony Mayney of Linton, Kent; Philippa, born 1571, married John Sulyard of Wetherden, Suffolk.



## Ralph's Epitaph at Beoley Church



©Hilary L Turner

Text below translated by E A B Barnard

M.S.

To Ralph Sheldon Esquire

A man of great wisdom modesty, kindness

Remarkable for his gifts of knowledge and judgement (a rare mixture)

A generous and beloved citizen:

After he had spent his youth in studying at Oxford

He had visited France and other countries

And had lived at Court; then had married

The daughter of Robert Throckmorton Knight a wife who in

Her life set a remarkable example, by whom he begot one

Son and nine daughters, and from them were begat (more or less 130 descendants

He dedicated this Chapel to God (which ) and built at Weston, with

great magnificence a house for himself as master and for his descendants,

Calmly falling asleep.

Edward Sheldon, instituted his sole heir, mindful of a

Dear parent (orphaned now by the death of so great a man)

To show his esteem and love, sorrowfully raised this

Inscription, such as it is,

He died A.D. 1613