

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE LEFT ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S
HISTORY**

by

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'Pray For The Good Astate Of Olyver Leder'

Oliver Leder had to prove himself to be very sure-footed to negotiate one of the most turbulent and transformative eras of English history, a period of political divisions, religious strife and social unrest. For more than forty years, Leder was a privileged witness to the events that shaped England and for many of those years he was an active participant in both local politics and national affairs of state.

Oliver Leder came to prominence in the 1420s as a protégé of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Henry VIII's powerful Chancellor of the Exchequer. During the king's expensive and protracted divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Leder was one of the financial backroom boys helping to raise taxes in the quaintly named Court of First-fruits and Tenth's of Spiritualities. Henry's equally messy divorce from the Roman church saw Leder occupying several key roles in the state. After Wolsey's downfall, Leder moved seemingly without effort to become a trusted confidante of Thomas Cromwell, and unlike either of his two mentors, Leder managed to preserve his head. He saw the establishment of the Church of England with a liturgy and doctrine provided by Thomas Cranmer and a bible in English placed in every church. He charted a skilful path through the fanatical Protestant dogmatism of Edward VI and the immediate reversion to Catholic orthodoxy that followed the accession of Mary I and Philip II. He was witness to the social unrest brought about by two different causes, namely unlawful enclosures (Kett's Revolt) and Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer (the Prayer Book Rebellion). Oliver Leder died in 1557, on the cusp of the next great period of English history, the age of Elizabeth.

How did this man from a Huntingdonshire village come to occupy such prominent roles of state? By c. 1497, when Leder was born, the Leder family had been established in Great Staughton for more than a century and a half since their antecedent, Thomas Leder, acted as attorney for Sir Edmund de Creting in the 1340s. Subsequently, the family was involved in the legal affairs of the Waweton/Wauton family who exercised their power and influence from their Manor of Staughton at Cretingsbury.

The Leders' connection with Great Staughton was not always a happy one. In 1402, a certain John Fisher of Great Staughton was charged with the murder of John Leder, but was acquitted on the grounds of self-defence. When Thomas Leder, father of Oliver, died in 1502, his son and heir Stephen inherited the estate and it was not until nearly forty years later that Oliver established his residence in the village with the purchase of the Rectory Manor in Great Staughton.

As a young man, Leder had followed in the legal footsteps of his forebears and in 1514 he was admitted to the Middle Temple. He was quick to rise through the ranks and very soon he was rubbing shoulders with the most powerful man in the kingdom after the king himself, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Henry VIII's closest and most trusted confidant. Wolsey's confidence in his young colleague was shown in contemporary records: in 1517–18 the 20-year-old Leder owed Thomas Wolsey the not inconsiderable sum of ten shillings on 'bills and obligations'. Already Leder was establishing the credentials he would need to climb up the social and political ladder. The law was not the only source of income for Leder; he had strong connections in trade and commerce. In 1526, for example, when he was in his late 20s, he was made a freeman of the Fishmongers Company and he was also said to have owned a share in a pepper factory in Spain.

Leder's growing influence in the political circles of Huntingdonshire was steady and uneventful. In 1524, he was Commissioner for Subsidy in Huntingdonshire, responsible for the

collection of taxes. Great Staughton at this time was one of the largest and wealthiest villages in the shire, contributing annually £21 15s 4d in taxes. (Godmanchester, a much more important commercial and trading centre, contributed £35 11s 6d.)

Leder's good fortune continued when, also in 1524, he was appointed one of Six Clerks in Chancery, an important public legal office responsible for commissions, patents and other instruments of business that formed part of the English Court of Chancery. For a twenty-month period, the Court was controlled by Leder's ally and patron, Thomas Cromwell. In accordance with Catholic doctrine, the clerks of chancery were obliged to observe the vow of celibacy but when this law was abolished in 1523, Leder seized the opportunity to marry Frances, daughter of Thomas Baldwin, a wealthy, lately deceased London draper. The inheritance ran into legal complications and difficulties that dragged on for a further six years, forcing Leder into considerable debt with the Crown. He enlisted the help of Thomas Cromwell and matters were eventually brought to a conclusion in 1529. Nevertheless, it was to be many years before Leder was able to discharge this debt to the Crown.

1527 saw Leder in the thick of Henry's plotting to be rid of Catherine of Aragon who had borne him a daughter, Mary, but not a son and heir. In that year Henry had unsuccessfully petitioned the Pope for an annulment to his marriage, but it was not until 1533 that Henry's wishes were granted.

The doctrinal and political struggle with papal authority came to a head in 1534 when the Act of Supremacy was passed, making Henry 'supreme head in earth of the Church of England', in the process disregarding any 'usage, custom, foreign laws, foreign authority or prescription'. Oliver Leder was soon to find himself party to this protracted break from Rome. In 1535, he had been appointed to the Court of First-fruits and Tenthms of Spiritualities. This curiously named body was responsible for setting and collecting taxes on benefices. The First-fruits were the initial taxes on the income of a benefice, the Tenthms were the proportion of taxes on income due in subsequent years. The taxes duly collected were then normally remitted to the Papal Exchequer. After his excommunication by the Pope, Henry saw no reason why the taxes collected by the Court of First-fruits should go to Rome and he therefore diverted the monies to fund his new Church of England. Henry's determination to stamp his authority on his new Church and his rejection of the Pope's authority was confirmed by the introduction into English churches of the Book of Common Prayer, which had been compiled by Thomas Cranmer. This became a compulsory part of the liturgy of the Church of England in the Act of Uniformity passed by Parliament in June 1549 in the reign of Henry's successor, his son Edward VI.

The upheaval in the church was not welcomed by all in the population; as early as 1536 there were a number of uprisings in the north of England, known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, protesting against Henry's rejection of the Catholic faith.

Meanwhile, Oliver Leder, 'gentleman', had not been slow in acquiring land in 'Magna Stoughton'. In 1535, he purchased 20 acres of land and an acre of meadow in the parish. To establish a permanent residence in the village, Leder set his sights on the most important building in Magna Stoughton, the Rectory Manor, which came with lands extending into Dillington and the Manor of Beachampstead. It was an ambitious move on Leder's part, for the Manor was second in importance only to the Wauton moated manor at Cretingsbury. In 1381 (the year of the Peasants' Revolt), Richard II had granted the Rectory Manor to the Charterhouse, London, a grant that was confirmed in 1394.

Like many of the ministers and allies of the king, Leder was quick to benefit from Henry's policy of selling off abbeys and religious foundations. In July 1539, with the Dissolution of the

Monasteries, Oliver Leder purchased the Rectory Manor for £1,430. Two days after this purchase he consolidated his lands by 'asserting his rights of ownership over John Gostwyk and his wife Joan, of the manor or grange of *Myddelbo* (Middlehoe), and of a messuage plus substantial land and forty shillings of rent in *Myddelbo*, *Sowtho* (Southoe), *Groffbam* (Grafham) and *Hayleweston*'. In due course Leder sold off many of the peripheral lands and settled with his wife in the Rectory Manor, which became for a time his principal residence.

He enlarged his landholdings in 1543 with the purchase of Rushoe Park and Whitley Wood from Walter Devereux, Lord Ferrers of Chartley, and at the same time acquired some of the property belonging to Stonely Priory. As late as 1553, he acquired property and land 'including three tofts, a windmill, a dovehouse, three gardens, and two orchards in Agden Grene, Stoughton Magna, *Kymbalton* and *Stonley*'.

The Leders' did not long remain in the rectory. Sometime after 1539 and before 1543, Leder built 'Place House' or 'Palace House', opposite the church of St Andrew, on the site of the Charterhouse monastery. John Leland 'father of English local history' visited the house shortly after it was built. The house consisted of two storeys, with a tiled roof and a north and south wing. A fire in the seventeenth century destroyed much of the building, leaving only the south wing standing. The grounds contained two timber-framed barns and a decorative moat, all of which still exist. This was the house that 'at the dayes of their deaths they (the Leders) did inhabit'.

Leder's purchases of land did not always proceed without incident. There were riots in protest at his enclosures in his parks of Rushoe and Whitley in 1554 during his time as sheriff in the shire. So serious were they that Leder brought proceedings against one Robert Sapcote and his band of followers, whom he accused of breaking down hedges 'in a warlike manner' and shooting with crossbows at the keeper and his wife who, terrified by the onslaught, were forced to take refuge in their lodge. Servants encountered by the insurgents were given equally short shrift, being hounded into the moat. Finally, the most serious criminal act: they had killed and maimed deer on the estate. These parks were no modest parcels of land. They included 100 acres of pasture and 100 acres of woodland, stocked with deer, with newly planted hedges, and freshly dug ditches, surrounded by stout fences to enclose the cattle; all these desirable features Leder claimed he had enjoyed throughout the reign of Henry VIII and even now under his sovereign Edward VI. The courts found in Leder's favour.

The last decade of Leder's life saw an England riven by political divisions, religious factions and social unrest that greatly eclipsed the damaging conflict that had followed Henry VIII's rupture with the Church of Rome. Henry had died in the summer of 1547 and was succeeded by his son, Edward VI who was imbued with a single, all-consuming ideal: to rid the church of any remnants of its former Catholic faith. Oliver Leder's religious affiliations are not known in detail but in his actions over the next decade he proved to possess an independence of mind that did not, on occasion, wholly accord with his sovereign's evangelical ruthlessness.

From 1546, in the early years of the reign of Edward VI, Oliver Leder was patron of the church of St Andrew in Staughton. In December 1547, he came under harsh criticism, along with his colleague Sir Lawrence Taylard, for being insufficiently observant of Edward's policies. It happened in St Neots, where Edward's Protestant ideals had been opposed by many in the population who were reluctant to shed traditional Catholic doctrine. The church in St Neots was equivocal in the matter, having illicitly concealed from the king's Commissioners ownership of substantial landholdings that should have been declared in accordance with the new doctrine. Others in the population, however, were equally determined that Edward's will should prevail and a mob, led by a Mr Dowke, broke into the church, intent on removing 'certain images of abuse'.

Oliver Leder and Lawrence Taylard, being apprised of the threat to the church, immediately confronted the insurgents and forced them to replace the ornaments. A riot then ensued, which resulted in Leder and Taylard being hauled off to the Privy Council at Hampton Court in April 1547 to face a charge of 'unlawfully threatening the townspeople of St Neots'. Unless they renounced this behaviour, the judgement stated, they would face the heaviest of consequences. The two men offered no defence, but escaped punishment, no doubt in part due to their political prominence.

On 3rd March, 1551, the Privy Council, commanded by Edward, ordered that Commissioners were to be appointed to carry out an inventory of the ornaments in every parish church in the land. Ostensibly, the principal reason was to prevent church goods being embezzled by private individuals following the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Severe penalties awaited any person 'that hath sold, alienated, imbezilled, taken or carried away, and of such also as have counselled, advised and commanded any part of the said Goods, Plate, Jewels, Bells, Vestments, and Ornaments to be taken or carried away, or otherwise imbezilled'. No church was to be spared, even those in villages like Great Staughton. Ornaments, crucifixes, plates, altar cloths, bells and any religious imagery were to be removed from the church and sold. There was however a rather more pressing concern: 'the Kinge's Majestie had neede presently of a masse of mooney, therfore Commissions shulde be addressed into all shires of Englande to take into the Kinges handes suche church plate as remaineth, to be employed unto his hignes use.' Thus were Edward's religious piety and his financial demands deftly combined.

The Commissioners for Huntingdonshire were Sir Robert Tyrwhit, knight, Thomas Audeley, Thomas Cotton, William Laurence and Robert Rowley. Robert Rowley was the signatory of the Inventory carried out in Great Staughton. The Commissioners were authorised to seize 'goodes, plate, juells, vestyments, bells and other ornyments within every paryshe belonging or in any wyse apperteyng to any church, chapell, brotherhed, gylde or fraternytye within this our realme of Englonde', which would then be sent to the Jewel House in the Tower of London to be melted down. Vestments and other items deemed unsuitable for such treatment were to be sold locally, and the monies delivered to the Treasurer of the Mint, Sir Edmund Peckham. Any linen seized was to be distributed to the poor of the parish.

The Commissioners arrived at the church of St Andrew in Great Staughton on 28 July 1552 where they were met by the three churchwardens, Roger Harrison, Thomas Barrowes and Thomas Peyte. Before they could commence their work, however, the churchwardens submitted a document asking the Commissioners to take into account the dilapidated condition of the church tower which was in imminent danger of collapse. Money had already been donated for repairs but more would be needed and would the Commissioners therefore be prepared to give any monies raised from the sale of any ornaments to help with the repair? The churchwardens made a compelling case. 'And we the sayd churchwardens of the sayd church of Moche Stowghton ... ar redy to prove that the roof of the sayd church fell downe to the grownde this last yere past.' Parishioners readily contributed to the repair, notably Oliver Leder: 'lent by Olyver Leder esquire, for and toward the reparacions'. He paid 21s to 'Myddelton of Kymbulton, carpenter' towards the repair of the roof and 20s was paid for 'tymber delyveryd by the sayd Olyver'. He also paid 'to the sawyers for sawyng of the same tymber, 20 shillings'. Thomas Walton donated 20s whilst Ralph Carpenter, owner of Gaynes Hall offered a slightly less generous 3s. The total amount donated by ordinary parishioners amounted to 2s. The Commissioners, having received the bill, then proceeded to carry out their Inventory.

'[This inventory] indentyd [made the] xxviii day of Julij 1552, between Robert Tyrwhyte, Thomas Audeley, Thomas Cotton, William Laurence, Robert Rowley; Roger Harrison, Thomas Barrons [Barrowes] and Thomas Peyt. church wardyns of all mannour goodes and ornamentes &c.'

The Commissioners made a substantial haul in the church including altar cloths, 'olde towyls', a cross of copper, a canopy, a 'crosse clothe of greyn seylk', four candlesticks and various items of clerical regalia. The Commissioners noted the existence 'in the stepull iiij belles', but removing four weighty bells from the tower for melting down would have involved strenuous effort and costly labour so they were reprieved. They reported that the tenor bell, inscribed *Hac in conclaue Gabriel nunc pange suauē*, dated from before the Reformation. It was actually cast around the year 1420 by a foundry in London.

Their work 'in thys church of Myche Stowghton' completed, the Commissioners signed their names on the document and left the churchwardens with the responsibility of selling off what remained. The three churchwardens duly set about selling the church property, which included 'three olde candellstickes' and did so 'with th' assent of all the parochineres'. The proceeds were duly allocated to the 'necessarie repaires of ther church'.

A year after the Inventory, another momentous event occurred when tuberculosis brought the reign of Edward VI to an end and he was succeeded by a monarch with very different ideas about the church and religion. In her short reign (1553–1558) Mary I, daughter of Henry and Catherine of Aragon, lost no time in reversing all of Edward's policies and restoring the primacy of the Catholic church in England, which led to her being nicknamed Bloody Mary for her ruthless policy of executing Protestant martyrs. The austere Protestant John Foxe, in his *Book of Martyrs*, made plain his dismay at this religious volte-face: 'the gospel and true religion were banished, and the Antichrist of Rome, with his superstition and idolatry, introduced.'

This may at first have caused a frisson of alarm to Oliver Leder but his forthrightness may now have come to his aid. The accession of Mary coincided with Oliver Leder and Lawrence Taylard being elected again as Members of Parliament for Huntingdonshire. Mary and her ministers were not slow in compiling a list of members who were noted, ominously, as having 'stood for the true religion', namely Edward VI's Protestantism. The list did not include either Leder or Taylard, indicating that the queen and her ministers were prepared to accept that Leder and Taylard were most definitely not of a venomous Protestant stripe. A year after the accession of Mary, in 1554, Leder was rewarded firstly with his appointment as sheriff for the second time, and a year later, on 2 February 1555, he received a knighthood from Mary's consort, King Philip of Spain, testimony to the esteem in which he was held by both royalty and parliament.

His acceptance of the religious and political realities of Mary's England did not prevent Oliver Leder from following his own path when it accorded with his principles. There was the case of a well-known local Protestant, by name Thomas Mountain, a fervent supporter of Edward's evangelism – he had been cast into gaol on the serious charge of heresy in this now Catholic land. Leder graciously entertained Mountain, presumably at his residence in Place House, prior to discharging his responsibilities as sheriff for the shire in conducting his prisoner to Cambridge to face his judges. Upon arrival, Leder had to apologise to the judges as he had unfortunately forgotten to bring with him the writ that laid out the charges against Thomas Mountain, who was promptly released from custody.

Sir Oliver Leder died at his estate in Great Staughton in 1557, to be followed a few months later by his wife of over thirty years, Frances, née Baldwin. The Leders are remembered to this day

in the church of St Andrew. At the west end of the nave is an oak screen, inscribed 'Of your Charyte Pray For The Good Astate Of Olyver Leder and frances hys Wyfe, Anno domini 1539.'

Sir Oliver Leder's will, drawn up on 21 September 1554, is a touching document. He asked his wife to execute his numerous charitable bequests, with the rider that 'not for that I do trust to my works, as some prating preachers have lately borne us in hand'. He left all his estates to her. In a heartfelt tribute to Frances, he wrote: 'being very sorry that for her wise and womanly governance and most loving and honest behaviour ... I have not ten times so much to give unto her'. Oliver Leder also provided generously for three nieces, but his nephew was not quite so fortunate, Leder describing him as 'a very unthrifty lad ... of a lewd life', who had already cost him 200 marks, presumably to bail him out of trouble with the law. He remembered in his will numerous godsons and he instructed his old friend Lawrence Taylard to act as executor of the will.

Sir Oliver Leder was buried in Great Staughton on 6 March 1557. His wife Frances died in 1557 before her husband's will was proved and the substantial estates went to her uncle Thomas Baldwin, who lost no time in selling them, in July 1558, to Sir James Dyer and his wife Margaret. With the arrival of Sir James Dyer, the Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, another chapter was about to open in the history of Great Staughton.