

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

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

by

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George Wauton's 'trayned band' and the Armada

For twelve days from late July to early August 1588, England found itself facing its greatest military peril since 1066, in the formidable shape of the *Grande y Felicísima Armada*, the 'Great and Most Fortunate Navy'. This mighty invasion fleet consisted of 125 galleons, 16,000 soldiers and 7,000 sailors under the command of the Duke of Medina Sidonia. By contrast, England's defences were patchy, dependent on 'trayned bands' comprising yeomen and tradesmen, ordinary citizens, often 'of the meaner sorte', and cavalry made up of the local gentry. In Huntingdonshire, there were two such 'trayned bands'. One was led by the scion of the Cromwell family, Sir Oliver Cromwell, uncle of the Protector. The other had as its captain George Wauton of Cretingsbury Manor, Great Staughton. It was destined to be Wauton's finest hour and his achievements are commemorated by an elaborate tomb in the church of St Andrew, paid for by his great friend and comrade-in-arms, Sir Oliver Cromwell.

George Wauton was born in 1534, the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Wauton; his forebears included John Waweton and his buccaneering son Thomas. When George Wauton's father Thomas died in 1555, the 21-year-old George inherited the Manor of Staughton. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, leaving without taking a degree, a common occurrence for those not intending a career in the church. George Wauton made his first, undistinguished entry in the history books in 1562, when as a callow, naïve young man, 'void of learning and knowledge in the common affairs of the world' he came close to losing his and his family's inheritance, the Manor of Cretingsbury, when the 'crafty and subtyll' Thomas Beverley almost persuaded the young Wauton to part with it. Wauton managed to extricate himself but was obliged to grant Beverley a 21-year lease of the manor. It was poor deal, Wauton's share of the bargain being '£50 in hand, 2 nags worth 5 marks and a lute worth 5 shillings'. Beverley's descendants would emerge a century later from historical obscurity to rebuild Gaynes Hall.

If this transaction was a blow to Wauton's self-esteem, not to mention his finances, he did not appear to show it and he quickly recovered, developing business and personal relationships with some of the powerful political figures of Huntingdonshire. When he had property difficulties again in 1582, Wauton was an older and much wiser man. The cause on this occasion was a property Wauton had leased to Sir James Dyer and subsequently, on the distinguished judge's death in that year, to his heir Richard, 'a gentleman of the royal chamber' of James I. According to court proceedings instituted by Richard Dyer, George Wauton had forcibly entered Dyer's principal dwelling, presumably Place House, and in so doing had damaged the conduit and watercourse, which George's mother Elizabeth had, in the words of the court documents, 'suffered the late Sir James Dyer to quietly hold'.

Wauton made slow but steady progress up the Huntingdonshire political hierarchy. His political ambitions were indubitably helped by his close friendship with Oliver (later Sir Oliver) Cromwell. Oliver was the son of Sir Henry Cromwell, 'the Golden Knight', so called because of his habit of distributing gold coinage to the populace as he passed by in his carriage. Sir Henry was unsurprisingly a popular figure in the county. He had several children, one of whom was Oliver, who became the *amicus optimus* (very dear friend) of George Wauton.

From 1583 to 1587 Wauton served as a Justice of the Peace and in 1586 was returned as Member of Parliament for Huntingdonshire. His contributions to the national debate were sketchy. His one contribution of note was a complaint he made against a certain Mr Wingfield,

who, according to Wauton's own testimony, had offered 'to draw his weapon upon him and gave evil language'. This was Edward Wingfield, who lived three miles away in Kimbolton, a fellow knight of the shire whose father had contrived to lose the family castle and estates on account of his leading 'a wasteful course of life'. This may have been compounded by Wingfield's allegation that Wauton had been an accessory to the murder of Wingfield's brother. Happily, the relationship was to be repaired little more than two years later, thanks to the King of Spain's decision to attack England.

England was not wholly unprepared for a Spanish invasion. It was known that the Armada had departed from Lisbon on 28 May 1588 and was heading for the English Channel. Two weeks later, responding to the gravity of the threat facing the country, Elizabeth I issued a proclamation: 'We give our dyrections for the preparing of our Subjects ... to be in redynes and defence against any attempt that might be made against us and our realm.' She called for 'the better sort of gents' to defend the country against the Spanish threat. Elizabeth's call to arms was quickly taken up in every town and village; preparations were rapidly put in place, led by the prominent men in the locality. Huntingdonshire was no exception and Sir Henry Cromwell, the Golden Knight, his son Oliver and George Wauton set to work to mobilise resources, men and weaponry.

Beacons were erected on every prominence, to be lit when the Spanish forces were sighted. With no permanent standing army, the defence of the country rested on 'trayned bands' recruited or conscripted from the ranks of the yeomanry and tradesmen. They were equipped, mostly at their own expense, with a variety of weapons, swords, maces and clubs. These relics of fourteenth-century warfare were increasingly redundant as qualivers, arquebus (early forms of musket) and muskets themselves became commonplace on the battlefield. Lower down the military hierarchy, 'the meaner sorte of gentlemen' responded swiftly and willingly to the call to arms. For mere tenants (copyholders), there was no choice; they were bound by feudal law to serve their lords in time of war, as Sir Henry reminded them in forthright terms: 'There is a statut y doth Compell every Coppiholder ... to serve their Land Lord in person at any tyme of invasion or Rebellion upon the forfeiture of this Land.' And just in case there be any misunderstanding, he rammed home the point: '[T]hat you are my Cobbyholders in my mannor of Ramsey to provid your selves with sufficient warlike furniture ... and to be redy at one howers [hour's] warning.' Signed, 'Yor frynd, H. Cromwell.'

At the top of the social hierarchy, the landed gentry formed themselves into cavalry units. Preparations were often ad hoc and improvised, but England held three significant trump cards that were to be deployed against the would-be invaders. The first was physical: better, faster ships armed with lighter, more effective canon. The other two were beyond human agency: the sea and the weather.

Communications had to be speedy and efficient: the hierarchy of command began at the top with the Queen and her Privy Council, based at court in London. The Privy Council issued orders to Lord St John of Bletsoe, Lord-Lieutenant of Huntingdonshire. Under his command was the Marshal of the county, Sir Henry Cromwell of Hinchingsbrooke and Ramsey, then fifty years of age, and his captains were his son Oliver and George Wauton of Staughton Manor.

The despatches between the Privy Council and the Lord-Lieutenant, and thence forwarded to Sir Henry Cromwell offer a fascinating account of the mounting tension as the Armada approached. As early as April 1588, Lord St John urged able-bodied men to rally to the cause: 'of persons most meete both in habilitie of bodie and sufficiency of estate to supplye ye defects of the former trayned bands and to take the place of those less fitt for the service'. Sir Henry rose to the challenge, commanding all 'captaynes and other leaders to remayne in the County' and ready to

start at an hour's notice and that 'the beacons may be put into a proper state and watched'. His letter came with a warning to those 'who are to be supposed to be spreaders of Rumors or sedicious newes' that they would be severely dealt with.

On 18 June, when the Armada was sighted in the English Channel, a proclamation was issued to every Lord-Lieutenant by Queen Elizabeth from the 'Cort' at Greenwich: '[W]e have therefore thought mete to wyll and requyre you to call together ... the better sort of gents' to meet the threat 'now burst out in uppon the seas tending to a proposed conquest'. If Spain should succeed, the 'trew and sincere Religion of Christ' would be overthrown.

The situation was daily becoming more urgent. Lord St John requested Sir Henry to 'send me a note how your present bandes are furnished and ... also what store of bows and bills Remain in the County'. The High Constables of the County were ordered to supervise the beacons erected on every hill, to be lit 'by men of honest credit' when the hour of need came. They were then instructed to meet with Sir Henry and await further instructions. In a letter to Lord St John, Sir Henry confirmed he and his men were ready. Sir Henry next wrote instructions to the 'gentlemen of the county', which included George Wauton 'to mete me at the George in Huntingto [*sic*] on Munday next in the morning betymes being the first of July'. On the same day, he issued a severe warning to the High Constables on the necessity of ensuring that 'you goe from towne to towne throughout your hundreths giving them very sharp & severe warning that they be presently provided of all such armor & furniture as they have & are to provid by my Lord Leiff'. Failure to carry out this command and 'you will answer the contrary at yo[ur] perill'. Sir Henry Cromwell then wrote personally to George Wauton expressing his gratitude for the exemplary way in which the Staughton man had fulfilled all his commitments to Queen and country by providing the necessary 'trayned bands'. He went on: 'I do heare ye, you and your officers have taken great paynes with those uninstructed shotte [musketeers, &c.] ... And so at this time I bid you hartily farewell being desirous of your good company.'

The threat from the Armada was focused on an invasion attempt, which would be concentrated on Tilbury and it was to that town that the 'trayned bands' of Wauton and Cromwell would direct their men. Wauton was appointed captain of the trayned bands covering the Hundreds of Leightonstone and Normancross, rather than that of the Hundred of Toseland, which was led by Oliver Cromwell. It included a number of men from Great Staughton who marched to Tilbury in defence of the realm: John Bullmer and Thomas Money were equipped with pike and arquebuse; Thomas Ibbott (who may have been an antecedent of the Edmund Ibbott who erected the sundial on Staughton Highway fifty years later); John Rogers and William Cosen with qualiver and arquebus; Thomas Burton, John Banker, Robert Lylford with qualiver and sword; William Glover, Francis Smyth and John Anewes with pike, an 18- to 20-foot-long spear and sword. Sir Richard Dyer was charged with supplying one 'launce' and two 'light horse'. Amongst the 'private gentlemen of the Courte and yeomen of the better sort, there are John Badwyne (Baldwin) gent, and Owyn Biggs' (Biggs was a major landowner in Dillington).

George Wauton commanded a troop of 200 trained men, whose weaponry and armour included 100 qualivers, 20 muskets, 80 corsletts (body armour) and 4 furnished carts to carry provisions and ammunition. His troop also included fifteen highly specialised pyoner (sappers). On 29 June, the Lord-Lieutenant wrote to Cromwell to say that he intended to inspect the trained bands and requested that Wauton's band be assembled for his inspection. 'I pray you therefore give warning accordingly to Mr. Walton [*sic*] on munday following for his band, and thus till then I Leave further to troble you.' Sir Henry addressed his trayned bands, urging them to remember what was at stake. 'Gentillmen, The cause of o' assembling here this day ... Concerneth matter of

no small importance, her majesty doth requier at our hands for the defence of our owne Lyves, liberties, wyves, wealth, children & contrey & especially the true Gospell of Christ.' Should Spanish force prevail, he warned, they would 'supplant the devellishe suppersticon of the pope and now are abroad uppon the seas for this purpose'.

News reached Cromwell and Wauton on 24 July 1588 that the Armada had been sighted off Plymouth and they should make haste to Tilbury. 'A perfect muster roll of all such soldiers as were mustered trayned and delivered before the Right Hon. the Lord St John, Lord-Lieutenant of the County of Hunts, Geo. Wanton [*sic*] Esquire, their Captain and Captain Oliver Cromwell the Mustermaster, with all such furniture as belongeth to the seyd souldyers as Pikes, Halberts, Muskattes, and Quallivers the 2 August in the yere of our Lord 1588.' On the same day, 2 August, Sir Henry Cromwell, knight, 'rid toward London with tene Launces, tene Light horse & tenne Carbines to serve her majesty all of his owne'.

The immediate threat from the Armada was swiftly lifted. By 4 August, the more manoeuvrable English ships had repulsed the Spanish fleet. The weather then took a hand, storms driving the Armada to seek shelter off the Isle of Wight. By 5 and 6 August, the worsening weather forced the Spanish to seek refuge from the elements off Calais where the decisive battle took place. Sir Francis Drake launched eight devastating fireships amongst the Spanish fleet causing panic and disrupting the Armada's formation. The English fleet succeeded in driving off the Armada, forcing the Spanish fleet to sail around the entire coastline of Britain in order to regain their home port. The immediate threat of invasion was over. It is unlikely that Wauton and his band of Staughton brothers were present when, ten days later on 18 August 1588, Elizabeth belatedly addressed the assembled troops in Tilbury, by which time the Armada had been routed and was pursuing its forlorn, hopeless retreat back to Spain. 'I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman,' the Queen proclaimed, 'but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.'

Although the Armada had been successfully routed, the threat to the security of the nation and to Elizabeth's throne had not disappeared and in the following year Cromwell wrote to George Wauton asking him to have the infantry of the Hundred of Normancross mustered at Stilton on 18 February and those of Leightonstone at Spaldwick on 19 February 1589. 'I will acquaynt you with the causes which doth urge her majestie thus speedily to put all her forces in a redlines.' Wauton and the other captains were urged 'to take some paynes by continuall practis to attayne the weight and perfect use of your weapons I comytt you all to God'.

It was some years before England's preparedness could be relaxed and the threat from the Spanish empire removed. It was thanks to the many thousands of 'trayned bands' who rallied to the defence of the realm and one of those bands was made up of men from Great Staughton, led by George Wauton of Staughton Manor. The drama of the Armada was the high point of George Wauton's career. Thereafter, he remained on his estate at Great Staughton, occupied with the official positions to which he had been appointed. From February to November 1594, and again in 1604–5, towards the end of his life, he was escheator for Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, responsible for co-opting juries to conduct an *inquisitio post mortem*, carried out on the death of a lord to determine the tax due to the king. The position was potentially a lucrative one, worth at least £20 per annum to the holder. In 1600, George Wauton donated a tenor bell to the church, which still gives good service today; four years later he was knighted by Elizabeth's successor, James I.

George Wauton died on 4 June 1606. His estate included the manor house, 300 acres of arable land, 80 acres of meadow, 200 acres of pasture, 100 acres of wood, three windmills and a dovecote. In his will, dated 18 January 1607 and proved on 14 June, Wauton remembered at least eight

household servants, a miller, a shepherd, a brewer and a herd boy, as well as the poor of Great and Little Staughton, Kimbolton and St Neots and the prisoners in Huntingdon gaol. The Parish Register of Burials in St Andrew's Church, Great Staughton, contains this entry: 'Sir G WAUTON was buried the 4th day of the month of June who bequeathed ten pounds to the poor of this parish and by his will ordained that it should thus remain for their use for ever that is manifest in the transcript.'

Oliver Cromwell, the executor, his 'honourable good friend', received Wauton's goods, 'to this end and purpose, that hospitality shall be kept in the manor house of Great Staughton ... for the space of three years next after my decease'. Sir Oliver paid for a more lasting testament to their long-standing friendship, which can still be seen today in St Andrew's Church. It is the elaborate tomb decorated with the Wauton coat of arms and bearing an inscription in Latin, which reads in part:

GEORGIUS WAUTON Eques auratus
Egressus ex hac vita quarto nonas Junii
Anno parte salutis millesimo sexcentesimo
Sexto statis sue septuagesimo secundo
...
Oliverus Cromwell miles de la Bathe
Amicus optimus optimo amico in mutui
Amoris, vereque gratitudinis ...

GEORGE WAUTON, knight bachelor
Departed this life on the second of June
In the year of our redemption 1606
And of his age seventy-two

...
This [monument], Oliver Cromwell, Knight of the Bath
A very dear friend to a very dear friend
In token of their mutual affection and in sincere gratitude

George Wauton died without issue and his estate passed to the cousin of his grandfather, the then twelve-year-old Valentine Wauton who was to acquire a very different national reputation.