GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

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

by

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From Waweton to Walton: birth of a dynasty

For three centuries, from the mid-1400s to the restoration of Charles II in 1660, the Waweton/Wauton/Walton dynasty was the most powerful family in Great Staughton. Their story begins around the year 1339 with the birth of the founder of the dynasty, John Waweton.

John Waweton, described in the historical records as being of Great Staughton and Somersham in Huntingdonshire, Basmey in Bedfordshire and Stowe Wythe in Cambridgeshire, was born c. 1339, the fourth son of Robert and Maud Waweton of Stowe Wythe. He married Parnell, by whom he had two sons and a daughter. John Waweton represented Huntingdonshire in ten parliaments from 1365 until 1395. How John Waweton came to acquire the manors of Staughton and Basmey in Eaton Socon is not recorded, but there is an unverified account that suggests that a daughter of one of the last of the de Cretings (perhaps Sir Edmund) married into the Waweton family in the late 1340s and John Waweton may have thereby inherited the manor of Staughton. We do know that in 1348, the lawyer representing Edmund de Creting was Thomas Leder.

The fourteenth century, aptly described by one historian as 'calamitous', was the ominous backcloth to the rise of one of Staughton's most influential families, whose power and authority were to extend until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The calamities of the fourteenth century began with the onset of the Little Ice Age and the ensuing great famine of 1315–1317. Twenty years later and two years before the birth of John Waweton, Edward III declared war against the French to recover lands lost by his father Edward II. It was the beginning of the Hundred Years War. When John was nine years of age, the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* arrived in England and the subsequent Great Mortality wiped out an estimated one-third of England's 4 million population. The shortage of labour resulting from the Black Death was to cause serious social unrest culminating in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. John Waweton lived and was politically active throughout the entire period.

One of the greatest revolutions in English history did not however involve civil unrest, wars or famine and John Waweton, Member of Parliament for Huntingdonshire, was present when it occurred in 1362. More accurately called the Pleading in English Act 1362, the Statute of Pleading was passed into law, stipulating that henceforth all pleas in the English courts 'shall be pleaded, shewed, defended, answered, debated, and judged in the English language'. After 300 years, Norman French was to be replaced in the courts and in Parliament by 'the vulgar tongue'. Edward III became the first monarch to address Parliament in English.

The linguistic genie was out of the bottle and the contagion of English quickly spread. Between 1382 and 1395, a group of scholars led by John Wycliffe published a translation into English of the Bible, almost contemporary with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400). By 1385, English had become the language of instruction in schools. As a final example of the triumph of English over the 'enemy language' French, Henry V, king of England, began writing his official correspondence in English on 12 August 1417.

In a diligent but somewhat colourless career as the representative for Huntingdonshire between 1365 and 1395, John Waweton served three sovereigns; Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV. Throughout his tenure as Lord-Lieutenant of the County from 1367 to 1399, John Waweton

was obliged under the Commission of Array to raise troops in the event of a national emergency. As an assize judge, he was considered sufficiently qualified to lead an official inquiry in March 1367 into the crimes of one William Burton. He served as a Justice of the Peace for Huntingdonshire from November 1369 to 1374 and from November 1397 to February 1405. In December 1380 he was a tax collector for Huntingdonshire and in March 1404, towards the end of his political career, controller of taxes.

His sole military exploit in the service of his king was in 1370 when he was part of a disastrous foray into French territory led by Waweton's almost exact contemporary Sir Robert Knolles (c. 1325–1406) whose freebooting character was matched only by his gross military incompetence. By 1370 the Hundred Years' War had been reduced to a succession of minor skirmishes followed by volleys of diplomatic invective. Knolles, at the head of an army of 6,000, was commanded to push into French territory and capture strategic towns on the way. It was a disaster. His generals lost confidence in his strategy, particularly when he declined to engage in battle the formidable French commander Bertrand de Guesclin and he finally abandoned his army to its fate. Most of the force was slaughtered but the remnants of the army managed to flee to Calais in the confident expectation that there would be ships to carry them home. This expectation proved misguided; there were not enough ships and what was left of the army was wiped out by the pursuing French.

Retribution for Knolles quickly followed; he was stripped of his lands and fined 10,000 marks (perhaps £2m today). Waweton was one of the few to survive the debacle and the experience did not seem to halt his modest rise up the political ladder. He returned to his property management ventures, in particular with Sir William Moigne, his neighbour and colleague. In the August 1377 Parliament of Richard II, Waweton became a trustee of Moigne's estates and performed a similar function for several other local landowners. In June 1385, his otherwise unblemished record was besmirched when he was accused of poaching on the Bishop of Ely's land in Somersham.

A testing moment for Waweton came in the wake of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. The Black Death had caused a severe shortage of labour, a fact which had encouraged agricultural labourers to press for higher wages. In response, a Royal Decree had been issued in 1349 by Edward III, setting the level of wages. Discontent festered for decades until in the late 1370s serious civil unrest broke out. In February 1378, there was an outbreak of civil disorder in St Neots and three years later in July 1381, at the height of the Peasants' Revolt, there were riots in Huntingdon. John Waweton did not hesitate in taking the necessary steps to 'suppress the insurgents'. In the same year, he was obliged to 'enforce labour services' i.e. force the labourers on the Ramsey Estates to return to work. Waweton came to the aid of his neighbouring landowner, William Gamboun and the subsequent relationship he developed with Gamboun was especially fruitful. In 1401, Waweton, having obtained the wardship of William Gamboun's son and heir Richard, promptly married off his daughter to the young man, to the great benefit of his wealth and landholding.

The trickiest moment of John Waweton's career came in the final years of Richard II's authoritarian reign. Waweton had long enjoyed the confidence of the king but elsewhere in the kingdom revolt was brewing which came to a head when Henry de Bolingbroke deposed Richard and installed himself on the throne as Henry IV. He reinforced his authority a year later by allegedly having Richard murdered. If Waweton thought that his loyalty to Richard would count against him, he must have been relieved to retain the favour of the new king. The last mention history has of John is in 1412, when he is named in tax returns. He may have died shortly after that date, leaving a widow, Parnell, who held the estate in Staughton. After much litigation the estate passed to John's son Thomas.

Thomas Waweton was born in 1370 in his father's manor in Great Staughton. His rapid rise to power in Huntingdonshire politics owed much to his father's influence and to his own energy, ambition and purpose. In 1495, at the age of twenty-five, he was appointed alnager in Bedfordshire. The position carried weight. An alnager was responsible for ensuring that woollen cloths, 'shall be of the same width, to wit, of two ells (an ell was roughly a yard) within the lists, and of the same goodness in the middle and sides'. If fault were found with the cloth, it was forfeited to the Crown. The title testified to the importance of the wool trade in England's economy at this time.

Two years later Thomas Waweton was elected to represent Huntingdonshire in Parliament and he quickly acquired important responsibilities: collector of taxes in 1404 and Justice of the Peace for Huntingdonshire and Bedfordshire at various times between 1405 and 1448. His personal circumstances changed; in 1406 Thomas made the manor of Great Staughton his principal residence and upon the death of his father in or around 1412, Thomas took possession of the manor of Basmey in Eaton Ford, which handily gave him the residence qualification he would require if he chose to stand for Parliament for Bedfordshire.

Thomas Waweton was quick to cement his power and influence by acquiring a number of powerful allies, like him knights of the shire. The undoubted de facto leader of the Huntingdonshire and Bedfordshire Members of Parliament and its dominant force was Sir John Tiptoft, with whom Thomas Waweton enjoyed a particularly warm and long-lasting friendship, notable for the many business dealings between the two men. Tiptoft had literally won his spurs as a loyal supporter of Henry of Bolingbroke, who knighted him in 1399 and when Bolingbroke deposed Richard II and assumed the throne as Henry IV, Tiptoft's position as a trusted confidant of the new king was assured.

Thomas Waweton's parliamentary career spanned the first four decades of the fifteenth century during which time he represented Huntingdonshire on several occasions between 1397 to the late 1420s. In the elections of 1413 and 1414 he was returned as the Member of Parliament for Bedfordshire and in 1415 he was appointed sheriff for that county. Knighted in 1418 and styled 'chivaler' (knight), he was again elected as MP for Bedfordshire in 1419. In 1420 and 1422, he reverted to his former constituency when he was returned as MP for Huntingdonshire and was again appointed sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1422. More honours followed when he became chamberlain of North Wales, thus rising in both royal and national ranks.

The pinnacle of Thomas Waweton's career came in 1425 when he was appointed Speaker of the House of Commons. In an entertaining and sardonic look at the eminent worthies who have held the office, one writer had some caustic observations about Sir Thomas Waweton who seemed to have held no legal appointments, nor was he even 'learned in the lawes', which would normally be expected of the holder of such a high office. Indeed, Waweton seemed to owe more to 'fortunate matrimonial alliances with eminent lawyers' than to any exceptional forensic and diplomatic skills normally considered appropriate to the office.

A curious episode occurred when he was Speaker of the House of Commons. Two heretical petitions were delivered to Parliament by the Lollards, followers of John Wycliffe, who believed in the preaching of the word and disavowed the ostentatious religious ceremonial of the Catholic church. It was a risky enterprise for Waweton to be seen even tacitly acknowledging any petition emanating from dissenters, let alone to allow a parliamentary debate on the subject. The first petition criticised the scandalous conduct of absent clergy who corruptly benefited from multiple livings. The second petition objected to the lengthy sentences handed down to heretics imprisoned without trial. In allowing debate on these heretical petitions, Thomas Waweton may well have been

influenced by his neighbour in Staughton, Sir John Cheyne, who had taken part in the rebellion of Sir John Oldcastle (the model for Shakespeare's Falstaff) in 1413 and who was suspected of being involved in the Lollard uprisings in the Midlands in 1431.

Waweton was also witness to one of the most curious ceremonies to have attended a State opening of Parliament. After the early death of his father Henry V, the victor of Agincourt, his new-born son Henry VI succeeded to the throne at the age of nine months in 1422 and at the age of two he opened Parliament, seated on the lap of his twenty-year-old mother, Catherine of Valois. The antiquary John Speed felt moved to comment in his *History,* published in 1611: 'It was a strange sight, and the first time it was ever seen in England, an infant sitting in his mother's lap (on the throne), and before it could tell what English meant, to exercise the place of sovereign direction in open Parliament.'

More parochial matters may have claimed Waweton's attention in 1420, when a new church bell was delivered to the vicar of Great Staughton, John Teesdale, and duly installed in the church tower. The bell is thought to have been cast by a bell makers' guild, which was active in London between 1395 and 1420.

Personal matters intruded sometime prior to September 1422, when following the death of his first wife Elizabeth, Waweton married Maud. The reason we can be specific about the date is that the couple received papal permission (an indult) allowing him and his wife to make use of a portable altar. In 1419, Waweton was honoured by the king as the soldier most worthy to defend the realm against an enemy.

Noteworthy though Thomas Waweton's parliamentary career may have been, it was not without blemish. Throughout his forty-year career Thomas Waweton often showed a reckless disregard for electoral law. Nor was he alone in indulging in frankly illegal tactics to secure either his own election or the election of cronies. An electoral law of 1413 stipulated, not unreasonably, that candidates should actually reside in the shire they wished to represent. Despite being resident in both Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, where he endured 'the longe labour, coost and travail' of sheriff, he successfully presented himself in 1416 as a candidate in Huntingdonshire and was duly elected.

Waweton's illegal machinations were to catch up with him in the summer of 1429, when, in the space of two weeks, he made two outrageous attempts to influence the outcome of two elections, an action that caused great controversy amongst some of Waweton's erstwhile friends and colleagues. The first egregious disregard of electoral law came on 20 August 1429, in the elections for Huntingdonshire. Waweton was determined to foist his relative William Waweton, who was not even resident in the county and his wealthy neighbour Robert Stonham in place of his close friends, Roger Hunt and Nicholas Styuecle. Waweton meant business; with a body of armed men, 'visitors from Bedfordshire', he stormed into Huntingdon town hall and forced the terrified sheriff and his entourage to return Waweton's two choices. He repeated the ploy in the elections for the sheriff of Bedfordshire. An official royal commission into the latter affair concluded that Waweton had acted in defiance of the law and the original candidates were re-instated. Waweton did not escape unscathed; brought before the courts, he was fined £100 for contravening the Statutes of 1406, 1410 and 1413.

Despite his behaviour, Waweton became sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1432, a period that coincided with an upturn in his fortunes when, after the death of Maud, he married Alana, a widow and daughter of Sir Simon Felbrigg, a standard-bearer of Richard II. Through her, Waweton

inherited estates in Northamptonshire and in 1443 he came into the Felbrigg estates. The marriage also marked an upward turn in Waweton's social rank, as Alana was related to Anne of Bohemia, Richard II's first queen. It must have been something of a turnaround in the perception of him by his Huntingdon and Great Staughton neighbours. No doubt as a result of his now regal connections, Waweton was summoned to attend a great council at Westminster in the spring of 1434. On 15 November 1435, in an indication of his power, wealth and influence, Waweton was asked by the king for a loan of £50 in support of the French war.

Despite the honours and tribulations at a national level, it was in the local politics of Huntingdonshire and Bedfordshire that Waweton had his greatest influence and not always for the good. In the 1430s, Bedfordshire politics was divided into two bitterly opposed factions. Reynold, Lord Grey of Ruthin, the political supremo of the county, was being challenged by the upstart Sir John Cornwall (ennobled as Lord Fanhope in 1432), the second largest landowner in the county. On 12 January 1439, Waweton, allegedly supported by 800 armed men 'girt with swords', took over the county court at Bedford, despite the fact that it was already in session. Fanhope made the expected response and a brawl took place, in which Waweton took a vigorous part, despite the fact that he must have been in his sixties by this time. A royal council was convened to give judgement on the matter, which resulted in Waweton being relieved of his responsibilities as Justice of the Peace.

For the remainder of his days, Waweton withdrew from political life and devoted himself to his property holdings. In May 1448, he received royal exemption from holding any office of the Crown, although he was appointed in 1450 as commissioner of *oyer and terminer* (a court of law convened to hear and determine cases) and a year later as a tax collector in Bedfordshire. The date of his death is not known but it must have been around this time, when he would have been over eighty years of age. He was buried in the church of Great Staughton. His wife Alana died in 1458 and was buried in the parish church of Eaton Socon. They left two sons and two daughters. The Waweton line continued into the following century when the Manor of Staughton passed to George Wauton in 1555.

One of the more interesting of Thomas Waweton's extended network of friends and acquaintances was Sir Robert Stonham, another neighbour in Staughton and said to be one of the wealthiest individuals ever to represent Huntingdonshire, where he was elected MP for the first time in 1421. He was born c. 1390 to Robert Stonham of Stonham Aspall in Suffolk and Katherine, daughter of Sir William Burgate. His path to riches began around 1415, when he married a well-connected lady of the shires, Mary, daughter of a wealthy landowner, Sir John Bernak, or Barnack, of Saxlingham, Norfolk. This promising start was continued when, in an extraordinary stroke of good fortune (at least for Robert Stonham), Mary's two brothers and co-heirs both died in infancy within days of each other, leaving Mary and Robert in possession of estates extending across several eastern counties.

When Mary's sister and co-heir Joan died in 1420, Mary and her husband thus inherited estates in Hallaton (Leicestershire), Sandy (Bedfordshire), Colne Engaine (Essex) and Saxlingham (Norfolk). Part of the inheritance was the manor of Dillington and Gaynes Hall thus passed into the hands of Robert Stonham and his wife, Mary Barnack. Even this good fortune was not sufficient for Robert Stonham, who laid claim, unsuccessfully in 1416, to the manor of Grafham, owned by the Member of Parliament, Henry Hethe. If he feared that this setback might curtail his landholding ambitions, he was to be reassured by his mother Katherine's astute choice of second

husband, John Spencer, keeper of the wardrobe to Henry V. Through his influence, Stonham was introduced to royal circles, but it was Katherine's third husband, John Tyrell, a distinguished Parliamentarian and treasurer of the royal household, who secured a permanent place for Stonham in the king's intimate circle.

For all the good fortune and helping hands that came his way, Robert Stonham was not without his own considerable merits. In 1415, he joined Henry V's campaign in France, but dysentery forced his early return to England and thus he missed the slaughter of Harfleur and the triumph of Agincourt.

Stonham entered Parliament as the MP for Huntingdonshire in 1421, but contributed little to national debate. He achieved some notoriety in 1429 when Thomas Waweton failed to impose him as his chosen candidate on the Bedfordshire electorate. Nonetheless, Stonham served in at least nine further Parliaments and occupied various official positions: collector of taxes, Justice of the Peace 1437–1443 and again in 1450 until his death in 1455.

One of his more unusual roles was his appointment in March 1439 'to supervise the felling of trees in the forest of Weybridge', situated to the north of Great Staughton. On two occasions, in 1432 and 1436, he was appointed sheriff of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. In contrast to his public career as MP, Stonham's royal duties are little recorded.

He accompanied the newly crowned Henry VI on his visit to France and obtained letters of protection in May 1430. He was still abroad in November 1431, presumably in France and the letters of protection were renewed. In February and March of 1431, the trial took place in Rouen of Joan of Arc and after being found guilty by an English judge and jury, she was burnt at the stake in May of that year. Were the letters of protection issued to Robert Stonham to enable him to be present at the trial and subsequent execution of the 'Maid of Orléans'?

Robert Stonham died on 27 February 1455 and was buried in the panelled vault of a specially built chapel in the parish church of Great Staughton. In his *History of Great Staughton*, H.G. Watson stated that in Camden's *Visitation of Great Staughton* in 1613, an inscription existed in the church relating to the Stonham family. It read:

> Here lies Robert Stonham Esquire and his wife Mary, which said Robert died the 27th day … *[February 1455 text missing]*. … Barnack knight, died the 23rd day of the month of September A.D. 1454. May God have mercy on their souls.

Watson (1919) suggested that on the chancel floor there was a matrix of a brass that may have corresponded to the above inscription. It is no longer extant. In the vault of what is now the Gaynes Chapel in St Andrew's Church, there are shields bearing the arms of the families of Stonham, Barnack, Noone, Engaine and Burgatt.