

Did Ralph travel on the continent?

Until recently two sources claim that Ralph travelled abroad; differing in content, both are often repeated. One is the brief reference in his epitaph supposedly composed by his son Edward (1561-1643), that :¹

‘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 second is no older than the 1920s, a suggestion based on the epitaph that Hyckes acted as ‘tutor’ to the young Ralph on a tour abroad.² The argument collapses completely in light of much later information from Hyckes himself who recalled his earliest acquaintance with Ralph as dating only from 1557 or 1558.³

The epitaph, however, brings problems of interpretation because it is uncertain exactly when it was composed. For example, it states that Ralph had 130 descendants, a total certainly not reached when Ralph died in 1613; there may have been more than thirty/30 before 1643 but the figure of 130 could not have been reached until the mid-eighteenth century. ⁴

Its mention that Ralph had attended Oxford University is not supported by any University or College records. Conversely, it omits to note that he attended the Middle Temple, one of the four Inns of Court in London, the alternative educational centre for many gentry sons interested in acquiring at least sufficient knowledge of the law to allow them to carry out the duties of JP or other county offices they were later likely to occupy.⁵

Thirdly, Ralph was described as a courtier. No record that he held any position at Court is known. That honour should go to Edward Sheldon of Ditchford and Stratton (1619-1676), Ralph’s grandson; both he and his family were associated with the Court of Catherine of Braganza (1638-1705), wife of king Charles II.⁶ Lastly, the Sheldon who is known to have visited Paris is Ralph ‘the Great’ (1623-1684).⁷ Again both discrepancies suggest a later date than the lifetime of Edward Sheldon (1561-1643) and a possible explanation for the confused information.

¹ Treadway Nash, *Collections for a History of Worcestershire*, London 1781, 2 vols, i, p.66; translated by E.A.B.Barnard, *The Sheldons*, Cambridge 1936, p. 41.

² E. A. B. Barnard and A. J. B. Wace, ‘The Sheldon tapestry weavers and their work’, *Archaeologia*, vol. lxxviii, 1928, 255-318, p. 259

³ Worcester Archaeological and Archives Service (WAAS), Worcester Consistory Court Deposition Books, vol. iii, f. 311; H.L.Turner, ‘Finding the Weavers; Richard Hyckes and the Sheldon Tapestry works’, *Textile History*, 33, no. 2, November 2002, 137-161, now on-line.

⁴ Treadway Nash, *Collections for a History of Worcestershire*, 2 vols, 1799, I, p.69, on-line.

⁵ *Middle Temple Admission Registers*, ed. H.A.C. Sturgess, 3 vols 1849, I, p.22.

⁶ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*.

⁷ *ODNB*.

There is now another possibility. Chronologically closest to the vaguely preserved memory of what had been a remarkable event in family history, it is also the most puzzling. Its information challenges rather than confirms that of the epitaph.

In November 1555 Sir Philip Hoby, on his return journey towards England, wrote from Antwerp to Edward Courtenay, first earl of Devon, then at Louvain.⁸ He requested the earl to call before him ‘a scholar and acquaintance of mine named young Sheldon’, commending him as ‘my countryman’. The earl was to encourage the young man in his studies and to ‘show him some kind of courtesy’. Hoby explained his reason for begging this favour; ‘for that his father being a dear friend of mine, may hear from his son’s report that my commendation of him to your Lordship may stand him in some stead.’

It is uncertain that the two ever met. Hoby’s arrival was delayed and, although Courtenay, much occupied with his own affairs, replied the next day undertaking to ‘look after young Sheldon’, he made clear that he had not yet seen him. Three days later Courtenay had moved on and by 10 December is recorded at Cologne.⁹ Sheldon’s whereabouts meanwhile are unknown.

‘Young Sheldon’ was not further identified. He should probably be regarded as Ralph, son of William Sheldon of Beoley and Weston; Hoby and Sheldon were old friends.¹⁰ They had served as Worcestershire JPs at the same time; had been in the parliament of 1547 and both had served in the household of Katherine Parr, later the sixth wife of king Henry VIII.

It is, however, unknown when Ralph joined Hoby’s entourage. He might just have arrived, perhaps bringing messages from England including news of his father’s recent marriage.¹¹ Or he might have set out with the original party when Sir Philip Hoby,¹² former ambassador of Henry VIII and of Edward VI, had left England in mid-1554, claiming ill-health and making clear his intention of taking the waters at the famous Spas of Liege and Aix la Chapelle.

If so, Sheldon had been with Hoby and his half-brother Sir Thomas for eighteen months. The latter’s diary recorded their route towards Italy through Protestant cities in

⁸ *CSP Venetian* 1555-56, nos. 284, 285, 20 and 21 November.

⁹ Kenneth R Bartlett, ‘The misfortune That is Wished for him: the exile and death of Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon’, *Canadian Journal of History Annales Canadienne d’Histoire*, April 1979, pp. 1-28, esp. p.16,

¹⁰ Because of the proximity of their lands, by service in the Court of Augmentation, in Katherine Parr’s household or while Hoby was JP in the year of Sheldon’s first shrievalty. E. A. B. Barnard, ‘The Hobys of Evesham and of Bisham (Berks.)’ *WAS*, ns, 12 (1936 for 1935) pp. 18-29; Susan James, *The Making of a Queen Kathryn Parr*, Ashgate 1999, pp. 122-5. *L&P Henry VIII*, vol 21 (ii) pp. 388-453, no. 165.

¹¹ The marriage to Margaret, widow of Sir William Whorwood, took place on 1 November 1555; the settlement is recited in TNA WARD 7/13/135; A note of the same event is at Birmingham Archives and Heritage (BAH), Barnard Miscellany 77/ D/1 and 77/Q/1, quoting deeds now lost from Coughton Court.

¹² *ODNB*.

Belgium, Holland and along the Rhine in Germany.¹³ The Hobys spent the summer of 1555 in Padua, the gathering place of Protestants who had chosen exile rather than live under the Catholic sovereign Mary Tudor. Whether Ralph had really spent almost a year there in their company is unknown. There is no proof, for example enrolment as a student attending the University..¹⁴

Hoby, not himself above suspicion, was on his return journey to England when he had made his request to a man of clearly doubtful loyalties. Courtenay's reasons for leaving England had been close to necessity. He had just begun on a journey towards Italy, its staging posts traceable by courtesy of the diplomatic correspondence of ambassadors whose countries wanted him dead. Courtenay boasted a lineage from the Yorkist side which gave him a claim to England's throne. At one time, and by one faction, favoured as a husband for Mary, he was also a candidate for the hand of her half-sister Elizabeth. Posturing as a catholic, but plotting as a Protestant, he had been allowed to leave England in May 1555.¹⁵

What purpose Hoby's appeal served, other than his own ends, is unclear. The obligation to Ralph's father, to whom he was socially superior, seems stronger than the desire to help Ralph. But in what way and for what reason William Sheldon would have been grateful is hard to understand. An introduction to Courtenay was scarcely likely to further advancement for either Sheldon, rather the opposite; it was a risk.

If, however, if Sir Philp had invited Ralph to join his entourage in 1554, it would probably have been seen as a welcome opportunity to further Ralph's education, and a chance to travel in educated and well-connected company. The offer reflected well on William's own status and was not a chance which William would choose to refuse. It might also link the Sheldon family more closely to Protestant supporters than previously known, in line with William's views and with his choice of his second wife. Either way, it is an interesting comment on the family's relationship with figures central to current affairs, and, in the light of Ralph's later conduct, even more intriguing, offering support to Barnard's remark that Ralph had a Protestant upbringing.¹⁶ No Catholic needed to leave England under Mary Tudor; no Protestant would willingly travel in France. Once again evidence contradicts the epitaph, another indication of much later composition than claimed, influenced by the travels of subsequent family members.¹⁷

¹³ Thomas Hoby, 'A booke of the travaile and lief of me, Thomas Hoby,' ed. by Edgar Powell, *Camden Miscellany X*, in Camden Society, Royal Historical Society, London 1902, 3rd series, vol IV, pp. 104-126.

¹⁴ *Padua and the Tudors: English Students in Italy, 1485-1603*, Jonathan Woolfson, University of Toronto Press. 1998, has no entry for Sheldon.

¹⁵ Kenneth R Bartlett, 'The misfortune'; he died in Padua in September 1556.

¹⁶ Barnard, *The Sheldons*, p. 30. He was unaware of this journey.

¹⁷ Ralph's heir was abroad between 1625 and 1633, his grandson between 1604 and 1607 and 1608-10 and his great-grandson in the 1640s and again between 1667-70.

Hoby, and presumably Ralph, were back in England in January 1556. Relations remained cordial; Hoby intended a bequest to William Sheldon in his will and contacts made in this period served Ralph well.¹⁸ In November 1556, rather older than was customary, Ralph was enrolled in the Middle Temple,¹⁹ where he shared with a future Treasurer the chambers of a former Treasurer.²⁰ He was still in attendance when his father sought a general pardon for him at the start of queen Elizabeth's reign, even though Ralph had held no office.²¹

The puzzle remains.

Ralph Sheldon's Epitaph in Beoley Church, Worcestershire

Text translated by E A B Barnard, *The Sheldons*, p 61.

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

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¹⁸ Sir Philip wanted William Cecil and Walter Mildmay to spend Christmas 1557 with him at Bisham, ODNB Mildmay; TNA PROB 11/40/345 as Hobby.

¹⁹ *Middle Temple Admission Registers*, ed. H.A.C. Sturgess, 3 vols 1849, I, p.22.

²⁰ Parmiter, Geoffrey de C., *Edmund Plowden, An Elizabethan Lawyer*, CRS monograph series 1987, p. 108.

²¹ *CPR 1558-60*, p. 210; it described Ralph as of Beoley and the Middle Temple. William also sought a pardon for himself, *CPR 1558-60*, p. 176.