

Oxford's Land Sales, Castle Hedingham and the Sheepcote in *As You Like It*

by Jan Cole

The topography of the Shakespeare plays has been of interest for many years, and some Stratfordian biographers still believe that Warwickshire scenery can be found in them.¹ More recently, even orthodox commentators have shown great interest in the Italian plays' topography, and in 2011 Richard Paul Roe's original investigations discovered multiple exact locations in the Italian-set plays that leave the reader in little doubt that the playwright was drawing upon first-hand experience.²

With Oxford as the proposed author, it seems worthwhile to look for Essex locations, particularly any located near Castle Hedingham, Essex, the seat of the Earls of Oxford. Oxford was born there in 1550 and although he probably moved away at a very early age to be educated by Sir Thomas Smith elsewhere in Essex, it is probable that he was returned to his father for Christmas and summer holidays. The 11-year-old Oxford is likely to have been there in August 1561 when Queen Elizabeth visited on her annual progress, and he may have been present in 1583 when his unnamed infant son and sole heir was buried at St Nicholas's Church, Castle Hedingham. In any case, he remained familiar with the layout of the parish through the work of his uncle, Arthur Golding, who managed the rents from his estates after 1562 when he was taken into royal wardship, and through the land survey and maps drawn up by Israel Amyce in 1592 in relation to its sale to Oxford's father-in-law, William Cecil.³

This essay will look at one location in Castle Hedingham that may have been used to provide local colour in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. It is a field located due west of Hedingham Castle called 'Sheepcote Field' on the 1592 map. It lies immediately below the road going south that Amyce marked as 'the way leading from Castle Hedingham towards Halstead'. This road is known today as 'Sheepcote Road'. On the Amyce map a building is depicted at the top of 'Sheepcote Field' near the road and labelled 'a tenement belonging to Colne Priory', which suggests that its rents were paid into Oxford's Earls Colne estate, which was also sold in 1592.⁴

The sheepcote in *As You Like It*

The 'Forest of Arden' in the play is, of course, an imagined composite, associated with the *Ardennes* region in Flanders and the English woodland that the audience would have related to the area in Warwickshire anciently held by the Arden family. It also contains some exotic Mediterranean or eastern features (olive trees, palm trees, lions).

However, significantly for the plot, it is also a rural agricultural terrain containing pasture, sheep, a tenanted sheepcote or shepherd's cottage, two shepherds (Corin and Silvius), a shepherdess (Phoebe), a country girl (Audrey), a country youth (William) and a country vicar 'of the next village' (Sir Oliver Mar-text). Also significantly for the plot, Arden is part of an aristocratic estate that contains woodland, foresters, parkland and deer that are formally hunted in 'the chase'.

Act 4, Scene 3 of the play finds Rosalind and Celia (disguised as youths) in the 'forest' after the hunt has finished. The shepherd Silvius enters and, a little later, the shepherd Corin. Later still, Oliver, one of the sons of Rowland de Boys and elder brother of Orlando, enters carrying a bloodstained napkin. It is he that asks the question:

*Good morrow, fair ones. Pray you, if you know,
Where in the purlieus of this forest stands
A sheepcote fenc'd about with olive-trees?*⁵

Celia's answer gives some precise directions in the following lines, and these are the lines crucial to my hypothesis in this essay:

*West of this place, down in the neighbour bottom,
The rank of osiers by the murmuring stream,
Left on your right hand, brings you to the place.
But at this hour the house doth keep itself,
There's none within.*⁶

Oliver's immediate response is to recognise the disguised pair, dressed as boys but 'of female favour', and he asks of Rosalind: 'Are not you / the owner of the house I did enquire for?' Celia replies: 'We are'.

Oliver then shows them the bloodstained napkin and explains how he has grappled with a lioness who was about to kill his brother Orlando. This causes considerable

alarm to Rosalind and the comedy of disguise moves forward. Rosalind faints, partly at the thought of Orlando's death and partly because she knows that Orlando, whom she loves, loves her. At the end of this scene they exit, and no more is said about the sheepcote.

However, we have already learnt about the sheepcote, though not yet given directions to it, in Act 2, scene 4. There, the disguised Rosalind and Celia are faint with hunger in the forest. They meet the court fool, Touchstone, and Corin the shepherd, and ask the way to a place where they can rest and buy food.

Corin decides to help them, explaining that he looks after the sheep but does not shear them, a distinction that stresses the two distinct occupations, and perhaps implying that they have been left unshorn, since all is not as it should be. He tells them that the master (i.e. the landowner) whom he serves is a man 'of churlish disposition' who is not likely to show hospitality – and, anyway, his master is not living there locally. As the editor of the current Arden edition of the play notes, 'Corin is not his own master, but employed by an absentee landlord... a situation which created major social tension'.⁷

Moreover, as Corin explains, the land is up for sale:

*Besides, his cote, his flocks and bounds of feed
Are now on sale, and at our sheepcote now
By reason of his absence there is nothing
That you will feed on. But what is, come see,
And in my voice most welcome shall you be.*⁸

Celia and Rosalind discuss the proposed sale, suggesting that Corin buys the cottage, pasture and flock, and (somewhat improbably, perhaps) that they will 'amend his wage' and give him sufficient money to buy it. Celia remarks, 'I like this place, / And willingly could waste my time in it', and Corin (perhaps regretfully) admits, 'Assuredly the thing is to be sold'.

An Oxfordian analysis

In these passages a rural situation of considerable reality is presented, including a flock of sheep, 'the bounds of feed' (i.e. complete pasture land, likely to be extensive), the sheepcote or shepherd's cottage, an apparently uninterested absentee landlord, a potential sale of land, property and livestock, low agricultural wages, and lack of food and the wherewithal for hospitality as a direct result (it is implied) of the landowner's

absence. We are also given precise directions regarding the position of the sheepcote in relation to 'this place'. Taken all together and from an Oxfordian viewpoint, this scenario suggests not only a geographical allusion to Castle Hedingham, but to its impending sale in 1592.

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Essex Record Office

As the Amyce map of 1592 shows, from the castle keep (to the immediate west of which stood the great hall or residential building of the de Veres), a road runs due west through the village to the junction of today's St James Street and its continuation (downhill towards the river and the parish boundary) as Queen Street.

The first junction with Queen Street is Sheepcote Road, abutting with Sheepcote Field. Sheepcote Road is parallel to the River Colne about half-a-mile down the hill in the low-lying river valley at the junction of the two neighbouring parishes of Castle Hedingham and Sible Hedingham. As a resident of Hedingham, I have been able to trace the directions in the play as follows. If you walk away from the entrance gates of Hedingham Castle, you go 'west from this place' down Castle Lane into Falcon Square, which continues into St James Street. Continuing westwards, you enter Queen Street. Continuing along Queen Street you proceed downhill towards the parish boundary,

which is the River Colne. However, if you turn left from Queen Street into Sheepcote Road, the river is on your right side, and walking a little way further you come to a building which today is the Hedingham Scouts Hut. It is approximately on the same site as the building shown at the top of Sheepcote Field on the Amyce map. There is some ambiguity in the play's text in the lines 'left on your right hand', but 'left' here can be read as meaning 'leaving the stream on your right side', or as the editor of the Arden edition paraphrases in her note, 'If you leave the line of willows [i.e. osiers] by the stream on your right hand, the path [i.e. road] will bring you to the house [i.e. the sheepcote].

The directions in the text can be compared to Hedingham as follows:

west of this place	west of Hedingham Castle
down in the neighbour bottom	downhill at the junction of the bottom of the parish of Castle Hedingham with the parish of Sible Hedingham
the rank of osiers by the murmuring stream	Osiers were willows whose long slender shoots were cut, peeled and tied into bundles to be used for basket-making. Osiers were grown along the River Colne for this purpose until the early 20 th century and sent to Halstead for basket-making.
left on your right hand	leaving the stream on your right-hand side
brings you to the place	brings you to the sheepcote (in Sheepcote Field below Sheepcote Road in Castle Hedingham).

With some slight alterations – the sheepcote in the play would seem to be at the bottom of the field rather than at the top as it is on the Amyce map; a stream is not a river, but the Colne is no more than ten feet across at this point – all five features and the directional relation between them fits the geography of Castle Hedingham, today almost unchanged since the sixteenth century.

Conclusion

It might be argued that the directions to the sheepcote in the play could be relevant to geography in Warwickshire or anywhere else in England for that matter. However, they correspond exactly to Castle Hedingham and can be verified both on a contemporary map and in present-day actuality. The cumulative scenario of sheepcote, osier-banked stream on a low-lying parish boundary, the impending sale of this land and an absentee landowner, matches Castle Hedingham and its status in relation to Oxford's ownership in 1592. Even Celia's pensive remark, 'I like this place / And willingly could waste my time in it' could reflect Oxford's memories of his birthplace, with its fertile fields and pasture beside the River Colne - a place that would be lost to him forever by the end of that year.

Notes

1. Weiss, R. *Shakespeare Revealed* (2007).
2. Roe, R.P. *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* (2011)
3. Pearson, D. *Edward de Vere (1550-1604): the crisis and consequences of wardship* (2005), see appendices 1-4 for the extent and sales of Oxford's lands.
4. Pearson, 232.
5. Act 4, Sc.3, ll.74-76 (Dusinberre, J. ed), *As You Like It*, Arden Shakespeare, 2006, rp.2014, p.307).
6. Act 4, Sc.3, ll.77-81, op.cit., p.307
7. Act 2, Sc.4, op.cit., p.208. Later, in Act 3, Sc.5, ll.108-109, we learn that the absentee landlord is 'old Carlot'. Carlot is simply an obsolete word for 'churl', cf. Corin's description of him as a man 'of churlish disposition'.
- 8 Act 2, Sc. 4, ll.82-86, op.cit.,pp.208-209