

Elizabeth and Francis Trentham of Rocester Abbey

by Jeremy Crick

Part two of the family history of Edward de Vere Earl of Oxford's second wife and the strategic importance of the Trentham archive in the search for Oxford's literary fragments. All photographs, unless otherwise stated, by Jeremy Crick.

Introduction

The marriage of Edward de Vere and Elizabeth Trentham, sometime in 1591, had a profound effect upon the forty-one year old Earl of Oxford and on the destiny of his new countess and her family.

Edward, from all the evidence, had had a torrid time over the last three years. He had lost his wife Anne (née Cecil) and seemingly his last chance of a legitimate male heir, and had seen his three daughters with Anne taken into care by their grandfather Burghley who was master of the Queen's wards. Edward's continued indebtedness to the Court of Wards, as a former ward, was already considerable and now there were three new marriages to purchase. All this meant that Burghley's grip on Edward's fast dwindling estate had become just that little bit tighter and, apart from his £1000 annual stipend from the Queen's coffers, Edward's finances were as good as holed below the water line. Whatever estates he still possessed were now mortgaged almost to the last acre in the desperate search for liquidity. For a man who had grown used to money being no object to his desire, staring over the brink into impoverishment must have been a terrifying prospect.

Missing his salon at Fisher's Folly, feeling his age creeping up on him, mourning Anne to whom he'd finally become reconciled, in poor favour at court and in even lower credit, it is very believable that Edward de Vere may have begun to slide into a debilitating spiral of depression.

The remedy to almost all of these problems, his ageing limbs discounted, arrived in the form of Elizabeth Trentham and her brother Francis. The Trenthams had made some excellent marriages in their long history but none as illustrious as this. Yet it was not what the Trenthams gained but rather what they brought to the marriage that is most notable. Right from the start, Francis Trentham – with considerable support from his uncle Ralph Sneyd – made it clear that he was prepared to pour a large measure of Trentham family wealth into securing the de Vere estate for the benefit of his sister and his new brother-in-law.

With Francis Trentham taking Edward's financial affairs into his very skilful hands, leaving the great man with funds at his disposal and unencumbered of the sheer misery of the account books, and with Elizabeth Trentham providing Edward with not only an ordered home life after years of bohemian living but also a male heir, from the date of their marriage Edward's life moved into a new phase in which his genius was given a new freedom to flower.

King's Place and an heir

History records that thirteen of Queen Elizabeth's Maids of Honour contracted noble marriages during her reign and Elizabeth Trentham was one of these lucky few. The Queen could be most generous with her favoured ladies and numerous records exist of the her bestowing gowns upon them from her vast wardrobes – often richly jewelled. It would be no surprise at all if the Queen made a present of such finery to her loyal Miss Trentham to reflect the change in her status now that she had become the Countess of Oxford. It's an interesting thought that one of those expensive gowns that Countess Elizabeth bequeaths in such detail in her will may once have graced the figure of the Queen herself.

Actually, Queen Elizabeth couldn't see for the life of her why her Maids of Honour and the ladies of her Bedchamber and Privy Chamber would ever want to get married in the first place and she would "much exhort all her women to remain in virgin state as much as may be". She expected their first loyalty to be to her, and husbands got in the way of this as did the disruption to her household brought on by the inevitable pregnancies. Even after marriage, her Maids of Honour were expected to continue in their full service to her and they still needed her permission to absent themselves from court.

Prior to the move, in 1597, to King's Place at Hackney, little has been discovered of the domestic arrangements of Edward and Elizabeth after their marriage. Nominally they first lived at Stoke Newington a couple of miles north of the city of London but, as Queen Elizabeth's court tended to move with the seasons, the Countess of Oxford would have followed it wherever it happened to be. The Queen's principal London palace was Whitehall and from here the Countess could have used the coach which we know she possessed to have commuted between the palace and her home – maybe this was why she bought this exceedingly rare item. But in the winter when the court moved to Richmond, the warmest of the royal palaces, and to Windsor in the summer, either the Earl and Countess joined the court there and were allocated rooms or the Countess joined the court alone unless she had been granted leave to remain with Edward or to travel home to Rocester.

It is often thought that Edward de Vere largely turned his back on court life in his later years. Yet there is ample evidence in his correspondence with Burghley and, later, with Robert Cecil, of his continued involvement in court affairs. In many ways, now that he

was married to one of the more spirited and assertive of the Queen's ladies (in contrast to the shrinking violet that was his wife Anne), this mature phase of his courtly career actually saw him recover some influence after the traumas of the past. After all, it was well known amongst courtiers that suits to the Queen could be furthered through the advocacy of the Queen's ladies. And some of this influence, as we shall see, when allied with the political influence of his new brother-in-law Francis Trentham, could be most effective.

When the licence to purchase the manor of King's Place was granted by the Queen on 2 September 1597 to, "...to our well beloved cousin Elizabeth, Countess of Oxenford, wife of Edward, Earl of Oxenford, and to our beloved Francis Trentham, esquire, Ralph Sneyd, esquire, & Giles Young, gentleman", largely funded, no doubt, with the £1000 which her father had bequeathed to Elizabeth for her preferment in marriage, it was a substantial country manor house with around 270 acres of farmland, orchards and gardens. It was here that Edward and Elizabeth brought their three year old son Henry, who had been born on 24 February 1593, and it would remain their principal London home until Edward's death in 1604, the Countess finally moving in 1609 after selling it to the poet Fulke Greville.

The original house, built in the 1470s, came into the possession of Henry VIII's secretary Thomas Cromwell around the year 1536 and he added two new wings that partially enclosed a single courtyard at the rear before handing the property back to the King. By 1580, Lord Hunsdon had added a further two wings thus creating an imposing E-shaped brick manor house with two courtyards. By this time, the house contained a classic Tudor long gallery as well as a private chapel and the great hall was so impressive that it was later copied for a City of London livery company hall.

There are two fascinating references in Sir William Herbert's leasehold of 1547 to the property which give us some indication of the appeal of the house to Edward de Vere: firstly, the house possessed "a proper lybrayre to laye bokes in" and, secondly, "the said house is inclosyd on the backside wyth a greate brode dyche and without that a Fayre large garden ... And at the Hither end of the House comynge from London ys a Faire large garden grounde inclosyd with a bricke wall." Edward de Vere, I should like to suggest, had a passion for herb-lore, botany and in the aesthetic delight of flower gardens and, here at King's Place, he had the opportunity to devote at least some of his time during the last eight years of his life to this passion. That the gardens at King's Place were notable is not in doubt – the diarist John Evelyn recorded a number of visits to Lady Katherine, the widow of Robert Greville, 2nd Baron Brooke, at King's Place (then known as Brooke House) in the 1650s and was clearly impressed by "one of the neatest and most celebrated [gardens] in England." Perhaps it was

King's Place, Hackney.



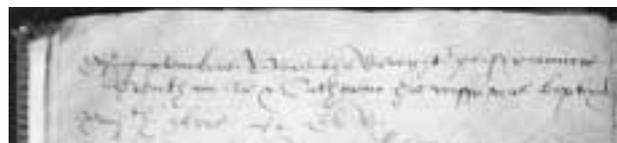
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Edward de Vere who prepared the groundwork for this horticultural delight.

There is solid circumstantial evidence that King's Place became a well visited, bustling family home, after all Elizabeth Trentham had grown up in a large family that was frequently augmented by the arrival of aunts, uncles and cousins. Elizabeth's brother Francis had also married in 1591 and he and Katherine, daughter of Sir Ralph Sheldon, already had the first four of their fifteen children when his sister moved to King's Place – the heir (Sir) Thomas Trentham V, (Sir) Christopher Trentham and the twins, Anne and Jane. Additional to the Rocester estate, Francis had also inherited from his father the wardship, education and marriage of Francis Meverell (son and heir of Thomas Trentham's sister Margaret and Sampson Meverell), and this included not only managing the Throwley Park estate (seven miles north of Rocester) but also maintaining Francis Meverell's younger siblings, Richard, Ralph and Anne, until Francis Meverell came of age.

Of her nieces by Francis and Katherine, Countess Elizabeth became god-mother to Vere Trentham, born in 1599, and in her will she has this to say of Marie, born in 1607, "I give and bequeath unto Marie Trentham (whom I intend, if God give me life, to educate and train up) five hundred pounds towards her preferment in marriage." Elizabeth had not only become very attached to the young girl, she had also spotted that she had what it took to become a Maid of Honour – which is the meaning of her intention to train the girl up. Visits back home to Rocester must have been very rare during her marriage – maybe Edward accompanied her at least once, though the evidence is not forthcoming – yet there is good evidence to believe that the Trenthams and the Sneyds were regular house-guests at King's Place.

After all, Francis Trentham had good reason to divide his time between Rocester and London. As a prominent Staffordshire landowner with close ties to other influential Staffordshire and Shropshire families like the Sneyds, Corbets and Newport, Francis spent most of his time in Staffordshire



*Rocester Parish Register:
"16 September [1599] Vere Dowghter of ffrancis Trentham
arm^r & Catherine his wiffe was baptised."*

managing his estates and enjoying the rich and varied social life of a young lord of the manor. He also had his civic duties to fulfil and, as much of this work was directed by the Privy Council, he was certainly a familiar face amongst the minor courtiers conducting business with them at Queen Elizabeth's court. From 1596 to 1615 he served as a Staffordshire Justice of the Peace, holding court sessions at Stafford and Lichfield; he served two terms as the High Sheriff of Staffordshire, in 1592 and 1611, and earned his Parliamentary spurs as a Shire Knight in 1610. He was just as active as his father in carrying out his civic duties, though there are strong indications that he listened very closely to the counsel of his new brother-in-law in certain policy matters.

And, as Francis had taken Edward de Vere's finances in hand, it is more than likely that on his frequent visits to London he mixed business, family and pleasure and lodged at King's Place. During prolonged absences from Rocester, there is evidence that either his younger brother Thomas or his brother-in-law Sir John Stanhope looked after things back home.

Estate matters

Acting as Edward de Vere's new financial adviser, accountant and broker, Francis spent hours going through Edward's estate papers whether they were at Castle Hedingham, Stoke Newington or King's Place. Trying to establish the identity of all the estates which Edward still held a proprietary claim to was a considerable task in itself. The next task was to unlock the complexity of the trusts that encumbered these estates and all debts accruing. Perhaps Francis and Edward worked together in the 'proper lybrayre' at King's Place since Edward was probably spending a lot of time here himself when he wasn't gardening.

It is surely very significant that the first property deal between Edward de Vere and Francis Trentham, in July 1591, concerned the extremely valuable Great Garden at Aldgate or, to give it its full title, the Covent Garden of Christ Church within the parish of St. Bartolph-without-Aldgate. As mentioned earlier, no record has ever been found of the date of Edward de Vere's marriage to Elizabeth Trentham, though it is widely believed to have taken place in either November or December 1591. The temptation to push this date back to the summer is, I believe, made irresistible by Francis Trentham's apparent purchase of the Great Garden in July.

The nature of the deal, as outlined by Nina Green in her extensive research into the de Vere estate, was such that "the profits from the garden property were to be used by Francis Trentham for the benefit of Oxford's widow, Elizabeth Trentham, after Oxford's death." If they were not married in July when this deal was struck, then they were certainly engaged to be married. The deal also gives us a strong indication that, by July 1591, Francis had already completed his

initial assessment of the de Vere estate and, having done so, he rightly judged that the Great Garden was the most promising piece of real-estate in Edward's portfolio for development. It is recorded that some 130 houses were built on the site, described as not less than ten acres, during this period and the profits arising from the leaseholds and freeholds on these houses were considerable.

As to when the site was developed, a clue comes from the second Inquisition Post Mortem of 13 August 1608, following the death of Edward de Vere, which dealt solely with the Great Garden – the first IPM having missed it. Having stated that Edward was "sised" of the property on his death (confirming Francis Trentham's status as trustee as opposed to outright purchaser), the IPM mentions, "... the houses, messuages, tenements & buildings on the foresaid great garden *newly constructed & built*" (my italics). No doubt the profits were used to support the widowed Countess and her son Henry after Oxford's death, but there can be little doubt that Francis intended to begin developing the site from the moment he signed the indenture, and that the profits arising from this investment were used by him to help refinance the rest of the de Vere estate.

Which brings into focus the £10,000 which, according to GE Cokayne's note, Francis settled on Edward upon becoming brothers-in-law which is, I believe, the sum of money that Francis pledged to invest in the de Vere estate over the coming years to rescue it from ruin on behalf of his sister and any future male heir to the Earldom of Oxford. It also brings us to Castle Hedingham and the complex series of deals that would see the family seat of the Earls of Oxford pass right down the Trentham line – as will be seen later.

Since the first part of this article appeared, I have had some interesting correspondence with Nina Green and Christopher Paul regarding this apparent settlement. Nina points out that the Cokayne note makes the £10,000 conditional upon Oxford settling Castle Hedingham on Francis and his heirs in default of any male heir of Oxford, and "the difficulty is that Oxford could not have made this promise because by the time he married Elizabeth Trentham he had already sold Castle Hedingham to Lord Burghley in trust for his (Oxford's) three daughters." Nina also points out that, on 3 July 1587, Oxford had granted Castle Hedingham to the Queen on condition that she regrant it to him and his heirs by his wife, Anne Cecil. Leaving aside the probability that Oxford and Elizabeth Trentham were married five months before the sale of Castle Hedingham to Burghley (in documents dated November and December 1591 and April 1592), the logic would indeed seem to argue against Cokayne's interpretation.

However, Christopher Paul has discovered the apparent source from which GE Cokayne made his note – Philip Morant's *The History and Antiquities of the*

County of Essex (1763-68) – and there are subtle, but important, differences.

Here is a part of Morant's note: "For, Edward, the 17th Earl of Oxford, having taken to his second wife Elizabeth daughter of Thomas Trentham ... her brother Francis Trentham Esq advanced ten thousand pounds to clear incumbrances on the Oxford estates." In other words, the £10,000 appears not to be conditional upon the settlement of Castle Hedingham but, rather, acted like a bond which sealed the marriage. Even this interpretation, however, needs some qualification. I don't believe for an instant that this £10,000 was offered as a lump sum – Francis Trentham may have been wealthy but he hardly had this much cash to spare. Yet when we add up all the Trentham investment in the de Vere estate over the coming years – particularly the repurchase of Castle Hedingham in 1609 – the total amount actually exceeds this £10,000. Of course, Francis was astute enough to make sure that all his investments in the de Vere estate contained detailed clauses that, should the male line of his sister's marriage to Oxford fail, the estates in question would default to male heirs of the Trentham line.

The sale of Castle Hedingham to Burghley in December 1591, in trust for his three de Vere granddaughters, was surely intended as a short-term measure to streamline the near bankrupt estate and yet still keep the ancestral seat within the family, so that should Oxford have the great fortune to be blessed with a male heir and future Earl with Countess Elizabeth, the manorship could be repurchased when his estate was more profitable.

Morant continues by moving forward eighteen years to 8 July 1609 when, "...the three daughters of the said Earl Edward, by his first wife, with their husbands ... conveyed the Honour of Castle Hedingham to her [Elizabeth, Countess Dowager of Oxford] for life, remainder to her son Henry Earl of Oxford for his life, and to his sons in taile male ... remainder to Francis Trentham Esq brother of the said Countess, and his heirs for ever." As Henry de Vere died without issue, the manor of Castle Hedingham did indeed default to Francis and his heirs - though not without being challenged.

In March 1592, a new trustee of the de Vere estate first appeared on the scene – Ralph Sneyd of Keele Hall, the uncle of Elizabeth and Francis Trentham. The estate in question was the Rectory of Walter Belchamp and, as Nina Green has established, the terms of this purchase were similar to the terms under which the Great Garden was purchased in that Francis and Ralph held the property as trustees for the use of the Earl and Countess of Oxford during their lives.

The overall management of the de Vere estate by Francis Trentham, with Ralph Sneyd acting as trustee, was so astute that by the time of Edward's death in 1604, all his personal debts had been cleared and the estate itself was extremely valuable. And having suffered from Queen Elizabeth's and Burghley's

rapacious interest in his estate for most of his life first as a Royal ward and then as Burghley's son-in-law, Edward was determined that his son would be spared any further assaults on his lands. As Nina Green put it to me, "Oxford seems to have taken complicated legal steps to ensure that his properties were already in the hands of Francis Trentham and Ralph Sneyd at his death so as to mitigate the effects of wardship on his wife Elizabeth and son Henry."



Courtesy of the Sneyd Archive, Keele University



Details from Sir William's tomb: Left, Jane Sneyd, the mother of Elizabeth and Francis Trentham and, right, Ralph Sneyd. The latter's likeness is remarkable compared to his portrait above.



The carved alabaster tomb of Sir William Sneyd Kt (d. 1571) at Wolstanton Parish Church. Note the two panels showing, left, his five sons and, right, his six surviving daughters.

A contested election

Following the death of George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, in 1590, Queen Elizabeth appointed her new favourite, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex – whose family seat was at Chartley – to become the new Lord Lieutenant of Staffordshire. Essex had many followers among the Staffordshire gentry, most notably the Bagot family of Blithfield. Richard Bagot, along with Richard Broughton, had been appointed by Burghley to manage the Chartley estate during the young Earl's minority. And when Essex took command of the army besieging the city of Rouen in the autumn of 1591, with around 4000 Englishmen both horse and foot, a sizeable contingent of this force was supplied by Staffordshire and included Richard Bagot's second son Anthony who had been close to Essex throughout his teens.

The reason for this interest in the Bagots and Essex is twofold: firstly, unlike the Trenthams and the Sneyds, a massive archive of Bagot correspondence from the Tudor period has survived the ravages of time and, as the family played a prominent role in Staffordshire civic affairs, a good deal of the activities of other Staffordshire families can be reconstructed through this archive. Sadly, the Bagots were not particularly close to either the Trenthams or the Sneyds and only two letters from Ralph Sneyd and one each from Francis Trentham and Thomas Trentham V exist in the Bagot archive. Yet this brings us to the second point of interest: on the 16th November 1592 Francis Trentham was appointed for the first of two terms as the Sheriff of Staffordshire.

As Sheriff, Francis was supposed to report both to Essex, as Lord Lieutenant, as well as directly to the Privy Council in matters like the conduct of 'the showe of horses and men' at the annual musters, the prosecution of recusants and the collection of the County subsidies to the Crown. Yet it appears that relations between Francis and Essex were frosty, to say the least. Whereas the previous Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Shrewsbury, addressed countless letters to the Staffordshire Justices of the Peace, Sheriffs and Deputy Lieutenants – all received by Thomas Trentham (see the Talbot Papers) – Essex seems to have foregone these formalities and dealt instead with his loyal supporters, whatever their actual civic roles were.

The most outrageous example of this concerned the Parliamentary elections of 1593. As the Sheriff, Francis Trentham was the officer in charge of conducting the election yet, in letters from Hampton Court dated 31st December 1592, 2nd and 9th January 1593, Essex wrote to his three Staffordshire supporters, Richard Bagot, Sir Edward Lyttleton and Sir Edward Aston – all staunch protestants – urging upon them his nominations for the two Shire Knights as well as five of the eight borough seats of Stafford, Lichfield, Newcastle-u-Lyme and the relatively new borough of Tamworth. Essex was particularly keen to see his step-

father Sir Christopher Blount (who'd married the widow of the Earl of Leicester) elected as the senior Shire Knight and for one of his twenty-one 'Rouen knights' (treated with much derision by Elizabethan society), 'Sir' Thomas Gerard, as the junior Shire Knight. Essex, rather pompously, added the following to ensure that his friends fulfilled his wishes, "I should think my credit little in my own country, if it should not afford so small a matter as this, especially the men being so fit."

It so happened that Sir Walter Harcourt, who had been elected Shire Knight in 1588, was determined to stand again. Readers will remember that it was Walter's father Simon Harcourt (Shire Knight in 1559 and 1562) who'd seen his son-in-law John Grey fraudulently elected as Shire Knight, alongside the legitimate choice of Thomas Trentham, at the election of 1571. The Harcourt faction had been a major force in Staffordshire County elections since the 1560s and it was notable that they had marked Catholic sympathies.

The confusion over the possibility of a contested election is reflected in correspondence between Bagot and Lyttleton – Bagot had already received the promise of support from sixty of his friends for the choice of Blount and Gerard. It then became apparent that someone had put pressure upon Gerard to withdraw in favour of Harcourt – yet neither Bagot nor Lyttleton ever got to the bottom of the matter. So when Francis Trentham stood up in the Shire Hall at Stafford and called for a show of voices from the freeholders and burgesses, it became clear that Essex's authority in the county was less than absolute, and Francis duly entered the names of Blount and Harcourt as the two Shire Knights on the indenture.

In his summary of this election (published in 1917), Josiah C Wedgwood makes a most remarkable statement. It is so tantalising that I have – without success – spent months attempting to locate the source of his information. He writes: "Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, Lord Lieutenant of the County, then at the height of his power, recommended the election of the members. Essex was supposed to favour Puritanism, but the sheriff, Francis Trentham, was allied with de Vere, Earl of Oxford." It is also interesting that when Wedgwood reviewed the election of 1601, he had this to say about Francis Trentham's younger brother Thomas Trentham IV who, with considerable help from the Sneyds who dominated the borough, was elected for Newcastle-u-Lyme, "His sister Elizabeth, moreover, had married, as his second wife, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, whose influence was very great at this time."

It would be reasonable to believe that Edward de Vere had a hearty dislike of Puritanism – the ideological assaults by its advocates upon the theatre establishment and against liberal publishing would be anathema to him and, as someone who had flirted with Catholicism himself, his enlightened view was that it was possible to be a loyal Englishman and a

Catholic. Perhaps under his influence, there is evidence that Francis Trentham, while remaining a solid Protestant, pursued a more liberal line in his civic duties than his father.

The end of an era

On 4 August 1598, just short of his seventy-eighth birthday, one of the greatest men of the Elizabethan era, Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley died. Working tirelessly until the end, even though the gout which addled his body made the simple act of holding a pen painful, he addressed one of his last letters to his son Robert (who would soon assume all his offices of state) saying, "If I may be weaned to feed myself, I shall be more ready to serve her on the earth; if not I hope to be in Heaven a servitor for her and God's church." The Queen was devastated by the passing of the man whom she had first appointed at her accession and who had served her so loyally and so brilliantly for most of his life. So overcome was Elizabeth that, in floods of tears, she shut herself off from everyone to grieve in private.

It is not known what Edward de Vere's reaction was to Burghley's death. The two men had never really understood each other and perhaps Edward could be forgiven if he had often viewed the man as his nemesis. As a Royal ward, he had stood helplessly by while Burghley, under the Queen's prompting, had handed out his estates to the Earl of Leicester to profit from during his minority – estates that he'd found almost impossible to reclaim once he'd come of age. He must have wondered too how it had come about that when he had agreed to marry Anne Cecil, the dowry offered by her father for the privilege of marrying the noblest Earl in England had fallen so far short of the marriage fee claimed, on behalf of the Queen, by the master of the Court of Wards – leaving him in massive debt.

It is perhaps more surprising that when Queen Elizabeth herself died at Richmond just a few years later, on 24 March 1603, Edward did not capture the solemn public mood and mark her passing with a great panegyric poem extolling her remarkable reign – perhaps the memory of her role in crippling his estate was still too sore in his mind. It is notable, however, that among his first acts, King James I renewed the Privy Seal annual grant of £1000 to the man whom he would describe in a letter to Sir Robert Cecil (then Earl of Salisbury) in 1604 as "Great Oxford".

Edward de Vere only outlived the Queen by just over a year, breathing his last on the 24th June 1604. His burial at St. John's at Hackney is recorded in the Parish Register, "Edward de Veare Erle of Oxenford was buried the 6th daye of Iulye Anno 1604." It is often written that he died from the plague – however, in the Bagot archive there are many letters from around this period in which the writers note the weekly death toll from the plague in London and, only three days after Edward de Vere's death, William Brown, in a letter to Walter Bagot (LA297), states: "London very clear of

The collection of Jason Lindsay.



This painting of Lord Burghley hangs over the staircase at the mansion house at Castle Hedingham today.

the plague." Edward's son and heir Henry de Vere was just eleven years old and, happily for him, history did not repeat itself and Elizabeth, now Countess Dowager of Oxford, had no difficulty in retaining his wardship as is made clear by a clause in a Private Act of Parliament of 1610 sought by Countess Elizabeth to sell the Manor of Bretts (of which more later) which states, "the said Henry, Earl of Oxenford, was and yet is in ward to your Majesty and his wardship and marriage is granted over to your suppliant [Countess Elizabeth]". No doubt the Court of Wards had sufficient confidence in Elizabeth and her brother Francis to let them manage the young Earl's estate.

Managing young Henry's estate was one thing, but managing "...a young nobleman neither of years nor judgement to advise himself, wanting the guidance of a father and past the government of a mother...", in the words of Countess Elizabeth, was evidently quite another once the sixteen year old Henry had fallen into the wayward company of his second cousin John Hunt. In an extraordinary letter (one of many that illustrate what a truly gifted writer she was) addressed to both Sir Robert Cecil and Lord Henry Howard on 22 July 1611, Elizabeth seeks their urgent help over the "apparent danger of my son's ruin", calling on them to discipline Hunt whom she not only accuses of leading her son "by continual use of cursing, swearing, filthy and ribaldry talk, and all other lewd and licentious courses to corrupt and poison my son's tender years with the like infection..." but also of running up huge debts in her son's name. Furthermore, it appears that Hunt had such

a hold over Henry de Vere that he had begun to neglect his duties as an esquire serving both the King and his son Prince Henry. In the following passage, Elizabeth seems to have reached the end of her tether:

“And am therefore absolutely resolved, unless I shall presently obtain the absolute banishment of him [Hunt] and his confederates from my son ... forthwith to renounce and disclaim any further charge or government of him [son Henry], as being loath (besides my daily private objects of grief) to draw upon myself a general and public imputation that his ruin hath happened in his nonage and under my charge and by consequence through my want of care or respect unto him, for the world will never believe (except I make it known by a public renouncing of his further government) but I might with suit unto his great and powerful allies and friends have easily procured this ivy to be plucked away from this young oak whose growth is so much hindered by it.”

However much her authority may have weakened when it came to her son during his troublesome teenage years, when it came to securing the ancient rights of the Earldom of Oxford, Elizabeth was capable of being both assertive and surpassingly eloquent. In 1609, the members of a commission examining “the state and employment of lands given to charitable uses” addressed a number of concerns to her regarding the management of Earls Colne Grammar School (the Priory of Earls Colne being the ancient burial ground of the Earls of Oxford, having been founded by them in the twelfth century). Elizabeth’s response is masterful and it reads, in part:

“Also I must advertise you that the choice and nominating of the schoolmaster is a right invested in my late Lord and his ancestors ... so as I hope in your honourable endeavours you will not impeach or diminish an ancient possessed right, or alien anything belonging to him in his minority.

“And whereas some exception, I hear, is taken against the insufficiency of the schoolmaster whom I commended to that place in my son’s minority and who in better judgments than mine own is sufficiently learned, honest, and industrious in that office, wherein if upon your just advisements I shall find myself mistaken, I will give such speedy remedy therein as shall testify how far I prefer the public good education of youth before any man’s private preferment.

“And whereas also, as I hear, it is suggested that the lands given to the maintenance of this school are misgoverned and converted to our particular profit, I do assure you that neither my Lord nor myself have made any advantage thereof, but where we found them rented at 20

nobles a year, have raised them to 20 pounds, the which is yearly paid to the schoolmaster. And I doubt not but that when that grant is ended my son out of his further care will increase the rent for the better maintenance of the school if the time require it and the land will yield it.

“Whereupon I presume in your just considerations having no cause to distrust my son’s discharge of this charitable trust, you will not upon malicious information of his adversaries call in question during his minority a right sealed in him and his heirs.”

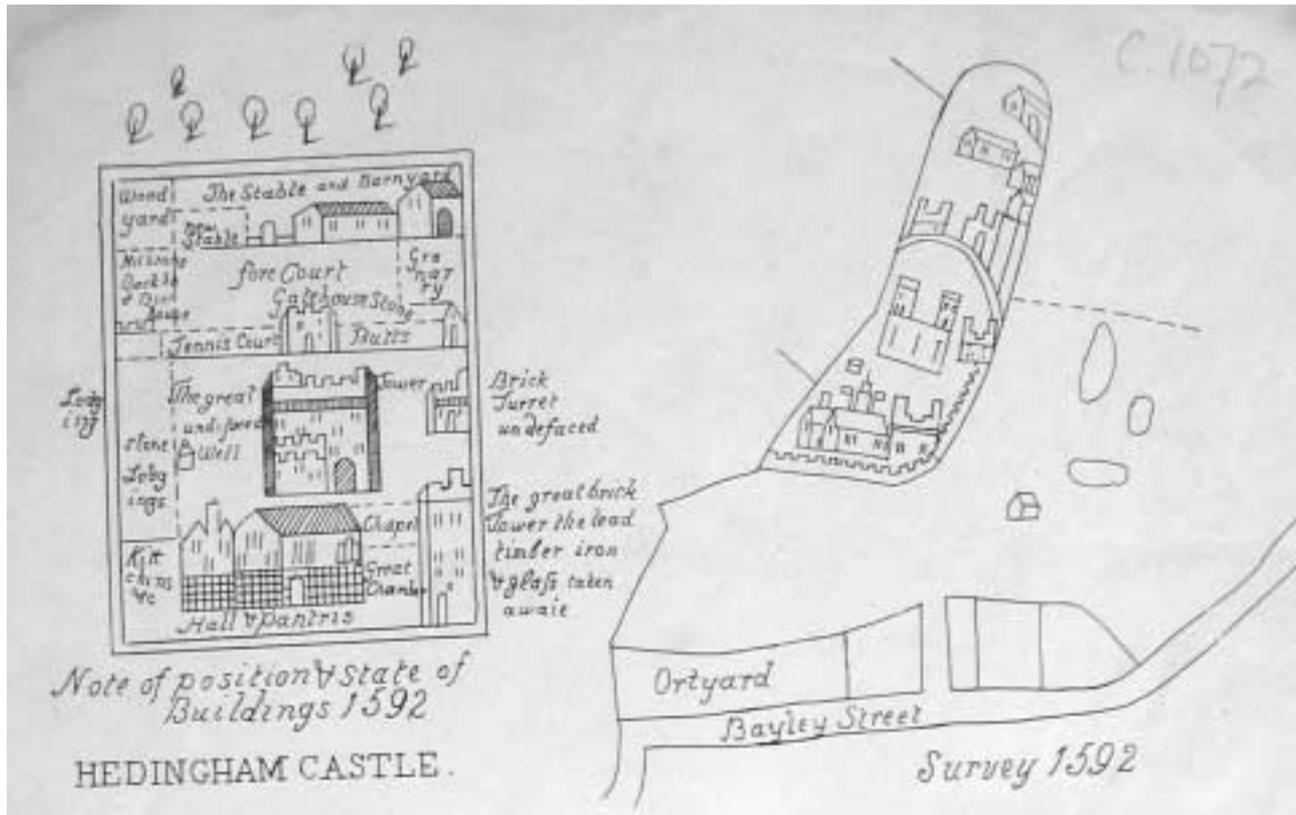
A couple of years earlier, Elizabeth and Francis had decided that it was time to bring the ancient family seat of Castle Hedingham back into the possession of the Earldom of Oxford. Having already received the consent of Oxford’s three daughters for the sale, Elizabeth then opened negotiations regarding the price with their uncle and trustee Sir Robert Cecil. As purchaser, a notable feature of the following letter to Cecil of 16 March 1608 is that Countess Elizabeth dwells heavily upon the dreadful state of repair of the castle and grounds as well as pleading relative poverty – talking the price down, of course, being a perfectly understandable ploy:

“Be not displeased with my present request, proceeding from my disabled estate, and a conceit that the most noble minds have the most sensible impression of a noble family’s ruin. The price I tender, with the aid of a worthy kinsman to my son [Francis Trentham], is a great sum ... not thinking it worth to another above £10,000. The place we purchase has the face of a fatal desolation, only affected by us as



Castle Hedingham

Burghley's 1592 survey of Castle Hedingham. Cokayne Papers C1072, Northampton Record Office



being my son's ancestors' ancient, native, first foundation. The parks and places of pleasure are so much defaced as they cannot be repaired; the house and the necessary provisions thereto so destroyed, as woods, meadows, waters, which can with no small charge be resupplied."

It is, of course, a great tragedy that Castle Hedingham today is but a shadow of its former self – with only the magnificent Norman keep still standing. The question of who was responsible for this destruction, however, is not easily solved in spite of Oxford's detractors blaming it all upon the 17th Earl. Shortly after clear title to the Castle had passed to the Queen, in 1587, Burghley was certainly concerned about saving the place from "utter spoil", yet in 1592 when Burghley took possession of the castle as trustee for Oxford's three daughters, he commissioned a pictorial survey of the extant buildings and I reproduce a copy of this which GE Cokayne prepared as a bookplate illustration. The Great Tower and the Brick Turret of the outer Gatehouse are clearly identified as 'undefaced', the Hall and Pantries, the Great Chamber, the inner Stone Gatehouse, the Stable, Barnyard, Granary and a sizeable stretch of the curtain walling are all clearly still standing. The only building identified as damaged is the Great Brick Tower from which the lead, timber, iron and glass had been "taken awaie". The only buildings that are identified as demolished are the Chapel, New Stable, Kitchens and Stone Lodgings.

If the "place we purchase has the face of a fatal desolation", as Countess Elizabeth declared in 1608, then the person who had been responsible for it over the

sixteen years since the survey, namely Burghley, must surely bear some responsibility for its neglect as must the Earl of Leicester who had held the castle during Edward de Vere's minority. The Queen too, in her obsession with showering her beloved Leicester with wealth and in her less than honest treatment of Oxford's wardship and marriage during his minority as a Royal ward, cannot remain blameless in seeing Oxford's estate as an easy target for rich pickings – with the result that the young Earl's estate was virtually crippled by the time he came into possession of it. In part three of this essay, however, I will advance some circumstantial evidence which may allow historians to pin the blame elsewhere for the demolition of everything in Burghley's survey except for the central keep.

In order to repurchase the manor of Castle Hedingham – which occurred on 8 July 1609 – Elizabeth and Francis made a very interesting decision about how to raise the money. First of all, in June 1609, Elizabeth sold King's Place to the poet Fulke Greville for £5,000 and secondly, they began to seek a buyer for the manor of Bretts in Essex. Although there is some confusion about exactly when Bretts was sold (as Christopher Paul has pointed out), the clear purpose of seeking the Act of Parliament to sell it, some time in 1610, is clearly stated in the preamble:

"AND whereas your said suppliant [Countess Elizabeth], being very desirous to uphold and raise the ancient and most honourable house of Oxenford what in her doth lie, to that end hath lately bought the castle and manor of Hedingham in the said county of Essex which

was the ancient inheritance and chief seat of the said Earls of Oxenford and hath continued in their name and possession almost from the time of the Conquest until the same was lately sold by the said Edward, Earl of Oxenford..."

That Elizabeth sold her well-loved family home in order to buy Castle Hedingham is only one of a number of clues that she fully intended the castle to become her new home – from this date onwards, in her correspondence, it is clear that she divided her time between Hedingham and her London home at Cannon Row, Westminster. And also the phrase, "being very desirous to uphold and raise the ancient and most honourable house of Oxenford", quoted above, makes it clear that she viewed preserving the ancient family seat an integral part of the very nobility of her son's Earldom. These facts alone should allow historians to conclude that, of all the people who had possessed Castle Hedingham since the death of the 16th Earl, Countess Elizabeth, with the help of her brother, were the most likely to have invested time and money into restoring and maintaining the fabric of the place.

Establishing that Castle Hedingham did indeed become Elizabeth's principal home after the sale of King's Place is, of course, of vital importance to any Oxfordian trying to follow the trail of Oxford's literary papers which, we can assume, had become a considerable archive in the eighteen years that they had accumulated in the 'proper lybrayre' at King's Place.

The clearest summary of the repurchase of Castle Hedingham is contained in a document dated 30 March 1668 written in answer to a petition to the House of Lords by the sisters and co-heirs of Countess Diane [née Cecil], the deceased wife of Henry de Vere, in which they seek to claim the honour and manor of Hedingham against Bryan Lord Viscount Cullen and his wife Lady Elizabeth Cullen who was the great-graunddaughter and ultimate heiress of Francis Trentham. The Cullens' reply contains:

...the manor of Hedingham alias Henningham in the Countie of Essex ... had bin for many yeares the inheritance and seat of the noble ffamily of the Earls of Oxford, and that Elizabeth late Countess Dowager of Oxford, the relict of Edward late Earl of Oxford, and sister of ffrancis Trentham of Rocester ... repurchased the same in her own, or her Trustees names, and by ffine & recovery settled the same on her self for her life, and to Henrie late Earl of Oxford, being the onlie son of the said Earl Edward ... And the ground of this settlement by the said Countess Elizabeth in that manor was not onely for that the said ffrancis Trentham was her brother and heire in case the said Earl Henrie her sonne dyed without issue, but because the said ffrancis Trentham had taken very great care and paines in managing the estate and affairs of the said Countess Elizabeth, and became bond for her in very great sumes of

money which the said Countess was forced to take up for the purchasing of the said manor and premises." After detailing the Private Act of Parliament request to sell Bretts, also the sale of "400 pound of her owne inheritance", the answer continues: "And the respondents believe that the said Countess Elizabeth paid £13000 att least for the said manor and premises which they believe was a full consideration for the same..."

The House of Lords, on the same day, dismissed the petition on behalf of the heirs of Countess Diane, their judgement containing the following:

"the Possession of the said Manor hath continued for near Threescore Years with the Title of the Heirs of Francis Trentham, of Rocester, in the County of Stafford, Esquire, Brother to Elizabeth late Countess Dowager of Oxford, according to a Settlement made by her, under which Settlement the said Lord Viscount Cullen and Elizabeth Viscountess Cullen his Wife now hold and enjoy the same..."

There is one final twist in the passage of Hedingham down the Trentham line which I will come to later.

Ten funerals and a wedding

It is an unfortunate fact that, Hedingham excepted, during the first two decades of the reign of King James, history has recorded a great deal more about the deaths and final testaments of members of the Trentham family than it has about their living activities. And it is a particularly tragic fact that, over the two decades that follow the death of Francis Trentham, a series of early deaths would blight the succession of the Trentham line.

The years 1603 to 1605 were particularly brutal for the Trenthams. Aside from the mourning that accompanied the death of Edward de Vere, Francis and his wife Katherine faced a succession of small tragedies. With five healthy sons (Thomas, Christopher, William, Francis and Anthony) and three healthy daughters (Grace, Vere and Katherine), their son Richard was baptised on 25 Aug 1603 and was buried two days later. The following year, their son Robert, baptised on 2 September 1604, was buried less than a month after that.

And then came a particularly hard blow. At the age of only thirty, Francis' younger brother Thomas Trentham IV was buried at Rocester on 25 April 1605. Having graduated at Balliol, Oxford, in 1591, perhaps the highlight of his career had come when, on 30 November 1601, as a Member of Parliament for Newcastle-under-Lyme, he may well have gathered with over 150 other Parliamentarians (history has not recorded their names) in the great Council Chamber at Whitehall and witnessed one of Queen Elizabeth's most notable speeches – known ever since as the 'Golden Speech'. The speech was the Queen's response to the Commons having effectively forced her to end the centuries old tradition whereby the sovereign had the

sole privilege of allocating monopolies in imported goods as highly lucrative patronage to her courtiers. Being a highly skilled political operator, she saw the direction in which the wind was blowing and, rather than have Parliamentarians curtail her Royal Prerogative by introducing a Commons bill, the Queen – rather like Churchill after Dunkirk – was able to turn a severe setback into a triumph:

“I do assure you there is no prince that loves his subjects better, or whose love can countervail our love. There is no jewel, be it never so rich a price, which I set before this jewel: I mean your love. For I do esteem it more than any treasure or riches ... And though God hath raised me high, yet this I count the glory of my crown, that I have reigned with your loves.”

Of the many bequests in Thomas' will, perhaps the most interesting fact we can deduce is his intimate knowledge of King's Place, and bequests to three of his Sneyd cousins and to Sir John Stanhope and his son are also indicative of the closeness of these families:

“I give unto my mother [Jane née Sneyd] my principall and best frende, from whom I acknowledge all that I have One hundred poundes w'ch remains in her owne handes, Item I give unto my deare and welbeloved sister the Countesse of Oxenford One hundred poundes...Item I give unto my Lorde of Oxenforde [Henry de Vere] my litle stoned horsse, for whose prosp[er]ity I have, and ever shall pray soe longe as I have breath...Item I give unto my welbeloved brother Mr ffrancis Trentham esquire my grey geldinge...Item I give unto my welbeloved cosen Mr William Sneade as a token of my love my dammaske Rapyre and dagger with a girdle and hangers to the same...Item I give unto my cosen Mr Raph Sneade an old guilte Rapyre which I much esteemed for the goodnes, Item I give unto my cosen Mr Thomas Sneade my russet Spanish rapire, Item I give unto my loving nephew Mr John Stanhope [see tomb, below right] my Trunck with all that remains within it which standes at my Lady of Oxenfordes house at



The tomb of Sir John Stanhope and Lady Catherine Stanhope née Trentham - the sister of the Countess of Oxford - in the church at Elvaston, Derby.

The first hall at Westwood, replacing the Grange in the 18C



Hackney within the wardrobe...I have ever founde Sir John Stanhope [see tomb, below left] my favourable and lovinge brother, soe nowe in the like testimony of my ever assured affection unto him I doe give unto him five poundes, trusting he will more measure the assured good will of the giver than the mean[n]es[s] of the guifte...”

Yet even amid these scenes of mourning, life carried on for Francis Trentham. In 1605, he decided to buy the 750 acre estate of Westwood Grange situated in delightful countryside about two miles west of the thriving market town of Leek close to the Staffordshire border with Derbyshire. Interestingly, this new estate was sited on the same river Churnett that flowed along the western edge of Rocester. Westwood Grange had been founded by the Cistercian monks of Dieulacres Abbey (pronounced, d'yer-le-cess) at Leek by the year 1291. Sampson Erdeswick, in his *'Survey of Staffordshire'* seems to have travelled directly from Rocester to Dieulacres when he made the following note, “Churnett, passing from the head, through one of the barrenest countries I know, hath not any place worth the naming till it come to Dieu Le Cresse, an abbey founded by the last Ranulfe, earl of Chester.” So taken with this new estate was Francis, that he seems to have considered it a second home rather than simply owning it as an absentee landlord for, in the same year, his eighth son Ralph was baptised at Leek Parish church, though he too would be buried within the year.

By 1610 Francis seemed to be continuing the pattern set by his forefathers of expanding his land ownership and taking his civic duties seriously. In this year he took his seat in Parliament as Staffordshire Shire



The tomb of the junior Sir John Stanhope - both father and son are mentioned in Thomas Trentham IV's will.

Knight and, in the following year, he served his second term as Sheriff of Staffordshire. Yet from this time on, there is a marked change of mood. Josiah C Wedgwood, in his brief biographical note on Francis, declares that “he retired from Parliamentary life at the close of this Parliament ‘through infirmity’.” In 1615, most unusually, Francis also retired from the Staffordshire Bench – of all the prominent Staffordshire JPs, Francis is unique in not continuing until the year of his death. Also, on 7 October 1617, in a letter to Walter Bagot, Francis is full of excuses as to why he would not be able to lead his Rocester men to the muster at Lichfield.

I have often wondered, too, whether another death in the family that would have been most grievous for Francis was a contributory factor in his disengagement with public affairs – the death of his sister Elizabeth, Countess Dowager of Oxford to whom he was clearly devoted. As for Elizabeth, in her will (dated 25 November 1612) she asks “to be buried in the Church of Hackney within the Countie of Middlesex, as neare unto the bodie of my said late deare and noble lorde and husband as maye bee, and that to be done as privatelie, and with as litle pompe and ceremonie as possible maye bee. Onlie I will that there bee in the said Church erected for us a tombe fittinge our degree.” The funeral took place on 3 January 1613 and, whether or not such a tomb was ever erected, there is certainly no sign or record of it today.

Elizabeth then, having given instructions regarding her personal debts, composes a long list of bequests in which her gold and silver plate and her wardrobe feature prominently. Her more expensive items are given to her son Henry:



Picture courtesy of Elvaston Castle, Derbyshire

Lady Catherine Stanhope née Trentham - the sister of the Countess of Oxford. Perhaps the gown she is wearing is one of those bequeathed to her in Countess Elizabeth's will.

“to bee kepte by him as a remembrance of my motherlie love unto him my roape of great pearle, my new jewel, my thirteene diamond buttons, and all those rich garments, cloakes, bedding, and houshold stuffe, fyne diaper and damaske linnen.”

It must have been particularly distressing for her mother Jane (née Sneyd) to have seen two of her children buried within so short a space of time and Elizabeth bequeathes “unto my deare and lovinge mother my silver cawdle cuppe my litle guilte bell my silver fruite dishe with the foote, and my blacke satten gowne cutte and laced.” Jane herself was buried at Rocester on 17 July 1616. Of her brother Francis she says,

“and whereas I have had of my said brother Trentham the some of foure hundred poundes for divers yeeres past, and have given him noe allowance for the same, I doe therefore in recompense thereof give unto him two hundred markes of lawfull English money, and alsoe the sume of twoe hundreth poundes more for a legacie.”

And then she bequeathes the rest of her wardrobe:

“Item, I give to my lovinge sister the Ladie Stanhope [see portrait, left], my ffifteene new peeces of silver vessell my black velvet gowne laced, my blacke satten gowne, my blacke taffitie gowne wth silver lace, my blacke and silver chamblet gowne, my crimson velvett petticoate and my kirtles of white cloth of silver ... Item, I give unto my sister Trentham [either Dorothy or her sister-in-law Katherine, wife of Francis] my borders of rubies and diamondes, my white satten gowne, my playne black satten gowne, my petticoate of cloth of gould and my kirtle of white satten with gould lace ... Item, I give unto Vere Trentham my goddaughter my jewell enamelled with redd and dyamondes in it ...”

In between this procession of entries in parish burial registers, there is at least one occasion for celebration – the marriage of Francis Trentham's son and heir Sir Thomas Trentham V Kt to the twenty-one year old Prudence Eyre which took place at Bakewell in Derbyshire on 17 April 1620. Having been admitted to the Inner Temple in 1613 and having received his knighthood in 1616 at the age of twenty-five, Sir Thomas' status as a most eligible bachelor was confirmed on the day of the wedding when the bride's father, Thomas Eyre of Hassop Hall, paid Francis the enormous dowry of £2,200 (worth around £350,000 today), recorded thus in Francis' acquittance note:

“Bee it knowne unto all men by these persons that I Francis Trentham of Rocester in the countie of Stafford Esq doo acknowledge my self to have had and received of Thomas Eyre of Hassop in the countie of Derby Esq the just and whole some of Two Thousand and Two hundred pounds of

lawfull money of England for and in consideration of a marriage made and solemnised between Sir Thomas Trentham knight sonne and heir of the said Francis Trentham and Prudence Eyre daughter of the said Thomas Eyre...”.

Four months later, on 15 August 1620, the great Ralph Sneyd – uncle of Francis and Elizabeth, builder of the great red-sandstone hall at Keele and trustee of the de Vere estate – was buried in the church at Wolstanton, though his tomb, unlike the magnificent carved alabaster tomb of his father Sir William, has unfortunately not survived to the present day.

Bringing to a close this remarkable chapter in the history of this remarkable family, Francis Trentham was buried at Rocester on 13 October 1626. In his will, dated 31 December 1619, he leaves £1000 each to his five daughters and confirms the clause in the Countess of Oxford's will in which she bequeathed £500 to her favourite niece Marie.

Francis had already entailed his entire Rocester estate to his son and heir Sir Thomas Trentham V Kt and successive male heirs. It is also very significant that his nephew Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, predeceased Francis (dying in 1625 at the siege of Breda) and that the entire de Vere estate passed to Francis and his heirs as a consequence of Henry dying childless. A comprehensive survey of the estate of Francis Trentham at his death will be presented in the third and final part of this essay. The Earldom of Oxford itself, shorn of its family seat of Castle Hedingham for the first time in its long history, passed to Henry's cousin Robert de Vere, son of Hugh de Vere.

Readers will remember that my research into the Trentham family proceeds on the hypothesis that, if any of Edward de Vere's literary papers have survived until the present, following the Trentham line offers the best chance of discovering them, thereby solving the Shakespeare Authorship Question.

We have now seen that Elizabeth Countess of Oxford was in possession of Edward's papers when she moved from King's Place to Castle Hedingham. Following her death, we have also seen that the de Vere estate papers came into the possession of her brother Francis, the principal trustee of Oxford's estate. Perhaps we'll never know who Oxford's literary executor was – the person to whom he confided his wishes for, not only the publication of the nineteen plays that remained unpublished at his death but also his wishes regarding the posterity of his name and reputation. With such evidence as we have of Elizabeth Trentham's remarkable skill as a writer, perhaps Oxfordians may care to hypothesise that it was she who began the process which led to the publication of the First Folio – which occurred two years before the death of her brother Francis. Whether or not Oxford asked for proof of his authorship to be passed down the family, it would only take a few fragments of his manuscript material to have got mixed up among the estate papers for proof of his authorship to have survived.

In the third and final part of this Trentham family history, we will explore all the many houses in England where these papers may have ended up as we follow the Trentham line to its extinction.

Notes

King's Place and an heir

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Estate matters

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Ten funerals and a wedding

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Thomas Eyre dowry: Bagshaw Papers C2723, Sheffield RO