

Biography & Epitaph of William Sheldon c.1500 - 1570

Early Years

William Sheldon's date of birth is not known, but was probably around 1500. He was the eldest child of ten children born to Ralph Sheldon and Philippa (née Heath), nothing is known of his life before his possible admission to the Middle Temple.¹ In 1528 he removed to the Inner Temple and he remained active in its affairs until the 1540s, serving, or if it inconvenienced him, refusing to serve, as steward for Christmas at various dates.² But whether he participated willingly in community duties or purchased an expensive escape, his presence amongst the members of the Inns of Court brought him into contact with many men far above his own social standing. It is probably to their judgement of his capabilities that he owed his rapid advance into positions of authority within the county administrative structure.

Possibly as early as 1526 he married Mary, fourth daughter of William Willington of Barcheston Warwickshire, Merchant of the Staple, amongst the largest sheep farmers in south Warwickshire with his own premises at Calais and an office in London.³ The marriage brought advantages to each side, providing Willington with legal advice and assistance while linking the relatively unimportant Sheldon, through the marriages of his new sisters in law, with the most prominent families in the area, Catesby, Cave, Grevile, Holte, Middlemore and Mountford. In 1532 Sheldon bought 300 acres of land at Weston which he later received licence to empark, for which his father provided the money, at least according to his father's will.⁴ In the same year he was appointed a JP in Worcestershire, apparently without a property qualification and before his father Ralph served in the same office.⁵ Willington's will shows that at least one financial arrangement concerned with land purchase, possibly part of the marriage settlement, was entered into with Sheldon's father on his son's behalf.⁶



Mary Willington, ©Hilary L. Turner

The family had links to Pershore abbey; at the time when its dissolution was imminent a conversation between Ralph Sheldon and the abbot was reported to king Henry VIII's secretary of state, Thomas Cromwell; Sheldon later acted as mediator in a dispute between the tenants and the abbey's steward.⁷ By the mid-1540s William, like many others, took the opportunity to increase his property by purchasing lands from the dissolved monasteries, Pershore amongst them. But not all his acquisitions lay so close by; many were not later listed in his will, so presumably a number of them were sold on to realise a quick profit.⁸ Neither were all bought only in his name; expenditure totalled £ 5472, but his brother Francis and his father in law joined with him in some transactions.

William's Career

William's career took a big step forward when, in 1542, he was elected to the House of Commons as MP for Worcestershire, the first of four occasions.⁹ Payment to

him as solicitor to Queen Katherine Parr, acting in the matter of her jointure,¹⁰ is recorded in 1543-44; his connection to her household may have come through acquaintance with Sir Anthony Bouchier, then in the Queen's service, to whom Sheldon wrote, in 1545, acknowledging the many kindnesses received in the past year and asking Bouchier's interest to assist him to obtain the reversion of a manor then the Queen's property. Subsequently he had to request Bouchier's forbearance in the matter of payment; the two were clearly on friendly terms for no difficulties were raised. In the same letter Sheldon, excusing his own absence, mentions having arranged a house in Pershore for the use of Bouchier, and presumably his retinue, perhaps to hold a court.¹¹ A year afterwards, 1547, when Sheldon was first appointed sheriff of Worcestershire, he seems also to have been in the service of Thomas Seymour, brother of Protector Somerset, as the steward of one of his properties.¹² But even as early as 1548, he may have been forging links with John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland,¹³ and, by then in possession of the family estate of Beoley, Worcestershire, following the death of his father in 1546, have been engaging in the cautious game of second-guessing power politics. His own connections too may have furthered his career; his brother in law Nicholas Heath, had been appointed bishop of Rochester in 1542 and would accept Worcester in 1543; he was deprived between 1551 and 1554, but translated to York in 1555 when he also became lord chancellor. Only in 1559, following the accession of Queen Elizabeth, did he finally lose all influence; he died soon after.¹⁴

In February 1546 William was amongst the commissioners appointed to survey chantry lands in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Shrewsbury, and was subsequently pricked as sheriff from November 1547-48; he was again elected MP for Worcestershire in 1547.¹⁵ In May the same year he accepted a post in the second Court of Augmentations as receiver for the revenues of monastery lands sold in the counties of Northampton, Warwick, Leicester, Rutland, Stafford, Shrewsbury, Hereford and Worcester and in the two latter cities and Coventry. It was a heavy commitment which he executed in tandem with his duties as commissioner of chantries, presumably a renewal (and enlargement) of the earlier grant.¹⁶

By the start of Mary's reign he was in a position to decline the knighthood offered on the occasion of the Queen's marriage; his excuse was on the unlikely, but acceptable, grounds of poverty. Although his father in law had to pay £30 to avoid the honour, William seems to have escaped making any payment.¹⁷ He served again as MP for Worcestershire in 1554 and 1555, and as sheriff in 1556; he seems also to have been employed in the Exchequer after the dissolution of the Court of Augmentations, and was certainly active in the county as a collector of taxes and of 'free gifts'.¹⁸ His associates include Sir William Raynsford of Great Tew, an enthusiastic purchaser of monastic lands in Oxfordshire; Sir John Williams of Thame, Oxfordshire, treasurer of the Court of Augmentations and Sir John Pollard who, with Williams, oversaw the hand-over of Reading Abbey, subsequently MP, to whose younger brother, Anthony, Sheldon married his second daughter.¹⁹ His other daughters married Francis Savage of Elmley Castle, Edmund Plowden the jurist of Bishop's Castle, Shropshire and a merchant Brayn in Bristol.²⁰

It must have been very soon after the accession of Queen Elizabeth, however, with a shrewd eye to his own and his family's interests, that William attached himself to the rising star of Robert Dudley, the future earl of Leicester. It is a jump that may

not have been too difficult to achieve in view of the connections of his second wife, whom he had married before November 1555.²¹ She was Margaret, daughter of Richard Brooke, chief justice of the Exchequer (d.1529) and widow of Sir William Whorwood, Henry VIII's Attorney-General from 1540-45; Sheldon's first wife died in January 1553.²² Margaret had previous connections to John Dudley who acquired the wardship of her older daughter, later first wife of his son Ambrose, older brother of Robert, which may have eased Sheldon's contacts there; her younger daughter by Whorwood subsequently married into the Throckmorton family.²³ Correspondence with Robert Dudley on matters concerning the lord lieutenancy of Worcestershire, where William was the acting deputy, was in progress by 1559. His eldest son, Ralph, was an intermediary in the sale of the constablership of Warwick castle which Dudley sought to acquire from its owner, Sir Robert Throckmorton, Ralph's father in law.²⁴ William subsequently provided a surveyor for lands at Dry Marston the earl wished to purchase and later acted again as collector of revenues.²⁵ He served on a commission to survey the lands of the bishopric,²⁶ a post he might have obtained through the offices of his brother-in-law, Sir Ambrose Cave, one of Queen Elizabeth's earliest Councillors,²⁷ and was *Custos Rotulorum* [Keeper of the Rolls] for Worcestershire from at least 1562 until his death; in that office he was described by bishop Whitgift, then of Worcester, as 'indifferent' in religion.²⁸ He was sheriff once more, in 1567.²⁹

William was still to acquire at least two and possibly three other properties, raising the money presumably by the sale of his ex-monastery lands though there are few traces of these transactions.³⁰ Skilts he purchased in 1562, Brailes, some part of which he already owned, he acquired by unknown means;³¹ following considerable wrangling over the will of his father in law, he acquired Barcheston by purchase, not, as is so often said, as part of the dowry of his first wife, Mary Willington. Because the acquisition of Barcheston has a bearing on the organization of the tapestry venture, the quarrel will be examined in some detail.

Acquisition of Barcheston

Willington died in mid-1555; other than the small bequests to relatives and servants many of the testamentary dispositions were governed by agreements made years before, in some cases probably forming part of the marriage arrangements for his daughters.³² There were equally long-standing arrangements for his nephew on his second wife's side, William Barnes, to inherit Barcheston, to which was added Brailes and Chelmscote; from the revenues of Barcheston, Barnes was expected to pay annuities to some of Willington's daughters.³³ All Willington's sons-in-law were named as executors, while his Overseer was Sir Richard Broke, chief justice of the Common Pleas from c.1554, possibly a distant relation of Sheldon's second wife. The widow's family, virtually ignored, accused William of overstaying his welcome after the funeral, of consuming provisions in the house which were rightfully the widow's property and of stealing money from her.³⁴ The case never focused on the provisions of the will and it is notable that no part of the dispute concerned any of the properties which Sheldon had acquired jointly with his father in law, for example the possession of the rectory of Tysoe, which Sheldon might quite reasonably have expected to inherit. He too must have had his grievances against the will. Ann Willington's son, Robert Middlemore, and her nephew, Barnes, also accused Sheldon of proving a false will in which Barnes was not an executor, but no such document has ever been found. Documents recently deposited at Warwick Record Office

suggest that falsification might have been beyond even Sheldon's legal dexterity simply because so many of the terms formalised or reiterated arrangements which predated its composition.³⁵ It is worth pointing out that neither contestant was a stranger to Sheldon who had recently fought an action at Star Chamber against both.³⁶ The friction, whatever its cause, must have pre-dated the will and might even have been stirred up by the widow. William easily had the advantage of influence at least over the widow's family, and his appeal to the lord chancellor who must, at that date, have been his brother in law, Nicholas Heath, succeeded in putting Barnes into the Fleet prison for, the latter claimed, 18 weeks. The outcome of the Chancery case is not known; parallel with it ran a second case, which led to Sheldon's acquisition of Barcheston.

An *Inspeximus* of 1572 gives us some of the details of this second dispute that led to the disputing parties' acceptance of an award in 1564 whereby William Sheldon agreed to pay £3000 for the manor of Barcheston.³⁷ Inquiries made of deponents in the Exchequer Court make it clear that Sheldon believed that by virtue of a deed of February 1538 the manor would be the property of the first Mrs Willington for her life with the reversion to him and to his heirs. His case was that he was merely claiming as his the lands formerly the jointure of Mistress Willington. However, the will had stated explicitly that Willington's nephew, Barnes, was to inherit Barcheston and, at the time of Willington's death, Barnes seems already to have held it in trust for his uncle and aunt. Sheldon must have made difficulties almost immediately, for a reference in documents of the other case shows that even by 1557 there had been a settlement whereby Barnes exchanged Barcheston for Wyncote, giving possession of Barcheston to John Throckmorton, son of Catherine née Willington. By 1561 depositions from each side reveal considerable confusion as to who had truly acquired possession from Willington. The death of Barnes in May 1562 removed the probability of continued dissension.³⁸ The next year the parties had agreed to arbitration by friends and relatives, the outcome of which was that Throckmorton was to receive £3000 from Sheldon and grant Sheldon outright possession.

The *Inspeximus* is substantiated, and the story illuminated, by a long series of documents quoted and by four much damaged sheets listing the documents handed over to Sheldon after he had made payment.³⁹ The quarrel originated in 'the year of the great commotion in the north', ie the Pilgrimage of Grace, 1538; a deed made about that time because Sheldon was 'much in the counsell of Willington and of his confidence', implies that Willington had given Sheldon possession and that the former then upset the arrangement. One witness declared that the first Mistress Willington, 'being sick of her breste' had on her deathbed told him that she had made every effort to ensure that Mary her daughter, Sheldon's wife, should have Barcheston even though Willington might re-marry. Another swore that he had been at Barcheston when the news of the transfer to Barnes had leaked out and had run to Weston and told Mary 'whereupon she wept that her mother in law should have it for she believed it had been given to her by her father'. Yet another stated that at Willington's funeral he had heard Sheldon roundly abuse a third party for letting the cat out of the bag, accusing the latter of mentioning the deeds which were to give him Barcheston when it would have been better to keep silent. The quarrel was resolved largely within the family, for the arbitrators and the executors who appointed them had all been friends of Willington's.

The case does not perhaps put Sheldon in a very good light, and it is the third known instance when Sheldon defended his interests tooth and nail. In 1547 he sued Sir Thomas Smyth over possession of Combe Grange, Westington near Chipping Camden.⁴⁰ Sheldon maintained that he had purchased it amongst other lands formerly the possession of Bordesley abbey, Smyth claimed it as his and alleged that Sheldon, 'a man of great possessions, substance, power and office in the country thereabouts' had cut down the trees and grubbed up the roots. Sheldon tried to get the case heard in the Court of the Marches but, failing in that, claimed that a former abbot had leased the lands to his father 'a long time before the dissolution'. Slightly later William's sister Mary, sent to a relative, got herself with child and then married the father, a man far below her in rank; her guardian, Dame Philippa Knightley, was sued for neglecting Mary's proper care.⁴¹

His Achievement

Although William died on December 23 1570, his funeral did not take place until 15 January, attended by the Heralds of the College of Arms in London as a mark of respect. The death certificate is held still by the College. Few details illuminate Sheldon's personal life; we know he had a portrait painted of his eldest son Ralph in the early 1560s, possibly by Stephen van der Meulan;⁴² that there was a burglary at Weston by one of his own tenants;⁴³ that he left a legacy of £4 to each of his musicians and stipulated that his tapestries were to remain at Beoley 'from heyre to heyre'.⁴⁴ His revenues did not only come from rents; from his father he had inherited coal mines at Coleorton Leicestershire, which he exploited with the earl of Huntingdon;⁴⁵ he owned salt bullaries at Droitwich.⁴⁶ A third venture, intended to introduce new skills, was launched in the plans to introduce tapestry weaving at Barcheston.⁴⁷ The degree to which it also benefited the family, and its ultimate success, is unknown.



William's tomb from Nash's *History of Worcestershire*

NOTES

1. This account draws on E.A.Barnard, *The Sheldons*, Cambridge 1936 which is superseded by the biography of Sheldon in S.T.Bindoff, *The House of Commons, 1509-1558*, HMSO 1982, p.308 and S.L.Adams, “‘Because I am of that Countreye and Mynde to Plante Myself There’ Robert Dudley and the West Midlands’, *Midland History*, 20, 1995, pp. 21-74, (Adams 1995). Bindoff’s identification of Sheldon with a W Shelton admitted sometime between 1524 and 1551 does not seem to this author to be very certain; spelling of the name with T and D are not otherwise known to be interchangeable – except in Library of Congress cataloguing - but an influential Shelton family lived in East Anglia. Revision of his date of birth to 1511 in Bindoff *op.cit.* ignores the fact that his first child, Anne, was married in 1546. If she were then 18, William’s marriage must have taken place around 1525-26, when he would surely have been older than 15.

2. F.A.Inderwick, *A Calendar of Inner Temple Records*, 1896, 3 vols., 92, 123, 172, 132, 137, 168, 214, 219, 220.

3. M. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, Lutterworth, 1954, pp.193-4 quoting SP 1/238 ff.264-268. As appears in his will, TNA PROB 11/42B, Willington’s daughters married, Margery = (1) Thomas Holte of Aston, (2) Sir Ambrose Cave; Godith = Basil Feilding of Newnham; Elizabeth = Edward Boughton of Lawford; Mary = William Sheldon; Margaret = Sir Edward Greville of Milcote; Anne = Francis Mountford of Kingshurst; Katherine = (1) Richard Kempe (2) William Catesby of Chastleton (3) Sir Anthony Throckmorton. The bargaining attendant on the settlement before Katherine married William, son of Sir Richard Catesby, shows how hard won was Willington’s social standing, despite his wealth, Oxfordshire Record Office, E/24/1/1D/3.

4. Quoted in Michael Warriner, *A Prospect of Weston*, Kineton, 1978, p.7-8, Warwickshire Record Office (WaCRO) CR 456 box 22,23; he paid £ 573 6.8d. His father’s will, however (PROB 11/31), notes that he had bought the manor for his son. Licence to empark was granted in 1545, *Letters & Papers Henry VIII*, 1545, ii,846 (34).

5. *L & P Henry VIII*, 1531-32, p.399, 706.

6. TNA, PROB 11/42B; *L & P Henry VIII*, 1545, I, 628; *L& P Addenda 1509-47*, 1711

7. *L&P Henry VIII*, 1538, ii, 666 where William’s father, Ralph, is said to have purchased ‘stuff’ from Bordesley; incorrect reference to BLib. Add Ms 17041. Mythology has it that vestments now at Downside were rescued from Bordesley by the Sheldons, J.Humphreys, ‘Redditch Vestments at Downside Abbey’, *Trans. Birmingham Arch. Soc.*, vol. 53, 1928, p.205. Some manuscripts, now in the Bodleian Library, are also rumoured locally to be former Sheldon property, presented to the Bodleian by Ralph Sheldon, but this is unsubstantiated by the evidence, N.R.Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, London 1964, p.11. Surviving manuscripts from the Abbey are Bodleian Library, Bodl 168 presented by William Willowbye in 1615 and Laud Misc 606, acquired from Archbishop Laud, previously owned by Thomas

Peinton; the third is British Library Add Ms 37787. Further information has been collected by Lorna Watts in (eds). S.M.Hirst and S.M.Wright, *Second report on excavations at Bordesley Abbey, Redditch*, BAR British Series 111, 1983.

8. *L & P Henry VIII*, 1544, Jan. g 80(50); Feb. g 141 (12); Nov. ii, g 340(9); g.340 (57); *Ibid.*, Aug. 1545 g.266 (7); *Ibid.*, 1546, g.302 no.65. Sheldon's will, 1570, TNA, PROB 11/53.

9. TNA, C 219/18B/108.

10. TNA, E 315/161/38; E 101/423/15, fo.8.

11. *L&P Henry VIII*, 1545, no.628; *CSPD Addenda 1509-1547*, no.1711

12. Osborn Collection, Yale Univ Lib 71.6.41, quoted from Bindoff, *House of Commons*.

13. Adams 1995, 44, n.95.

14. S. T.Bindoff, *op. cit.* Heath was deprived of Worcester between 1551 and 1554, and was the prisoner-guest of the bishop of London, 1551-53. Translated to York in 1555, when he also became lord chancellor. In this capacity he announced the death of Mary and the accession of Elizabeth to Parliament, Norman Lloyd Williams, *Tudor London Visited*, 54, 1992, Cassell, London. For his portrait, see Roy Strong, *The English Icon*, 1969, p.104, National Portrait Gallery, London.

15. Surveyor of chantries, *L&P Henry VIII*, 1546, ii, g.302 (30); sheriff, *CPR 1547-53 Addenda* p.317; as MP, Hatfield 207.

16. Augmentations appointment, *CPR 1554-55*, p.76-77; payments as collector of taxes, *CSPD Addenda 1547-53*, p.357 and *CSPD 1547-53* nos 816, 838; of pensions and corrodies *CSPD 1601-03, Addenda 1547-65*, p.409, payments of monastic pensions; he subsequently sold the office to his son in law Francis Savage, *CPR 1554-55*, p.262 and on Francis' death acquired wardship of his son, *CPR 1557-58*, p.69. Commissioner of chantries 1548, *CPR 1547-49*, p.137.

17. John R. Dasent (ed.), *Acts of the Privy Council*, NS vol 5, 1892, 1554-55, 50; E.P. Shirley, 'Composition to avoid Knighthood 1 & 2 Mary', *Herald and Genealogist*, V, 1879, 18-24.

18. As MP Bindoff but no note; as sheriff, BLib Harleian 1043, f.52-3; *CSPD Mary*, HMSO 1998, nos 656 & 682; as collector of 'loans' lent on privy seals, *CSPD 1547-80*, p. 116.

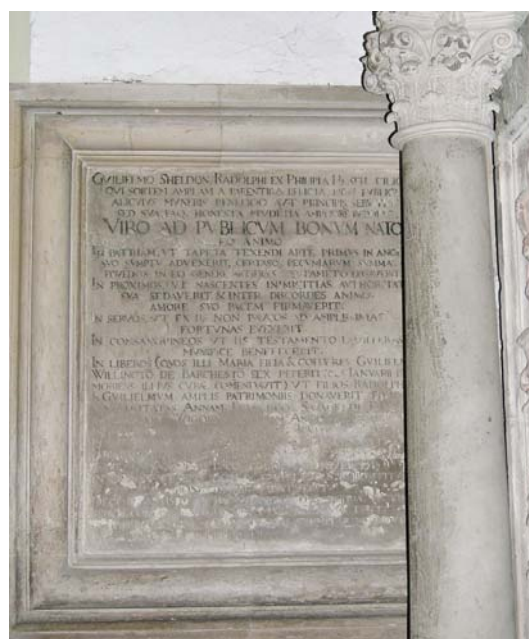
19. Bindoff, *op.cit.*

20. Inscription, William's tomb at Beoley, Barnard, *The Sheldons*, p. 26.

21. Birmingham Archives, Barnard Miscellany 77/ D/1 and 77/Q/1, quoting deeds at Coughton Court, dated 30.11.1555, reveal that William had re-married before that date. Originals not checked.
22. T. Nash, *Collections for a History of Worcestershire*, London 1781, vol. i, p. 65, correctly gives 25 January 1553 as the date of burial for Mary Willington.
23. Bindoff, *op.cit.*, sv Whorwood.
24. Adams 1995, 37, 47 & n.223.
25. Birmingham Archives, Ms 3061/Acc 1901-003, 357601 and 357602.
26. *CPR 1558-60*, p.422.
27. Bindoff, *op.cit.*, sv Cave.
28. *CPR 1560-63*, p.444; M. Bateson, ed. 'A Collection of Original Letters from the Bishops to the Privy Council, 1564', *Camden Miscellany IX*, Camden Society NS liii, 1895.
29. BLib Harleian 1043, f.52-3.
30. Gloucester RO D3602 (Mickleton); Barnard gave no reference for his statement that Barnes bought the manor of Tarlton in Tredington from Sheldon who had acquired it amongst his purchases of dissolved monastery lands, though he might be correct. However, the only surviving deed refers to a transaction by another William Barnes nearly a century later, Worcester RO, name indexes, 8004/1; Packwood NT guide (poor authority).
31. *CPR 1558-60*, 1 April 1560, p.370, (Skilts), Geoffrey Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses*, 1994, p. 264; Hilary L. Turner, 'An early map of Brailes: Fit Symbolographie ?' *Warwickshire History*, xi no.5, Summer 2001, 182-193.
32. Willington's will TNA, PROB 11/42B; the date of his death is said to be 1 May 1555, mentioned in many of the Warwickshire Record Office (WaCRO), Stockton Fortescue deposit, CR 580 references below, which can also be found, summarized, in www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a
33. The will stipulated that payment was to be made to Anne Mountford while money from Tysoe was to go to Godith Ffeilding and Elizabeth Boughton.
34. TNA, C 3/122/71
35. WaCRO CR 580 9/38; 14/1-5, 9. A century later the will was quoted again, in connection with charity lands at Brailes, TNA, C 93/30/28 as also E 41/347 which is an extract from the will as proved.
36. TNA, STAC 2/24/259; STAC 4/4/58; STAC 4/6/7.

37. WaCRO CR 580 box 17/5.
38. Barnes died 12 May 1561, Tredington parish registers, originals at WaCRO, transcribed M.F.Brittain, *Birmingham and Midlands Society for Heraldry and Genealogy*, n.d.
39. WaCRO CR 580 box 14/6-8, 10-20, box 15,16.
40. TNA, STAC 3/1/103, STAC 3/4/32, STAC 3/32/150
41. TNA, STAC 2/20/94 and STAC 2/25/197.
42. Private Information.
43. TNA, C66/1016.
44. TNA, PROB 11/53.
45. The mines at Coleorton had been developed by William's father TNA, C 1/892/23; others were at Bedworth TNA, E 133/10/1663 and LR 13/30/7.
46. The bullaries were at Droitwich, Birmingham Archives, Ms 3061/Acc 1901-003 167742, 167884, 167456, 167800. Licence to sell others, also at Droitwich, was granted in 1566, *CPR 1563-66*, p.361.
47. Hilary L. Turner 'Finding the Sheldon Weavers: Richard Hyckes and the Barcheston tapestry works reconsidered', *Textile History*, vol 33 no 2, Autumn 2002, 133-161; 'Tapestries once at Chastleton House and their influence on the image of the tapestries called Sheldon: a re-assessment' *Antiquaries Journal*, vol 88 2008, 313-343

William's Epitaph at Beoley Church



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Epitaph to William Sheldon at Beoley

To William Sheldon, son of Ralph Sheldon and Philippa Heath: He inherited a great fortune from his parents and not by the opportunities of any public office, or by any fawning on a prince but by his well-known and honourable prudence he greatly increased it.

A MAN BORN TO AID THE PUBLIC GOOD

So patriotic that he was the first in England to commence the Art of Tapestry Weaving for which at his own expense he provided large sums of money, and left by will property and money to care for the workmen in that craft. Towards his neighbours, by his very influence he settled their quarrels as they arose, and between discordant people by his very love he established peace; many of his servants, as also not a few of his friends, he raised to ample fortunes. In his will he greatly and openheartedly benefited his relations as well as others. To his children (of whom Mary the daughter and co-heir of William Willington of Barcheston bore to him six in number, and dying on 25 January 1553, commended them to his care) he presented his sons Ralph and William with ample patrimonies, and to his daughters goodly dowries – Anna married Francis Savage of Elmlye in the County of Worcester, Philippa to Anton Pollard of Newnham in the County of Oxford, Catharine to Edmund Plowden in the County of Shropshire, Gooditha to Robert Brayn of Bristol – and he left them all in peace and concord. To his fellow creatures his own house, with all his goods, was as a hospitable inn, ever at their service.

On December 25 1570 he departed this life.

As an example of true virtue he was greatly missed; no less by his friends in the county as well as by his children, his relatives and his servants.

Ralph his son erected this monument