

The wives of Sir William Stanley: Joan Beaumont and Elizabeth Hopton

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WILLIAM STANLEY had already been granted the castle and lordship of Skipton-in-Craven and had been appointed to Neville-dominated commissions in the West Riding before his court connections brought him his first marriage at the end of 1465.¹ Joan, Lady Lovell, was the daughter of Viscount Beaumont, a powerful magnate in the previous reign, and step-daughter of the King's aunt Katherine Neville, Duchess of Norfolk. Sir William Stanley, by this time king's carver, had enjoyed an annuity of £20 from Lord Lovell who died in January 1465. Lovell's heir, Francis, was made ward of Richard Neville Earl of Warwick who married the boy to his niece Anne Fitzhugh, daughter of Alice Neville. William Stanley did not have control of the heir or his lands but he did acquire an interest in his wife's jointure estate of part of the barony of Nantwich in Cheshire. This was the county where the Stanley family originated and where Sir William was also active; he was chamberlain of Chester and was also sheriff and constable in nearby Flint. The estates of the Beaumont family were granted elsewhere, the heir William, Joan's brother, being an attainted Lancastrian. Many of the Beaumont lands went to Lord Hastings while the maternal Bardolf inheritance was granted to William Beaumont's estranged wife, Joan Stafford, daughter of Anne Neville, Duchess of Buckingham, and to any heirs she might have, with reversion to Lady Lovell.² This first marriage of Sir William lasted over three years and produced three children, William, Joan and Catherine; Joan Lady Lovell died on 24 August 1469.

Stanley's second marriage came in Edward IV's second reign, after Warwick's rebellion, Edward's flight, and his return in the spring of 1471, when Sir William Stanley was one of the first to join him, with 300 men.³ After the battle of Tewkesbury Stanley was made banneret. Another reward was marriage to Elizabeth Hopton, which brought considerable advantages but no known children. This lady had an interesting history although only the outlines are recorded or suggested. The Hopton family had long been established in south Shropshire, their castle of Hopton lying between the Clun and Teme valleys, north-west of Wigmore whose lord, Duke Richard of York, they served.

Elizabeth's brother, Walter, fought beside Edward of York at Mortimer's Cross in February 1461, the prelude to York's taking the throne. Other supporters of York, William Hastings, Walter Devereux, William Herbert, all associates of Walter Hopton, were ennobled, but Hopton died in 1461, leaving his sister heir to their father's estates and to half those of their mother Eleanor's brother, Sir William Lucy, who died in 1461.

At this time Elizabeth was the wife of Roger Corbet of Moreton Corbet in north Shropshire, a colleague in local affairs of the Hoptons. She was quite young when she married and was probably her husband's second wife. The Corbets had been a distinguished family in the Welsh Marches for nearly 400 years. Elizabeth bore Roger Corbet two sons and three daughters; the elder son Richard was born in 1448. In May 1465 Roger Corbet was one of those knighted on the eve of the coronation of Elizabeth Wydvile. We do not know if Sir Roger's wife and heir accompanied him to witness the splendid ceremonies or the tournament following the coronation where the Earl of Worcester officiated as constable. The Earl, John Tiptoft, held the manor of Lydham, just north of Hopton Castle, as part of his maternal inheritance of half of the Charlton lordship of Powis, so he may have known the Hoptons. A distant cousin, Sir Robert Charlton of Apley in Shropshire, married a sister of Roger Corbet.⁴

Two years after his knighting Sir Roger died, by early June 1467, when his heir was said to be nineteen. That summer the Earl of Worcester was at Ludlow preparing to go to Ireland as the King's lieutenant. He had long been a widower, after two early and brief marriages, the second apparently a love match. He was unusual among English noblemen in having studied at Oxford and with humanist scholars in Italy where he was admired for his erudition and cultivated tastes. Not ostentatious, he commanded respect; he was a patron of scholars and a collector of books. Summoned home from Italy by his kinsman Edward IV in the autumn of 1461, he was made constable of England and thus had the duty of meting out summary punishment to rebels and traitors, which he did with due severity. After Hexham in 1464 Edward himself passed sentence on the Earl's brother-in-law Lord Roos, a gallant Lancastrian, husband of Philippa Tiptoft. During the summer of 1467 the Earl made contact with the newly-widowed Elizabeth Hopton; whether it was an old liking or a sudden attachment, he proposed marriage to her. There was no time to get the King's licence, which both should have had, but they were readily pardoned and the King was godfather to their son, his namesake, born in Dublin in July 1469.⁵

The marriage had a tragic end: called back by Edward in 1470, Worcester fell victim to Warwick while the King and others escaped. He was caught near his manor of Great Eversden, perhaps because he visited his wife and young son, who may have found sanctuary; he was beheaded at the Tower on 18 October 1470, going to the scaffold with great courage and coolness. Over a year later, in December 1471, joint custody of the young Earl and his estates was granted to Elizabeth Hopton and her third husband, Sir William Stanley.⁶ Six months later came the marriage contract between Lord Stanley and Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, a match of like convenience. By coincidence, the Countess of Worcester's eldest son had helped the son of Margaret Beaufort in 1469-70: Richard Corbet was ward of Walter Devereux Lord Ferrers at Weobley in Herefordshire where Ferrers' sister Lady Anne Herbert, Countess of

Pembroke, brought her charge, Henry Tudor, from Raglan after the death of her husband at Warwick's hands. When Jasper Tudor came to Hereford, Corbet was one of those who brought Tudor's nephew Henry to him. Richard Corbet was knighted at Tewkesbury in May 1471 by which date he was of age, so William Stanley did not have control of the Corbet lands.

Stanley's second marriage brought increased prestige and power through his control of the Tiptoft lands, in Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Hampshire, Middlesex and Essex, and the Charlton lands in the Welsh Marches. The main homes of the late Earl were Great Eversden, a house near Enfield known variously as Tiptofts and Worcesters, and Worcester House in Thames Street, London, near Black Friars, where he was buried.⁷ Sir William Stanley made an exchange of lands with Richard Duke of Gloucester in 1475 whereby the Duke got Skipton and Stanley acquired the great castle of Chirk above the Ceiriog Valley and near Offa's Dyke. His second marriage also extended the range of his contacts in the Marches through the Corbet family. Elizabeth Hopton's two older daughters were married into prominent Shrewsbury families, the Thornes and Sturys, and her son Sir Richard married the only daughter of Lord Ferrers. This created links with the Herberts: Anne Countess of Pembroke was a loved and respected head of her family and her eldest daughter, Maud, became Countess of Northumberland when Henry Percy was restored — he had been at Raglan in Lord Herbert's custody in 1468-9. The youngest Corbet daughter, Elizabeth, married Richard Cholmondeley, heir of Sir William Stanley's neighbour in Cheshire where he built his 'right goodly house of stone and tymbre' in Ridley Park, east of Holt.⁸

Shropshire's importance was enhanced by the presence of the court and council of the Prince of Wales at Ludlow from late 1473 until April 1483. Lord Ferrers, his son-in-law Sir Richard Corbet, and Sir William Stanley were among those associated with the work of the Council. The Prince and his retinue made visits to his earldom of Chester, and to Shrewsbury where he stayed at the Abbey, his minstrels in attendance.⁹ Among the young noblemen at this court may have been the Prince's kinsman, the King's godson, Edward Earl of Worcester, a year or so older than the Prince. Elizabeth Hopton's estates were not far from Ludlow; her younger Corbet son, Robert, may have lived at Hopton Castle since he held appointments in the area: constable of the castles of Wigmore and Radnor, steward of various royal lordships, forester of Corndon and Radnor, and parker of Wigmore. Unlike the Countess of Richmond who worked for her son in exile, the Countess of Worcester appears to have played no part in politics or public life; she was probably as devoted to her youngest son as Margaret Beaufort was to her only son and may have concerned herself with him and his upbringing. A second tragedy befell her in 1485 when this second son, Edward, died on 12 August, soon after his sixteenth birthday; he was buried at Ely Cathedral.

At that time her eldest son and probably her husband were involved in the planning which brought Henry Tudor to the throne. Sir Richard Corbet was certainly a whole-hearted supporter, paying allegiance to Henry Tudor at Shrewsbury and going in the company of 800 gentlemen and other friends to risk all at Bosworth.¹⁰ Sir William Stanley's late charge determined the outcome of the battle, but the death of his stepson can hardly have influenced his actions. It may however have contributed to his later disaffection: the story of his wanting to be

Earl of Chester is unlikely, but he may have fostered the hope of the vacant earldom of Worcester. He was not even given a barony, and he lost control of the Tiptoft estates.¹¹ Disappointment may have been one element in Stanley's support of Perkin Warbeck in 1493-95, but he may also have been influenced by his old service to the heir of Edward IV — he had been chamberlain of the Prince's household at Ludlow. He was alleged to have said that if the young man, Warbeck, were King Edward's son (Prince Richard, born in August 1473 at Shrewsbury) he would not take up arms against him.¹² Sir William Stanley was beheaded on 16 February 1495. His widow's main interests and her family were in her native Shropshire; she died in June 1498 when her grandson Robert was her heir, Sir Richard his father having died in 1492.¹³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This article attempts to supplement and in some details to correct J. M. Gidman, *The wives and children of Sir William Stanley of Holt*, *The Ricardian*, vol. 9, no. 116, March 1992, pp.206-210. The main source used for Sir William Stanley's career is Joanna M. Williams, *The Stanley Family of Lathom and Knowsley, c. 1450-1504*, M.A. Manchester University, 1979; also useful are M. J. Bennett, *Good Lords and King-Makers: the Stanleys of Lathom in English Politics, 1385-1485*, *History Today*, July 1981, pp.12-17; and Michael K. Jones, *Sir William Stanley of Holt*, *The Welsh History Review*, vol. 14 (1988), pp.1-22. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1461-67*, pp.115, 342, 474. The first grant was in February 1462, with renewals on 29 May 1464 and 12 November 1465 — on the last date the grant was to Stanley and 'Joan late the wife of John Lovell, knight, lord Lovell, whom he will shortly marry.'
2. *CPR 1461-67*, pp.26-27, 179, 355.
3. J. O. Halliwell, ed., *Warkworth's Chronicle*, Camden Society 1839, p.14.
4. Details of the Corbet family come principally from: G. Morris, *Shropshire Genealogies*, vol. 1, Shrewsbury Public Libraries Ms.2788; the Acton Reynald Collection, Shropshire Record Office; and A. E. Corbet, *The Family of Corbet*, London 1915-17. The inquisition *post mortem* for Sir Roger Corbet is in the Public Record Office, ref. C140124, PFF/4872.
5. The only biography of the Earl is still that of R. J. Mitchell, *John Tiptoft (1427-1470)*, London 1938. His learning and letters are discussed by Roberto Weiss, in *Humanism in England during the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford 1967, pp.112-122 *et passim*. On the too-readily quoted Tudor epithet 'butcher', a comment by D. B. Quinn may be cited: 'if his summary execution of Lancastrian enemies had been unusually vigorous, it was almost a commonplace of the English civil wars at this time', see *A New History of Ireland: II Medieval Ireland*, ed., Art Cosgrove, Oxford 1987, pp.601-2. The propaganda story of the murder of two young sons of the Earl of Desmond is without foundation.
6. *CPR 1467-77*, p.297.
7. *Victoria County History of Cambridgeshire*, vol. 5, p.61; *VCH Middlesex* vol. 5, pp.226-7; John Stowe, *The Survey of London*, London 1987, p.217. The tomb with effigies in Ely Cathedral, sometimes said to be the Earl's is that of his father John Lord Tiptoft.
8. John Leland, *Itinerary*, ed., Lucy Toulmin Smith, London 1964, vol. 4, p.3.
9. R. A. Morris, *Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns*, Chester 1894, p.59; H. Owen and J. B. Blakeway, *A History of Shrewsbury*, Shrewsbury 1825, pp.231-233.
10. The information about Richard Corbet's earlier help to Henry Tudor and his participation at Bosworth and afterwards, is from an undated petition of Sir Richard to Henry VII, quoted in Owen and Blakeway, p.248.
11. *Complete Peerage*, vol. 12, part 2, p.846. The heirs to the estates were John Tiptoft's sisters Philippa Lady Roos, Lady Joan Ingoldsthorpe, and the heirs of the third sister, Joyce, who married a son of Lord Dudley.
12. W. J. Archbold, *Sir William Stanley and Perkin Warbeck*, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 14 (1899), p.92 *et. seq.*; D. M. Kleyn, *Richard of England*, Oxford 1990, pp.83-84.
13. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem Henry VII*, vol. 2, nos. 130, 131, 155-159, 233 and 234 (1498).