

15th Century Lives

15th Century Families

Ian Dawson



Sitting on Cats

Introduction: Part 1

'... sometimes as I work at a series of patent and close rolls, I have a queer sensation; the dead entries begin to be alive. It is rather like the experience of sitting down in one's chair and finding that one has sat on the cat. These are real people.'

F.M. Powicke, Ways of Medieval Life and Thought, (London, 1950) p.67

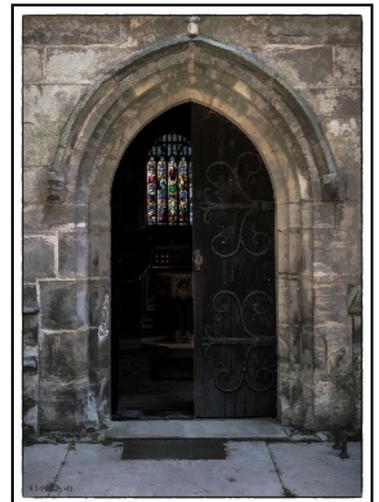
I first met Edward Redmayn in the early 1970s. I was at university studying the reign of Richard III, particularly the king's deployment of his northern supporters in the south to prevent a repetition of the rebellion of 1483. Edward's name kept cropping up in government records for the far south-west, many miles from his Yorkshire home. I found Edward on commissions to root out King Richard's enemies in Cornwall and Devon, being appointed Sheriff of Dorset and Somerset, awarded lands in the south to boost his status in the region and as a member of Commissions of the Peace, sitting in judgement on those accused of crimes.

I carefully wrote out the details on my index cards in what I thought a rather fetching turquoise-coloured ink (this was long before computers, spread-sheets and word-processing), pulled together my conclusions in my dissertation – and filed away Edward and his northern friends in a far distant corner of my mind. For all the details I'd uncovered about his life, Edward was just one of many impersonal names on a page.

It was fifteen years before I met Edward again. By then I was married and living to the north of Leeds and one obvious place to take our toddler was the playground at nearby Harewood House. It cost just a pound to spend an afternoon watching young Matthew whizzing down slides and swarming over climbing frames until he subsided in an exhausted heap. One day, however, we took a detour on arriving at Harewood before buckling down to the important business in the adventure playground. The detour was my treat, a chance to explore All Saints, the medieval church tucked away in the woodland - and that's where I met Edward for the second time.

My first impression, standing in the west doorway of All Saints, was of space and airiness – and emptiness. The church was taller and broader than I'd expected but bare and empty. It hasn't been used for regular services since the 1970s. Then, as I walked a pace or two down the nave, I realised that All Saints isn't quite empty. I glimpsed a tomb chest in the north aisle, then several more in the south aisle and in the chancel – six in total – and each chest had a pair of effigies on top of it. Deserting my family, I went to investigate and that's when I came face to face with Edward Redmayn, lying alongside his wife Elizabeth just as they have been for the last five centuries.

I must have stood there quite a while, certainly long enough to provoke repeated cries of 'when are we going to the swings?' but our son wasn't to know that, to borrow Sir Maurice Powicke's phrase quoted above, I'd just sat on the cat. Seeing Edward's effigy felt as if I was shaking hands with the man himself, a real,



Harewood Church, West End

breathing person. He was no longer just a disembodied name in the records. The details of his delicately-carved alabaster effigy deepened this impression. He's wearing armour so must often have fiddled with buckles and straps to tighten them, making sure they fitted snugly, just as we all do with our clothes. He wears a livery collar around his neck and I thought I could hear the chink of metal as he put it over his head. But it was his hair that really helped me see Edward as being as human as you and me. If he'd worn a helm, as if going into battle, that would have hidden his humanity but instead he has a full, fashionable head of hair, grown long, almost touching his shoulders.



Effigy of Edward Redmayn in Harewood Church, Leeds

I spent the rest of that afternoon going through the motions of parenting while dredging my memory for what I could remember about Edward. Now aware of him as a real person, I was thinking about him differently. He was no longer just a name on an index card listing appointments and lands held, responsibilities carried out, but a man who found himself in complex situations, who had choices to make, who had to live with the rippling consequences of decisions and actions taken by others, not least the king.

A northerner by birth and experience, Edward had been catapulted south in 1483 in the aftermath of the rebellion against Richard III and must have spent much of the next two years in the south, amongst people he didn't know well or even know at all. What had it been like, living amongst strangers who saw him as an outsider? What did he and Elizabeth feel about this major change in their lives, something they couldn't have anticipated even a few months earlier? Did they decide that Elizabeth too would travel south or did she stay in Yorkshire, supervising their estates? How, after the battle of Bosworth, had they adjusted to life back in the north under a new king?

And that in turn led me to wonder what kinds of things really mattered to Edward and Elizabeth – their family, the people on their estates, wealth and status, loyalty to the king, the good of the country, friendship, their souls? By the time I'd finished mulling this over, that cat that I'd sat on was well and truly squashed.



Standing by the font, in Harewood Church,

Not long after that second encounter with Edward, I went back to Harewood on my own to explore some more. I wanted to find out about the other five couples in All Saints Church. Who were these individuals lying atop their tomb chests, hands eternally erect in prayer? The brief information cards next to each pair of effigies helped me get started. They revealed that the effigies belonged to two different family groups.

Either side of the chancel, in places of honour, lie Sybil and Elizabeth Aldburgh. Sybil and Elizabeth were sisters who together inherited the Harewood estates in 1391, commissioned the rebuilding of the church and lived at Harewood Castle, whose ruins stand nearby amidst the woodland. Alongside Sybil is her husband, Sir William Ryther (not a man to admire, as we'll see). Elizabeth is accompanied by her husband, Sir Richard Redmayn, great-grandfather of Edward, whom I've already introduced. Together with the effigies commemorating Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn these tombs make up the Aldburgh-Redmayn family group.

The remaining three tomb chests belong to the Gascoigne family, three generations of whom lie, line astern, in the south aisle. The men are all (not too confusingly) called William, their wives another Elizabeth and two Margarets. The Gascoignes lived at Gawthorpe Hall, barely a mile from Harewood Castle, the two residences sitting either side of the ridge on which the eighteenth-century Harewood House now stands. Gawthorpe Hall has long vanished though its foundations are visible thanks to archaeological excavations of its site above the lake created by Capability Brown for the owners of Harewood House.

Armed with names and dates I then dug into books, articles, doctoral theses and a range of contemporary sources to learn more about their lives. What I discovered was that while the Redmayns and Gascoignes knew this part of Yorkshire intimately they were not mere parish gentry who rarely ventured beyond the county boundary. These effigies commemorate one Lord Chief Justice, one Speaker of the House of Commons, the niece of an earl and two members of King Richard III's household. Members of these families experienced and had opinions about all the critical events of the fifteenth century – the deposition of Richard II by Henry IV, the battle of Agincourt and the conquest, then loss, of northern France, the descent into the

conflict known as the Wars of the Roses, its battles, uncertainties and periods of peace and, finally, the disappearance of the Princes in the Tower and the emergence, almost from nowhere, of the first Tudor king, Henry VII.

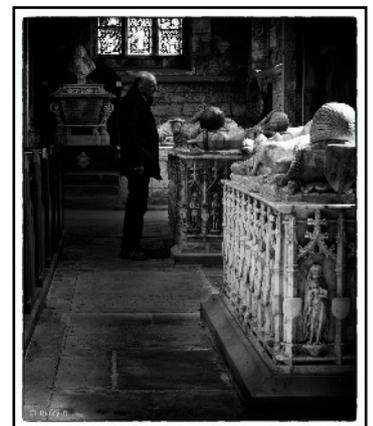
And as I learned more I began, as I walked amidst their beautiful effigies, to imagine the Aldburghs, Redmayns and Gascoignes come to life, standing and talking where I was now standing, walking or riding back to Castle or Hall, sitting together at meals, going outside to enjoy the warmth of a summer's day. Elizabeth and Sybil must have spent many hours together, for they were not only sisters but also shared Harewood Castle, living there with their husbands though also, in all probability, spending time at their other properties. What, I began to wonder, did they all talk about when they met, what choices did they have to make and what really mattered to each of them as individuals?

Some of those conversations and choices must have revolved around politics and war because the members of these families had personal experience of the kings and the nobles, of battles, campaigns and politics but that can't have been all they talked about, any more than our conversations revolve completely around politics and politicians. Our conversations and the decisions we take range over family, friends and neighbours, births and the development of children, relationships and who might marry whom, gossip about those we know and those we don't really know but think we do, about illnesses and treatments, what we do for fun, the state of the roads and how long journeys take, homes and repairs, purchases of the everyday and of luxuries and, just occasionally, the weather. And in that myriad of conversations and choices we reveal, occasionally at least, what really matters to us, from family, love and friendship to ambitions, beliefs and ideals.

Those questions – what did they talk about, what choices did they have to make, what mattered to them – are what prompted me to write these chapters. I want to see what kinds of answers I can find, to see if I can identify more moments in these people's lives when I realise they were once as alive and human as you or I, those moments when once again I feel as if I've just sat on the cat.

There's another reason too though I'm not sure how much sense this makes. Every time I walk into that airy, empty nave at All Saints to visit the effigies I have an eerie feeling that they, the Redmayns, Aldburghs and Gascoignes, are waiting for me, waiting to hear what progress I've made with their stories. And so, for reasons I can't at all explain, I find I have a sense of responsibility to these people, a responsibility to tell their stories, to create a sense of the trajectories of their lives, to keep their memories alive for other people to discover.

And if that doesn't feel ambitious enough (now that I've written all of three pages!) the Aldburghs, Redmayns and Gascoignes aren't the only people I will be writing about. In later chapters I will introduce three more families –the Stonors of Oxfordshire, the Devereux family from Herefordshire and the Pastons of Norfolk. They had much in common but differences too, differences arising from the regions they lived in and their status in society but also differences between generations of the same family and between individuals in the same generations, just as we differ from others in our own families. It's these differences that I hope



The Gascoigne tombs in the south aisle

will create not one but multiple stories of the fifteenth century, reflecting the varied experiences of these individuals and the ways in which they responded to them.

One major challenge in writing these stories lies in identifying the similarities and differences between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Can we possibly understand people who lived 600 years ago? The differences between their lives and ours are many and fundamental but it’s also true that, for all the differences, we share a common humanity. Our medieval ancestors had similar emotions and feelings to ourselves. Like every generation, they created friendships, built marriages, bore children, mourned the deaths of family and friends, laughed at jokes and sang songs, felt hesitant, doubtful and lacking in confidence or were bumptious and overly pleased with themselves. As Professor Miri Rubin explains in her book *The Middle Ages, A Very Short Introduction*:

‘It is often assumed that people of this period were vastly different from us. This is not a helpful assumption. Then, as now, individuals aimed to live the best lives possible while struggling to make ends meet, fulfilling the expectations of institutions, and trying to satisfy some of their desires Our sources – ranging from wills to poetry, from visual imagery to testimonies in courts of law – show individuals from across the social spectrum displaying emotions familiar to us: loyalty, jealousy, greed, hope, and passionate love.’

One final introductory paragraph – I don’t imagine the readers of these pages to be academic historians gilded with research degrees! I’m trying to write for readers with a general interest in history, perhaps intrigued by historical novels or television programmes about the Later Middle Ages, perhaps teachers who’ve never had the chance to study much late medieval history, maybe A level students interested in finding about the people behind the politics in their textbooks, and, probably most of all, I’m writing for myself as this task is really helping me enjoy and get more out of my own reading and research! I hope you enjoy meeting Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn and everyone else as much as I am.

Part 2 continues, overleaf

An Unofficial History

Introduction: Part 2

'This isn't the Official History. It is only a rough sketch for it. The Official History will be much longer, every detail will be double-checked to make sure it is the unvarnished truth ... It will also cost more.'

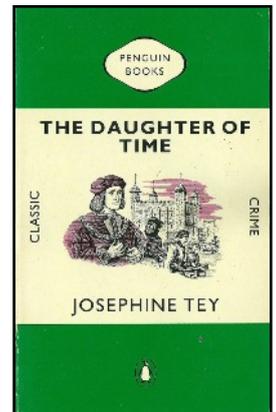
J L Carr, How Steeple Sinderby Wanderers Won The FA Cup, 1975, page 4

In my early teens I spent a lot of time reading – or trying to read - books that felt like Official Histories. I picked them up because I was interested in the topics, almost always medieval history. I didn't know much about the topics at the time but knew I wanted to find out about them. Those books were good solid academic histories, written by eminent research historians with 'every detail ... double-checked' and sounding like 'unvarnished truth' as JL Carr puts it in the quotation above. The trouble was that they all sounded the same in my head when I read them. They didn't sound as if the author was talking to me. They sounded as if the author was lecturing to me or, worse, lecturing at me. Just as importantly, I never got the sense that he or she was trying to enthuse me, share his or her passion for the topic, get me interested in the puzzles and uncertainties. He or she told me things - lots and lots of things - but I had to bring my own enthusiasm and that's hard if you don't know enough to have questions in your mind that you want to find answers to.

Every now and again, however, I came across books that I didn't have to struggle through. I can pick out three and none of them could be mistaken for Official Histories. There was Duncan Grinnell-Milne's *The Killing of William Rufus*, Rowland Parker's *The Common Stream* and Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*. They were different types of books, the first two non-fiction, the third with fictional characters investigating real history, but they had several things in common that appealed to me. Firstly the author was present, audible throughout (Josephine Tey's voice coming through her detective, Alan Grant) and they talked to me, even chatted to me, drawing me in to their investigation, taking me along as he or she made progress or got stuck when they hit a dead end. Secondly each author had questions they wanted to find answers to, which made for a sharper, more focussed style of writing and structure to their books, more like an unfolding novel than the kinds of history books I was used to. And finally, each author obviously cared about, was passionate about the topic– and that made me care too.

It's no surprise then, that when I wrote my own books for students in schools, I tried to write as if I was standing in the classroom talking directly to the students. I wasn't always successful by any means but I knew that as a writer I had to remember that very few of these young readers already had an interest in the topic or knew anything about it. It was my job to enthuse, puzzle, intrigue them if I could.

And that brings me to my qualifications (I hope) for writing these chapters. I'm not an historian, not in my eyes anyway because I think of historians as people who spend their lives as researchers, working in archives, burrowing away at the frontiers of knowledge, making new discoveries and suggesting re-interpretations. I don't do that. On the other hand I do have two degrees in history, spent the bulk of my first degree studying the fifteenth century back in the days when I had to use my Latin even as an undergraduate, then took a detour into the twelfth century for an MA



The Daughter of Time,
Josephine Tey

and was even planning to start PhD research on the fifteenth century when ‘life’ interfered - but more importantly, I’ve spent 40 years teaching, training teachers, writing and editing books for school students and teaching about the fifteenth century at degree level. All that could be summarised as forty years communicating my love of history, particularly of the later middle ages and so these chapters are just another way of communicating that pleasure. So I feel qualified to write an Unofficial History, if not an official one.

So what does this ‘Unofficial History’ consist of? It’s not a book, at least not one you can buy in a shop with a set number of pages and chapters, and you don’t have to pay for it. Instead it’s an open-ended adventure with an unknown, as yet, number of pages and chapters, depending on what attracts my interests and which tangents I follow and how excited I get, and with no deadlines for publication online.

Whoopee!

And the style will be ‘Unofficial’, the style that I want to write in, that I enjoy writing in. It owes a lot to those books I read when I was young – a style in which I’m visible and share my enthusiasm, talking directly to you, the reader, telling you why a topic or a detail excites me, sometimes explaining how I feel about the people and the topics I’m exploring, in which I ask questions which interest me though don’t always find the answers, in which I start each chapter with a quotation which I think is relevant to the content but, more importantly, has made me smile or think or means something important to me but isn’t there to impress you with my profound thinking and depth of knowledge of the classics!

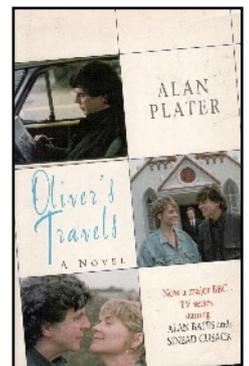
Most importantly I want to have fun twice over. I want to have fun doing the research (though that brings a danger, one I’ve already been battling, that I find myself writing like the historians I’m reading) and I want to have fun writing - I want the writing to feel like play, not work. I can’t have fun writing an Official History so this has to be an Unofficial History, one in which the right side of my brain – the creative half – is dominant, even if the left side, the logical half is essential in planning and research. This won’t work if I let the logical left take over completely and turn this into an Official History!

And finally, a quotation which sums up my attitude to the people I’m writing about. This is from the last page of Alan Plater’s book *Oliver’s Travels*:

‘It’s all about paying homage,’ said Oliver. ‘Hearing what the ghosts are saying.’

‘What are they saying?’ said Diane.

‘They’re saying ... please listen.’



Oliver’s Travels,
By: Alan Plater

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Cover Picture: Effigies of Edward Redmayn and his wife, Elizabeth Huddleston, in Harewood Church, Leeds