1. Sitting on Cats

'… 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)

I first met Edward Redmayn in 1972. I was in my final year at university, writing my dissertation on Richard III's relationship with the north of England. Nowadays there's a vast array of books and articles on King Richard and the north but back then hardly any research had been published at all. That made every visit to the university library an adventure, even if I was grappling with sources in Latin and the obscure vocabulary of government records – and it was during one of those library adventures that I came across the name Edward Redmayn.

Edward was a northerner but kept cropping up in government records for the far south-west. Why was he so far from home? The answer was that Edward was one of the northerners used by Richard III to keep control of the south. Many southern landowners had rebelled against Richard in 1483, then fled abroad when their rising failed. Would another rebellion break out? King Richard could never be sure, and hence he used the men he trusted most, his northern supporters, as his eyes and ears in the south. That was why I found Edward Redmayn on commissions to root out King Richard's enemies in Cornwall and Devon, serving as Sheriff of Dorset and Somerset and as a Commissioner of the Peace sitting in judgement on those accused of crimes. I also discovered that Edward was well-rewarded for his work. He was given lands in the south-west that the king had confiscated from rebels, land that not only increased his income but was intended to boost his status in the region.

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 soon afterwards moved on to a life in school-teaching. However I'd enjoyed my research so much that I didn't forget Edward Redmayn and his northern friends. Although I'd filed them away in a distant corner of my mind they were still there, a memory waiting to be jolted back to life.

Fast forward fifteen years to the late 1980s. By then I was married, living in the north of Leeds and one place we enjoyed taking our toddler was the playground at 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 before buckling down to the important business in the adventure playground. The detour was a treat for me, a chance to explore All Saints, the medieval church tucked away in the woodland at Harewood – and that's where I met Edward Redmayn for the second time.

My first impression of All Saints, as I stood in the west doorway, was of space, airiness … and emptiness. Looking around, the church felt taller and broader than I'd expected walking along the tree-shrouded path towards it, but it felt lonely too, understandably as it hadn't been used for

services for some years. Then, as I walked a pace or two down the nave, I realised that All Saints isn't empty at all. I glimpsed a tomb chest in the north aisle, several more in the south aisle and two in the chancel – six in total – and on each chest rested a pair of effigies.

Deserting my family, I set off to investigate and that's when I found myself face to face with Edward Redmayn, lying alongside his wife Elizabeth, just as they have for the last five centuries. I must have stood there quite a while, far too long judging from the repeated cries of 'when are we going to the swings?' but our son wasn't to know that, to use the words of the distinguished medievalist, Sir Maurice Powicke, I'd just sat on the cat.

Those government records I'd read back at university had come alive. Here in front of me were Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn. I was startled, shocked, lost in the sensation that two people who'd lived over five hundred years ago had suddenly sprung to life in front of me. They were real people. I felt that if I held out my hand I'd find myself shaking hands with them.

The details of Edward's delicately-carved alabaster effigy deepened this impression. He's wearing armour and I could imagine him checking and tightening the buckles and straps to make sure they were secure, much as we do with belts and buttons. He wears a livery collar around his neck and I could hear the chink of metal as he raised it over his head and settled it on his shoulders. But it was his hair that most helped me see Edward as being as human as you and I. If he'd worn a helm, as if going into battle, that would have hidden him as a person but instead he has a full, fashionable head of hair, grown long, almost touching his shoulders.

I spent the rest of that afternoon going through the motions of parenting while my thoughts were in the fifteenth century. Now that Edward was no longer just a name on an index card, I was thinking about him differently. He was 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 spent much of the next two years in the south-west, amongst people he didn't know well or didn't know at all. What had it been like, living amongst strangers who saw him as an outsider and almost certainly as a threat? 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, their friendships, their souls? By the time I'd finished mulling this over, that cat I'd sat on was well and truly squashed.

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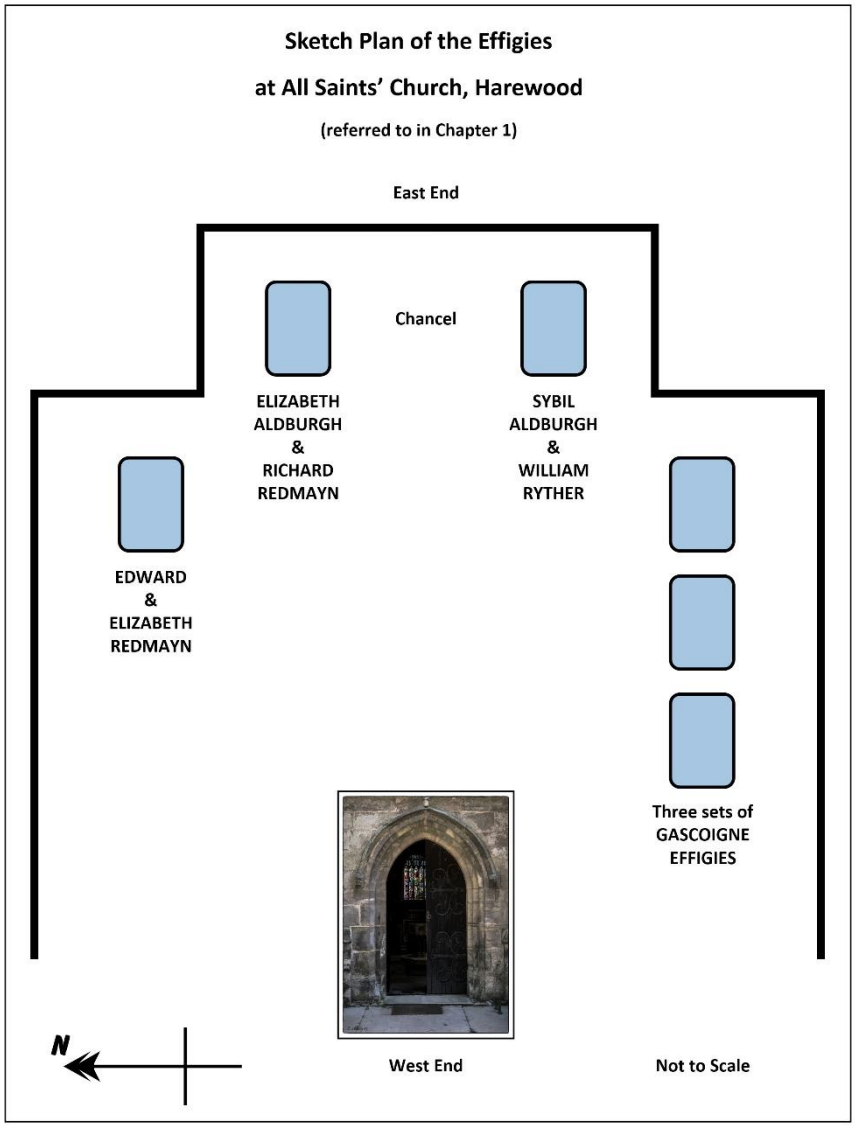
Not long afterwards, I went back to the church at Harewood on my own to take a closer look at the six tombs. I'd only looked at the effigies of Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn on my first visit so who were they, these other five couples lying atop their tomb chests, hands eternally erect in prayer? I dearly hoped they were all members of the Redmayn family. If so, were they older or younger than Edward and Elizabeth? If not, who were they?

The best way to understand what I'm about to tell you is to imagine that, like me, you're standing in the church facing the altar and chancel. As you look around the church, the six tombs are helpfully set out in three clear groups – one group on your left, one on your right and one straight in front of you. [You can see the groupings in the diagram below] The first group, on your left in the north aisle, is the simplest because it's a group of one, the tomb chest of Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn, whom we've already met. This is the most recent tomb, dating from around 1510 when Edward died.



Now look straight ahead towards the altar and you'll see the second group, the two oldest tombs, dating from the 1420s, a full century earlier. They're positioned either side of the chancel, closest to the altar and so in the places of greatest honour. That's because they commemorate Elizabeth and Sybil Aldburgh, the sisters who commissioned the rebuilding of the church in the early 1400s. Elizabeth and Sybil grew up at Harewood castle (whose substantial ruins stand nearby, deep in modern woodland) and then inherited the castle and its estates from their brother in 1391.

Next to Elizabeth and Sybil lie their husbands. Sybil's husband was Sir William Ryther, a local landowner, but it was Elizabeth's husband who grabbed and held my attention. I'd found another Redmayn! Elizabeth's husband was Sir Richard Redmayn who, according to the brief information card by their tomb, had died in 1426. This was around thirty years before 'my' Edward Redmayn was born so were Sir Richard and Elizabeth the grandparents of Edward? Great grandparents? I didn't know but I felt triumphant – I'd added Richard and Elizabeth to the Redmayn family-tree.

And that information card told me two more things that intrigued me. Sir Richard originally lived at Levens in Westmorland in what we now call Cumbria, so how had Richard and Elizabeth Aldburgh come to know each other? And secondly, in 1415, the year of the battle of Agincourt, Sir Richard had been Speaker of the House of Commons. Just how important a role had Sir Richard played in national politics and what major events had he taken part in?

That's two of the three groups of tombs accounted for. The third and final group – containing three tomb chests – is to your right as you stand facing the chancel. I really wanted them to be more Redmayns but … sadly not. These tombs commemorate members of the Gascoigne family who lived at Gawthorpe Hall, barely a mile from Harewood Castle, on the other side of the ridge on which the eighteenth-century Harewood House now stands. However the Gascoignes weren't just neighbours. Sir William Gascoigne was a contemporary and colleague of Richard Redmayn in royal service. His effigy is proudly arrayed in his lawyer's robes as Lord Chief Justice of England.

So I'd discovered the names of all those commemorated at Harewood and, disappointed as I was that more of them weren't Redmayns, I'd learned a little about them at the same time. Over the following months I continued to visit (and, to be honest, talk to) these beautiful effigies. As I did so, I found myself imagining the Aldburghs and Redmayns come to life, standing together talking, walking or riding back to the castle, sitting together at meals, going outside to enjoy the warmth of a summer's day, visiting the Gascoignes, their near-neighbours over the hill. Elizabeth and Sybil Aldburgh must have spent many hours together, for they were not only sisters but also shared Harewood Castle, perhaps spending some time there together as well as living at their other properties. What, I began to wonder, did they talk about when they met?

My first thought was that their conversations must have been dominated by politics, rebellions and battles. The main impression most of us have of life in the fifteenth century (if we have an impression at all) is of a society constantly at war with France or enmeshed in civil wars and rebellions at home. Given that at least two members of the family, Sir Richard and Edward, were involved in politics, it seems likely that the Redmayns, their wider family and friends witnessed or took part in many of the dramas 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 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.

However national events can't have been all they talked about, any more than our conversations focus solely on politics and politicians. There must have been many, many times when they were far more interested in discussing (or do I mean gossiping about?) family, friends and neighbours, births and growing children, who might marry whom, illnesses and treatments, visits to York or London and the speed and comfort of their journeys, their hawks and horses, purchases of clothes, books and other luxury or everyday items, the efficiency or otherwise of their household officials and servants and, of course, the weather. And, of course, there would have been difficult, emotion-draining family conversations too, the sort of discussions we all hate but sometimes can't avoid. All these conversational possibilities intrigued me – and reminded me that these people were, once upon a time, mothers, fathers, children, brothers, sisters, friends, people just like ourselves.

By now I was hooked by the idea of researching and writing about the experiences of the Redmayn family across the fifteenth century – and the roots of this interest (obsession might be a more honest word!) undoubtedly lay in the physical impact of their effigies in All Saints Church. There has been, from the beginning, something compelling about their effigies silently waiting for me each time I visit them, poised to interrogate me about what I've found out since my last visit. What was the Redmayns' story back into the 1300s, before Sir Richard met Elizabeth Aldburgh and came to Yorkshire? Could I find out more about the women of the family who are no more than names on the information cards alongside their effigies? What was the trajectory of the Redmayn family across the fifteenth century – did they become more prosperous and influential? Did they experience ups and downs of fortune? And then there was the question I'd already asked about Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn but want to ask about all the family – what really mattered to them?

And in the midst of all these questions there was the exciting thought that, if I could uncover enough evidence, I might find myself sitting on more cats, experiencing those moments when the Redmayns come alive in front of me and I could recognise the real people behind the names, even across six hundred years of history.

Now how good would that be?

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Committing myself to telling the Redmayns' story was easy. It was trickier deciding who I was writing for and what style of writing I would use. I knew instinctively that I wasn't writing for historians because, though I have two history degrees and spent fifteen years teaching about the later Middle Ages at degree level, I'm not a research historian. Nor was I writing for children or school students despite having written and edited over a hundred books for use in schools. Instead I wanted to do something far more selfish, to write purely for my own enjoyment and satisfaction. In the words of the novelist Rosemary Sutcliff:

> *I don't write for adults, I don't write for children. I don't write for the outside world at all. Basically I write for some small inquiring thing in myself.*

Coming across those words was liberating. They gave me permission to write for that 'small inquiring thing in myself' and that, in turn, meant that I could write in my own style, with a sense of creativity and even playfulness that conveys my excitement at my discoveries and frustrations when I hit the difficulties that crop up when writing any book. I don't want to be a 'voiceless' academic narrator but to be audible in my text, to sound as if I'm enthusiastically telling my wife or friends about my search for the Redmayns.

While I was thinking about this, two books that I'd enjoyed many years earlier swam to the surface of my memory. Neither was an academic history book. Neither was written by a professional historian but in both the authors were audible. One was Rowland Parker's The Common Stream about the development of his village through time. The other was The Killing of William Rufus by Duncan Grinnell-Milne, an exploration of who might have killed King William II. What I'd found enjoyable about these books was that they were explicitly personal investigations, the authors' voices communicating their enthusiasms, their excitements at discoveries, their frustrations with dead-ends. As I'd read, I felt that the authors were talking directly to me and that had kept me turning the pages. The memory of those books cemented my feeling that I needed to be present but not intrusive in my chapters, talking through my investigation, elated by discoveries, honest about disappointments. No wonder I'd found Rosemary Sutcliff writing 'for some small inquiring thing in myself' so encouraging.

There's also a second reason for my voice being audible in my text. My presence underlines that this is MY interpretation of the Redmayns' story, not THE story. The phrase 'the story of the Redmayns' is a useful, simple short-hand but misleading because each historian, each member of the Redmayn family, each friend or relative of the Redmayns would tell the family story differently. The danger of a 'voiceless' style of writing is that it sounds as if there's no possibility of seeing events and people in other ways. In reality, history is a discipline full of differing interpretations which arise for a host of reasons, not least the uncertainties created by the limitations of the sources – and I knew from my past research that there'd be much I'd never discover or be certain about with the Redmayns.

Writing in a more personal style also helps me with the issue of objectivity. Ruthless objectivity can be seen as essential for writing history but how objective can I be about the Redmayns, given my sense of connection to the family? The danger is that I will interpret their choices and actions more positively than the evidence justifies but that sense of connection with the Redmayns also has advantages. Most importantly, it helps me respect the people I'm writing about. Many people today assume that the only motives of a family like the Redmayns were self-serving and that life in the Middle Ages was always harsh, brief and utterly lacking in joy and pleasure, that the Middle Ages, like Narnia under the White Queen, was always dark, frozen winter and never bright, smiling sun-filled summer. My positivity – which is in keeping with the views of many historians of this period – may well counter those negative myths by emphasising that those who lived in the past were just as human, just as intelligent, thoughtful and capable of moral thought, just as worthy of respect as ourselves.

So, not only had I decided to write about the Redmayns, but I'd identified the style I wanted to write in, a critical decision because how I tell my story is as essential for my enjoyment and satisfaction as what I find out about the Redmayns. Of course, that still left plenty of room for errors! Hovering at

the back of my mind, as ever when starting to write, was a quotation from the novelist Iris Murdoch – '*every book is the wreck of a perfect idea*.'

My consoling thought was that over the last thirty years I've created plenty of 'wrecks', books that didn't quite live up to my aims when first planning them but which still proved very useful to teachers and students and which, more selfishly, I had great fun researching and writing. That had taught me that my enjoyment comes from the pleasure of research and discovery and from the creativity and process of writing, not from contemplating the finished product sitting on a shelf. With luck the same would be true this time!