

Thomas Nevill of Nevill Holt (1510-1571)

by *Bernard Elliott*

One of the most important Leicestershire personalities in the Tudor period was Thomas Nevill of Nevill Holt. Leland said of him in 1564: 'Neville of Holte was among the Gentlemen of Leyrcestershir that be there most of reputation.'¹ Nevill was a fairly common surname in sixteenth-century England and to distinguish this Thomas from several other Thomas Nevills who lived at this time contemporaries usually referred to him, as Leland did, as Nevill of the Holt.

Nevill of the Holt owed some of his reputation to the fact that he spent a period at court where in the 1530s he was one of a group of courtiers who supported Thomas Cromwell. In 1539, he was one of the squires sent down to meet Anne of Cleves on her arrival in England² and since Cromwell was responsible for making these arrangements it confirms the suggestion that Thomas Nevill was a member of Cromwell's circle. Nevill's association with the court may have dated from the time when he was a ward at court, for his father, William Nevill, who held Holt of the King *in capite* by knight-service³ died when Thomas was only nine years old.⁴ So, as heir of a tenant-in-chief and a minor he was automatically declared a royal ward and the rights of wardship which involved custody of a ward's land and the authority to sell his marriage went to the highest bidder. Thus it was that on 26 November 1511 Roger Foljambe of Walton, Derbyshire and John Tiddleswell, clerk, were given custody of the lands, wardship and marriage of Thomas Nevill.⁵ Accordingly, Roger Foljambe married Thomas to his niece, Katherine Foljambe;⁶ and it seems that there was one daughter, Anne, born of this marriage, for in 1536 Anne Nevill married Brian Huddleston in the chapel within the house, owing to the plague being rampant in the village of Holt at this time.⁷ No further reference is made either to Katherine or Anne and *c.* 1525 Thomas had married as his second wife Clare Nevill of Thornton Bridge, Yorkshire.⁸

It was in the late 1530s that Thomas Nevill's name came to prominence, for in 1538 he was appointed to the commission of peace for Leicestershire along with other well-known local figures, such as Will Ayssheby, John Digby and Roger Wigston;⁹ and that same year he was chosen by the King to serve as sheriff.¹⁰ In the following year, Thomas Nevill was again chosen to serve on the commission of peace.¹¹ These appointments confirm the view expressed in the previous paragraph that Thomas Nevill belonged to those courtiers who supported Cromwell. There are a few more hints that substantiate this statement. First of all, he had sufficient influence at court to purchase the dissolved monastery of Bradley and 'among the lesser courtiers the acquisition of a suppressed monastery seems almost common form.'¹² Secondly, among the papers left by Cromwell after his execution were several of criminal information connected with Thomas Nevill of the Holt.¹³ Clearly, Cromwell relied on Thomas Nevill for information.

Cromwell's death made no difference to the public duties carried out by Thomas Nevill, for he continued to be called upon to act as a royal commissioner. In 1546, he was one of the Leicestershire assessors to the contribution commission in which persons made a loving

contribution to the King for the defence against the French King.¹⁴ In 1547, he was again called upon to serve as a royal commissioner in a dispute between Sir William Turville and the inhabitants of Croft.

The mark of a gentleman in Tudor England was the ownership of land and so Thomas Nevill was constantly acquiring land in addition to that which he inherited. From his father, William, he inherited the Kirkby manor in Medbourne,¹⁶ the manor of Holt¹⁷ and land in Holt, Drayton, Bringhurst and Lubenham.¹⁸ In addition to this inherited property, in 1538 he bought other land in Holt and the deserted village of Prestgrave¹⁹ and that same year he took advantage of his influence with Cromwell to purchase the suppressed monastery of Bradley. In the parish of Holt stood the small Augustinian priory of Bradley founded *circa* 1220.²⁰ It received many small endowments in the 13th century from inhabitants of the surrounding villages, including land and windmills at Holt and Great Easton. The largest endowment came in 1385 when Richard, Lord Scrope of Bolton, gave it his manor of Blaston. Its income in 1535 was £21-6-0½d,²¹ but at the time of the suppression only two canons were in residence.²² So, it was one of the smaller monasteries suppressed under the Act of 1536 which began the general dissolution. In 1538, Thomas Nevill bought from the Crown for £372-5-10d the house, site, church, 120 acres of pasture in Bradley and Blaston, a windmill in Great Easton and the priory's lands in Bradley, Blaston, Holt, Easton, Slawston, Hallaton and Holyock (a lost village).²³ By September 29th of that year Thomas Nevill had paid to the newly formed Court of Augmentations the full sum.²⁴

Though the purchase of the priory of Bradley greatly increased the amount of land which he possessed, he continued to buy land in the area. In 1539, he acquired more land in Medbourne,²⁵ in 1543 he bought from Leonard Stubbs of Tur Langton property in Holt and Prestgrave²⁶ and in 1565 he bought the last rights of the Scrope family in Medbourne.²⁷ Thus, Thomas Neville now owned all Medbourne as well as Nevill Holt.

Thomas Nevill was now the largest landowner in the district, he was also the wealthiest, since for the subsidy of 1545 he was taxed at £20 on £200 worth of goods.²⁸ That he was a very wealthy man can be seen when we reflect that the highest assessment of Leicestershire for the subsidy of 1524 was Sir Thomas Pulteney of Misterton who was taxed on lands to the value of £160 per annum.²⁹

The feudal view of land was that it was basically a source of military service and Henry VIII certainly upheld this theory, for on several occasions he called upon Thomas Nevill to assist him in his wars. In April 1544, he went north with the future Earl of Somerset and saw service with the latter in Scotland.³⁰ Later in 1544, he was called upon to furnish 20 footmen for the invasion of France;³¹ they were to serve in the vanguard for 15 days from 8th to the 22nd June for 6d.³²

Though many Tudor landowners accepted the view that the land which they held imposed on them military obligations, they also regarded it as an economic investment. Thomas Nevill's desire to acquire a large extent of land suggests that he was a typical enclosing Tudor squire. The exact date of the first enclosure of Holt has not been discovered, but it would seem to have been in the early 16th century, for by 1572 it was fully enclosed.³³ So, Thomas Nevill may have enclosed Holt; Bradley which he purchased at the dissolution was already mainly enclosed,³⁴ but in the other villages where he held land, such as Medbourne, Bringhurst, Drayton, Great Easton and Lubenham he made no move to enclose, for Bringhurst and Drayton were enclosed in the early 19th century,³⁵ Medbourne in 1844³⁶ and Lubenham in 1601.³⁷

Thomas Nevill's friendship with the King and Cromwell may have been his guiding principle in his attitude to the religious changes occurring at this time. According to

T.B. Trappes-Lomax, he was probably a Roman Catholic.³⁸ Though Thomas's descendants became Roman Catholics and were the mainstay of the Jesuit mission in South Leicestershire,³⁹ he himself without doubt favoured the Protestant cause. Henry would certainly not have appointed one who still believed in papal supremacy to the important posts of J.P. and sheriff in the aftermath of the Pilgrimage of Grace. It is pretty certain that Thomas Nevill embraced the new religious doctrines, for on Henry VIII's death the government of Edward VI continued to look to him for support in their religious policy. Thus it was that in 1547 Thomas (now Sir Thomas) Nevill sat on the commission of peace for Leicestershire⁴⁰ and the year 1551 was particularly busy for him, for he served on a commission 'to enquire by any means how the enhancing of prices of corn, victuals and other things grows by the insatiable greediness of divers covetous persons and to apprehend and punish such as hinder the reformation of such enormities.'⁴¹ In addition he served on a commission to make an inventory of church goods⁴² and on another to collect the third payment of the relief granted by Parliament.⁴³

In 1552, he was again appointed as sheriff for Leicestershire⁴⁴ and in 1554 served once more on the commission of peace.⁴⁵ But for most of Mary Tudor's reign Sir Thomas seems to have taken a back seat in affairs. With the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, however, his name appears once more prominent in local politics and in 1561 he was again picked as sheriff for Leicestershire.⁴⁶

By this time two problems faced Sir Thomas, the first was that he had no male heir and the second was that he was growing short of money. Like his royal master, Sir Thomas was anxious to have a male heir, but so far he had been unsuccessful in this quest. By his second wife, Clare Nevill of Thornton Bridge, Yorkshire, he had had a son, Francis, who died in infancy and a daughter Mary.⁴⁷ On the death of his second wife, Sir Thomas had married Margaret Fiennes, widow of Sir Edward Fiennes.⁴⁸ But by 1560 it was evident to him that he would not have a legitimate male heir. In addition to his daughter Mary, he had had an illegitimate son by Lucy Blunt of Frolesworth, wife of Anselm Blunt.⁴⁹ Owing to his failure to produce a legitimate male heir, in 1564 he took measures to entail his estate.⁵⁰ The object of the transaction was stated in the preamble:

'for as much as it hath pleased God to take to his mercy all the issue male of the said Sir Thomas lawfully begotten and leave him destitute and without hope to have any more during the life of dame Margaret his wife, nevertheless for as much as he mindeth as much as he can conveniently to advance with his living such as shall be of his seed and blood first'

and the following arrangement was made. In default of a male legitimate heir, the estate was to pass to his illegitimate son, Humphrey Blunt in preference to his legitimate daughter, Mary.⁵¹ Only if Humphrey Blunt had no children was the estate to pass to Mary and her descendants. When Sir Thomas died in 1571⁵² Humphrey Blunt inherited the estate, but he died young and childless in 1590,⁵³ whereupon the entailed estate of Holt passed to Thomas, son of Thomas Smyth of Cressing Temple Essex, by Mary, Sir Thomas Nevill's legitimate daughter,⁵⁴ and Smyth took the surname of Nevill as required by his grandfather's settlement.

The second problem that faced Sir Thomas in his declining years was the debts that he had incurred. As early as 1539, Thomas Nevill of Holt was among a number of people owing money to the King⁵⁶ and his debts seem to have increased the more as time went on. He spent money on the acquisition of land and he considerably enlarged Nevill Holt Hall, adding in Tudor red-brick most of the west wing and possibly parts of the east side in stone.⁵⁷ Upon these extensions Sir Thomas bestowed great costs and charges.⁵⁸ Consequently, although he had been rich at one time, towards the end of his life he was

so heavily in debt that he had had to mortgage the manors of Bringhurst and Drayton, that of Blaston and land in Holt for £250, £200 and £400 respectively.⁵⁹ Moreover, it seems that Sir Thomas had had to part with his silver, for according to his servant, George Parker of Easton, Sir Thomas used to say to his wife 'Mistress Nevill, I drink to you in your own plate, for I have none.'⁶⁰

It is now over fifty years since G.F. Farnham and A. Hamilton Thompson first drew attention to Sir Thomas Nevill,⁶¹ and it is rather remarkable that since then only one slight reference to him is to be found in the volumes of the Society's *Transactions*,⁶² for he was without doubt one of the most important characters in Leicestershire in the early stages of the Reformation. His career underlines the fact that so long as a subject retained the King's favour he prospered, but it shows too that the King and his ministers equally needed such men as Sir Thomas to carry out their policies. Though Sir Thomas sought fame and fortune for a while at court, by no means did he cut himself off from local society, for he was one of Leicestershire's gentry charged with special responsibility for local affairs. Consequently, he was rewarded for his services to the monarchy by a knighthood. Though the Nevills remained at Holt for the next 500 years, no later member of the family ever attained to the dignity and rank achieved by Sir Thomas. He indeed was the true founder of one of Leicestershire's best known families.

Notes

- 1 *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1535-1543* edited by J. Toulmin Smith (1964 reprint), I, 21
- 2 *L(etters) and P(apers Foreign and Domestic) Henry VIII*, XIV, ii, 202
- 3 J. Nichols, *Leicestershire*, II, ii, 725
- 4 *T(ransactions) L(eicestershire) A(rchaeological) S(ociety)*, XIII, 219
- 5 *L and P Henry VIII*, I, p.524
- 6 *Some notes by Gregory King, Lancaster Herald, on the family of Nevill of Holt*, Leicestershire Record Office, FH/GN/I/3
- 7 *Associated Architectural Societies, Reports and Papers*, XXI, 307
- 8 Some notes, *ut supra*
- 9 *L and P Henry VIII*, XIII, i, p.140
- 10 *L and P Henry VIII*, XIII, ii, p.406. At that time the sheriff of Leicestershire was also sheriff of Warwickshire
- 11 *Ibid.*, XIV, i, p.486
- 12 D. Mathew, *The Courtiers of Henry VIII* (1970), 158
- 13 *L and P Henry VIII*, XV, p.511
- 14 *Ibid.*, XXI, i, p.484
- 15 Public Record Office, *Star Chamber Proceedings, Henry VIII*, Bundle 28, No.57: Cf W.G. Hoskins, *Provincial England* (1963), 174
- 16 *Victoria County History* (henceforth *V.C.H.*) *Leicestershire*, V, 232
- 17 *Ibid.*, 245
- 18 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 218
- 19 *Ibid.*, 220
- 20 *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, V, 246. Beadley was an Augustinian House and not, as Sybil Jack says, a Benedictine House, *T.L.A.S.*, XLI, 10
- 21 Sybil Jack, *ibid.*, 28
- 22 Tanner's *Notitia Monastica* (1744), 242
- 23 *L and P Henry VIII*, XIII, i, 241
- 24 *Ibid.*, XIV, i, p.486
- 25 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 220
- 26 Leicestershire Record Office Box 2017
- 27 *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, V, 233
- 28 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 220
- 29 W.G. Hoskins, *Essays in Leicestershire History*, (1950), 128 f-n

- 30 Nichols, *Leicestershire*, II, ii, 726. According to Nichols, Thomas Nevill was knighted in Scotland by Somerset. But in W.A. Shaw, *The Knights of England*, (1906) contains no reference to Nevill being knighted by Somerset. According to Shaw, vol.I, pp.150 and 151, Thomas Nevil of Holt was dubbed a knight by Edward VI at his coronation 20 February 1547
- 31 *L and P Henry VIII*, XIX, i, p.154
- 32 British Library Add.MS, 5753 f.93, I
- 33 *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, II, 257
- 34 Sybil Jack, *op cit.*, 22
- 35 *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, II, 260
- 36 *Ibid.*, 262
- 37 *Ibid.*, 257
- 38 *Ibid.*, 64
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, Edward VI, I, 85
- 41 *Ibid.*, IV, 142
- 42 *Ibid.*, 395
- 43 *Ibid.*, 356-7
- 44 *Ibid.*, 387
- 45 *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, Philip and Mary, I, 21
- 46 Public Record Office, *Lists and Indexes*, No.9, 146
- 47 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 243
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*, 222
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 According to Nichols, *Leicestershire*, II, ii, 729 Sir Thomas Nevill died on 5 March 1569, but he actually died on 5 March 1571, *T.L.A.S.* XIII, 223 and *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, V, 245
- 53 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 229; *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, V, 245
- 54 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 230
- 55 *V.C.H. Leicestershire*, V, 245
- 56 *L and P Henry VIII*, XIV, i, p.457
- 57 Information ex staff of Nevill Holt Preparatory School
- 58 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 227
- 59 *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, 223
- 60 G.E. Farnham, *Quorndon Records* Supplement 44
- 61 G.E. Farnham, and A. Hamilton Thompson, 'The Manor, House and Chapel of Holt', *T.L.A.S.*, XIII, (1923-4), 199-244
- 62 Sybil Jack, *op. cit.*, 16