

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## I

HOW JOHN HOPTON OBTAINED HIS  
LIVELIHOOD

...for it is resonable a gentilman to know his pedegre and his possibilyte: seynt Poule foryete nat to write to the Romayns of what lynage he was descended, Ad Romanos xj.

Thomas Gate to Thomas Stonor,  
5 October between 1460 and 1474

*The Stonor Letters and Papers* I, p136

'A most interesting dinner. There was a M. de la Raspelière there who kept us spell-bound with his explanation of how that Mme de Saint-Loup with the pretty daughter is not really a Forcheville at all. It was as good as a novel.'

Marcel Proust,

*Remembrance of Things Past*, vol 12 (Chatto and Windus paperback edition, 1967), p354

John Hopton was a fortunate man. On 7 February 1430 the escheators of various counties were ordered to hand over to him numerous estates which had been found to be his by virtue of enfeoffments made some seventeen years previously by Sir Roger Swillington, the half-brother of John's father Thomas Hopton.<sup>1</sup> Such a windfall was not entirely unexpected in 1430. Three years before, on 26 February 1427, in an indenture between Thomas Saville of Thornhill, Yorks, and the guardians of John Hopton (then styled John Swillington) for the marriage of Saville's daughter Margaret to John, mention was made of 'what time of good fortune any of the reversions falle'.<sup>2</sup> The young man clearly had good, albeit still unsettled, prospects. At any rate Thomas Saville thought them worth taking a risk for; his gamble on the

<sup>1</sup> *CFR* 1422-30, pp313-19. The first court held in his name at Westwood, for his two chief Suffolk properties, Blythburgh and Walberswick, was on 22 February 1430: SRO, HA 30/312/194.

<sup>2</sup> BL, Lansdowne MS 255, f242 (new numbering), a copy made 17 April 1642 from the original in the possession of William Saville bart of Thornhill. See Parr III, pp220-1.

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## JOHN HOPTON

quality of his daughter's future life paid off in 1430. Still, if Hopton's own future looked bright in 1427, at the time of the actual enfeoffments a dozen years earlier that future was barely worth consideration at all.

Sir Roger Swillington had made careful provision for the descent of the bulk of his property; indeed it was just his care to leave nothing to chance that led directly to John Hopton's dramatic enrichment in 1430. His fortune stemmed not from some oversight or omission in the schemes of men, but from death, infertility, and the incompatibility of husband and wife, to which the best laid plans have perforce to yield. Sir Roger had settled his estates on his son John and the heirs male of his body, with remainders successively to his second son Robert and the heirs male of his body, to the daughters of John and their heirs, to the daughters of Robert and their heirs, to Margaret his daughter and the heirs of her body, to Thomas Hopton and his sons, to Sir Thomas Routh and his sons. Between 1417 and 1429 Sir Roger, his wife Joan (who held certain of these properties for her life), Sir John and Robert Swillington, and Margaret (married to Sir John Gra of Ingleby, Lincs.), all died. Sir John, Robert and Margaret left no children. During that time Thomas Hopton too had died.<sup>5</sup> His son John was therefore the final beneficiary of the original settlement. The wheel of fortune had spun dizzily, then come to rest where Sir Roger Swillington was not likely to have expected it; it was his thoughtful preparation for eventualities which he could not have seriously contemplated that made out of a bastard's son a substantial country gentleman. It was a startling conversion, and to grasp it fully we must trace John Hopton's story back a long way before 1430.

We have to begin where John Hopton began, in Yorkshire; for while the greater part of his life was spent in Suffolk, he was a Yorkshireman, as were his predecessors at Blythburgh, the Swillingtons. They came from the village of that name which lies a few miles to the south east of Leeds in the valley of the Aire, where they had been long established. By the late thirteenth

<sup>5</sup> *CFR* 1422-30, pp313-19; see also *CCR* 1492-35, p101, *CPR* 1413-16, p55.

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOW JOHN HOPTON OBTAINED HIS LIVELIHOOD

century they had added to their Yorkshire properties estates in Suffolk and Norfolk; these Hugh Swillington, who died in 1304, had obtained by his marriage to Helewise Pirnhow.<sup>4</sup> Adam, the second surviving son of Hugh, was a retainer of Thomas of Lancaster,<sup>5</sup> and was summoned to parliament in the first year of Edward III's reign. He died in 1328. This promise of a wider than merely provincial importance went unfulfilled in the main line of the family; Adam's eldest son, also Adam, died young and his son Robert, who died in 1379,<sup>6</sup> was of little consequence. It was his uncle Sir Robert, the second son of Adam (d. 1328), who was the successful member of the family. He obtained from his nephew the greater part of the family estates in Yorkshire and East Anglia,<sup>7</sup> under what terms we do not know, but it was entirely in keeping with the grand figure cut by the representative of the junior branch, and the sorry one cut by that of the main line, that Sir Robert should acquire the patrimony. For Sir Robert Swillington was undoubtedly a man of ability, whose talents for war and qualities as administrator and counsellor were recognised and made use of by king and Duke of Lancaster alike. To trace the career of this serviceable younger son is not our purpose here; indeed it would require a chapter to itself. His career followed a not unusual pattern for the fourteenth century, and is in no way remarkable save in its degree of achievement. John of Gaunt's retainers were a group of all the talents, and Sir Robert Swillington, holding most of his Yorkshire properties of the Duchy of Lancaster honour of Pontefract, of which he was steward, found his niche there, among his near neighbours and friends, Sir John Saville of Elland, Sir William Scargill of Thorpe Stapleton, and Hugh Waterton of Methley; yet he clearly was the brightest of stars even in that brilliant firmament, being Gaunt's chamberlain of the household and one of his councillors.<sup>8</sup> To John of Gaunt,

<sup>4</sup> *CP* xii, 578; see also the Rev. Canon Beanlands, 'The Swillingtons of Swillington', *Thoresby Society*, xv, *Miscellanea* (1909), pp185-211.

<sup>5</sup> G. Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth Century England* (1957), p71.

<sup>6</sup> *Test Ebor* I, p107.

<sup>7</sup> Beanlands, p205.

<sup>8</sup> *John of Gaunt's Register 1372-76*, ed. S. Armitage-Smith, Camden Society, Third Series, xxi (1911), *passim* (*sub index*); *The Controversy*

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## JOHN HOPTON

arguably the most successful politician of the English Middle Ages (William the Marshal always excepted), Swillington rendered steady service and gave (no doubt) wise counsel; and Gaunt's success was both the product of such advice and the cause of his advisor's prosperity. Never out of royal favour, Gaunt throughout his long career could always secure for his followers the patronage at the disposal of the king; this, and not only his own vast wealth, was the key to his power, and he and his councillors never lost sight of it. He never made, or was never allowed to make, the mistake of his wife's grandfather Thomas: Gaunt died in his bed surrounded by a large and loyal retinue, he was not struck down, a failed because deserted leader.

It was a major contribution to this happy and stable situation that so many of Gaunt's retainers were also retained by the king. Swillington was one of these. He was retained as a yeoman by Edward III as early as 1350, with an annuity of £10 per annum for his good service and for his staying in the king's service; this fee and other subsequent royal favours were confirmed by Richard II in February 1378.<sup>9</sup> He had long been in Gaunt's service by that time, having received from the duke in August 1362, for example, lands for life over and above the value of £60 a year in lieu of an annual cash payment of that amount.<sup>10</sup> Of the opportunities this service offered him Sir Robert made much. Of the profits (if any) of his military service we have no sure record: their assistance to his prosperity must remain an open question. An advantageous marriage – 'the beginning of worldly wisdom'<sup>11</sup> – was however one opportunity he did not miss. He took as second wife<sup>12</sup> Margaret, daughter and co-heiress of Sir Roger Bellars of Leicestershire; on the death of her father in 1380 and her sister in

*between Sir Richard Scrope and Sir Robert Grosvenor*, ed. Sir N. H. Nicolas (1832), I, pp58, 112, 203; II, pp190, 214, 302; Robert Somerville, *History of the Duchy of Lancaster*, I (1953), p112, and *sub index*.

<sup>9</sup> *CPR 1348–50*, p541; *CPR 1377–81*, pp134–5.

<sup>10</sup> *CPR 1361–4*, p397.

<sup>11</sup> K. B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (1972), p172. See Anthony Trollope, *Doctor Thorne* (Everyman edition, 1908, reprinted 1975), *passim*, especially pp198–9.

<sup>12</sup> He seems to have made an early first marriage in 1348: Beanlands, pp204–5. He was married to Margaret by autumn 1375: *CIPM* xiv, pp111–12; *CFR 1368–77*, pp319–20.

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOW JOHN HOPTON OBTAINED HIS LIVELIHOOD

1382, she brought him substantial properties in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire.<sup>13</sup> That he benefited in all the innumerable other ways open to such a valuable and valued servant is finally and most obviously demonstrated by his will and in his *inquisition post mortem*. The generosity of his bequests to the men of his own household and to the women of his wife's, the 500 marks for his daughter's marriage, the £100 to his younger son Richard, speak for themselves: he had the means to be munificent. His landed property was the basis for this liberality; his 35 manors were concentrated in Yorkshire, the central Midlands, and Suffolk. In the absence of estate documents there is little reason to doubt the general accuracy of Sir Arthur Hopton's statement to Leland over a century later, that the 'Swillingtons. . . sum tyme were menne of 2000. markes of landes by the yere or more',<sup>14</sup> and that this was the time at which they were. How important his marriage had been to him is shown not only by the number of properties of his wife – and their comparative valuation in relation to the other properties – listed in his inquisition, but also by the fact that he made his will at Stanford, Notts, one of her estates, and desired to be buried in Kirby Bellars Priory rather than at Swillington. Nor did he forget his master, the Duke of Lancaster: Gaunt was made an overseer of his will and he left him his best goblet of gold and silver and his best horse. He died in July 1391.<sup>15</sup> It is with some reluctance that we leave him.

We cannot leave him quite yet. It was a measure of the man that he should at his death remember his bastard: he left £20 'a Thomas de Hopton bastardo'. And too that he did not forget the woman who was (it seems likely) Thomas' mother: to Joan Hopton he left an annuity of £2 for life.<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to doubt that Thomas Hopton was Sir Robert's son, and every reason to believe it: the evidence of the will, the association of

<sup>13</sup> *CIPM* xv, pp130–4, 195–6; PRO, C136/73/61; *CCR* 1377–81, p435; *CFR* 1377–83, pp245–6.

<sup>14</sup> *Itinerary*, ed. L. T. Smith (Centaur Press edition, 1964), II, p19.

<sup>15</sup> His will: PRO, PCC 8 Rous (Probate 11/1) printed in *Early Lincoln Wills, 1280–1547*, ed. A. A. Gibbons (Lincoln 1888), p77; dated 7 July, proved 22 July. 11 July is given as the date of his death in his *IPM*: PRO, C136/73/61.

<sup>16</sup> PRO, PCC 8 Rous.

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## JOHN HOPTON

Thomas Hopton with Sir Roger Swillington, Sir Robert's son and heir and the enfeoffments of Sir Roger with their remainders to Thomas and his male heirs. Moreover, there was the later and successful attempt of the Hoptons to obscure the manner in which they obtained the bulk of the Swillington properties, for the Hoptons by the sixteenth century had fabricated a pedigree and tampered with the quarterings of their arms to disguise their descent from a bastard line. They achieved their purpose for as long as it mattered.<sup>17</sup> It seems that Thomas' mother was of gentle birth, from a family which was near neighbour to the Swillingtons; the Hoptons of Armley, Mirfield and Ackworth, in their various branches are not easy to disentangle, but it appears that Joan was of this local family. The young John Hopton in 1427 had lands in Ackworth and thereabouts, and it is probable that he had inherited these from his father, as his guardians were enfeoffed in them to his use; how these had come to Thomas is not clear. His half-brother Sir Roger had granted him a small property in Ufton, Derbyshire, for his life, but it was to revert to the Swillington family on his death.<sup>18</sup> All this was small beer indeed; nevertheless it was more than most bastards ever got. Sir Robert and Sir Roger's concern for the welfare of Thomas Hopton – he may have been a useful man for Sir Roger to have in Yorkshire, and he was one of his feoffees for Swillington itself<sup>19</sup> – shows that the relationship between them was a close and enduring one. Thomas' illegitimacy was no bar to friendship with his half-brother and with Sir Roger's substantial Yorkshire neighbours, for William Scargill was one of the guardians of his son and Thomas Saville was ready enough to marry a daughter to that son. By then of course the Swillington lands were in prospect and John Hopton had changed his name to be ready for them, a change that was curiously impermanent, yet is a witness, as are the enfeoffments that engendered it, to the nearness of Hoptons and Swillingtons. Surely none of this could have been if Thomas' mother had not been a gentlewoman.

<sup>17</sup> Beanlands, p208. Parr 1, p218; *Visitations of Suffolk 1561, 1577, 1612*, ed. W. C. Metcalfe (1882), p43. Davy's MSS collection of Suffolk pedigrees has the correct Hopton descent: BL, Add MS 19136 f100.

<sup>18</sup> *CFR 1422-30*, p316.

<sup>19</sup> *CCR 1422-29*, p347.

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOW JOHN HOPTON OBTAINED HIS LIVELIHOOD

We must now, however, return to Sir Robert's son and heir Roger. He had been knighted by the summer of 1396<sup>20</sup> but there is no evidence of his activity, official or otherwise, before the usurpation of September 1399. Then the family's link with the new royal house of Lancaster was restored, if indeed it had ever been broken. On 25 February 1400 Henry IV granted Sir Roger an annuity of £40 for life: he was styled a king's knight.<sup>21</sup> He was still so styled in Henry's V's reign,<sup>22</sup> yet Sir Roger in no way emulated his father; while he was a useful Lancastrian servant in local government he never sought, or was required, to exercise his talents beyond that limited sphere. His summons to attend the Great Council at Westminster in August 1401 had no sequel.<sup>23</sup> He appears to have been a quiet and dependable supporter of the new regime with no pretensions. Only in one respect perhaps did he render Henry IV a more than routine service: he went to live on his Suffolk estates. This of course could have been his own inclination, for his mother (who had married John Aylsford by 1396,<sup>24</sup> and who survived her son by almost a year) held some Midland estates including Kirby Bellars during her lifetime.<sup>25</sup> Yet while his move from the West Riding can only have been by choice, the king may well have been the prompter or promoter of that choice. In the West Riding Lancastrian influence was powerful, in Suffolk it was not; to have Sir Roger there, if not a necessity, was certainly an advantage. He made the move some time in or shortly after 1403. While in December 1399 and May 1402 he was on Yorkshire commissions, by September 1403 he was a commissioner of array both in the West Riding and in Suffolk, and in May 1406 for Suffolk alone; and while on the commission of the peace for the West Riding from May 1401 to February 1407, his service then ceased there, but continued in

<sup>20</sup> *CPR 1391-6*, p723.

<sup>21</sup> *CPR 1399-1401*, p221.

<sup>22</sup> *CCR 1413-19*, p215.

<sup>23</sup> *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England*, ed. Sir N. H. Nicolas (Record Commissions 1834-7), I, pp157, 159.

<sup>24</sup> *CPR 1391-6*, p723. Margaret had been assigned dower in the Suffolk estates; Sir Roger bought her and her husband out for a rent of 100 marks per annum: see PRO, C136/73/61 and C138/28/46.

<sup>25</sup> *CPR 1399-1401*, p213; *CPR 1401-5*, pp129, 288-9.

Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## JOHN HOPTON

Suffolk, where he had been first appointed in November 1403, into Henry V's reign, albeit intermittently.<sup>26</sup> It was at Blythburgh that he took up residence, and between 1404 and 1408 he obtained various confirmations of his rights there, including that of holding a weekly market on Thursdays and three fairs yearly,<sup>27</sup> and got a charter of free warren.<sup>28</sup> More important, in terms of the royal favour to himself and to his tenants at Blythburgh and at Walberswick, a long quarrel between the burgesses of Dunwich and the Swillingtons over the use of the continually shifting harbour mouth that served these ports was settled, at least for the time being, with the royal licence. Sir Roger and his tenants were the beneficiaries.<sup>29</sup> Manifestly there was now a resident lord at Blythburgh.

Sir Roger also married again. His first wife had been Joan, daughter of Sir Robert Nevill of Hornby, Lancs. She had died by 1407, as by that year Sir Roger was married to Joan, daughter of Stephen Scrope, widow of William Pert of Tiverington, Yorks. This marriage brought him the manor of Castle Carlton, Lincs,<sup>30</sup> and (somewhat unusually) a son-in-law who was his own half-brother, Thomas Hopton. Or it was shortly to bring him such a son-in-law, for Thomas Hopton at some point married Margaret, Joan's third daughter by William Pert.<sup>31</sup> That marriage cannot have been long after, and may have been before Sir Roger's own marriage, for Margaret Pert was the mother of our John Hopton, and John was certainly of age in 1429 (even if his age, as then given by the jurors of the *inquisition post mortem* on Margaret Gra as twenty-four, does not altogether tally with the fact of his having guardians two years previously). This would, however, suggest that the half-brothers were both married by 1407, the one

<sup>26</sup> *CPR 1399–1401*, pp213, 567; *CPR 1401–5*, pp129, 288, 289, 519, 521; *CPR 1405–8*, pp231, 497, 500; *CPR 1413–16*, p423; *CPR 1416–22*, p460.

<sup>27</sup> *CPR 1401–5*, p353; *CPR 1405–8*, p455.

<sup>28</sup> SRO, HA 30/312/1.

<sup>29</sup> *CCR 1405–9*, pp336–8; BL, Add Charter 40673, see SRO, HA 30/369/327; *CPR 1408–13*, pp206–7, see SRO, HA 30/50/22/27/1.

<sup>30</sup> *CCR 1405–9*, p174. Stephen Scrope was (according to Nicolas) the fourth son of Sir Geoffrey Scrope of Masham: *Scrope and Grosvenor Controversy II*, p332.

<sup>31</sup> *CFR 1461–7*, p190 and *CFR 1422–30*, p207.



Cambridge University Press

0521020158 - John Hopton: A Fifteenth Century Suffolk Gentleman

Colin Richmond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOW JOHN HOPTON OBTAINED HIS LIVELIHOOD

to the mother, the other to the daughter: one wonders whether both unions were arranged together and took place at the same time. It would help us better to understand this rather curious episode if we knew the relative ages of the half-brothers; Sir Roger was said to be twenty-two years old at his father's death in 1391 and, if that statement has any accuracy, he died before his fiftieth year in 1417. Thomas Hopton was dead by February 1427, and his widow had taken a second husband by December of that year. But the fact that Thomas survived his half-brother, though by how long is uncertain,<sup>32</sup> tells us nothing about his age: he could have been an old man who married a young wife *c.* 1407, or he may have still been young himself. If his conception had been a youthful venture of Sir Robert, before his probable first marriage in 1348, Thomas would have been a very old man to have taken such a wife in the first decade of the fifteenth century and to have fathered two sons, John and Robert. All in all it seems more likely that Thomas was a bastard of Sir Robert's maturity and that Sir Roger and he were pretty close in age. They were evidently close enough in other respects, for Sir Roger must have been the matchmaker for his half-brother. Thomas was not likely to have aspired to such a bride on his own account: he cannot have had much to offer. He had at any rate now achieved respectability.<sup>33</sup>

The other testimony of that intimacy between the half-brothers was the series of enfeoffments made by Sir Roger, and it is to the complicated story of the working out of these that we must now turn. That Thomas Hopton and his male heirs were preferred ahead of the representatives of the former main branch of the Swillingtons – in Sir Roger's view (though not in the view of Chancery some years later) Sir Thomas Routh and his male heirs – does demonstrate that Sir Roger held his illegitimate brother in

<sup>32</sup> Presumably he did not die until after October 1420, for Ufton, which he held for life, descended directly to Margaret Gra; whereas if Thomas had died before October 1420 it would have gone to her brother Robert, who died in that month.

<sup>33</sup> Joan Pert's other two daughters had as their husbands respectable enough Yorkshire gentlemen: in 1427 Elizabeth was married to Roger Aske and Isobel to Robert Conyers: *CFR* 1422–30, p207.

## JOHN HOPTON

high favour, even if he can hardly have imagined that the remainders would ever reach him. On 4 July 1413 Sir Roger made his enfeoffment of the manor of Wissett, Suffolk; on the following day he obtained the royal licence to settle Blythburgh after the same fashion.<sup>34</sup> That Sir Roger made similar arrangements for the bulk of his other estates – where he was able to do so – we know from the evidence of the *inquisition post mortem* on Margaret Gra of 1429, where it was discovered that John Hopton was the beneficiary under the terms of certain enfeoffments of those estates. The feoffees in these other estates, however, were different to those for Wissett and Blythburgh, being altogether far grander folk including as they did Robert, lord Willoughby of Eresby, Henry, lord Fitzhugh, and the Swillingtons' Suffolk neighbour, Sir John Heveningham. It seems certain nonetheless that the enfeoffments, if not the feoffees, were all of a piece, though most were probably later than 1413.<sup>35</sup> No one was, after all, much concerned with Thomas Hopton during Sir Roger's lifetime. It was not until he and his sons were dead that Thomas or his son John began to feature in the calculations of others. Meanwhile Sir Roger and his two sons died in a short space of time.

Sir Roger made his will at London on 24 and 26 November 1416.<sup>36</sup> Among other bequests he left a cup worth 10 marks and 10 marks in money to both Robert, lord Willoughby and Henry, lord Fitzhugh, and he left a cup of similar value and 5 marks in cash to John Heveningham the elder. To Richard Daniel, parson of Swillington and his executor, whom we shall meet again, he left 20 marks for his good and faithful service and to see to the carrying out of his will; and to Robert Sampson, whom we shall

<sup>34</sup> *CCR 1429–35*, p101; *CPR 1413–16*, p55; and see above pp1–2.

<sup>35</sup> In Margaret Gra's *IPM* the enfeoffments are not dated. Sir Roger made enfeoffments of his chief Yorkshire estates in December 1416 and February 1417 – after he had made his will: Lord Fitzhugh was then one of the feoffees (*CCR 1413–19*, pp404–6); he also had the same group of feoffees for the remainder of his Suffolk properties (*CCR 1413–19*, pp400–2); but we are not of course told of the full scope of the settlements on these occasions. The descent as outlined in the Blythburgh and Wissett enfeoffments, and inferred for the other properties, was complicated between 1417 and 1427 by Joan Pert, Sir Roger's widow, holding many of the estates in dower or because they had been settled on her for life.

<sup>36</sup> Will; PRO, Probate 11/2B (PCC 38 Marche).