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JOHN HOPTON  
A FIFTEENTH CENTURY  
SUFFOLK GENTLEMAN

COLIN RICHMOND

*Senior Lecturer in History,  
University of Keele*

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*for*  
Clara Gissing

## PREFACE

I would like first to thank those archivists and their staffs who over the years have been so helpful. To William Serjeant at Ipswich I am particularly grateful for seeing to the deposit of some Blois MSS at Cambridge University Library in the summer term 1971; to Arthur Owen, archivist there, I am grateful for receiving them, and to the staff of the Anderson Room for their courtesy. At the Suffolk Record Office I would also like to thank Patricia Woodgate and Marion Allen. At Norwich I am grateful to Jean Kennedy, at Stafford to Freddie Stitt, Margaret O'Sullivan, and Isobel Morcom. At Magdalen College, Oxford, Gerald Harriss and his capable deputies (Jasper Scovil and Pamela Colman) always welcomed my visits. Especially I want to thank the staffs in the Manuscripts Department of the British Museum and the Round Room of the Public Record Office: their skills have not gone unappreciated.

To my friends I am also grateful. To Bernard Finnemore for the index, to Mary Harris for help with my Latin, to Norman Scarfe for detailed criticism, to Carolyn Busfield for typing many drafts including the final one, to Peter and Margaret Spufford for constant enthusiasm, to David Morgan for interest, encouragement, expert advice, and innumerable references, to Rees Davies for reading a draft and making suggestions which without exception improved it: he has given more time and attention to this book than it deserves, certainly more than I deserve.

It is fitting that a study which began in earnest at Cambridge should be completed there: to William Davies and his colleagues at the Press I am most grateful.

## A NOTE ON SOURCES

The collection of MSS on which this study depends is the Blois Family Deposit at the Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich. The documents from it relating to John Hopton and his family, almost all estate accounts and associated papers, I have described below (pp 32–4). These were supplemented by Easton Bavents estate accounts in the Redstone Collection, for which see also below (p 33). Various other collections at Ipswich provided information for chapter 4.

At Magdalen College, Oxford, are MSS concerning Sir John Gra, most of whose Lincolnshire property was purchased by William Wainfleet for the college; these and other documents there were used in chapter 1.

In the British Library MSS section there are some deeds and other random documents concerning Thomasin Barrington, the Knevet family, and others, as well as a handful of seventeenth century transcripts of important Hopton documents. There are perhaps others which I have not come across.

From the Public Record Office I have mainly used *inquisitions post mortem*, but have also found other classes of document useful here and there.

At the Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford, among the Stafford Collection the Jerningham and Sulyard Papers produced material relevant to chapter 4.

The Bradfer-Lawrence and Townshend Collections in the Norfolk Record Office, at Norwich, were helpful, while at Lincoln, in the

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#### A NOTE ON SOURCES

Lincolnshire Record Office, I used the Ancaster Deposit for the Willoughbys.

Yet, after the Blois papers I have made most use of wills: those proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, at the Public Record Office; those proved in the Bishop of Norwich's Consistory Court, at the Norfolk Record Office; and those proved in the Suffolk Archdeaconry Court, at the Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich. Occasionally wills from other sources including printed wills, particularly those in *Testamenta Eboracensia*, have been useful.

Beside wills the *Paston Letters* are my major source. I have deployed them throughout but especially in chapter 4. They reveal what other material only hints at; without them I could not have explored Hopton's world, indeed I only carried on, once I had set out, because I had them as my companions.

Beyond this the scraps I have used come from a wide variety of printed sources; these I have made clear in the notes. One further source of evidence which I hope makes its own impact is the visible, the tombs, churches, and what remains of the houses of the men and women I have discussed. Scant as this is, it frequently still has a power to move us which even the most exciting written record does not always have.



## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BIHR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>
<i>BL</i>	British Library
Blomefield	F. Blomefield, <i>Topographical History of Norfolk</i> (5 vols, Kersfield and Lynn, 1739–75)
C	Chancery
<i>Cal Anc Deeds</i>	<i>Calendar of Ancient Deeds</i>
<i>CCR</i>	<i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i>
<i>CFR</i>	<i>Calendar of Fine Rolls</i>
<i>CIPM</i>	<i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</i>
<i>CPR</i>	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
Copinger	W. A. Copinger, <i>Manors of Suffolk</i> (7 vols, 1905–11)
<i>CP</i>	<i>The Complete Peerage</i> , ed. V. Gibbs and others (1910–59)
Davis	<i>Paston Letters and Papers of the fifteenth century</i> , ed. Norman Davis, I (1971), II (1976)
E	Exchequer
<i>Ec H R</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
Emden, <i>Biog Reg Camb</i>	A. B. Emden, <i>A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500</i> (1963)
Gairdner	James Gairdner, <i>The Paston Letters</i> (6 vols, Library edition, 1904)
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
Magd. Coll.	Magdalen College, Oxford

## ABBREVIATIONS

NRO	Norfolk Record Office
PCC	Prerogative Court of Canterbury
Parr	Robert T. L. Parr, 'Yoxford Yesterday' (8 typescript vols, begun in 1907 and not completed before 1947, unpublished; in the Borough Library, Ipswich)
Pevsner	Nikolaus Pevsner, <i>The Buildings of England</i> (1951–74)
PRO	Public Record Office
<i>Rot Parl</i>	<i>Rotuli Parliamentorum</i> (1767–77)
<i>A Royalist's Notebook</i>	<i>A Royalist's Notebook, the commonplace Book of Sir John Oglander of Nunwell, 1622–1652</i> , ed. Francis Bamford (1936)
SRO	Suffolk Record Office
Staffs RO	Staffordshire Record Office
<i>The Stonor Letters and Papers</i>	<i>The Stonor Letters and Papers</i> , ed. C. L. Kingsford, Camden Society, Third Series (2 vols, 1919)
<i>Test Ebor</i>	<i>Testamenta Eboracensia</i> , ed. James Raine and others, Surtees Society (1836–1902)
VCH	Victoria County History
<i>Walberswick Churchwardens Accounts</i>	<i>Walberswick Churchwardens' Accounts, A.D. 1450–1499</i> , ed. R. W. M. Lewis (1947)
Wedgwood	J. C. Wedgwood, <i>History of Parliament, Biographies of the Members of the Commons House 1439–1509</i> (H.M.S.O., 1936)



Map 1





Map 3

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## INTRODUCTION

I have composed the text of this present book as I best might . . . the beginning I have put in the beginning, and the end at the end.

*From the prologue to *The Anglo-Saxon version of the Life of St Guthlac*, trans and ed. C. W. Goodwin (1848), p7*

I stumbled on John Hopton one summer in the late 1960s. At the Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich, I had out the rough account book of Hopton's Blythburgh bailiff, Nicholas Greenhagh.<sup>1</sup> Later that summer or the next I looked at other fifteenth century documents in the collection from which it came, the Blois Family Deposit, and in no considered way pondered the possibility of working on the gentleman whom they concerned, John Hopton. At Christmas 1970 I sat down to discover something about him from the ordinary, published sources. I was surprised at what I found.

I had expected, had been looking for indeed, a typical figure, one of 'those gentlemen whose aggressive self-confidence, intemperate acquisitiveness and blatant family pride set the tone of English history between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries'.<sup>2</sup> Such a man is worth studying because I happen to think the inscription of 1633 on Leominster old town hall is accurate for the later Middle Ages: 'Like columnes do upprop the fabrik of a building, so noble gentry dos support the honor of a kingdom.'<sup>3</sup> The gentry's political importance is not to be denied, and politically active I had found most of them to be; for example, if they were worth anything (in wealth, status, influence) they sat in parliament. I anticipated that John Hopton would fall into this pattern: playing a part in local government and local affairs,

<sup>1</sup> For which see chapter 2, pp33–4.

<sup>2</sup> *Social History*, vol 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1978), p122.

<sup>3</sup> Pevsner, *Shropshire*, p228.

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## JOHN HOPTON

sometimes (perhaps often) at odds with his neighbours, prone to throw his weight about, and politically involved, either through a connection with a local magnate or by some affiliation made at the heart of political life at Westminster – for his adult life spanned most of the Wars of the Roses. He turned out differently.

For one thing, as my views on fifteenth century gentry and the fifteenth century generally were altered by what I ‘found’ John Hopton to be, so how I wanted to present them changed. What became important to describe now was not just John Hopton but also the society in which he lived; for that society, which was as much a product of my assumptions as John Hopton previously had been, might, from an angle of vision starting at him, be rather different. Hence chapter 4 soon became what I was working towards. It was also a necessity. The amount of material on John Hopton himself was limited, even more limited by the fact of his being the man he turned out to be; moreover, most of it concerned his estates and I did not want to lose him in a study of his property. If I was going to keep him in view I had to see him beside his ‘acquaintances, neighbours and friends’. Only a description of his context would bring him out. It is a local and a Suffolk context because I believe that is his context, but two criticisms might be (and have been) made: he ought perhaps to be seen against a broader social background and in a wider geographical one – the West Riding of Yorkshire and London should figure more than they do.<sup>4</sup> Maybe so. Indeed his being a Yorkshireman living in Suffolk, and his being a wealthy Yorkshireman at that, could be the reasons why he is not the typical gentleman I had expected; on the one hand he was an outsider, on the other a rich one: possibly obliged to be independent, certainly he could afford to be.

My having come across this particular fifteenth century gentleman (I nearly put this particular type of gentleman) has produced another peculiarity of the book he has led me to write. There is not much, hardly any comparative material in it. I have not gone looking for other John Hoptons in counties other than Suffolk, nor have I used him as a means to ask general questions about the

<sup>4</sup> Here I am grateful to Rees Davies.

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## INTRODUCTION

gentry and their society; as to whether he is in some or many aspects typical, more or less so than for instance the image I once had of a gentleman in that century, and to what extent the local world he lived in is one discernible elsewhere have been none of my business. I have left that to others. The presentation of as near as I could get to the real particularity of one gentleman at one place at one time is all I have tried to achieve.

One generalization I will venture on. If John Hopton is to fifteenth century politics as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to Hamlet, then we ought possibly to consider rewriting the play. Ten years' association with John Hopton has not only made me fond of him,<sup>5</sup> but also makes me think I know him and his society: I feel I can say as William Worcester wrote to John Paston, 'I am of hys contrey and know hys rysyng and maryages aswell as hymself.'<sup>6</sup> I may be deceiving myself, but if I am not, John Hopton and his like (presuming there are any) are more important than I had assumed. English fifteenth century life might not so much bear Huizinga's 'mixed smell of blood and roses'<sup>7</sup> as the odour of Hoskins' 'very small beer'.<sup>8</sup> I believe it does. Alongside Borges' single marvellous line 'over us looms atrocious history' I would like to set this book.

<sup>5</sup> 'Attempts to write biographies without empathy for the subject of the work...are schoolboys' jokes or exercises in sleights of mind.' Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier* (1971), p306.

<sup>6</sup> Davies II, p178.

<sup>7</sup> *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Penguin ed., 1955), p26.

<sup>8</sup> 'But real life at any time is mostly very small beer (only some historians contrive to inflate it).' W. G. Hoskins, *English Local History, the Past and the Future*, an inaugural lecture delivered in the University of Leicester, 3 March 1966 (Leicester 1967), p8.



# THE SWILLINGTONS and JOHN HOPTON



