INTRODUCTION

The Staffords, Earls and Dukes of Buckingham, were among the richest and most powerful members of the later medieval English baronage; yet their great wealth and territorial resources, which they acquired in part through royal patronage, eventually brought about their downfall. From the early years of the fourteenth century until the death of the first Duke of Buckingham in 1460, the Staffords prospered in the service of the Crown. Their personal talents as soldiers and statesmen and their growing reserves of manpower were placed at the disposal of successive kings of England; in return they were elevated from relative obscurity to the highest rank of nobility.

The second Duke received no such favours from Edward IV, because the latter's insecurity on the throne made him innately suspicious of the Staffords' royal blood and their traditional expectations of a share in the business of government. A combination of frustration, fear and ambition perhaps led the Duke to support Richard of Gloucester, whose success in gaining the throne encouraged Buckingham himself to take part in an abortive *coup d'état* in October 1483. Although Henry VII reversed his attainder two years later the third Duke remained under constant suspicion as a potential rebel, and eventually went to the block in 1521 because of his failure to allay these fears.

The Staffords derived most of their income and almost all their influence from the ownership of land. Their place in national affairs was largely determined by their success as landlords and by their skill in exploiting every resource at their disposal. Like all medieval landowners they were concerned with efficient estate management and revenue collection, since their reputation as 'good lords' or leaders of men depended largely upon the state of their finances and their ability to maintain a suitably impressive

lifestyle. The survival of a large quantity of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century records from the Stafford household and estates makes it possible to examine in detail not only how the three Dukes of Buckingham approached their administrative and financial problems, but also how these problems influenced their political behaviour.

The history of the Stafford archive is an interesting one. The third Duke began to order and classify his family papers many years before his death. Some of his father's manuscripts were destroyed during the rebellion of 1483 and the remainder were burnt by the Welsh supporters of Richard III two years later.[1] Estate records were negligently kept throughout Buckingham's minority; but there was a great corpus of evidence relating to the Staffords' eight receiverships from the late fourteenth century onwards, and these the Duke's officials set about sorting and numbering for purposes of litigation. They were stored, together with copies of his own estate accounts and business papers, in iron-bound chests, with plate locks, padlocks and iron bolts, in a specially built muniment room at his manor house at Thornbury. Three chests were removed to the Tower of London at the time of Buckingham's attainder, but, as a surviving contemporary catalogue shows, most of their contents were subsequently lost. Several other account rolls also found their way to the Tower, and are now in the Public Record Office.

Henry, Lord Stafford, continued his father's system for preserving records; he made many transcriptions and detailed lists of evidence concerning Buckingham's estates and titles. Most of the manuscripts he examined are not known to have survived, although his own notes, bound up into three so-called cartularies, give some idea of their scope. His son, Edward, was responsible for the compilation of an invaluable register *de rebus diversis*, which, together with Henry, Lord Stafford's letter book and two of his cartularies, a household book for 1508/9 and eight volumes of medieval and sixteenth-century estate records, eventually came into the hands of Stebbing Shaw, the Staffordshire antiquary. The second Lord Bagot acquired these volumes in

[1] For a more detailed account of the history of the Stafford manuscripts, their dispersal and present whereabouts, see C. Rawcliffe, 'The Papers of Edward, duke of Buckingham', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, V (1976), pp. 294–300.

1820, and they now constitute a major part of the Bagot collection in the Staffordshire County Record Office.

The descendants of Henry, Lord Stafford, suffered many vicissitudes which led to a further dispersal of their family archive. Successive generations of Staffords managed, however, to retain a considerable number of medieval manuscripts and these were also recently deposited in the Staffordshire County Record Office. They represent the largest of several scattered deposits bearing upon the three Dukes of Buckingham and their estates, since they comprise over 300 account rolls, 200 court rolls and parts of court rolls, as well as several miscellaneous legal documents and administrative directives issued by the third Duke. The British Library Department of Manuscripts has acquired over the years many important records formerly belonging to the Staffords; but, except for the purchase in 1936 of a set of thirty account rolls and court rolls from the collection of W. A. Cogman, their provenance is largely unrecorded.

The most important collection of evidence for the affairs and finances of Humphrey, first Duke of Buckingham, is *The Redd Booke of Caures Castle*, a register of letters patent and general directives issued by the Duke and his ministers over the years 1434 to 1455. The original appears to have been lost, but a copy of it made between 1620 and 1648 by the Welsh genealogist Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt now belongs to the National Library of Wales.

As a result of the accidents of wardship and marriage some Stafford papers found their way into the archives of other landowners. The muniments of Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII and the third Duke's guardian, now housed at Westminster Abbey, include two receiver general's accounts for the Stafford estates during the 1490s and an extensive survey of Buckingham's property undertaken over the years 1515 to 1518. The Howards obtained possession of some accounts at the time of the marriage of Thomas, third Duke of Norfolk, to one of Duke Edward's daughters; and the Marquesses of Bath inherited others as a result of the acquisition by their ancestor, Sir John Thynne, of the Staffords' lordship of Caus in 1576.

Taken as a whole, this widely-dispersed and incomplete collec-

tion of manuscripts still constitutes the largest and most comprehensive archive for any fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century English noble family. It provides an opportunity to examine in detail the organisation of a great estate and the changes which affected it over a period of more than one hundred and twenty years. Certain groups of manors and lordships, notably those in Staffordshire and Gloucestershire, are almost continuously documented, with near complete sets of accounts, court rolls and deeds for all but the decade 1475 to 1485. Less is known about other parts of the estates, but enough has survived in the form of receivers' accounts, valors and surveys to present a clear picture of the way in which the Staffords used their resources. Although the first two Dukes of Buckingham must inevitably remain shadowy figures in comparison with John of Gaunt (*d.* 1399), whose muniments form such a large and significant part of the medieval archives of the Duchy of Lancaster, their family papers are nevertheless the most important single source of information for the English baronage after 1400. As much is known about Gaunt as any member of the fifteenth-century nobility; but this ambitious son of Edward III, with his great retinue financed out of an income which may eventually have reached £20,000 a year, is not representative of the class as a whole. The loss of so many records concerning the administration and finances of Richard, Duke of York (*d.* 1460), the richest, if not the most efficient, landowner of his time, and the general paucity of evidence for other titled families of this period make the Staffords a particularly rewarding subject for study. The papers of the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Earls of Northumberland contain a quantity of manorial and central accounts, but the disappearance of all material relating to their household leaves a serious gap in our knowledge of the Percys' financial and domestic affairs.[2] In this respect their archive cannot be compared with that of the Staffords, which includes over twenty-five household accounts and day books for the period 1460 to 1521 alone. Although the last three Beauchamp Earls of Warwick left an impressive collection of estate and household accounts, valors and other documents,

[2] See J. M. W. Bean, *The Estates of the Percy Family 1416–1537* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 166–7 for a list of surviving Percy manuscripts between 1416 and 1537, and pp. 2–3 for a note on their limitations.

now as widely scattered as the Stafford papers, hardly anything is known of their estates after 1449, when they passed by marriage into the hands of Richard Neville, the Kingmaker.[3] This is all the more unfortunate because the Kingmaker's family muniments have been lost and his private affairs remain largely a matter of conjecture. Smaller collections and scattered groups of muniments have survived for other baronial houses, such as the Lords Grey of Ruthin, the Bourchiers, Lords Fitzwarren and Earls of Essex, the Talbot Earls of Shrewsbury and the Stanley Earls of Derby; but the lack of evidence imposes great limitations on any study of these houses.

Despite the comparative wealth of information at our disposal, a balanced history of the Staffords, dealing fully with each of the three Dukes of Buckingham and their finances, cannot now be written. The distribution of the source material is uneven: almost none survives for Duke Henry, whereas for Duke Edward there is a relative superabundance. So much in fact can be discerned about him that his equally celebrated but less well-documented ancestors inevitably suffer. He is perhaps the first English nobleman of whom a rounded character sketch can be attempted, and since he was such a driving force behind the reforms introduced on the Stafford estates during the sixteenth century, it is tempting to see him as a far greater innovator than he actually was. Certain parts of this book, especially those dealing with the Staffords' legal affairs and their exploitation of common law procedures for administrative ends, concentrate almost exclusively upon Duke Edward, not because he was necessarily the first of his line to employ such practices, but because he alone is known to have done so. Allowance should therefore be made for the date and limitations of the surviving evidence, which, if not properly assessed, tends to convey a distorted impression of developments on the Stafford estates.

The late K. B. McFarlane did much to alter our view of the place of the great nobleman in medieval society. The image of the violent, ungovernable warlord, so beloved by earlier generations, is now recognised to be false; we know that the English

[3] K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), p. 187, n. 2, lists the nine major deposits of Beauchamp family papers.

upper classes were not only better educated and politically more astute than had been supposed, but that they took a close personal interest in the control and management of their estates. Although outstanding for their wealth and the extent of their territorial possessions, the three Dukes of Buckingham were by no means atypical as landowners. They shared with their contemporaries a consuming desire ' to exploit every imagined right, to push every promising advantage to its limit '; nor were they alone in their insistence upon stringent economies at all levels of expenditure.[4] As they appear, more specialised studies of individuals and their families tend to underline similarities rather than differences in attitude. Mr T. B. Pugh's *The Marcher Lordships of South Wales 1415–1536* (Cardiff, 1963) has already made available much valuable information about the organisation of the Staffords' Welsh estates and their approach to the administration of justice in the Marches. He has drawn attention to the wider problems faced by Edward, third Duke of Buckingham, in his relations with the Crown, and in so doing has greatly contributed to our general understanding of the rôle and influence of the nobility in late medieval English society. My work owes much to both Mr McFarlane and Mr Pugh.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 49. Mr McFarlane's researches into the Stafford family were unfinished when he died in 1966 and only a short paper based on them has been published (*ibid.*, pp. 201–212).

Chapter 1

THE RISE OF THE STAFFORD FAMILY 1343–1460

At the time of his attainder and execution in 1521, Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, Earl of Stafford, Hereford and Northampton, Lord of Brecon and Holderness and heir general to both Edward III and Henry VI, held property worth over £6,000 a year gross. He and his ancestors had occupied many high offices, including the Constableships of England, Calais and France, and had served the Crown as councillors of state and captains of war. His estates were spread between Holderness in East Yorkshire and Newport in South Wales; he owned houses in Calais and possessed titles to lands in France and Ireland. Most of this great patrimony had been acquired in stages at the expense of other noble houses, which, being less fortunate than the Staffords, had failed to escape the disastrous consequences of attainder, dynastic failure and the accidents of war.

The early history of the Staffords was, however, undistinguished. Although the Norman knight Ralph de Tonei had been rewarded for his part in the conquest of England with a grant of more than one hundred confiscated manors, William I could never forget that Ralph's father had rebelled against him in Normandy, and had tempered his generosity with prudence by ensuring that these estates were scattered across England. Despite their claim to be titular lords of Stafford, Ralph's immediate descendants were prevented from controlling the town itself because they threatened to become too powerful along the Welsh March.[1] They were loyal by necessity rather than choice, for their slender finances and modest following placed an effective curb on their activities. Even so, the Staffords, as the de Toneis became known, proved themselves able men, whose military and adminis-

[1] T. J. Mazzinghi, 'Castle Church', *William Salt Archaeological Society*, VIII (1887), pp. 72–9; for a list of the various properties acquired by the Stafford family during the middle ages see Appendix A.

trative skill eventually earned them a place in national affairs. It also brought them titles and other marks of royal favour, including opportunities to make a number of highly advantageous marriages.

Ralph Stafford was the first of his line to achieve recognition both in England and France as a soldier, diplomat and statesman. The outbreak of the Hundred Years' War in 1338 provided him with a splendid opportunity for personal advancement which he exploited to the full. Then aged thirty-seven, with years of military experience in the Scottish wars and a strong position at court behind him, he was, from the onset of hostilities, among Edward III's most trusted captains and ambassadors. He received many rewards, of which the most outstanding was his creation as Earl of Stafford with an annuity of 1,000 marks in 1351.[2] Despite his loyal service during the wars with France, it is unlikely that such generosity would have been shown towards him had he not recently acquired the means of supporting an earldom. In 1347 Ralph and his heirs had been granted special livery of the Audley estates. The possessions of the childless Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester and Hereford, had been partitioned between his three surviving sisters in 1317. Margaret, the second sister, who was married to Hugh Audley, received the lordship of Newport in Wales and other property spread across the south of England, worth in all £2,314 a year.[3] The Audleys' only child, a daughter also named Margaret, was thus a most desirable commodity on the marriage market.

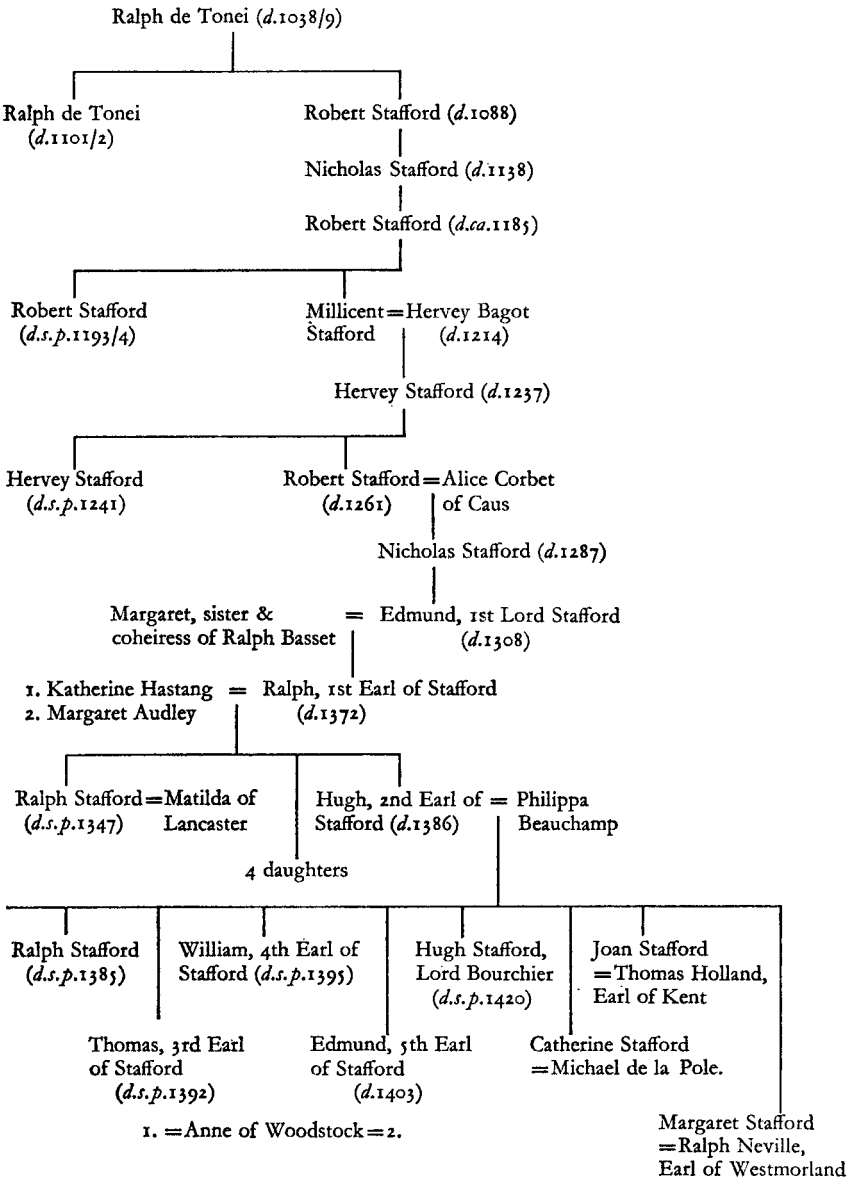
Shortly after the death of his first wife, Ralph Stafford led an armed raid on the Audleys' house at Thaxted and abducted the young Margaret.[4] With a potential income which was worth at least twenty times his own, and which was based on lands extending from Norfolk to the Welsh Marches, she was indeed a valuable prize. Far from disapproving of Ralph's second matrimonial venture, King Edward seems to have intervened to protect him from Hugh Audley's wrath; he may even have effected a rapprochement between Hugh and Ralph. By 1343, nine years

[2] *Cal. Charter Rolls*, vol. V p. 124.

[3] For a more detailed account of the partition see M. Altschul, *A Baronial Family in Medieval England: the Clares, 1217–1314* (Johns Hopkins' University Press, 1965), pp. 165–74.

[4] *C.P.R.*, 1334–8, p. 298.

TABLE I. *The early Staffords, 1038–1403*



after the marriage had taken place and some three years before his own death, Audley was sufficiently reconciled to settle all his wife's property on Ralph, his daughter and their heirs.[5] No sooner had they taken possession of these great estates than a second inheritance descended to them through Ralph's grandmother, Alice Corbet. The Castle and lordship of Caus in Shropshire, which was worth about £265 a year clear in 1401, greatly strengthened the Staffords' position along the turbulent Welsh Marches and provided the Earl with another recruiting ground for his private bodyguard.

Ralph Stafford died a wealthy man in 1372. The inquisition *post mortem* taken on his English estates set his annual income at £1,432,[6] although in fact after 1351 he seems to have been worth over twice this sum. The Audley and Corbet estates together brought him at least £3,350 a year; from his parents he had inherited a further £200 a year in rents and profits of justice; and he also enjoyed an annuity of 1,000 marks[7] as Earl of Stafford. He was thus assured of revenues of about £3,000 a year; a sum which during a successful campaigning season he may even have been able to double. That he benefited from the war with France is beyond question, although it is now impossible to calculate the value of the rewards, wages, plunder and ransoms he took during a lifetime of military service. His only recorded ransom is for Jean Boucicaut: this he sold to the Exchequer for £1,000 in 1353.[8] But there must have been others, even if their proceeds were shared with his followers. Judging by the behaviour of other captains, who were equally ready to defraud their own men and the exchequer that paid them, some of his official receipts for wages and necessary expenses may also have found their way into his private coffers. However badly the rank and file may have fared during the Hundred Years' War, those commanders who managed to avoid capture and ransom generally did very well for themselves. Like the Beauchamp Earls of Warwick and the Talbot Earls of Shrewsbury, Ralph Stafford and his successors

[5] *Ibid.*, 1343–5, pp. 140, 366, 384; *C.C.R.*, 1346–9, p. 347.
[6] C.135/230/62.
[7] The value of the mark was about two thirds of a pound (13*s.*4*d.*).
[8] *Issues of The Exchequer*, ed. J. Devon (R.C., 1847), p. 159.