

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1996 EDITION

A THE STONOR FAMILY

Kingsford did his work so thoroughly that there is little significant to add to his account of the family, although more intensive research would doubtless reveal more.¹ What the modern historian can do, in the light of all the work on the late-medieval gentry that has been done in the past twenty years or so, is to place the activities of the family more effectively in context than Kingsford could.²

The *leitmotiv* of much of this section will be the family's typicality, something Kingsford was in no position to assess, since the only real yardstick he had were the Pastons, who are now turning out to be anything but typical.³ Looked at over the whole period from the late thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, what impresses most about the Stonors is their ability to survive. After all, this period encompasses seven depositions (1327, 1399, 1461, 1471 (two), 1483 and 1485) and a host of political crises of greater or lesser magnitude. Yet the Stonors only misjudged badly once, when William rebelled against Richard III in 1483 and, in some sense, this could be seen as yet another instance of picking the right side, for it was the successive rebellions by members of Edward IV's household that eventually led to the downfall of Richard III and, effectively, the

¹ However, there has been a more recent account of the family: R.J. Stonor, *Stonor: a Catholic Sanctuary in the Chilterns from the Fifth Century till Today* (Newport, Mon., 1951). Unfortunately, this is sparsely referenced, especially where it offers new information. The Hon. Miss Georgina Stonor was kind enough to consult Stonor's notes for some of my queries, but it has not been possible to verify much of this information and Stonor is not always entirely reliable. Reference to this work will, nevertheless, be found, where appropriate. For fuller information on the Stonors and their associates in the fifteenth century, see C. Carpenter, 'The Stonors and their Circle in the Fifteenth Century', in *Essays Presented to Gerald Harriss*, ed. R. Archer and S. Walker (London, 1995).

² This work is discussed in Section C, below.

³ See below, Introduction, pp. 10, 17. J.G. Gairdner's edition of *The Paston Letters* was first published in the 1870s (3 vols., London, 1872-5). The Plumpton letters had been available for longer (*The Plumpton Correspondence*, ed. T. Stapleton (Camden Soc., 1839, rpt., intro. K. Dockray, Gloucester, 1990); J. Taylor, 'The Plumpton Letters, 1416-1552', *Northern History*, 10 (1975), 72-87), but, as well as being a smaller collection than either Stonor or Paston letters, there are not many that pre-date Bosworth.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

KINGSFORD'S STONOR LETTERS AND PAPERS

restoration of the house of York in 1485.⁴ It was not political misjudgement but the failure of direct male heirs and subsequent dispute between heir male and heir general which got the family into serious difficulties, and after that, of course, being of the 'wrong' religion.⁵ Since religion was not an issue in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Stonors' history is turning out to be characteristic of the fortunes of gentry families in what at first sight appear to be potentially lethal times for them: survival of external shocks but vulnerability to the roulette wheel of reproduction.⁶

Even in their rise they were typical.⁷ Throughout the late middle ages, the legal profession was the best possible avenue to advancement, safer than exploiting legal and/or administrative expertise in more direct service

⁴ R. Horrox, *Richard III: a Study of Service* (Cambridge, 1989); C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: a Study of Warwickshire Landed Society 1401-1499* (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 14.

⁵ Below, i, pp. xxxv-vi; Stonor, *Stonor*, chs. 7-9.

⁶ C. Carpenter, 'The Fifteenth-century English Gentry and their Estates', in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Jones (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 36-60.

⁷ Concerning the early Stonors, R.J. Stonor claims that the Richard de Stonor who married Cecily was a younger brother, not the father, of John Stonor the justice and that Kingsford has thus interposed an extra generation (*Stonor*, pp. 74-8), but Cecily's husband is explicitly referred to as son and heir in a grant from the older Richard (No. 1 and cf., below, i, pp. vii-x on the early Stonors). Again, he gives no references, but it seems that Stonor is confounding a Richard who looks very much like a younger brother of John and, coincidentally, was also married to a Cecily (*CIPM*, xii, 336) with Richard, the father of both of these. Neither Kingsford nor Stonor gives any justification for their dating of the aforementioned deed (Kingsford c. 1290, Stonor c. 1308). Stonor adds another brother, Baldwin, to Kingsford's duo of John and Adam. In the case of all four possible brothers, he seems to be confusing the profession of canon/civil lawyer, still essentially a clerical one, for which the training was done at university, with the new lay profession of common lawyer which was developing its own means of training (P. Brand, *The Origins of the English Legal Profession* (Oxford, 1992); Stonor, *Stonor*, pp. 74-9). From his account of the brothers, it seems that two, Baldwin and Adam, were clerics, not lawyers, and one, Richard, a country gentleman (*Stonor*, pp. 74-9). Baldwin, as a cleric with cure of souls, would not have been permitted to practise even canon law (Brand, pp. 150-1; *Stonor*, p. 76). It also seems doubtful that the Richard de Stonor who had already been ordained in minor orders and instituted to a rectorship could be the same as the Sussex gentleman who married Cecily (*ibid.*, p. 77) or that John himself was a cleric at any time (*ibid.*, p. 76), although, like other prominent lawyers of the time, he did serve clerical masters (P.J. Jefferies, 'Profitable Fourteenth-century Legal Practice and Landed Investment: the Case of Judge Stonor, c. 1281 to 1354', *Southern History*, 15 (1993), 19). But Stonor is surely correct in making the Richard de Stonor who appears in 1365 the son of Richard of Sussex rather than of John's brother, 'Master Adam', who was probably a clerk (*Stonor*, *Stonor*, pp. 77-8 and cf. below, i, pp. x-xi, ii, p. 166). See also Jefferies, 'Profitable Fourteenth-Century Legal Practice', pp. 18, 20, although most of the above issues, including John's age (see below, note 9), are not resolved in this.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1996 EDITION

to the crown, which could always end in tears.⁸ A man employed primarily for his legal abilities, especially once he had reached the rank of justice, might be dismissed when things went wrong, as John Stonor was on two occasions, but usually there were not enough well-qualified men around for the dismissal to be permanent or to lead to something worse.⁹ Normally judges had more to fear from the mob than from their employers or employers' supplanters. If this failed to be true of some of Richard II's justices in 1388, it could be argued that these judges had involved themselves too directly in politics and that 'mob' would not be an entirely inapposite term for the Lords Appellant. Ironically, it was then that Robert Belknap, father-in-law of a future Stonor, was almost to meet the fate that the founder of the family's fortunes had avoided through the maelstroms of 1321–30 and 1340–1.¹⁰

'Dullness', Kingsford's term for John's career, is hardly the word one would use in relation to someone who had lived through so many crises,¹¹ but it was nevertheless a quietly effective career, albeit notable for one of the earliest judgements distinguishing equity from the common law. As rising men are expected to do, he built up the family estates and became the founder of its tenurial fortunes. He also began the rebuilding of the family residence. In both these respects he was typical of his sort and it is at this point that the Stonors most resemble the fifteenth-century Pastons, a family also founded by a royal judge and with an eye to the tenurial main chance. The main difference is that Stonor was so much better at it than the Pastons, managing to enlarge his estates without apparently offending a large segment of his more powerful neighbours.¹²

⁸ On the legal profession and its rewards, see E.W. Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England* (Cambridge, 1983). On the hazards of service to the crown, see e.g. Carpenter, 'Fifteenth-century Gentry', pp. 45, 48–9; Horrox, *Richard III*. Sir John Stonor's career has recently been considered from this perspective: Jefferies, 'Profitable Fourteenth-century Legal Practice', pp. 18–35.

⁹ Below, i, p. ix. Also Edward I's judges (M.C. Prestwich, *Edward I* (London, 1988), pp. 339–42), who, although not restored to their posts, were ultimately pardoned. For R.J. Stonor on John, see *Stonor*, pp. 79–92; see also Jefferies, 'Profitable Fourteenth-century Legal Practice'. Again, there are details in Stonor, like specific dates for his birth and coming of age, which one would like to be able to verify: I have not found a proof of age for him (cf. below, i, p. vii).

¹⁰ Below, i, pp. viii–ix (Kingsford may not be correct in suggesting here that John's brief removal in 1331 was apolitical: politics were still very volatile at this time), p. xviii; A. Harding, 'The Revolt against the Justices', in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R.H. Hilton and T.H. Aston (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 165–93; A. Tuck, *Richard II and the English Nobility* (London, 1973), pp. 116–17, 118, 124–5, 128.

¹¹ Cf. below, i, p. x.

¹² T.F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England* (6 vols.,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

KINGSFORD'S STONOR LETTERS AND PAPERS

There is little of any importance to add to Kingsford's brief account of his son John's life. He seems to have done little of note. Why he cut such an insignificant figure locally is far from clear, especially as he was a knight, although it must be said that he was only in possession of the family property for the last seven years of his life. Given that he was knighted and that he did so little at home, it is not impossible that he was campaigning abroad for much of his adulthood, but I have found no reference to support this theory.¹³ It is with John the younger's son Edmund that the family manifests the pattern that one would now expect, that of established gentry participating in the rule of the locality, or, as Kingsford puts it, the life of 'a country gentleman'. It is no doubt for this reason that he has left so much more evidence than his father of involvement in local transactions.¹⁴

In 1382, at Edmund's death, the Stonors entered on a period of minorities and early deaths, lasting really until Thomas I came into his lands in 1415.¹⁵ As it turned out, this was no bad thing under Richard II. The family avoided any need to take sides during the upheavals of 1386-9 and 1397-1400 and might be regarded as especially fortunate in that Ralph, who had accompanied Richard II to Ireland in 1394, died that year, probably in Ireland, ensuring that he was not able to commit himself to the king between 1397 and 1399. Meanwhile, the family had had the protection of Robert Belknap, the king's close associate, who held the Stonor

Manchester, 1920-33), iii, 180n. Below, i, pp. xi-xvi; C. Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: the First Phase* (Cambridge, 1990); *The Paston Letters*, ed. J.G. Gairdner (6 vols., London, 1904, rpt. Gloucester, 1983), i, 216-64; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, pp. 199-202, 623-4.

¹³ Below, i, pp. xvi-xvii. Evidence of his participation in local transactions is scarce but see *Cal. Close Rolls* 1360-4, 117; 1364-8, 166. On this generation, see Stonor, *Stonor*, ch. 3. Stonor (*ibid.*, p. 95), referring to *Foedera* (without a precise reference), claims that Stonor was chosen 'to represent' Devon in the invasion of France in 1345. It is extremely difficult to see what he means or to what he is referring, but the only *Foedera* mention of Sir William Bodrugan, who is alleged to have served with Stonor, is in III, i, 121 and is in a protection for those going to Gascony with the Black Prince in 1356. Neither here nor anywhere else is military service by John Stonor mentioned. Jefferies claims that John II 'lived at Ermington for two decades' ('Profitable Fourteenth-century Legal Practice', p. 28), which may be true but, other than the fact that he was jointly vested with ownership of the manor with his father and that his son was born there (*CIPM*, xi, 471-2), there is little evidence for this and he did no public service in Devon either.

¹⁴ Below, i, p. xvii. Stonor, *Stonor*, pp. 107-12. His involvement in local society can be seen in *Cal. Close Rolls* 1369-74, 197-200, 1374-7, 514, 1377-81, 126, 358, 360, 375-7, 494.

¹⁵ Below, i, pp. xviii-xx; *Cal. Close Rolls* 1413-19, 223-4; Stonor, *Stonor*, pp. 112-16.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1996 EDITION

wardships between 1382 and 1389, and seems not to have suffered from Belknap's fall in 1388.¹⁶

Once Thomas I had come of age, the family was ready to come into its full local inheritance, all the more so since Thomas was so close to Thomas Chaucer, one of the main local power-brokers.¹⁷ The link through Chaucer to the royal administration – if not to Henry Beaufort, Chaucer's principal patron – was strengthened through Thomas' marriage, for his wife was a kinsman and eventually heir of Robert Hallum, bishop of Salisbury, the former royal clerk.¹⁸ Despite another early death and minority, the Stonors were able to maintain, and even improve, their local status. Again Chaucer's protection helped. It also provided the passport to a close connection with his successor, William de la Pole, first duke of Suffolk, who married Chaucer's heiress and became possibly as great a power in the Thames Valley as in East Anglia. If it is true, as seems likely, that Thomas II married a natural daughter of the duke, his passage from the 'Chaucer/Beaufort' circle into its inheritor in the region, Suffolk's affinity, was made all the easier.¹⁹

¹⁶ Below, i, pp. xviii–xix; *Cal. Close Rolls 1389–92*, 206; *Cal. Inqs. Misc. 1387–93*, 34–6; above, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Stonor Letters*, i, pp. xviii–xix. See Carpenter, 'Stonor Circle', for a discussion of the Beaufort and Chaucer connections and additional note to i, p. xx, below for literature on these two. For more on Thomas I's career and connections, see *HP*, iv, 483–5 and Carpenter, 'Stonor Circle'. The relevant section in Stonor, *Stonor*, is pp. 116–19.

¹⁸ *The Register of Robert Hallum, Bishop of Salisbury 1407–17*, ed. J.M. Horn, Cant. and York Soc., 72 (1982) (and see esp. p. 247); Harriss, *Cardinal Beaufort* (as in additional note to i, p. xx, below), pp. 41, 66, 91–2, 396; n.17, above. Hallum was not especially friendly to Beaufort in ecclesiastical politics.

¹⁹ Below, i, p. xx; Carpenter, 'Stonor Circle'. On Thomas II and the assertion that his wife was indeed a natural daughter of Suffolk, or the child of a subsequently annulled marriage, by none other than Jacqueline of Hainault, see Stonor, *Stonor*, ch. 5 and i, p. xxiii, below. It is true both that Suffolk was accused of having fathered an illegitimate daughter in France 'nowe married to Stonard of Oxonfordshire' and that Stonor's wife received letters of denization in 1453 (*Historical Manuscripts Commission*, 3rd Report (London, 1872), p. 279; below, i, p. xxiii). Moreover, there is contemporary evidence in stained glass at Stonor that Joan's arms were those of the de la Poles without any bend sinister (*ex inf.* the Hon. Miss Georgina Stonor), although she would in practice have been illegitimate in law if her mother's marriage had been annulled. However, the accusation against Suffolk refers not to Jacqueline of Hainault but to a nun and Stonor's wife is said to have been living in Normandy, not in any of Jacqueline's domains, before she came to England, although it is conceivable that she was removed to Normandy by her father. Leland, who does mention a secret marriage of Suffolk to Jacqueline, says that this produced a daughter who married the grandfather of the Sir William Barentyn of Haseley who was living when Leland wrote (John Leland, *Itineraries*, ed. T. Hearne (3rd edn, 9 vols., Oxford, 1768–9), iv, 20, viii, 109). Given that Thomas Stonor II's daughter married John Barentyn of Haseley and that William was the latter's heir

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

KINGSFORD'S STONOR LETTERS AND PAPERS

In theory, this connection should have presented some danger to the family in 1450 and the following years, especially in view of their kinship with the Hampdens, who produced, in Edmund Hampden, a man who was intimately linked to the court and was to suffer first exile and then death at Tewkesbury for Henry VI.²⁰ However, again they managed to avoid over-commitment to either side. Indeed, Thomas II hardly held office at all before 1461.²¹ This was perhaps because his stepfather Richard Drayton was regarded as the senior member of the family; certainly Drayton was a JP right through the 1450s. However, Thomas does seem to have become sufficiently embroiled to serve on two anti-Yorkist commissions of array, one of December 1459 issued from Coventry and the other of 1460. Even so, he escaped unscathed.²² He was on the Oxfordshire commission of the peace from 1466, arriving with John, duke of Suffolk, with whose family the Stonors had maintained their connections. He retained his position through the upheavals of 1469–71 until his death in 1474.²³ If he was not named on the commission of array issued by Edward IV immediately after Barnet, he was on the one issued a little while later, so it does not seem that he was held to have blotted his copybook by his co-operation with the Readeption government. The connection with George Neville, which no doubt recommended him to Warwick and Clarence, does not appear to have done him any lasting damage.²⁴ Apart from Edmund Hampden, who returned to meet his end at Tewkesbury, the only member of the Stonor circle who seems to have got seriously into trouble at this time is Peter Marmion. Under bizarre circumstances he was forced into conveyance of the manor of Nursling in the aftermath of Tewkesbury by Thomas Hargrave, who claimed to have been at the battle with the victorious Edward IV. This episode was to have significant later consequences for the Stonors.²⁵

(below, i, p. xxiv; *IPM Hen. VII*, i, 82), this could be taken as confirmation of the story, but it might also suggest that two different stories – neither of them necessarily entirely accurate – had become conflated.

²⁰ Below, i, p. xix; *HP*, iii, 279; Wedgwood, *Biographies*, p. 414.

²¹ He was sheriff of Oxfordshire and Berkshire in 1453 and MP for Oxfordshire in 1447 and 1449 (below, p. xxiii).

²² Below, i, pp. xxi–ii; *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1446–52*, 593; *1452–61*, 674–5. A 'John Stonor' was on the 1459 commission, which is most probably an error for Thomas: it does not seem likely that his rather insignificant younger brother would have served. The commissioner in 1460 is not given a christian name at all, which might suggest an awareness that the name had been given wrongly the year before. Confusion in the prevailing political circumstances would not be surprising (*Cal. Pat. Rolls 1452–61*, 557, 603).

²³ Below, i, p. xxiii; *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1461–7*, 570, *1467–77*, 625; below, Introduction, p. 28.

²⁴ Below, i, p. xxiii; Nos. 347, 82, 97, 113.

²⁵ Wedgwood, *Biographies*, p. 414; Kingsford, *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, 35 and below, note to No. 304, where the full reference to this may be found. Also *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1467–77*, 286.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1996 EDITION

William Stonor was indeed the 'worshipfulest' of the Stonors,²⁶ perhaps not least because he was the first heir since 1354 to succeed as an adult. In his links with both the crown, now a growing power in the localities, and the nobility, he surpassed any of his predecessors, even the justice. But it was perhaps his very eminence in local terms which in the end made it impossible to emulate his forebears' ability to keep their heads down. Again, he was typical of his kind, for the revulsion against Richard III, particularly in the areas where Edward IV's direct influence had been strong, was to be the exception to the fifteenth-century rule that the gentry tried to keep quiet while confrontations among crown and nobility washed over them.²⁷

The Stonors were thus more typical than Kingsford supposed in their failure to participate in the Wars of the Roses, and the same is true of their lack of conventional military service, which again seems to have surprised Kingsford. We now know that, although members of the gentry continued to fight for their king, especially if the wars were near home, war ceased to be their *raison d'être* at what might once have been thought to be a surprisingly early stage in English history. The Stonor military record, apart perhaps from participation in the Irish expedition of 1394, is entirely characteristic for a gentry family in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially one that had been established by a lawyer: possibly Henry V's large-scale expeditions of 1419–20, the Picquigny campaign and the turn-out at Stoke of much of the Midlands on behalf of Henry VII.²⁸

If the Stonors themselves are typical of their kind, the Thames Valley, where the core of their estates lay, was, politically speaking, unusual, although we are now beginning to realise that regions of this sort were not uncommon, especially in the fifteenth century. It was one of those

²⁶ Below, i, p. xxxi. On William, see Stonor, *Stonor*, ch. 6.

²⁷ Horrox, *Richard III*, chs. 3–4, 6; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, chs. 14, 16, 17; *idem*, 'Stonor Circle'.

²⁸ Below, i, p. xxxix; M. Powicke, *Military Obligation in Medieval England: a Study in Liberty and Duty* (Oxford, 1962); M. Prestwich, 'Cavalry Service in Early Fourteenth Century England', in *War and Government in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Gillingham and J.C. Holt (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 147–58; D. Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300* (Oxford, 1992); P.R. Coss, *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: a Study in English Society c. 1180–c. 1280* (Cambridge, 1991); N. Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981), ch. 2; S. Walker, *The Lancastrian Affinity 1361–1399* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 3; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, ch. 3 and pp. 565–6; M.J. Bennett, *Lambert Simnel and the Battle of Stoke* (Gloucester, 1987), pp. 83–4, 136. This is a selection from a large literature, much of which is mentioned in Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, ch. 3.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

KINGSFORD'S STONOR LETTERS AND PAPERS

parts of England where the greatest local landowner, or one of the greatest, was not a nobleman but the king. Although this situation was more widespread after 1399 when the duke of Lancaster was king, Oxfordshire and Berkshire represented an earlier instance. Here the king's landed power consisted chiefly of the honor of Wallingford, now part of the duchy of Cornwall.²⁹ The immediate influence over the lives of local gentry emerges very clearly from the records of the Black Prince, an unusually energetic duke.³⁰ In the fifteenth century, royal authority in the region was either exercised direct, as appears largely to have been the case in Edward IV's second reign, or manifested through a substantial local landowner who also had access to the Wallingford offices, such as Thomas Chaucer and William de la Pole under the Lancastrian kings, and Francis, lord Lovell, under Richard III.³¹

B THE SURVIVAL OF THE LETTERS AND PAPERS

Kingsford was almost certainly correct in suggesting that the three surviving gentry correspondences are the tip of a lost iceberg. His own researches in the Public Records revealed the remains of at least one other correspondence which, like the Stonor and mercantile Cely letters, had fallen victim to the nineteenth-century habit of breaking up archives.³² Why some have come down to us and others not is an enduring mystery. The obvious thing that all the major sets of letters have is a reason for writing them: absence abroad (the Lisle letters, the Celys, Thomas Betson at times in the Stonor letters and occasionally members of the Stonor and Paston families), or from home, at distant properties or Westminster (William and Elizabeth Stonor, the Pastons, Godfrey Grene keeping an eye on the Plumpton's business in Westminster), or just widespread lands and the need to keep in touch with agents dealing with these estates (much

²⁹ Carpenter, 'Stonor Circle' and, more generally, on the implications in the localities of private ownership of land by the crown; *idem*, 'Gentry and Community in Medieval England', *Jnl Br. Studs.*, 19 (1994), 1-20 and 'Who Ruled the Midlands in the Later Middle Ages?', *Midland History*, 33 (1994), 340-80.

³⁰ *The Black Prince's Register*, ii, Duchy of Cornwall (London, HMSO, 1931). For his dealings with the Stonors and their properties, see pp. 12, 119-20, 193, 240, 249, 278, 398-9, 425, 426-7, 562. John Stonor the justice was probably on his council (Tout, *Chapters*, v, 322).

³¹ Not a great deal is known about political structures in the region: see Carpenter, 'Stonor Circle,' for a preliminary discussion.

³² C.L. Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise in XVth Century England* (Oxford, 1925), pp. 31-4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1996 EDITION

of the Stonor and Plumpton letters).³³ But these conditions would apply equally to many other families, and stray references do indeed show that others were writing letters.³⁴

They would also apply to the nobility, of whose literacy Kingsford, following Gairdner, was needlessly dismissive, although, to be fair to him, he did not know about the Lisle letters. We now know that the nobility were far from illiterate. It is likely that, having secretaries, they usually dictated their letters but so did most people with access to a secretary until the arrival of the word-processor, at least for business correspondence.³⁵ It is also very possible that, employing a greater number of trusted emissaries, they tended to send information by word of mouth rather than by letter. There are references in the Stonor letters to additional information that the messenger brings verbally, and on one occasion this comes from a noble.³⁶ Moreover, it may be that the nobles' larger bureaucracy and greater administrative distance from their estates radically reduced the number of occasions when they and their servants needed to correspond.

The survival of a correspondence seems to have been a lottery. We should probably be amazed and grateful that any at all have come down to us, especially when we consider the number of lay deeds and estate accounts – a more mundane but, to them, more precious type of document – that have gone missing. Kingsford's second thoughts on the Stonors – that their papers were taken into crown hands during the dispute of 1500 over the inheritance, rather than in the confiscation of 1483/4 – may well be correct. However, it is a notable fact that there is almost nothing in the PRO from after Richard III's usurpation.³⁷ Against this, it seems highly improbable that the Stonors would not have secured the return of their family papers on their restoration in 1485. Moreover, the Cely papers seem similarly to have been preserved as exhibits in a chancery suit and the survival of the Plumpton papers, which did not come into crown ownership, is probably also due to their deployment in disputes over the family property – in this case, after the death of William

³³ *The Lisle Letters*, ed. M. St Clare Byrne (6 vols., Chicago and London, 1981); *The Cely Letters 1472-1488*, ed. A. Hanham, EETS, 273 (1975); *Plumpton Correspondence*, Dockray, Introduction, p. 2 (unnumbered pp.); *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. N. Davis (2 vols., Oxford, 1971-6), i, pp. xlv, xlvii-l.

³⁴ E.g. *Cal. Close Rolls 1429-35*, 254-6.

³⁵ Below, i, pp. xlvii-viii; K.B. McFarlane, 'The Education of the Nobility in Later Medieval England', in *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 228-47; N. Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry* (London, 1984); *Lisle Letters*, i, 59; K. Mertens, *The English Noble Household 1250-1600* (Oxford, 1988), p. 44.

³⁶ E.g. Nos. 22, 23; Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise*, pp. 26-7.

³⁷ Below, i, p. xxxvi; Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise*, pp. 30-1.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55467-1 - Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483

Christine Carpenter

Excerpt

[More information](#)

KINGSFORD'S STONOR LETTERS AND PAPERS

Plumpton in 1480 – followed by transcription in the seventeenth century. Uniquely, the core of the Paston letters and papers – those that had not gone to Magdalen College, Oxford with part of the Fastolf property – survived because of family continuity into a period when people were interested in such things.³⁸

C THE STONOR LETTERS AND PAPERS AND FIFTEENTH-CENTURY HISTORIOGRAPHY

When Kingsford published his edition of the Stonor letters in 1919, the letters that had helped shape historians' views of the fifteenth century were those of the Pastons. These had been published in a modern edition by Gairdner in the 1870s and had been drawn on extensively by Plummer for his notorious version of the fifteenth century as a period with next to no redeeming features, and especially to illustrate what Plummer, with profound effect, christened 'bastard feudalism'. In the intrigue, manipulation of the law and violence that they depicted, and in the role they gave in all this to the nobility, the letters seemed to confirm everything that was thought to be worst about the century.³⁹ How much this picture was still, amazingly, drawn from Shakespeare's history plays can be seen from the fact that four years after publication of the Stonor letters, in the first of his Ford lectures, Kingsford found it necessary to spend a whole lecture demonstrating that Shakespeare was not the last historical word on the period.⁴⁰

By contrast, the Stonor letters, in which noble power is much less evident and conflict and violence far more of a minor theme, presented a very different version of the century. Moreover, it is not just the letters that are important but the fact that, unlike the Paston letters as originally published, this is a major archive of a gentry family from the late thirteenth to the late fifteenth centuries, giving almost unparalleled information on all sorts of aspects of their lives and showing how there was far

³⁸ Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise*, p. 31; *Plumpton Correspondence*, Dockray, Introduction, p. 1 (unnumbered pp.); *Paston Letters and Papers*, i, pp. xxv, xxxi; Taylor, 'Plumpton Letters', pp. 75–81.

³⁹ *Paston Letters*, ed. Gairdner, 1st edn (see n.3, above); Sir John Fortescue, *The Governance of England*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1885), pp. 14–30. The view of the century owed, and was to continue to owe, a great deal to Stubbs (*Constitutional History of England*, 4th edn, Oxford, 1890), iii esp. 520, 638).

⁴⁰ Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise*, ch. 1.