Margaret Beaufort and Reginald Bray

The fact that Reginald (aka Reynold) Bray was an important member of Margaret Beaufort's household during her marriages to Henry Stafford and Thomas Stanley is well documented, but none of the ancient documents or modern books about Margaret Beaufort describe when this relationship began.

This note explores the possibility that Reginald Bray was not born in Worcestershire, as some have claimed, and that he was actually born in North Bedfordshire and grew up close to, or even at, Bletsoe, the childhood home of Margaret Beaufort. This has been prompted by research into the various links between the Brays and the Sandys of Hampshire followed by the links between both families and Margaret Beaufort, her son King Henry VII and his son King Henry VIII.

The catalyst bringing the Brays and the Sandys together was the Waweton family who lived near Eaton Socon on the Bedfordshire-Huntingdonshire border. In 1371, Sir John Sandys attended Parliament for the first time as Knight of the Shire for Hampshire and would have met John Waweton representing Huntingdonshire. In the Parliament of 1391, Sir John Sandys again represented Hampshire and would have met Thomas Bray representing Middlesex. Although Thomas lived at Chiswick at that time, his family came from Silsoe in Bedfordshire, and he retired to Tempsford in that county.

Close relatives of Thomas Bray shared ownership of Great Staughton Manor near Bletsoe with the Wawetons in 1370 and Alice Bray sold her share of Great Staughton to Thomas Waweton, son of John, in 1406. In the Parliament of 1414, which met at Leicester, Thomas Waweton represented Bedfordshire while Sir Walter Sandys, son of Sir John, represented Hampshire. It would be natural for them to travel together on their way back south after this Parliamentary session, for Sir Walter to stay for a few days at Great Staughton and for him to visit Thomas Bray and his son John.

Sir Walter Sandys and John Bray would have been the same age and appear to have stayed in contact as John Bray's son Richard is known to have married Sir Walter Sandys' daughter Margaret in about 1430. In 1427, John Bray had acquired Dillington Manor two miles north of Great Staughton. Dillington is just eight miles from Bletsoe.

In 1349, and again in 1361, Central Bedfordshire, including Silsoe and Bletsoe, had suffered very badly from the Great Plague and the resulting shortage of peasant labour had made operation of the larger estates very difficult. Margaret Beauchamp had inherited Bletsoe and other estates after the death of her brother John Beauchamp in 1421 and she lived there with her first husband Sir Oliver St John between their marriage in 1428 and his death in 1437. During this period, she had seven children.

After her first husband Sir Oliver St John died, Margaret Beauchamp needed help in the financial and practical management of Bletsoe and her other estates and she may have recruited Richard Bray from nearby Dillington for this purpose. Richard Bray's first wife Margaret Sandys had died in 1436 leaving him with one son, John the Elder born in 1432. Richard had then married Joan Troughton of Dunstable and their first child, Reginald Bray, was born in 1438.

Richard Bray could easily have travelled from Dillington to Bletsoe each day, but it is more likely that accommodation was provided for him, his second wife Joan and his two young sons at Bletsoe. After a couple of years, Margaret Beauchamp married again. Her husband was John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset and they had one child, Margaret Beaufort, born at Bletsoe in 1443. John Beaufort died the following year, and her second widowhood would have further increased Margaret Beauchamp's dependence on Richard Bray, her estate manager. Her daughter the young Margaret Beaufort would have known the Brays and John and Reginald may even have joined the lessons provided for her and the St John children by their tutor.

Margaret lived at Bletsoe until her marriage to Edmund Tudor in 1455, after which she moved to Lamphey Castle in south-west Wales. After Edmund's death in November 1456, Margaret moved to his brother Jasper's Castle at Pembroke, and this is where her only child Henry was born in January 1457.

Margaret took the initiative in finding a new husband. She married Henry Stafford in January 1458 and lived with him at Bourne in Lincolnshire, one of the estates that Margaret had inherited from her father. By this time, Richard Bray's son was in his early twenties and Margaret may have recruited him into her household at Bourne. It is known that Reginald Bray continued as a member of Margaret's household when she and Henry Stafford moved to Woking Manor in Surrey early in 1467.

After Henry Stafford died in October 1471, Margaret married Thomas Stanley in June 1472. Margaret Beaufort and Thomas Stanley lived at Woking Manor with Reginald Bray as her chief adviser until her son, now King Henry VII, persuaded her to give it to him in 1503.

The move to Woking enabled the Brays and the Sandys to renew their friendship. Sir Walter Sandys' grandson William just one year younger than Reginald Bray had inherited the Sandys family home at East Cholderton west of Andover, forty-five miles from Woking and would later reclaim ownership of The Vyne north of Basingstoke from the Brocas family, taking possession of it in 1488. William Sandys was knighted at the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471. His second son, also William, fought for King Henry VII and was knighted by him at the Battle of East Stoke in 1487. This second Sir William Sandys married Reginald Bray's niece Margery in about 1488 and later became Lord Chamberlain to King Henry VIII.

Meanwhile, the first Sir William's brother Christopher Sandys became a member of Margaret Beaufort's household at Woking and, in 1485 and 1486, he was rewarded by King Henry VII for his faithful service to Henry's mother. In 1489, and no doubt at Reginald Bray's instigation, Christopher was sent to collect the rents from a Manor in Essex whose young heiress was a Ward of Court. He later arranged for his son to marry the heiress.

Christopher Sandys also used his position in Margaret Beaufort's household in regular contact with Reginald Bray to arrange for his two cousins William and Oliver to be appointed as deputies to Reginald when Reginald was awarded the Parkership of two hunting chases in Surrey, one at Guildford and the other at Shere Vachery. Margaret Beaufort is known to have been a frequent visitor to the chase at Guildford. Oliver

Sandys was one of the first members of the Yeomen of the Guard when this group was created by King Henry VII.

The successive relationships between the Brays and the Sandys, and also between the Sandys and the Royal Family, are well-documented. While the presence of Richard Bray and his sons at Bletsoe during Margaret Beaufort's childhood is not supported by any known documents, it is considered to be more plausible than the unsubstantiated claim that Richard Bray was knighted and a surgeon in Worcestershire.

Nick Alexander
nandaalexander@btopenworld.com

21st August 2022