The Stonors and Thomas Betson: Some Neglected Evidence

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Many people will be acquainted with Thomas Betson, Elizabeth Stonor née Croke and her husband William (from 1478 Sir William) Stonor from Eileen Power’s classic but youthful and now outdated Medieval People.¹ When their letters begin, a year after Elizabeth’s marriage to William in 1475, Betson is a member of the household and partnering William in the export of wool. How this association came about has always been mysterious. Power said merely that Betson and Elizabeth were already old friends. C.L. Kingsford, the editor of the Stonor Letters,² guessed that Betson was somehow related to Elizabeth’s first husband, the mercer Thomas Rich. Christine Carpenter thought that Betson must have been a kinsman of Elizabeth herself.³ On equally baseless grounds I stated that Betson had worked briefly for Thomas Rich before Rich’s death.⁴ Everyone was sure that it was from Rich that Elizabeth inherited her interests in the wool trade. The real background ought to have been obvious to Kingsford (and after him, Christine Carpenter). Unfortunately Kingsford made one false assumption that has never been questioned. Although Thomas Rich had made his will on 2 July 1471, Kingsford supposed that he had died only in August 1474. As a result he ignored the evidence that the husband who died that year (in fact on 3 September) was John Fen, a wealthy stockfishmonger and merchant of the staple of Calais, whom Thomas Betson had served as apprentice and then factor.

This unsuspected marriage therefore clarifies Elizabeth’s relationship with Betson and explains William Stonor’s subsequent venture into the wool trade in association with Betson as co-shipper, as well as Fen’s various appearances in the Stonor letters and papers. It clears up some further mysteries: how Betson came to have a long-standing (and not wholly cordial) acquaintance with Elizabeth’s mother Margaret Croke; why, by his testament of 19 August 1474, John Fen bequeathed £100 apiece to the children of Thomas Rich; why Fen’s two younger children, Margaret and Hugh, were ‘in the charge of Elizabeth Stonor as early as March 1477’ (Kingsford assumed that William Stonor had purchased their wardship and, by a misreading of letter 282, that he resold it after Elizabeth’s death – in actuality Elizabeth was their mother); why in 1476 Elizabeth was having difficulties with two of Fen’s executors (no. 208)⁵ and why in 1477 and 1478 (no. 227) Elizabeth was supplied with wax and tapers ‘for the mind of Master Fen the 3rd day of September’. John Fen, clearly, was meant when in August 1477 (no. 168) Elizabeth was making preparations to hold the annual obit of ‘mine husband’. In deciding otherwise Kingsford had to disregard the facts that Elizabeth was never sold wax for a memorial service for Thomas Rich and that in his will Rich had explicitly said that no month’s mind was to be kept for him.

Rich’s last will and testament was drawn up on 2 July 1471 but not admitted to probate until 4 October 1475.⁶ Internal evidence suggests that it was made with a degree of urgency. If Rich had lived for a further three years he would surely have brought it up to date during that time. As it was, he left unfulfilled duties as the executor of his father, Richard Rich, and still retained goods that he was required to dispose of in accordance with his father’s testament. He charged his own executors to make an inventory of these and left £10 to a scrivener ‘to make up the reckoning between my father and me’ and provide copies for the various people concerned. In 1471, too, Rich’s son John (the only child that he


² C.L. Kingsford, ed., Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483, Camden Society Third Series 29, 30 (1919) and 34 (1924).

³ Introduction to Kingsford’s Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483, Camden Society Third Series 29, 30 (1919) and 34 (1924). To avoid unfairly associating Kingsford with a text that contains none of his proof-reading corrections (see Alison Hanham, ‘Varieties of Error and Kingsford’s Stonor Letters and Papers’, The Ricardian, vol. 11 (1997-99), pp. 345-52). Page refs. will be to the consecutive nos. inserted in parentheses in this so-called ‘reissue’.


⁵ Tentatively dated by Kingsford to ‘[? May 1478]’ this was in fact written between 18 May and 12 Sept. 1476, when Elizabeth had received news of what she calls ‘your falling’ – an expression that might mean that William had suffered an epileptic fit but could also imply a sudden seizure of any kind.

⁶ Public Record Office, PRO, 20 Wattys, PROB. 11/6, f. 147r-147v. I am most grateful to Anne Sutton for sharing her notes on this. She also read an earlier and different draft of the present paper and raised a number of interesting questions for consideration.
specifically named) was still young enough to require the nurse to whom Thomas left 40s. In case Elizabeth was again pregnant, Thomas said carefully that the child, ‘if any such be,’ should take an equal share in the third of his goods which went by custom to his children when they came of age or married. Was a further child in fact born?

Kingsford’s preconception that Thomas Rich had lived until August 1474 prevented him reading John Fen’s testament and will with due attention. From his perspective as editor of the whole collection of Stonor family letters Fen must have seemed of peripheral importance and he was not one of the civic notabilities whom Kingsford would have encountered in his researches for the edition of Stow’s Survey of London which he had published in 1908.

Evidently he saw no significance in the fact that Fen’s chief executor and administrator of his testament was his second wife, named Elizabeth. At the date of the will, ‘Elizabeth now my wife’ was carrying a child. Presumably she was also the mother of Fen’s younger daughter, to whose nurse he bequeathed ten marks. Unlike Thomas Rich he made careful provision for an annual obit, ordering that as long as Elizabeth remained alive his executors should hold one in his parish church of St Margaret Moses, in Friday Street, Bread Street Ward, London.

Fen’s ‘last will’, dealing with real estate, is still more interesting. Straight after his death his feoffees to use, ‘after due request by Elizabeth now my wife to them’, were to make her a legal estate for life in his lands and tenements ‘as well copyhold as freehold being at Stepney, and my place that I now dwell in, with the tenancies there annexed, set in the parish of St Margaret Moses’. After her death his place in London was to be devised to finance a perpetual chantry in St Margaret’s and an annual obit for, among others, his two wives. The properties in Stepney would then go to his son John Fen and the heirs of his body, and in default of such issue to ‘the child male being now within my wife’s belly, if there be any such, and to the heirs of his body.’ In November 1474 Fen’s widow and executrix was granted administration, being represented at the hearing by her procurator – none other than John Croke, father of the Elizabeth who had been married to Thomas Rich and would shortly become the wife of William Stonor. Her son Hugh Fen was possibly born about that time.

In his testament Fen described Thomas Betson as ‘my factor and servant’, meaning a right-hand man who was his accredited representative in dealings at Calais with foreign customers and English officials and in conducting financial negotiations in Bruges and Antwerp. Betson’s exact age is unknowable. One guess would make him at least twenty-three and nearing the end of his eight-year apprenticeship as a stapler when Elizabeth married his master, most probably in 1472. At that date Fen had two known children by his previous wife (also named Elizabeth) and the new mistress of the household brought with her four, or perhaps five, of her own. If there was a posthumous child by Thomas Rich he or she had died by 1 July 1475 when Elizabeth’s brothers-in-law Sir William and John Stocker were among those who stood surety for the payment of Fen’s legacy to the children of Thomas Rich, named in the bond (in reverse order of ages?) as John, Katherine, Joan and Anne. Perhaps it was under Fen’s aegis, and with his blessing, that Betson was betrothed to Fen’s stepdaughter Katherine Rich and became for Elizabeth ‘my son Betson’. While Betson would always treat Elizabeth with the deference due to his master’s wife, a liking obviously grew up between them. There may have been another bond: a shared background in the particular strain of English religious experience that put special stress on private and personal prayer, a ‘virtuous’ life and good works. It has not been sufficiently noted that Betson’s letters show that he, at least, was intensely and overtly religiously-minded -- and somewhat priggish with it. Thus he began a letter to Elizabeth on 17 May 1478 (no. 211):

Liketh it your good ladyship to know that on Trinity Eve last past I came unto Calais and I thank the good Lord heartily I had a full fair passage. And the better, I know well, it was through your good prayers. Of the which, if I durst be so bold, I will beseech your ladyship of continuance. And I to my power shall remember your good ladyship, with all your lovers, daily amongst my poor prayers. Of the which, if they be good and acceptable unto God, my master your husband, your good ladyship with all your children, I beseech Him heartily ye may have part. ... Our Blessed Lord Jesu Christ preserve you both in honour and worship virtuously to continue to God’s pleasure, and also to send you good and profitable counsel and grace to do thereafter. This is and shall be my prayer, for sooth, every day.

7 PRO, PCC, 17 Wattys, Prob. 11/6, ff. 125v-126v, written 19 August 1474, probated ?November. 1474.
8 Stonor 1996, p. 55 n. 5 and p. 58. Since a bond to secure payment of a legacy remained in force until the youngest heir married or became 21, it would be logical to list legatees from youngest to eldest.
Part at least of Fen’s money had been invested in the export trade in wool. After his death Thomas Betson must have continued as factor for Elizabeth and her co-executors: Fen had bequeathed him £40 ‘to the intent that he be true and faithful to my executors.’ Her new husband, William Stonor, then inherited his services.

Eileen Power put together the essays in *Medieval People* to convey her own enthusiasm for social and economic history to youthful readers. (She was yet to pursue the researches into the wool trade that would correct some of the information she had derived from H.E. Malden’s introduction to his selection of Cely letters and papers, published in 1900.) Kingsford belonged to an earlier historical school and evinced little interest in financial matters, so he failed to appreciate that Fen had been a wealthy man: the third of his disposable estate in goods, money and chattels that went to his children amounted to just over £1,500. An equivalent sum therefore constituted his widow’s customary third. She would also retain control over the £758 19s ½d due to Margaret and Hugh Fen as their share in their father’s estate when they married or reached the age of twenty-one (no. 264). Hugh would not attain his majority until 1495 or 1496, (Fen’s two elder children, Elizabeth and John Fen, fall out of the picture because Fen had assigned their keeping to ‘my worshipful cousin Hugh Fenne, gentleman’). During the minorities of her children by Thomas Rich Elizabeth had similar use of the £100 apiece that Fen had left them. Very probably this money was their inheritance from Rich, which Fen, as Elizabeth’s new husband, had meanwhile employed (‘occupied’) in his own businesses.

Additionally, Elizabeth had her life-interest in Fen’s ‘place’ in London and properties in Stepney. She was receiving rents from the latter by July 1476 (p. 474). The deeds were still to be sealed a month or so later (no. 208), although she then told William that her co-executors, the priest Harry Fen (John Fen’s brother) and Laurence Fincham, were ‘reasonably well cooled: they be not so hot as they were, and yet they will be better hereafter, I doubt not’. At much the same time an undated letter to William from Elizabeth’s brother John Croke (no. 183) refers to William’s ‘matters at Stepney’, the ‘surrender of Hugh Fen to your feoffees’ and the need to prove that Hugh and John Fen (seniors) had been jointly seized of certain properties. Gender-based assumptions are evident here. Elizabeth wrote of ‘my deeds’, Croke, on the other hand, of William’s feoffees, ‘your’ land and ‘your’ place of Stepney. As a result, Kingsford jumped to the conclusion (p. 58) that William had purchased this house of John Fen’s. It was, of course, Elizabeth’s by a life-time assignment. If Elizabeth Fen, widow, was the London gentlewoman to whom Thomas Stonor referred in no. 142 (undated), no wonder he feared that she would be snapped up while William dawdled in his courtship. She was a prize on the market.

The evidence is against Kingsford’s supposition that Elizabeth’s interests in the wool trade were a prime attraction of the match: ‘Sir William Stonor had of course a personal interest in the wool-trade as a great sheep grazier on the Chilterns and Cotswolds’ (p. 72). The Stonors possessed sheep, but these were leased out to tenants, who presumably made part of their profit by selling the clip to a middleman. My perception is rather that Stonor, who was twenty-five in 1475, a country gentleman of increasing ‘worship’ and accustomed to a relatively steady income from rents, simply married into the wool export business, with its less predictable profits and heavy overheads and would have concurred with Kingsford (p. 61) in describing it as a ‘commercial speculation’. The overwhelming likelihood is that since much of Elizabeth’s fortune was invested in wool under Betson’s management, Stonor continued the arrangement, relying on Betson’s services and taking out the membership in the Staple Company by purchase

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10 Lacey (p. 156) reported (mistakenly, it turns out) that under John Croke’s will his Rich grandchildren received £10. In the hope that Margaret and Hugh Fen were similarly remembered I consulted Croke’s testament (PRO, PCC, 33 Wattys, PROB. 11/6, ff. 252r-253r, written on 12 Aug. 1477 and probated 19 Nov. 1477) and will (PRO, PCC, 4 Logge, PROB. 11/7, ff. 26r-28r, written on 26 Sept. 1477 and probated 19 Nov. 1481). (Kingsford (p. 324) and Lacey (passim) confused the will and the testament. Confusion is furthered by the PRO on-line in describing it as a ‘commercial speculation’). The Riches in fact appear only as residuary legatees of one half of the goods allotted to any of Croke’s 5 sons who died before the age of 21 (none did so). Margaret and Hugh Fen receive no mention: perhaps the Riches did only because Croke had been their father’s executor.
11 John, who would be apprenticed to Fen’s executor, Laurence Fincham, fishmonger (no. 249), came of age in 1482 (p. 57) so he was born in 1461. His sister Elizabeth was also under age in August 1474. In his will of Feb. 1476 Hugh Fen left each of them one of his gowns: Roger Virgoe, ‘The will of Hugh atte Fenne, 1476’, Norfolk Record Society, vol. 56, *A Miscellany* (1993 for 1991), pp. 31-57, p. 50. I thank Anne Sutton’s kindness for a copy of this article.
12 E.g. no. 61 (27 Dec. 1460): 80 sheep delivered to a farmer for 4 years on a buy or return basis and Addenda, p. 492: a mere 10 owned by Edmund Stonor, for which the rent was owing. The only shorn wool specified in this connection is a tiny amount that Jane Stonor had acquired from her husband’s estate, perhaps in settlement of a debt (no. 157, p. 251). For Hugh Fen’s sizeable flocks, ‘in farm’ to tenants, Roger Virgoe, ‘The will . . . ’, p. 49.
Both William and his brother Thomas may have become disillusioned with the profits to be made on exported wool. It could easily be two years before the final return from a sale at Calais was received in England and Sir John Paston warned his brother against pursuing a lady whose money was ‘not ready but in the hands of merchants of the Staple’.15 Moreover, the ‘stock’ (capital) of nearly £1,159 that Elizabeth had invested in the wool trade was in effect borrowed since it comprised the £400 that Fen had bequeathed to her children by Thomas Rich and the £758 19s ½d due to Margaret and Hugh Fen as their share in Fen’s estate. Either from capital or profits, fixed sums had to be repaid at stated times as each child married or reached the age of twenty-one.

Thomas Stonor for one came round to the view that his brother had damaged the family standing by ‘marrying into trade’. Reports reached Elizabeth that Thomas was accusing her of plundering William’s income for her own commercial purposes (no. 175, 7 November 1476). The passage in which she rehearses Thomas’s slur is damaged but may be reconstructed as ‘[that] I [should] pluck from your livelihood all that I can to make a great [feat therewith]’. ‘Feat’ was the common term for a trading activity. It seems that Thomas also thought it unfitting for a gentleman of worship like William to be kept in a London household ‘among a meinie of boys’ – ‘a train of no-account youths’, presumably the apprentices – and uttered other reflections on the servants which Elizabeth indignantly described as sheer impertinence (no. 180, 7 March 1477). (She, on the other hand, claimed to criticise Thomas only for his own good.) Snobbery similar to Thomas Stonor’s was expressed by Sir John Paston when, irked by the unexpected acumen of an aunt by marriage, he dismissed her as ‘in many things full like a wife of London … and she will needs take advice of Londoners, which I tell her cannot advise her how she should deal well with anybody of worship’.15

In a triangular relationship between Betson, Elizabeth and William, William is the silent member because his letters are not preserved. His attitudes can only be known in so far as they are reflected in letters from the other two. (Thus, William and Elizabeth were obviously on affectionate and intimate terms although they led separate lives for much of the time.) Betson was plainly more at ease with his old master’s widow than he was with her new husband. Due courtesies were observed between the two and gifts exchanged, usually in the form of edible ‘dainties’. A chamber was kept for Betson at Stonor (no. 172). Pressure of business meant that in June 1478 (nos. 217-18) he had to decline an invitation ‘to come unto Stonor to see my best beloved etc. and also to make me merry.’ But he belonged more to Elizabeth’s London establishment (Fen’s ‘place’ in or near Friday Street?), where he told William, rather patronisingly, on 25 March 1478 (no. 205), ‘we mean here to be merry for the season that my lady is here and when night, when I deem ye were in your bed, for mine eyes smarted, so God help me’.

But this is one of Betson’s less self-consciously deferential letters to William. Two years earlier, on 22 April 1476 (no. 162), and again on 17 May 1478 (no. 212), he felt obliged to thank William for his ‘gentle cheer and faithful love’, ‘on my behalf nothing deserved’, and assure him of his own ‘good heart and will’ (no. 162). Even when his ‘old friend’ Elizabeth sends a letter and token, ‘with all inwardness of mine heart I thank your ladyship and of your continual favour and kindly love, the which always full largely your good [ladyship] showeth unto me, and of mine part as yet nothing deserved unto you nor to yours’ (no. 217). Such ingratiating phrases rarely occur in similar collections. When they do they mean that the writer is begging a favour, whether from superior or equal. In Betson’s letters to Elizabeth and William they suggest insecurity. So it would be interesting to know something about his previous relationship with John Fen. Had Betson enjoyed an esteem and trust from Fen that he lacked from his new employer? Or had a degree of subservience been ingrained from his first days as an apprentice?

A sense of insecurity and obligation would help explain one unattractive feature of Betson’s character. It is undeniable that he was a tale-bearer and, however well-intentioned, a mischief maker. I fear that it

13 Betson’s drawing of the mark is shown in the frontispiece of Stonor 1996, typically without the ascription given in the original edition.
15 Ibid., no. 313.
may have been Betson who passed on Thomas Stonor’s disobliging comments on Elizabeth, doubtless from zeal on his mistress’s behalf. On the other hand, when William sent a gift of capons to London, with instructions to Betson to take the best two for himself, he may have been flattered by Betson’s man-to-man report (no. 207): ‘Sir, I took 2 capons, but they were not the best ... and indeed, to say the truth, I could not be suffered. My lady your wife ... took her will in that matter, like as she doth in all other. I dare not write you the truth till you come home’. But should Kingsford’s ‘honest and faithful Betson’ have thus peached on Elizabeth? And what further was he going to tell William verbally? Equally, when Elizabeth was on bad terms with her mother in December 1477 Betson need not have pandered to her prejudices (and revealed mutual antipathy between Margaret and himself) by reporting on 22 December (no. 185):

I spoke unto my lady your mother on Saint Thomas Day and she would scarcely open her mouth unto me. She is displeased and I know not wherefor, without her old sickness be fallen on her again. God send her once a merry countenance and a friendly tongue, or else shortly to the Minories – whereof she waxeth weary now, as it was told me but late.

Similarly, on 31 July 1478 (no. 224) he regaled Elizabeth with gossip picked up from the midwife who had care of her daughter Anne:

Mother midwife told me that neither my lady your mother, my lady Stocker [Elizabeth’s sister] nor her husband came once to see my cousin Anne sith she came to her, nor yet asked once how she fared. And if my lady your mother meet my cousin Anne she will say no more but ‘God’s blessing have ye and mine’ and so go her way forth as though she had no joy of her. When ye come to London I shall tell you more.16

Ironically enough, he had just made it plain that it was precisely such tattling that Margaret Croke held against him:

Sith I came home to London I met with my lady your mother and God wot she made me right sullen cheer with her countenance whiles I was with her. Methought it long till I was departed. She broke unto me of old fern years [‘brought up old matters’] and specially she break to me of the tale I told her between the vicar that was and her. She said the vicar never fared well sith – he took it so much to heart.

Apparently quite unaware that he had done anything wrong in officiously reporting what the unhappy vicar had done or said against Margaret, Betson adds self-righteously, ‘I told her a light answer again and so I departed from her. I had no joy to tarry with her. She is a fine merry woman, but ye shall not know it, nor yet find it, nor none of yours, by that I see in her’. A month earlier, however, Betson had passed on without comment Margaret’s blessing and good wishes to Elizabeth, to ‘my cousin Katherine and to all [her?] sisters’ and to William (no. 217).

Kingsford was probably right to describe Betson as William’s faithful and devoted servant, although it has to be said that this assessment rested entirely on Betson’s own statements. William himself may not have felt the same high regard for his partner as Elizabeth evinced. Overseas trading conditions were difficult in the years between 1476 and 1479, when inflation in the Flemish money market affected exchange rates with sterling. William may have seen only that the returns on investment in wool were less than expected and been inclined to attribute this to Betson’s mismanagement, if not downright dishonesty. Perhaps under the stress of illness, he evidently expressed serious misgivings in May 1478, just as Betson was about to travel to Calais. Why else did Betson feel obliged on 17 May (no. 212) to assure him of his reliability by promising to lose no time in selling their wool as soon as customers appeared? He added defensively:

And also, sir, I beseech you to be my good master and faithful lover, as ever heretofore to my knowledge I have found you. And sir, I trust to God, as for my part, so to endeavour me for your mastership that with God’s grace both ye and my lady your wife shall well understand and know that I love both your worships and your profit. And so it shall prove indeed, with God’s help.

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16 Both Power and Lacey seriously misread this letter. Power omitted any mention of the midwife and depicted Betson as ‘chosen to look after his Katherine’s little sister Anne when she was ill in London’. Medieval People, p. 134. Lacey (p. 158 n. 45) took it that Anne was living with Margaret Croke, despite Margaret’s refusal to speak to her, and thought that Sir William and Lady Stocker were ostracising Margaret rather than Anne. She also argued that Betson’s various comments meant that Margaret was suffering deep depression after her husband’s death.
It appears later that William’s illness may have entailed some mental disturbance. That could account for the very odd features of a story that reached Betson in Calais. On Betson’s instructions, the apprentice Goddard Oxbridge then sent William a vehement denial of his own supposed role in this (no. 213, Goddard to William, 21 May 1478). In brief, it seems that Betson had been told (by William?) that Goddard’s fellow-servant, Davy Wrixham, had claimed in front of Elizabeth and one of her brothers that ‘Master Betson’ had confessed to Goddard that he (Betson) had tried to bring Davy into disrepute with William. What Goddard now brought to mind was that about Easter the previous year Davy had confided to him that Betson had been refused absolution until his confessor was satisfied that he was ‘in love and charity with [his] neighbours’ by admitting this offence to Davy in person, begging his forgiveness and promising to do his best to rectify the wrong. On the surface this second version of the tale is much more plausible, in view of Betson’s strong religious convictions. Since they would be well known to Davy he could still have invented the story from malice. Goddard, however, was willing to believe that ‘Master Betson’ might undermine Davy’s standing in that way. One may deduce that William was also ready to accept the basic accusation in garbled form a year later.

William’s distrust was alarming, because the time for Betson’s long-awaited marriage to Katherine was at last approaching, together with some agreed settlement to be made on the bride. If William was worried about his finances, Betson was concerned about his high-handed attitude to money: the letters are full of requests for payment by desperate servants and tradesmen and Thomas was sometimes left ‘bare’ of money to pay costs on their wool. On the same 17 May he wrote in a postscript to Elizabeth (no. 211), ‘I will advise you, madam, to remember large expenses and be wary of them. And in likewise my master your husband – it is well done ye remember [remind] him of them, for diverse considerations, as ye know both right well.’

Betson returned to England on 18 June (no. 216). He then learnt that William ‘had been very sore sick’ and implies a disordered mind when he tells Elizabeth, ‘your ladyship must cause him to be merry and of glad cheer and to put away all fantasies and unthrifti [unprofitabl] thoughts that comes no good of, but only hurtful. A man may hurt himself by riotous [extravagant, profligate] means – it is good to be wary’.

Marriage marked the step from youth to maturity: ‘marriage maketh man’ might well have been the saying. It also conferred a recognised advance in social status. A clear distinction between the married and unmarried staplers in Calais is shown by the challenge that twelve of the married men issued to twelve of the ‘order’ of bachelors for an archery match on 17 August 1478.17 A century later, when the Company was enforcing quotas, married staplers were permitted to ship thirty-five sarplers a year, while a bachelor was restricted to twenty sarplers (and then only if he was housing two other people).18 Until his betrothed reached marriageable age Betson remained in a state of dependency on Elizabeth, and still more William, to whom, as Katherine’s stepfather, he had to commit her upbringing. And on William’s generosity would depend the size of her marriage portion. In December 1476 Elizabeth had gently reminded William of his obligations to another of her daughters (no. 176) – or perhaps used William as an excuse to discourage some particular overtures? She had told the other parties that she had to consult William but that ‘I wist right well that ye would be right kind and loving father if God fortuned that ye and they should deal’.

Betson faced his long wait with a mixture of Christian fortitude and anxious impatience. Katherine’s date of birth cannot be established with any certainty, apart from the fact that she had been born and baptised before 6 November 1465, when her great-grandfather, William Gregory, left her 20s. as his god-daughter (pp. 55 and 262). Kingsford, who conjectured that she had been born in 1462 or 1463,19 took it for granted that she was the eldest of Elizabeth’s children by Thomas Rich. Of the four named in July 1475, John, born before 2 July 1471, was certainly the youngest.20 It seems less clear that Anne rather than

17 Hanham, Celys and their World, p. 44: PRO SC1 59/47. Pace Colin Richmond (‘Books and Pictures …’, The Ricardian, vol. 13 (2003) p. 399), to see such recreations as an exercise in ‘male bonding’ is to ignore the context. The participants were already ‘bonded’ in the Fellowship of the Staple – to all intents and purposes an all-male society in which they addressed one another as ‘brother’.


19 He seems to have reached that conclusion on the double assumption that Katherine would have reached puberty before her marriage to Betson about Aug.-Sept. 1478 and that at the time a girl would typically do so at the age of 15.

20 John Rich will be the ‘son’ of William Stonor for whom russet was supplied on 3 Dec. 1478 (no. 235) and whom William was intending to send to school at Ewelme with the master Roger Makney in 1478-79, provided that the district was free of the plague: PRO, SC1 63/311; Hanham, ‘Varieties of Error’, p. 351. I am grateful to Prof. Yukio Arai for the summary of his paper identifying Makney as the schoolmaster at Ewelme: Yukio Arai, ‘Sir William Stonor and the God’s House at Ewelme’, Memoirs of the Faculty of Education, Kumamoto University no. 51 The Humanities, Nov. 2002, pp. 103-107.
Katherine was the next youngest. For which daughter in late 1476 – Anne or Joan Rich or Margaret Fen? – had Elizabeth received an offer of marriage from the friends of a ‘child’ – an imprecise word that could imply no more than minority? That Anne did in fact marry in the course of the ‘lost’ year 1477, from which almost all the letters are missing, is the obvious conclusion to be drawn from Betson’s letter of 31 July 1478 (no. 224), where he reports to Elizabeth that ‘my cousin Anne’, who had been in the care of a midwife, is now ‘whole and right well amended and as a woman should be: there is no fault, Our Blessed Lord be thanked and his Blessed Mother. Good madam, by the next that comes let her have all her clothes – she hath need unto them and that knoweth Our Lord’. Anne was evidently married to the mercer Richard Thornell by March 1489.21 If a child had been born to them in 1478 it did not survive (as Betson’s report perhaps implies). When Thornell made his will in August 1501 their five children were all under age. The other Rich sister, Jane or Joan, remained unmarried and became a nun in the Minories, at unknown date.22 If she is the ‘mistress Jane’ named in no. 248 as paid a total of £4 14s 8d on Elizabeth’s account and in nos. 249-50 as supporting efforts to change Betson’s will she, like Anne, seems more probably Katherine’s older, not younger, sister.

Reordering the ages would help explain the evidence of Katherine’s immaturity which Betson’s letter to her of June 1476 (no. 166) reveals. The child with whom he joked and who, he was disconcerted to learn, had gone searching for him in some English ‘Calais’, was surely closer (by mental age at least) to ten rather than the thirteen that Kingsford and Power supposed. William did posterity a service when he happened to preserve this one letter to Katherine. Uniquely, it shows an adult addressing a child on her own perceived level. In writing to Katherine, Thomas gave rein to the imaginative and playful sides of his personality and appears at his most engaging. The anxious groom had asked the apprentice Thomas Howlake, whom he teasingly calls Katherine’s ‘gentle squire’, for news of her. Betson’s long letter, written at intervals, is full of these little teases: he will keep for himself half the good wishes that Katherine has sent and return the other half back to her; he thanks her for her care of his horse, ‘and my wife shall thank you for him hereafter’, and he will be home shortly, ‘with all hands and all feet’. Katherine, who had lived in the same household as Thomas for four years, knew him well and could be expected to enjoy these sallies. At the conclusion of his letter, ‘when every man was gone to his dinner and the clock smote noon and all our household cried after me and bade me, “Come down!” “Come down!” “At dinner!” “At once!”’ he adds ‘And what answer I gave them, ye know it of old’.

All the same, the letter places Katherine firmly in her designated role as future wife and mother and consists mainly of a set of variations on the theme of time and age with which Betson’s thoughts were preoccupied. He begins by scolding Katherine for not eating enough ‘that ye might wax and grow fast to be a woman’. He tells her to greet his horse and ask him for four years of his age to help her, ‘and I will at my coming home give him 4 of my years and 4 horse loaves to amends. Tell him that I prayed him so’. Would the additional four years bring Katherine up to a more marriageable age of thirteen or fourteen? And she must give his regards to the clock, which has the unmannerly habit of putting itself forward, and tell it to amend its behaviour. Power commented rightly that the letter ‘brings [Betson] to warm life again’.23 It is not so obvious that Katherine comes alive here, so it is a relief to learn from other letters that this carefully groomed child-bride could be wilful. On 22 December 1476 (no. 185) Betson said ‘I am wroth with Katherine because she sendeth me no writing. I have [written] to her diverse times and for lack of answer I wax weary. She might get a secretary if she would. And if she will not, it shall put me to mid

Mine own sweet cousin, it was told me but late that ye were at Calais to seek me but ye could not see me nor find me. For sooth, ye might have come to my counter and there ye should both find me and see me and not have faulted of me. But ye sought me in a wrong Calais, and that ye should well know if ye were here and saw this Calais – as would God ye were and some of them with you that were with you at your gentle Calais.

23 Medieval People, p. 131.
However sheltered her life in the country, had Katherine never gathered that Thomas and the apprentices periodically travelled abroad by ship or heard anyone talking about Calais as an important town across the sea, for which the wool stored in her mother’s house at Stepney was destined?

Although William’s promises to Betson and Katherine may have proved deceptive, so that after their marriage Elizabeth had to beg William ‘to remember my son Betson, for he hath much ado with money now and he trusteth verily to your promise . . . For God’s sake, sir, let him not be forgotten’ (no. 229, 5 October 1478), on 24 June 1478 (no. 218) Betson wrote to thank William for the ‘courteous and loving letter’ in which he had reported Katherine’s excellent manners and behaviour. Overworked and overexcited that his marriage was at last in sight, Betson became a little incoherent with gratitude, thanking William for his careful education of Katherine and, with William’s recent illness in mind, sending him his best wishes for an edifying end:

> I beseech Our Blessed Lord … to reward your mastership with heaven at your ending for your good disposition to her wards, in good exhortations giving, … or else, truly, she could not be of that disposition – virtuous and goodly – her youth remembered and considered. … I beseech God for His mercy, and Our Blessed Lady, to send your mastership and all yours as well to fare as I would mine own self, and to preserve you in virtuous living, and also to send you sad [‘solemn’] remembrance of all good beginning. And then, without doubt, ye shall make, with God’s help, a worshipful ending to God’s pleasure and to the honour and worship of all them that love you heartily. Sir, I am too bold thus to write, but God knoweth mine heart.

After offering William encouragement in some pious and charitable work that he had in mind – ‘If ye continue your intent ye shall be glad thereof ere this day 3 years’ – Betson concluded with the apology, ‘I fare like a sorry piper – when I begin I cannot leave’. By way of postscript and in a more light-hearted vein, he then added that he meant to interrogate Katherine and if he found that William’s praises were unjustified, ‘our vicar here, so God help me, shall cry out upon her within these 10 weeks and less’ – punning on ‘cry out upon’ meaning ‘publicly denounce’ and ‘cry’: ‘proclaim the banns for’. ‘By that time I shall be ready in every point, with God’s grace, and so I would she were. For sooth, ye may believe me of it’.

On the same day, however, he wrote to Elizabeth in a very different style (no. 217). Inadvertently, the result is a comic masterpiece of mingled indignation and dismay. Katherine was far from ready for the wedding and Betson grumbled mightily that he was expected to buy Katherine’s clothes with no help from her mother. (Elizabeth was at Stonor and evidently unwell, as she often was, but Betson clearly felt put-upon).24 If that was what Sir William and Elizabeth really wanted, their obedient servant would blunder ahead like the proverbial horse ‘blind Bayard’: ‘it shall be to me painful but I must and shall [do] as well as I may’. Elizabeth might at least advise him on Katherine’s needs: ‘she must have girdles, 3 at the least, and how they shall be made I know not. And many other things she must have: ye know well what they be. In faith I know not’. Loath as he was to ‘displease or to trouble any person’, if anyone did come to his aid, he added peevishly, for goodness sake let them do it ungrudgingly – he would be ‘the gladder a great deal’ if it were done ‘with a courage and with good will’.

Betson must have been at least thirty when the marriage at last took place, in August or September 1478. After 5 October 1478 we hear nothing of the couple for almost a year. Then on 29 September 1479 (no. 249) William’s agent Richard Bryan describes the scene at the house in Stepney where Betson lies dangerously ill – probably of bubonic plague. Bryan reports sympathetically to William on ‘the gentleman’’s condition: ‘in good faith we saw by his demeanour that he might not prosper in this world … and we desired and prayed him to be of good comfort, and so comforted him as heartily as we could in your name and in my lady’s’. The party then went downstairs, leaving the invalid, who ‘fell into a great slumbering and was busily moved in his spirits’. Possibly William had conveyed messages expressing the affectionate anxiety that Kingsford detected in this report, but Bryan’s urgent commission was to secure the assets, with the help of ‘Mistress Jane’. Together they packed up all the silver plate not in immediate use and late at night Bryan questioned the apparently dying man about his debts to Stonor. Betson, always sensitive to slights, evidently felt that Bryan’s interrogation about his dealings reflected William’s distrust of his honesty. He roused himself sufficiently to assure Bryan that ‘as for the occupation’ of the capital investment over the past eighteen months, his ledgers were open to inspection. (Had William not looked

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24 I now think it likely that it was not Lady Botiller but Elizabeth who, in 1479, coveted Mary Stonor’s bread-maker and bullied William into trying to remove her from his protesting sister: ‘Varieties of Error’, p. 351, from PRO, SC1 62/93. The letter belongs with nos. 241 and 242, which Kingsford dated to June and July of either 1479 or 1481.
at them during that time?) ‘As he will answer between God and devil, the book that he bought it by, ye shall be privy thereto. And the book that he sold by ye shall be also privy to, which two books shall be his judges’.

Bryan and Jane had got there just in time to set about the secret mission with which William Stonor had entrusted them: to persuade Betson to alter his will so as to remove two of his named executors – Humphrey Starkey, the recorder of London, and Alderman Robert Tate, mercer and lieutenant of the Staple in 1478 – and leave Katherine solely responsible. In his next letter (no. 250) Bryan said darkly that ‘there hath been many special labours and secret i-made since Mistress Jane and I were come, to the contrary disposition that we came for’. So far ‘my Mistress Betson attendeth, all things and counsels laid apart, to abide and trust in your good fatherhood and in my lady’, but Jane must at all costs remain with Katherine until matters became clearer. ‘Diverse folks’, whose names would be revealed to William and Elizabeth later, ‘thus hath and would exhort [Katherine] to a contrarier disposition, had not we been here betimes. And Mistress Jane is worthy much thank’. We do not learn the outcome of the struggle for influence or who these ‘diverse folks’ may have been, because Betson recovered under the ministrations of the specialist whom Margaret Croke, Katherine’s grandmother and godmother, had called in.

Kingsford and Power expressed surprise that the partnership between Stonor and Betson should have come to an end, despite their enjoyment of ‘an affectionate friendship as well as a business tie’, or an ‘old friendship’. Despite, too, said Christine Carpenter, ‘the manifest charm which [Betson’s] letters have already shown to us’. Reasons are not hard to deduce. Betson surely resented Bryan’s interrogation about his business dealings. Nor can he have liked either the attempt to remove the two men whom he had carefully named as Katherine’s co-executors or the pressure put upon his vulnerable young wife. In any case, Elizabeth’s death probably removed William’s incentive to engage further in what seemed an unproductive commerce. Elizabeth’s last extant letter was written to William on 26 March 1479 (no. 237). On 15 October the mercer Thomas Bradbury expected to see her in London ‘hastily’ (no. 252). Her life had little longer to run. One of William’s creditors asks to be remembered to ‘my good lady your wife’ on 12 June (no. 254) but on 16 January 1480 William Harleston sends condolences on her death (no. 260): ‘for verily she was a good woman and a well disposed. And I pray God send you no worse than she was’.

It was Elizabeth rather than William who had taken a keen interest in their trading activities. Thomas Henham, Howlake and others of her ‘meinie of boys’ duly provided William with news of shipments and sales, but he did not keep their reports consistently. The partnership lasted, in name at least, into 1482 (no. 310), when Betson owed William £1,200 and William’s adviser Richard Page told him that if Betson were willing to settle the debt ‘and will not deal with your stock’ William should ask for repayment in cash, ‘for I would not ye were encumbered with ware – that will not be your profit, so it seems me.’ Did Betson buy him out at that stage? Or was this one of the unpaid debts in the list originally annexed to the testament and will that Betson drew up in June 1483?

The Betson family had moved from Stepney to a house in the parish of Allhallows Barking by the Tower when Thomas drew up this document. In several places a lack of clarity suggests hurried composition. If the registered copy reflects the original accurately, it was written on 12 June and Betson set his seal to it the following day, 13 June. It was, of course, a time of anxiety and uncertainty in London. On the same 13 June William Lord Hastings was suddenly executed at the Tower. Equally, English merchants were at risk from the civil unrest in Flanders and Betson’s primary concern was that he might die ‘at Calais or in any other place beyond the sea, as God knoweth what shall fall’. In that case he apparently wished to be buried at the relevant parish church, ‘not outrageously but soberly and discreetly and in a mean (‘moderate’) manner, that it may be unto the worship and laud of Almighty God and to the weal and profit of my soul’. The first charge on his executors, however, was to ensure that an annual obit was sung in the church of burial for the next fifteen years. He also gave careful directions for an annual obit to be observed in London.

There were personal bequests to members of Betson’s family: his sister Elizabeth Mattok and his [step]mother Alice Wodward at ‘Pomfret’, while his brother John, whom the Stonors had owed for supplies of wine in 1478 (no. 224), was forgiven all the money that Thomas had paid on his behalf and

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26 Stonor 1996 retains a misprinted ‘1 October’ in the heading. The internal dating is 15 Oct.
27 Kingsford, p. 56, misdated it May instead of June. Together with the codicil added in Sept. 1485, the will is PRO, PCC, 24 Logge, PROB. 11/7, ff. 184v-185v.
for which, Thomas said carefully, he held his obligations. ‘Hewe Fenne’ was left ten marks and ‘Margarete Fynne’ ten shillings. (Betson does not term them his ‘cousins’, as Kingsford implied.) His apprentice Henry Pantry received five pounds and a Richard Chaver (?) two, while Thomas Henham, perhaps now advanced to the status of factor, was bequeathed five marks. Eight pounds were ‘to be dealt amongst my maidens after the discretion of my wife as she shall seem most best’. Additionally, and as an afterthought, Betson left twenty pounds to each of his children, over and above their customary third of his goods. He omitted to state whether this was to be paid immediately on his death or only when each became of age.

The testament amply demonstrates the religious mindset of the man who could not send a gift of quails for William without adding, ‘I pray God they may do him good to God-ward, and all them that eat of them’ (no. 216). In 1474 John Fen had been worth more than three times as much as Betson would be in 1483, but the proportion of disposable estate that each earmarked for specified pious and charitable purposes was very different: about six and a half per cent in Fen’s case, perhaps sixty per cent in Betson’s. Fen’s major bequests in this category were for the repair of the parish church of Great Yarmouth and the harbour there. Much else was left to the discretion of his executors. Besides similar, but more extensive, bequests to the houses of friars in London, for the poor, the sick and prisoners and for the upkeep of highways near the city, Betson left £40 to six priests studying divinity, three at Oxford and three at Cambridge, to pray for him for a year; £30 for an ornament in the Staple Chapel in Calais; £16 to buy a pair of antiphonaries for Allhallows Barking and £100 for a priest to say mass in his church of burial for fifteen years. He also allowed a total of £22 10s. for keeping his annual obit over the same period, including 10s a year for the wardens and fellowship of the Craft of Stockfishmongers to drink where it pleased them.29 Partly for their prayers, partly in return for administrative services he left the Fellowship £20 with which to buy some plate.

To pay for these various bequests, Betson’s executors – Katherine, his ‘cousin’ Roger Spenser, goldsmith, and Master Robert Tate, alderman, with the Common Clerk of London, Master William Dunthorp or Dunthorn, as overseer – were to sell his goods ‘to the most advantage, for money’, ‘whoever holds them and whether on this side the sea or beyond it’. ‘Remembering right well’ ‘the great labour and business’ that this would entail, Betson left the three men twenty marks each. His executors were not, however, entrusted with disposing of the sums thus gathered. All the money, it seems (apart presumably from Katherine’s third) was to be paid into the chest of the Stockfishmongers’ Company, whose wardens and fellows were made responsible for hiring (and at need, firing) the mass-priest, for holding the annual obit, and even for administering the third part of the goods that went by custom to Betson’s children, so that during their minorities the Company had ‘the keeping’ of their inheritance ‘and they to set surety for it to the mayor and his brethren of the worshipful city of London, foreseen always that [the wardens and fellowship] be yearly charged with the finding of my said children, according as the manner is, after their poor haviours’. ‘Haviours’ meant wealth, possessions, so ‘as befits their slender means’? At a rough estimate the children’s share would have been about £515 between four or perhaps five of them.

Betson must have held more than nominal membership of the Stockfishmongers’ Company, and had active connections with the trade that are not alluded to in the Stonor papers. It was not entirely unusual to delegate administration of provisions in a will to one’s company, although there were times when the duty was refused: when Robert Gregory left £240 to the Mercers to pay a mass-priest and stage his obit in perpetuity and rather grand style, the mercers considered that the annual cost allowed them insufficient profit and declined the bequest.28 It does seem a little surprising that Katherine (along with her co-executors) was not given the ‘finding’ of her children. Did Betson fear that William Stonor would continue to influence her, or even seize assets to recover a still-unpaid debt? And while Katherine will have received a life-interest in the marital home, it is also odd that a house that Betson had in Holborn was to be enfeoffed at his death, not to the widow for her lifetime, but with immediate ‘full estate and possession’ to ‘Thomas Betson mine eldest son’, who cannot have been more than five years old at the time. In default of any heirs of Thomas junior the property was to descend to Betson’s next eldest son (unnamed), and ‘in default I will my daughters have it to their proper use, to sell it and to divide the money among them equally’.

28 Richard Thornell made genial provision in his testament (f. 52r) for 40s. ‘to be spent at [the] tavern called “The Mitre” in Cheap, in meat and drink amongst good company’, see n. 21.
For the second time Betson outlived the making of a testamentary disposition, surviving the perils of overseas travel to be eventually buried in the church or churchyard of Allhallows as he had hoped. In May 1484, however, he was again in Calais, where he expected, said William Cely, to make a killing (‘to do a great feat’) by selling his share of the huge supply of wool that he, the prominent staplers and mercers Hugh Clopton, Richard Pontesbury and Thomas Grafton and others had bought in the Cotswolds, where they had cornered the market and ‘made sweepstake’. Trading conditions were extremely difficult at the time. Many staplers, including George Cely, breached Staple regulations by arranging to accept payment in England rather than Calais, and with such large stocks on their hands it would be very surprising if Power’s unrelentingly ‘upright Betson’ – Kingsford’s ‘best type of London merchant’ – along with Hugh Clopton and his other associates, did not make similar surreptitious arrangements with John De Lopez, the Spanish Bruges-based wool-buyer and financier.

Betson’s luck ran out a little over a year later when, like many Londoners, he fell victim to the sweating sickness in September 1485. On 25 September he was too ill to make any substantial revisions to his testament of June 1483 and the nuncupative codicil written on his behalf in the third person on that day (not, as Kingsford said, 30 September), and in the presence of his brother John Betson, Thomas Henham and John Kyrkeby, contained only the few changes that he had verbally expressed. The stepmother must have died by then and her intended legacy of forty marks was now to be paid to Thomas’s brother. Katherine was to have the properties lately purchased from Sir John Scott for term of her life. And whereas Betson had previously willed that his feoffees should give estate in his house at Holborn to his son, this was now also willed to Katherine for life. Afterwards both places were to go to his eldest son Thomas, and in default to his second son John and in default to the three daughters, Elizabeth, Agnes and Alice. As Betson had forgotten to state in 1483, if any of the children died under age the share was to go to ‘the other overliving’. And during their nonage the children were to be ‘underneath the guiding and rule’ of Katherine.

Betson died on 30 September, perhaps as the result of medical mismanagement: the Great Chronicle of London said that at first many people had died suddenly from the unfamiliar disease ‘for lack of good guiding, for they were kept so hot and close that many were smothered that might have been saved with moderate keeping’. The will and its codicil were proved on 12 May 1486, administration being granted to Katherine. Like her mother before her, she took as her second husband a widowed merchant and stapler, the haberdasher William Welbeck, whom she survived. When she died in 1510 she asked to be buried in Allhallows Barking beside Thomas Betson. Whether the choice was dictated by convenience or expressed her abiding affection for the husband of her youth, who dare say?

A minor mystery may take us back full circle to the start of the story. In his testament Betson ordered that after payment of his debts and funeral expenses the third part of his goods should be ‘given and disposed for my soul, my father and my mother’s souls and for the souls of Elizabeth and John and Margaret and for all Christian souls’. Usually such intentions were offered for ‘friends’ and benefactors. John is most probably Betson’s old master, John Fen. In that case, which of his two wives, both named Elizabeth, was meant? The affectionate, but self-willed, Elizabeth of the Stonor letters, or Betson’s mistress in the early days of his apprenticehood? And who was Margaret? Fen’s daughter by Elizabeth née Croke can be excluded as still alive when Betson made his testament, unless Margaret ‘Fyne’ was an entirely different person. But was Margaret Fen, elder sister of Hugh, perhaps named after a dead half-sister, either her father’s daughter by his first wife or her mother’s (posthumous?) daughter by Thomas Rich? Or was ‘Margaret’ some member of Betson’s own family? Alas, further conjecture that she might have been the master’s daughter whom the apprentice had first hoped to marry would stray far beyond the permissible boundaries of assumption.

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30 Hanham, ed., Cely Letters, no. 220 (22 May [1484]). First published in 1975 and so unknown to Kingsford or Power. For fuller details of the story see Hanham, Celys and their World, pp. 296-7.
31 As his widow attested in a Chancery suit against Thomas Howlake, her childish ‘gentle squire’: PRO, C1 82/102.