

The World of Etheldreda Gardener: Viewing a Woman of the late Fifteenth Century through the Lives of her Husbands

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THE STORY OF **ETHELDREDA GARDENER** and women like her allows historians to examine the personal relationships of men and women during the middle ages as well as women's social and economic importance in the merchant and gentry classes. Documents such as wills, inventories, and official letters often provide useful insights into personalities and relationships in the late medieval period.¹ However, since we have few personal documents such as diaries or letters by women in the medieval period, we must locate information about them in sources generated by men.

Etheldreda Gardener was a wealthy woman, a mother of five living children, and the daughter of a wealthy Cambridgeshire knight who came originally from a mercantile family. Despite the fact that she left no personal records, documents left by her second and third husbands indicate that she was a respected and responsible wife. Financial records found among the Talbot papers in the British Library, the will of Richard Gardener (her second husband), and the inventory of Sir Gilbert Talbot (Etheldreda's third husband), offer some clues about the kind of woman Etheldreda was. The business and financial documents, acquired by the Talbot family when she married Sir Gilbert, contain receipts, leases, and letters from the crown that belonged to Sir Richard Gardener, Etheldreda's second husband, a wealthy, prominent mercer and mayor of London. As executrix to Gardener's will, Etheldreda was a respected merchant's widow. Gardener's dependance upon her resulted in granting her partial responsibility of implementing his will.

Etheldreda was born the daughter of William Cotton, esquire, of Landwade, Cambridgeshire.² William Cotton had been born in 1410, the son of London mercer and alderman, Walter Cotton.³ Instead of following his father's career, William Cotton pursued a political career, becoming a loyal Lancastrian and holding various court positions.⁴ Etheldreda's grandfather, Walter Cotton, an alderman of London, married Margery, the daughter of John Fresshe, to whom he was apprenticed.⁵ Although her grandfather owned the manor of Landwade

and built the church, he never lived there nor claimed that he was from the place, 'he being in his youth bred a merchant'.⁶ His son and heir, William, married Alice Abbot, daughter and heir of John Abbot, mercer of London, yet was a courtier and country gentleman. Etheldreda's sisters, Joan and Catharine, married two brothers from the Higham family of Cambridgeshire. Richard Gardener was seised jointly (possessed of land) with the Higham brothers and Etheldreda's brother, Thomas, of many of his Cambridgeshire properties. The Gardener-Alington-Cotton relationship formed a complex network of family influence. It encompassed trade and linked landed estates in Cambridgeshire to mercantile wealth of the City through personal friendships and marital arrangements.

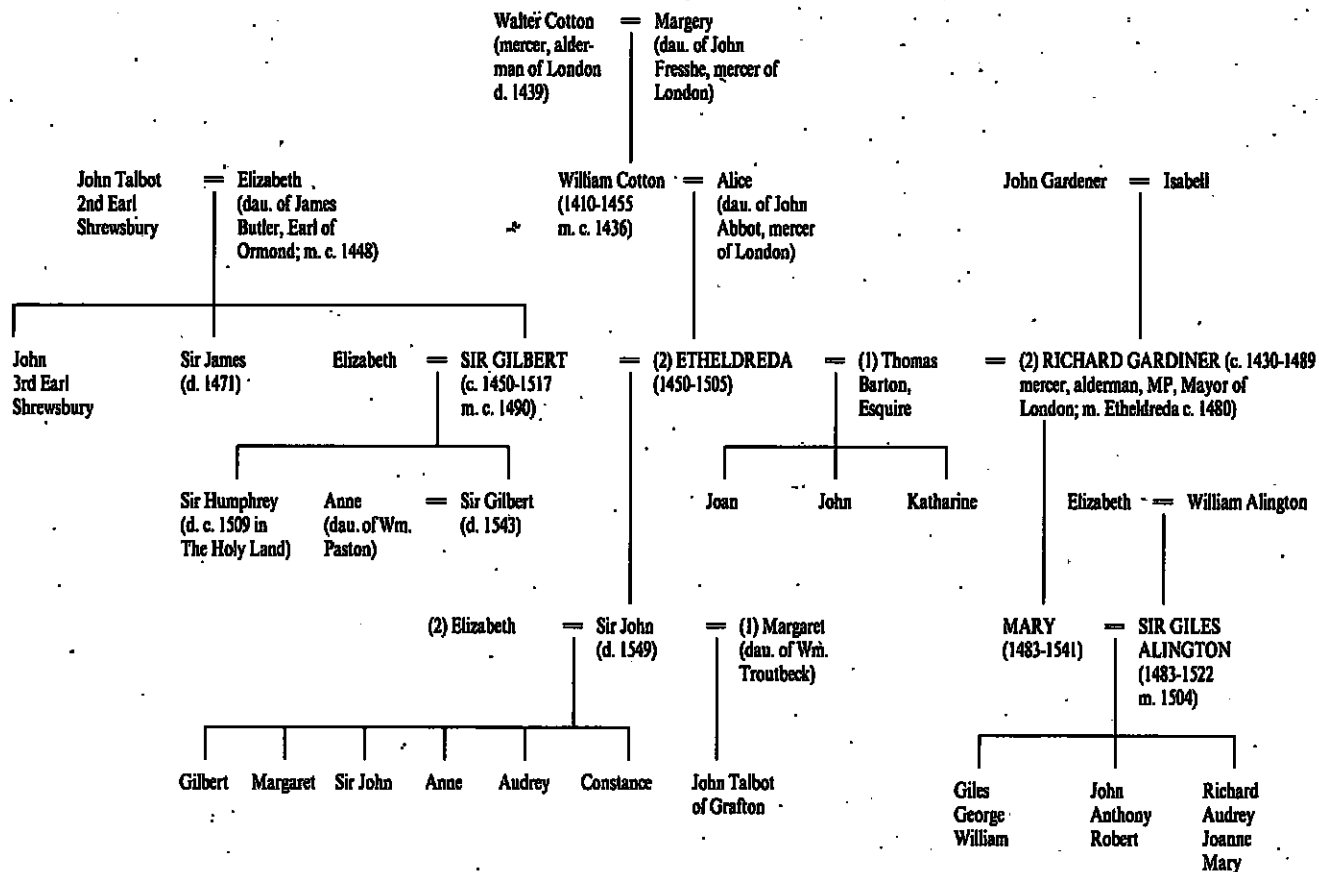
Etheldreda was born prior to 1455, the year that her father died, fighting for Henry VI in the battle of St. Albans.⁷ Her life up to the time of her first marriage is undocumented. Most of her father's lands were held of the Earl of Oxford, and she might have enjoyed an early and familiar association with the family. Certainly, she remained in contact with the de Veres throughout her later life. In any case, her father left her well situated for marriage. William Cotton bequeathed ten marks per annum for life to each of his daughters; he also ordered the sale of his personal effects to provide marriage portions for each of them.⁸ With this inheritance, mercantile connections through her grandfather, and court associations through her father, Etheldreda was a highly desirable marriage partner.

Little is known about Etheldreda's first marriage to Thomas Barton, esquire. A man of gentry status and some wealth, Barton's will has not survived. He and Etheldreda had three children: Joan, John, and Katharine. Thus, when Etheldreda entered into her second marriage she presumably brought property and money from her first husband as well as her father. She also had proved her capability as a child-bearer.

Her second husband, Richard Gardener, was a prominent mercer and former mayor of London.⁹ He was considerably older than Etheldreda, possibly twenty to twenty-five years her senior.¹⁰ Gardener was a widower, previously married to a woman named Elyn by whom he had a son, Ralph, also deceased.¹¹

Gardener was born in Exning, Suffolk, the son of John and Isabell Gardener. Since the Cotton family owned the manor of Exning, the families probably had long known one another. Also, Gardener belonged to the Mercers' Company as did Etheldreda's grandfather, Walter. Gardener married Etheldreda between 1480 and 1483, when their daughter, Mary, was born. Gardener, who was also a member of the staple of Calais, was concerned with maintaining his position as one of London's most prominent mercers. He was among the largest exporters of wool and cloth in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.

Secure in his financial and social prominence in the City, Gardener wanted to establish himself as a member of the gentry. His marriage to Etheldreda was a wise strategic move in this respect for it gave him a footing among the gentry of his native region. The acquisition of several estates in the parish of Horseheath in Cambridgeshire was probably included in his marriage settlement with Etheldreda.¹² In addition to these estates, Gardener purchased the wardship of young Giles Alington, aged two years,¹³ son and heir of Sir William Alington, who died defending Richard III at the battle of Bosworth.¹⁴ In 1485, when



Gardener received the grant of young Giles' wardship from the Earl of Oxford, he was effectively purchasing a husband for his daughter, Mary, who was also aged two years. Clearly Gardener wished for his daughter to live as a gentlewoman and not remain connected to the City.

Etheldreda was not married long to Gardener, for he died 18 December 1489.¹⁵ Etheldreda, and Gardener's close friend and fellow mercer, John Tate, were made co-executors of his will. Gardener bequeathed all his estates to Etheldreda for life. Upon her death they were to revert to their daughter, Mary, and her lawful children. Should Mary not produce legitimate issue, the manors were to pass to Joan, John, and Katharine Barton, Etheldreda's children from her first marriage. In addition to providing for his family (broadly defined to include Etheldreda's children from her first marriage), Gardener left numerous pious bequests. One was to provide a priest to pray for his soul in the church of St. Bartholomew the Less. In addition, the priest was to accompany Etheldreda whenever she left London for a month or two during the year.¹⁶ The will implies that such trips were common: possibly she visited her family in Cambridge, or went to stay at Horseheath or Westley Waterless, other Gardener estates in Cambridgeshire.

It was unlikely that Etheldreda would remain a widow for long after Gardener's will received probate in 1490. A woman of her station in the City with a sizeable inheritance and property in the country was an attractive prospect for any man seeking alliances with London merchants, the gentry, or both. Etheldreda was still young enough to provide a man with heirs. One man who was interested in Gardener's widow was Sir Gilbert Talbot.

Sir Gilbert Talbot was the third son of John, second Earl of Shrewsbury. Talbot was a loyal follower of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond: along with John de Vere, thirteenth Earl of Oxford, he played an important role in placing Henry VII on the throne.¹⁷ Thus, he was very close to the King and held an important position at court.¹⁸ Sir Gilbert also had a strong interest in trade. In 1489, the year of Gardener's death, Talbot was made a member of the Mercers' Company on payment of 2s.¹⁹ An indenture dated 7 March 1491 placed John Pound, son of Robert Pound, citizen and grocer of London, as an apprentice to Sir Gilbert Talbot *cives et mercero London' ac mercatori Staple ville Calais* (citizen and mercer of London and merchant stapler of the town of Calais).²⁰ A list of debts to be recovered, found in Talbot's inventory, lists many prominent London merchants with whom he did business.²¹ Letters among the state papers indicate that Talbot was purchasing goods for Cardinal Wolsey as late as 1513.²² Talbot's connection with John de Vere may account for his marriage to Etheldreda since the de Vere association with the Cottons was well established. Talbot's marriage to Etheldreda not only provided him with another son but also with valuable City connections that enabled him to augment his income substantially. That he had noble patrons, such as Cardinal Wolsey, only served to increase his reputation and position among the merchants of London. Not surprisingly, many of the London merchants with whom Talbot associated were known to Richard Gardener: and after marriage to Etheldreda, Talbot possibly made many profitable business arrangements. Etheldreda bore a son to Sir Gilbert sometime between 1492-1495. Talbot already had two sons from his previous marriage to Elizabeth, daughter of Ralph Dacre, Lord Greystock: Sir Humphrey and Sir



*Terracotta bust of Sir Gilbert Talbot. Victoria and Albert Museum A.38-1947.
(Courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum).*

Gilbert, the younger. Neither produced legitimate male heirs. Sir John Talbot, Gilbert and Etheldreda's son, married successively Margaret Troutbeck and Elizabeth Wrotesley and produced seven children from his two marriages. Eventually, Etheldreda and Sir Gilbert's heirs carried on the Shrewsbury line: four generations later, in 1618, Sir John Talbot's direct descendent became the ninth Earl of Shrewsbury; and the line has continued to the present.²³

Etheldreda's life during her marriage to Gilbert Talbot was surely spent raising her children and acting as guardian for her ward, Giles Alington. Her principal residence may have been at Horseheath since it was listed in Talbot's inventory, and was also Giles Alington's inheritance. Sir Gilbert's absence from the country during the years 1503-1506²⁴ on the King's business might indicate that Etheldreda was a capable administrator while her husband was away. There seems to be no evidence of an administrator of any sort. Thus the management of their estates and children was probably left to Etheldreda.

Evidence from other family documents, such as those of the Le Stranges of Hunstanton, Norfolk, indicate that many gentry women played an active role in the management of the late medieval household and estate.²⁵ Although there are no extant household accounts from Etheldreda's three marriages, she may have kept records of food, clothing, and household supplies purchased for her family and servants. Purchases and expenses for the remainder of the estate might also be included such as farm supplies, labourers' wages, and revenues from the sale of estate crops and livestock.

Etheldreda may have overseen accounts kept by a steward or bailiff during her husbands' absences — especially those of the latter two, Gardener and Talbot. She probably represented a figure of authority whose approval was required when her husband was away from the household. Her appointment as co-executor of Richard Gardener's will and as guardian of his ward, Giles Alington, directly indicates that she was considered a capable and responsible administrator and manager.

In 1501, she commissioned a new burial cloth to be made for Richard Gardener. Her devotion to the memory of her second husband and willingness to perform requests made in his will reflect her loyalty regardless of the seeming insignificance of the task.

Available records suggest that the five children from Etheldreda's three marriages were probably brought up together. They certainly displayed a great deal of affection for each other throughout their lives. In Mary Alington's will, bequests of livestock, clothing and bedlinen to her half-sister, Joan Barton (a daughter from Etheldreda's first marriage), clearly show a close relationship.²⁶ George Alington, son of Giles and Mary Gardener, was made an executor of Sir John Talbot's will indicating he was a trusted and important person in Talbot's life.²⁷ Since Etheldreda died circa 1505, during a period when Sir Gilbert was often away from England attending the King's business it is possible that her newly married daughter, Mary Alington, received the responsibility of raising her half-brother, John Talbot. In this circumstance, young John may have grown up with the children of Mary and Giles and developed a close relationship with George Alington.

Etheldreda's second marriage to a merchant and third marriage to a knight illustrate the erosion of the boundary between the merchant and gentry classes during the late medieval period.²⁸ Although both Gardener and Talbot engaged in trade and owned landed estates, the *foci* of their careers were different. Gardener was predominantly a merchant; as an alderman and former mayor of London, he retained a prominent position in London society. Gardener invested money gained from his marriage to Etheldreda in landed estates in Cambridgeshire and purchased a husband of knightly status for his daughter and heir which suggests his concern to be accepted among the landed gentry. However, he remained a London merchant and never retired to the country.

Conversely, Gilbert Talbot was born a gentleman, but worked in trade and married a prominent, wealthy merchant's widow to augment his income from his estates and court positions. The varying activities of Talbot's diligent career ranged from his crucial role in Henry VII's victory at Bosworth to his trade contacts with Cardinal Wolsey in France.²⁹ As a loyal courtier to Henry VII and later, Henry VIII, Talbot received the manors of Grafton and Upton Warren in

Worcestershire as well as income from rents and offices amounting to at least £165 annually.³⁰

Etheldreda was part of an intricate network of gentry and merchant families. The ease with which she moved between the country and the City suggests that social distinctions were becoming less important: merchants held landed estates and were knighted; knights exported wool and cloth.

Etheldreda's family background provides an interesting example of the intricacies of merchant-gentry relationships. It illustrates the permeability of boundaries between the gentry and merchants in late medieval England, and the usefulness of women in helping men to cross these boundaries. Women were instrumental in sustaining the intricate networks of relationships that served to eradicate some of the social barriers that we assume existed in late medieval English society. As we frequently discover, it was the woman, whose life and experiences remain obscure, who was the agent of important social changes.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I would like to thank Caroline M. Barron for suggesting the study of Etheldreda Gardener as a thesis topic (see n.21 below). Her guidance and friendship made the production of this article possible. Anne F. Sutton, whose assistance was essential to my thesis, provided me with the opportunity to publish this article. I am indebted to her kindness and patience. Barbara J. Harris made significant suggestions which helped to correct some oversights. DeAnn Gallagher-Hall and Keith Hall offered useful comments and ideas, however any errors that remain are my own. The Richard the Third and Yorkist History Trust provided a grant which I used for travel for research and productions costs. I thank the Trustees for their interest in this topic.
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