

William Flete: More than just a Castle Builder

HEATHER FALVEY

THIS BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM FLETE, builder of the castle at the manor of the More, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, outlines some of the more colourful events in his life and the provisions of his will. He was both influential and litigious, consequently his name frequently occurs in the historical and legal records of his time. He was a successful merchant; a financial agent for Cardinal Beaufort; a representative for Hertfordshire in various parliaments and a land holder in Lincolnshire, London and Hertfordshire.

Some aspects of the life and work of William Flete have been incorrectly recorded for 500 years: not only has one of his greatest achievements been credited to someone else, but also another person's will has been attributed to him. Given the problems associated with researching a fifteenth-century character, albeit one who was a member of parliament and a wealthy business man, it is not surprising that misconceptions have arisen. The surname 'Flete' seems to have originated from the town of Flete in Lincolnshire. Records show that there were a number of people named 'Flete' living in and around London during the fifteenth century, several called William, of whom three, including the builder of the More, lived and died at about the same time.¹

The time and place of William Flete's birth are unknown, but it is likely that he was born in Lincolnshire. Lands and tenements in the towns of Flete, Holbeach, Whaplode and Gedney in Lincolnshire had been held by the Flete family for generations.² At the time of his death, as well as holding lands in London and Hertfordshire, he himself held lands in those towns.³

The parents of William Flete of Rickmansworth were named John and Anne.⁴ William married Alice, whose maiden name is unknown, sometime before 24 September 1410.⁵ It seems that they had no children who survived as no mention is made of any offspring in those provisions of his will that remain. It is probable that Alice predeceased her husband: his will requested prayers for the soul of Alice his wife as well as for those of his father and mother. He did not remarry.⁶

The Flete family was influential both in Lincolnshire and London and William

had a number of powerful kinsmen. In Lincolnshire he was connected with the eminent landowner Sir William Flete, who served on many royal commissions in the county, and in London a number of relatives held influential positions both in the city and in the royal household.⁷ Everard Flete held the office of warden of the Mercers' Company four times.⁸ Simon Flete, a receiver of the king's chamber, was controller of Harfleur by 1416 and in January of that year William Flete received a royal commission to victual that town, probably as a result of Simon's influence.⁹ Also in 1416 Simon settled all his estates and possessions on William:

Simon Flete esquire of Lincolnshire to William Flete, merchant and citizen of London, his executors and assigns. Gift of all his lands, reversions, rents and services, and all his goods and chattels moveable and immovable, quick and dead on either side of the sea.¹⁰

Since Simon is described as 'of Lincolnshire' it can be assumed that the lands he left to William were in that county, although exactly where is unclear. Simon went on to become a councillor and keeper of the privy wardrobe to Henry VI.¹¹ Other influential kinsmen include John Flete, a Lincolnshire justice of the peace and another William Flete, one of the king's clerks.¹²

William Flete of Rickmansworth was a member of the Mercers' Company: in 1410-11 he paid £6 13s 4d for admission to the livery of the Company.¹³ The fact that he purchased his entry into the Company proves both that he was wealthy and that he had a desire for the advantages that membership of the Company could bring: as a member of the Mercers' Company, he also became a citizen of London. Citizenship was both convenient and necessary for a man with ambition to succeed in both business and 'politics'. From his recorded business activities it appears that he was a merchant rather than a working mercer. He traded overseas, dealing in almost anything wholesale, including cloth and wool: he does not appear to have dealt retail as a mercer. Flete's admission into the Company was mutually beneficial since he had connections with a number of influential people in addition to his Flete relatives: he acted as attorney for John Beaufort, Earl of Somerset on a number of occasions.¹⁴

When William Flete of Rickmansworth entered the Mercers' Company a namesake was beginning his apprenticeship to William Cavendish, the distinguished mercer.¹⁵ This second William Flete issued from apprenticeship in 1420-21, at the age of about twenty-five. Since William Flete of Rickmansworth bought his way into the Company as an adult in 1410-11, he must have been considerably older than his namesake. This second William Flete made his entry into livery in 1427-8 and he was Warden of the Mercers' Company from 1438-9. He was an important figure in the Company and was one of the executors of William Cavendish.¹⁶ Known facts about William Flete the mercer indicate that he spent his working life in London. He may well have traded overseas, but his activities were not on the scale of those of William Flete of Rickmansworth. The mercer's apprentices were John Dolande, Richard Lesyngham, William Everyngham, Nicholas Hatton and John Pykton.¹⁷ At the time of his death he was obviously still active as a mercer since 'Richard Lesyngham my prentiz' was a beneficiary of his will and one of his former apprentices, Nicholas Hatton, was one of his executors.¹⁸ He too came from Flete in Lincolnshire and so was probably related to William Flete of Rickmansworth. The will of the former apprentice of William Cavendish lists bequests to his brother John who was a monk of the

Charterhouse in London and to his brother Thomas who was a shearman, as well as various bequests to relatives in Flete, including his sister Isabel, wife of Robert Garmyll. He bequeathed 46s 8d to the brotherhood of St Lawrence in Flete and £5 to the 'Church Werk' of Flete, indicating both his considerable wealth and his connections with the town of Flete.

This William's wife was Isabel née Strete. From her will, dated 7 March 1454 and proved in June 1456, it is obvious that she was involved in silkwomen's work and employed a number of women skilled as dyers, throwsters and corseweavers.

Also I bequeath to whomsoever of the people mentioned below [are] still working for me in the skills of the dyer the Throwster and the Corse Wever in remembrance of my soul, 6s 8d, [—] wife of William Multon, the wife of John Lewgor, Isabel Cruse, Isabel Barnabas and Joan Wemmys. Also I bequeath to the said Isabel Barnabas 13s 4d over the 6s 8d already bequeathed to her by me.¹⁹

She made a bequest to Richard Lesyngham, by now 'citizen and mercer', and both he and another of her husband's former apprentices, John Pykton, were named amongst her executors. Her will confirms the burial place of her husband as the Chapter House of the Charterhouse, London, where his brother was a monk. Although not as wealthy as William Flete of Rickmansworth, William and Isabel Flete must have received a considerable income from his mercery retailing and her silkwomen's establishment. Neither of their wills give any details of land they may have owned, although part of his will is damaged: it is likely that their wealth was derived from business rather than land. That they were successful is not in dispute: the bequests in their wills are ample evidence of wealth.

Entries in the Close and Patent Rolls make the distinction between 'William Flete, merchant' and 'William Flete, mercer'. 'William Flete, merchant' is the subject of this biography; 'William Flete, mercer' was the man married to Isabel Strete. Because the name 'William Flete' is so common it is difficult to state categorically which of the recorded events refer to the early career of William Flete of Rickmansworth: namesakes not only include the mercer, but also a king's clerk, a wealthy fishmonger and a landowner.²⁰ However it is probable that he was the William Flete who was involved in a number of trade disputes with foreign merchants: the problems which arose took much litigation and many years to resolve.

On 11 January 1403, John Hauley of Dartmouth, together with a number of associates, including 'William Flete esquire', was ordered to appear before the king and council at Westminster.²¹ They failed to comply with the order and on 12 June 1403 they were again summoned to appear before the king's representatives. Various Flemish merchants had

made complaint in certain articles presented to the council for alleged damages inflicted upon the Flemings and captures of their goods, craving restitution and condign satisfaction.²²

The Englishmen in question had in turn submitted complaints against the Flemings: acts of piracy had been committed by both sides. No punishments are recorded.

Prior to February 1413 the disagreement flared up again. William Flete and other merchants, including William Walderne, Drew Barentyn, Walter Cotton and William Reynewell, had dispatched by various ships to the port of Thelmonia near

Genoa a large quantity of wool and other merchandise, valued at £24,000. Henry IV had sent letters to the people of Genoa requesting a safe conduct for the ships and the merchants' factors. However, the Genoese

scheming to impede the passage first detained the factors and afterwards compelled the ships to enter the port of Genoa and spoiled them of the wools and merchandise or any money from thence.²³

Flete and his associates brought this ill-treatment to the attention of the king. On 21 March 1413 letters patent were issued to them permitting them

to sieze any Genoese and their factors with their ships, vessels, goods, debts, obligations, securities and merchandise and keep them to their own use until they have full satisfaction of the said sum (ie £24,000) with damages and expenses estimated at £10,000.²⁴

The matter dragged on for a number of years. At a meeting of the king's council, held on Saturday 8 June 1420, a resolution was made concerning the long-pending claim of William Walderne and other English merchants on some merchants of Genoa. Those present at the meeting included William Walderne, William Flete, Walter Cotton and William Reynewell and two Genoese ambassadors, Raphael de Spinula and Stephen Lomelin.²⁵ The English merchants were questioned individually as to what sum of money each of them would accept as recompense for the losses caused by the Genoese. William Flete's response shows the force of his character. He said that

[O]n his part he would agree to accept the sum of £7,333 6s 8d [and] that between himself and the other English merchants who had an interest in this case on the one hand, and the Genoese on the other, an agreement and a final conclusion ought to be reached on this matter in front of the king's council, sovereign in England, before the departure of Raphael de Spinula and Stephen Lomelin, ambassadors of the Duke and commonalty of Genoa, sent and empowered for this very purpose. Also, the provision ought to be made that the whole of the above mentioned sum should be ready and paid in full within one year.

Flete's reply conveys that he was determined to gain a favourable settlement once and for all. He gives the impression of being both self-righteous and pompous in his declaration that a conclusion ought to be reached since the Genoese had been expressly sent for that purpose. The other English merchants agreed with Flete. This implies that they were willing to be led by him, possibly because he was capable of getting results. However, his claim was rejected by the Genoese ambassadors, who offered the sum of £5,000 and no more. In fact this was by no means the end of the matter, for in May 1428 Flete and several other Englishmen, together with various Genoese merchants, agreed to abide by the arbitration of men appointed for the purpose 'in all causes and matters pending between them.'²⁶

Flete was one of Cardinal Beaufort's main legal and financial advisers in the 1420s and '30s.²⁷ Exactly how he made his acquaintance with the Cardinal is unclear. He was acting as attorney for Beaufort's brother, the Earl of Somerset, as early as December 1408 and this may well have brought him to the Cardinal's attention.²⁸ Flete was a representative for the county of Hertford in the parliaments of April 1414, November 1414, 1423 and 1433.²⁹ It is possible that Beaufort played a part in Flete's election to the Commons both in 1414 and 1423: in 1423 provision were enacted for the repayment of a substantial sum advanced by Beaufort to the

crown.³⁰

In his capacity as Beaufort's financial agent, Flete acted as go-between for the king's council and the Staple of Calais, with whom he had had many previous dealings as a merchant. In the spring of 1436 the king's council requested from the mayor of the Staple, Nicholas Wooton, a loan of 10,000 marks, to be used as wages for the army of the Duke of York. This request was repeated in a letter conveyed to Calais by William Flete, dated 1 March 1436. The Staple refused to raise the loan, which would have eventually been repaid from other sources.³¹ In a petition to the Chancellor of England, John Stafford, Flete later complained bitterly of his treatment by the Staplers, saying that his embassies had 'caused hem [the Staplers] to shew unto the seide William Flete litel tendernesse or noon but rather malice and wronge in all his matiers'.³² In the petition Flete named several Staplers who had caused 'the seid grevaunces iniuries and wronges'. They included Robert Reynham, John Dye, Robert Sutton, and John and Stephen Hobbe. He had attempted to obtain redress from them by means of four different writs, the fourth of which was 'delivered unto hem be my seide lorde Cardinale at his last beyng at Caleis'. It was because these writs were ineffectual that he made the petition, in which he claimed compensation of £60 for his 'harmes'. Yet again Flete's self-righteousness is apparent.

Flete acted as proxy for the abbot of Croyland in the parliaments of 1410, April 1414 and 1425.³³ The connection between William Flete of Rickmansworth and Croyland is unclear.³⁴ On 24 January 1426 he was appointed to the office of escheator in the counties of Essex and Hertford. His term of office expired on 17 December 1426.³⁵

Much of Flete's vast wealth was invested in land. As already stated, he had land in Lincolnshire; he also owned a great deal of property in London. In 1412 his possessions in London were said to be worth £5 11s, but by the time of his death they were worth at least six times as much.³⁶ Details of much of the property that he owned in London, which included tenements and shops, are given in a licence for the alienation in mortmain of various properties by his executors to the prior and convent of St Mary Elsing Spital, Flete's main beneficiary.³⁷ The list gives an indication of how much property such a man as Flete might own outright or have an interest in. This is not necessarily the total of his holdings, these merely covered the cost of that particular clause in his will.

Flete began acquiring properties in Hertfordshire from the beginning of the fifteenth century, although quite why he settled in Hertfordshire, as opposed to any other county, is not at all clear. It appears that it was his acquisition of property there that resulted in him being elected to represent that county in parliament. He first gained property in Rickmansworth, shortly before 1401, when he foreclosed upon a mortgage due to non-payment of a debt.³⁸ In September 1410 he and his wife acquired the manor of Britwell in Rickmansworth, along with other holdings in Watford and Cassio which had been previously held by John Chilterne.³⁹ In 1416 Flete also acquired the manors of Batchworth, Ashleys, and the More.⁴⁰ He held all four manors, Britwell, Batchworth, Ashleys and the More, of the Abbot of St Albans and owed him homage and fealty for them.

The manor of the More was the most important and prosperous of the four and during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it had a number of influential tenants.⁴¹ In 1426 permission to build a crenellated house at the More was granted by Henry VI.

Charter licencing Henry bishop of Winchester, Thomas, bishop of Durham, William Babyngton, knight, Henry Merston, clerk, William Alyngton, Simon Flete, Robert Frampton, William Flete and John Deryng to enclose, crenellate, enturret and embattle, with stones, lime and 'brik' their manor of More in Rykmersworth, and also to empark 600 acres of land in wood in Rikmersworth and Watford; grant also of free warren there, unless the land be within the metes of the king's forest.⁴²

William Flete was the actual tenant of the More at this time, the other men named in the charter were merely his feoffees, or guarantors: powerful men who would back him up if his tenancy of the More were challenged. Flete's employment as one of Cardinal Beaufort's financial agents is the link between the Cardinal (Henry bishop of Winchester) and the More: Beaufort agreed to act as his employee's main feoffee.⁴³ It has been proved that the fifteenth-century castle there was indeed built during William Flete's tenancy, that is, in the first half of the century. It was a fine brick-built castle, similar in plan to Herstmonceux castle, Sussex.⁴⁴ In his Chronicle, John Warkworth gave credit for the building of the house to Archbishop George Neville and since then Flete's involvement has largely been overlooked.⁴⁵

Flete's tenancy of the four manors in the Rickmansworth area resulted in many problems for the Abbot of St Albans, his landlord. Flete knew that previous tenants of those manors had questioned the Abbot's authority over them, and, using the findings of previous lawsuits, Flete contested the Abbot's right to any rents or services for these manors: a long bitter feud between the two ensued. The Abbey chronicles, clearly biased in the Abbot's favour, narrate the dispute at great length.⁴⁶ Flete is likened to

a new Heliodorus, who laboured with all his might to despoil the temple of the Lord within the monastery of St Albans of its rights and revenues.⁴⁷

The Abbot's advisers suggested that he settle the matter once and for all by means of a discussion between the two parties rather than a law suit: it would be less costly.

Therefore, we are advising you to take the course of peace; and perhaps without the later formality of a lawsuit, you will make from Saul a Paul, and from a persecutor a chosen vessel.⁴⁸

The outcome of their discussions could be presented to a judge for ratification. The claims and counter claims were laid before Sir William Babyngton and his co-adjudicator John Cotesmore, who duly considered them. Judgement was in the Abbot's favour: details are given in an indenture dated the feast of Corpus Christi (31 May) 1431, although the matter itself had been settled in 1428.⁴⁹ Following the successful conclusion of the dispute both William Flete and William Babyngton were accepted into the Confraternity of the Abbey. The Chronicler immediately revised his opinion of Flete, describing his 'conversion' to peace with the Abbot thus:

The same William, kindled by the light of the Holy Spirit, was suddenly converted: he was empty of any poison of bitterness; ... The same William made a statement in front of the whole Convent and promised from the heart that he would completely forsake, as far as he could, all ill-feeling, all anger and ill-will towards this monastery, monks as well as Abbot, and that he would everywhere proclaim goodwill in word and

deed, and that thus the controversy that was still going on that very day would be ended; ...³⁰

As well as being at odds with his landlord, Flete was unpopular with others of the Abbot's tenants in the locality. Sometime after March 1426 a number of them petitioned the chancellor, Archbishop John Kemp, concerning the 'wronges and oppressions done by William Flete wyth in the shire of Hertford.' The tenants' main grievance was the fact that Flete was apparently going to go unpunished for all these

wronges [and] extorcions cuntrey to pore men whiche may not be remedied ne amended for asmeche as he is on of the Justice of the pese in the said Countee.

They recounted many of Flete's alleged misdeeds, which included the removal of Harry Wenge from a farm that he held by indenture and 'hym manast [menaced] so that he durst not occupye the ferme ij yaer after his endenture'. Flete had also threatened 'to have slayn' Thomas Lavenham: he would have been attacked had it not 'for grace of god ben and a gode horse'.³¹

It seems that the men were justified in their fears that Flete would go unpunished due to his position as justice of the peace: he apparently continued to act in overbearing manner and his behaviour was such that in 1431 matters came to a head. In that year a group of the Abbot's tenants marched to parliament to complain about Flete's behaviour.

In those same days tenants of the Lord Abbot from Watford complained to the lords and knights of the shires in this parliament about William Flete, parisher of Rickmansworth, concerning his extortions, seizures and bad payments inflicted on them and others their neighbours for fifteen years; and these tenants communicated their injuries to the chancellor of the realm with shouts, sobbing and tears, and they offered bills of complaint. And they brought seven ploughshares and coulter to the door of the parliament chamber to show how they were overworked, for they were unable to plough, sow, mow, or dig, or even engage labourers in the right season, but he with his vast wealth and by the strength of his wickedness, for the sake of repairing his manor of the More, oppressed and tyrannised many tenants, to his own shame – like a man that did not fear God – and to the injury of the monastery of St Albans.³²

The tenants must have made an impression on parliament with their 'ploughshares and coulter': this time Flete was called to give an account of his behaviour. True to character, he made a counter-petition, sometime after 26 February 1432.³³ He complained to the chancellor, John Stafford, that the tenants, including Thomas Lavenham, William Chapman, John Herman, Richard Thresher, John Lythyng and Richard Atte More, had maligned him when they claimed that he had oppressed them. Again Flete's self-righteousness is obvious: he failed to admit any misconduct on his part. Indeed, he claimed that the tenants had acted with 'grete maliceus purpose and forthocht in the hie court of parliament' in complaining about his actions without due cause. He said that he had answered their accusations in 'alle goode feyth trowth and conscience'. He requested that the chancellor find in his favour and offer

the said William due remedye and recompense as well for his name and

fame as for his costes vexaci[on] expenses and damages by such meens and terme as semeth yowe resonable so that othiir in tyme coming have cause to eschewe such noyse disclaundryng and vexation of any p[er]son.⁵⁴

In 1435-6 Flete again came into conflict with Thomas Lavenham and the Abbot of St Albans, this time over an alleged right of way between Rickmansworth and Watford. The Abbey chronicler does not actually mention Flete by name: he describes him as 'the lord of the manor of La More in Rickmansworth.'⁵⁵ The matter was brought to the Abbot's attention by his steward who outlined the case against the lord of the manor of La More in Rickmansworth, concerning a certain public right of way. He [the lord of the manor] asserted and maintained that because of too great tolerance this [the right of way] could easily become a custom; and thus through his own [the Abbot's] negligence, he would incur the losses or expenses of losing what was theirs for ever, which his church would not regard lightly.⁵⁶

The lawsuit which followed was between Thomas Lavenham, who farmed the land in Watford across which the disputed right of way ran and John Wynkebourne, tailor, of Rickmansworth and William Creke, gentleman, of the manor of Mickelfield, Croxley Green. Creke and Wynkebourne must have been acting on Flete's behalf: Creke's own property was neither on nor near the disputed route. Wynkebourne and Creke claimed that there was a public right of way between the manors of the More and Britwell and the church and market place in Watford, crossing the land held by Thomas Lavenham and that it always had been a public right of way, which was why they had driven carts and cattle along it. Lavenham, who was supported by the Abbot of St Albans, claimed that there was a footpath following the disputed route but that it was not to be used by cattle, carts and the like. Lavenham concluded that as Creke and Wynkebourne had admitted driving cattle and carts along the route, which was not a public right of way, they were guilty of trespass and he was entitled to compensation for the damage caused by their cattle to his crops. The court found in Lavenham's favour and presumably Flete had to find an alternative route to Watford.

As a representative for Hertfordshire in parliament, Flete often became involved in matters of local importance. For example, in 1431 he was summoned to a meeting at Hertford to discuss measures to be taken against Lollards in the area.

On the Tuesday of Pentecost Week, the Bishop of Ely and the Abbot of this church [ie St Albans], together with the more powerful personages of this County, namely, John Hotoste, William Flete, John Hay, Thomas Frowyk and John Pownteney, met in the Priory at Hertford, by royal command, for a sitting [to take measures] against Lollards and [to raise] a cash loan.⁵⁷

Nearby Amersham, in the county of Buckingham, was a hotbed of Lollard activity at the time and as an influential person and the tenant of a wealthy manor in Rickmansworth Flete was considered a suitable person to help deal with such problems.

In February 1434 a commission was issued to levy and collect the fifteenth and tenth which the last parliament had granted to the king, of which a certain amount was to be retained 'in relief and discharge of the impoverished towns, cities and

boroughs within the county.' In this matter Flete had to work alongside Henry Wynge and Thomas Lavenham, men with whom he had previously been in conflict.⁵⁸

In 1438, along with other important men in the area, Flete was ordered to participate in a commission '*de kidellis*' with regard to the river Colne, part of which ran through the lands belonging to the manor of the More, very close to the castle itself.⁵⁹ This meant that those named had to

survey all gorges, mills, stanks, stakes and kiddles in [the named river], constructed in the time of Edward I and down to the present time, and to cause such as obstruct the passage [of ships and boats as well as of the water] to be thrown down and removed.⁶⁰

Both his position as one of Cardinal Beaufort's financial agents and his own great wealth meant that Flete was also involved in a number of complex business transactions. Many involved the ownership and trusteeship of certain properties.⁶¹ His wealth put him in a position to offer loans on the security of property, sometimes known as 'recognizances'. This he did in both 1421 and 1428 for John Cheyne of Insamstede Cheyne (Chenies, Buckinghamshire). Cheyne was a neighbouring landowner, who also had to serve on the commission concerning the river Colne mentioned above and he too attended various parliaments.⁶² That Flete was willing to offer these loans indicates that he was prepared to help people of a similar, or higher, social standing than himself, even if he was unpleasant to his inferiors. Others of his financial activities included contributing over £100 for the ransoming of the Earl of Huntingdon; in 1436 offering the government a loan of £100 for the war effort; and in 1438 loaning 200 marks to Richard, Earl of Salisbury on the security of 'certain silver vessels'.⁶³

Flete's involvement in so many different matters has resulted in many references to him in public records, making it relatively easy to trace events in his life. However, when it comes to his death, details are not so readily available. The date of his death was 9 May.

We the aforesaid Abbot and Convent [of Thorney] promise that we and our successors will keep and observe the obit or anniversary of the said William Flete, Alice his wife, John and Anne, parents of William himself, in our aforesaid monastery, both on the ninth day of the month of May and on the morrow of that day, every year, for ever, with the office for the dead and the dirge at Vespers with mass and other prayers on the morrow as ought to be done to celebrate for the dead.⁶⁴

It is likely that he died in 1444: in the Fine Rolls there is a record, dated 10 May 1444, of a writ of *diem clausit extremum* 'after the death of William Flete, Hertford'.⁶⁵

Flete's will no longer exists but details from it can be found in various entries in the Patent Rolls relating to business carried out by his executors, John Fray and Edmund Brudenell, on his behalf.⁶⁶ A third executor, William Byngham, clerk, is mentioned in the Thorney Abbey Cartulary.⁶⁷ The clauses of his will that remain give details of land owned by Flete in Lincolnshire and London, and outline bequests made to pay for the provision of masses for the remembrance of his soul and those of his wife and parents. There are no records of his bequests to any surviving relatives and friends or associates: these would have served to shed light on his personal relationships. That this information no longer exists is unfortunate

but the lack of personal details is rather appropriate for a man who seems to have been rather unpleasant.

Flete had requested that his body be buried in the church of St Mary Elsing Spital, London, and he was indeed buried there.⁶⁸ In his will Flete ordered his executors to grant:

to the prior and convent of the hospital of St Mary, Elsing Spital, lands to the value of £30 a year to pay for the observance of his anniversary and of Alice his wife and John and Anne, his parents, and to sustain a chaplain to celebrate divine service daily in the hospital for the souls of the same at the altar of St Katharine the Virgin there and for twelve poor men to pray for the same souls within the hospital daily in the almshouse there, each poor man taking 8d. each week from the prior and convent.⁶⁹

On 30 June 1455 Henry VI granted John Fray and Edmund Brudenell a licence to convey lands and rents to the value of £30 in London and its suburbs to St Mary, Elsing Spital.⁷⁰ This amount was later reduced to £26.⁷¹

Flete was also

seised of certain londes and tenementes in the townes of Whaplode, Holbeche, Flete and Gedney [and] the seid William Flete declared by his testament that he wolde that the seid londes and tenementes shulde be solde by his executours and the money therof disposed by theim in almes dedes for merite of his soule.⁷²

It appears that problems arose over the sale of these lands: the prospective buyers would not pay for them because one of the tenants, Alexander Mede, refused to give up the lands he held, thus 'maliciously lettyng [hindering] the perfourmyng of the seid will.' William Byngham petitioned the chancellor, Cardinal John Kemp, on the matter.⁷³

Another provision of Flete's will was a bequest to Thorney Abbey, Cambridgeshire. It is probable that Flete's connection with Thorney went back to his childhood but quite what that connection was is not known. Through his executors he handed over to Abbot John Ramsey of Thorney sixty acres of land and two acres of pasture with appurtenances in Flete, Holbeach and Whaplode, in the county of Lincoln, the rents from which were to provide money to pay for annual masses for his soul and those of his wife, father and mother.⁷⁴

The second William Flete, the mercer, certainly died in 1444: his will was proved on 25 September 1444.⁷⁵ His executors were his wife Isabel, Randolph Strete, (one of her relatives) and Nicholas Hatton, a former apprentice. According to Isabel's will, he was buried in the Chapter House of the Charterhouse, London, where his brother John Flete was a monk.⁷⁶

William Flete the king's clerk also seems to have died in 1444. On 30 October 1399 he had been given a grant for life of £10 per year from the issues of the county of Lincoln⁷⁷ and on 15 May 1444 the same £10 passed to other hands:

Grant, in survivorship, to William Estfeld, knight, and the King's serjeant Robert Osbern for good service, specially of the latter in the office of the King's secretary, of £10 yearly from the issues of Lincolnshire in the King's hands by the death of *William Flete*, who had the same for life of the grant of Henry IV.⁷⁸

Since it is most likely that the 'William Flete, Hertford' referred to in the writ of *diem clausit extremum* is William Flete of Rickmansworth, it seems that all

three men of the same name died in the same year.

As has been shown, William Flete of Rickmansworth led a varied and eventful life: judging by the number of legal disputes he was involved in, he was a quarrelsome individual, determined to get his own way. Since he had so many different interests, parliament, business, land holding, agent for Cardinal Beaufort, to name but a few, it would have been unusual if he had not come into conflict with others. Indeed it is because of his pugnacious character that so much is known about him: had he been less vociferous, the only known fact about his life might have been the building of the castle at the More, and even that has not usually been attributed to him.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The purpose of this biography of William Flete is to separate the details of his life from those of two namesakes. For the sake of clarity, the subject of this biography will be referred to as 'William Flete of Rickmansworth' because of his connection with the More. At the same time as this research was being carried out, the History of Parliament Trust was in the process of completing *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1386-1421*, ed., J.S.Roskell, and L.Clark and C.Rawcliffe, History of Parliament Trust 1993, 4 vols. This contains a biography of William Flete of Rickmansworth, who represented the county of Hertford on several occasions, (vol. 3, pp.88-91). The published biography provides an excellent description of Flete's parliamentary career and business dealings, but there are some discrepancies between this researcher's findings and those of the Trust with regard to Flete's marriage and will.
2. Lincolnshire County Record Office, BRA 984/22/1-6.
3. Public Record Office (PRO), C1/19/195.
4. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1452-61*, p.251.
5. *Calendar of Close Rolls 1409-13*, p.167.
6. *CPR 1452-61*, p.251. *The History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.88, states that William Flete married twice, first Alice and then Isabel, who survived him. However, it was another William Flete who had a wife named Isabel, who survived her husband. PCC 28 Luffenham; Guildhall Library, London (GL), Ms. 9171/5, ff.190-190v.
7. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), pp.88-9.
8. Mercers' Company Biographical Index Cards compiled by J.Imray and others.
9. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.89; *CPR 1413-16*, p.412.
10. *CCR 1413-19*, p.297.
11. *CPR 1422-29*, pp.74-5.
12. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.89, and see n.34.
13. Mercers' Company Biographical Index Cards (see n.8). This amount of £6 13s 4d was a huge sum: in 1412 the total of Flete's possessions in London were said to be worth £5 11s a year. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.90.
14. *CCR 1405-9*, p.422; *CCR 1419-22*, p.140.
15. Mercers' Company Biographical Index Cards (see n.8).
16. *CPR 1436-41*, p.108.
17. Mercers' Company Biographical Index Cards (see n.8).
18. PCC 28 Luffenham.
19. GL, Ms. 9171/5, ff.190-190v.
20. *CCR 1399-1402*, p.126; *History of Parliament* (see n.1), pp.88-9.
21. *CCR 1402-05*, p.27.
22. *CCR 1402-05*, p.76.
23. *CPR 1408-13*, p.461-2.
24. *CPR 1413-16*, p.90.
25. Sir H.Nicholas, ed., *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England*, vol.2, London 1834, pp.270-1.

26. A.H.Thomas, ed., *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, London, 1413-37*, Cambridge 1943, p.221.
27. G.L.Harriss, *Cardinal Beaufort: A Study of Lancastrian Ascendancy and Decline*, Oxford 1988, p.271.
28. *CCR 1405-09*, p.422.
29. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.88.
30. *Ibid.*, p.89. Beaufort knew many of the men who represented the shires in the early parliaments of Henry V's reign, indeed many of them worked for him in a variety of ways. This ensured that Beaufort was able to maintain 'close contact with leading members of the gentry in whose hands rested the government and representation of a swathe of southern shires.' Harriss, (see n.27), p.73.
31. PRO, E28/56/41; G.A. Holmes, The Libel of English Policy, *English Historical Review*, vol. 76 (1961), p.211.
32. PRO, C1/16/488.
33. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.91.
34. A 'William Flete, the king's clerk' was to be given 'maintenance for life' by Croyland Abbey. *CCR 1402-5*, p.293. This William Flete was a kinsman of the MP (see text preceding n.12) and not the MP himself: the clerk's parents' names are given as 'Henry and Amy', *CCR 1402-5*, p.293, whereas as the MP's are known to have been 'John and Anne'. *CPR 1452-61*, p.251.
35. *Calendar of Fine Rolls 1422-30*, p.118; *CFR 1422-30*, p.157.
36. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.90.
37. *CPR 1452-61*, p.283-5. See n.68 for details of St Mary Elsing Spital. The cartulary of St Bartholomew's Hospital gives details of lands and buildings originally donated to the hospital and subsequently rented out. N.J.M. Kerling, ed., *The Cartulary of St Bartholomew's Hospital*, London 1973. Work on the cartulary was begun in 1417-18; Appendix I is the rental of St Bartholomew's Hospital, which was compiled at Easter 1456. The rental mentions a number of shops and tenements 'formerly held by William Flete'. However it is unclear to which William Flete this refers.
38. *History of Parliament* (see n.1), p.89. I have not been able to discover exactly where this land was.
39. *CCR 1409-13*, pp.167-8.
40. *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, A History of Hertfordshire*, W.Page, ed., London 1908, vol.2, pp.375,381.
41. H.E. Falvey, The More: Archbishop George Neville's Palace in Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, *The Ricardian*, vol.9, no.118, pp.290-302.
42. *CPR 1422-29*, p.351.
43. This was explained to me by Dr Gerald Harriss of Magdalen College, Oxford, in private correspondence. There are a number of references to Flete in Harriss, *Cardinal Beaufort*, (see n.27).
44. M. Biddle, L. Barfield and A. Millard, The Excavation of the Manor of the More, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, *Archaeological Journal*, vol.116 (1959), pp.136-199.
45. *A Chronicle of the First thirteen Years of the Reign of King Edward the Fourth*, Camden Society 1839, p.25. In fact Neville's building work at the More merely consisted of a number of alterations to the house built by Flete. Neville had a cellar built in the northern corner of the eastern side of the castle, (the walls of which still stood just over four feet high when the excavations were carried out) and he also had the whole house 're-plumbed': a brick and tile conduit was constructed to replace the wooden pipe of Flete's house, and the main plumbing system appears to have been laid contemporaneously with this conduit. Biddle, et al. (see n.44), pp.154-6.
46. H.T. Riley, ed., *Annales Monasterii Sancti Albani a Johanne Amundesham*, Rolls Series, London 1870-71, vol. 1, pp.263-274. I would like to thank Livia Visser-Fuchs for checking my translations of the Latin originals; any mistakes that remain are my own. The author of a collection of essays relating to the manors of the Abbey of St Albans uses details from this lawsuit between Flete and the Abbot to illustrate points raised in the text. A.E. Levett, *Studies in Manorial History*, Oxford 1938, p.98.
47. *Ibid.*, p.263.
48. *Ibid.*, p.265.
49. *Ibid.*, p.266-72.
50. H.T. Riley, ed., *Chronicon Rerum Gestarum in Monasterio Sancti Albani*, Rolls Series, London 1870-71, p.22.
51. PRO, C1/20/157. Flete received three commissions to be a justice of the peace for the county of Hertford.

These were dated 7 July 1423, 20 July 1424 and 3 June 1427. *CPR 1422-29*, p.564.

52. *Chronicon Rerum Gestarum in Monasterio Sancti Albani* (see n.50), pp.60-61.
53. PRO, C1/11/280.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Annales Monasterii Sancti Albani a Johanne Amundesham* (see n. 46), vol. 1, pp.121-6.
56. *Ibid.*, p.121.
57. *Chronicon Rerum Gestarum in Monasterio Sancti Albani*, (see n. 50), p.64.
58. *CFR 1430-37*, p.195.
59. *CPR 1436-41*, p.199. Another landowner mentioned in this commission was Edmund Brudenell, one of Flete's executors. (See n. 66 below.)
60. *CPR 1350-54*, p.93.
61. *History of Parliament* (see n. 1), pp.90-91. This details many of Flete's financial dealings, many of which were 'complex financial transactions, the exact nature of which is now hard to understand'.
62. *CCR 1419-22*, p.135; *CCR 1422-29*, p.393. In John Cheyne's biography, in *History of Parliament* (see n. 1), vol.2, pp.547-9, Flete is described as a 'merchant-financier'.
63. *History of Parliament*, (see n. 1), p.91; *Proceedings of the Privy Council*, (see n. 25), vol. 4, pp.316-330; PRO E210/9641. William Flete the mercer was also involved in important financial dealings, notably in November 1442, when, together with two associates, he offered a series of recognizances totalling £400. *CCR 1441-47*, pp.132-3.
64. *Thorney Abbey Cartulary*, Cambridge University Library Add. Ms. 3020-1, ff.292v-293r. The entry itself is dated 1 June 30 Henry VI (1452). I would like to thank Dr Rosemary Horrox of Cambridge University for correcting mistakes in both my transcription and subsequent translation of the entries in the Thorney Abbey Cartulary relating to William Flete's bequests.
65. *CFR 1437-45*, p.276. However, the following is to be found in the *Patent Rolls*, dated 6 July 1447:

[Pardon to] Thomas Peryman of Harowe, co. Middlesex, the younger, 'laborer', for not appearing before John Juyn and his fellows, when impleaded with Richard Bonner of Harowe, 'carpenter', William Hulle, of Busshey co. Middlesex, 'yoman', John Doke of Harowe, 'laborer', John Turnour of Harowe, the younger, 'laborer', and John cotes of Stanmere, co. Middlesex, 'laborer', to answer *William Flete* touching a trespass. 1

Hertford *CPR 1446-52*, p.15. William Flete had been prosecuting Peryman for a trespass and this is a pardon of outlawry to Peryman for the offence. The original offence would have been committed during Flete's lifetime but the pardon could well have been issued after his death. It is just possible that he was still alive in 1447: the earliest reference to bequests in his will is dated 24 November 1451. *CPR 1446-52*, p.502. The next known tenant at the More was Sir Ralph Butler: his tenancy began sometime before 1456 but exactly when is unclear. H.T. Riley, ed., *Registrum Abbatiae, Johannis Whethamstede Secundae*, Rolls Series, London 1872-73, vol. 1, p.223.
66. *CPR 1452-61*, p.251. John Fray represented Hertfordshire in the parliaments of 1419 and 1420. He held a number of manors, many in north-east Hertfordshire. He was an influential lawyer who rose to become chief baron of the Exchequer. He also held a number of appointments in the City of London. There is a comprehensive biography of Fray in *The History of Parliament* (see n.1), vol.3, pp.123-6. This states that '(h)is relationship with Flete, who made him his executor, seems to have been particularly close, perhaps because Flete, a mercer by trade, also had interests in the City.' Edmund Brudenell came from Amersham in Buckinghamshire and so was a near neighbour of Flete. His family held several manors in the area. *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, A History of Buckinghamshire*, W. Page, ed., London 1925, vol. 3, pp.149,177,195. He was a justice of the peace for Buckinghamshire for virtually all of his adult life, until his death in 1469. *CPR*, various. He was appointed to many commissions including the '*de kidellis*' mentioned above. Robert Brudenell, Edmund's second son by his second wife Philippa, was born in 1461. He was 'bred to the law' and rose to become chief justice of the king's common bench at Westminster. *Dictionary of National Biography*.
67. *Thorney Abbey Cartulary* (see n. 64), ff.39v-40r. The entry itself is dated 24 November 30 Henry VI (1451).
68. *CPR 1452-61*, p.251. Elsing Spital was founded as a hospital for 100 blind people in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the mercer William de Elsing in 1329. At the dissolution of the monasteries, the

hospital was closed and its church was partly pulled down; the remaining section became the parish church of St Alphage. H.A. Harben, *A Dictionary of London*, London 1918. St Mary's Elsing Spital was a very important and popular place to be buried. *Stow's Survey of London*, Everyman's Library, London 1956, pp.263-4.

69. *CPR 1452-61*, p.251.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *CPR 1452-61*, pp.283-5.

72. PRO, C1/19/195.

73. *Ibid.*

74. Thorney Abbey Cartulary (see n. 64), ff.292v-293r.

75. PCC 28 Luffenham. The first third of the will is damaged but the rest is legible.

76. GL, Ms. 9171/5, ff.190-190v.

77. *CPR 1399-1401*, p.230.

78. *CPR 1441-6*, p.252.

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