

Sir Ralph Verney

Verney, Sir Ralph (1613-1696), landowner and politician, was born at Hillesden, Buckinghamshire to Sir Edmund Verney (1592-1640) and Margaret Denton (1594-1641).¹ When Ralph was 15 years old, Sir Edmund paid L1,000 to the Court of Wards to obtain a decree that permitted Ralph's marriage to Mary (1616-1650), sole heiress of John Blacknall, a wealthy Abingdon lawyer. Despite the protests of Mary's family, and the fact that at 13, she was not of legal age, she married Ralph on 31 May 1629. Attempts to get her to repudiate the marriage failed, and she brought the Verneys valuable estates including Abingdon and Wasing in Berkshire and Preston Crowmarsh and Fifield in Oxon.² The couple lived apart until 1631, when Mary settled at the Verney's Buckinghamshire seat at Middle Claydon. During the following two years, Ralph spent college terms 20 miles away at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, where he formed ties with sons of important Puritan families. He studied astronomy, arts, and Latin, but apparently not Greek, and spent 3-4 hours a day on logic and divinity with his tutor John Crowther.

In contrast to the previous generation, the couple had only two surviving children, Edmund (1636-1688) and John (1640-1717). After 1634, Sir Ralph's family lived part of each year in Covent Garden, London with his father Sir Edmund. Yet Sir Ralph always felt 'more natural' giving country hospitality and he abhorred 'court compliment'. Sir Ralph also became immersed in business affairs at an early age. He managed the Verneys' estates and finances and acted as trustee for many friends.

Sir Ralph had deep feelings about his family's importance, and he saved every scrap of paper, founding perhaps the largest consecutive family correspondence for seventeenth-century England. His prudent, conscientious nature and attention to detail showed most clearly in his methodical preservation of his papers, which remain at Claydon House. An ardent bibliophile, he also amassed a huge collection of books and pamphlets, especially religious tracts.³ Sir Ralph was deeply interested in Anglican theology and practice, and his own faith was tinged with a puritanical piety expressed in strict outward observance. Thus, he refused to hire a gardener until he discovered whether he was 'married or popish or phanatical or takes tobacco'.⁴

In 1640 Sir Ralph represented Aylesbury in the Short and Long Parliaments and was knighted in the following year. As he sat next to his father, he secretly recorded his impressions which may be read in "Notes of Proceedings in the Long Parliament". As a young man with Parliamentary sympathies, Sir Ralph was in a difficult position. His father was Knight-Marshal and Standard Bearer to Charles I who died at Edgehill fighting for the King. His younger brothers also served in the Royalist army. At first Sir Ralph supported the Parliamentary cause, which caused grief to his family. However, he soon became disenchanted with political and religious radicalism, and in 1643 he refused to sign the Covenant--a religious oath that made concessions to presbyterians. To make matters worse, the Verney estates were under financial strain and Claydon House was located in the midst of the military positions. Rising taxes, decreasing rents, and the disruption of war combined to make Sir Ralph's financial position extremely precarious.⁵

He withdrew from Parliamentary work in the summer of 1643, and fled to France in November using the alias Ralph Smith. Prior to his flight, he had obtained letters of protection from both sides and placed his property in trust. In 1645, Sir Ralph was expelled from the House for absenting himself from his duties. It was, he confessed 'one of the greatest and most inexpressible afflictions that ever yet befel me, for which my soul shall mourn in secret'.⁶

Sir Ralph's voluntary exile in Rouen, and then Blois, was, punctuated with continental journeys. His decision to take flight was likely motivated by a combination of deep religious

principles, loyalty to the traditional Anglican Church, his unstable finances, and the threat of sequestration.⁷ This indeed took place in October 1646, due to a flaw in one of the trust deeds. The sequestration was only lifted in 1648, when his wife Mary journeyed to England and lobbied friends in Parliament. She died soon after her successful intervention.⁸

Sir Ralph returned to England in 1653 but he was briefly imprisoned as a royalist suspect in 1655 and was fined in 1656. He had inherited an estate worth £2,000 per year, but he had debts of about £11,000 and responsibility for nine brothers and sisters. Rebuilding the Verney estate became a life-long obsession.⁹ To obtain needed cash, he sold all but a tiny portion of his late wife's dower lands. But he doggedly kept his Claydon estate intact through frugal living and astute debt consolidation at low rates. He avoided the court, improved his estate, and cleared it of debts.

After the Restoration, Sir Ralph regained his county offices in the magistracy and lieutenancy and accepted a baronetcy in 1661. He resisted pressures, however, to stand for Parliament until the 1680s when he represented Buckingham in 1681, 1685, 1689. Sir Ralph's later religious and political views were grounded in his desire for peace and moderation after a life marred by sectarian feuding. The books that he gave to his sons reflected the mid-stream of religious thought: Jeremy Taylor's guides to living and dying and Allestree's The Whole Duty of Man. He also kept a stock of 'little prayer books' written by Dr Thomas Tenison to give as gifts to friends. Sir Ralph refused to take sides during the Exclusion Crisis. And only when the bishops and the Church were threatened, did he finally back the Glorious Revolution.¹⁰ Although he was a firm supporter of the Crown, he maintained a country independence and low-church sympathies.

His enemies called him 'a trimmer'.¹¹ Yet Sir Ralph's trimming grew out of strength not weakness and he commanded immense local respect. During elections in the 1680s, he refused to treat the Buckingham populace, but he later contributed to their Town Hall. In 1686 he was removed from the county bench and in 1688 from the Lieutenancy, after he refused all three questions concerning the repeal of the Penal Laws and Test Act. In the Convention Parliament he voted for agreeing that the throne was not vacant and subsequently appeared on several black lists. In the 1690s, he spent the bulk of the year in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. He died in 1696 aged 83 leaving a healthy estate to his younger son John, a London merchant. His family pride is reflected in the monument he erected at Claydon with busts of his parents, his wife, and himself.

Lipscomb, Bucks i, 179 VCH Bucks, iv 33, 74

Bruce, John, ed. 'Notes of Proceedings in the Long Parliament, Temp, Charles I by Sir Ralph Verney (L: Camden Society, 1845 vol. 31.) PUL 1421.234

1. Memoirs, i, 120.

2. Bruce 138ff, Memoirs 115ff, Bruce 142*

3. Bruce 136, 177; Mems i, 112, 126.

4. 33-11, rv/jv, July 14 1679; J. Broad, 'Gentry Finances and the Civil War: The Case of the Buckinghamshire Verneys', EcHR, 2nd series, 32 (1979), 183-200; M. Slater, Family Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Verneys of Claydon House (1984), 12-15; Cambridge University Library, Sel 2.114-126; P. Hopkins, 'The Verney Collection of Popish Plot Pamphlets', Bulletin of

the Friends of the Cambridge University Library, 9 (1988), 5-15. I thank J. Habakkuk for the last reference.

5.M. Slater, Family Life, 7-12; CH Deed, Francis, Earl of Bedford and Sir Edmund Verney, Nov 1 1634; L. Stone The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641, (1965), 634. Charles I owed Edmund £1,500 when he died.Horwood, 433; Bruce

6.to R Burgone, Oct 10 1645

7.Gardiner says its a matter of conscience. Gardiner GCW ii,23 Gardiner says (ii,150-1)

8.F. Verney, Memoirs of the Verney Family (1892), i. 1-18, ii. 148-185, 382-419; Slater, Family Life, 11-18; J.Broad, 'The Verneys and the Sequestrators in the Civil Wars, 1642-1656', Records of Buckinghamshire, 27 (1985), 1-9; J. Bruce, ed., Notes of Proceedings of the Long Parliament (Camden Society, 31: 1845); Horwood, HMC7,434. Sequestration lifted 1649 (Horwood 434 says 1647.Sept 22 1645, Gardiner, iii, 312-18. HPT says sequest lifted 1648 not 49.

9.Horwood, 434. Wrong date of jreturn in NRaACATALOGUE INTRO.

10.J. Taylor, The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living (1658) and The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying (1663); 33-5,rv/jv,Sept 26 1681; 42-22,rv/jv,July 31 1687; 31-13,munv/rv,Jan 24 1678; 31-18,munv/rv,Feb 11 1679; 32-50,rv/munv,Dec 23 1678; 42-60,rv/jv,June 3 1688; B. Henning, The House of Commons 1660-1690 (1983), iii. 635; 39-40,rv/wc, Feb 27 1685.

11.32-134,munv/jv,May Day 1679; 35-25,jv/rv,Mar 14 1680; 29-15,rv/munv,Feb 3 1676; 37-11,jv/rv,Oct 19 1682; 29-20,rv/munv,Feb 17 1676;39-40,rv/wc,Feb 27 1685; B. Henning, The House of Commons 1660-1690 (1983), iii. 635.

“References to the Verney letters are to microform reel and document numbers in the British Library, followed by initials of writers and recipients and the date of the letter”.