Wellesbourne talk

John Wellesbourne came to my attention as a kind of spin-off from the Thrupp project. I found myself looking into the sixteenth century history of Abingdon and its region, and here I found Wellesbourne as the man the Henrician government put into Abingdon to oversee the disposition of the Abbey's landed property after its dissolution in 1538. Wellesbourne is not a prominent personage in sixteenth century history. He didn't make it into the Dictionary of National Biography, and you don't find him in the index to the main textbooks. But it occurred to me that he was, perhaps for that very reason, rather typical as a man of his class and period; and with the advantage that, because of his public activities, his career happens to be remarkably well documented. It seemed worth looking through his career in some detail to see what it could tell us about how things worked in England in this time that was, after all, formative for the future development of the country as a whole and for Abingdon and its region in particular. So I'm not going to be talking about Wellesbourne's relationship with Abingdon, except incidentally, so much as his 'life and times' – his career as it developed, the chances that he took and those he lost, and how he got to be where he was, socially and economically, at the end of his life.

I ought to decribe my sources. The main source of information on Wellesbourne is the great collection of Letters and Papers of the time of Henry VIII, which was printed many years ago, and is in all the best libraries. But to make sense of that mass of material I have depended mainly on the works of Geoffrey Elton and on a rather good Cambridge PhD thesis of 1975 by Elton's pupil, DR Starkey, who we now all know from radio and television, and who was already then an opiniated so-and-so but a first-class historian nonetheless who taught us a lot about how government was carried on under Henry VIII and especially about the significant part of it that was carried out in the king's court.. Also AE Preston gathered together a lot of material which is with his papers in the Berkshire Record Office.

I should say at the start that this talk is likely to be somewhat unfair to John Wellesbourne. Our predominant reaction to Henrician people is that this was a generation of 'men on the make', materialists and opportunists, totally without any ethical or moral principles. Wellesbourne will certainly fit the same pattern. But this

may be an artefact of the kind of historical sources most easily available to us, which, for this period, are legal and political documents, contracts, and correspondence between patrons and their clients, or would-be clients, grovelling on the one side and imperious on the other. Wellesbourne may have been kind to his aged relatives and and he may have loved children and cats; these are things we know little about. What we do know, I will mention..

Wellesbourne's family was one of Warwickshire yeomen that had moved in the fifteenth century to Buckinghamshire and had risen, we don't know how, to the extent that they got the heralds to manufacture for them a spurious pedigree that traced their origin to a by-blow of the de Montforts 200 years earlier. We don't know when John was born, but he first comes to public notice in June 1519, as a groom of the king's privy chamber. The privy chamber was being re-vamped at that time, both in its organisation and its personnel, and where we know the age of the new entrants, most are about the same as the king, who was born in 1491, or up to ten years younger. Getting that position at court was the one single step that made the rest of Wellesbourne's career and it needs some explanation.

The re-modelling of the privy chamber followed innovations made by Henry's great role model, Francis I of France, who effortlessly outdid Henry in his image-building as an idealised young, virile, glamorous Renaissance prince. Henry, like Francis, wanted young men always about him to join in his pursuits and amusements, including some that were pretty vile, to run errands, do hatchet jobs on a deniable basis, while also looking after his creature comforts like a staff of superior servants. The number of these people would vary at different times from a dozen to twice that, and the internal organisation, like everything alse at the time, was necessarily hierarchical. The terminology varied at different times, but the lists that were published from time to time always tell the same story – Wellesbourne was there, but he came pretty low on the pecking order, usually last or next to the last, even after he was formally promoted from groom to gentleman. I think we can be pretty certain that Wellesbourne was never one of those who could join with the king in boyish horseplay, or hand him his shirt at a ceremonial robing. More likely he would be the one who had made sure the shirt was clean and ironed – he wouldn't do these jobs himself, of course, but would make sure they were done. And we also know that at a

certain period, rather than engage in horseplay, he was the man who organised the royal horses. Having said that, it remains that he became, I think by far, the longest-serving of the members of the privy chamber; although I could also be cynical and say it was because the careers of some of his higher-ranking fellows were cut short by the axe on Tower-hill.

We do not know how John Wellesbourne came to get his place. He must have been a client of somebody, most probably the Chancellor, Wolsey, because the 1519 re-organisation was his doing. In principle, since he was a good manager, it was in the interests of organisational efficiency; but in fact since he was also a good politician, it was also a purge and re-manning with individuals he could rely on. One thing that is almost certain is that Wellesbourne would have paid some money either to his predecessor or to his patron; the going rate at that time seems to have been four years' purchase of the salary. But obviously he will have needed more than just an influential friend and a full purse. He'd have to have shown some personal suitability for the job. Whatever it was that earned Wellesbourne his position, he might reasonably have felt that his future looked bright.

The emoluments for a member of the privy chamber came from a number of sources. Firstly, there was the salary, £10 per year for a groom, very reasonable for the time, though much less than such a person will have needed to maintain his status. There were perks – he'd be on Henry's New Year gift list, and though he would have to give the king presents in return, he would expect to gain on the exchange. More important would be the money-making opportunities that might come his way – he'd no doubt be in competition with others for these, but seems to have done reasonably well for himself, especially at the beginning. Within the first two years, he had got a corrody in the monastery of Chertsey, essentially a kind of pension plan; a 21-year lease of property in Wiltshire; and the wardship of an heiress, which was especially valuable since she was an idiot and the wardship would therefore presumably be permanent. Soon after, he got sinecures in various parks in Warwickshire, with rights to windfalls and 2d per day; the right of presentation to a prebend in Windsor, and the office of controller of the customs in the port of Bristol with permission to employ a deputy to do the actual work. This stream of jobs and positions would continue throughout his career.

But the most important possibilities of enrichment came from sources that we cannot know in any detail. A renaissance court was a kind of stock exchange for patronage, for favours of all kinds, and the great fount and origin of patronage and favour was the monarch himself. A position so close to the king, with such access to the royal ear, was immensely valuable. We can safely assume, even though there is no direct evidence, that Wellesbourne, like his colleagues, would occasionally and with due circumspection, say a word on behalf of one or other petitioner, and reap a commensurate reward when the petition was granted. We do know, for instence, that the Grooms of the Stool – this was an honour that tended to go to the most senior of the gentlemen of the chamber – became immensely rich, since they were probably the only persons who could regularly be alone with the king; and one of Wellesbourne's younger and more successful contemporaries, Ralph Sadler, at one time was making about £2500 per year, an astronomical sum for the time, of which half came from the proceeds of influence and access..

The other great advantage of membership of the privy chamber was the opportunities to demonstrate your talents in government functions, and many of the top people of later reigns started their careers in this way. Members of the privy chamber, because of their closeness to the king, partook in some ways of the royal mystique, something that is hard for us today to understand, and might be called on to represent the king away from the court in ways that one might think at variance with their formal status. It was in 1526 that Wellesbourne had his first chance to shine, but muffed it. Francis I had been captured by the Emperor at the disastrous battle of Pavia. Henry may not have been quite as sympathetic as he pretended, but certainly needed to mark his diplomatic pleasure when Francis regained his freedom. Wellesbourne was sent to France with a gift of horses for the king and for his equally powerful mother, Louise of Savoy, who was actually running the country insofar as anyone did, by way of congratulation. He arrived late, and several of the horses had either died on the way or were so sick and moth-eaten they were in no fit state to be presented. The ambassador, John Clerk, had reluctantly to substitute two of his own horses, and Wellesbourne himself was made to sacrifice his favourite ambling nag. Even these were not really up to the standard required for diplomatic gifts, but they were dolled up and fitted with the ornamental harnesses that Wellesbourne had brought. Whether

by luck or good management, the formal presentation was arranged for a very cold day, and the queen-mother didn't go out but merely looked at them from a distance as they were paraded past her window, and pronounced herself very pleased. John Clerk's relief is palpable in his report, and Wellesbourne's name is conspicuously absent from the list of participants in the ceremony. Clerk very kindly reported back to England that it hadn't been his fault; whether it was or not, we can't tell; but it hadn't been a promising start to a diplomatic career.

One small point that may be worth mentioning. John Clerk was a career diplomat, but what he would have had on his visiting card, supposing such a thing to have existed, was that he was bishop of Bath and Wells. It is absolutely typical for the time that the a government function would have been paid for out of the revenues of an institution, in this case the bishopric, and that the actual duties of the bishop would have been carried out by relatively low-paid deputies.

Wellesbourne would get another chance in May 1530. This time the goal was to get Francis's support in the struggle to get the papacy to set aside Henry's marriage to Katherine of Aragon, and Wellesbourne who was now a gentleman, and no longer simply a groom, of the privy chamber, had a much more senior status in it, under the Earl of Wiltshire, Anne Boleyn's brother. The embassy was unsuccessful. Francis was not keen to commit himself. Paris was in the grip of plague and famine, and the court had moved to Angoulême, Francis's home town. The envoys had to follow them there and then sit about twiddling their thumbs while Francis found excuses not to see them. It was Wellesbourne who wrote the dispatches home. By October, he was back in England, having been superseded by Sir Francis Bryan, a fellow-member of the chamber, though hierarchically much above him, and a Boleyn cousin. Another of his successors in the post, one who would last very much longer, would be John Mason, another man with Abingdon connections. At least Wellesbourne seems not to have lost financially by his foreign trip; he had to wait two years, but did eventually receive the considerable sum of £112, along with the salary increase that went with his promotion within the privy chamber from groom to gentleman to 50 marks a year, i.e. £33 6s 8d from the original £10. But he still remains near the bottom of all the lists, and many years later we find him still earning only his 50 marks a year as salary

while all but one of the other gentlemen are on £50. But of course the formal salary was only a small proportion of his total income.

All this was innocent enough routine stuff, and perhaps seems a bit bloodless. But by 1530, things were changing in Henry's court; the routine factional cold wars, in which the gentlemen of the chamber could hardly help being involved – indeed for many of them it was why they were there – these were hotting up. It was time to make choices; although probably what no one yet realised was that the choices were now fraught with deadly danger, since to be too prominent in the wrong faction was increasingly likely to lead not merely to the loss of your job, but to that of your head. In September 1529, Cardinal Wolsey, the chancellor and Henry's chief minister, fell from power. In November, his successor, Thomas More, addressed the opening session of what would go down in history as the Reformation Parliament. It is frankly difficult for a modern historian to find any among the warring parties with which it is possible to feel sympathy; except perhaps that of the abandoned queen Katherine, but only because we know they were doomed to lose. The rising star, though it may not yet have been obvious to everyone, was an ex-legal secretary of Wolsey's, Thomas Cromwell; and it was to Cromwell that Wellesbourne now attached himself. I would give a lot to know the whys and wherefores. Did he fall easily and naturally into the great man's ambit? Was he recruited? Or, did he make a difficult and painful decision, and then have to work hard to get himself accepted? It is lack of information like this that makes Henrician people so two-dimensional and unsatisfactory to write or talk about.

One thing that happens when a great man falls is that his protégés are no longer protected. Cromwell was working his passage to power by ensuring that the plunder, or some of it, of the fallen chancellor was directed towards the king. Just a few weeks after Wolsey's dismissal, a report was sent to Cromwell of a sort that is sadly familiar in his correspondence. It tells how on 13 November 1529, John Wellesbourne and another person led a party of eighteen to Our Lady's Chapel in Ipswich, one of the religious institutions that Wolsey had enriched – Ipswich was his home town. They presented themselves as royal commissioners, which they were, and had themselves regally entertained by the priests. They then filled waggons with the plate and valuables of the institution and took them away, leaving the priests under the

impression that the king simply wanted to admire the pieces and the workmanship, and when he had seen ithem would send them straight back. The writer – it wasn't Wellesbourne himself – seemed to think this was enormously funny.

The liaison with Thomas Cromwell proved very profitable to Wellesbourne, and over the next several years it was Cromwell who could be relied on to steer material rewards in his direction. In July 1532 he got a lease of land at Mixbury, which became his main residence. That is in north Oxfordshire, near Brackley. Various other land grants followed. He wanted some wood from the estates of Oseney Abbey for his building projects at Mixbury and at his other manor nearby at Fulwell, and when the abbot proved uncooperative he asked Cromwell to put pressure on him. Pretty certainly, it was Cromwell who got him his arrears of pay for the French embassy, and his salary increase and promotion. In 1535, he heard of a man in Warwickshire who seemed likely to die soon and leave infant children. He asks Cromwell to get him the wardship and offered him a half-share in the profits. In 1537, he is obviously considering how to convert his leaseholds into freeholds, and he proposes a complex deal. It was the time when the monasteries were beginning to be dissolved, but the government spin was that this would only affect institutions which were corrupt and badly run, or those which asked to be dissolved spontaneously and of their own free will. Wellesbourne suggests that Cromwell get the king to grant lands from monasteries already dissolved to Oseney Abbey to a value equal to those he leased. The abbey could then be told that it could earn brownie points by making a gift of Wellesbourne's manors to the crown. After which, the crown, i.e. Cromwell, would grant them back to Wellesbourne, freehold, by way of reward for his loyal services. The unspoken assumption is that whatever is given to Oseney will return to the crown shortly anyway. In this case, it does not seem that Cromwell did as he was asked, but Wellesbourne did get the freeholds he had wanted, in due course, after Oseney's dissolution, along with several more.

But by 1535 Wellesbourne was in Abingdon, acting as Cromwell's agent in the dissolution of Abingdon abbey and the expropriation of its properties. His local interest seems to have come through his brother Oliver, who was already living in or near Abingdon, possibly at West Hanney, having married a local woman. Oliver would later marry into the Yate family of Lyford and start a short-lived Catholic

dynasty. John Wellesbourne seems to have become friendly with the abbot, and helped to sort out the long-running dispute between the abbey and its ex-bailiff, John Audlett. He seems to have been diplomatic enough to understand that the abbot would see it as a dishonour if he had to give evidence on oath. I think it would be over-cynical to take this as an indication that the abbot was about to tell lies in court; someone of his standing would expect to be believed, and would lose face if it seemed he has to be asked to swear to his statements. Plainly it was a dispute that would have to be solved before the dissolution could go ahead. The appearance is that Wellesbourne was trusted by both Cromwell and Abbot Rowland. The details are not clear, but it was probably his achievement that the dissolution took place peacefully and that nobody (so far as we know) had to hanged in the process as happened for instance in Reading.

In the weeks after the final surrender of the abbey, and while the buildings were already being gutted, Wellesbourne was busy with a great public relations exercise, reconciling the locals to what had happened. So far as the people of Abingdon and the region were concerned, it was simply that the crown had replaced the abbey as their landlord. To be honest, that's probably how Cromwell saw it as well; he couldn't have foreseen that within a generation virtually all the monastic property, 20 or 25% of all property in the kingdom, would have been dispersed to a newly enlarged and enriched landowning class. One of the great popular complaints against the monasteries as landlords, and indeed against landlords in general at that time, was that they were not maintaining the traditional rituals of hospitality. The rich were supposed to keep their doors open, and appropriate seats at their tables, for their tenants, for local notabilities, for the poor, for travellers, or anyone else who wanted to walk in. Wellesbourne set out to fulfil this expectation, at least in the short run, and found himself serving '8 or 10 messes of meat daily' (a mess would probably be a table of either six or twelve people) at a cost of a little under £7 per week – about what a pensioned-off monk would get in a year. He makes the interesting comment that this is not much more than he spends at his own house; evidently he was a man who would keep up the old tradition even if other landlords had given it up. Anyway, he is able to assure Cromwell that all the locals are quite content with the new regime, and they all agree that his hospitality, in the name of the king, of course, is better than what they had been getting before.

There's no evidence of any strong resistance to dissolution from the monks of the abbey, although it does seem that there was some whingeing from individual monks who had moved on to other monasteries that still hoped to survive. But Wellesbourne did have to deal with some criticism from the secular clergy. He had a lot of trouble from John Mann, vicar of Westbury, the next village to his home at Mixbury in north Oxfordshire. He describes him to a fellow protégé of Cromwell, Thomas Wriothesley, as 'an evil priest' and 'the worst man living'. He has tried to have him hanged, but Man has influential friends who saved him. These friends include one Andrewes, under-sheriff, and Sir Simon Harcourt, sheriff of Berkshire, and both of these had previously been on Audlett's side against the abbot. So there is some sort of a conscious opposition to what is going on, though it isn't clear whether or to what extent the basis was personal and financial or religious and principled. And then there is John Davy, vicar of Radley, who has been informed against for uttering traitorous words. Any criticism or even questioning of government action could be construed as treason and be a hanging matter. Wellesbourne is going to send Davy up to London for Cromwell to deal with. As also with a Welshman, who was at the Lamb Inn and spread rumours about new taxes to be levied on births, marriages and deaths, which was the only reason many people could imagine for another innovation of Cromwell's, the keeping of parish registers.

Meanwhile, Wellesbourne was collecting lucrative functions connected with the monastery property. He got a 21-year lease on The Rye and pastures round about, for which he would pay £20 yearly in rent, but the same sum would be due to him as seneschal or steward of all the lands that had belonged to Abingdon Abbey in Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire and Middlesex. He would have for 21 years the mills and all fishery rights in the river upstream of Abingdon, at an annual fee of some £40, and part of the manor of Culham as a freehold. His brother Oliver, described as 'the King's friend', got similar perks at a somewhat lower level: bailiff and woodward for Hormer hundred, keeper of Manor Place in Cumnor, and lands in Kennington. John Wellesbourne, at the same time, was becoming a person of consequence in and around Abingdon, a magistrate, and on the commissions of oyer and terminer, which in principle settled criminal cases but at that time were much

used to force through Archbishop Cranmer's iconoclastic policies, furthering the Reformation by removing images and shrines from churches and public places .

Thomas Cromwell wasn't really a bloodthirsty person, but when the time came to strike, he struck hard, and expected his clients to support him. Wellesbourne will have taken warning from the fate of several of his privy chamber colleagues who had backed the Boleyns; in 1536 some were dismissed and at least one executed. What part he played in this coup we don't know, but on the next occasion his involvement is recorded. Towards the end of 1538, Wellesbourne found himself on a special jury at Aylesbury – remember his family interests in Buckinghamshire – which found, as it was expected to, that certain noble personages were guilty of treason. They had actually been tried and condemned to death at Westminster, but this was forcing the acquiescence of the counties, and confirming that any property these people might have locally was up for grabs. What it was, was Cromwell's putsch against the de la Pole family and their friends. These were the last of the Plantagenets, Yorkists descended from the Duke of Clarence (he who was drowned in the famous butt of Malmesey in Richard III's time), and therefore could be presented as a danger to the king since they had some theoretical dynastic claim to the crown. They were religious conservatives, who had supported Katherine of Aragon, and, most dangerous for them of all, they had a relative, Reginald Pole, who was at Rome working against the Reformation. A couple of years earlier, Cromwell had worked with them to destroy the Boleyns, but now their turn had come. The defeat of this faction left Cromwell more in charge than ever. But it also meant that remaining conservatives began to feel their heads loose on their shoulders, and it was probably from then on that Cromwell's days also were numbered. But meanwhile Wellesbourne was rewarded for his co-operation by being made steward of the manor of Sutton Courtenay, taken from the executed Marquess of Exeter, who had got it from Katherine Audlett, at a salary of £4 per annum, but of course as steward he would have all sorts of perquisites and powers of patronage. It would actually be worth much more to him. It is worth mentioning that Exeter, and two others of the men Wellesbourne had helped to convict, had been colleagues of his in the privy chamber. Of the fourteen men who had been gentlemen of the chamber in 1533, by 1538 four had lost their heads and at least three more had been in serious danger. Wellesbourne was one who sailed through.

But when Cromwell in his turn went to the block in 1540 Wellesbourne somehow survived unscathed. How he managed this is another of those things we would like to know but don't. His friend Thomas Wriothesley, who had been a Cromwell client much longer than Wellesbourne, saved his neck by turning against his former patron in the nick of time, and giving evidence against him, and it is very likely that Wellesbourne did the same. Wriothesley would end up as lord chancellor and an earl. Wellesbourne, more modestly, continues to be named to commissions of the peace in various counties, and to accumulate properties as owner, leaseholder, or steward.

In 1544, Henry declared war on France and in June of that year he crossed the Channel with an absolutely enormous army and a stated intention to besiege Paris. Everyone who could be leaned on to provide troops had been, and Wellesbourne went across at the head of a force of 80 billmen and 20 archers, who he was presumably having to keep and pay from his own pocket. Higher ranking members of the privy chamber would provide three or four times that number. Wellesbourne's brother Oliver also went along. By September, in an access of belated realism, the objective had shifted from Paris to Boulogne, which was duly captured; and on the 30th, just before embarking to return to England, Henry dubbed John Wellesbourne a knight. This should not be taken as marking any special deeds of valour in the face of the enemy; he was already being referred to as Sir John more than a year earlier. It's perhaps worth noting that just five years later it was the much more able diplomat John Mason who negotiated the return of Boulogne to the French.

And that was essentially the end point of Wellesbourne's career. For a couple of years yet he continued to collect offices and lordships on various types of tenure, but by November 1547 he was 'late gentleman of the Privy Chamber', in the following March he made his will, and by May he is described unambiguously as 'deceased'.

The will is interesting perhaps because it is almost the only piece of evidence we have for Wellesbourne in a private, family context. His residence at that time is at Fulwell, on the North Oxon-Buckinghamshire border, and his main estates are there and at neighboring Mixbury, although he also holds a lot of other property, which is not listed, on lease. His wife Elizabeth is to be executrix, and she gets a life interest in all his property after specific legacies. After her death, it is to go to his oldest son, also

called John. There is a second son, Edward, who seems to be settled in life because he doesn't get any legacies unless his older brother dies. The youngest, Arthur, is still a schoolboy, and Elizabeth is instructed to see that he learns Latin and Greek, and to look to his career prospects. The wording suggests that Elizabeth is a second wife, and stepmother to the sons. Wellesbourne owns a house in London, with some books in it, which he leaves to a Sir Martin Barclay – someone apparently just as unimportant and much more obscure than Wellesbourne himself. I noted earlier that he seems to be a man who keeps to the traditional canons of hospitality, and this fits with the fact that in his will he is particularly solicitous for his servants. There is one male servant to whom he leaves a lease of one of his manors, on condition that he pays annuities of £2 per year to two female servants, who are also witnesses to the will and, one guesses, may have nursed him in his final illness. All the other servants are to get a year's wages at his death – presumably for many this would be redundancy money.

One thing that you always look for in wills of this time is the preamble, which usually shows whether the testator has maintained the old religious traditions or embraced the new protestant creed. One might expect, given Wellesbourne's record, that he would use Protestant wording, trusting for salvation to the merits of his only saviour, Jesus Christ, rather than to the intercession of the blessed virgin and all the holy company of heaven. Strangely, there is no such preamble in the will – which is unusual – and only right at the end, almost as an afterthought, does he consign his soul, quite non-committally, simply to God, leaving the question of what he really believed totally ambiguous.

And that is the life of a man who I think is a reasonably typical representative of his class and his time. He played the game; didn't do extremely well at it; certainly not as well as some of his fellow-courtiers like Wriothesley or even John Mason, but he died richer than he was born, and in his bed. So he might have felt reasonably satisfied with himself at the end.

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