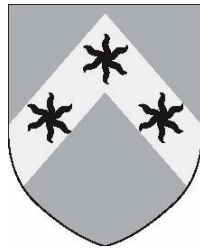




THE de COBHAMS OF STERBOROUGH



Introduction

This fact sheet briefly sets out the history of the de Cobham family who lived in Starborough (then Sterborough) Castle in the 14th and 15th centuries and who are buried in Lingfield Parish Church. Lingfield church is one of Surrey's least known architectural gems tucked away as it is behind Lingfield High Street and is a good example of a medieval hall-church which the Cobhams rebuilt as their family mausoleum. The tombs and memorial brasses are amongst the finest to be found in the country. Sadly Starborough Castle no longer exists; it was pulled down by Cromwell's troops in the 17th century.

The de Cobhams of Cobham

The Cobham family can be traced back to Henry de Cobham (died c1230) who purchased the manor of Cobham, near Rochester from his lord, Sir William Quaretemere, a knight of Henry II. By 1200 Henry had become one of the leading landowners in north east Kent. He achieved his wealth and status through his qualities as an administrator, serving the crown and some of the largest ecclesiastical foundations in the area. Around 1209 he obtained from King John a 'charter of confirmation' of his lands and rights in Kent. Henry's sons inherited his administrative talents, serving variously as commissioners, sheriffs, justices and the like, and all three increased the family's wealth and estates.

Henry's eldest son, Sir John de Cobham the Elder, maintained the family's connections with the village and church at Cobham which continued for four generations, but it was his youngest son Reginald who made the link with Starborough through his marriage to Joan, daughter of Sir John's well-to-do tenant William de Hever of Prinkham. When his father-in-law died Reginald acquired the manor of Prinkham, which he renamed Sterborough. He later inherited his unmarried brother's estates, thus providing a substantial inheritance for his heirs. Reginald was

not particularly prominent in public life and he kept a low profile during Edward II's last turbulent years. However his wealth and his Cobham connections enabled his son, also Reginald, to gain prominence at court where he quickly became an intimate of the young king Edward III, then aged 15, who had controversially succeeded his father in 1327.

Reginald, 1st Lord Cobham of Sterborough

Reginald was by far and away the jewel in the Cobham crown. In 1329 he accompanied the king to Amiens when Edward paid homage to Philip of France. He was one of several young household knights involved in the king's policy of re-asserting royal authority after the problems surrounding the new king's accession. Edward was determined to establish the court as a centre of companionship and honour. Reginald had a role in this and took part in the tournaments and jousting which became a feature of court life.

Reginald campaigned in Edward's wars against the Scots in the 1330s and later against the French following Philip's confiscation of the English Duchy of Aquitaine, which turned out to be the start of the so called Hundred Years War. In 1337/8 Reginald was appointed one of the councillors to the young Prince of Wales, Edward the Black Prince, with whom he was to serve at the battle of Crecy in 1346, after which he was summoned to parliament for the first time as lord and was thus able to style himself as such. He was made a Knight of the Garter in 1352. Not only was Reginald a successful and resourceful military commander he was also employed by the king on administrative and diplomatic tasks. He was one of the justices appointed to investigate maladministration in the shires. He was sent to discuss the wool trade with the merchant princes in the Low Countries, visited the Papal Curia and negotiated the surrender of Calais in 1347. He was again in Calais in 1359 to discuss possible peace terms with the French.

In his personal life Reginald had a wide circle of aristocratic associates many of whom he had known when they were companions-in-arms. In 1343 he married Lord Berkeley's elder daughter Joan. Their only child, Reginald, was born some seven years later. Although far more successful than the senior branch of the Cobham family Reginald remained on good terms with John, the 2nd Lord Cobham of Cobham. The king had demonstrated his confidence in Reginald in 1341 by allowing him to crenellate his Sterborough manor house which he later remodeled as a substantial castle covering an acre and a half. A 17th century drawing shows the castle to have been a standard quadrangular design. Three centuries later Cromwell saw it as a sufficient military threat to have it demolished.

When Reginald died of the plague in 1361, aged about 62, he was a relatively rich man. He had estates in five counties and appeared to have secured a place in the peerage for his family. He was buried in the Parish Church of St Peter, Lingfield.

The first mention we have of the church is in circa 965 when it was gifted, together with six hides of land (about 600 acres) by King Edgar's queen Aelfthryth, to the Abbot of Hythe, Winchester. During his reign Edgar (959-975) strengthened a number of the basic tenets of English kingship – the notion that secular law should take precedence over local custom and the Danelaw and the framework of shires and hundreds for local government, which lasted to the 20th century. And particularly

monastic reform. In the previous decades the Danes had plundered or destroyed many of the minsters and religious houses, and those that had survived had drifted into a loose, secular lifestyle. Edgar's reforms required funds and lands for the new Benedictine monasteries and abbey churches. Edgar led by example giving generously himself and requiring others to do likewise.

Therefore when the Cobhams decided that Lingfield's modest Saxon church was hardly a fitting resting place for so distinguished a person as the 1st Lord, they were obliged to obtain the permission of the Bishop of Winchester before they could start on the reconstruction of the church. This was completed quite quickly after Reginald's death because in 1369 the bishop gave permission for 'the newly rebuilt chancel' to be reconstructed following an act of sacrilege. The existing chancel dates from this period.

Reginald, 2nd Lord Cobham of Sterborough

Reginald was aged eleven when his father died. During his lengthy minority his family's fortunes were damaged since the influence in public affairs the 1st Lord had achieved was inevitably eroded. Moreover his estates, on the orders of the king, were administered by the queen who was renowned as an exacting landlord. When he was able to enter public life he had to earn the king's recognition but the opportunities to do so were limited. The war with France was going badly and the king was growing old. Reginald saw four periods of active service in the continuing wars with the French and was twice summoned to parliament, in 1371 and 1372. As for gaining influence with the new king Richard II, Reginald suffered from his association with a number of the appellant lords who had upset Richard during the course of his minority. As a result the only course open to Reginald to improve his fortunes was to marry well which he was to do with considerable success. His first wife was a well-dowered widow, a daughter of the Earl of Stafford. On her death she held manors in six counties.

Reginald's second wife, Eleanor, the widow of Sir John Arundel, a seasoned soldier and marshal of England, who perished at sea in 1379 in an abortive attempt to assist the beleaguered Duke of Brittany, was similarly well dowered. Although not a love match the union produced the necessary heir, also Reginald. But despite his newly acquired wealth the 2nd Lord's isolation from public affairs continued until his death in 1403. He too was buried in the new church.

Sir Reginald Cobham of Sterborough

On gaining his inheritance Reginald's prospects looked promising. The accession of Henry IV was to Reginald's advantage as he had connections with the ruling elite and enjoyed the patronage of the new Earl of Arundel. Like his grandfather and father before him he saw service in France and was at the battle of Agincourt. But he was never summoned to parliament probably because, although still affluent, he was of reduced means, his mother's estates having reverted to her first husband's family on her death. The only public responsibility given to him was the custody of the Duke of Orleans, who had been captured at Agincourt. Exclusion from public office was not unusual amongst the landed gentry who were often considered too exalted for such work.

As a result Reginald turned his attention to ensuring his place in history by founding an intercessory college of priests at Lingfield comparable to that at Cobham, which had been founded by the 3rd Lord Cobham in 1362, the year following the death of his illustrious cousin Reginald. The purpose of chantry colleges was to provide perpetual post-obit intercession for the souls of the deceased and their families, the belief being that the regular celebration of the mass would alleviate the suffering of the soul in purgatory. The scale of the endowment was an indication of a family's status and fame.

In 1431 Sir Reginald purchased the advowson or freehold of the church from the Bishop of Winchester who gave permission for an extensive rebuild and the founding of a college. Provision was made for a master or 'custos', five other chaplains, four clerks and thirteen 'poor persons'. Lands were provided to the value of £40 to support the community. The church as seen today is essentially the 15th century building with the 14th century chancel and tower. The misericords and screens date from the mid 1430s. The Cobham tombchests and memorial brasses were moved to the new north chapel and provision made for Sir Reginald and his second wife to be buried in front of the high altar. The church thus changed from being essentially parochial in character to that of a grand mausoleum. Sir Reginald died in 1446 and was buried according to his wishes.

Sir Thomas Cobham of Sterborough

Sir Reginald's eldest son, also Reginald, predeceased him and he was succeeded by his second son Thomas. He was variously a justice of the peace and sheriff of Surrey, Essex, Hertfordshire and Norfolk. He too was married twice but failed to sire a legitimate male heir. He died in 1471 and was buried in Lingfield. With his death the Sterborough line of the Cobhams became extinct. His daughter Anne carried her inheritance in marriage to Sir Edward Burgh of Gainsburgh and the Cobham connection with Sterborough Castle also ended.

Footnote

Although with Sir Thomas' death the Sterborough line of the Cobhams became extinct, Sir Reginald's college remained in being until Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries when in 1544 it was 'surrendered to the King'. The foundation was then valued at £75 per annum 'clear' and nearly £80 'in the whole'. It consisted of the church with the glebe, Neulande Mill (just to the east of Lingfield Station), the manor of Haxted including the mill, Byllies Park, Jordans Land, various tenements and lands around Lingfield. In Kent the manors of Pyriton, Hoothlyght (near Lamberhurst), Squeyres (Westerham) and Broke plus other parcels of land; and the Green Dragon Inn in Southwark. Outgoings included payments to the Bishop of Winchester and the abbot of Hyde Abbey and various quit rents and an annuity to the master of the college.

In the same year the church and the college and Squayres were given by Henry to Sir Edward Carwarden who was his master of tents and revels and a member of his privy chamber. Sir Edward is buried in Bletchingley Church. The college buildings were later pulled down. A 17th century hall house now stands on the site which is on the western boundary of the present churchyard.

The annex attached to this fact sheet shows the Sterborough de Cobhams family tree and describes the Sterborough de Cobham arms.

Sources:

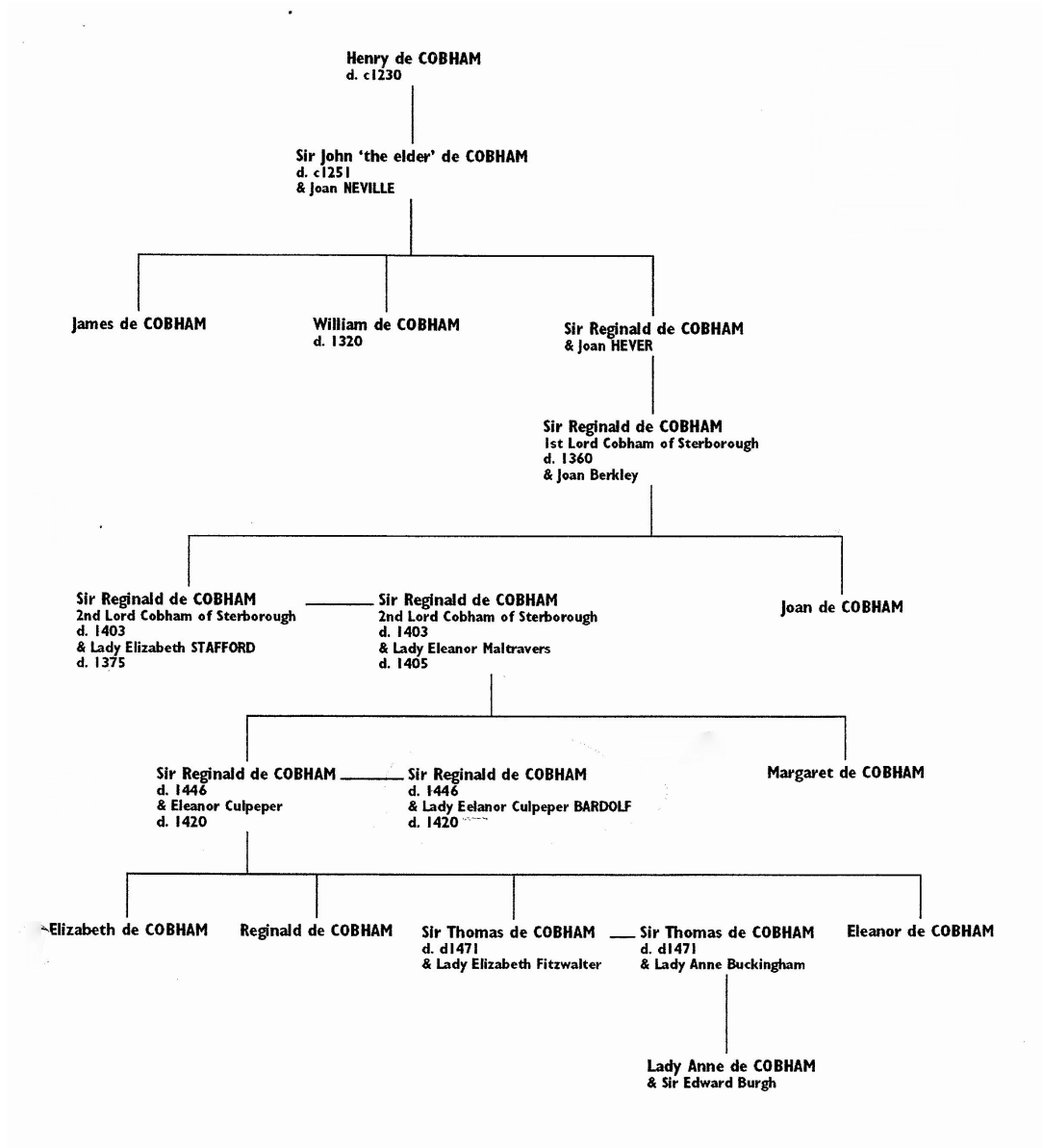
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THE DE COBHAM ARMS

The de Cobham arms as depicted on the tombs and memorial brasses show a shield 'gules' or red, with a chevron 'or' or gold with three 'estoils, sable', ie three black stars of six points depicted with wavy lines. The estoils differentiate the arms of the Sterborough de Cobhams from those of the senior branch of the family who used a variety of marks of difference on the chevron. The simplicity of the de Cobham arms indicates the antiquity of the original award.

