THE STONOR PAPERS

WILLIAM J. SYKES

Chief Librarian of the Public Library, Ottawa.

THE *Stonor Papers* are the letters and other documents connected with the Stonor family, written between the years 1290 and 1483. They have been preserved for several centuries among the mass of "Chancery Records" in the Tower of London. Though the collection was probably acquired as a whole over four hundred years ago, it had been broken up and its contents had been distributed among various classes of records. These scattered letters, deeds and indentures have recently been brought together, arranged as far as possible in chronological sequence by Mr. Charles L. Kingsford, and published in two volumes by the Royal Historical Society. One cannot make even a slight examination of them without being impressed by the patient work and thorough scholarship of the editor. The collection as it now stands is second in importance only to the famous *Paston Letters*, both for its human interest and for the light it throws upon English life in the time of the three Edwards, the Lancastrians, and the Yorkists.

The Stonor family resided in the little village of Stonor in Oxfordshire, situated about five miles north of Henley-on-Thames, from which place it no doubt took its name. It was certainly established there as early as the time of Edward I,—as a deed of the year 1290 shows. The last paper in the collection is dated 1483, and some fifteen years afterwards the last male heir in the direct line died. After his death there was a long and devastating Chancery suit about the estates, and at that time the family papers may have come into the possession of the court.

The fortunes of the house were firmly laid by Sir John de Stonor, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas in the reigns of Edward II and Edward III. He added greatly to the family estates, and his wealth was increased by his descendants in the direct line for about six generations. They were rich country squires, who—in addition to looking after their numerous estates and manors—served from time to time as sheriffs for Oxfordshire and members of parliament. About half of them were knighted.

For a little over the first hundred years, 1290 to 1420, there are in all only forty-one papers, none of them in English; Latin or

Anglo-French was the language used. Of the Latin letters there is not much to be said. They are chiefly law documents, deeds, and indentures, but some are letters of real interest from churchmen or scholars at Oxford. The Latin differs very considerably from that of Caesar or Cicero, and the Anglo-French shows many peculiarities in spelling, and consequently in pronunciation. It is perhaps remarkable that the earliest English letter is dated 1420, for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were written in English about 1375, and other contemporary writings indicate the triumph about the same time of the English language in England. Of course legal documents continued for some time longer to be written in Latin.

There are not many references in the *Stonor Papers* to public affairs or to the great events of the time. I have found no mention, for example, of Cressy, Poitiers, or Agincourt; of Wycliffe or the Lollards; none of Geoffrey Chaucer, although Thomas Chaucer—his son—was ward of one of the young Stonors, and his name appears several times. There is an account of the battle of St. Albans, probably a bit of Yorkist propaganda; but this is also found in the *Paston Letters*, and may or may not have been sent to Thomas Stonor. In the last few pages of the papers there are references to the unrest and uprisings in the time of Richard III, but—except for this—one would hardly learn from them that the Wars of the Roses were being waged. The struggles mentioned were in the main about property and in the law courts, though a few were actual bodily encounters. In 1466 there was a good deal of trouble in connection with the Devonshire estates of the family, caused by one Richard Fortescue who is described as "a great maintainer and oppressor in the country". An extract from a legal document will illustrate Fortescue's methods!—

> Mekely besecheth and peteously complayneth your poor and continuell Oratour, John Frende, graciously to concydre that Richard Fortescu of Ermynton in the Counte of Devonshir, squyer, with other riotus persones to hym assembled to the nombre of lllјxx (four score) persons and moo, ryotously arrayed in fourme of warre, that is to sey with Jackys, Bowes, Arrowes, Swerdes, Gleyves, and other defencible wepyns, the xij day of Decembre laste passed ayenste the pees of our sovereign lord the Kynge at Ermynton aforesaid ryotously and ayenste the lawe come and tooke your seid Oratour oute of his hows as his prisoner, and hym ladd unto the hows of the seyd Richard Fortescue, and ther hym in pryson kepte by the space of iiij dayes unto the tyme your seid Oratour had payed for the delyveraunce and raunsom to the seid Richard Fortescue v. marc.

But this is not a characteristic entry, and for the most part

the papers reveal the quiet lives of country gentlemen, spent in the management of their estates and in the performance of minor public duties.

We shall first glance at some of the externals in the lives of the Stonors. The family residence was already of considerable size when in 1416 Thomas Stonor bought 200,000 bricks at a cost of £40 (four in shillings per thousand) to build additions. An inventory of the main furnishings of the house was taken after the death of one of the masters in 1474, and in it we have an interesting glimpse of mediaeval housekeeping. There was a chapel with a fair collection of vestments, holy vessels, and ornaments; a hall "hanged with black silk"; a little chamber annexed to the parlour with hangings of pale cloth, purple and green; three chambers hanged with pale silk, red and green, with a bed of the same; a chamber at nether end of the hall hanged with green worsted. We hear of cushions, two covered with gray skins, two with red worsted, and two of tapestry worked with "notes" (mottoes). The inventory ends with five jacks, three sellettes (head pieces), two glaves, and a boar-spear. In a further inventory we are told of leather pots, a pair of coburnes (cob irons), two coterells (costrels), one great brooch, one middle brooch and one bird brooch. As one reads such a list—of which I have given only some items—a picture rises of this roomy country house, with its chapel, its old-fashioned furniture and hangings, its offices and kitchen utensils,—a house like that of Chaucer's Frankleyn "wherein it snowed of meat and drink".

Among the *Stonor Papers* are all sorts of tradesmen's bills, which give us a fair idea of goods and prices in those days. For example, there is a shoemaker's bill (dated six or seven years before Bosworth Field), where we find these items: four pairs of long boots to the knee, man's, 16d.; to my lady, two pairs of shoes and two pairs of "gelegs" (clogs or galoshes) 20d; to my lady's children, eighteen pairs of boots,—price of all, three shillings. In a bill for cloth from a London mercer we find thirty-eight yards of green sarsonette charged at five shillings per yard, with this note about the price:—

> Madam, the sarsonette is very fine, I think most profitable and worshipful for you, and shall last your life and your child's after you, wheras poor stuff of 11d. or 15d. a yd. would not endure two seasons with you; for a little more cost me thinketh more wisdom to take of the best, I winning never a penny on it.

There is a very modern ring about this comment. From several bills it does not appear that cloth was as cheap comparatively as other commodities. Various accounts also throw many side-

lights on things used and on ways of doing things. Weaving was cheap enough, as we see from a bill rendered to Mistress Stonor in 1468:—

> To weaving 16 yds. of broadcloth, white, 2d. a yd.

Other cloth in the bill, such as russet kersey, was 1d. per yard. A carpenter received for $5\frac{1}{2}$ days work 22d. A ploughman was paid for the "erying" of twelve acres of land twelve shillings and four pence. Other items relating to farm work are:—

> Unto Richard Mason for crosenpynnyng in the hey barn, 12d.
>
> Paid to a thetcher thetchyng on the berne be thirteen days taking a day, 3d.——3. 3d. Also for a man to serve him seven days, 14d.

We get an idea of servants' wages in those times from an item dated 1468:

> Thomas Pratt hath made covenant to serve Nicholas Wendover fro Michaell messe the yere of the regne of Kyng Edward the IVth, the VIIth yere by a whole yere, takyng for his labour 13/4 and a goune cloth.

A curious item runs "Paid for a pair of plough wheels 2/4". Of course oxen were used on the farms, and were shod as in the early days in Upper Canada. We note this item: "For shoeing on 11 oxen —4/7". The price of a horse about 1416 is noted: "pro equo griseo domini £3". But, as there is no further description of the horse, it is hard to draw any conclusion. Here are some quaint charges: "A chicken for the hawk, 1d." "The barber to make clean Roger's head,—15d." For this price one might think Roger could also have been bled two or three times.

The Stonors, being large land owners, were much interested in their flocks of sheep, and in the wool trade. To these we find a number of references. Take this curious one about the hire of sheep:

> Thys yndentur made at Stonor the 27th day of December the ere of Kyng Herre the Sexte xxixth; wytnysseth that Thomas Stonore, Esquier, hath delyveryd to Symon Cooke yn the pariche of Newnam yn Counte of Oxford 80 ewe schepe, price the polle 12d., for the terms of iiij ere next folowyng; peyyng erly to the sayde Thomas Stonore, esquier, at the translacyon of Synt Thomas the martyr yn Julii next folowyng after the date of thys present wrytyng 14/4, at feest of Sent Mycnell next folowyng 14/3; and after the terme of 4 ere the sayde Thomas Stonore, Esquyer, to chese whether he wol have for the sayde schepe ende of the terme the pris above rehersyd for the poll or the scheppe.

Seventeen years later sheep were dear for those days,—2-6 a poll. One gets an insight into the wool trade from a bill of sale in which nine sarplers (tons) of good wool and two sarplers of middle wool were sold at nine marks a ton (mark=13/4).

But, leaving the outward circumstances of life, let us turn to some matters of greater human interest. I suppose lawsuits are of human interest, and among these papers are many pertaining to the courts. A family having so many estates in different shires might naturally be involved from time to time in litigation. But however important wills and deeds and writs were to the individuals five or six hundred years ago, for the most part they leave us cold now.

The spectacle of a lady climbing in society is always interesting if not edifying. Elizabeth, wife of Sir William Stonor, was a London woman of the merchant class, wealthy, and connected with the Lord Mayor. Her marriage into one of the county families and her kinship on this account with the Duchess of Suffolk enabled her to go to court. So she writes to her husband:—

> And, sir, you schall understand that I have be with my Lady of Southfolke as on Thursday last was, and wayted upon hyr to my Lady the Kynges Modyr and hyrse, be hyr commaundment. And also on Satyrday last I wayted upon hyr thedyr ageyne, and allso ffro thens she wayted uppon my lady hyr Modyr, and browght hyr to Grenwyche to the kyngis good grace and the quenyse: and there I sawe the metyng betwene the Kynge and my ladye his Modyr. And trewly me thowght it was a very good syght. And sire, I was with my lady of Southfolke at this day hopyng that I myght have hade hyre at sume leysyre that I myghte a spokyn to hyr ffor the money, but trwly sche was very besy to make hyre redy, ffor sche is redyne to Cauntyrbery as this same day, and sche wyll be here ageyne as on Satyrday next comyne, so sche told me hyr selff.

Even in the high society of court circles Dame Stonor had an eye for business.

There are numerous references to marriages, which appear for the most part to have been plainly matters of business. Matches as a general rule were arranged for money or position. Here is a passage from a letter of a younger brother to Sir William Stonor, which illustrates the usual attitude in bargaining for a wife:—

> Doyng you to wyt y have spoken with the parson of Penyngton of the matyr that I have spokyn to yow off, and the parson hath told me that hyt was Perkyns dowtter: and Perkyns seythe that he cowd aweyll me in my lond x. mark a year. But I undyrstond nat that he wull depart fro hony lond with here, but with mony. But syr, yff hyt wold plesse yow to speke with Perkyns

> and awys whethyr he wull geve hys dowttyr hys part of Snowys well at Borowyscot to her and to her eyrys, I wold with the glader wyll dele with hym.

A clause from a will of those days puts the matter bluntly. The marriage of young Thomas Stonor is to be sold by the executors and the proceeds are to be applied for the marriages of his sisters Elizabeth, Maud, Philippa, Joan, and Anne. But the chief example of prudent marriages that increase the wealth and advance the social position of the house is that of Sir William Stonor. He was first married to Elizabeth Ryche, a wealthy London widow, the same lady who was so pleased by her reception at court, and through whom he formed a profitable connection with London merchants in the wool trade. On her death he married Agnes Wydeslade, daughter of a Devonshire squire, securing a great heiress in poor health. Upon her death within about a year, he made his third and greatest venture in marrying Anne Neville, niece of Warwick the King Maker, and cousin of royalty. Similar examples of bargaining in marriages can be cited from the *Paston Letters* to show the point of view in those times. Dame Elizabeth Stonor puts it characteristically when writing to her husband about an approaching match of one of her daughters "that ye and they should deal". Perhaps it should be noted, in concluding this section, that if we may judge from the family letters, marriages seem to have been just as happy in those days as in ours.

Though we meet among the papers no accounts of marriage festivities, we have several records of funeral ceremonies. In 1474 the wealthy squire, Thomas Stonor, died, and from papers of the estate we learn that the total expenses of the funeral came to £74/2/5, a very large sum in those days. A memorandum gives many details of the preparations. For the church there was to be black cloth for hangings, black and white vestments for the choir, lights and ornaments, and a curious item—"singing wine and singing bread." There were great bills for food and drink; bread and cheese and ale for poor men, lambs and veal and roasted mutton and pigges and roasted chickens in a dish for gentlemen; and apparently this strenuous mourning lasted for several days. The menu for the funeral dinner for poor men reads: pottage, boiled beef and roasted veal in a dish together and roasted pork; for priests, first course: pottage, capons, mutton, geese, custard; second course: pottage, capons, lamb, pig, veal, pigeons roasted, bacon, rabbits, pheasants, venison, jelly. One need hardly add that there were many extra utensils and many additional waiting-men.

Among the papers are to be found a number of references to

education. A glimpse at the primary schooling of a boy in 1380, that is probably unique, is afforded us from a letter of Brother Edmond, a clerical friend of the family, reporting on the boy's health and progress. This preparatory school was kept by a married man ("magister et ejus uxor"). The letter is in Latin of which this is a rough translation:—

> If it please you, you shall know that I have seen your son, Edmond, and have regarded his condition for a day and two nights. His indisposition grows less from day to day, and does not cause him to take to bed; but when he becomes feverish, he remains quiet, slightly indisposed, about two hours, after which he gets up; and so he spends his time, goes among the pupils, and he eats and runs about as in good health and spirits. Therefore, no danger is to be feared for him. And he, of his own idea, recommends himself to you and to his mother, and sends salutations to the others of the household. And he is beginning to say the Latin grammar (Donatum) slowly and hesitatingly, as is to be expected; truly I have never seen a boy so careful of it as he during his illness. The master and his wife wish some of his clothes to be sent home because there are far too many, and fewer would be sufficient, and they could easily be injured or soiled without their knowledge. I send you the names and the description of books contained in one volume (roll) which books the possessor is not willing to sell for less than 12d. (solidi).

Stonor is not far from Oxford and the University is referred to in the papers several times. It appears to have been a custom for some of the Stonors to assist needy students. A letter from the Rector of Lincoln College to Sir Wm. Stonor in 1482 begins as follows:

> Please it your maistyrshyp to understond that I hayff beyn with doctour Sutton, our commyssare, and I dyd shew to hym howe youre maistyrshyp boyth was and ys dysposyed to the universite, as in fyndyng and relvyng off divers scolars to the same, and also by relevyng off many other sucehe as cummyys to your maistyrshyp at divers tymes in the yere, lyke as Mr. Eadmunde, Mr. Flynte, Mr. Kyckall, and other moye.

About a century earlier we find a begging letter in Latin from a needy scholar at the University, which furnishes an excellent concrete illustration of Chaucer's lines about the clerk of Oxonford:

> But al that he mighte of his friendes hente
> On bookes and on lerninge he it spente
> And bisily gan for the soules preye
> Of hem that yaf him where-with to scoleye.

That affairs in college circles of those days were not alway characterized by the peace and harmony of our time is shown by a curious indenture in the reign of Richard II, directing the return to Queen's Hall, Oxford, of the college seal, keys, and a number of books and manuscripts that had been improperly taken away.

There are a few references to doctors of physic. One runs thus, "Sith I came to town, I have been both at physic and surgery: I thank God of amendment: my purse thereby greatly impaired." Moreover there are four prescriptions from a London master of physic for Sir William Stonor's second wife. Perhaps the most noticeable thing about them is their likeness in form to prescriptions of to-day. They are, I believe, a very rare kind of mediaeval paper.

The value of memoirs and letters in history is very great; they carry the spirit of life with them. As a recent writer has said: "The exactitude of a textbook, the balanced narrative of later writers, can never quicken history as does the reading of a contemporary account, faulty though it may be in particulars, and incomplete in generalities." In the future, I should say, no one can deal with the condition of the English people in the 14th and 15th centuries without taking into account the *Stonor Papers*.