

Oxfordshire in Wool and Silk: Ralph Sheldon 'the Great's' tapestry map of Oxfordshire

By HILARY L. TURNER

SUMMARY

In the later C17, Ralph Sheldon 'the Great', of Beoley and Weston, ordered copies of two of four woven tapestry maps first commissioned by his great grandfather around 1590 to decorate his new house at Weston in Long Compton, Warwickshire. Each of the original set had at its centre one of the four counties in which the family lived, held land and had friends, Gloucester, Worcester, Warwick and Oxford. They bore the arms of successive generations of the family. When the Oxfordshire and Worcestershire maps were woven a second time, perhaps because they had been damaged in attacks on the Royalist family's properties during the Civil War, the map was copied almost exactly by weavers at Mortlake, while the borders, the heraldry and the original decorative elements were updated.

The original idea for maps of woven tapestry sprang from the enthusiasm for cartography which swept late Tudor England. The 1570s saw the first attempt to map the country, carried out by Christopher Saxton county by county.¹ Only some fifteen years later Ralph, great-grandfather of 'Ralph the Great', of the catholic family Sheldon of Beoley (Worcs.) and Weston (Warwicks), commissioned a set of four tapestry maps.² Each focussed on a single county, Oxford, Warwick, Worcester and Gloucester. Each was a county where the family lived, had friends and owned estates, built up from the early sixteenth century first by canny marriages and later by astute purchases from the lands of dissolved monasteries.³ Of necessity, a tapestry has to be quadrilateral and so each had to include large expanses of neighbouring areas. The result was that when hung on adjacent walls in the new house at Weston (in Long Compton), they presented a panoramic view across England from London to Bristol. The family adhered to the Catholic faith and this, together with their Royalist sympathies, resulted in both their properties being ransacked and pillaged during the Civil War (1642-49).⁴ With the restoration of King Charles II, and the return of his own confiscated lands, Ralph Sheldon 'the Great' (1623-1684), decided to have copies made of two of the original four tapestries. It was a decision in keeping with his antiquarian interests in coins and medals, books, heraldry and genealogy. Nevertheless, it was no small undertaking, for the work had to start right from the beginning. The cartoon was almost certainly produced by copying the original tapestry depicting Oxfordshire, Berkshire, the Thames Valley and parts of adjacent counties; this tapestry therefore takes much of its information from the Elizabethan original, although comparison of the two shows that it is not identical in every detail.

¹ C. Saxton, *Atlas* (1579), facsimile, The Collectors' Library of Fine Art, (1979).

² H. L. Turner, "A witty devise": the Sheldon tapestry maps belonging to the Bodleian Library, Oxford', *Bodleian Library Record*, 17, no.5, April 2002, 293-313; H. L. Turner, 'The Sheldon Tapestry Maps: their Content and Context', *The Cartographic Jnl*, 40 no 1, June 2003, 39-49; H. L. Turner, 'Pride and Patriotism mapped in Wool', in P. Barber ed., *The Map Book* (2005), 128-9. The Map is now in private ownership.

³ S.T. Bindoff, *The House of Commons 1509-1558*, (1982) and P.W. Hasler, *The House of Commons 1558-1603*, (1981), contain brief, not always accurate, biographies of William (1500-70) and Ralph Sheldon (1537-1612). They supersede E.A. Barnard, *The Sheldons*, (1936). This family is unrelated to that of Gilbert Sheldon, builder of the Sheldonian Theatre.

⁴ P. Tennant, *Edgehill and Beyond: The People's War in the South Midlands 1642-45*, (Banbury Hist. Soc., 23, 1992), 68, 138-9, 174.

The immediate impact on the viewer is the tapestry's size, some 14 ft. 8 ins. x 19 ft. 5 ins. (4.45 m. x 6 m.), the splendour of the arms and crest and then the wealth of detail, Pl. I. The pale background of the centrally placed county of Oxford, its historic border outlined in red, is further emphasised by the meandering blue line of the Thames which traverses the composition. Differing colours denote neighbouring counties and their isolated outlying areas. Only gradually does the eye begin to range over humpbacked hills, outlined in green, out of scale trees, parks enclosed by palings and bridges, whether named or not, crossing the smaller streams and rivers. Coming closer, one sees villages, windmills, some of the larger residences in each county and thumbnail depictions of towns. Looking even more closely, some of these can be seen to have received detailed treatment.

Oxford city, almost at the centre of the tapestry, is shown from the south, the tallest spire intended to be that of the University church, St Mary the Virgin, the clearest feature the castle to the west of the town, a view now obscured, Pl. II. Far from being an imaginary representation, it is suspiciously similar to the drawing in the unpublished manuscript of William Smith's *A Particular Description of England*.⁵ Two moderately accurate depictions might have been commissioned, those of the houses at Rotherfield Greys and Holton, while a rather confused rendering of Eynsham may have been intended to indicate the abbey. Comparison of the two last with later prints shows a certain resemblance;⁶ the towers of Rotherfield Greys were mentioned by John Leland.⁷ The individuality of the depictions is noticeable, if not outstanding, and is not unparalleled. Estate surveys made by the most skilled practitioners, for example John Norden, often drew the manor house along with other prominent buildings; in Oxfordshire for example, John Blagrave depicted Harpsden.⁸ Elsewhere on the tapestry however, other residences present a less plausible appearance. North of Oxford, owing much to the imagination of the designer, stands the royal palace of Woodstock, with fairytale turrets unlikely ever to have existed; Rycote too owes much to fancy. Sarsden and the royal hunting lodge at Langley are formalised depictions, as is the un-named cluster of buildings at Thame Park, enclosed by palings, Pl. III. Twin towers, clearly a conventional symbol, indicated Minster Lovell, Wytham and Besselsleigh. The two last, now in Oxfordshire, but then in Berkshire, may have been additions introduced in the seventeenth century. The common link between these places is a connection between their owners and the Sheldon family of the later C16, either by friendship or by marriage.⁹ Other sizeable dwellings which one might expect to see, for example Mapledurham, Stonor, Broughton and Hanwell are therefore absent.

Some of the smaller towns were also delineated with considerable exactitude. Banbury, with its castle, Burford, Witney, Thame, Henley, Faringdon, Wantage, Wallingford and Abingdon, were all shown from the south, the most prominent feature of each in roughly

⁵ B.L. Sloane Ms 2596, printed Henry Wheatley and W. Ashbee, (1879).

⁶ Holton see Bodl. Ms Top Oxon a.38, f.144; Wood's Eynsham is reproduced in E. Gordon, *Eynsham Abbey*, (1990), fig.26.

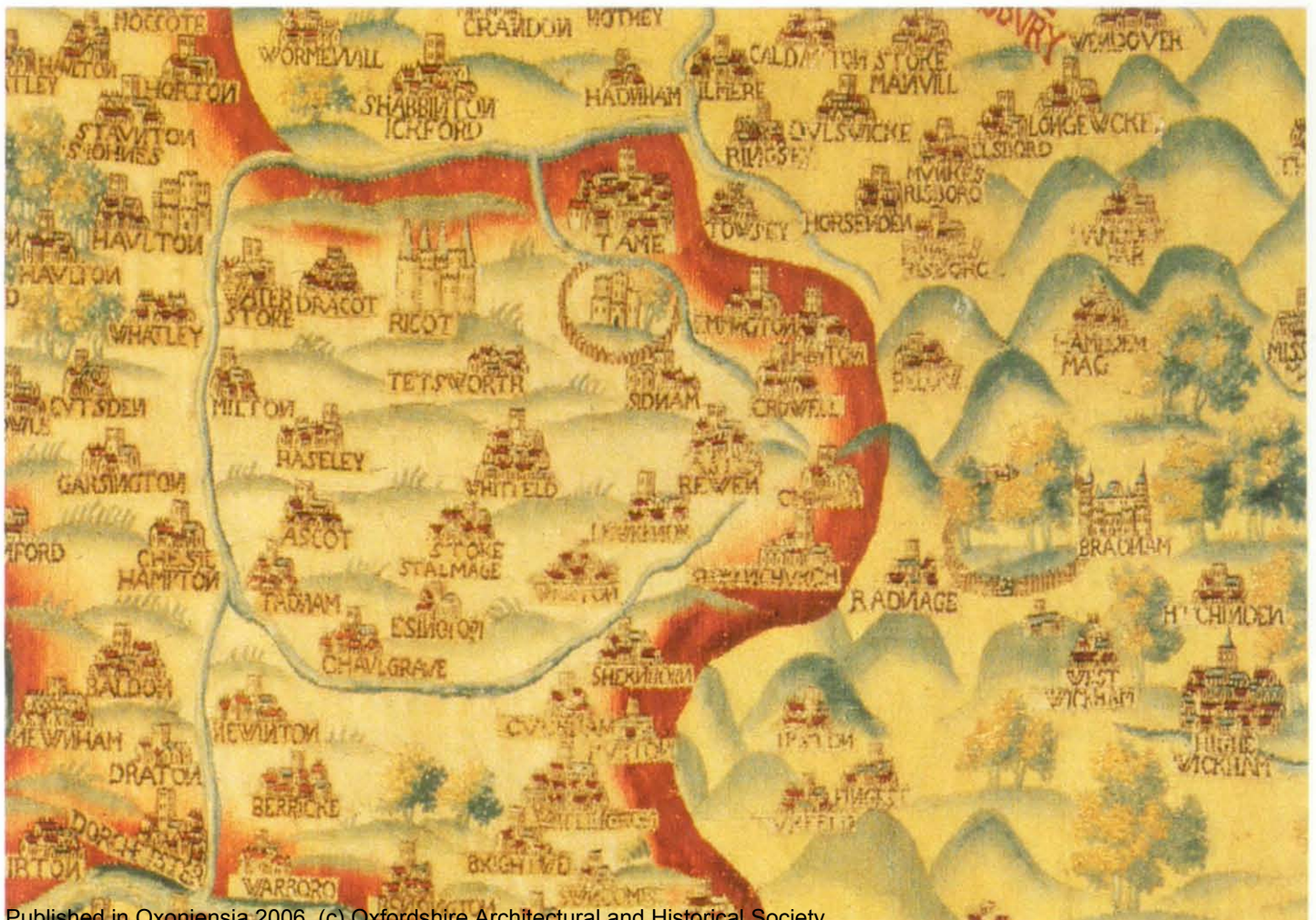
⁷ L. Toulmin Smith, (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland*, 5 vols, (1906-10), v.72.

⁸ Blagrave's Harpsden is held by Oxfordshire Archives, Cooper Caldecott collection, Ms.C.17.49(129). John Norden's biography is in the new *DNB*.

⁹ Minster Lovell belonged to Sir John Harington, first baron Harington of Exton, cousin through the Markham family; the earl of Derby, a connection through the Throckmortons, owned Eynsham; Holton's link came first through Ralph Sheldon's friend Lord Windsor and subsequently through the marriage of Sheldon's niece to the owner; Greys Court at Rotherfield Greys was the home of Sir Francis Knollys, whose son married a Sheldon cousin. Wytham and Rycote, both, by 1600, the property of the Norris family, fit this picture only if they were intended as a concealed reference to the original owner, Sir John Williams of Thame, a colleague of William Sheldon at the Court of Augmentations. Identification of relationships derives from the Sheldon genealogical tree derived from the Visitation Records printed by the Harleian Society, the Victoria County Histories or biographies.



Plate II. Detail, Oxford city and environs, from the C17 tapestry map. While Oxford is a moderately realistic view, Woodstock is imaginary. Photo courtesy of the National Trust. [Turner p. 68]



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Plate III. Detail from the C17 tapestry map, showing Thame and the Chilterns, together with several houses which belonged to Sheldon's relatives. Photo courtesy of the National Trust. [Turner p. 68]

the correct spatial relationship. Villages, however, were purely imaginary, shown in a stylised fashion as a collection of roofs, over which rose either a church tower or a spire, chosen at random and not necessarily reflecting reality.¹⁰ Even some of the most visible spires, those at Kidlington, Cassington and Adderbury, were not shown. Each village was named in capital letters, the Ns always reversed. Spellings are often idiosyncratic and, some of them phonetic, were taken from a variety of sources. Not all are paralleled on Saxton's map though the three most unusual, Staunton Hautincourt (Stanton Harcourt), Kenkham (Kingham) and Hoccote (?Murcot) are.¹¹ Some, but not all, bridges known to have existed were also depicted; two, Rotcotbridge (Radcot), and Newbridge are named.

One of the more amusing pictures is the White Horse, pictured on the south side of the Berkshire Downs not, as would be correct, on the north side facing the Vale of the same name. No prehistoric animal this, but a solid, spirited, cart horse! Accurately located, if not exactly depicted, the Rollright Stones totter on Oxfordshire's northwest limit. These pictures provided some hints about the date and the inspiration for the Elizabethan tapestries. Both Horse and Stones were mentioned by William Camden in his *Britannia*, his best-selling travelogue which described the main places in English counties. The first version was published in 1586 and was reprinted with enlargements and emendations five times before 1607.¹² In that edition, the last one to be in Latin, maps, based on Saxton's, were included as was a picture of the Rollright Stones. But was their inclusion on the tapestries inspired by Camden's text or because they were only a few miles distant from the Sheldons' house and therefore a familiar landmark?

Outside the Oxfordshire boundaries stood the royal palaces of Windsor, Hampton Court, Richmond, Oatlands and Nonesuch. Here again, details are not formalised but make an attempt at individual depiction; they could have been adapted from printed sources, either from the drawings of Windsor and Nonsuch by the Flemish artist Wyngaerde employed by Henry VIII, or from the slightly later views submitted for inclusion in a Europe-wide project to illustrate cities, executed by two German-born engravers Braun and Hogenberg.¹³ Houses shown include Bradenham, Stoke Poges, Eaton and Drayton in Buckinghamshire, Osterley and Syon in Middlesex, Cobham and Effingham in Surrey, Deniston (now Donnington) castle near Newbury, Sherborn and Sudeley in Gloucestershire, Compton Wynyates and the Sheldons' own residence at Weston in Warwickshire. Again, nearly all these houses belonged to Sheldon friends. The smaller towns, Buckingham, St Albans, Croydon, Newbury, Cirencester and Cheltenham are also depicted with some individuality though sometimes with muddled spelling.

¹⁰ Bloxham, Burford, Witney, Bampton, Abingdon, Faringdon had spires; Salford and Pusey may have done. Appleton, Coleshill, Spelsbury, Shipton, Stanford, Steeple Aston did not. Standlake is shown spired on the Elizabethan tapestry, towered on the later version.

¹¹ Swatcliffe (Swaccliffe), Addington (Oddington), Synston (Enstone), Erinford (Fringford); Gympton, Aderbury, Apleton, Cokerton (Alkerton), Tade (Tackely), Fasewell (Carswell), Kingston Baptist (Bagpuise), Norton Brimers (Brize Norton), Shallington (Shillingford), Tadham (Stadhampton), Sanderden (Souldern or Somerton), Hoccote (?Murcott). Mislocated places are Steeple Aston, Astoll (Asthall) and Swinbrook (following Saxton), Bletchington and Kirtlington. Some spellings are phonetic; Cutsden, Neuenton, Godderton (Goddington). Carswell was already a deserted village, but had connections to the Wenmans of Thame park. Kenkham and Staunton Hautincourt came through Saxton from Holinshed's *Chronicle* in its first edition and thus from William Harrison. Overall, the place names do not consistently agree with any one of the maps available between 1574 and 1610. Whether spelling was influenced by local usage, illiteracy or the weavers' incompetence is hard to decide.

¹² The only account of Camden's life remains that in the new *DNB*.

¹³ R.A.Skelton, (ed.), G.Braun and F.Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum 1572-1618*, (1965.) Wyngaerde's sketches are in the Fine Art Library, Ashmolean Museum.

For London there was almost certainly a model; there were several choices in existence in the later C16.¹⁴ In this instance, however, there was some updating. On this tapestry, as on the earlier one, London is shown in panoramic fashion, but here the skyscape is dominated not by the truncated tower of Old St Paul's as before, but by a dome, the idea for which was circulating even before the Great Fire of 1666. It was proposed again as a design in Wren's Great Model of 1673-5, and finally executed, in defiance of very clear specifications, in 1710.¹⁵ The tapestry is therefore far from being an imaginary reconstruction and favours a later date than that once ascribed to it, based on the heraldry, 1647, where the arms are those of Henrietta Maria Savage, daughter of John Savage, first earl Rivers, quartered with those of Sheldon, celebrating the marriage of that year.¹⁶ It is unlikely that a financially embarrassed Royalist family was in a position to undertake such work before the Restoration. A date in the 1660s, suggesting a rather mournful commemoration of her death in 1663, seems probable. But, since the weaving factory planned by his great great grandfather, William, had long since ceased production, the work must have been carried out at one of the small London manufactories such as Mortlake. Either it was not possible, or it was thought undesirable, to exactly mimic the original colour scheme, or indeed the shades used; this decision diminished the effect of the strong contrasts visible in the original. No attempt was made to reproduce the older border which had been filled with mythological and allegorical figures between elaborate strapwork. It was replaced by a picture frame border, a style paralleled by other Mortlake designs. The figure in the lower cartouche could represent either Ceres or Pomona.

The biggest change in the design, however, was the omission of the decorative details which had filled the corners of the Elizabethan tapestries. Enough remains from three of the earlier set, Oxfordshire (much damaged), Worcestershire and fragments of Gloucestershire, together with a complete Warwickshire, to suggest that they shared certain features. In the top left-hand corner were the royal arms, in the lower left a scale and dividers; the upper right corner was occupied by a lengthy text compiled from Camden's *Britannia*, the lower right displayed the Sheldon arms, the different quarterings on each tapestry commemorating four successive generations. The date 1588 woven into one tapestry has traditionally, but not very convincingly, been interpreted as the date for their weaving.¹⁷

In the C17 design Camden's text was removed from the top righthand corner and the family arms from the bottom. On this tapestry that area remained empty; no attempt was made to add pictorial or topographical detail other than hillocks, thus explaining the striking lack of detail here in contrast to the crowded settlements elsewhere. The family arms, the quarterings updated, were moved to the top left corner. Only the lower left corner remained unchanged, with a scale, dividers and a scroll bearing an inscription *Com' Oxon et Berceiae locurletata per Franciscum Hickes*. The substitution of the letter 'r' for 'p' makes nonsense of the word *locupletata* which would give the translation 'the counties of Oxford and Berkshire enriched by Francis Hickes'. Whether this last detail was copied from the

¹⁴ William Martin, 'The Sheldon Tapestry (Bodleian) Map of London and Vicinity', *Trans. of the London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, New Series, v, pt ii, (1925), 115-137.

¹⁵ The Warrant Design, that authorized as the plan of construction, is detailed in *Publications of the Wren Soc.*, i, 1924, pls iv, vii, viii; vol. xv, pls 3-7; vol. xiii, p. 4.

¹⁶ Ralph the Great's life is sketched in the new *DNB*.

¹⁷ Exhibition catalogue, *Victoria & Albert Museum, Portfolios, Tapestries*, 1914, where all six maps are illustrated; Their dating is discussed in H. L. Turner, *Bodleian Library Record*, 17, no.5, April 2002, 306-308; and in H. L. Turner, 'The Sheldon Tapestry map of Warwickshire' *Warwickshire History*, 12, no1, (2002), 32-44; Warwickshire, the only one of the Elizabethan set on display, hangs in the Warwickshire Museum; the Bodleian's two are on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the fourth is in a private collection.

earlier Oxford tapestry or not cannot now be ascertained because that part has perished, but it seems probable that it was. The words echo the layout of the Elizabethan Worcestershire example where, in a similar phrase, Richard Hyckes his father, was credited with the 'embellishment'.

The Hyckes, father and son, were the managers of the small works whose business plan was outlined in the will of William Sheldon (d.1570). They were subsequently appointed, in succession, as Queen Elizabeth's arrasmaker, in practice the head of the royal conservation department. It is this fact which provided the clue to their true identities. According to Anthony Wood, Oxfordshire's gossipy C17 diarist who claimed friendship, not always reciprocated, with Ralph 'the Great', Richard Hyckes had been sent by William Sheldon to serve an apprenticeship in the Low Countries; when he returned a workshop was provided for him.¹⁸ It seems improbable that, in the mid-C16 when English craftsmen did not travel abroad and when the textile trade, particularly that in tapestries and luxury woollen goods, was centred in the Low Countries and controlled by Flemings, this should have happened. Numerous Flemish tapestry weavers had, from 1500 and even before, been employed by the Tudor sovereigns and, in the 1560s, many more fled from the campaigns of Philip of Spain's armies across the tapestry weaving heartland of the Netherlands. The reception of these émigrés in this country was a carefully thought out operation, and it is more probable that Hyckes, despite his English sounding name, was one of them. Certainly from 1564 William Sheldon is known to have employed one Heinrich Cammerman, born in Brussels.¹⁹ When he arrived in England, aged 22, he would only just have been out of his apprenticeship, and so was probably not working alone, but with a team; William Sheldon's will states clearly that he had given rewards to some who had been in his employ and its terms imply he was making provision for others.²⁰ Quite specifically, Richard Hyckes was given use of the family's manor house of Barcheston rent-free, on condition that he wove, amongst other textiles, arras and tapestry. He was permitted to employ both foreign (ie Flemish) and English labour and the enterprise was backed by a loan scheme to encourage Warwickshire's unemployed to retrain. Although it is commonly said that the Elizabethan map tapestries were woven at Barcheston, only a single documentary clue to the nature of its products is known; in 1568 Hyckes was paid 68s by Sir John Talbot of Grafton near Bromsgrove for the weaving of his arms.²¹ Four tapestries as large and as complex as the Maps, however, almost certainly required more highly developed skills and more weavers than Hyckes could muster.

It is not clear where the map tapestries originally hung in the house at Weston for which they had been commissioned. Such information as we have comes again from Anthony Wood, whose undated observation states that he saw 'fine tapestries' in the dining room there. The implication in the context is that they had been 'signed' by Hyckes.²² But Wood neither specifically describes what he saw as maps nor are his words clear enough to be taken as referring only to maps. There may have been other tapestries signed by Hyckes that we do not know of. Together with the C17 map of Worcestershire and the Elizabethan

¹⁸ N. Kiessling, *The Library of Anthony Wood*, (2002), introduction; H. L. Turner, 'Finding the Weavers; Richard Hyckes and the Sheldon Tapestry works', *Textile History*, 33, no. 2, (November 2002), 137-161.

¹⁹ W. Hefford, 'Flemish Tapestry Weavers in England:1550-1775', in *Flemish Tapestry Weavers Abroad*, G. Delmarcel, (ed.), (2002), 43-61.

²⁰ TNA Prob 11/53, f.58, part printed in E.A. Barnard and A.J.B. Wace, 'The Sheldon tapestry weavers and their work', *Archaeologia* 78, 1928, 255-314, (256-57). This article should be used with extreme caution.

²¹ J. Humphreys, ed., 'The Elizabethan Estate Book of Grafton Manor, *Trans of the Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, xlv, 1918, 1-124, esp 49, 83.

Warwickshire map, this Oxfordshire tapestry was sold when Weston and its contents were auctioned in 1781; they were purchased by Horace Walpole, and presented to Lord Harcourt who built a special room for them at Nuneham Courtenay.²³ They subsequently came into the possession of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society.²⁴ Richard Gough, topographer, bought other pieces, including the earlier Oxford and Worcester examples, which found their way to the Bodleian Library amongst his bequests. Yet another piece of the earlier Oxfordshire tapestry had been cut out and used to decorate a firescreen. It was presented to the Victoria and Albert Museum by its American owner in 1954; part is currently on display in the British Galleries there.²⁵

These unique tapestries attempted to convey an idea of the countryside – hence the very different sizes of the trees in a royal forest such as Wychwood and in the more open countryside or the exaggerated steepness of the tightly massed humpbacked Chiltern hills contrasted with the more rolling Downs. To express this in tapestry was, in the 1580s, both a novel and innovative concept. But topographical record and faithful representation of particular details of buildings was not the main purpose, so that as a historical record the tapestries should be treated with caution. As a set however, they would have transformed Weston into one of the best decorated houses in England. The content of the Elizabethan tapestry suggests that it was designed with the idea of commemorating the friends of the family, fellow Catholics, in the popular new medium of the map; the few additions made to the second version indicates that Ralph the Great, conscious perhaps that he was the last male in the direct line and that his estates must pass to cousins, was alive to his family's history and thought it worth preserving.

A NOTE ON LOOKING AT THE TAPESTRY

When tapestry is woven the warp threads hang vertically and the weft – the coloured threads which make the pattern – run horizontally. When a tapestry is displayed, it is turned through 90° so that the warp threads then run parallel with the floor. You can see them all across the width; where two blocks of plain colour meet along the straight line of the once vertical warp threads they are usually sewn together to prevent the weight of the hung tapestry pulling them apart. You can see this most clearly on the place names; the black letters were woven into a rectangle of lighter colour which then had to be secured by being stitched to the threads above and below. Because the weavers worked from the back of the tapestry with the cartoon in front of them and sideways, the letters ought to have been reversed so that on the tapestry they would come out the right way round. The designer himself seems to have been very confused about the letter N – all of which are backwards on!

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²² A. Clark, (ed.), *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, antiquary of Oxford described by himself*, (Oxf.Hist.Soc.1891), I, 477n.

²³ E.W. Harcourt, (ed.), *The Harcourt Papers*, 14 vols, (1876-1905), vol. 3, 281-84 and another letter, Harcourt to Richard Gough, end November 1783, quoted in E.M. Jourdain, 'The Tapestry Manufacture at Barcheston', in A. Dryden, *Memorials of Old Warwickshire*, (1908), 30-38.

²⁴ H. L. Turner, 'The Yorkshire Philosophical Society's Tapestry Maps', Yorkshire Philosophical Society, Annual Report 2005, (2006).

²⁵ G. Wingfield-Digby, *The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Tapestry Collection, Medieval and Renaissance*, (1980), 71-76, not without errors, provides a bibliography and plates 97,98. An account of the later Worcestershire tapestry, owned by the Museum, will appear in W. Hefford, *From Mortlake to Soho: English tapestry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; a catalogue of tapestries in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, in preparation, Cat 10, forthcoming. Published in Oxoniensia 2006, (c) Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society