

WILLIAM PYKENHAM: A RETRACTION AND AN APOLOGY

by COLIN RICHMOND

IT WAS as well that my 'New Light on William Pykenham?' had its question mark, as only half the light shed in that imaginative piece (Richmond 2004) has proved to be illuminating. While Charles Tracy in an article in this issue of the *Proceedings* confirms my judgement about the tomb in Hadleigh church, he demonstrates that my conclusions as to William's descent were a fabrication. I was reluctant to believe that the successful clergyman had not made his own way in the world from humble beginnings and by his own talents: my political inclinations ran away with me. Yet, if I had remembered to read a footnote of an earlier article of mine (Richmond 1987), I would have been aware that William's origins were in 'an affluent gentry family' of Essex.

There is a lesson here for ageing historians; it does not need to be spelled out. Though fond of my fabrication, it is as fiction and not as fact that it will have to be treasured in future. There never was a William Pye of Tottenham, though that a Pye should become a Pykenham was a more than reasonable suggestion for an age in which name changes were the order of the day among aspirant English gentry. William Pykenham did not have to be aspiring; he was a born gentleman.

I must apologize as well as retract. And not only to readers of a journal I now find myself, with some embarrassment, editing. Sue Andrews, the Honorary Archivist of Hadleigh, has been critical of my handling of the whole matter in the Institute's *Newsletter* of Spring 2006. She and I do not see eye to eye, but had I only consulted her I feel she could have put me right about Pykenham being well-born. Thus, I apologize to her for being remiss. The omission was largely one of professional arrogance. It was also, however, the idea of the daunting two-bus journey to Hadleigh in the days before I was quite old enough to have a free bus pass that deterred me.

Is there anything more to be said about William Pykenham? If there is, I must watch my step about what I say. Charles Tracy has done justice, and not before time, to the archdeacon's stylish taste in his building projects. Since first encountering William writing to Margaret Paston I too have always thought of him as an attractive character: brisk, articulate, and not afraid to speak his mind to so formidable a 'woman of Norfolk'.¹ It has to be said, nonetheless, that the Pastons earlier in the 1470s did not trust him, John Paston II telling his brother that over the probate of their father's will Doctor Pykenham had not been 'kynde and just'. Still: the Pastons were an understandably jumpy family at that point, and the administration of John Paston I's will was never going to be smooth sailing.² Margaret and John Paston III appear by 1478 to have been on good enough terms with him.³

Not born and bred at Tottenham then, but (probably) dead and buried at Hadleigh.

NOTES

- 1 Davis II, no. 733: probably 1479. Consulting the original (BL Additional MS 27446, f. 20), one discovers he has had an interesting, perhaps a significant, second thought. Although crossing out the phrase 'that ys wyth rygth' from the final sentence 'for I wolde ye dede as wele that ys wyth rygth, to yowre honor, prosperite, an to the plesur of Godde', and substituting for it 'as any woman of Norfolk', he has done so with so faint a stroke as to leave 'that ys wyth rygth' easily read.
- 2 Davis I, p. 469. John II wrote to John III a fortnight later, 'sende me worde how ye trist Doctore Pykenham', so possibly the brothers had divergent views: Davis I, p. 474. John II was impatient to have the £100 loan promised him by Pykenham, James Hobart, and others, so he was particularly on edge.
- 3 Davis I, pp. 612-4.

REFERENCES

- Davis, N., 1971, 1976, *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*. Oxford.
- Richmond, C., 1987, 'The Sulyard Papers: The Rewards of a Small Family Archive', *England in the Fifteenth Century. Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Daniel Williams, 199-228. Woodbridge.
- Richmond, C., 2004, 'New Light on William Pykenham?', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch. and Hist.*, XL, 437-42.