

VILLAGE CROMWELLS¹: THE PARLES FAMILY, 1166-1452

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ABSTRACT

It is surprising how many gentry families flourished for generation after generation, rising up, surviving social and political set-backs, flitting in and out of the periphery of the national stage, only to sink back into deep historical obscurity.

One such is the Parles family, landowners in Oxfordshire, Staffordshire and Northamptonshire. Descended from two brothers living in the reign of Henry II, it was the younger branch that achieved prominence – through notoriety, rather than wealth – and who overcame the early loss of their estates to establish themselves afresh before a series of deaths swept away a generation of young heirs, leaving the inheritance to pass out of the family.

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The progenitors of the two lines of the Parles family were Baldwin and Payn de Parles, sub-tenants in Oxfordshire in 1166³. They married two sisters and coheirs and thus acquired interests both in Rollright (Oxfordshire), and Handsworth (Staffordshire)⁴.

The elder line continued at Rollright into the latter part of the next century⁵, while the descendants of Payn seem to have based themselves at Handsworth. Complicated divisions and other arrangements between the branches meant that the younger line retained an interest in the Rollright properties, paying homage to their senior cousins, with the annual service of one farthing⁶. This status quo prevailed for over a hundred years.

It is possible to trace the descent of the younger branch. The Staffordshire plea rolls and feet of fines detail the various disputes that the family had with the Priory of Sandwell, and the Dean and Chapter of Lichfield in relation to the advowson of Handsworth; these usefully state the various relationships with unusual precision⁷.

¹ "Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast,
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood."

Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, stanza 15.

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³ DD, pp.626-7, citing the Oxfordshire Pipe Rolls of 9 Henry II. They held at Rollright under William de Chesney and Robert de Stafford.

⁴ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.6, pt.1, 1885, pp.113ff, citing the *Coram Rege* Roll, Easter Term, 9 Edward I.

⁵ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.6, pt.1, 1885, pp.113ff; this shows that John Parles, then heir of the elder line, held at Rollright in 1281.

⁶ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.6, pt.1, 1885, pp.113ff.

⁷ In 1199, Payn de Parles put forward a claim to the advowson of Handsworth, *jure uxoris*, and eleven years later the Prior of the Order of St John in England admitted that he had a right to

Payn was succeeded by William, apparently his son; William by his son John, and then his grandson, another William.

The younger William de Parles was the man who would first make, and then break his branch of the family. It was William's good fortune to marry an heiress: Joan de Watford, one of the four daughters of Sir Eustace de Watford, a Northamptonshire landowner. Although she had to share her father's properties with three sisters, she nevertheless represented a good catch.

Like his father-in-law, William took the part of the barons in Simon de Montfort's rising against King Henry III⁸. Both were afterwards pardoned by the victorious king, but not before William had suffered various vicissitudes.

He was taken prisoner at some stage, being held in Gloucester Castle before his release in 1266 at the intercession of his feudal overlord, Roger de Somery⁹. William later alleged that he was also kept in Roger's prison¹⁰, although this might have been an exaggeration to aid him in a legal case. His lands were temporarily confiscated, and put in the custody of Roger de Clifford, his erstwhile gaoler at Gloucester¹¹. On 25 June 1267¹² a pardon was issued to a number of the defeated rebels, including "*William de Parles, knight of the said Earl*" [*ie de Montfort*].

That blip overcame, William presumably returned to Handsworth and resumed his normal activities. With his wife, he participated in the division of the Watford estates in 1276¹³. It was back downhill from there.

Not long afterwards¹⁴, William was caught up in an affair that would change the fortunes of the family dramatically. He was accused of killing one Philip, son of Robert; was arrested, and imprisoned awaiting trial¹⁵.

William's younger son, Eustace, seems to have been sent to London in a desperate attempt to rescue his father from the machinery of the law. As a first step, a writ *de odio et atia* was obtained from the king's court. This was an order that applied when

a moiety (VCH Warwickshire (Stephens, 1964) citing the Curia Regis rolls). The Prior of Sandwell released his claims to the advowson in 1230, in exchange for a property in Birmingham (Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.4, 1883, p.218 *et seq.*, citing Staffordshire Feet of Fines, 20 January 1230). In 1247, however, the dispute with the Order of St John was still rumbling on (Staff. Hist. Coll., vol. 4, 1883, p.102 *et seq.*, citing the Staffordshire Plea Rolls, 10 May 1247).

⁸ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.8, 1887, p.118.

⁹ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.8, 1887, p.118, citing the Close Rolls for 1266.

¹⁰ Staff. Hist. Coll. vol.6, pt.1, pp.80ff, citing the Banco Roll of Michaelmas 5-6 Edward I; in this case, William was suing over the loss of some timber at Handsworth, and alleged that a deed he had executed had been obtained from him under duress.

¹¹ Staff. Hist. Coll. vol.6, pt.1, pp.80ff.

¹² Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.8, p.6, citing CPR; I have been unable to locate this entry in the printed Calendar.

¹³ CCR, 3 February 1276. Joan seems to have been the third daughter.

¹⁴ The execution of William Parles must be dated to about 1278. He was certainly still at liberty in August 1276, when he witnessed an indenture for his mother-in-law (HMSO, 1900), and still alive in September 1277, when he was involved in the case regarding timber at Handsworth cited above, and is named in respect of a fine for his wife's inheritance (CFR, 6 September 1277); the post mortem court cases regarding his estates, however, were on foot by 28 May 1279 (CIM, vol.1, #1161).

¹⁵ The details of the case and the consequent aftermath are found in a petition by William's children, dated 1290 (PRO, SC 8/256/12795).

someone had been imprisoned on a murder charge, and it required the sheriff of the county to determine whether the accusation was *bona fide*, or merely the result of malice or ill-will ('*odio et atia*') (Osborn, 1947). Eustace further alleged that the judge who was due to hear the case, Ellis de Hauville, had been assigned it as the result of influence behind the scenes by his father's enemies.

In addition to the writ addressed to the sheriff, the royal court issued a second writ to the judge, ordering him to wait until the relevant inquiries had been concluded. In the event, for some reason William's trial proceeded. He was found guilty of murder, and hanged.

While this was certainly catastrophic for William, it was only the beginning of his family's misfortunes. As a felon, all of his properties were immediately forfeited. His eldest son, John, was thus deprived of his paternal inheritance, and his widow suffered the ignominy of being charged by the Crown the full value of all the goods in her husband's possession at the time of his execution, even though some were items that belonged to others (who subsequently reclaimed them), while others may have represented her own inheritance¹⁶.

John and his brother Eustace appear to have reacted by launching claims of their own to their father's estates. In theory, the land of a convicted felon escheated to his feudal lord. Thus, the family's property at Handsworth was claimed by Roger de Somery¹⁷, while that at Rollright was squabbled over between the senior and intermediate lords, Nicholas de Stafford and John de Parles¹⁸.

To counter these claims, Eustace alleged that his father had enfeoffed him with the Rollright estate¹⁹, and John put forward a similar assertion in relation to Handsworth²⁰. The former was dismissed as a fabrication, while the latter was examined with sufficient detail to indicate that it was a sham transaction:

*"Two years and more before he committed felony, William de Parles (lately hanged) enfeoffed John his son of the manor [of Handsworth] and went away to his land in Northamptonshire, and dwelt there about three weeks. Then he returned, with his wife and household, and disposed of the issues of the manor as he had done before, until the day of the said felony"*²¹.

These suits dragged on for some time²². As late as 1293 John sued Agnes de Somery for the manor of Handsworth, from which he claimed he had been unjustly disseised²³. Perhaps William's children became more desperate as the years went by. In their petition, they had claimed that the real killers had subsequently come forward and confessed and that they, having been wrongly disinherited, should now obtain justice. The case papers were annotated, "*nothing is to be done for them*".

¹⁶ CIM, vol 1, #2237: writ dated 14 July 1280 to enquire into the values of the goods and chattels of the late William de Parles.

¹⁷ CIM, vol 1, #1176.

¹⁸ Staff. Hist. Coll, vol.6, pt.1, pp.80ff.

¹⁹ CIM, vol 1, #1161, dated 28 May 1279.

²⁰ CIM, vol 1, #1176; Public Record Office (1865) *Calendarium Genealogicum*, pp.297-298.

²¹ CIM, vol 1, #1176.

²² For instance, Roger de Somery was still seeking the delivery of the escheated lands at Handsworth in about 1283 (PRO SC 8/331/15633).

²³ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.6, pt.1, pp.289ff, citing the assizes at Wolverhampton, Michaelmas 21 Edward I.

Finally, they took matters into their own hands. They appeared at the king's court, and in the royal presence accused William de Bereford, then a justice in eyre, of bias. This prompted action, but not what they had hoped for – they were committed to the Tower of London in 1293 for defaming one of the king's judges²⁴.

Fortunately, the Watford properties inherited by William's wife Joan were not affected by the forfeiture. The base of this branch of the Parles family thus moved to Northamptonshire. Some of this inheritance Joan advanced to her son, John²⁵, who presumably returned to Watford to lick his wounds and consolidate what remained of the family's estates. He was dead by 1341²⁶, and was succeeded by his son Walter.

Walter Parles made his mark as an effective local administrator. He served as sheriff of Northamptonshire, and represented the county in no fewer than six parliaments²⁷. In addition to his inheritance at Watford, Alderton²⁸ and Silsworth²⁹, Walter held land at Byfield and Shutlanger³⁰, some of this possibly acquired by his own marriage. The family was on the rise once again.

From documents relating to Walter and his sons we see that the family was enhancing its status not just by judicious marital alliances, but also through the purchase of lands. It seems that at least some of this may have been funded by the profits of trade.

A series of records from the early 1340s refer to Nicholas Parles, son of Walter, as a merchant³¹. This is particularly surprising, as Nicholas was probably Walter's elder son and heir presumptive³². Perhaps he and his father traded together, for the younger man is almost never named except as "*son of Walter Parles*".

Additionally, Nicholas and his wife Roesia benefited from a settlement of the manor of Upton, Northants by Nicholas de Cancellis in 18 Edward III [1344-1345]³³, inheriting

²⁴ ODNB, article on William de Bereford by Alan Harding.

²⁵ PRO C 143/71/22, dated 2 Edward II [1308-9], showing that Joan retained lands at Watford, and had previously granted further properties to her son John.

²⁶ Staff. Hist. Coll. (1890) vol.11, pp.108ff, citing the Plea Rolls, De Banco, Easter 15 Edward III, when his widow Eleanor had a suit for dower against Roger de Somery's heir – perhaps a vestigial claim in relation to Handsworth. It failed.

²⁷ Roskell et al. (1992, vol.IV, p 18).

²⁸ As noted above, Watford was inherited from his paternal grandmother, Joan. Walter's mother, Eleanor, also held land and rent at Alderton ['Aldryngton'] at the time of her death in 1345 (CIPM, vol.8, Edward III, #573).

²⁹ PRO C 143/209/2, showing that his mother Eleanor held a life interest in property at 'Synelesworth' in 4 Edward III [1330-1331].

³⁰ PRO C 143/285/11, dated 21 Edward III [1347-1348].

³¹ He is so called in a creditor's petition of 10 January 1342: "*Nicholas, son of Walter Parles of Watford, merchant of Northamptonshire*" (PRO C 241/115/402).

³² It is clear that Nicholas was trading as early as 1342, albeit possibly in connection with his father. He was said to be aged "*21 and more*" in April 1347, and was thus born by 1326 (CIPM, vol.9, Edward III, #40). Walter himself was said to be 36 as at December 1345, according to his mother's IPM cited above, which tallies with the grant of a messuage and rent in Watford by Joan to Walter Parles in 2 Edward II [1308-1309] (PRO C 143/71/22). Walter's IPM of 1361 states his heir was his son Ralph, aged 26 – *ie* b.c.1335 (CIPM, vol.11, Edward III, #173); Nicholas was dead by then, without issue (CIPM, vol.11, Edward III, #172).

³³ PRO C 143/269/7; the settlor retained a life interest.

it three years later³⁴. However, they died without issue, Nicholas predeceasing his wife, who died in 1361³⁵, and Upton passed out of the family.

When Walter also died, at about the same time as his daughter-in-law, he was succeeded by his next son Ralph³⁶. The young heir was to mirror his father's career. He acquired a further estate at Shutlanger, afterwards called Parles Park³⁷. He was several times sheriff of Northamptonshire, and a justice of the peace for many years. He was twice elected MP for the county³⁸. Before his death at an advanced age³⁹ in 1420, he added more property at Stoke Bruern, and at Morecote, Helmdon, Wappenham, and Yelvertoft to the family's holdings⁴⁰.

A string of minor grandsons followed in succession: first Ralph, born about 1409, the son of the elder Ralph's son Walter⁴¹; then his brother William, who died under age in 1430⁴², and finally John, born in 1419⁴³.

John took full possession of the Parles inheritance at his coming of age in 1440⁴⁴, but only enjoyed it for a dozen years. He died in 1452, leaving an only child and heiress, Joan, aged 5, who subsequently married John Comberford, of Comberford, Staffordshire⁴⁵; the inheritance passed to their son Thomas Comberford in 1508⁴⁶.

Thus the Parles family came to a close – not with a bang, but with a daughter.

³⁴ CIPM, vol 9, Edward III, #40, IPM of Nicholas de Cancellis of Upton.

³⁵ CIPM, vol 11, Edward III, #172.

³⁶ CIPM, vol 11, Edward III, #173.

³⁷ VCH Northants (Riden & Insley, 2002), sub Stoke Bruerne, pp.374ff, citing PRO CP 25/1/178/82/538.

³⁸ Roskell et al. (1992), Vol.IV, pp.17-18.

³⁹ Roskell et al. (1992), Vol.IV, p.19, n.1 consider the possibility that there were two Ralphs, one after the other, but rejects it. Although there seems to be some confusion about Ralph's marriages, and there almost certainly was a son of the same name, it appears that the career details assigned to the elder Ralph by Roskell et al. are largely accurate – if for no other reason than that the contemporary records do not attempt to distinguish between them.

⁴⁰ CIPM, vol XXI, 6-10 Henry V, #636

⁴¹ CIPM, vol XXI, 6-10 Henry V, #636; VCH Northants (Riden & Insley, 2002), sub Stoke Bruerne, pp.374ff

⁴² VCH Northants (Riden & Insley, 2002), sub Stoke Bruerne, pp.374ff

⁴³ VCH Northants (Riden & Insley, 2002), sub Stoke Bruerne, pp.374ff

⁴⁴ VCH Northants (Riden & Insley, 2002), sub Stoke Bruerne, pp.374ff

⁴⁵ VCH Northants (Riden & Insley, 2002), sub Stoke Bruerne, pp.374ff; his father William Comberford had been Joan's guardian

⁴⁶ CPR, 6 July 1508; according to VCH Northants, Joan had died at least four years previously, but the writs de diem clausit extremum were only issued on 17 May 1508 (CFR)

Pedigree

- 1a. **Baldwin de Parles**, living 1166: ancestor of the Parles family of Rollright, Oxfordshire; married **Juliana**; left issue, a son **Walter**⁴⁷
- 1b. **Payn de Parles**, living 1166-1200⁴⁸; married **Alice**⁴⁹, who brought her husband an interest in Rollright and Handsworth, Staffordshire. Issue:
 2. **William de Parles**, called heir of Payn de Parles⁵⁰; succeeded his father at Handsworth by 1210⁵¹; living in 1224⁵²; married **Sara**, living as her husband's widow, 1227⁵³. Issue:
 3. **John de Parles**, succeeded his father by 1227⁵⁴; called son and heir of William de Parles⁵⁵; dead by 1277⁵⁶. Issue:
 4. **Sir William de Parles**⁵⁷, succeeded his father by 1277⁵⁸; hanged for murder, circa 1278; married **Joan de Watford**, daughter and coheir of Eustace de Watford; living, 1308⁵⁹. Issue:
 - 5a. **John de Parles**⁶⁰, disinherited upon his father's felony, circa 1278; dead by 1342⁶¹; married **Eleanor**, died 6 December 1345⁶². Issue:

⁴⁷ DD, pp.626-627. It is likely that this Walter also held land in Lancashire (Pipe Roll Society, 12:237); he was still living in 1217 (Pipe Roll Society, 39). His descendant John Parles held at Rollright in 1281 (n.19 *supra*).

⁴⁸ DD, pp.626-627; VCH Warwickshire (Stephens, 1964); Pipe Roll Society, 12:22: *Pagani de Parles in Rollinriht*

⁴⁹ In the *Coram Rege* Roll case referred to above, she is called Agnes, sister of Juliana, but this is a late reference (1280-1281). At least one contemporary source names her as Alice (Gough Family MSS, 3145/16/1). According to DD, p 627, Juliana was afterwards referred to as '*Juliana Tirel*', but it is unclear whether she was an heiress using her maiden name, or whether she had remarried.

⁵⁰ DD, p.627; although this does not state that he was the son of Payn, it is clear from the descent of the Handsworth and Rollright properties that he was the issue of Payn's marriage with Alice. The *Coram Rege* Roll entry confirms this.

⁵¹ VCH Warwickshire (Stephens, 1964).

⁵² Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.4, pp.24ff, citing the Plea Roll, 6 October 1224: William de Parles v William son of Robert, regarding four acres of meadow in Handsworth.

⁵³ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.4, pp.40ff, citing the Assize Roll of 12 Henry III: alleged disseisin of Sara, widow of William de Parles, of her free tenement at Handsworth, 3 November 1227.

⁵⁴ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.4, pp.218ff, citing Feet of Fines, 18 November 1227: Robert son of Margery v John de Parles, regarding a virgate of land in Handsworth.

⁵⁵ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.4, pp.102ff, citing the Plea Roll, 10 May 1245: The Prior of St John in England v John Parles, regarding the advowson of the church in Handsworth.

⁵⁶ According to the Staffordshire Assize Roll of 5 Edward I, William de Parles had succeeded John de Parles in lands at Handsworth (Staff. Hist. Coll., vol.6, part 1, p.91).

⁵⁷ Harleian Society (1931).

⁵⁸ Harleian Society (1931); the Staffordshire Plea Roll of 4 Edward III [*s/c*] states that William was "*son and heir of John de Parles*" of Handsworth.

⁵⁹ PRO C 143/71/22 grant by Joan de Parles at Watford, 2 Edward II; she was said to be living on 21 September 1310, but no primary source is cited (Harleian Society, 1931).

⁶⁰ He is specifically named as son of William de Parles (CIM, vol I, #1176).

⁶¹ Staff. Hist. Coll., vol. 11, p.108ff, citing the de Banco Rolls, Easter 15 Edward III, which refer to his wife Eleanor as his widow.

⁶² CIPM, vol 8, Edward III, #573.

6. **Walter Parles**, born circa 1309⁶³; six times MP for Northants, and sheriff of that county⁶⁴; died 24 July 1361⁶⁵; married **Alice**⁶⁶. Issue:
 - 7a. **Nicholas Parles**, born by 1326⁶⁷; dead by 1361⁶⁸; married **Roesia**, died 1361; no surviving issue⁶⁹
 - 7b. **Ralph Parles**, born circa June 1335⁷⁰; sheriff, JP and MP for Northants⁷¹; died 1420⁷²; married firstly **Joan Talbot**, daughter of John Talbot of Richard's Castle, Herefordshire⁷³; married secondly **Katherine**, living in 1364⁷⁴; married thirdly **Elizabeth**, living 1381⁷⁵; married fourthly **Alice**, living 1411⁷⁶. Issue:
 - 8a. **Margery Parles**, daughter of her father's first marriage; died 28 September 1427; married firstly **John Hervy**, MP, of Thurleigh, Beds; died circa 1411; married secondly **Sir William Argentine**, MP, died 1419. Left issue by her first marriage⁷⁷
 - 8b. **Walter Parles**, living 1417⁷⁸ dead by 1420⁷⁹; issue:
 - 9a. **Ralph Parles**, born circa 1409; heir to his paternal grandfather, 1420⁸⁰; dead by 1430, without issue⁸¹
 - 9b. **William Parles**, his brother's heir; died in 1430⁸²
 - 8c. **William Parles**⁸³; issue:

⁶³ CIPM, vol.8, Edward III, #573.

⁶⁴ Roskell et al. (1992, vol.IV, p.18).

⁶⁵ CIPM, vol.11, Edward III, #173.

⁶⁶ PRO C 143/285/11: Walter, son of John de Parles, to make a settlement on himself, Alice his wife and the heirs of their bodies, of a messuage and land at Watford, Northants, 21 Edward III.

⁶⁷ CIPM, vol.9, Edward III, #40: Nicholas, son of Walter de Parles, aged 21 and more [in 1347].

⁶⁸ CIPM, vol.11, Edward III, #172 & 173.

⁶⁹ CIPM, vol.11, Edward III, #172.

⁷⁰ CIPM, vol.11, Edward III, #173.

⁷¹ Roskell et al. (1992), vol IV, pp.17-18.

⁷² CIPM, vol XXI, Henry V 1418-1422, #636.

⁷³ Roskell et al. (1992), *op. cit.*, p 17. Curiously, Roskell et al. and VCH Northants both state that Ralph had two wives, but the former names Joan and Elizabeth, while the latter names Katherine and Alice. As all are based on contemporary references, and seem to preclude conflation with his son and namesake, it appears Ralph had no fewer than four marriages.

⁷⁴ PRO CP 25/1/178/82 #538: Northants property dealing by Ralph Parles and Katherine his wife, 20 January 1364.

⁷⁵ Roskell et al. (1992), vol.IV, p.18.

⁷⁶ VCH Northants, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Roskell et al. (1992, vol.III, p 360).

⁷⁸ Roskell et al. (1992, vol.IV, p.18; vol.II, pp.50-52).

⁷⁹ CIPM, vol XXI, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ CIPM, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ VCH Northants, *op. cit.*

⁸² VCH Northants, *op. cit.*

⁸³ Roskell et al. (1992, vol.IV, p.18).

9. **John Parles**, born 1419; had seisin of his ancestral properties at his coming of age, 1440; died 1452; married **Margaret Weldon**, daughter of William Weldon of Weldon, Northants⁸⁴ (afterwards wife of Robert Catesby), died 1459⁸⁵; issue:
 10. **Joan Parles**, born circa 1447; had seisin of the Northants properties, 1461; dead by 1504; married **John Comberford**, of Comberford, Staffs, and left issue, who succeeded to the Parles estates
- 8d. **Ralph Parles**, married **Alice**, both living in 1411⁸⁶
- 5b. **Eustace de Parles**⁸⁷, involved in legal cases related to his father's execution, 1279-1293

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Chris Phillips, for his transcription of unpublished Feet of Fines records, and for his detailed calendar of regnal dates, available on his website at www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk which also provides details about the Argentein family, corroborating the marriages and family of Margery Parles.

Abbreviations

Please see p.388 of the journal for details of the following abbreviated sources:
CCR, CFR, CIM, CIPM, CPR, DD, ODNB, VCH.

PRO: Public Record Office documents, abstracted on their website at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Staff. Hist. Coll.: see below, Wrottesley et al. (1880ff).

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⁸⁴ PRO C 1/22/131; CPR, 25 November 1450; CCR, 1 November 1453.

⁸⁵ VCH Northants, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ VCH Northants, *op. cit.*

⁸⁷ named as son of William de Parles in the petition at PRO SC 8/256/12795.