

Alchemists, Pirates, and Pilgrims: Towards a Revised Model of English Knighthood in the Lancastrian Era

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In the stained glass of Ashton parish church, Lancashire, may be seen the kneeling figure of Sir Thomas Ashton who died *circa* 1458. This fifteenth-century knight is gloriously depicted there adorned in a warrior's full plate armour; around his neck he wears the Lancastrian 'SS' collar, given to loyal adherents of that regime. In spite of this rather conventional iconography, however, Sir Thomas was a very unconventional knight. For instead of pursuing a military or political career, as had his father and grandfather, Sir Thomas seems to have devoted himself to the arcane and mysterious science of alchemy, not a pursuit one normally associates with knighthood.¹ In the generalisations of historians and in the popular imagination the medieval English knight is commonly presented in terms of military activities, estate management, and local administration and parliamentary service. One recent popular work, for example, introduces fifteenth-century English knights as primarily military men, yet allows that 'many now preferred the lifestyle of the landowner, man-about-town and parliamentary representative'.² There is of course no doubt that knights spent a great deal of time and energy engaged in these affairs, as evidenced by the sheer number of sources devoted to them, especially from the later medieval period. It is there, however, that descriptions of knighthood usually end. We are left with the impression that the life of the fifteenth-century English knight consisted of roughly equal measures of going to war, serving as an office-holder and commissioner, and maintaining a certain level of income through the defence and increase of landed estates. Such a static picture does not take into account, however, evidence indicating that there was a greater variety of activities and life paths chosen by medieval English knights. The purpose of this article is to argue that, at least for the Lancastrian era, our model of English knighthood should be augmented to include this diversity.

Over the course of the twentieth century, a number of excellent studies have contributed to our picture of later medieval knighthood and helped to establish the current three-fold model of knightly activities. Knighthood in England originated in the eleventh century as a matter of military function rather than social status and several scholars have emphasized the continued military role of knights in the fifteenth century, aptly demonstrating that participation in military activities was a key element of English knighthood in the Lancastrian era.³ Since the Angevin period, English knights were also expected to fulfil certain civilian duties, such as serving on the grand assize. In the ensuing centuries, they would commonly be appointed to such offices as sheriff and justice of the peace, hold a variety of commissions, and serve as members of parliaments. By the fifteenth century, administrative service had become as important as military service in defining what knighthood was all about.⁴ From the thirteenth century, the English government also defined knighthood by a certain income level, exemplified by the practice of distraint of knighthood. From that time, knighthood became increasingly linked with the management and defence of landed estates.⁵ As my own prosopographical study of the 160 knights who swore the 1434 oath not to maintain breakers of the peace reveals, the vast majority of knights in this period performed some kind of

¹ W.M. Bowman, *England in Ashton-Under-Lyne*, Cheshire 1960, pp. 97-106.

² C. Gravett, *The English Medieval Knight 1400-1500*, Oxford 2000, p. 4.

³ For the origins and development of knighthood in England, see P. Coss, *The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400*, Stroud 1993, pp. 3-71. For the continued military role of knights in the 15th century, see M. Vale, *War and Chivalry: Warfare and Aristocratic Culture in England, France and Burgundy at the End of the Middle Ages*, London 1981, p. 128; C. Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c. 1300-c. 1450* Cambridge 1988, pp. 58-73; S. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*, Chesterfield 1983, p. 10; and C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society 1401-1499*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 49, 59-61, 85.

⁴ Coss, *Knight in Medieval England*, pp. 31-33, 40; C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth-Century Political Community*, London 1987, pp. 69-83; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, pp. 60-61, 66-71, 82-87.

⁵ Coss, *Knight in Medieval England*, pp. 30-71; H.L. Gray, 'Incomes from land in England in 1436', *English Historical Review*, vol. 49 (1934), pp. 623-24, 628; T.B. Pugh, 'The magnates, knights and gentry', in *Fifteenth-Century England 1399-1509: Studies in Politics and Society*, ed S.B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross, and R.A. Griffiths, Manchester 1972, pp 96-97; C. Carpenter, 'The fifteenth-century English gentry and their estates', in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed M. Jones, Gloucester and New York 1986, p. 38.

military service at least once in their lives; nearly all held some office or commission or sat in at least one parliament; and they typically held landed estates in between one and four counties providing them with incomes of between £40 and £200.⁶

Clearly the evidence seems to show that the life of the typical English knight of the Lancastrian era was essentially a blending of the three interlinked pursuits of war, local politics, and the defence and expansion of landed estates. While this three-fold model of English knighthood in the fifteenth century is not inaccurate, however, it is incomplete. In order to acquire a deeper understanding of the meaning of English knighthood during this period, one should examine the unusual as well as the usual in the lives of actual knights of the time. All of the knights discussed below strayed from this standard model in some way. The purpose of these anecdotes is to explore some of the more atypical episodes, activities, and choices of fifteenth-century English knights and thereby to make clearer the rich tapestry that was knighthood in the Lancastrian era.

Sir Thomas Ashton the alchemist is a perfect example of a knight who chose to pursue an activity that was uncommon and unconventional for one of his rank. While his father, Sir John Ashton (died 1428), had distinguished himself as both a soldier and administrator, Sir Thomas held no administrative offices, was never elected to a parliament, and is not recorded to have participated in any military ventures. Knighted some time between 1429 and 1434, Sir Thomas thereafter held only a single commission, that of February 1438 to collect a subsidy in Lancashire. King Henry VI, who was strapped for cash and facing a losing war in France, seems to have taken a great interest in Sir Thomas's experiments, granting him and his fellow Lancashire knight, Sir Edmund Trafford (died 1458), and their servants a licence in 1446 to pursue unmolested their quest for the 'philosopher's stone', by which it was believed base metals could be transformed into gold. This licence was the first step in a renewed interest in the potential of alchemy, forbidden since Henry IV's reign, as a source of revenue.⁷ Trafford, Sir Thomas's partner in the alchemical arts, gave up more conventional service in local government to pursue alchemy under the royal licence. Trafford served in France, fighting at the battle of Verneuil in 1424, and was knighted by the king himself in 1426.⁸ He was made a JP in Derbyshire in 1425 and was a commissioner to hold an inquisition *post mortem* in that county in 1427. In the 1440s, Trafford's governmental service shifted to Lancashire, where he served on the bench for several years and on a commission to collect a tax in 1445.⁹ Although his administrative service was not terribly extensive when compared to other knights of his time, it ended completely in 1446, when he and Ashton officially became alchemists in the king's service. While there were alchemists and treatises written on alchemy in the later Middle Ages, it was indeed rare for knights to regard it as a suitable activity.

Although legal battles over land and the lawless behaviour that went along with them were certainly common among English knights of the period,¹⁰ piracy on the high seas was another uncommon and unconventional choice for one of knightly rank. Yet that was precisely the direction taken by the Devonshire knights, Sir Philip Courtenay (died 1463) and Sir Nicholas Carru (died 1447). Having come into a vast inheritance in 1424, Courtenay was knighted by 1430, when he accompanied the king on his coronation expedition to France, and was granted a royal pension of £40 yearly in 1439.¹¹ Beginning in 1436, Courtenay began a nearly thirty-year period as a commissioner and JP in Devonshire, Cornwall,

⁶ G. Bogner, 'The English knights of 1434: a prosopographical approach', forthcoming in *Medieval Prosopography*. Most of the knights and lesser gentry of England were required by the government to swear this oath against lawlessness, maintaining peace-breakers or otherwise hindering the wheels of justice. Their names appear in lists by county on the chancery rolls: TNA, PRO, C 66/436/15-29; CPR 1429-36, pp. 370-414.

⁷ Bowman, *England in Ashton-Under-Lyne*, pp. 97-106 (Although there is no firm evidence, Bowman states that 'there is little doubt' Sir Thomas participated in the Wars of the Roses, p. 106); H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004 (hereafter ODNB), vol. 2: p. 684; H. St. James Stephen and P. Turner, 'Duchy of Lancaster records: calendar of patent rolls, 4 Ric. II-21 Hen. VII', *Reports of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (hereafter DKR) vol. 40 (1879): 535; J.S. Roskell, L. Clark, and C. Rawcliffe, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1386-1421*, Stroud 1992, vol. 2, pp. 75-78; CPR 1441-46), p. 450.

⁸ Verneuil: VCH, *Lancaster*, vol. 4, p.332n. Knighting: W.A. Shaw, *The Knights of England: A Complete Record from the Earliest Time to the Present Day of the Knights of All the Orders of Chivalry in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and of Knights Bachelors*, 2 vols. in 3 parts, London 1906, vol. 1, part a, pp. 130-32.

⁹ CPR 1422-29), pp. 561, 467; Stephen and Turner, DKR, vol. 40 (1879), pp. 535-37; CFR 1437-45, p. 334.

¹⁰ For these so-called land wars, see J.G. Bellamy, *Bastard Feudalism and the Law*, Portland, Maine, 1989.

¹¹ J.C. Wedgwood, *History of Parliament, Biographies of the Members of the Commons House 1439-1509*, London 1936, pp. 229-30; VCH, *Somerset*, vol. 5, p. 172; Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *History of Parliament*, vol. 2, p. 673; PRO, E 101/70/4/657.

Somerset and Dorset.¹² Much of Courtenay's life, however, seems to have been devoted to the sea. His grandfather had served the king as admiral of the west¹³ and although he never attained that high position, Sir Philip seems to have followed in his grandfather's seafaring footsteps. From 1436, granting licences or commissioning private individuals to keep the seas with their own ships was an important part of the naval policy of Henry VI's government.¹⁴ In May 1440, Courtenay was commissioned to command a private fleet to combat piracy, a fleet that was based at Dartmouth later that year and was included in orders for the safe-keeping of the sea in 1442. He was given a licence in January of 1445 for his ship the *Trinity Courtenay*, to be used to transport pilgrims to Santiago de Compostella.¹⁵ A good number of Sir Philip's commissions dealt with keeping the peace at sea, such as that of December 1457 to urge subjects to supply ships, men and equipment for defence, that of August 1461 to take from various ports ships, men, and weapons for the king's fleet, and several commissions of inquiry into cases of piracy.¹⁶ At some point in 1446, however, Sir Philip seems to have lapsed into piracy himself. In that year he was accused of capturing some Spanish ships and their goods and spiriting them away to his base at Dartmouth. The findings of the commission appointed to investigate are unknown.¹⁷ In spite of this piratical incident, however, Sir Philip continued to be a loyal servant on the sea for many years.

Sir Nicholas Carru is another example of a knightly pirate-hunter gone bad. Knighted by the time of his father's death in 1431, Sir Nicholas spent a good portion of his life serving on commissions in the south-west, many of which were concerned with investigating complaints of piracy and arranging for restitution to the victims.¹⁸ Yet like Courtenay, Carru may have dabbled in piracy himself on at least one occasion. While he was serving on a commission of June 1440 to inquire into the theft of iron from a vessel called *La Marie*, it was revealed that the pirates in question had operated from a barge owned by Sir Nicholas himself. As with Courtenay, we do not know the findings of the commission of oyer and terminer appointed to look into Sir Nicholas's complicity in this affair.¹⁹ Although illegal piracy was a rare pursuit for knights in this era, as my analysis of the oath-taking knights of 1434 demonstrates, the actions of Courtenay and Carru demonstrate that it was a possibility.²⁰

Moved by rumours of strange shining lights seen in the sky at night over the very old chapel of St Mary at Newton, Cambridgeshire, Sir John Colville (died *c.* 1446) was prompted to rebuild this chapel around 1406, found there the College of St Mary-on-the-Sea, and grant it land in 1408 and 1446.²¹ It was not this mystical incident, though, but the diplomatic activity to which he later devoted himself that really made Colville an unconventional knight. While the vast majority of fifteenth-century English knights served their king in local administration and some held higher offices at court, and while a number of northern knights served on diplomatic commissions to address truce breaches with the Scots, it was rare for a knight to develop anything like a career in international diplomacy. Diplomacy in this period is characterized by its growing professionalism. Although some envoys were chosen according to their rank, they were increasingly being selected for their skill in speaking and their knowledge of law and languages, particularly Latin,²² and it is possible that Sir John possessed such qualities. It is not that he shied away from more traditional knightly activities: in 1412 he served on the expedition to France against the duke of Orléans; in 1413 he commanded a naval force which won a victory over the French in the English Channel; and in 1415 he fought on the muddy field of Agincourt.²³ These events are overshadowed,

¹² Some examples of his many commissions: *CFR 1430-37*, pp. 257-62, 267-69; *CPR 1441-46*, pp. 61-62, 154, 430-31. JP: *CPR 1441-46*, pp. 468-69; *CPR 1446-52*, p. 588; *CPR 1452-61*, p. 664; *CPR 1461-67*, pp. 562-63.

¹³ Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *History of Parliament*, vol. 2: pp. 670-73.

¹⁴ C.F. Richmond, 'The keeping of the seas during the Hundred Years War, 1422-1440', *History*, vol. 49 (1964), pp. 292-96; and 'English naval power in the fifteenth century', *History*, vol. 52 (1967), pp. 7-8.

¹⁵ Wedgwood, *History of Parliament: Biographies*, p. 230.

¹⁶ *CPR 1441-46*, pp. 155, 290; *CPR 1446-52*, pp. 89, 380-81, 536; *CPR 1452-61*, pp. 170, 178; *CPR 1461-67*, pp. 37, 204.

¹⁷ *CPR 1446-52*, p. 40.

¹⁸ J.J. Alexander, 'Devon magnates in 1434', *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art*, vol. 72 (1940), p. 286. Commissions to investigate piracy: *CPR 1429-36*, pp. 197-98, 218, 220-21, 300, 355; *CPR 1436-41*, pp. 89, 448-49; *CPR 1441-46*, p. 290; *CPR 1446-52*, p. 40.

¹⁹ *CPR 1436-41*, pp. 448-49, 451, 506. It is interesting to note that the vessels owned by Courtenay and Carru probably indicate that they were also involved in trade, yet another unconventional activity for a knight.

²⁰ Bogner, 'The English knights of 1434', see n. 4 above.

²¹ VCH, *Cambridge*, vol. 2, pp. 312-13; *CPR 1405-8*, p. 265, 338; *CPR 1408-13* pp. 219; *CPR 1441-46*, p. 403.

²² Allmand, *Hundred Years War*, p. 117.

²³ VCH, *Cambridge*, vol. 4, p. 202; Sir N.H. Nicolas, *History of the Battle of Agincourt, and of The Expedition of Henry the Fifth into France, in 1415*, 2nd edn London 1832, p. 378.

however, by Sir John's many years of service as a diplomat. In 1409, he was an English representative at the Council of Pisa; he served on embassies to redress truce infractions with Brittany in 1414 and 1421; in 1419, he travelled to the burgrave of Nuremberg, the duke of Lorraine, and the Holy Roman Emperor to find a suitable bride for Henry V's brother, the duke of Bedford; he was assigned in 1421 to arrange for the escort of French envoys to Scotland and then back to the king; in 1431 he set out on a mission to the Roman court; and in 1433 and 1434, he represented England at the Council of Basel.²⁴ The silver in this unconventional knight's tongue must have been more powerful than the steel in his sword.

If diplomacy was an unconventional choice for a knight, surely running a hospital was even more unconventional. In 1434, most of the knights and lesser gentry of England were required by the government to swear an oath against maintaining peace-breakers or otherwise hindering the wheels of justice. On the list of those in Kent required to swear the oath is the name 'Brother Andrew Bircheford, knight, of Swynfeld, master of the hospital of Ospreng'.²⁵ The hospital of Ospreng was founded by Henry III to shelter poor travellers and care for lepers and was to be administered by a master, three 'regular brothers of the Holy Cross', and two secular clerks.²⁶ English hospitals of the period were almost always religious institutions, run by a group of regular or secular clergy.²⁷ Given the fact that he is referred to as 'brother', indicating membership in such a religious order, it is unusual that he is also designated as 'knight'. What is perhaps even more unusual about this knight is that, aside from this mention on the Kent oath-taker list, the name of the mysterious Sir Andrew Bircheford or Brother Andrew Bircheford could be found nowhere else in the records.

This curious lack of military or political activity is difficult to explain, since the vast majority of knights from this period held some royal offices or commissions or participated in at least one military adventure. Bircheford was not alone in this, however. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how a man like Sir John Colepeper of Warwickshire, for example, could have been knighted and lived such a long life, yet left virtually no impression on the records aside from also swearing the 1434 oath and dying in 1482.²⁸ Another good example of this non-activity on the part of a knight is Sir Ralph Bulmer (died 1444), who inherited his father's estates in Yorkshire and Durham when he came of age *circa* 1423 yet did not undertake any military or administrative service during his twenty-year adult life.²⁹ Sir Roger Harsyk (died 1454) of Norfolk was knighted by 1420, when his name appears on a list created by justices in Norfolk of men 'of ancient coat armour able to serve the King in the French wars'.³⁰ There is no evidence, however, that he ever actually served in France or held any offices or commissions. Given that most gentry studies seem to define the county gentry, of which knights were its highest level, in part by the administrative offices they were expected to hold, it seems strange that some men should have wished to bear the expense of becoming knights, had the means and influence to be thought fit to swear the 1434 oath, and yet were able to avoid royal appointments and commissions so consistently.

Since Palestine had been lost to the Turks in the late thirteenth century, crusades to the Holy Land in the fifteenth century were unusual activities as well. Most Englishmen of the knightly class who saw military service in the Lancastrian era fought either in France, Wales, or on the northern marches toward Scotland. However, a few unconventional knights made the arduous journey to the Holy Land to seek military glory and perhaps to take up knighthood in that chivalric locale.³¹ One such man was John

²⁴ VCH, *Cambridge*, vol. 4, p. 202; F. Devon, ed., *Issues of the Exchequer; Being a Collection of Payments made out of His Majesty's Revenue, from King Henry III, to King Henry VI. Inclusive*, London 1837, pp. 310, 366; A.C. Ewald, 'Calendar of French rolls, 1-10 Henry V', *DKR*, vol. 44 (1883), pp. 553, 554, 610, 626; *CPR 1413-16*, p. 264; *CPR 1416-22*, pp. 321-22; *CPR 1429-36*, p. 342; PRO, E 101/321/36; J. Ferguson, *English Diplomacy 1422-1461*, Oxford 1972, p. 215; A.C. Ewald, 'Calendar of French rolls, Henry VI', *DKR*, vol. 48 (1887), pp. 291, 297, 300.

²⁵ *CPR 1429-36*, p. 388.

²⁶ A. Hussey, 'Hospitals in Kent', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, vol. 29 (1911), p. 262.

²⁷ C. Rawcliffe, 'Hospitals', in *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*, ed P.E. Szarmach, M.T. Tavormina and J.T. Rosenthal, New York 1998, pp. 360-61.

²⁸ *CPR 1429-36*, p. 384; *CFR 1471-85*, p. 235; PRO, C 140/82. It is possible, though unlikely, he was the same John Colepeper who served a term as sheriff of Kent in 1466-67: A. Hughes and J. Jennings, *List of Sheriffs for England and Wales, from the Earliest Times to A.D. 1831*, PRO Lists and Indexes, no. 9, New York: Kraus Reprint, 1963, p. 68.

²⁹ J.W. Walker, ed., *Yorkshire Pedigrees*, vol. 1, Publications of the Harleian Society, vol. 94 (1942), pp. 72-76; *CFR 1430-37*, pp. 323-24; W.P. Baildon and J.W. Clay, eds, *Inquisitions Post Mortem Relating to Yorkshire, of the Reigns of Henry IV and Henry V*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, vol. 59 (1918), pp. 50-51, 83-84.

³⁰ W.J. Blake, 'Fuller's list of Norfolk gentry', *Norfolk Archaeology*, vol. 32 (1961), p. 271.

³¹ M.H. Keen, *Chivalry*, New Haven, Connecticut 1984, pp. 78-79.

Pecche (died 1440), a commissioner and sheriff in Kent in the 1420s and 1430s.³² Pecche interrupted his administrative work around 1424 when he took out letters of attorney in preparation for a pilgrimage to Palestine and was probably knighted there, for he is listed as a knight in the records beginning in 1426.³³ Sir Robert Molyneux was unfortunate enough to be captured by the Turks while crusading in 1448, but was released on the promise to pay his ransom. The church must have considered Sir Robert a valuable soldier of Christ for it offered an indulgence to help pay this sum.³⁴ A more fantastic crusade story can be found in the epitaph of Sir John Cheyne (died 1468) of Drayton Beauchamp, Buckinghamshire, a knight who had a long career as a local administrator and member of several parliaments. As a young esquire Cheyne apparently undertook a crusade to the tomb of Christ, where he defeated and beheaded a 'huge savage giant' and was then knighted for his efforts. While there is no other evidence for this fantastic deed, Cheyne could well have been in Palestine since his name does not appear in any records between 1414 and late 1420, by which time he had been dubbed a knight.³⁵ The rarity of evidence for military journeys to the Holy Land in the records of this period shows that crusading activities were very unusual for Lancastrian knights. Yet these few warrior-pilgrims, who made the trip across the sea long after the fire of crusading ardour had died down to mere embers, show that some men still took the religious duties of knighthood very seriously.

Other activities in which some Lancastrian knights engaged could be considered very conventional in the chivalric sense, yet when compared with the pursuits of the majority of knights, were in fact atypical in the Lancastrian era. While the typical English knight of the period spent some time in military service, usually in his younger years, Sir John Montgomery (died 1449) was unusual in that he spent virtually his entire career engaged in war and defensive administration in Normandy, except for some time toward the end of his life when he was a JP in Hertfordshire and Essex.³⁶ In 1413 he was appointed bailiff of Calais; two years later he led three archers at the successful siege of Harfleur and then stayed on as part of the garrison. In 1418, he was knighted at a celebration of the feast of St George in Caen. He participated in the conquest of Normandy, during which he was made captain of several fortified places and on many occasions acted as a commissioner of array. Following the death of Henry V, he continued to serve under the duke of Bedford, who made Sir John one of his privy councillors. He was present on the expedition to crown Henry VI in Paris in 1430, made additional military trips to the continent in 1431, 1433, and 1434, was made gaoler of Calais in 1438, and was a commissioner to take the musters of troops in Normandy in 1439.³⁷ It may seem strange that a knight who pursued war with such zeal would be included among the unusual, but while most knights made soldiering a part of their careers, career soldiers like Montgomery were in fact surprisingly rare among the English knights of this period.

The price for being on the losing side in a medieval political dispute was usually death. Sir Roger Chamberlain of Kent (died c. 1465) is an example of the unusual because of the narrow escape he made from being executed and his subsequent return to favour. In the 1440s, he became attached to the powerful Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, who appointed him constable of Queenborough Castle in 1441 and soon after made Sir Roger his chamberlain. In 1447, however, Gloucester was arrested by his political opponents and died within a week of his arrest, probably of a heart attack.³⁸ As his close confidant, Sir Roger was arrested along with his master and convicted of treason.³⁹ The ghastly sentence passed upon Sir Roger was partially carried out, but he was pardoned 'after his drawing and hanging and

³² *CPR 1422-29*, p. 124; *CPR 1429-36*, pp. 124-27, 134-40; *CFR 1430-37*, p. 259; Hughes and Jennings, *List of Sheriffs*, p. 68.

³³ Ewald, 'French rolls, Henry VI', p. 234; *CCR 1422-29*, p. 333.

³⁴ F.R. Raines, *A History of the Chantries within the County Palatine of Lancaster*, vol. 1, Chetham Society, vol. 59 (1862), pp. 110n-111n; Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *History of Parliament*, vol. 3, p. 754; VCH, *Lancaster*, vol. 3, p. 69n.

³⁵ Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *History of Parliament*, vol. 2, pp. 552-54.

³⁶ *CPR 1441-46*, pp. 470, 471.

³⁷ Ewald, 'French rolls, Henry V', pp. 546, 552, 555; Ewald, 'French rolls, Henry VI', pp. 225, 231, 241, 242, 273, 275, 282, 283, 292, 301, 321, 326, 341; *CPR 1441-46*, pp. 361, 398; B. Williams, *Henrici Quinti, Angliae Regis, Gesta*, London 1850, p. 279; A.C. Ewald, 'Calendar of the Norman rolls – Henry V (second part and glossary)', *DKR*, vol. 42 (1881), pp. 357, 380, 386, 391, 392, 398, 423, 438, 447, 450; *CPR 1436-41*, p. 314; PRO, E 404/31/331; PRO, E 101/47/39; Nicolas, *Ajincourt*, p. 382; Shaw, *Knights of England*, p. 130; Ewald, 'Norman rolls – Henry V (first part)', pp. 713, 718, 719, 790; T. Wright, *The History and Topography of the County of Essex*, vol. 1, London 1831, p. 228; PRO, E 404/46/248.

³⁸ M.H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, London 1973, pp. 400-401.

³⁹ Wedgwood, *History of Parliament: Biographies*, p. 171.

the spoiling of his body to the baring and the touching thereof with a knife . . .'.⁴⁰ After being given this reprieve, however, the lucky Chamberlain showed himself loyal to the king by successfully defending Queenborough against Jack Cade's rebellion in 1450 and then capturing two leading rebels. In 1453, parliament reversed his earlier conviction for treason.⁴¹

A knight who was less fortunate in a political dispute was Sir Thomas Tuddenham, who in 1462, during the Wars of the Roses, was beheaded by the Yorkist king, Edward IV, for corresponding with the Lancastrian queen, Margaret of Anjou.⁴² What makes Tuddenham unusual, though, is an event that occurred much earlier in his life, one that had nothing to do with politics. In 1418, while he was still a minor, one of his guardians, John Wodehouse, married Thomas to his daughter, Alice. Apparently unhappy in this marriage, Alice sought comfort in the arms of her father's chamberlain, by whom she conceived a child that died shortly after birth. Alice's confession of this affair had created a great scandal by 1425; by 1429 she and Thomas were formally separated and Alice entered a nunnery. What is strange about this case is that for some unknown reason Tuddenham waited until 1436 to seek a divorce, and even after the bishop's court gave him permission to remarry, he never did so.⁴³ During these proceedings, both Alice and Sir Thomas admitted that their marriage had never been consummated, but Alice insisted that they had treated each other with 'conjugal affection ... save for carnal knowledge ...'.⁴⁴ Impotence on Tuddenham's part may explain the lack of consummation, Alice's affair, and his decision not to remarry, but it may also be that Sir Thomas loved his wife in spite of his difficulties and her infidelity and so delayed divorcing her for so long.

While matters of the heart, like Tuddenham's, appear in the records from time to time, such appearances are sufficiently rare to warrant the mention of a few more examples here. William Gascoyne (died c. 1454), who would be knighted around 1429 and later pursue a sensible life as a local administrator in Yorkshire, secretly married a girl named Margaret Clarel prior to his coming of age in 1426.⁴⁵ Although the first marriage of Sir William Plumpton (died 1480) had been arranged by his parents in 1416, in the early 1450s he clandestinely married Joan Wintringham and kept the marriage secret until he was brought before an ecclesiastical court in 1472. It then became clear that he intended for the son from this secret marriage to inherit his estates, rather than the granddaughters of his first marriage, whom he had married off with the understanding that they were his heirs.⁴⁶ The Northumbrian knight, Sir William Swynburn (died 1455), who served the king on the border with Scotland, was apparently unfaithful to his wife, for in November of 1428 the bishop of Durham appointed a commission to order Sir William to appear before him. Also called were Margaret Merlay, with whom he had been living, and Margaret's parents, who had apparently been secretly cooperating in this adulterous affair.⁴⁷ Sir John Basynges (died 1445) of Rutland had no legitimate children and was probably unmarried, although he did have a bastard son, also named John, with his servant Agnes Brounfield, to whom he granted, through a group of trustees, his manors of Empingham and Normanton for her life, with reversion to John the younger.⁴⁸ Although 'love' stories like these are rare in the documentary evidence, we need to remember that fifteenth-century knights were sexual beings as well as military and political ones, and that sometimes love and desire took precedence over purely economic concerns.

Aside from their authority over peasants on their estates, one usually thinks of knights primarily as servants, retained by greater lords. Sir John Stanley (died 1437), however, was a knight who possessed an unusual position of power. An important landholder in Lancashire and Cheshire, Stanley inherited from his father the title Lord of the Isle of Man, over whose inhabitants he was granted virtually king-like

⁴⁰ CPR 1446-52, p. 68.

⁴¹ R. Furley, *A History of the Weald of Kent, with an Outline of the History of the County to the Present Time*, Ashford 1871-74, vol. 2, pt 1, p. 386; Devon, *Issues of the Exchequer*, pp. 471-72; Wedgwood, *History of Parliament: Biographies*, p. 171.

⁴² Keen, *England*, p. 510; Wedgwood, *History of Parliament: Biographies*, p. 881; G.R. Corner, 'Memorials of the principal persons interred in the church of Allhallows Barking', *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, vol. 2 (1864), p. 239.

⁴³ R. Virgoe, 'The divorce of Sir Thomas Tuddenham', *Norfolk Archaeology*, vol. 34 (1983), pp 406-17.

⁴⁴ Virgoe, 'Divorce', p. 407.

⁴⁵ A. Gooder, ed., *The Parliamentary Representation of the County of York 1258-1832*, vol. 1, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, vol. 91 (1935), pp. 186-87; Wedgwood, *History of Parliament: Biographies*, p. 364.

⁴⁶ K. Dockray, 'Why did fifteenth-century English gentry marry? The Pastons, Plumptons and Stonors reconsidered', in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed M. Jones, New York 1986, pp. 64-67.

⁴⁷ R.L. Storey, ed., *The Register of Thomas Langley Bishop of Durham 1406-1437*, Surtees Society, vol. 169 (1954), pp. 100-01.

⁴⁸ VCH, *Rutland*, vol. 2: p. 244.

authority. Sir John devoted a great deal of energy to the Isle of Man, suppressing revolts there in 1422, and having the island thoroughly surveyed and its laws reformed and codified in the years following.⁴⁹ Stanley's success on the Isle of Man shows that if called upon, a fifteenth-century knight could function as a statesman as well as a retainer.

Even those atypical knights who either performed no military service and yet were workhorses when it came to governmental service, or who did not hold a single office or commission and yet were deeply involved in war and defence, should be mentioned as knightly examples in Lancastrian England. While he never saw the face of battle, Sir Hugh Welughby (died 1448) lived a busy life as an administrator in Nottinghamshire, sitting on the county bench for nearly three decades, representing his shire in the parliament of 1427, serving one term as sheriff in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire and another in Lincolnshire, holding a number of commissions, and even serving a term as escheator of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire (an office that was rare for one of knightly rank).⁵⁰ On the other hand, Sir Hugh Annesley, also of Nottinghamshire, left no administrative record whatsoever but seems instead to have devoted himself to the war in France: he participated in the 1417 invasion and the conquest of Normandy, indentured with the king for war service in 1422, and served in the retinue of Thomas, Lord de Roos, in 1427.⁵¹ While most of the knights on the oath-taker lists of 1434 combined military and administrative service in some proportion, the few knights like these who devoted themselves to one or the other should not be overlooked.⁵²

To the rare episodes and choices mentioned above we should add another colourful snippet to our knightly mosaic. The Dorsetshire knight, Sir Humphrey Stafford (d. 1442), spent much of his early years on military campaigns. In 1400, he fought in the retinue of his kinsman, Edmund, Earl of Stafford, in both Scotland and Wales. In 1403, he began to serve Prince Henry in Wales with a retinue of four lances and 100 archers, and in 1407 he was with Henry at the capitulation of Aberystwyth. It was probably in one of these engagements that Stafford lost one of his hands. He had it replaced, though, with an artificial one made out of silver and was thus later known as Sir Humphrey 'of the Silver Hand'. Apparently, his injury did not slow him down much for he served for many years as a sheriff, MP, JP, and commissioner.⁵³ Although Stafford's fate is not tremendously meaningful, his unusual silver hand serves as a symbolic reminder that a reconsideration of commonly held assumptions about the meaning of knighthood in fifteenth-century England is needed. We cannot simply define knights in this period as soldiers, local administrators, and landholders. While taken individually the unusual vignettes presented in this article were rarities, enough of them exist to demonstrate that there was a variety of possibilities open to English knights. Fifteenth-century knights indeed participated in war, helped run their counties, and spent time consolidating or expanding their lands through violence, litigation, or marriage. But they were also men who were not above increasing their wealth by other means, such as trade or stealing goods from ships in the Channel. They were men susceptible to the ways of love or perhaps the attraction of arcane sciences. Knights in that century clearly regarded their knighthoods differently: to one man, knighthood might mean a life in the saddle, to another a busy administrative career, to a third a life of little involvement spent in the comfort of his estate. A knight might discover that he preferred running a charitable institution or fostering the ways of peace as a diplomat to the slaughter of the battlefield. And while armed pilgrimage was rare, the actions of some knights show that they still embraced such ideas. When one takes the rare and unconventional into account, defining what the knightly life was all about in fifteenth-century England becomes much more fluid and complex.

Perhaps an article about the uncommon aspects of knighthood should conclude by pointing out that knighthood itself had become uncommon by the Lancastrian era. The estimated total number of English knights had dropped dramatically since the late thirteenth century, so that by our period those who had

⁴⁹ J.S. Roskell, *The Commons in the Parliament of 1422: English Society and Parliamentary Representation under the Lancastrians*, Manchester 1954, pp. 124-24; Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *History of Parliament*, vol. 4, pp. 456-57; B. Coward, *The Stanleys, Lords Stanley and Earls of Derby 1385-1672*, Chetham Society, 3rd ser., vol. 30 (1983), pp. 6, 99-101.

⁵⁰ CPR 1422-1429, pp. 193, 405, 480-82, 568; CPR 1429-1436, pp. 49-51, 124-27, 353-55, 425-26, 519-24, 622; CPR 1436-41, pp. 504-5, 588; CPR 1441-46, pp. 61-62, 430-31, 476; CPR 1446-52, p. 593; Hughes and Jennings, *List of Sheriffs*, pp. 79, 103; *Return of the Name of Every Member of the Lower House of the Parliaments of England ... 1213-1874*, Parliamentary Papers 1878, pt 1 (England 1213-1702), repr. München 1980, p. 314; CFR 1422-30, pp. 53-54, 84-85.

⁵¹ PRO, E 101/51/2; PRO E 101/71/1/757; Ewald, 'French rolls, Henry V', p. 635; Ewald, 'French rolls, Henry VI', pp. 247-48.

⁵² Bogner, 'The English knights of 1434', see n. 4 above.

⁵³ Roskell, Clark, and Rawcliffe, *History of Parliament*, vol. 4, pp. 439-42.

the desire and the wherewithal to become knights were something of an unusual breed.⁵⁴ Oftentimes in our search for the typical, we historians produce models that tend to be sterile generalizations, rather than portrayals of real three-dimensional human beings. Instead of dismissing the unusual, we should embrace it and try to make it part of the models we create. It is hoped that this modest study will help to flesh out our view of English knighthood toward the end of the Middle Ages by showing the great variety of pursuits and activities chosen by men of that social rank. If to the bare skeleton of war, administration, and land-holding we add possibilities such as alchemy, piracy, pilgrimage, love, hospital administration, diplomacy, a narrow escape from the executioner, and simply staying at home and not getting involved, then our model becomes human history.

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⁵⁴ See N. Saul, *The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford 1981, pp. 10, 24, and Wright, *Derbyshire Gentry*, pp. 9-10, for possible explanations of this reduction.