

VI.—THE ARMORIAL EVIDENCE FOR THE DESCENT OF ROGER THORNTON AND OF HIS WIFE AGNES.

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Many local historians¹ have written about the life and works and have speculated upon the pedigree of this famous merchant and benefactor of Newcastle, who died 2nd January, 1429/30,² but not one of them, so far as I know, has attempted to make use of the armorial evidence on seals and other contemporary monuments and records. It is my object in this paper to review this evidence in the hope that it may, if not finally settle, at least throw some light upon the difficult problem of his origin and early history. The tradition of his early poverty and the well-known tag of verse describing his entry into the town by the Westgate, 'with a hap, a ha'penny and a lamb's skin,'³ may have some small substratum of truth, but the armorial evidence does not substantiate it; it tells quite another tale. It would seem, therefore, more probable that legend, knowing of his later great wealth, may have by contrast exaggerated his former penury, and it should also be remembered that there is no evidence for the tradition of earlier date than the sixteenth century. The 'lamb's skin' or 'ram's skin,' as another version has it, may be explained as, in all probability, a reference to the wool trade, then the most important trade of the country and in which Roger Thornton was largely interested.⁴

¹ Bourne, *History of Newcastle*, *passim*; Brand, *Ibid.*, I, *passim*, Hodgson's *Northumberland*, II, 316; Welford *Men of Mark*, etc., III, *s.v.*; Boyle and Knowles, *Vestiges of Old Newcastle*, 287 note; J. C. Hodgson in *Arch. Ael.*, 3rd ser., XIV, 191.

² *The Newminster Cartulary*, p. 302 (66 Surtees Soc. publ.).

³ Brand *op. cit.*, I, II note.

⁴ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1399/1401, p. 358—'Licence to Roger Thornton and four other merchants of Newcastle to buy two thousand sacks of wool . . . and ship to Flanders, etc.' See also *ibid.*, 1408/13, pp. 39 and 216.

He himself displayed in his lifetime the arms *sable a chevron and a chief indented silver*,⁵ a shield which his son Roger used upon his seal.⁶ I have only been able to find a description of one seal used by Roger himself. It is sketched in Harleian MS. no. 1985, fo. 291, attached to a deed of 1415/6⁷ by which he grants the manor of 'Acclom' (now Acklam) in Cleveland to Henry Boynton.⁸ In the document he is styled 'dominus de Thornton juxta Staynton in Cleveland.'



His identity with Roger Thornton of Newcastle is proved by a deed of homage for this manor in same MS. dated 1420/21 by William Boynton, elder son of Henry Boynton, knight, now dead, to 'Roger de Thornton de Novo Castro.' The seal, which is stated to 'have noe inscription,' is armorial, bearing a chevron between a crescent in chief and an annulet in base. This is not his shield, but I take it that of his wife Agnes Wauton, of whom, and her arms, I shall speak later.

The shield with the chevron and indented chief is that of an ancient Yorkshire family of knightly rank, deriving their name from Thornton near Bradford in the West Riding and lords of that

⁵ Shield in St. John's church, Newcastle (illustration facing p. 36, no. 2); Shield on painted screen Hexham priory.

⁶ Attached to a deed of 1439. The inset is this seal.

⁷ He uses the same seal of a deed dated at Benton, 1411/12 (*ibid.*).

⁸ The manor of Acklam, together with the manor of Kirklevington in Cleveland and 'the lordship of Whickham' had been granted to Roger Thornton on 28 July, 1405 'in consideration of his good service in safekeeping of the town of Newcastle against the earl of Northumberland and other rebels and in recompense of his great losses on that occasion'; these manors were in the king's hands because of the forfeiture of the earl of Northumberland and of William and Henry Boynton (*Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1405/08, p. 30). It is probable that it was for the service rendered to the king on this occasion that he was made an esquire of the king's household (*Ibid.* p. 30).

manor as early as the time of king Henry II.⁹ In the year 1245, Roger Thornton granted land there to the Cluniac priory of St. John at Pontefract.¹⁰ In 1388 another Roger Thornton appears as one of the knights of the West Riding.¹¹ This, in all probability, is that **Thornton** depicted in the 'Military'¹³ *Roll of Arms* his surcoat and horse trappings blasoned *sable a chevron and a chief indented silver*. He is also most probably the Sir Roger Thornton, knight, of Langton, Yorkshire, descended from the above family, who, according to the pedigree,¹⁴ must have been living about the date of that roll of arms and whose ancestor the pedigree states bore *silver a chevron and a chief indented gules*. His descendant in the fourth generation Peter Thornton,¹⁵ of Thornton Rust,¹⁶ bore the same shield but with the tinctures as in the roll. A differenced version of this shield was granted 4 Oct., 1563, to Thornton of East Newton, Yorks., namely, *silver a chevron sable between three hawthorn leaves*,¹⁷ the arms borne in 1666, differenced by a trefoil, by Thornton of Tiersall whom Dugdale states were descended from Thornton of Thornton in Bradford dale.¹⁸

The earliest known crest of the Newcastle family is that shewn above the mantled helm on the seal of Roger Thornton the second,^{18a} attached to his charter already mentioned, it is the head and neck of a cockatrice between two displayed dragons' wings. This also shews a Yorkshire connexion, for it is the crest given a century and a half later for Thornton of East Newton,¹⁹ a family it will be remembered descended from that of Thornton near Bradford.

⁹ James, *History of Bradford*, p. 336.

¹⁰ *Yorksh. Record Soc.* xii, 5; *Ibid.* xxx, pp. 382—385.

¹¹ Hodgson's *Northumberland*, II, I, 316.

¹³ Harleian MS. no. 4205, fo. 40 b. *temp.* Henry vi.

¹⁴ Foster's *Visit. of Yorks.* p. 580.

¹⁵ Tonge's *Visitation of Northd.* p. xxx (41 Surtees Soc. publ.).

¹⁶ Parish of Aysgarth, Wapentake of Hang West, North Riding.

¹⁷ Foster's *Visit. of Yorks.* p. 296.

¹⁸ Dugdale's *Visit. of Yorks.* p. 250 (36 Surtees Soc. publ.).

^{18a} See inset p. 84.

¹⁹ Foster's *Visit. of Yorks.* p. 296.

There appears to have been some uncertainty about their right to it, as, when William Flower in 1563 granted them a differenced shield, he also granted them a new crest, namely, *a lion's head rased purple*, a crest afterwards borne by the Thorntons of Tiersall. The later crest used by the Thorntons of Netherwitton was *a tower gold*.²⁰ The armorial evidence thus set out seems to lead to the conclusion that Roger Thornton of Newcastle was a descendant of the ancient Yorkshire family of knightly rank who derived their name originally from Thornton near Bradford in the West Riding. It is most improbable that in the late fourteenth century a Newcastle merchant of the same christian and surname as a well-known and contemporary Yorkshire knight would have used, openly and unchallenged, the same shield of arms unless it was also his own by right of descent. His ancestral purse may have been a lean one and the 'lambskin' a symbol of his trade, but that he belonged to this ancient knightly family of Yorkshire seems to me the conclusion to be drawn from the evidence of his arms.

Roger Thornton's wife was Agnes Wauton²¹ (a name variously spelt Wauton, Wanton, Wawton or Waulton) whose shield, engraved on the dexter side of the brass and on the dexter side of her husband's impaled shield, on the Thornton brass in All Hallows church, Newcastle,²² was *silver a chevron sable an annulet in base*, for difference. The precedence thus given to the wife's shield, especially when taken in conjunction with the fact that in 1411/12, and again in 1415/16, Roger Thornton himself used the same arms on his seal, but with a crescent for difference above the point of the chevron,²³ is rather puzzling and difficult to explain quite satisfactorily. Roger may have used his wife's seal to these deeds not having one of his own, or not having it to hand when needed :

²⁰ Foster's *Visit. of Northumberland*, p. 120.

²¹ Hodgson's *History of Northumberland*, II, I, 316.

²² Drawn by W. H. Knowles, *Vestiges of Old Newcastle*, plate p. 288.

²³ See *ante* p. 84 .

instances of such use of another person's seal are numerous.²⁴ The position of the two shields on the brass may be explained by the supposition that his wife was an heiress or that her shield was considered the more honourable and so given precedence.²⁵ In any case, there can be no doubt at all as to the ascription of the two shields. That put up in St. John's church during the lifetime of Roger Thornton²⁶ and that on the seal of his son²⁷ both prevent any such uncertainty.

This shield of Agnes Wauton, like her husband's, points to her descent from an ancient family of knightly rank, lords of the manor of Masham in Yorkshire during part of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²⁸ In later years branches of the family were seated in Shropshire, Lincolnshire, Bedford and Essex.²⁹ Their arms are well known and are blazoned with various differences in the rolls of arms from the time of Edward II to that of Richard II.³⁰ In Willement's roll of the time of the latter king (*ob.* 1399) 'Mons^r Thom. Wauton'³¹ bears the same shield as that of Agnes Thornton but with the annulet in the dexter chief, she was possibly of kin to this man; but it is no part of my intention to attempt a pedigree of either Roger or of his wife. I have pointed out the indications of the armorial evidence at present available. I leave it to a more skilful genealogist or a more patient investigator to place both husband and wife on the proper branch of their respective family trees.

²⁴ Edward II often sealed writs of privy seal with the privy seal of his wife Isabel when he had not his own with him (*Études de Diplomatique Anglaise*, by Dépres, p. 18.)

²⁵ Just as on the seal of Dervorguille Baliol her paternal shield of Gallogway is placed before the *orle* of her husband John Baliol (*Oxford Hist. Soc. Proc.*, vol. 64, plate p. 363, no. 4).

²⁶ *Ante* p. 84. ²⁷ *Ante*. p. 84.

²⁸ *Kirkby's Inquest*, p. 153 (49 Surtees Soc. publ.); Whitaker's *Richmondshire* II, 98; Eyton's *Shropshire*, III, pp. 180-183.

²⁹ *Visits. of Bedfordshire*, pp. 39 and 198 (19 Harleian Soc. publ. XIX) Morant's *Essex* II, 349, 558.

³⁰ See Foster, *Some Feudal Coats of Arms*, p. 257.

³¹ A Roll of Arms of the reign of Richard II, no. 557.