

- 43 This was a problem that did not abate in the 1630s. See William L. Sachse (ed.), *Minutes of the Norwich Court of Mayoralty 1630-1631*. Norfolk Record Society, XV, Norwich, 1942; and idem, *Minutes of the Norwich Court of Mayoralty 1632-1635*. Norfolk Record Society, XXXVI, Norwich, 1967.
- 44 E.K. Chambers and W.W. Greg (eds.), 'Dramatic Records from the Privy Council Register, 1603-1642', in *The Malone Society, Collections Parts IV and V*, Oxford, 1911, 378-79.
- 45 Gurr, 6.
- 46 Bernard M. Wagner, 'George Jolly at Norwich', *Review of English Studies* VI, 1930, 449-52; Sybil Rosenfeld, 'The Players in Norwich, 1669-1709', *Review of English Studies* XII, 1936, 129-38; and Jeremiah S. Finch, 'Sir Thomas Browne and the Strolling Players in Norwich', *The Review of English Studies* XV, 1939, 468-70.
- 47 William Ringler, 'The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558-1579', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 5, 1942, 394, 406, 411, 417-18; Muriel C. Bradbrook, 'The Status Seekers: Society and the Common Player in the Reign of Elizabeth I', *Huntington Library Quarterly* XXIV, 1961, 111-14.
- 48 Bradbrook, 115.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 117; Peter Womack, 'Imagining Communities: Theatres and the English Nation in the Sixteenth Century', in David Aers (ed.), *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, New York, 1992, 109.
- 50 Womack, 110-11.

SPORT AS A POLITICAL MEDIATOR: THOMAS COKE AND THE LAYERS OF BOOTON

by Mary-Anne Garry

SUMMARY

As well as illuminating the domestic sphere, the 18th century Household Accounts at Holkham illustrate the early days of fox hunting in Norfolk and the shared passions of those who took part. These included both Whigs and Jacobite-sympathising Tories, united by a mutual love for field sports at a time when their respective political opinions were more than usually distanced.

Christopher (Kit) Layer junior is remembered as the young Norfolk lawyer who became a Jacobite, squandered his inheritance in high living and suffered the grisliest of fates at Tyburn where he was hung, drawn and quartered. This unhappy tale has already been told by R.W. Ketton-Cremer in *A Norfolk Gallery*. It was a surprise therefore, while studying Household Accounts at Holkham Hall, to come across scattered entries for 'Mr Layer' at an establishment to which Layer had no obvious connection. The majority appear under Hunting Expenses; others refer to board and lodging, clothes (including a peruke), and one for seven places to hear Mr Layer's trial in London. It gradually became clear that the Layer referred to was in fact Kit's uncle, but this was of little help. At a time when politics were more deeply divided than today, why should Thomas Coke of Holkham — a young man in his early twenties on the threshold of his political career and an ardent Whig seeking a position in Walpole's government — have made payments to Christopher Layer senior, a none-too-successful Tory squire and close relative of a Jacobite rebel ?

Ketton-Cremer tells us that the Layers were an old Norwich merchant family who settled at Booton, near Reepham, towards the end of the 16th century and a hundred years later had a comfortable landed estate in that neighbourhood. Christopher was a favourite Christian name in the family and Christopher Layer senior, the subject of this piece, was Sheriff of Norfolk in 1677.¹ He was an enthusiastic sportsman and, in politics, a strong Tory: his convictions led him to refuse the oaths of allegiance to William and Mary and he remained a staunch non-juror to the end of his days.²

Layer was but one of many like-minded neighbours in and around Aylsham at this time who disliked King William, loved Queen Anne and were to dislike King George. The celebrated duel of 1698, when Oliver le Neve mortally wounded the Whig magnate Sir Henry Hobart of Blickling, was still hot news and Layer and his fellow Tory squires were greatly boosted by the support of the second Earl of Yarmouth, a Paston of that once strong and prestigious family.³ Politics aside, Ketton-Cremer suggests that day-to-day life in the district was filled with agreeable sociability; he bases this opinion on the letters calendared in the Le Neve Correspondence, many of which mention Layer, Giles Bladwell of Swannington and Erasmus Earl of Heydon among others.⁴

There was but one thing missing in Layer's life: an heir, for he was childless. This was resolved by adopting his nephew Kit, son of his younger brother John who had gone into trade as a lace merchant in London. Young Kit (another Christopher, but known as Kit to avoid confusion), the nephew, was born in 1683 and had three sisters. On his arrival in Norfolk his uncle sent him to Norwich Grammar School and later placed him with Henry Rippingall, the leading attorney at Aylsham and another enthusiastic Tory. When Kit married in 1709 'his kind indulgent uncle' gave the young couple an extravagant wedding present: he made over his entire Booton estate to his nephew in return for an annuity. Kit had made a most suitable marriage: his bride was Elizabeth, daughter of Peter Elwin of Aylsham.⁵

Ketton-Cremer is keen to refute any suggestion that Christopher Layer's generosity towards his heir at this time was anything but indulgent. He uses the Le Neve correspondence to back this up, quoting from a frequent correspondent Mr Millicent: 'I hear young Layer has married Elwin's daughter and all settled by old Christopher upon him, and he at Booton'. This is the only letter in Walter Rye's edited collection that touches on the Layer marriage. It is worth noting that Millicent lived in Hertfordshire and may not have been privy to rumours that Christopher Layer had already spent most of his substance on high living. This less-happy view of his affairs would seem likely in view of subsequent facts, and the same feckless streak that infested the nephew may have been inherited from the uncle. Further confirmation comes from Kit Layer's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which is emphatic that Layer senior was in need of cash. The entry records that the estate was worth £400 a year, with the understanding that Kit would give his uncle an outright payment of £1000 and an annuity of £100. It continues that Kit readily produced the £1000 and obtained the property, but refused to pay any part of the annuity.

Shortly afterwards Le Neve died; with his death the correspondence ceased and Christopher Layer disappears from view. From the date of his nephew's marriage in 1709 no more is known for certain until 1719, when Layer makes his appearance in the Household Books at Holkham.⁶ We can be fairly sure of his circumstances at this time. He was quite without resources of his own and was certainly not in the receipt of an annuity, but largely dependant on Thomas Coke. The Accounts Books show him living not far from Reepham at Beck Hall, Billingford, a Coke property. For many years Beck Hall had been leased to Colonel Horatio Walpole, uncle to the great Sir Robert, who married Coke's widowed grandmother in 1691. He lived until 1717 after

which time it is probable that Lady Ann Walpole spent most of her time at either her house in Ormond Street, London or in Richmond. She died in 1722. Despite Ketton-Cremer's belief — which there is no reason to doubt — that Layer and his Tory friends were a convivial group whose 'Jacobite inclinations were unlikely to be translated into serious action', it is nonetheless surprising to find this committed Tory squire under the protection of that ambitious young Whig Thomas Coke.

The first entry for Layer reads Candlemas (February) to Michaelmas (October) 1719 'as also for Mr Layer's board'. Further entries for 1720 include paying James Lee 'for an Horse for Mr Layer £20' and, in January, a consideration for 'A Coat given to Captain Layer 2gns'. In March an entry records payment to Mr Bell, a tenant at Billingford 'for a quarter boarding for Mr Layer £6.10.0.', and again 'Mr Layer's board etc' from Lady Day (March) to Michaelmas (October) 1720 '16.14.0.'. In March 1721, under Gifts and Charities, Mr Layer receives 'a Suit of clothes from Mr Haynes the Taylor, which for cloths, trimming and making amounts to £8.10.0.'. Mr Haynes not only supplied the livery suits for the domestic servants at Holkham at this time but also suits for Thomas Coke himself. A few months later Mr Layer is bought a Peruke costing £2.12.6.

We do not know when these generous payments began since the Household Accounts, if there were any, for the years 1700 to 1718 have unfortunately not survived. Both Thomas Coke's parents had died in 1707 and the house at Holkham was empty except for the steward Humphrey Smith, who lived above the kitchen. Only at Thomas Coke's coming of age in 1718 — also the year of his marriage — do the accounts resume. A transaction between Coke and Layer, to be described below, gave Layer some money of his own. This probably explains the absence of any further entries for the Board and Lodging of Christopher Layer for 1722–26, though it must be said that in the early 1720s the Holkham accounts were being kept by up to nine different accountants and the amalgam is not always entirely clear. It is reasonable to assume Christopher Layer was still there until 1726, the date of his last entry: 'Paid out on Mr Layer's account and others the 3rd quarter £4.19.9.'. This coincides with a Burial entry in the Holkham register also for 1726: 'Christopher Layer, Gent': Thomas Coke buried Christopher Layer at Holkham, at his own expense.

While it was customary for employers to pay the funeral charges of those who died in their service the choice of Holkham as a final resting place, rather than Billingford or even Booton, suggests a degree of affection. At this date the appendage 'Gent' usually describes a man of independent means: one who might pay to be buried in the chancel of the church, a request most often set out in wills. Christopher Layer could afford no such memorial, he left no will, and in this instance the description 'Gent' must be seen as a mark of respect.

Before considering why Coke should have taken Christopher Layer under his wing it is worth recalling Layer's nephew, the artless Kit. After adoption by his uncle, Kit attended Norwich Grammar School and later began his legal studies with Mr Rippingall of Aylsham. What of this young man, whose actions were to ruin his own life and distress his family? Rumours of an entanglement with Mrs Rippingall are dismissed by Ketton-Cremer, though they are substantiated by his entry in the DNB which paints a far darker picture. What exactly Kit did or did not do is unknown, but he certainly quarrelled with Mr Rippingall and left for London to complete his training. In due course he was called to the Bar. An extravagant and philandering young man, as early as 1713 he had been in such debt that he sold his Booton estate to his father-in-law Peter Elwin. It was about this time that he espoused the Jacobite cause.

From the household Accounts at Holkham we know that from at least 1719, and very probably for some years before, Christopher Layer senior was dependant on others for his

living. Presumably he had been reduced to penury by his nephew. At best young Kit was feckless: he left a number of his personal papers, which were later to compromise him, in the care of a brothel keeper.

The summer of 1722 was a bad one for the Jacobite cause. Bishop Atterbury was arrested in August, and Kit a month later on 18 September. Both were sent to the Tower. Meanwhile a new Member of Parliament, Thomas Coke (he had been elected at Norwich in April 1722), was taking an interest in the fate of at least one suspected conspirator whilst hoping at the same time to obtain a post under the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole. Distantly connected by marriage, the two men shared many recreational and cultural interests as well as Whigdom.

Kit Layer's trial opened on 21 November 1722 and lasted eighteen hours. The jury unanimously found him guilty. Among those attending was Coke who paid for seven places to 'hear Mr Layer's Tryal'. Although no record survives for Christopher Layer senior's journey to London it would seem inconceivable that he was not one of those seven concerned observers. The *Norwich Mercury* of 24 November 1722 was constrained in its report of the facts regarding 'A Tryal for High Treason'. After summing up, the Jury went out and 'at 4 am after a short stay bought in their Verdict: Guilty of High Treason'. At no point did they mention Norfolk or any East Anglian connection. Sentence was passed on 27 November but not carried out until 17 May 1723, an exceptionally long interval.

What bound Thomas Coke to Christopher Layer at a time when it would have been politically expedient to have thrown him off? Given Kit Layer's Jacobite activities it is all the more remarkable, if Coke did consider this association might not find favour with Walpole, that there is no evidence to show he did anything about it: rather the reverse. Walpole had always taken a grave view of a possible Jacobite invasion, which he saw as one of the most serious threats to the stability of the regime. Walpole feared Jacobites almost to the point of obsession, and as a precaution against any possible Jacobite uprising both kept troops in Hyde Park long after they might have been needed and suspended Habeas Corpus. Jacobitism was his passion: 'He saw it every where, just beyond his grasp ... Agents lurked in the most unlikely places ... no informer was too corrupt to believe . . . the scantier the evidence the more certain Walpole was; any measure was justified in bringing conspiracy to light.'⁷ But Coke appeared unswayed by any pressure from outside and was true to Layer: not only had he no intention of giving him up, but he supported him both hospitably and financially. As already suggested Coke probably found Layer already living at Beck Hall at the time of his inheritance in 1718; this was a *fait accompli* arranged by Coke's four Guardians, a quartet acknowledged to have been prudent and successful in their management of his estates.⁸ Thomas Coke's Guardians were all relations (one was his grandfather Newton) and employing Christopher Layer had not seemed controversial to them; at least if it did, Layer's particular skills outweighed other considerations.

From his early days Christopher Layer senior had been part of that Norfolk circle that enjoyed hunting and the social life; he had also been much involved in the breeding of hounds. These two topics — hounds and hunting — occupy much of the Le Neve Correspondence although when it begins, in the early 1690s, fox hunting was still in the future and the hounds that Layer bred were beagles. Layer's neighbour and friend Oliver Le Neve owned a pack of beagles made up of hounds from all over Norfolk and Suffolk, with more supplied by John Millicent variously from Essex and Hertfordshire. Pure-bred packs, such as this one, were something of a specialised business. Beagles had been in existence for hundreds of years⁹; while many people at this time ran packs of hunting dogs generally they were mixed, containing more than one

variety. Hounds bred for a specific purpose in any number were more likely to be owned by the élite: stag hounds for hunting in deer parks and beagles for chasing hares.

Beagles have great appeal,¹⁰ and as much care and affection was shown towards these merry little dogs as pleasure was taken in their sporting prowess. Tellingly, one letter from Le Neve's agent, writing to him in London, begins: 'The hounds are all in good health, as are all your family'.¹¹ One named Flurry was sent on approval, with the owner Mr Millicent more than happy to have her back if she proved a disappointment. A beagle called Beauty is thought too tall and long 'and looks strangely in the pack'.¹² Oliver Le Neve is to seek Christopher Layer's advice about this. Captain Mason at Necton, Thomas Pigge of Great Dunham, Mr Fountaine of Narford and, most especially, Mr Matthew Halcot of Litcham all bred beagles and supplied Le Neve from time to time. So many of the letters contain hound business that one must imagine Christopher Layer's man and others frequently travelling the Norfolk roads looking at, inspecting, fetching or returning beagles. In times of urgency hounds were loaned out to other packs¹³ and that favourite topic, madness in dogs, was much discussed.¹⁴ By 1707 Le Neve's pack was considered to be the finest in England¹⁵, and for this he had Christopher Layer to thank. The correspondence shows Layer to have been at the hub of hound-breeding and one whose advice was sought over a large area.

Meanwhile, from his earliest years, Thomas Coke had been inordinately fond of hunting. In 1711 his cousin and Guardian Sir Edward Coke of Longford, Derbyshire worried that his excessive love of 'going abroad a-hunting ... makes him grow cool to his studies'.¹⁶ In 1712 Coke began an extensive Grand Tour on the continent which lasted for six years. His tutor Dr Hobart complained forcibly of the expense in arranging a hunt in France, dogs having to be borrowed from many different places and generally proving unsatisfactory.¹⁷ Coke returned to England in May 1718 and after his July wedding spent time in London or Longford; it was not until September 1719 that he visited Holkham for longer than a few days. In the eleven years of his minority Coke's Guardians had managed his estates and done much to improve them, setting a course which he followed with success. Christopher Layer's reputation as a breeder of hounds must have been known far and wide and Humphrey Smith, the Holkham steward, would have been the person most likely to have dealt first hand with Layer. Although apparently in need of employment and somewhere to live, Layer brought with him one valuable asset — a pack of hounds.

There is an account of Smith's expenses with Mr Layer and James Lee at Billingford for March 1720.¹⁸ Thomas Coke's huntsman William Pickford also lived at Beck Hall, where Layer sojourned; he cared for a pack of Harriers at a cost of £36 in 1723, while John Bayley's bill for keeping the Foxhounds for the same period amounted to £65. Further bills for hunting, wages for the whipper-in, huntsman's man and two others, travel expenses and other unspecified expenses to do with Foxhounds amounted to £251.5.9. Fox hunting as its inception, at least in Norfolk, was far from being a rough sport enjoyed by farmers, as has been suggested elsewhere,¹⁹ but was an expensive innovation pioneered by the elite. By 1720, when the hunt was beginning to gain popularity, Mr Layer's pack seems to have comprised not beagles but their bigger cousins. Le Neve's beagles had been praised for their ability to run fast but subsequently Layer bred larger stronger hounds. For this purpose two distinctive strains were combined: northern hounds, which were mainly beagle, and southerners imported from Gascony which were heavier and slower but with good noses. In Carr's words, 'The breeding of hounds to hunt only foxes marks an epoch in the history of hound breeding'.²⁰ At all events Coke purchased Layer's pack for £80 and they are entered in the accounts as Fox Hounds.²¹

This is the transaction already referred to which may have enabled Layer to pay his own way for a time.

For centuries hunting had been seen as a harmless pastime for the upper classes: it was considered healthy and trained them for their vocation, war. It also tired them out and freed them from the pleasures of the flesh.²² Early hunts were slow, lumbering affairs through wooded country, but during the 17th century horses were bred to run faster; while deer were still considered the noblest quarry, hares tested the hounds as no other animals could. Foxes were generally regarded as vermin, though people prized their skins: hares continued to be thought their physical and moral superior, sweet-scented, subtle and clever. Until the early 18th century catching foxes was still a woodland affair. They were caught by being dug out, or terriers were sent down to do battle underground.²³ But swifter horses and the excitement of the chase demanded a faster quarry animal and the hitherto-despised fox, previously associated with thieving and cunning, answered this requirement.²⁴ It is thought that fox hunting in the modern sense began in Yorkshire and the West Country. A possible reason for this is that in the 1720s there were relatively few foxes in Norfolk. Numerous entries in the Household Accounts show foxes being introduced to Holkham, where they were cared for and fed on rabbits and offal. Nor were they cheap: a large fox cub cost 10/–, and it is no surprise therefore to find them making suitable gifts. Sir Charles Turner of Warham sent Coke a present of a fox in 1720, and in May of that year Coke's step-uncle Mr Archer, who lived in Berkshire, sent him two fox bitches. In the previous year a man was paid 10/6 for saving two litters of foxes at Holt Wood and another, who brought five braces from Martham, received 2gns and a further 15/6 for 'entertaining them'.²⁵

Coke hunted throughout Norfolk, from Crostwick in the east to Lynn in the west, and as fox hunting appealed to Coke, so it did to Walpole. The thrill of chasing 'twelve miles in forty minutes' — comparable to the speed of a Newmarket race — had a great attraction. Jumping hedges, known as leaping, did not feature until much later.²⁶ The introduction of fox hunting in the 1720s helps to explain Lord Hervey's sneering comments on life with Walpole at Houghton, which he recorded in 1731 and 1733. This particular form of hunting was still new enough to be deplored by Hervey, who saw it as an unwelcome and entirely uncivilised pastime.²⁷ Forty years on, in October 1772, Marchioness Grey writing from Wimpole in Cambridgeshire took the same view:²⁸

... so unreasonable are these gentry that they are not content with riding in this breakneck style for half a day. It is however owned that [today] this was sufficiently violent and could not have been supported much longer. The speed was owing to the merit of the dogs, who more resembled, 'tis said, a pack of tigers, and poor Renard no match for them.

The Royal Family continued to hunt deer, often from the comfort of a chaise, not killing the animal but rounding it up to be chased another day. George III hunted in this manner, known as 'carting deer', six days a week; it was only the Prince Regent in the late 18th century who hunted foxes.²⁹

In conclusion: fox hunting inspired a passion in its followers and perhaps, like collecting desirable works of art, played an important unifying role. (At this time the popularity of Claud Lorraine was widespread and fashionably French, exemplifying the lost Golden Age that so many of the 18th-century elite attempted to recapture in landscape design.) From this distance — and with no surviving correspondence of Coke's to draw upon — one cannot be sure of his exact feelings regarding Layer, but enough proof exists that Layer was too important to him as an improver of his hunting pleasures to dismiss for any Jacobite associations, even at a crucial time in Coke's career. The burial of Layer at Holkham and the entry in the register indicate

affection. The Coke toast, Live and Let Live, might well have been coined at this period: it would have suited both parties.

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- 1 R.W.Ketton-Cremer, *A Norfolk Gallery*, p126, London, 1948
- 2 Ketton-Cremer, 1948, p126
- 3 Ketton-Cremer, 1948, p127
- 4 *Le Neve Correspondence*, ed. Walter Rye, London, 1895
- 5 R.W.Ketton-Cremer, *A Norfolk Gallery*, p 128, London, 1948
- 6 Holkham Household Accounts A/7
- 7 J.H.Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole* ii, pp 41 & 46, London, 1960
- 8 R.A.C.Parker, *Coke of Norfolk*, p1, Oxford, 1975
- 9 'Hunting with beagles can be traced back to the Greeks. Xenophon in the year 350 BC wrote that game and hunting were the invention of the gods. His description of the hounds closely resembles that of a modern beagle.': Robert Colville, *Beagle and Otter Hunting*, quoted by Heather Priestley in *All About the Beagle*, pp 16-17, London, 1977
- 10 Beagle was often used as a term of endearment. Shakespeare uses it in *Twelfth Night* when he makes Sir Toby Belch admire Maria in the strongest terms he can manage: 'She is a beagle, true-bred, and one that adores me', Act II, Sc.III. James I, wishing to endear himself to Robert Cecil, first Earl of Salisbury, nicknamed him 'his little beagle', and Robert compliantly referred to himself as a 'beagle' in his letters to James. David Cecil, *The Cecils of Hatfield House*, p132, London, 1973
- 11 *Le Neve Correspondence*, letter no. 1938
- 12 *Le Neve Correspondence*, letter no. 1357
- 13 *Le Neve Correspondence*, letter no. 1481
- 14 *Le Neve Correspondence*, letter no. 1875
- 15 *Le Neve Correspondence*, letter no. 1991
- 16 Holkham: Coke Family Papers F/3 442
- 17 Holkham: Coke Family Papers F/3 442
- 18 Holkham: Household Accounts A/7
- 19 Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, p170, London, 1992
- 20 Raymond Carr, *English Fox Hunting: A History*, p36, London, 1976
- 21 Holkham: Household Accounts A/7
- 22 Carr, 1976, p 16
- 23 Carr, 1976, p 27
- 24 Carr, 1976, p 21
- 25 Holkham: Household Accounts A/7
- 26 Bedfordshire and Luton Record Office L 30/9a/9
- 27 *Lord Hervey and his Friends 1726-38*, ed. Earl of Ilchester, pp 70, 120 and 179, London, 1960
- 28 Bedfordshire and Luton Record Office L 30/9a/9
- 29 Carr, 1976, p 41