

# SIR NATHAN WRIGHT (1653–1721), RECORDER OF LEICESTER AND LORD KEEPER OF THE GREAT SEAL: A RE-APPRAISAL

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Sir Nathan Wright (1653–1721) served in the offices of both Recorder and Deputy Recorder of Leicester, and also as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal under King William III and then Queen Anne. He did not, however, have a good reputation amongst some of his contemporaries during the period known by historians as ‘the rage of party’. Twentieth-century historians consider him to have been an extravagant spender, mainly for buying up landed estates. This paper challenges this view by using information from a previously neglected manuscript – namely, Wright’s own notebook. His role in local and national politics is also re-appraised.

Nathan Wright, Leicester’s own Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, had a significant role both locally and nationally, although he did not have a good reputation amongst some of his contemporaries. Bishop Burnet stated that Nathan Wright ‘was sordidly covetous, and did not live at all suitably to that high post’.<sup>1</sup> Lord Campbell, writing later, described him as ‘A man so little prominent either for abilities or crimes’.<sup>2</sup> Twentieth-century historians also appear to have had a low opinion of him. Holmes has suggested that many barristers found ‘a stake in the English hedge’ irresistible, even when England was at war, naming Wright as a lawyer who was a big wartime spender.<sup>3</sup> Plumb alluded to conflict between the landed gentry and the newly wealthy, citing Wright as an example of the many scores of men ‘who had made fortunes in government service, in law, or in commerce, who were buying up estates partly as an investment but also to secure that position in society that came with ownership of land’.<sup>4</sup> Plumb noted that Wright spent almost £50,000 on estates in Leicestershire and Warwickshire within three years,<sup>5</sup> the same sum also cited by Holmes.<sup>6</sup> This writer, using information from Wright’s previously neglected manuscript notebook,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Burnet, *Bishop Burnet’s History of his own time*, vol. II (London, 1724–34), Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), hereafter Burnet, ‘History’, p. 426.

<sup>2</sup> John Campbell, *The Lives of the Chancellors and Keepers of the Seal of England, from the Earliest Times till the Reign of George IV*, 5th ed. (London, 1869), hereafter Campbell, ‘Lives’, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> G. Holmes, *Augustan England: professions, state and society, 1680–1730* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), hereafter Holmes, ‘Augustan England’, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675–1715* (London: Macmillan, 1967), hereafter Plumb, ‘Political Stability’, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> Plumb, ‘Political Stability’, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, ‘Augustan England’, pp. 135–6.

<sup>7</sup> Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR), 7/D/39, Sir Nathan Wright’s Notebook, hereafter ROLLR, 7/D/39 Wright, ‘Notebook’.



Fig. 1. Sir Nathan Wright, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England. An engraving by R. White in T. B. Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, C. H. Firth (ed.), Vol. VI (London), 1915, p. 2959.

questions the conclusions of Plumb and Holmes regarding the sum of money he spent on estates, and re-appraises his role in local and national politics.

Nathan Wright (Fig. 1), the son of a clergyman, was born in Thurcaston in Leicestershire. His father, Ezekiel Wright, formerly a fellow of Emanuel College Cambridge, married Dorothy, the second daughter of John Oneby of Hinckley Esq.,

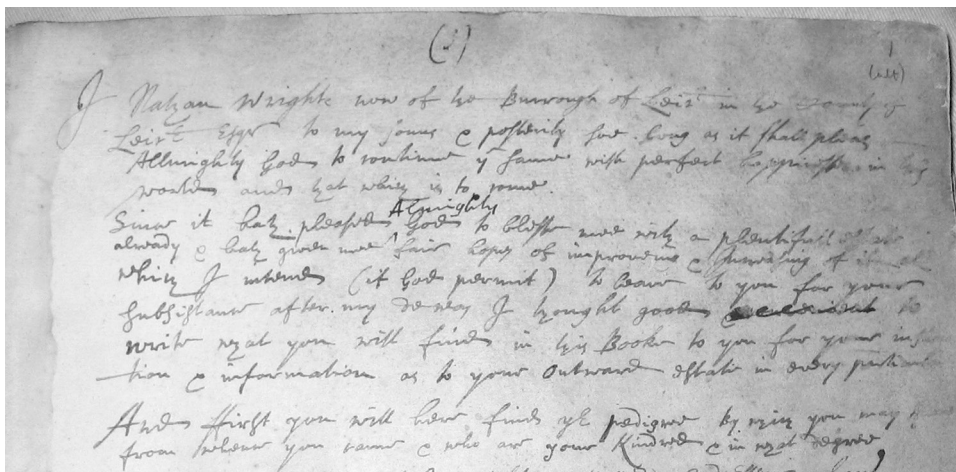


Fig. 2. The first entry in Nathan Wright's notebook. A transcription is provided below.

Steward of Leicester.<sup>8</sup> There were five children, three of whom survived to adulthood. In his will, Ezekiel Wright appointed Thomas Staveley, one of his brothers-in-law, overseer of his financial assets, to ensure provision for his children should his widow Dorothy re-marry or die.<sup>9</sup> When Ezekiel died, his eldest surviving son Nathan was 15 and was 'initiated in the law' by his uncle Thomas Staveley. He then attended Emanuel College, subsequently moving on to the Inner Temple in London where he studied for seven years.<sup>10</sup> He was elected Recorder of Leicester in 1680 and later moved to London.

Wright's unpublished Notebook was purchased in 1939 by the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.<sup>11</sup> The notebook, of which we have no information regarding its provenance, contains abstracts of the title deeds of properties he owned; his first entry (Fig. 2) explains why he started the notebook:

I Nathan Wright, now of the Burrough of Leicester, in the County of Leice Esqr to my sonnes and posterity soe long as it shall please Almighty God to continue ye same with perfect happiness in this world and that which is to come.

Since it hath pleased Almighty God to blesse me with plentifull estate already and hath given me fair hope of improveing and increasing of it which I intend (if God permits) to leave to you for your subsistance after my decease I thought good to write what you will find in this Book to you for your instruction & information as to your outward estate in every particular.

And First you will here find the pedigree By which you may know from whence you came and who are your Kindred & in what degree.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Public Record Office (PRO), Prob/11/331. Last Will and Testament of Ezekiel Wright.

<sup>10</sup> J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicestershire* (1745–1826:1971, Wakefield: S. R. Publishers in association with Leicestershire County Council, 1971), hereafter Nichols, 'Antiquities', vol. III, part I, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook'.

<sup>12</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 1.

This entry is not dated, although, from the information noted in the pedigree of the notebook, it would seem to have been started sometime after January 1682. In July 1676, Nathan Wright had married Elizabeth, second daughter of George Ashby of Quenby. As a commoner, some considered this match may have ‘played its due part in helping Wright’s political career to prosper’.<sup>13</sup> Their first home in Barwell, acquired by Wright in 1675, was held in trust by Thomas Staveley, and Robert Alfounder, Clerk.<sup>14</sup> Ten children were born of this union: the first five were born at Barwell between the years March 1677 and January 1682, the last five in Leicester between January 1683 and May 1694.<sup>15</sup> Wright was now describing himself as ‘now of the Borough of Leicester’, suggesting that he began to keep the Notebook whilst he was Recorder in Leicester. Over the years, information concerning family births, marriages, deaths and stages in Wright’s own career was added to the pedigree.<sup>16</sup> After the death of his father his son George continued to make entries in the notebook.<sup>17</sup>

The Wright children married well. The social gossip in Narcissus Luttrell’s *Historical Relation* corroborates much of the information in the Notebook. He noted the marriage of Wright’s son George to ‘Mrs Bedford, whose father was of Doctors Commons, and her portion 20,000l’.<sup>18</sup> In May 1705 he recorded that ‘Sir Jeremy Sambrook, a noted merchant of this city, dyed yesterday, leaving his estate to his son, who married a Daughter [Elizabeth] of the lord keeper’.<sup>19</sup> A second son, a rector, and also Nathan, married the only daughter of Lord Francis Powlett, a younger son of the Marquis of Winchester, ‘with whom he obtained the estate and mansion-house of Englefield’.<sup>20</sup> A younger daughter, Dorothy, married Harry Grey, who succeeded to the title of Earl of Stamford when his cousin, Thomas Grey, the second Earl, died in 1720.<sup>21</sup> Robert, the third son, was a merchant who died of a fever in 1709, at Fort George in India. Nichols suggests that Robert married twice,<sup>22</sup> but the notebook pedigree shows that Robert married a merchant’s daughter in India. There were two children, a girl who died young, and a son, another Nathan,<sup>23</sup> who returned to England to be brought up by his grandfather.<sup>24</sup>

Wright inherited some land from his father. As part of his marriage agreement, Ezekiel Wright’s money was used by his father-in-law John Oneby to purchase ‘lands and tenements’, in the Parish of Broughton Astley. This was intended to produce a

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Hanham, George Ashby, Leicestershire Constituency, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1690-1715/member/ashby-george-1656-1728> (accessed 23 September 2012).

<sup>14</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, pp. 1–5.

<sup>17</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, pp. 5–6; pp. 133–4.

<sup>18</sup> Narcissus Luttrell, *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs from September 1678–April 1714*, vol. IV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1857), hereafter Luttrell, ‘Historical Relation’, p. 688; ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Luttrell, ‘Historical Relation’, p. 545; ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Nichols, ‘Antiquities’, vol. III, part I, p. 217; ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Nichols, ‘Antiquities’, vol. III, part II, p. 683; ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Nichols, ‘Antiquities’, vol. III, part I, p. 218; ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, pp. 2–4.

<sup>24</sup> PRO, Prob 11/583, Last Will and Testament of Nathan Wright.

yearly return of £200 and be his wife's jointure.<sup>25</sup> In the event the land did not realise that sum,<sup>26</sup> and, in 1658, Ezekiel bought land and cottages in Barlestone with a rental value of £60 per annum.<sup>27</sup> Family members and friends held these properties in trust for Ezekiel and his heirs. The deeds for land in Sutton near Broughton show that the property was conveyed to 'John Oneby Esq and Benjamin King Gent in trust for Ezekiel Wright and to protect the inheritance',<sup>28</sup> a mechanism described by Habakkuk as a means of strengthening the entail.<sup>29</sup> The property in Broughton Astley was held in trust by Mathew Babington Esq., Edward Read gent., and George Vincent gent. In 1661 it was conveyed to Richard Mason, Doctor in Physicke, and Benjamin King gent., also bothers-in-law of Ezekiel Wright.<sup>30</sup> The property in Barlestone was held in trust by Thomas Stavely Esq., Benjamin King gent., William Stavely Clerk and George Vincent. In 1665, Ezekiel Wright added the Queniborough rectory to his portfolio: this included the parsonage, out-houses, stables, orchards, pasture in several yard lands and the advowson.<sup>31</sup> In his will, Ezekiel Wright bequeathed his holdings in Broughton Astley and Barlestone to his son Nathan, along with a moiety of the impropriation tythes in Queniborough.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from the purchase of his family home in Barwell, Wright's other purchases at this time added to the property inherited from his father in Broughton Astley parish. In 1675 he bought the Conigree Fields, which was part of the desmene of the Manor of Broughton Astley. In 1679/80 he purchased the Broughton Astley manor and advowson from the second Earl of Stamford, and between 1681 and 1699 he added other small purchases in Broughton Astley to his portfolio.<sup>33</sup>

The Notebook includes a wealth of incidental details, such as, Mrs Cooper's annual rent for a farm in Thorpe was 3s 4d and two fat capons at Christmas.<sup>34</sup> The Notebook, however, served primarily as an aide memoire for Wright and his heirs: this is shown by entries relating to the deeds of assignment for the advowson of the Broughton Astley rectory. Wright noted: 'these are in my chest writings all tyed up together. These deeds must be carefully preserved.' Wright sold the advowson of the parsonage soon after purchase to a John Smith; he passed it to a second party, who assigned it further to Sir Thomas Halford Bart in trust for Mr William Cotton. After Sir Thomas died and the church was next void, his brother and executor, Sir William Halford, presented William Cotton junior to the church. Evidently, Wright was concerned that Sir William Halford was wrong to present William Cotton Junior to the church as the deeds showed it was 'My title & by that I have lawful seizin of the advowson. Take good care that these deeds be preserved.'<sup>35</sup> William Cotton

<sup>25</sup> PRO, Prob/11/331, Ezekiel Wright will.

<sup>26</sup> PRO, Prob/11/331, Ezekiel Wright will.

<sup>27</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> H. J. Habakkuk, 'English Landownership, 1680-1740', *The Economic History Review*, 10 (1940), pp. 2-17, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', pp. 32-6.

<sup>32</sup> PRO, Prob/11/331, Ezekiel Wright will; ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 50; p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 53.

senior was rector of Broughton Astley between 1654 and 1691, followed by his son William Cotton who was rector between 1691 and 1714.<sup>36</sup> On the same page there is a note in George's hand: 'My father upon the death of Mr William Cotton Anno Dom. 171[4] presented his nephew Mr John Twells who is the present rector 1721.'<sup>37</sup> Although Wright never lived in Broughton Astley, he presented a silver cup to the parish church inscribed 'The Gift of Sir Nathan Wright late Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England, 1718'.<sup>38</sup>

After his move to London and appointment as Lord Keeper, the size of Wright's purchases increased, no doubt reflecting his larger income of £4,000,<sup>39</sup> plus an annuity of £3,000 after he left office.<sup>40</sup> The common law appointment of Keeper of the Great Seal was one of three major political appointments controlled by the crown that bought with it rich rewards.<sup>41</sup> Holmes, in his discussion of 'Lawyers and Society', suggests that, until his dismissal as Lord Keeper in 1705, Wright seemed to be content 'with the small property inherited from his father in 1668 and his marriage into a Midland gentry family'.<sup>42</sup> In fact, he acquired the manors of Oadby and Caldecote while he was Keeper, and Brooksby after he was dismissed. Holmes implies that all three were purchased after he had left office, and when he was no longer a practising lawyer.<sup>43</sup> Oadby manor, rectory and church impropriation were purchased in 1701 for £8,000. The following year he purchased Caldecote and Hartshill Manors and land in Warwickshire for £10,000, and between 1704 and 1707 added several smaller pieces of land adjacent to his holdings in Caldecote and Broughton Astley. In 1708 he purchased Brooksby and Newfields, along with the manor, advowson, land and fishing rights on the Wreake, from Sir William Villiers for £14,782. Included in this deal was an annuity of £100 for life to Sir William.<sup>44</sup>

Not all purchase prices are recorded in the Notebook, but it is evident that between the years 1675 and the 1720s, Wright spent something in the order of £42,500. This is at odds with Plumb's claim, also quoted by Holmes, that Nathan Wright spent £50,000 on estates in Leicestershire and Warwickshire within three years.<sup>45</sup> He certainly bought three estates in Leicestershire and Warwickshire, bought over a six-year period, for which he paid a total sum of £32,782, a sum considerably less than that given by Plumb. Plumb cited a Leicester Museum MSS account book of Sir Nathan Wright as his source; unfortunately, no accession number was cited.<sup>46</sup> A search of the Leicester Museum accessions that predate Plumb's publication has

<sup>36</sup> P. L. Jeanes, *A Short History of Broughton Astley including the hamlets of Primethorpe and Sutton-in-the Elms* (Broughton Astley Village Hall Management Committee, Broughton Astley, 1974), p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 53.

<sup>38</sup> A. Trollope, *An Inventory of the Church Plate of Leicestershire*, vol. I (Leicester: Clarke and Hodgson, 1890), p. 336.

<sup>39</sup> William A. Shaw (ed.), *Calendar of Treasury Books* (London: H.M.S.O., 1939), vol. 17, part I, 1700, hereafter Shaw, 'Calendar', p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> Shaw, 'Calendar', vol. 21, part I, 1706–07, pp. 334–5.

<sup>41</sup> Holmes, 'Augustan England', p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> Holmes, 'Augustan England', p. 134.

<sup>43</sup> Holmes, 'Augustan England', p. 132.

<sup>44</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', pp. 132–2. (PLEASE CHECK PAGE RANGE)

<sup>45</sup> Plumb, 'Political Stability', p. 83; Holmes, 'Augustan England', pp. 133–4.

<sup>46</sup> Plumb, 'Political Stability', p. 84, fn. 1.

not yielded this Account Book. The total spend of £50,000 over three years, for the purchase of three estates claimed for the lost account book, is at odds with the total spend of £32,782 for three estates over a six-year period, noted in Wright's own hand in the Notebook. As he seems to have been scrupulous in making copies of the title deeds of all his properties, it would be expected that if he had spent a sum as large as £50,000 on manors in three years there would be evidence of this in his Notebook.

Although several scholars have discussed the politics of the city and county of Leicester at the time of Wright, it could be that his role as Recorder in Leicester has been underestimated.<sup>47</sup> A clause in the 1665 Charter stopped interference from outside officials such as sheriffs and county justices, a coveted chartered liberty that preserved the magisterial sanctity of the Corporation.<sup>48</sup> Paul Halliday is of the opinion that Leicester's 1684 Charter, unlike that of the 1660s, was 'extorted from them by the Crown being eager to gain more control of corporate government, and a prominent nobleman seeking his own advantages'.<sup>49</sup> Wright, as Recorder, was involved with Leicester Corporation when the 1684 Charter was under discussion. During the 'Tory reaction' with Whigs being purged from commissions of peace and town corporations by *quo warranto* campaigns, the affairs of Leicester became of great interest to the dominant local peer of the time, Theophilus Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon. During the Exclusion Crisis, Huntingdon had flirted with Whiggism, but 'kissing the king's hand' in 1681 marked the beginning of his political rehabilitation. He joined the Privy Council and in 1687 became Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire. If he could persuade Leicester Corporation to surrender its charter this would demonstrate local power and loyalty to the king,<sup>50</sup> and restore the Hastings family influence over the town.<sup>51</sup> One of the main objectives for Huntingdon was to ensure that the post of Recorder was reserved for an aristocrat, preferably himself, thereby enhancing the status of the post and giving county landowners power in the town.<sup>52</sup> Wright, the incumbent Recorder, was only a commoner, and Huntingdon saw that via the new charter he could tighten his control over the borough.<sup>53</sup>

To achieve these ends, Huntingdon kept away from Leicester and used his agent, Dr John Gery, as a go-between. Through Gery, 'the earl conveyed promises, threats, exhortations, and advice: from him the earl got detailed advice about people and

<sup>47</sup> J. H. Plumb, 'Political History, 1530–1885', in W. G. Hoskins (ed.) *Victoria County History (VCH) Leicestershire*, II (London: Oxford University Press for Institute of Historical Research, 1954), hereafter Plumb, 'VCH Leicestershire, II'; Greaves, R. W. 'The City of Leicester Parliamentary History, 1660–1835', in R. A. McKinley (ed.) *VCH Leicestershire*, IV (London: Oxford University Press, for the Institute of Historical Research, 1958), hereafter Greaves, 'VCH Leicestershire IV'; Neil Paterson, 'Politics in Leicestershire c1677–c1716' unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2007, hereafter, Paterson, 'Politics'.

<sup>48</sup> R. W. Greaves, 'Huntingdon and the Charter', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly (HLQ)*, 15 (1952), hereafter Greaves, 'HLQ 15', p. 372.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Halliday, *Dismembering the Body Politic: Partisan Politics in England's Towns, 1650–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), hereafter Halliday, 'Dismembering', pp. 150–1.

<sup>50</sup> John Miller, *Cities Divided: Politics and Religion in English Provincial Towns, 1660–1722* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), hereafter 'Cities Divided', p. 184.

<sup>51</sup> Halliday, 'Dismembering', p. 189.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, 'Cities Divided', p. 190.

<sup>53</sup> Paterson, 'Politics', p. 183.

conditions in Leicester'.<sup>54</sup> Huntingdon implied that the Corporation would fare better and retain more privileges if it surrendered its charter rather than await *quo warranto* proceedings.<sup>55</sup> Gery was adept at his job: the Corporation were wined and dined and cajoled. In a letter to Huntingdon dated 10 September 1684, Gery explained that when the Corporation and their wives were at the Angel he had bought the Mayoress a gallon of sack to drink, 'which made the Good women spend sweetly that day'. When surrender of the Charter was voted on, only four votes were against.<sup>56</sup>

The Borough records provide a formal account of Wright's role in the surrender of the Charter,<sup>57</sup> but the correspondence between Huntingdon and Gery is much more informative, particularly with regard to both his and Gery's opinion of Wright. A letter from Gery in September informed Huntingdon: 'I find there hath been som private discourse of having a Nobleman Recorder and its wishd by som that when the new Charter is passd your Lordship speakes to the King that your Lordship may be put in, and if the Recorder be made deputy it will satisfy.'<sup>58</sup> On 21 October, Huntingdon wrote a long letter to Gery noting he had dined with the Leicester contingent in London, including Nathan Wright, and was frustrated that the Corporation's delay in dealing with the charter until a new mayor had been elected did not bode well for the Earl:<sup>59</sup>

I tooke no notice to them of the Recordship but Mr Wright made mee an offer of itt. To which I gave him thanks; but with all told him I submitted those things to the Kings disposal and there I should leave itt. So that I was very reserved upon that Subject. But such care is taken that I shall certainly have itt, but let that bee a secret.<sup>60</sup> I pray give mee your opinion upon the whole and what account they make of the other officers. viz. Recorder&c. I have reason to bee very circumspect; for if any thing is amisse, it will bee laid upon mee.<sup>61</sup>

Theire is usually associate justices to these Corporations whether any such will bee made must bee considered but I pray give mee some names of Gentlemen in the Towne and within five miles of itt that will bee fit to be inserted. I found Mr Wright uneasy and pray give mee his character in the Country.<sup>62</sup>

Huntingdon was evidently uncertain about Nathan Wright and the response from Gery after he had spent several days in Leicester, was fairly unequivocal in regard to who should go and who should stay in the Corporation, and that opinions were divided:

But I perceive a perfect aversness and great dislike amongst them all against any Country Gentlemen to be joynd with them, and they all seriously declare they had much rather their Corporation were totally destroyd then such a thing done. Country Gentlemen haveing little kindness for tradesmen may come and afront their

<sup>54</sup> Greaves, 'VCH Leicestershire IV', p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> Halliday, 'Dismembering', p. 189.

<sup>56</sup> Greaves, 'HLQ 15', p. 377.

<sup>57</sup> H. Stocks and W. H. Stevenson (eds), *Records of the Borough of Leicester: being a series of extracts from the archives of the Corporation of Leicester*, Vol. 4, 1603–88, VI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), hereafter Stocks, 'Records', p. 553; p. 556; p. 561; p. 571; p. 582.

<sup>58</sup> Greaves, 'HLQ, 15', p. 382.

<sup>59</sup> Greaves, 'HLQ, 15', p. 379.

<sup>60</sup> Greaves, 'HLQ, 15', p. 387.

<sup>61</sup> Greaves, 'HLQ, 15', p. 387.

<sup>62</sup> Greaves, 'HLQ, 15', p. 388.



Mayor and oppose them in all they doe; and I do clearly see if your Lordship doth that, it will so disoblige all sorts that though your Honour may be Recorder yet have no interest amongst them, for its not those incorporated but all free men have voates in many cases, for I know two Recorders had no manner of interest amongst them. So that I make it my humble Request to your Lordship totally to decline that, and then I am sure your Honour may command anything from them. I am the more free your Honour desiring more than once my opinion. And its not my opinion only but the opinion of your Lordships fast friends. It may oblige 4 or 5 Gentlemen and disoblige 500 Inhabitants and though it may be so with som Corporations yet some are not so.<sup>63</sup>

This is a clear indication that the Corporation had no desire to lose their most coveted chartered liberty contained in the charter they were surrendering. Regarding Wright, Gery provided a supportive testimonial:

the Recorder at the perswasions of the Towne hath left his owne seat [Barwell] which was a fine one, and hath tooke a house in Leicester, and is a person of 500L per annum and of considerable parts and rising, and being neglected now may be mischievous amongst them. ... No deputy Recorder liveing not with them will be acceptable, and your Lordship liveing at a distance it will be more necessary.<sup>64</sup>

Huntingdon was appointed as Recorder in 1685,<sup>65</sup> with ‘our well beloved’ Nathan Wright as ‘first and present’ Deputy Recorder for three years.<sup>66</sup> In Huntingdon’s absence, presumably Wright dealt with day-to-day business for the corporation: for instance, the management of the affairs and payment of the poor of Holy Trinity Hospital was in his hands, along with the town solicitor William Browne.<sup>67</sup>

As Recorder and Privy Councillor, Huntingdon was in a position to control the borough.<sup>68</sup> With the succession of James II after the death of Charles II in February 1685, it was important for Huntingdon that there were appropriate candidates for the town in the election of that year. After discussions in London between Huntingdon and Wright, it was agreed that Wright would stand ‘as a gentleman with a residence in the town.’<sup>69</sup> However, on his return to Leicester, Wright wrote to Huntingdon expressing his gratitude for his offer, and despite effusively indicating willingness to serve his King and country, he explained that he must decline:

At my coming to Leicester I found that Sir Henry Beaumont & Mr Babington had offered themselves to the Corporation to serve then in the coming Parliament as their Burgesses & that several persons were engaged to them therefore I would not think it advisable for to offer myself to them for that service especially in opposition to two persons to whom I have been particularly obliged otherwise.<sup>70</sup>

It is possible that he felt that, as well as not standing against people to whom he felt obliged, he should not stand against someone to whom he was related by

<sup>63</sup> Greaves, ‘*HLQ*, 15’, p. 391.

<sup>64</sup> Greaves, ‘*HLQ*, 15’, p. 391.

<sup>65</sup> Stocks & Stevenson, ‘Records’, p. 563.

<sup>66</sup> Stocks & Stevenson, ‘Records’, p. 571.

<sup>67</sup> Stocks & Stevenson, ‘Records’, p. 582.

<sup>68</sup> Paterson, ‘Politics’, p. 188.

<sup>69</sup> Paterson, ‘Politics’, p. 191.

<sup>70</sup> *The Aristocracy, the State and the Local Community; The Hastings Collection of Manuscripts from the Huntingdon Library in California* (Harvester Press, 1986), Reel 13, Box 45.

marriage. The mother of his uncle Thomas Staveley was a daughter of Thomas Babington of Rothley Temple, Leicestershire.<sup>71</sup> The first entry in his Notebook indicated that Wright was determined to make provision for his family: he also indicated this in his will.<sup>72</sup> It may be that this concern, along with maintaining good relationships with his local network of contacts, took precedence over his political career. Huntingdon's reservations about Nathan Wright were probably beneficial to Leicester Corporation, as they kept him as deputy recorder and did not have to put up with a member of the county gentry forced on them, as Huntingdon wished.

Wright was re-appointed as Recorder in 1689 and then moved to London to pursue his legal career.<sup>73</sup> He took the degree of Sergeant at Law in 1692, was sworn as King's Sergeant at Law on 1 January 1696, and received a Knighthood two days later.<sup>74</sup> Several cases brought him to prominence, including in 1696 the trial for high treason of Sir John Fenwick, and that of the Earl of Warwick, for the murder of Richard Coote in 1699.<sup>75</sup> His appointment as Lord Keeper in 1700, following the dismissal of Lord Somers, was generally regarded as a surprise as he was a much criticised Keeper. He recorded in the Notebook:

I Nathan Wright Wright above named was constituted Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England 21 May 1700. His Majesty King William the 3rd on that day delivering me the Great Seal of England at Hampton Court & I was then judicially sworn and took the oath of Privy Councilor.<sup>76</sup>

He continued as Keeper under Queen Anne who, when he went to surrender the seal after William's death, is reputed to have returned it to him, saying she would not have done so if there had been anyone better. As Glassey notes, this was 'a curiously ungracious tribute'.<sup>77</sup>

Wright was not a peer so could not speak in the House of Lords, although he was a regular attender.<sup>78</sup> Contemporary and near contemporary accounts of his term of office as Keeper are varied. The most scathing contemporary criticism, and the most quoted, came from Bishop Burnet, an ardent supporter of Lord Somers, who he said was removed without a shadow of complaint against him. Referring to Wright's appointment (and having noted that both Holt and Trevor had excused themselves when offered the seal), he stated: 'the seals were given to Nathan Wright, in whom there was nothing equal to the Post, much less to him, who had lately filled it. The King's inclinations seemed now to turned to the Tories, and to a new Parliament.'<sup>79</sup>

<sup>71</sup> R. P. Jenkins, 'Staveley, Thomas (b.1626, d.1684), antiquary', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>72</sup> PRO, PROB 11/583. Last Will and Testament of Nathan Wright.

<sup>73</sup> Stocks & Stevenson, 'Records', p. 597.

<sup>74</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> T. B. Howell (ed.), *A Complete Collection of State Trials for High Treason and other Crimes and Misdemeanours*, vol. XIII, London, 1812, pp. 538–768; pp. 939–1033.

<sup>76</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Lionel Glassey, *Politics and the Appointment of Justices of the Peace, 1675–1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), hereafter Glassey, 'Justices', p. 153.

<sup>78</sup> *Journal of the House of Lords*, 16 (1701), pp. 591–2, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=13827> (accessed June 23 2012).

<sup>79</sup> Burnet, 'History', p. 242.

These comments reveal Burnet's Whig sympathies.<sup>80</sup> Another disparaging comment came from Christopher Musgrave when referring to Wright's place of residence:<sup>81</sup> 'Is it not ominous to chuse a Lord Keeper from the Gravel pits.'<sup>82</sup> Somers's biographer, Oldmixon, when discussing why Wright was considered for the post of Keeper, said: 'The brightest Men at the Bar turned down the post as they would fall so far short of him [Somers] in Genius.' Oldmixon, however, did admit begrudgingly that Nathan Wright was 'A good lawyer 'but having no great Qualities nor Endowments otherwise, being little Conversant with the Affairs of State, or with Polite Literature, every one forsook that it would be more profitable than glorious to him, to be my Lord Somers's Successor'.<sup>83</sup>

A pithy account of Nathan Wright is found in the *Memoirs of the Secret Services of John Macky*, the Scottish spy:

Son of a Clergyman, a good common lawyer, a slow Chancellor, and no Civilian. Chance more than choice brought him the Seals. The Lords Chief Justices Holt and Treby refusing to succeed so Great a Man as the Lord Somers, they fell into the hands of this Gentleman, who being recommended by the opposite party, proved their faithful Tool ever since.

He hath done a great deal of Good to his private family since he was keeper, having married his son and daughter to very considerable Fortunes; got the Employment of Clerk of the Crown in Parliament for his Son, and bestowed the best Livings, in the Queen's gift on his poor relations.<sup>84</sup>

This may reflect the snobbery of the aristocracy, as only two bestowals of Crown livings by Nathan Wright have been noted.<sup>85</sup> He did give the living in Broughton Astley to his nephew, John Twells, but he owned that advowson.<sup>86</sup>

Not all contemporary reports of Wright were negative. Some, although anonymous, were supportive.<sup>87</sup> Some allude to the party conflict of the time. In 1705, Sackville Tufton commented:

The Great Seal was continued in the hands of Nathan Wright, a Gentleman whose Education in the Church and Spotless Integrity in managing that high Trust, had caus'd him many Enemies of a different Perswasion and who was the treading upon Slippery Ground.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Edward Gregg, *Queen Anne*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, hereafter Gregg, 'Queen Anne', p. 196.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Frankle, 'Wright, Nathan Wright (1654–1721)', O.D.N.B. Oxford, 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Portland MSS, 3.620 quoted in Frankle, 2004, as n. 81.

<sup>83</sup> John Oldmixon, *Memoirs of the Life of John Lord Somers*, London, 1716, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), p. 52.

<sup>84</sup> John Macky, *Memoires of the Secret Services of John Macky, Esq, during the reigns of King William, Queen Anne and King George I*, London, 1733, ECCO, pp. 41–2.

<sup>85</sup> See Nichols, 'Antiquities', vol. III, part I, p. 217; Benjamin Newton, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. I, London, 1736, ECCO, pp. ix–x; Muriel Paterson, 'Sir Nathan Wright 1653–1721, Recorder of Leicester, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, and his Notebook'. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Leicester, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 53.

<sup>87</sup> See: An Impartial Hand, *The Lives of all the Lords Chancellors, Lords Keeper and Lords Commissioners of the Great Seal of England, London, 1722*, p. 201; Annon, *A New and General Biographical Dictionary containing an historical and Critical account of the lives and writings of the most eminent persons in every nation*, London, 1798, ECCO, vol. 15, p. 375.

<sup>88</sup> Sackville Tufton, *The History of Faction alias Hypocrisy alias Moderation* (London, 1705), ECCO, p. 90.

Ebenezer Marshall, quoting Burnet, stated: 'Nathan Wright whose sordid mind had brought him into contempt, was deprived of the Great Seal.'<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, Robert Morden commented: 'The present Lord Keeper is the Right Honourable Nathan Wright a Person of Known Learning in our Laws of Justice, Wisdom and uncorrupted Integrity that caused him to be advanced to the High Station and Trust with the universal Approbation of all Men.'<sup>90</sup>

The plotting of Whig sympathisers in the dismissal of Nathan Wright is clear in the Marlborough–Godolphin Correspondence.<sup>91</sup> Marlborough's wife Sarah first met Queen Anne as a young princess and went on to form a lasting friendship with her, but she also tried to exert influence over her.<sup>92</sup> Tory opposition to Sarah's husband's war plans was an irritation to her and it became her aim to eliminate all Tories from government.<sup>93</sup> Moves by the Tories in the Commons to 'tack' the 'Occasional Conformity Bill' to the land tax led Sarah to indict all Tories as Jacobites.<sup>94</sup> Sarah claimed that she had persuaded the queen to take the seal from Nathan Wright:

A man despised by all parties, of no use to the crown and whose weak and wretched conduct in the court of chancery had almost brought his very office into contempt. His removal however was a great loss to the church.<sup>95</sup>

This implies that Wright was seen as an ally of the Church of England. His replacement, Cowper, was, according to Burnet, 'a very acceptable Man to the Whig Party'.<sup>96</sup> The Whigs wanted Cowper as Keeper, Anne did not, but was forced to submit. Whig co-operation was essential to ensure that the required legislation for the war and the necessary taxation were passed in the next parliament.<sup>97</sup>

The main issue for which Nathan Wright was held in contempt by all political persuasions was the Commission of the Peace. Those on the Commission of the Peace, along with courtesy judges and bishops, were customarily country gentry. Plumb contended that: 'To bring the independent country gentry into some ordered relationship with government, or to diminish their role in it, became an absolute necessity if political stability was ever to be achieved.'<sup>98</sup> Gentry who were deemed to be supportive of a government would vary depending on its political complexion. Those out of favour could be purged and replaced by those who were in favour. The Lord Chancellor, who held the seal, had the responsibility of recommending and selecting; he could 'make and unmake justices', and so had considerable patronage.<sup>99</sup> In a time of party conflict, eviction from the Commission was a cause of great

<sup>89</sup> Ebenezer Marshall, *The History of the Union of Scotland and England* (Edinburgh, 1799), ECCO, p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Morden, *The New Description and State of England* (London, 1704), ECCO, p. iv.

<sup>91</sup> H. L. Snyder (ed.), *The Marlborough Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter 'Marlborough', p. 334; p. 418.

<sup>92</sup> Gregg, 'Queen Anne', p. 29; p. 31.

<sup>93</sup> Gregg, 'Queen Anne', p. 158; p. 188.

<sup>94</sup> Gregg, 'Queen Anne', p. 192.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, *An account of the Conduct of the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough* (London, 1742), ECCO, p. 77.

<sup>96</sup> Burnet, 'History', p. 379; p. 426.

<sup>97</sup> Snyder, 'Marlborough', fn. 3, p. 418.

<sup>98</sup> Plumb, 'Political Stability', p. 22.

<sup>99</sup> Glassey, 'Justices', p. 5.

concern, and, as noted by a correspondent of Nathan Wright's successor, Cowper: 'It must be allowed that the honour of being in, is not so great as the disgrace of being turn'd out of the Commission.'<sup>100</sup> Bishop Burnet had ample criticism for Nathan Wright in relation to justices of the peace:

The Justices of the Peace had been put in and put out, in so strange a manner, ever since Wright had the Great Seal, that they did not deserve so great a Power should be committed to them. Many Gentlemen of good Estates, and ancient Families, had been of late put out of the Commission, for no other visible reason, but because they had gone in heartily to the Revolution, and had continued zealous to the late King.<sup>101</sup>

As Nathan Wright was Keeper under ministries of different political complexions, Glassey has suggested that he may have accepted uncritically names put before him by politically committed people. Those to be put out would be disaffected, impoverished and corrupt, and those to be kept in would have estates, be loyal and show integrity. There is no way of being certain, but Wright appears to have taken recommendations from both Whig and Tory in good faith. Glassey argues that whatever justification might have been offered in his defence, he had lost the esteem of all parties.<sup>102</sup>

Later, John, Lord Campbell, continued the disparaging comments, and his chapter on Nathan Wright begins: 'It seems strange that I should have to introduce into my list of Lord Chancellors and Lord Keepers of the Great Seal a man so little prominent either for abilities or crimes.'<sup>103</sup> Campbell also noted that Wright was never himself a member of parliament and that his real ambition was to retain his snug business at the bar, and 'to die a *Nisi Prius* leader'.<sup>104</sup> Campbell did, however, note also that while Wright was 'at head of law, there was considerable improvement introduced in the administration of criminal justice, the credit of which may be due to him, although from his having no voice in parliament, we do not exactly know how he viewed it'.<sup>105</sup>

Although unpopular in some parts of London society, Wright was more favourably treated by late eighteenth-century Leicester historians, perhaps reflecting local feeling. Throsby pointed out the widely different views of Nathan Wright held at a time 'when party malevolence was unbounded':

The Tories of the day praised him with most flattering marks of their esteem, bordering on adulation: while the other powerful party, the Whigs, endeavored to render him an object of contemptuous pity, as a man in every way unqualified for his station.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Glassey, 'Justices', p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Burnet, 'History', p. 379.

<sup>102</sup> Glassey, 'Justices', pp. 169–70.

<sup>103</sup> Campbell, 'Lives', p. 203.

<sup>104</sup> Campbell, 'Lives', p. 205, n. t, Quoting from Memoirs of Mr. Surrebutter's professional career. "Deaf as a post, and thick as mustard,  
He aim'd at wit, and bawl'd and bluster'd,  
And died a *Nisi Prius* leader,  
That genius was my special pleader."

<sup>105</sup> Campbell, 'Lives', p. 215.

<sup>106</sup> John Throsby, *The history and antiquities of the ancient town of Leicester*, Leicester, 1791, ECCO, pp. 180–1.

Nichols's account of Wright is wide ranging and eclectic: from John Dunton's observation that as Keeper he 'is deservedly advanced to the high pinnacle of State preferments: and his conduct is so wise and loyal as convinces the world that it is only religious and real goodness establishes greatness'; to Macky's description of him as 'a plain man both in person and conversation, of middle stature, inclining to fat, with a broad face, which is much marked by the small-pox'.<sup>107</sup> Nichols also comments on *Corona Civica*, a poem complimenting Wright as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England as a counterbalance to the 'satirical squib', *The Country Parson's Honest Advice to that judicious Lawyer, and worthy Minister of State, my Lord Keeper Wright*.<sup>108</sup> Nichols also suggested that a more appropriate character of Wright could be found in a letter from Sir T. Littel to Mr Samuel Echard that is quoted at length. Littel makes the point that Nathan Wright was unique in achieving the advanced position of Lord Keeper:

Without the assistance of some great friend or party, or having been made attorney-general, or having sat long in Parliament (of which he was never a member); and, whatever was the occasion of his being neglected after he had left his place, he had shewn an inviolable fidelity to the Crown during the whole course of his administration; and, upon critical conjunctures, had given wholesome and proper advice; which others declined doing, either from fear of displeasing, or from some other sinister views.

Littel goes on to comment on Wright's regard for the constitution of the Church and the state, and his disinterested views and the fact he would have nothing to do with the 'exorbitant length and violence of parties'. Nathan Wright was also described as having an exact regard for justice and dislike of corruption; he was respected in his public role by people who were not influenced by party passions, and in his retirement 'was loved and esteemed for those social virtues that render a man acceptable in a private station'.<sup>109</sup>

Talk in London of the removal of Wright from office was first noted by Luttrell on 26 June 1705.<sup>110</sup> In the Notebook, Wright wrote:

The Great Seal was taken out of my custody the 6th day of October 1705 by Mr Secretary Hedges by Her majesty's warrant dated the 5th day of the same October and I was discharged of the Office of Lord Keeper but was continued of the Privy Council for about a year or two.<sup>111</sup>

Was Nathan Wright as bad a keeper as his contemporary critics implied? Vernon, quoted by Horwitz, suggested that he accepted his responsibilities as Keeper 'with a foresight that he should not hold them long'.<sup>112</sup> It is clear that opinions about him were divided along party lines. Probably the most realistic description of his situation is again provided by Littel:

<sup>107</sup> Nichols, 'Antiquities', vol. III, part I, p. \*215.

<sup>108</sup> Nichols, 'Antiquities', vol. III, part I, p. \*216.

<sup>109</sup> Baker MSS, University of Cambridge, vol. XXIX, p. 189; reprinted in *The European magazine and London Review*, vol. 49.

<sup>110</sup> Luttrell, 'Historical Relation', p. 599.

<sup>111</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, 'Notebook', p. 5.

<sup>112</sup> H. Horwitz. *Parliament, Policy and Politics in the Reign of William III*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977, p. 275.

He would gladly have been excused accepting that great post for his health's sake, which had been much impair'd the Spring by a dangerous fever. Besides he thought it imprudent to forgo the great profits he might make in his practice yearly, which might have lasted his life, for the precarious enjoyment of the post profitable place. But his Majesties command must be obeyed: it was not decent, or perhaps safe, to disobey them.<sup>113</sup>

It is unfortunate that the most frequently quoted comments regarding Nathan Wright are the most vitriolic. There is little mention of the less partisan opinions of him that appeared in eighteenth-century literature. He was without doubt a most competent lawyer, who was, nevertheless, looked down upon by many as a mere commoner who probably lacked charisma. With powerful people such as Godolphin and the Marlboroughs plotting against him, in spite of Queen Anne's good intentions to keep him (as she disliked Cowper so much), the need for Whig support in parliament to get legislation passed was more important ultimately. Nathan Wright had to go.

As Lord Keeper, Wright was reviled by contemporaries who held different political views. The most vitriolic comments came from the ardent Whig supporters, Bishop Burnet and Sarah Churchill. Others, whose political views were not so entrenched, were more sympathetic. Robert Morden saw him as 'a Person of Known Learning in our Laws of Justice, Wisdom and uncorrupted Integrity'.<sup>114</sup> Sackville Tufton, writing in 1705, pointed out that 'his spotless integrity made him many enemies of a different persuasion' and implied his downfall was brought about by 'disbanded courtiers who had interests behind the curtain'.<sup>115</sup>

A range of sources imply, but do not state explicitly, that Nathan Wright started out as a Whig; however, Burnet and others clearly placed him with the Tories over the years he was Keeper. His network of contacts as a young man certainly had Whig sympathies, many of them being supporters of the parliamentarian Earl of Stamford during the Civil War: these included Babington of Rothley, Villiers of Brooksby and Ashby of Quenby, into whose family Wright married.<sup>116</sup> However, by the 1715 election in Leicester, Nathan Wright was clearly on the Tory side.<sup>117</sup> It is not known how or when Nathan Wright transferred his political allegiance: it could be speculated that this may have been associated with his religious convictions. Having been brought up as a clergyman's son he was regarded as an ardent supporter of the Church of England. Sarah Churchill acknowledged, when he was dismissed as Keeper, that: 'His removal however was a great loss to the church, for which he had ever been a warm stickler.'<sup>118</sup> It is also possible that prejudice against him in London during his time as Keeper was more than just political. He was a commoner which seems to have been held against him by some. This is confirmed by Musgrave's

<sup>113</sup> Baker MSS, as n. 109, p. 189.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Morden, *The New Description and State of England*, London, 1706, ECCO, p. iv.

<sup>115</sup> Sackville Tufton, *The History of Faction alias Hypocrisy alias Moderation*, London, 1705, ECCO, p. 90.

<sup>116</sup> Plumb, *VCH Leicestershire II*, p. 110.

<sup>117</sup> Plumb, *VCH Leicestershire II*, p. 124.

<sup>118</sup> Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, *An account of the Conduct of the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough* (London, 1742), ECCO, p. 77.

comments about choosing a Lord Keeper ‘from the gravel pits’,<sup>119</sup> and as Glassey has pointed out, Wright lost the esteem of all parties, but during the ‘rage of party no-one could please everyone’.<sup>120</sup>

If Nathan Wright was not respected in London whilst he was Lord Keeper, he was respected in Leicester when he served as Recorder there. He had good relations with the Corporation and was re-chosen as Recorder in 1688, and presented with a silver bowl as a token of his regard before he moved to London.<sup>121</sup> It is argued here that his role during the negotiations for the 1685 Charter was significant, particularly as Huntingdon was uncertain about him. His role in the charter negotiations and his standing with the Corporation in effect thwarted Huntingdon’s ambitions. His appointment as Deputy Recorder prevented a leading peer or member of the county gentry from gaining power in the town – not what Huntingdon had planned.<sup>122</sup> Plumb suggested that men such as Wright were disliked by ‘families who regarded themselves as the traditional leaders of the county’.<sup>123</sup> No evidence has been identified in this study to indicate that the county gentry at the time viewed Nathan Wright negatively. Plumb seems aghast that he bought the Brooksby estate ‘of Sir William Villiers, whose family had been established in Leicestershire for centuries and many of whose members had sat in parliament’.<sup>124</sup> However, evidence in the Notebook,<sup>125</sup> shows that the deal to sell Brooksby was a good one for Sir William. The only evidence noted in the course of this study that could suggest a strained relationship between Wright and Leicestershire families is related to the 1715 Leicester election. Ashby, Wright’s brother-in-law, was standing as a Whig candidate, but by that time their respective politics were poles apart. It is possible that Wright was not interested in political power as such for himself. Indeed, it was suggested that when he was Lord Keeper, ‘he had wisely declined all he could to meddle with Politiks during his continuance in that High Station’.<sup>126</sup>

Wright may have been a more modest man than many of the comments about him would suggest. It is reported that after he retired to Caldecote he spent ‘the remainder of his days in a happy retirement, beloved and respected, at Caldecot-Hall in Warwickshire’.<sup>127</sup> In his will he stated: ‘I humbly recommend my spirit to Almighty God my Creator and my body to the earth to be decently but without ostentation or any funeral pomp to be interred at the discretion of my executors.’<sup>128</sup> He was duly buried at Caldecote Church, where he is commemorated by a small mural tablet to

<sup>119</sup> Portland MSS, 3.620 quoted in Frankle, Robert ‘Wright, Nathan Wright (1654–1721)’, O.D.N.B. (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>120</sup> Glassey, ‘Justices’, pp. 169–70.

<sup>121</sup> Thompson, J., *The History of Leicester in the eighteenth century* (Leicester, Crossley and Clarke: London, Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1871), p. 13.

<sup>122</sup> Miller, ‘Cities Divided’, p. 190.

<sup>123</sup> Plumb, ‘Political Stability’, p. 84.

<sup>124</sup> Plumb, ‘Political Stability’, pp. 83–4.

<sup>125</sup> ROLLR, 7/D/39, Wright, ‘Notebook’, pp. 131–2.

<sup>126</sup> An Impartial Hand, *The Lives of all the Lords Chancellors, Lords Keeper and Lords Commissioners of the Great Seal of England* (London, 1722), ECCO, p. 201.

<sup>127</sup> Annon, *A New and General Biographical Dictionary containing an historical and Critical account of the lives and writings of the most eminent persons in every nation: particularly the British and Irish*, London, 1798, vol. 15, ECCO, p. 375.

<sup>128</sup> PRO, Prob/11/583, Last Will and Testament of Nathan Wright.



‘Nathan Wright, over five years keeper of the Great Seal of England, died 4 August 1721’.<sup>129</sup> His body was later taken to Gayhurst, where a large memorial to him and his son George dominates the church interior.<sup>130</sup>

Although Wright was dismissed as Keeper, one of the perks of that position was very important to him. After the death of William III a new seal was issued for Queen Anne. At the death of a monarch, the old silver seal was customarily retained by the Keeper. As others had done, Nathan Wright had William III’s matrix melted down and made into a silver cup. In his will, Wright left ‘to the said George Wright my eldest son my great Silver Gilt Cup and cover and I devise that the said cup and cover may go in succession from eldest son to eldest son as an heirloom in my said sons house at Gayhurst’.<sup>131</sup> This cup has a portrait medallion of William III on one side and Queen Anne on the other. This is now held by the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>132</sup>

Nathan Wright clearly profited from his years of government service, but he used the profits of his role to provide for his family, an aim he notes in the first entry in the Notebook. His will saw his estate divided between his extant sons with George, the eldest retaining the majority of the estate. His grandchildren were each left a bequest of five guineas with the exception of Nathan, the son of Nathan Wright’s third son Robert who had died in India in 1709. This young Nathan was brought up by his grandfather at Caldecote, inheriting £1,500 at the age of 21 this being money from his father Robert’s estate that his grandfather had looked after for him. He also inherited £50 per annum to cover his maintenance and education, with his uncles George, Nathan and William acting as his guardians until his majority. His will reveals that as both father and grandfather, Wright’s primary intention was to provide for his descendants.

The evidence from the Notebook shows that Nathan Wright did not spend the £50,000 in three years for which Plumb named him as an extravagant spender. His reputation has been tarnished by much-quoted comments from the likes of Burnet and Macky. The most balanced contemporary analysis of him appears in the letter written by Littel.<sup>133</sup> Wright was a man who may not have wanted to become the Lord Keeper, but as a loyal subject was reluctant to go against the wishes of his sovereign. His career demonstrates that attaining high office remained a possibility for well-qualified individuals who were not ardent party-political figures, even through the period of the 1690s–1710s that has come to be known as ‘the rage of party’. This suggests that although there were limits to party political divisions in the period, the prejudices Wright faced from so many different quarters reflected the suspicion in which such individuals were held.

<sup>129</sup> L. F. Salzman (ed.), *VCH Warwickshire*, IV, London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Historical Research, 1947, p. 42.

<sup>130</sup> Nichols, ‘Antiquities’, vol. III, part I, p. 218; Gayhurst Church, Buckinghamshire, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/francescarter/10183279425/> (accessed 9 January 2015).

<sup>131</sup> PRO, Prob/11/583, Last Will and Testament of Nathan Wright.

<sup>132</sup> The Wright Seal Cup, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158110/cup-and-cover-the-wright-seal-cup> (accessed 15 January 2015).

<sup>133</sup> Baker MSS, as n. 121, p. 189.

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