

SIR HUGH CONWAY AND THE BUILDING OF HILLESDEN CHURCH

NICHOLAS ORME

The ambitious and highly decorated church of Hillesden is a striking piece of early Tudor architecture, the more remarkable for being in an isolated place. The church has been much admired without any serious attempt to identify the person or persons responsible for its construction. That responsibility can be attributed to Sir Hugh Conway (died 1518): a household servant of Henry VII, lord treasurer of Ireland, and treasurer of Calais. The article presents a detailed biography of Conway, and explains why he was the only person who had the means, opportunity, and motive for building the church. His wealth in monetary terms was ill-matched by a modest handful of estates, of which only Hillesden satisfied his wish to have a country residence within a reasonable distance of both London and the Midlands where he had interests and duties. He rebuilt Hillesden church not long after 1493 in tandem with a manor house, now vanished, as a linked pair of buildings to demonstrate his status as a royal servant and official. The church still includes the closet and private chapel of the manor house: rare survivals to which attention is also drawn for the first time.

Hillesden Church is an impressive piece of early-Tudor architecture in an isolated site on a hilltop three miles south of Buckingham.¹ It has been noticed and admired since the early nineteenth century, notably by George Gilbert Scott (1811–78) who loved and sketched it in his youth and later called it ‘the first building which directed my attention to Gothic architecture’.² He duly restored the church in 1873–5. In contrast, little attempt has been made to establish who was responsible for the building and why. The pioneer historian of Buckinghamshire, George Lipscomb, did not pursue the matter in 1847, and nor did the *Victoria County History* in 1927.³ More recently, in 2000, the revised edition of *Buckinghamshire*, in the ‘Buildings of England’ series originated by Nikolaus Pevsner, has suggested very tentatively that the work was ‘apparently’, or ‘may’ have been, carried out by the canons of Notley Abbey (Buckinghamshire), who owned the church.⁴ The purpose of the present article is to assign the responsibility for the rebuilding to a person who has not hitherto been considered: Sir Hugh Conway, the lord of the manor of Hillesden from about 1487 until his death in 1518. It aims to show that he alone had the opportunity, means, and motive to do so, and that the site and nature of the rebuilding links the work with him beyond any reasonable doubt.

Conway’s Early Career

Hugh Conway came from a family of Welsh gentry (probably speaking Welsh and English), based at Bodrhyddan in the parish of Rhuddlan (Flintshire). His father John Conwy (whose surname was also spelt as Conwey and Conway) married twice: first Alice Minshull from a family that held land in the Wirral (Cheshire) and secondly Joan or Jonet, daughter of Edward Stanley, esquire, of Ewloe (Flintshire). Hugh appears to have been the only son of the first marriage, since he was later associated with Tranmere (Cheshire), possibly through an inheritance of land from Alice, but he did not succeed to his father’s property when John died in 1486. This went instead to Hugh’s brother John, the eldest son of Joan, who bore her husband a numerous progeny of boys and girls.⁵

There is some uncertainty about Hugh’s date of birth. In view of his death in 1518, he can hardly be the Hugh Conway who figures in the retinue of the Duke of Somerset in 1451.⁶ The same or another man of this name was granted the posts of bedel of Marke and Oye on the outskirts of Calais (France) by Edward IV on 13 July 1461 – posts that could be done in person or by deputy, and may have been simply a reward.⁷ A Hugh Conway then occurs as a member of Edward’s household in 1464, when he was paid for having travelled to Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the king’s campaign

against Henry VI and his supporters in Northumberland.⁸ In 1469 Edward made another grant of the bedelships of Marke and Oye to a Hugh Conway, and in 1481 the king gave him a life-interest in a tenement in Mark Lane (London).⁹ If there were two Hugh Conways, it is difficult to know how to demarcate them chronologically. The problem of supposing that our Conway was being rewarded by 1461 is that this would backdate his birth to at least 1440 and would mean in turn that he was acting as treasurer of Calais in his seventies and died aged seventy-eight: something possible but rather unusual. Another uncertainty arises from a Welsh genealogy that lists our Hugh Conway as having married Anne, the daughter of Sir Simon Mountford, a knight of Warwickshire.¹⁰ If this is true, the marriage is likely to have taken place in the 1460s or 70s and to have ended with Anne's death before 1487 when Hugh had a different wife. No surviving children of such a marriage are recorded.

The career of our Hugh Conway grows clearer after the summer of 1483 when Richard III usurped the throne of the legitimate child king, Edward V, who soon disappeared from sight and then from life. Conway was evidently one of the many who were affronted by Richard's actions and looked for another possible king. His decision may have been influenced by his stepmother's links to the Stanley family, whose head, Thomas Lord Stanley, was married to Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry Tudor. According to the historian Polydore Vergil, Lady Margaret, in the autumn of 1483,

'sent Hugh Conway into Brittany unto her son Henry, with a good great sum of money, commending him to utter [*i.e.* declare] all things and exhort his return [to England], and especially to advise him to arrive in Wales, where he should find aid in readiness... Then Henry premised [*i.e.* sent] into England Hugh Conway and Thomas Ramney to give notice of his coming.'¹¹

Henry's planned invasion of 1483 failed, but was repeated with triumphant success two years later. It is not known what Hugh did in the interval: whether he returned to Brittany or joined Henry on his march through Wales in 1485. By the time that Henry took the throne at Bosworth Field on 22 August, however, Hugh was established as a loyal supporter of the Tudor king, and he duly reaped the reward of his loyalty.

Conway's Rise to Importance

Less than a month after the battle, on 21 September, Conway was appointed to a senior office in the royal household as keeper of the great wardrobe, an appointment to be held for life.¹² Unfortunately, this was followed by a disagreement with Henry in the following winter or the early spring of 1486. As Hugh was reported as recalling it some eighteen years later, a friend of his brought him intelligence that Francis Lord Lovell, a leading supporter of Richard III, was planning to escape from Colchester where he had taken sanctuary and to start a rebellion. The friend swore him to secrecy, but Hugh told Sir Reynold Bray, the king's trusted counsellor, and Bray informed Henry VII. Hugh was summoned before the king, who expressed his disbelief in the story and asked for the name of Hugh's informant. Hugh refused, on the grounds that he had taken an oath not to reveal it, 'wherewith the king was angry and displeased with me for my good will'.¹³ The information was correct, since Lovell did leave Colchester in the spring of 1486 and tried to foment a rising in the North, but a little over a year later Hugh lost his household office, whether or not because of his interview with the king. On 25 May 1487, despite his appointment for life, he was replaced by a previous keeper of the great wardrobe.¹⁴ This did not apparently affect his standing at court in other respects. On the following 23 November he was made a Knight of the Bath during the celebrations preceding the coronation of Queen Elizabeth Woodville, which he attended two days later,¹⁵ although he was placed low in precedence among the knights on both occasions. In due course he was promoted from 'esquire for the body' to 'knight for the body', joining the group of senior courtiers who waited on the king's person.¹⁶ At about the same time, if not earlier, he probably adopted or inherited a coat of arms: sable, on a bend cotised argent, a rose between two annulets gules, which was adopted in slight different forms by other branches of his family.¹⁷

Henry VII's accession benefited Hugh in another respect. At an unrecorded date that can only be fixed as before 1487, Hugh married Elizabeth Courtenay, daughter of Thomas, Earl of Devon (died 1458). Her birth date is also unknown but is likely to have occurred in the later 1440s or the 1450s. It was a remarkable social achievement for a Welsh gentleman's son to win the daughter

of an earl, but the Courtenay family was in eclipse from the 1460s until the mid-1480s. Elizabeth's brother Thomas, Earl of Devon from 1458 to 1461, was killed at the battle of Towton fighting Edward IV in 1461, and his lands were then confiscated.¹⁸ Another brother, John, was briefly restored to the earldom in 1470 when Henry VI regained the throne for a short period, but John lost his life at the battle of Tewkesbury in the following year, and the senior male line of the Courtenays was extinguished.¹⁹ It is not clear how Elizabeth and her sister Joan supported themselves from 1461 to 1469, when Edward IV returned four Courtenay manors to Joan to hold for her lifetime.²⁰ Nor do we know how an alliance came about between Elizabeth, whose family supported Henry VI, and Hugh, apparently the servant of Edward IV. The bond may well have been a late one, made after 1485 when he and the Courtenays were on the same side, in which case the marriage would have been between two mature people: a woman long in need of a husband and a man desirous of status, land, and money.

All these were duly forthcoming, since in October 1485, soon after Henry VII took the crown, he promoted Edward Courtenay from a younger branch of the family to be Earl of Devon and restored to him most of the lands that the elder branch had lost after 1461.²¹ This enabled Courtenay to make provision for the sisters of Earl Thomas. Lands began to be transferred to them in 1487,²² and on 9 March 1490 Henry VII approved the conveyance of eight of the manors previously granted to Courtenay for the benefit of Sir Hugh Conway and his wife Elizabeth. The manors consisted of Hemington (Somerset), Sutton Courtenay (Berkshire), Hillesden, Waddesdon, and Wavendon (Buckinghamshire), with Breamore, Old Lymington, and New Lymington (Hampshire). The properties were to descend to the heirs of Elizabeth's body, in other words to her own children or grandchildren, failing which they were to return to the Courtenay family.²³ If, as is likely, she was middle-aged, the grant was effectively one with a limited duration.

Hugh now possessed considerable public status from his place at court and his marriage into an earl's family. The endowment of 1487–90 also gave him wealth. In 1512 the annual income of Hemington was estimated at over £26, the Hampshire properties at £58, and Sutton Courtenay

at over £92.²⁴ In 1518 Wavendon was valued at £9, Hillesden at £24, and Waddesdon at £30,²⁵ but a more stringent taxation survey of 1522 rated them at £10, £52, and £42 respectively.²⁶ The manors, with Hugh's wages and perquisites at court and later on from other offices, would have raised his income to more than £300 per annum. They also brought him religious patronage. As tenant of Breamore he became 'founder' and patron of Breamore Priory, a house of Augustinian canons, with rights to visit and advise on the election of a prior. As lord of the manors of Hemington and Sutton Courtenay he was patron of their parish churches with the right to present clergy, and the manor of Waddesdon gave him the patronage of a church of three portions or rectories, each of which he was entitled to fill.²⁷ In the remaining manors, the church patronage belonged to other people.

At first, after 1485, Hugh seems to have lived at Barnes (Surrey), an estate belonging to St Paul's Cathedral where he probably only owned or rented a house. He is mentioned as 'of Barnes' in 1487 and 1488.²⁸ In the latter year he is also referred to as of Rhuddlan, his ancestral home, and Tranmere, where he may have inherited some property from his mother.²⁹ In 1492 he was contracted to serve in Henry VII's invasion of France – an exploit soon called off in return for a pension from the French king.³⁰ At some point after 1490, however, he evidently decided that while continuing his career in the royal household, he should establish a country house and estate for himself and his wife in Buckinghamshire, where his properties lay that were the nearest to London. He fixed on Hillesden for this purpose for reasons that we shall explore in due course, and in 1500 he is described as living there.³¹

Conway in Ireland and France

In the late summer of 1494 Henry VII gave Conway an important public office as lord treasurer of Ireland. Hugh received £7,000 for Irish expenses in August and was formally appointed on 13 September 1494.³² This was a country much in the king's mind since it had been involved in the rebellion of Lambert Simnel in 1487 and would be again in that of Perkin Warbeck in 1495–7; moreover the finances there were in an unsatisfactory state, with income falling greatly short of expenditure. Agnes Conway, who investigated Hugh's term as treasurer in 1932, rated his abilities

poorly and wrote of 'his slackness in office', his 'not being satisfactory in Ireland', and his dilatoriness in his later post as treasurer of Calais – a view shared more recently by Steven G. Ellis.³³ This judgment may be unfair. It is true that in April 1495 the king appointed William Hattecliffe as under-treasurer and John Pympe as treasurer-at-war in Ireland, leading to the removal of most of the Irish finances from Hugh's control.³⁴ Nevertheless it would be odd if Henry, with his sharp eye for administration, chose Conway for a difficult post and then curtailed his activities after only about half a year. Other considerations may have intervened, such as the need for more officers to turn round the financial deficit and handle the military expenditure to counter the threat of Warbeck and his allies. Moreover, nine years later Henry gave Conway another major financial office. Still, for whatever reason, Conway left Ireland on 7 November 1495, having been paid just over £161 for his first year in service.³⁵ He is not known to have been formally replaced as treasurer until 1504,³⁶ but his recorded activities in the years after 1495 were centred in England.

The first of these was an appointment as a commissioner (*i.e.* justice) of the peace in Warwickshire in 1496. Conway's second wife and his own relation Edward, as we shall see, held property in the county, and it may be that Henry VII was glad to have one of his core supporters in a region whose traditional leader, the Earl of Warwick, was currently Edward Plantagenet: a prisoner in the Tower of London as a dangerous rival for the throne. The appointment was renewed on four more occasions up to 1503.³⁷ By 1500, as has been mentioned, Hugh was living at Hillesden, and in 1500–1 he served as sheriff of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.³⁸ Subsequently he was appointed a commissioner in 1505 to inquire into woods and forests in Buckinghamshire and three other counties,³⁹ and held a similar commission in 1506 in Warwickshire and Worcestershire (he also owned property in the latter county).⁴⁰ The period from 1496 to 1504 may have seen his greatest involvement in the affairs of Buckinghamshire and the surrounding area, but in 1504 he was obliged to shift his interests to another sphere.

This followed Conway's assignment by Henry VII to be treasurer of the town and marches of Calais, an appointment made on 15 June 1504 and surely expressing confidence in his financial

abilities.⁴¹ The office gave him charge of all the royal income and expenditure in this important English possession, as well as the responsibility for maintaining and guarding the defences on the west side of the town. He was also named in 1505 as a commissioner to conclude a commercial treaty with George, Duke of Saxony and governor of Friesland.⁴² When Henry VII died in 1509, the new king Henry VIII reappointed Conway to the Calais post on 8 October in that year.⁴³ He retained it until about Michaelmas (29 September) 1517, when he probably asked to be relieved of his duties because of age or ill-health, and was succeeded by Sir William Sandys as from the following 6 October.⁴⁴ A number of the annual accounts survive that Conway caused to be drawn up to summarise the revenues and payments of his administration,⁴⁵ and although he was twice pardoned for submitting his accounts after the due date, his continued tenure shows that he was not thought to fall short of acceptable standards.⁴⁶ As we shall see, his duties at Calais probably led to a shift in his movements away from Buckinghamshire. It is unlikely that he spent the entire year in France, and one would expect him to have been allowed visits home, but London may have become a more appropriate place for his residence while in England. That he was assiduous in doing his work at Calais is suggested by a complaint to Cardinal Wolsey by Sir Richard Wingfield, the deputy (*i.e.* governor) of the town, about the poor state of its management and defences in 1515. This stated that Conway was one of the only two principal officers who were currently present in the town.⁴⁷ He also had links in Calais with a hospital for poor soldiers managed by twelve sisters of the Order of St Elizabeth, apparently a branch of the Franciscans. In his will he describes them as 'of my foundation', either because he helped establish them or was responsible for them by virtue of his office of treasurer.⁴⁸

The beginning of Sir Hugh's time of duty at Calais coincided with some damaging allegations made against him to Henry VII by a certain John Flamank, which come nearest to recording any of Hugh's conversation. The allegations were made in about September 1504, soon after Hugh's arrival in the town.⁴⁹ Flamank, who was a retainer of Sir Richard Nanfan (then the deputy of Calais), claimed that he attended a meeting between Nanfan, Conway, Sir Samson Norton (the master

porter), and William Nanfan (a man of lesser rank). At the meeting Conway purportedly remarked that the king was sick and unlikely to live long. He said that he had been in the company of various great men who had discussed what might happen when Henry died. Some spoke in favour of the Duke of Buckingham, others of Edmund de la Pole (both of whom had royal blood), but none of the Prince of Wales (Henry VIII). Norton answered that Conway should tell about the king about these remarks. Conway rejoined, 'If ye knew King Harry our master as I do, ye would beware how that ye broke to him any such matters, for he would take it to be said [by the informant] but [*i.e.* only] of evil, ill will, and malice. Then should anyone have blame and no thanks for his truth and good mind, and that have I well proved heretofore in like causes'. He went on to recall his difficult interview with Henry in 1486 about Lord Lovell's suspected rebellion and concluded 'I shall no more tempt him while I live in such causes'.

Flamank claimed that later in the conversation Conway talked of a prophecy that Henry VII would not be able to reign longer than Edward IV, meaning twenty-two years and a little more, which would presume his death by 1507. Norton told him to 'burn the book it is in, and a vengeance take the writer'. Sir Richard Nanfan also warned Conway about prophesying against the king. Conway said that his only intention was to keep everything safe for the king and his children, and that he feared there would be no surety while Lady Lucy Browne was staying in the castle of Calais with her husband, Sir Anthony Browne, the lieutenant of the castle. Lucy was a strong supporter of the lingering Yorkist cause, and Conway argued that she might help her cousin Edmund de la Pole, the exiled Yorkist candidate for the throne, by letting him into the town through the postern. Soon after this, in 1506, de la Pole was arrested by the Duke of Gelderland, handed over to Henry VII, and later executed. Flamank's allegations are of suspect value. He was a known troublemaker and appears to have wished to ingratiate himself with Henry VII. Henry took the claims seriously enough to order Nanfan, Conway, and Norton to be relieved of their duties in July 1505,⁵⁰ but Conway was soon reinstated as treasurer and Flamank made himself so unpopular that he was obliged to leave Calais. The king evidently continued to regard Hugh as a loyal and dependable servant, and Henry VIII took a similar view.

Conway's Later Life

By the time that Conway became treasurer of Calais, there had been a change in his marital affairs. Elizabeth Courtenay was still alive in 1490 when the property arrangement was made, but she was dead by 1497 and perhaps a few years earlier.⁵¹ The couple had no children who grew to adulthood to inherit from them, and it is doubtful whether they even had offspring who died in childhood. Such offspring would have given Hugh the right, by the so-called 'courtesy of England', to hold Elizabeth's property until he died, and he did not apparently claim this when (as we shall see) an attempt was made to remove her property from him. At about the time of Elizabeth's death Hugh was granted the wardship of the lands and children of Richard Burdett, a gentleman of Arrow (Warwickshire), who died on 28 April 1492 leaving an heir under the age of majority.⁵² The grant was the kind of perquisite often given to a courtier. It duly resulted in Hugh marrying Burdett's widow Joyce, not later than 1497. She brought with her at least two pieces of property: one third of the manor of Arrow as her dower, and the whole of that of Ab Lench (Worcestershire) which she held for life.⁵³ Another attraction for Hugh may have been that Joyce had borne children and (in her thirties) was still young enough to do so again, but no children of the marriage are recorded and none (even a deceased one) is mentioned in Hugh's will, although he arranged for prayers for himself, Joyce, and their parents.

Hugh further exploited the situation by arranging for Joyce's daughter Anne, the heir of most of the Burdett property, to marry his younger half-brother Edward.⁵⁴ This brought Arrow and some other manors into the hands of a Conway, and a Warwickshire branch of the family was established.⁵⁵ Edward and Anne appear to have been difficult people to deal with. In 1504 they complained that Joyce had too much dower in Arrow and this was reduced, apparently without opposition by Hugh, from land worth £19 to £12.⁵⁶ In the same year there was an action for debt, either real or contrived, in which Hugh claimed one thousand marks (£666 13s. 4d.) against Edward.⁵⁷ And at about this time Edward and Anne tried to start legal proceedings in the Court of Chancery against John Curson, a feoffee (*i.e.* trustee) of the Burdett manor of Forshaw (Warwickshire), in which they claimed that Curson and Hugh were

trying to disinherit Anne of the manor.⁵⁸ It may be significant that Hugh did not mention Edward or Anne in his will, although Joyce employed Edward as an executor of hers.

The death of Elizabeth without surviving children caused potential difficulties for Hugh's possession of the eight manors conveyed to him in 1490. If the conveyance was read in one way, he had a life interest in them since he was named as a recipient of the properties. An alternative case could be made that since Elizabeth had died without issue, the lands should immediately return to the Courtenay family. The latter argument was not apparently put forward while Henry VII was alive. Until 1502 the situation was complicated by the survival of Elizabeth's sister Joan who had claims on some of the lands, and it may be that Edward Courtenay, the Earl of Devon (died 1509), did not choose to pursue the matter. He would have been aware that Conway enjoyed the favour of Henry VII, and he had the embarrassment that his own son William was imprisoned in 1502 on suspicion of treason. William had married Katherine, daughter of Edward IV and sister of Queen Elizabeth of York, and aroused fears in Henry of having designs on the crown. After 1509, however, matters changed. Henry VIII liberated William and allowed him to succeed to the earldom in 1511, although he died immediately afterwards. Katherine thereby became countess of Devon, and in 1512 Henry returned to her most of the Courtenay family estates. With her newly enhanced status and power, and perhaps suspecting that Conway had lost the royal esteem that he had received from the old king, she made an attempt to recover the properties granted in 1490, on the grounds of Elizabeth's death without issue.

The issue was put to arbitration by Richard Fox, Bishop of Winchester and keeper of the king's privy seal, Thomas Docwra, prior of the order of St John (a friend of Conway), and Lewis Pollard, serjeant-at-law. They made an award that was substantially in Hugh's favour and probably respected the fact that he had been named in the original grant. Conway was allowed to keep the three Buckinghamshire manors, including Hillesden, for the rest of his life, after which they were to revert to the Countess Katherine. The other lands were to be returned to her immediately, but she undertook to make annual payments from them to Conway until he died. The sums, as

mentioned above, were fixed at £26 16s. 11d. from Hemington, £58 0s. 3d. from the three Hampshire manors, and £92 1s. 7½d. from Sutton Courtenay. Katherine also undertook to give the settlement the highest degree of legality by securing confirmation from Parliament – implying that Hugh's tenure had not been altogether legitimate. A private act of Parliament was duly introduced in 1512, approved, and registered upon the statute roll.⁵⁹ The arrangements remained in place until Hugh's death.

Hugh's retirement from Calais in 1517, we have suggested, was due to failing health – he was probably in his seventies – and he had been ill for some time when he made his will on 12 March 1518 (new style).⁶⁰ The will shows that he still had his house at Hillesden, furnished with beds and other possessions, but he now also owned or rented one in London in the parish of St Sepulchre, a large suburban parish north west of the city walls. He may, of course, always have had a residence in or near the capital (we have encountered his links with Barnes and possibly Mark Lane), but a London house must have been particularly desirable after 1504, when he had to spend time in or travelling to Calais and wished to keep a foothold at the king's court in and around London. St Sepulchre's parish lay immediately south of the priory of the knights of St John of Jerusalem at Clerkenwell, whose prior, Thomas Docwra, had assisted Hugh in the arbitration of 1512. Accordingly Hugh requested burial in the Jesus chapel within the priory church. He bequeathed £100 for the cost of his funeral and for alms to clergy and the poor, and requested that Thomas Conway, a priest and one of his nephews, should say mass in the Jesus chapel for his soul and that of his family for three years at a salary of £6 13s. 4d.⁶¹ No reference was made to Elizabeth.

The will included gifts to five religious bodies. Three hundred pounds were left for 'the new building of the church where I was born': either Rhuddlan or perhaps Bebington (Cheshire), the parish church of Tranmere with which Hugh's mother was connected.⁶² The house of sisters at Calais received £20 in Flemish money, the priory of Breamore of which he was also 'founder' and patron £40, the prior of St John £40 partly 'towards the building of his steeple [*i.e.* tower]', and the prior of the Dominican friars of London, Robert Thompson, a sum at the discretion of Hugh's executors, Thompson having attended Conway during his illness. The other principal legacies

were those to family members and friends. Joyce his widow received all his purchased lands for her life. These lands included houses, fields, and woods that he had bought at Hillesden, Brackley (Northamptonshire), and Hartwell near Aylesbury (Buckinghamshire).⁶³ She was also awarded a debt of 500 marks owed to Hugh by Sir William Sandys, £100 worth of plate, and all Hugh's moveable goods. After her death the purchased lands were to be used by his executors to pay two priests to say mass for the souls of Hugh and Joyce and their parents; again no other wife was mentioned. Susan Savage, Joyce's goddaughter, received a bed and its apparel and £40 towards her marriage. Hugh's 'son' James, a canon of Breamore, was given £4 for a cope and a habit, and William Edgar his 'child' £10 towards his maintenance; James looks likely to have been an illegitimate son, while William may have been a young servant in Hugh's household. Richard Archbold, master of arts, received £20, and 'Sir Nicholas', Conway's steward – presumably a priest – ten marks and two pieces of plate. The 'gentlewomen' who had tended him during his illness were to be rewarded, and all his servants to have their wages for the remaining quarter of the year and for a further year after that. His executors were Prior Thomas Docwra and Hugh's relative Christopher Conway, with Sir Henry Wyatt as overseer.⁶⁴ The will was proved on 6 August 1519.

Sir Hugh died on 22 March 1518, ten days after the completion of his will.⁶⁵ Joyce survived for at least a few years. She is mentioned as holding just over £4 worth of land in Hillesden parish in 1522, part of Hugh's own purchases,⁶⁶ but it is not known whether she continued to live in the house with the permission of Katherine Countess of Devon, or removed herself to Hugh's or another house in London. She may have died by 1527–9 when Hugh's great nephew, John Conway of Rhuddlan, claimed Hugh's purchased lands as his heir and brought an action against the prior of St John, now William Weston, for refusing to yield up the title deeds of these lands which were allegedly in his keeping.⁶⁷ This action could not have succeeded, since Hugh had bequeathed the reversion of his lands to his executors, not to John Conway. Joyce was certainly dead by 24 November 1532 when Edward Conway, her son-in-law and executor, made an agreement with William Sandys, now Lord Sandys, for the repayment by instalments of the sum of 400 marks

(£266 16s. 8d.) still outstanding from Hugh's loan at an earlier date.⁶⁸

Conway's career can be summarised as an ascent to the second rank of the officers of Henry VII and Henry VIII. He never held a great office of state and was probably not involved with the formulation and execution of policy, but he seems to have been personally close to Henry VII as a member of his inner household and he held two important financial offices, that at Calais for thirteen years. Neither his contretemps with Henry in 1486 nor the allegations made against him by Flamank in 1504 appear to have undermined his reputation for loyal and efficient service. His relationship with his Courtenay wife and her family is almost unrecorded, apart from the settlements of 1490 and 1512. He patronised his own family to the extent of providing Edward with a lucrative marriage and arranging a post at Calais for Christopher by 1511, as well as the nomination of Thomas to be his chantry priest.⁶⁹ He had a probably typical mixture of good and bad relationships with his peers. Despite his alleged dislike of Lady Lucy Browne, her husband Sir Anthony bequeathed him a silver gilt standing cup in his will of 1505.⁷⁰ Hugh seems to have had more difficulty dealing with his superior officer at Calais, the deputy Sir Richard Wingfield, since he and Wingfield each complained about the other during the 1510s.⁷¹ His links with Sir William Sandys, his successor as treasurer there, on the other hand, seem to have been cordial in view of the considerable loan that he made to Sandys.

Conway and the Rebuilding of Hillesden Church

It remains to establish the responsibility of Hugh Conway for the building of the church that we see today. More accurately, this was the rebuilding of an earlier structure of which the only significant part to be retained was the tower at the west end, dating from the early fifteenth century. The rebuilding must have happened after 1493. On 16 April of that year, Nicholas Treble, the 'official' or deputy of the archdeacon of Buckingham, recorded the following information about Hillesden church in the course of making a visitation of churches in the archdeaconry. It reads in translation,

'The chancel there is ruinous in various parts, in the roof [and] in the glass of the windows. The altar there is broken so that the chaplain cannot celebrate

[mass] on account of the defect of the roofing. The abbot of Notley has to amend these enormities. Which defects themselves have already been amended, as it is said, and he was dismissed.⁷²

The record appears to be in two parts: a previous report of dilapidations and a subsequent one that they had been repaired, so that the abbot was exonerated of further work. It is impossible to equate the abbot's repairs with the grand rebuilt church that we see today. The repairs would have been sufficient to deal with the dilapidations and little more, showing that the earlier church was still in place in 1493.

There is no reason to suppose that the rebuilding was subsequently carried out by Notley Abbey. Hillesden was only one of its churches and lacked much status, since (unlike most monastic churches) the whole of its tithes were appropriated to the abbey. This meant that the church was not served by a vicar with tenure, but by a modestly paid curate or chaplain.⁷³ The abbey's attitude to the

church is probably accurately summed up by the visitation of 1493: it allowed the church to become dilapidated and only dealt with the matter when the Church authorities intervened. Moreover, the abbey was responsible solely for the upkeep of the chancel. It would have had to persuade the parishioners to fund a new nave and transepts, and this could never have produced the ambitious structure that we see. There is an equal difficulty in attributing the new church to the Courtenay family. Katherine, countess of Devon, regained the manor in 1518 and held it until her death in 1527, but her recorded activities centre on the royal court and, to a greater extent, on her estates in Devon, especially Tiverton.⁷⁴ Her property (including Hillesden) then passed to her son Henry, Marquess of Exeter, who owned it until his execution by Henry VIII in January 1539, but his life appears to have been chiefly spent at houses in London and at West Horsley (Surrey).⁷⁵ Hillesden was a distant and outlying piece of Courtenay property. With only

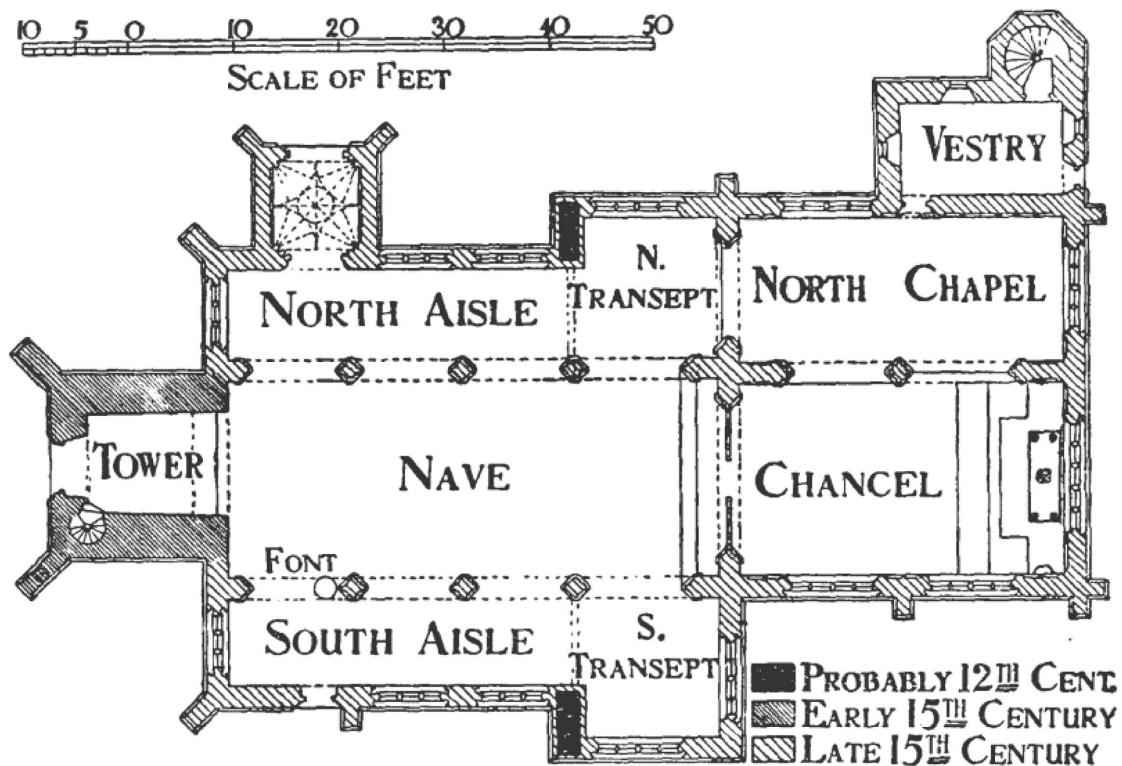


FIGURE 1 Plan of Hillesden Church (after *Victoria County History*)

three manors in Buckinghamshire, the family had neither resources nor reasons to build up a presence and power base in the county.⁷⁶ After 1539 the manor of Hillesden remained in the hands of the crown until 1547, when it was granted to Thomas Denton.⁷⁷ No one in or after 1547 would have built an ambitious church for Catholic worship, so the Denton family must also be excluded.

Hugh Conway's claim to consideration is much stronger; indeed he is the only person who can be conceived of as inaugurating a large building project at Hillesden. He was in possession of the manor for the twenty-five years that followed 1493, and had a furnished residence there from at least 1500 until 1518. He left only a widow and no children, and no responsibility can be attached to her. He was a wealthy man: his income, as we have seen, was over £300 a year, and a man who could lend 500 marks to Sir William Sandys was able to dispose of ready money. However, the argument in

favour of Conway's role at Hillesden is not based simply on the elimination of the other candidates, but on the choice of the site for building a church and probably a new manor house. Today the place seems an isolated one to select, the church not even lying on a through road but at the end of a cul-de-sac. The decision to build at Hillesden was dictated by Conway's personal circumstances, which apply to no other potential candidate. He was cash-rich but poor in the number of his estates, which were mainly confined to the eight manors of the Courtenay conveyance. Five of these were a long way from London and unsuitable places for a courtier to put down roots, making the three Buckinghamshire properties the best options in this respect, being the nearest to the capital.

Of the three, Wavendon, although close to the great artery of Watling Street, was too small to support Sir Hugh's dignity. That left the choice between Hillesden and Waddesdon. Hugh's



FIGURE 2 Hillesden church, south side (*photo: Vicki Harding*)

preference for the former cannot now be explained. He may have been swayed by the site – the presence of buildings and other amenities – or by its access to places elsewhere. It was close to Buckingham: not an important town in the early sixteenth century, since the county centre was Aylesbury and Buckingham did not send members to Parliament until 1529, but a market town providing goods and services. Hillesden also had better communications than it seems to possess today, since it lay just off the main road between Buckingham and Aylesbury which, until the eighteenth century, ran via East Claydon, further west than the modern route. This road would have enabled Hugh and his retinue to ride to Aylesbury and thence to London, or via Buckingham to the Midlands, to which Hillesden was closer than Waddesdon. An alternative, longer journey could be made via Buckingham to Watling Street at Stony Stratford or Bletchley, from whence there was a straight Roman road to London and the Midlands. Whichever way he went, he could have reached the capital under good conditions in two days at most, with an overnight stop on the way.

Hugh may have begun to build a residence at Hillesden as soon as he gained possession of the manor in about 1490,⁷⁸ and in due course it took the shape of a substantial dwelling house on the east side of the church. The house must have been either greatly improved by Conway from an earlier manorial centre or, very likely, built afresh in the early Tudor style. He probably also laid out the deer-park, first mentioned in 1547.⁷⁹ Unfortunately nothing about the house has survived or been recorded, apart from two elements yet to be mentioned. It was burnt during the Civil War in 1644 and its replacement was demolished in the 1810s.⁸⁰ Hugh seems to have envisaged rebuilding the church as well: if not when he started on the manor house, at least before he finished it. This deduction may be made because the house was not apparently given a private chapel; instead, it will be argued, the chapel was provided as part of the rebuilt church, which enabled it to be larger and more magnificent than could be easily contained within a house. Very likely, Conway took the view that a new church would enhance his house, whereas the old one may have been modest and had certainly been in a poor state recently, reducing the impact of his house.

It was common for a manor house to adjoin a church and for the owner of the house to take an

interest in the church building and, sometimes, to enhance it. At Hillesden, however, the rebuilt house and church did not merely form a pair of structures; they were actually joined by a bridge from the house to a two-storey block on the north-east side of the church, north of the north chancel chapel. Bridges between houses and churches or chapels appear to have been fashionable at this time, no doubt reflecting rising expectations of comfort, although they rarely survive today. One, undatable but apparently made of wood, connected the manor house and church at Morley (Derbyshire).⁸¹ Another, described as ‘a gallery of timber’, was commissioned by Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, between 1512 and 1521 to give passage from the back of his great house at Thornbury (Gloucestershire) to the north side of the adjacent parish church.⁸² A third example, linking the hall with the sacristy and chapel of Merton College (Oxford), was built by Warden Richard Rawlyns between 1509 and 1521, made of stone and probably for his own use,⁸³ but the Hillesden bridge is likely to have been wooden as in the first two cases.

Crossing the bridge from the manor house allowed access to the upper level of the two-storey block on the north side of the church. The arch of the doorway to the bridge and the hinges of its door still survive inside this upper storey. The storey consists of a room lit by one single and two double windows, containing on its south wall a recess pierced by a row of small apertures that look into the church. These apertures are about 76cm (30 inches) above the original floor level, and would have allowed someone standing, sitting, or kneeling on a *prie-dieu* to observe the celebration of mass at the high altar of the church or at the altar of the north chancel chapel, as well as commanding views into the nave. A spiral staircase descends from the upper room to a lower one on the ground floor which has small windows placed high up and appears to have been a vestry or vestibule. It contains doors to the church on the south and to the outside on the east, and would have enabled the lord and lady of the manor to pass into the church via the bridge and upper floor, or their retainers to enter at ground level.

Upper rooms of the Hillesden kind were often provided in great houses in proximity to domestic chapels. They were known as closets, and were used by nobility and gentry (especially women)



FIGURE 3 Hillesden church, north and west faces of the closet and vestry block
(photo: Vicki Harding)

to pray in private, to observe mass in the chapel below, or to do private tasks such as reading letters untroubled by servants passing through a room.⁸⁴ The upper storey at Hillesden may be interpreted in this way, and the adjoining chapel north of the chancel as the private chapel of the manor as much as a chapel of the church. This chapel is likely to have been separated from the rest of the church by parclose screens and to have been accessible only to the Conways and their servants, the latter of whom may have entered it

via the exterior door in the vestry or vestibule. The chapel should not be termed a chantry chapel because no permanent endowment was ever made for a chantry priest to function there, but Hugh may have employed a chaplain to celebrate mass in the chapel, especially when he or his wife was in residence.⁸⁵ His steward in 1518 was a priest.⁸⁶ It may therefore be argued that Conway's closet and private chapel survive within the church, as opposed to occupying their usual place in the manor house. In consequence they form one of



FIGURE 4 Interior of Hillesden church looking north, showing the north chapel, the door to the closet and vestry block, and above it the windows giving a view from the closet into the church (*photo: Vicki Harding*)

the best surviving pairs of such buildings – a fact that has not hitherto been noticed.

Given the lack of documentation about the church's building and early history, one can only speculate about the other features of the church as they were planned and would have been in the early sixteenth century. The layout consists of chancel and nave, north and south nave aisles, north and south transepts at the east ends of the aisles, and

the north chancel chapel with the private block to its north.⁸⁷ Chancel and nave were divided by a rood screen, part of which survives, as does a portion of the screen of the north chapel. Although that chapel was probably wholly screened, it may also have served as a Lady Chapel since the north side was a common location for such a chapel in a parish church. The transepts may have served as similar chapels defined by screens and containing



FIGURE 5 The north wall of the north chapel, showing the door to the closet and vestry block and the windows of the closet, partly blocked by the later monument above the door. (photo: Vicki Harding)

altars, one of which may have been dedicated to St Nicholas in view of the scenes from his life in the east window of the south transept. The carvings of angels below the ceiling of the chancel have been compared with those in St Mary's church, Warwick.⁸⁸ Should this comparison be relevant, it might be an additional pointer to Conway, since his wife's manor of Arrow was about twelve miles west of Warwick, and he would have known

Warwick Church from his visits to the town as a justice of the peace. If Conway was responsible for honouring St Nicholas in the church (rather than the saint's cult being of earlier origin), he may have hoped to father children or to survive sea journeys (the saint's specialities), but we cannot know. The presence of his coat of arms in the building would be expected, and as this does not survive in the stonework, it may have been placed

in the east window of the chancel and perhaps in more than one form: the arms of Conway, Conway impaling Courtenay, and Conway impaling Joyce's family arms or those of her first husband. It is also possible to conceive of an image of Conway's name saint St Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, because the surviving fragments of original glass include parts of some bishops. A church of the early sixteenth century would also have included seating, no doubt allocated according to social status, while Sir Hugh and his lady had their own reserved spaces in the closet or the north chapel.

Conway, then, had a positive reason to build at Hillesden that nobody else would have shared. He wanted the country seat appropriate to a knight of the king's household, to signal his wealth and status. At first he may even have hoped to keep or buy the Courtenay lands and to bequeath them to a child or other relation. After 1504 his pattern of living changed. His presence in Calais required a house in London, to keep him in touch with the royal court and administration while providing easier access to France. Not surprisingly, he seems to have shifted his religious interests from Hillesden to London and Calais, although he kept his country house until his death. He failed to acquire any heirs in Buckinghamshire to keep alive his memory, and thought himself more likely to be remembered in the priory of the Knights of St John in London than at Hillesden. His will contains no mention of Hillesden Church, but that was not necessary. He did not own the church, he had put it into an excellent order already, and he did not actually feel moved to give a legacy to any of the churches on his lands. The period in which his life centred on Buckinghamshire was probably fairly brief, between about 1496 and 1504, which is perhaps when the church was built. In turn this brevity explains why he has left so little trace of himself at Hillesden, and has fallen out of the memory to which this paper seeks to restore him.

Sir Hugh Conway's Will

This is transcribed from The National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/19/289. Capital letters, word breaks, and punctuation have been modernised. Abbreviations are expanded in italics, and inadvertent scribal repetitions omitted.

In the name of God, amen. The xijth day of the moneth of Marche the yere of oure Lorde God ml

cccc and xvijth [1518, new style] and in the ixth yere of the reigne of Kyng Henry the eyght, I, Sir Hughe Conway, knyght, beyng hole of mynde and in perfite remembrance, laude and praysyng be vnto almyghty God, make, ordeine, and dispose this my present testament as well to the disposicion of all my goodes, moveable catalles, and dettes, whate so euer they be, as of my purchase landes within the realme of Englonde in maner and forme followyng, that is [to] wytt: First I bequethe and recommend my soule vnto almyghty God my maker and redemer, to the most glorious virgine his mother Oure Lady Seint Mary, and to all the holy and blessyd company of hevyn, and my body to be buried within the newe chapell of *Jesus* within the place of Seint Johnes Jer[usa]ll[e]m in Englonde. Item I will that an hundreth poundes sterling or more or lesse shal be bestowed aboute my buryng and in almes amonges religious people and other poore people after the discrecion of myn executours. Item I bequeth to the highe aulter of Seint Sepulcres of London wherunto I am parisshener for my tythes and oblacions by me necligently forgotten or withholden, such somme of money as by myn executours shal be thought convenient and nedfull. Item I bequeth towardes the performyng and fynysshing of the newe buyldyng of the churche where I was borne, ccc poundes sterlinges or more or lesse as nede shall require. Item I bequethe to the place of susters within the towne of Calais of the ordre of Seint Fraunces which is of my foundacion, xx li Flemysse. Item I woll that Sir Thomas Conway, clerke, shall syng and saye for my soule, my frendes soules, and all *Christen* soules by the space of three yeris complete within the forsaid chapell of *Jesus*. Item I will that he shall haue yerely for his salary tenne markes sterlinges. Item I woll that my lady my wif shall haue to hir and hir assignes duryng hir lyf naturall all my purchase landes and tenementes within the realme of Englonde, and after the deceas of hir I will that the same landis and tenementes shal be applyed and be at the disposicion of myne executours towardis the salary and fyndyng of twoo prestis to syng and saye for my soule, my wifys soule, our father and mother soules, and all *Christen* soules for euermore. Item I bequethe to my said lady fyve hundrethe marke sterling which Sir William Sandes is indetted and owithe vnto me for the which he stoundeth bounde vnto me by seuerall obligacions, and oon hundreth ponde in plate and iiij beddes of downe with their apparell as they

nowe stonde and be within my place of Hilsedon *with* all other my goodes moveable within the same place, excepte the plate and iuelles within the place, and also my bedd the which I lye in within my place in London, with all the apparell that belongeth to the same; one of the which fyve beddes I will that Susane Savaige, my ladies goddoughter, shall haue with all his apparell, such as yt shall please hir to gyve. Item I bequeth to Maister Richard Archebold, maister of arte, towardes his exhibucion, xx li sterlinges. Item I bequeth to the same Susane towardes hir mariage, forty poundes. Item I bequeth to the house of chanons of Brommere in the countie of Southampton, forty poundes. Item to my sonne Sir Jamys, chanon of the same place, for a coope and an abbett for hymself, iiii li sterlinges. Item I bequethe to euery maner *seruante* that I haue at the houre of my dethe their quarters wages now due at Our Ladye Day next comyng, and also I will that euery of them shall haue a yeris wages after that. Item I will and bequethe to Sir Nicholas my stywarde, tenne markes sterlinges, a goblet of siluer, and a pounced pece. Item I woll that all my gentilwomen and all other that haue had busynes aboute me at suche tyme as I ley syke be rewarded by the discrecion of myne executours. Item I bequethe to the prior of the Freris Prechiours of London for his laboure and attendance such rewarde as by myne executours shal be thought convenient. Item I bequethe to William Edgare my childe towardes his exhibucion, x poundes sterlinges. Item I woll that all my debtis and dueties the which I owe of very right or conscience to any maner of persone or persones be well and truely contented and satisfied by myne executours. The residue of all my goodes, catalles, and debtes after my debtes paid, my funeralles charges doon, and thise my legacies and bequestes expressed in this my present testament fulfilled and perfourmed, I will that it shal be disposed by the discrecion of myne executours in werkes of mercy and charite, and of th'execution of this my present testament and last will I make and ordeine Sir Thomas Docwra, lord prior of Seynt Johnes Jer[usa]ll[e]m in England and Cristofer Conwaye myne executours. Item I bequethe to the said lorde of Seint Johnes for his labour in that behalf and towardes the buyldyng of his steple, xl li sterlinges. Item I bequeth to Christofor Conway for his laboure in that behalf, twenty li sterlinges. And of the ovirsight of the execucion of this my present testament and last

will I make and ordeine Syr Henry Wyott, knyght, overseer. And I will that he haue suche rewarde for his laboure as by myne executours shal be thought convenient. In wytnesse wherof I haue subscribed this my present testament with myne owne hande the day and yere aboue wryten, thise wytnes: Frire Robert Tompson, doctor of diuinitie and prior of Friers Prechiours of London, and William Kene, *seruaunt* vnto John Wilford, notarij.

[The will was proved on 6 August 1519, and the administration committed to Sir Thomas Docwra and Christopher Conway.]

References

1. I am very grateful for the advice and help of Professors Ralph Griffiths, Steven Gunn, Michael Hicks, and Nigel Saul, Drs John Broad, David Grummitt, and Robert Peberdy, and Ms Julia Wise (Buckingham CC) during the research for and writing of this article.
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 64. The only known Christopher of the right date in Hugh’s family was a son of his half-brother Piers (Bartrum, *Welsh Genealogies*, 329), but that son was a cleric which Hugh’s executor seems not to have been.
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 69. On Christopher Conway, see *LPFD*, i part i, 461–2; ii part i, 552.
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84. M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven and London, 1978), 56; K. Robinson, 'In Chapels, Oratories or other Suitable Places in their Houses': religious routines and the residences of greater medieval households', in M. Airs and P.S. Barnwell (eds), *The Medieval Great House* (Donington, 2011), 171–99 at 188–91.
85. A chaplain named Reginald Shepley is mentioned as serving in the church alongside the parish chaplain in 1522, at the above-average salary of £7. He may have been a fixed-term chantry priest celebrating mass for Conway and paid by the executors, or have had some other origin (*The Certificate of Musters*, ed. Chibnall, 52).
86. Above, p. 11.
87. HER, MBC 7225. There are descriptions in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Buckinghamshire*, 2 vols (London, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England)), ii, 146–50, and *VCH Buckinghamshire*, iv, 177–80.
88. Pevsner & Williamson, *Buckinghamshire*, 398–9.