

## THE BRAYS v. THE LACYS; A CREWKERNE AFFRAY AND ITS SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CONTEXT

BY MARCUS BARRETT

'They wanted brave young yeomen who'd been used to mow and reap,  
Rose rather to see the sun git up, not lie a-bed asleep.  
I war never used to fight, I said, T'were what I cudden do.  
Well. Mother said, if dissen goo they'll call thee coward too.'

The summer of 1529 was not a quiet one at the Easthams mansion-house of Sir Edmund, later Baron Bray. On 5 June twenty-five named men and two named women with over forty others, forced their way in to the lord's estate lands and even his house itself.

'With divers other rittours and mysruled persons to the number of 60 persons and above . . . unlawfully assembelyd, riottusly and in the maner of warre, arrayed with swerdis, bucklers, bowes, arrowis, billis staffys and schorte daggers, in grete rowtis . . . in to the said maner, riottusly and with force enteryd'<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines the circumstances of what was an unusual outbreak of revolt near a normally peaceable town. This Crewkerne affray is unique for two reasons. The skirmishes themselves are documented in remarkable detail by the participants' own testimony to the Court of the Star Chamber. Furthermore, the cases exist alongside other extant sources which are sufficient to allow the reconstruction of a fascinating picture of a sixteenth-century community and its difficulties.

Lord Bray, although both rich and powerful, was not a local and yet he spent upwards of ten years in litigation to retain this remote manor, his case only ultimately closing with his death in 1539. The Baron Bray was essentially a London man and knew little of small-town west country politics. The family link with this three-hundred acre estate was not a long one. Indeed, why Bray's uncle, Sir Reginald, should ever have originally chosen Easthams is a mystery. It was a decision which, within twenty years his heir, Edmund Bray, may well have been regretting in the comfortless corridors of the Court of Star Chamber, the place to which he had been forced to protect himself from the one particular local family, the Lacys.

We know, sadly, little about the Lacys. From the cases it seems they were minor gentry or perhaps a rather downwardly-mobile landed family, as time progressed they were described simply in terms of their trades. Even around 1511 whomever they were, they were a force enough to remove Edmund Bray from his uncle's manor and retain it themselves. John Lacy, then head of the family, feeling sufficiently secure to appoint clergymen to the small (now lost) estate chapel both in 1517 and 1525.<sup>3</sup> Pride, however, preceded the fall and John Lacy's luck was to run out with his death in 1529. The old man's tenacity of old John Lacy did not long outlive the man himself, by the end of that year the younger Bray had returned to his manor.

If the yeoman's death was a blessing for Bray it must also have been a catalyst for the two would-be Lacy beneficiaries. In 1529 shortly after John Lacy's death and Bray's return,

the frustrated local family again took the law into their own hands. The Lacys were clearly not a family reticent to protect their interests, after their rapid eviction, Thomas, the son, and James, the grandson, were planning forcefully to reclaim the manor—a plan which they shortly and spectacularly achieved. Having lost his uncle's bequeathed lands for the second time, Lord Bray looked to the law himself and brought a succession of actions before the reformed Court of Star Chamber, beginning the long process of redress which became the cases of *Braye v. Pecher* (1531) and *Braye v. Lacy* (1531–9).

What had forced Bray to litigation? Ironically it was the Lacys' blatant charge of tactic—to direct action: The armed assembly of sixty and more locals which presented itself at the manor-house was no mere protest, having broken into Bray's grounds the band:

'then and ther assautyd, manassid and threte one John Cornysche . . . and hem expellyd and with force put of and frome the saide maner, and with therof utterly with force riottously disseissid your saide subjecte . . .' (p. 112)

What had until then for the Lacys been a matter for successive litigation was now beyond due legal process. The act was a decisive, swift and bold one. The first-named victim, Cornish, was a clerk and priest to Bray, possibly himself from gentlemanly stock.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this act itself tells us much about the rioters' priorities.

Considering the long history of the issues at dispute it is perhaps unsurprising that the Lacy mob were in no mood for conciliation. When Bray brought the rebels to court in 1531 the dispute was already fifty years old; contention as to ownership of Easthams went back to events in the late fifteenth century. At some point between 1479 and 1493, one John Hayes marched on the manor leading a contingent of royal troops ultimately bound for Crewkerne. Hayes took Easthams for the Crown, though it appears this was never originally intended. We know that Hayes was 'Receiver' for the western counties under Richard III; because of its Courtenay leadership, Crewkerne itself had changed ownership during the Wars of the Roses and may well have been seen as unsettled territory, hence the impromptu camp at Easthams. We can see, therefore, how Easthams and its area were in uncertain times even during the late 1400s; long before the Brays came, the manorial lordship had been the subject of prior dispute. The military takeover by Hayes had lasted certainly until 1493 when the soldier-administrator had appointed a priest to Easthams chapel. However, within seven years the whole estate was held by two widowed sisters, Joan and Anne Copplestone. Only after the demise of the Copplestones was the way open for the rich Sir Reynold (or Reginald) Bray to buy the manor for £93. 6s. 8d. With the coming of Bray local tensions concerning ownership of Easthams, already simmering for years, began to boil. Before Hayes arrived the then owner and last of his line, John Sinclair, had settled the whole estate on local trustees, in 1479. Sinclair aimed to safeguard the estate after his own death by appointing such grantees as William Poulet from the rising Hinton St George family nearby. Hayes' coming and then the fast turnover of ownership leading to the Brays meant Sinclair's trust was mistakenly and unlawfully abandoned. Bray, the grand new buyer, however, was sufficiently bothered about those old loose-ends that he tried (unsuccessfully) to secure the necessary formalities from Hayes himself.

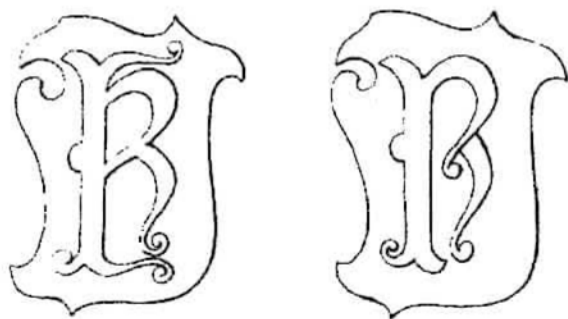
The new owner, Sir Reginald Bray, was a man of high government office and even something of a king-maker of his day. The events of the Lancastrian victory in which Captain Hayes had been involved, were echoing again at Easthams: as Steward to Margaret, Countess of Richmond, Bray senior was given credit for bringing about the marriage of her son, Henry, to the Princess Elizabeth, thereby achieving a union between the fighting houses of Lancaster and York. Bray himself was certainly valued by Henry VII who created him a Knight of the Garter and gave him control of all Crown investment in buildings across the realm. It was work in which the energetic Sir Reginald excelled until just months before his death in August 1503. What is perhaps most intriguing about this man of action is quite

why, during the last two years of his life, he chose Easthams with its estate and mansion-house tucked away in its quiet backwater of the Crewkerne parish.

Like his uncle, Edmund too was known in royal circles and was a statesman of some standing. He was a minister to Henry VII and baron of Parliament from 1529—a year which otherwise brought him more than a few little *local* difficulties. Edmund, later Lord Bray, was not to enjoy 'quiet possession' of his uncle's estate for very long for he soon began defending himself against numerous simultaneous, determined legal actions. By 1510 he was already facing the blight of defending his manor against members of his own family who claimed an interest. The resolution of this is not known but what followed was something far more explosive and which was to become a running dispute between two tenacious nephews of two dead men.

Old John Lacy was a disaffected yeoman. It first fell to him to attempt the restoration of the family's fortunes by claiming Easthams back. When Hayes' forces had moved upon the manor-house in the late 1400s they had only compounded an existing problem. John Lacy claimed descent from John Sinclair's family and sought to capitalise on the extra confusion brought about by the martial invasion. At some point, probably while Hayes himself controlled the estate, the link with the Sinclair family and its trusts were lost, hence Edmund Bray was logically the next focal point for the Lacy repossession campaign. The Lacys first came against the Brays under the leadership of old John, however, what form this challenge took in the early 1500s is now lost. John Lacy's main argument seems to have been that he had been 'disseised' or dispossessed of family lands by the soldier, Hayes.

After John's death and Sir Edmund's return to Easthams the Lacys were next to act with an audacity which characterises the local spirit in these cases; the new generation of Lacy men re-took the mansion-house before the year was out. Bray must have been furious, after winning back his lands from old John he had lost them yet again. But fury was not alone in his thoughts, Bray considered the mob not only to present imminent physical danger but also a threat to public order in the area—to other men in a similar position to himself. His worries are plain from the application he made to the Star Chamber. This latest invasion was, 'a most perlyos example [to] all other lyke offenders' It was certainly perilous for Bray's latest chaplain, John Cornish, who found himself immediately and literally ejected from his living. We know Cornish survived the alarming experience, living as he did to witness the will of a fellow cleric at the safe distance of Wells in 1530.<sup>5</sup> Cornish was easy pickings for the angry rebels, the message, however, from the Easthams mob was clear to more than merely the bruised chaplain: it was a symbolic act of defiance and a particular one of retribution. The Lacys, having come thus far were determined to stay with:



"A man of high office—even a king-maker";  
shields in memory of Sir Reginald Bray—St George's Chapel, Windsor.

'possession of the same maner . . . from ther said forcible entre, have kepte and yet do keep with force, to the grete loose of your saide subjecte and danger of disheryson [of] the saide maner . . .' (p. 113)

Bray was to take over nine years successfully to prosecute his case at Westminster, but then he did face other calls upon his time: in the same year as the latest overthrow of his mansion-house he was called to Parliament and made a baron. He was, it seems, rather more popular in London than Crewkerne. When Bray's response to the defiant Lacys finally came, the lord sought a writ of subpoena against the leading rebels, summoning them to appear at court and explain themselves with 'ryghte and goode conciens'.

The initial response came from four of the accused, their attitude speaks for itself. In terms of what they told the court, it is a very different story from that of the absent baron. The charge of illegal behaviour by William Pecher, Nicholas Mitchell, Thomas Hanning and John Giles, is not only denied but refuted with an alternative account of events. Contrary to Lord Bray's version, they claimed, it was the servants of the baron himself who:

'with the under sheryffe of Somerset and Dorset came [on] the same daye. mencyonyd in the saide bill of compleynt, to Crokehorne in the same countye of Somer[set] and ther requyrid the seyde William Pecher, baylyff of Crokehorne forseyd and one William Glover, constable of the same towne, to goo with theym to Estham and see the kynges peace kept. . . . ' (p. 113)

They claimed to have returned innocently with Bray's desperate servants to the manor where they heard the under sheriff read a declaration of riot. We do not know exactly what the sheriff said, to whom he said it or even how many he addressed by that stage in the day. All the case tells us, rather tantalisingly, is that the paper was read 'openly', suggesting some public gathering of persons.

Not willingly seen to abandon his duty, William Pecher—who was actually the Crewkerne bailiff—then asked the sheriff whether the order which had just been read to the assembled horde was 'suffycient and of auctoyte or naye', to which he received the curious and equivocal answer that the sheriff himself 'knew nott, nether cowde tell theym whether it was suffycient or naye . . .'. We do not know at what stage this remarkable indecision arose but its effect on any grumbling crowd of malcontents can be imagined. Pecher *et al* were men of authority and power, why were they vacillating at such a time, when if Bray himself or even his Easthams servants are to be believed the mob was growing more and more restless for action? Pecher then admits that he decided to leave the scene. We are left with the knowledge that after asking the sheriff if they had done all they could—or perhaps more accurately, *should*—'apon that they departed . . .'

That there was something going on between these 'gentlemen' and the rioters themselves, Bray himself knew. He indicted more members of the local gentry as time went on. The lord was clearly intent on bringing an action in London which would cover a large multitude of disorderly sins—yet still Pecher, Mitchell, Hanning and Giles distance themselves from all allegations.

'every of them saithe that as to ony ryott, unlawfull assembly, unlawfull procurement, mayntenaunce, resistaunce, contempt, disobedyens or of any other mysdemeanor by them as the same complaynaunte hathe summytyd to be done contrarye to the kynges pease, they be not therof gyltye in maner and forme . . . [are] redy to averre and proue . . . that they maye be dismyst with ther reasonable costes and charges wrongfully systeynd in this behaffe'

So Bray had accused them not simply of a conspiracy with the local rioters but also 'procurement and maintenance'. Yet both the defendants and their lawyers stood up to these allegations with a self-confidence, denying everything, putting their own story forward and even

asking for legal costs against Bray for wasting their time. But there was to be a division in the tactics of the rebels and 'tactics' we must surely call them, for as the cases unfold it becomes clear that the storming of Bray's mansion in 1529 and again later was not sudden and instantaneous but rather had been well thought-out, with all the players taking different roles and employing different justifications for their part.

After Bray had heard what Bailiff Pecher had to say, we next hear of the rioters from the prolonged case of *Braye v Lacy* which ran for nearly a decade. Now Bray had the middle-ranking instigators firmly in his sights. He was learning from his own mistakes, claiming that he was actually the victim of a series of armed attacks. There had, he said, been:

'dyvers riotis and forcibles entres haue byn lately made by enter ynto the seide manor and keyping off possession theroff . . .' (p. 114)

We now see a picture of what had been happening at Easthams since the younger Lacys took-up the fight in 1529. Whether Bray ever actually regained temporary possession of his house and lands between 1529–31 is unclear. What is certain is that once the initial violence had occurred, the locals became confident and experienced trespassers. Bray's tone became one of heightened alarm:

'dyuerse assaultes and affrayes made uppou the seruantes off your seid orator . . . [by] dyuers other persons by [Lacy's] commaundment . . .' (p. 114)

Lacy had consolidated his strength and advantage. The case itself became the thrust and parry of struggle between these two men, Baron Bray and Yeoman Lacy, both claiming birth-right to Easthams. After the first case, when Bray brought Crewkerne's law officers to book for their incompetence or worse, collusion, the Easthams lord managed to apprehend a quantity of the more minor players in the rebellion. Lacy's followers evidently did not all share in his good luck:

'[certain] off the seid offenders apperyd and were commyttyd to ward fer their offence'

While Pecher and his civic friends survived the legal process to thrive again, it seems some of those who did appear for the summons in London in that earlier case were not much believed by the court. Still, though, the central problem for Bray was left unaddressed: Lacy was at the mansion-house despite the interim order that the lord of the manor should be allowed to return. The rebels were by now ensconced at the highly defensible manor-house, capping its small but steep and easily defensible hill. They held a house surrounded by its own rich and productive estate with excellent visibility over conquered pasturelands, which no doubt their kinsmen continued to work. The Lacys' group were amply sheltered and kept in fuel and foods by the local woods, estate mills and river. As appears from their responses the rebels had confidence in their coup.

The Lord Bray's patience was, however, not inexhaustible. Having the law now firmly on his side in the form of an interim warrant for abatement and recovery, he took action in the summer of 1530. A party of pro-Bray 'frendes and seruantes' assembled outside the manor grounds, the sheriff of Somerset was called again to vouch for the peacefulness of the intended recovery, in line with an express provision of the Star Chamber decree. That such an emphasis was placed on the desired peacefulness of the action tells us quite how contrary the previous meetings between these two sides must have been. It becomes increasingly difficult to establish which side employed more brute force. Yet even in 1530 Lacy and his rebels still wanted to be seen keeping honour amid the disorder, despite the clear instruction from the Star Chamber to leave Easthams forthwith. Lacy was ready for the baron's sinister-sounding 'friends' and, if the lord's account is to be believed, had already taken steps further to secure his continued possession.

Thus in 1530 the two sides met again. It was by now a familiar charge, the Bray contin-





“The Rebels held a house surrounded by its own rich and productive estate—with excellent visibility over conquered pasturelands.”

gent met with a horde of obstructing locals. In a band which reads rather like the roll-call from *Widdecombe Fayre*, there was William Lawrence, Andrew Sadler, Thomas Twight (the younger) Thomas Brown and:

‘dyuers othe[r] yvelle dysposed persons, riotusly assemblyed . . . to the number off a hundred persons . . . by the commaundment, procurement, advyse, mayntenaunce and councill off oon Richard Pycher and John Dabney . . .’ (p. 115)

The rebel band had clearly gained more support than its already impressive sixty from the 1529 invasion. What of the new names? If ‘Richard Pycher’ was other than a mistake for the same Pecher as before—the bailiff—then we begin to see the first evidence of inter-family links and loyalties which become stronger as the cases unfold. Now numbering over one hundred not only did the rebels have quantity on their side, now they had quality too. The name of ‘Dabney’ was suffixed ‘gentleman’ confirming his links with a very influential local family. Indeed, with Pecher, Daubeney was now seen by the Bray camp as being one of the ringleaders of the mob.

The family of Daubeney from which ‘Dabney’ came were already rather grand in Somerset by the sixteenth century. As Lord Bridgwater, it was a Daubeney who had made national fame in the Lancastrian cause and put down many westcountry risings. Later Daubeneyes were responsible for the building of Barrington Court and the so-called King Ina’s Palace at nearby South Petherton, moves which further stamped the Daubeney name on Somerset’s history. Despite a presence in Somerset since at least the 1200s, by the sixteenth century they had become seriously influential. They were, as Dr Dunning has termed them, ‘new gentry’.<sup>6</sup> At the time of our John Daubeney there were other members of the family as lords

of the manor at Wayford and South Petherton and with connections at Perrott. Here, therefore, we see the trace of something calculated and perhaps unnerving for the otherwise powerful Lord Bray; not merely a local rabble on the rampage but something far worse, a fully orchestrated revolt led by men with respected local pedigrees. Indeed, that the Daubeney of this case and his companions were men of substance, is illustrated by their next move. Facing *lawful* eviction at the hands of a large band of Bray followers, the rebels decided boldly to bring the mechanisms of the law back to their own side:

'not therwith contentyd, the seid riotus persons by the counsell off the seid Thomas Lacy, Richard Pychar and John Dabney, have caused a sessions of the pece to be somonyd at Yvelchester . . . on Tuysday next.' (p. 115)

The Easthams rabble were not, then, all ruffian peasants against their manorial lord as Bray might have preferred to portray in his pleadings. Daubeney and the Pechers were intent on using their influence for the Lacys' sakes. We see that the Crewkerne bailiff and constable were not perhaps as ineffectual as they first seemed—the prevarication was *intentional*. The rebel-leaders' thinking becomes even more apparent as Bray's legal challenge in London continues its piecemeal narrative. One can sense the disbelief which Bray must have felt at the disintegration of his country estate, especially when the Lacy mob used the local courts to block the baron's repossession. At Ilchester, he claimed, the Lacys even tried:

'Their untruely to endyte the seruantes of your said orator [i.e. Bray] off forcible entre uppon the stute of anno octavio and their to have [a] wrytte off restitution contrary to the order and decree theroff made yn your ster chamber by the lordes of your most honorable counsell . . . [it would be] to the most perlyos example of all other lyke offenders, yff due punyshment be not theroff hadd . . . ' (pp. 115–6)

It was perhaps an ungentlemanly ingenuity but one which the Lord Bray could not but fear. If successful this legal gamble by Lacy would be highly damaging. If men like Bray could not enforce the justice of the Star Chamber against the very social disorder which it was now supposed, as a reformed institution, to crush, what hope had lesser gentry with fewer influential supporters? If the minor local courts and justices were allowed to inhibit the Star Chamber's work, landholders like Bray were impotent. Hence Lord Bray issued another request to the Westminster court, the summons of more rebels, this time including the lesser but now identifiable figures who had helped to halt his advance. It is telling that Bray's legal request for explanations from the locals met a ready response. After a patter of the usual, standard form lawyerly rebuttals, the alternative explanation of events came forth. The whole misunderstanding was caused, the rebels claimed, because:

'the seid complenaut [Lord Bray] sent to the maner of Estham . . . the number of a xyj riotuse and yldisposed persons . . . the whiche were arrayed in werleke mener leke men redy to batell and fight and so . . . to brake the house and mancion of Estham and some other of thym enterid intot he seid maner in other plases . . . ' (p. 116)

This explanation fits with Daubeney's idea to sue Bray for aggravated trespass. But a change in style rather than substance soon became apparent. A distance seemed to be appearing between the lesser local rebels and the grand plan of the Lacys. The old Lacy self-righteousness and dignity was being subverted by the other rebels for something far more applicable to themselves. Theirs was not the injured attitude or the indignant disbelief that the Lacys were cultivating before the courts; the Crewkerne locals needed an excuse far more believable from their own standpoint. They could, after all, hardly claim the great grievance from that same family dispute which fired-up the Lacys. The locals needed something far more tangible to offer their lordships at the Bench. Those rustics who did travel to Westminster in their own defence, therefore, implored their judges to believe the inno-

cence of simple, harmless and instinctive actions. They told a story of how Thomas Twight, William Lawrence, young Andrew Sadler's father and other among their number held:

'parcell of landes of Estham [off] of the Thomas Lasy ... at his will and pleasure, beryng and paying hym yerely the rent ... as yt is worth ...' (p. 116)

Naturally, therefore, when hearing of the approaching Bray troops they assumed their livestock, grazing nearby, to be in very real danger of being seized for security against the incumbent Lacys. They were not amassed to cause any trouble, they claimed, but merely to ensure their own livestock were not mistaken for the Lacys'. Their argument, in effect, was that they were guilty only of the protection of their private property—assets in their purest form near a thriving sixteenth-century market town: livestock in the field.

We begin to see the extent of the self-interest among these men, they are no longer merely the 'diverse riotous persons' but instead a cross-section of a thriving rural community, connected through the lands they worked. Andrew Sadler 'had pasturing upon the same londes dyurs bestes as keyn and other bestes', William Lawrence had sufficient cattle for him to be worried when they were 'taken' by Lord Bray's men, Thomas Twight worries about his cattle when they are promptly seized and William Partridge was certainly out to protect the place where he 'have home his cattal'. While Lacy and the other leaders were at Ilchester trying to fine Bray for trespass, the local farmers were busy showing how Bray was ruining their living. The collective theme was to portray Lacy as *de facto* lord of the manor while simultaneously distancing the locals from the legal quarrel. It seems the Easthams locals were out simply to paint Lacy-the-robber as someone with whom business must be done. It was a safer argument for the farmers and for the Lacys such tactics fitted perfectly into their need to be shown as responsible, practical managers of the Easthams estate. Thomas Lacy worried not that his would-be tenants complained about the evil intent of Bray's henchmen.

The dispute was now running on two levels, as if purposefully to confuse the court: the Bray and Lacy legal struggle—a complex matter of family lineage, lost deeds and law of property and the contrasting, simple and vulnerable complaint of farmers whose living was disrupted by Bray's heavy-handed friends in May, June and probably again in October 1531, each time they tried to re-take the manor. But the local rebels were also out to confuse the facts of the case to their own advantage. William Partridge, for instance, tried to muddy the waters as best he could:

'He hath a lease of a parcell of the said manor off[f] one Nicholas Michell, and not of Lacye, and his sonne hath no parcell therof in ferme; that he hath is for money, and not for any mayntenance.' (p. 119)

Again, this evidence tends to corroborate the theory that the pro-Lacy 'gentlemen' were in close co-operation—even to the point of sharing out the ill-gotten gains of the first attack in 1529. The lesser farmer-rebels held a common interest in protecting their own rights to the land around the Easthams estate and to which they had grown used—probably from long before the Brays' time.

That, however, was not the end of the links between the rebels. From the Star Chamber cases we know that extended families had become involved from an early stage. William Lawrence was actually Andrew Sadler's brother; Lawrence's wife was there as was Sadler's father. William Partridge's son had been implicated and two men from the Brown family were also involved. We know that a number of local women were active in the rebellion, being named by Bray's legal team, and taken with the probability of the two Pechers, Richard and William, and the triplet of Lacy brothers themselves with their sons, the close nature of the small Crewkerne farming community becomes obvious.

On the last day of May 1531—the day Bray had begun the attempted repossession—this



community had come to the fields of Easthams with a determination. They were out to protect their families' interests and if that meant confrontation with the baron's men, so be it. A clearer reflection of attitude toward the absentee baron could not be desired. Initially Andrew Sadler's party were understandably cautious, though anxieties soon faded when their livestock was under direct threat, they:

'came thether to see the extent of the seid persons so forseable entyng in to the premisses . . . to distrene, lede and drife away their seid bestes . . . and yf they had perseyid that they wold haue don [so] the seid defendautes wold have driven them to their owne houses . . .' (p. 116)

The baron's men did not, it seems, hold much authority with the locals, nor even the accompanying sheriff. William Lawrence was unimpressed by the presence of this dignitary by his fields—and kept his heavy wooden staff close by his side.

'He [Lawrence] was upon the ground at Estham when the sheriff made the entre, havyng a litill staffe in his hande, and he departyd agayn from the said ground before the seid sheriff redded the decre.' (p. 117)

Lawrence would have the court believe he was no protester for Lacy's rights; he was a self-assured local with no patience for the dispute waging all around him.

'He met with . . . Lord Braye's servants in a feld callyd Crokehome field, belonging to the Lord Marqwys of Exetor, dryvying of this deponent's cattell and other menys cattell, which they [Bray's men] hadde taken, and when this deponent Percyved his cattell amonges other he beganne to dryve them bak agayne.' (p. 117)

The scene was set for Lawrence to make Bray's armed men into the fools of farce. Remarkably, at this point in the story the surviving papers record what the witnesses to the court said almost in a dialogue between the two sides: Lawrence and his tenacious pursuers. The yeoman was told by Bray's bruisers, 'Let go the catell or ells they wold shote at him' to which Lawrence shouted back, they could 'do what they wold, he wold have his catell!' Lawrence then tells us how he tried to take the beasts back:

'so he turned agayn to his said catell, and [then] the Lord Bray's servants drove them agayne to the place where they had distreynd them, and ther left them.' (p. 118)

Lawrence, like Cornish two years before, was ultimately defeated by superior numbers but his truth or tactics (depending on whether he is believed or not) is consistent with that of the other farmers on that day.

In young Thomas Twytt or Twight's account we find that same rather cavalier disregard for the Somerset sheriff who: 'redde a paper, but what yt was, or what intent yt was he can nat telle, for he gave none gre [credence] to hyt.' Perhaps this lack of heed was the result of youth, at the time of testifying he was only twenty years old in contrast to Lawrence's thirty. Perhaps he had witnessed the prevarication between the under sheriff, the Crewkerne bailiff and constable years before. Whatever his attitude to the current sheriff, he left before the re-entry was attempted, taking his wooden staff with him. But 'Twytt' was no fool. Like Lawrence his defence of his animals was spirited, coming as it did against such an array of the baron's servants, he:

'desyred the Lord Bray's servants to lett him have the catell agayn, saying that yf they hadde any commaundment that they wold shewe from the Kynge and his counsell to attache the seyde catell, that then he wold they shuld take them.' (p. 118)

Whichever view we take of the facts, either Bray's men were thugs out to rough-up the locals as part-vengeance and part-deterrent, or they had orders to treat all the smallholders as if they were Lacy supporters and take their animals. It was a brave action and a conscien-



Lawrence shouted 'They could be what they would—he'd have his animals back!' and he promptly herded them away again.

tious defence from Lawrence. Twight and their friends but for the first time Bray now had an admission that the sheriff had in fact read his decree to the rebels; if Twight had heard it, so too had others who had chosen to ignore it. The rebel claim of Bray's *forced* re-entry must have begun to look weak. It soon began to crumble away completely.

We hear from Andrew Sadler's answers that he, like Twight, was in his twenties, that by the time of the court case he had also remembered hearing 'the shreyf rede a wryting'. He then, however, begins steadily to implicate himself in what seems a more blameworthy,

aggressive, *plan* than has emerged from the farmers so far: the 'writing' which he had heard was 'he [the sheriff] sayd . . . a decre made in the Stare Chamber.' As Sadler told how he had stood in the field listening to the decree, he mentions, defensively, how he had also been carrying a staff. This is further compounded by another accused, Brown, giving evidence that he had actually heard the order against Lacy read aloud and even admitted to having understood it. Stubborn self-interest begins to look more like unlawful defiance.

Nor could these young locals claim that these were the high jinks of naïve youth. In William Partridge we have one of the older, wiser men present. A larger-scale yeoman farmer in his forties, he seems rather to have been the sage or mentor of the group. Partridge's art is to reply only to very narrow questions so as not to implicate the others or himself, he denies breaking any of the doors on the mansion house at any time, he certainly did not take any oxen that were not his own and he could not tell the court whether Clerk Cornish and another, Melson, really were legally the administrators of the estate or not. It was denied that there was any conspiracy with the Lacy brothers to take the estate in the first place. Partridge was clearly a cautious, calculating man, determined to say as little as he could for the right effect—to remove himself and his friends and family from suspicion by his confident precision.

Partridge's own explanation of the troubles was that he came himself to collect his herd of cattle, just like the other defendants but later, in October. Partridge raises another reason for his own grievance, he, like the others was threatened on his own land—Clerk Cornish himself had attempted to turn him away. It is not clear in what role Cornish had returned to the estate or whether he was fronting Bray's repossession, but he evidently retained the characteristics which had him put-out in the first place in 1529. We see hard evidence of the locals' attitude toward Bray's resident steward and of why he was so disliked. Partridge tells the court, in effect, that Easthams had been mismanaged by the lord's agent and that the original disorder had been the direct result of the manager/chaplain's disrespect to them. When Partridge came to his fields and happened to meet Cornish with a band of servants, older and wiser though the yeoman was, an argument arose which lasted an hour. This took place, we learn, in a field of Partridge's on the outer-most reaches of Easthams manor, yet still Cornish would intervene. After an hour the steward walked off, giving Partridge the justification he needed to claim himself correct and law-abiding and allowing him to move his cattle. But by now it was clear that the rebels knew of the riot papers, the decree for repossession and Bray's previous victory at the Star Chamber which handed-down judgment against Lacy. Despite their alternative reasons, the old tactic of ignorance of Bray's right to return now looked a sham. Still, it seems, the rebels' ultimate object did not fail, Bray was kept away.

For Edmund Bray it seems Easthams had indeed become something of a Bleak House. The legal process had ground on at the Star Chamber with answers to interrogatories coming in from the rebels over a period of years but still the Lord Bray was not able to enjoy repossession of his late uncle's estate. In the summer of 1531 his attempt at repossession was foiled by tough Lacy resistance and a counter-allegation that because it had no seal the Star Chamber decree was 'a fogid wrytyng'. The situation was getting worse not better: it was for the rebels their finest hour yet it is the last we hear of them together. There was now no longer even the pretence of legitimacy to their presence, despite the court, decree, sheriff and Brays' attempts, the rebels remained.

There is uncertainty as to the eventual date on which Bray succeeded in regaining his lands at Crewkerne, certainly he was still having very serious problems at the end of 1531 some twenty years after Lacy Senior had first taken the house and some three years after the younger Lacys had seized it. However, at some point before the autumn of that year the Lacys must finally have lost their grip on Easthams. A new complaint was brought against Nicholas Fitzjames, Gentleman, for inciting yet another storming of the house with John



Bray was still having problems 20 years after Lacy senior had taken the house. Only the buildings to the right of this shot date from the house's earlier history.

Taylor, William Trott and the old faithfuls Edmund Brown, Thomas Lacy, William Partridge and even one of the Partridge sons, John. But even this final, gentlemen's backlash had been completely defeated by autumn 1532.

The litigation, as always, continued long after the dust had settled; for another seven years Bray's lawyers traced, tried, convicted and imprisoned the miscreants. Unsurprisingly, many simply disappeared, anonymously, back into their rural routines. The Cornish regime at the manor was finished and life seems to have continued peacefully thereafter. We only learn of a few rioters being punished, many more returned whence they came—quite literally along the myriad drovers' tracks which led from Easthams into the surrounding countryside. One can, however, almost trace the waning interest which Lord Bray felt for his Crewkerne estate.

Bray could not wait for the outcome of the prolonged legal cases; he lost his patience. While the on-going process of bringing the Lacys and their friends to justice continued, Edmund Bray rid himself of the clan, its supporters and his troublesome lands in one go, by selling the estate. In 1532 Bray conveyed the manor of Easthams to Sir Edward Seymour who in turn sold it soon thereafter, in 1535, to Thomas York of Wiltshire. The Easthams estate passed to numerous gentleman owners during the remainder of the sixteenth century before going to the family of a rich Crewkerne barrister. That was an irony which would not have been lost on poor old John Lacy or his old adversary-at-law, Sir Reginald Bray.

Unique in their characteristic detail as they are, these cases allow an additional insight into the backgrounds of the many rebels as well as the extent of their relationships. As such the mid-Sixteenth-Century community which became embroiled in this dispute begins to take

shape. With the rolls of names which Bray indicted at the Star Chamber came mention of the rebels' trades. Of the key figures, old John Lacy's son, Thomas, is initially described as a smith in 1531 but by 1539 he had become primarily a yeoman; his brother, Richard, was a shoemaker. William Lawrence apart from his husbandry, supplemented his living with tailoring. Thomas Brown was a glover. Both Thomas Lacy and Nicholas Mitchell were tenant farmers on a larger scale, which gave them the respect of other senior landholders like the Partridges. Some whom Bray accused were from administrative backgrounds like William Pecher the bailiff of Crewkerne, yet later were considered 'gentlemen'. Pecher himself certainly was not just a boisterous fool: within ten years he was Somerset's coroner. William Glover was the town's constable, William Viall, another leading rebel, was a clerk, yet both were said to have stormed the mansion-house in 1529. We have seen John Daubenev's pedigree but Nicholas Fitzjames too was a gentleman of repute. He was from a local 'establishment' family and would go on to a prestigious county career as magistrate and later, sheriff, appearing himself as law officer in many subsequent Star Chamber cases. The rebellion, therefore, was an odd mix of peasant and tradesman, townsman and gentleman, all joined in what seems essentially an obscure family vendetta.

That many of the men and women of the affray were locals who benefitted from trade in nearby Crewkerne and belonged to families based there is clear when cross-referring to the extant survey of Crewkerne Manor of 1599.<sup>7</sup> Within sixty years of the Easthams troubles we find, for instance, the Partridge family still active and important farmers in the area. Perhaps William's ingenuity had paid-off for the son who stood with him that dangerous October earlier in the 1530s. By 1599 there were two branches of the family holding land in Crewkerne, one led by John which held in free tenancy in contrast to the majority of the town's customary tenancies and the other, led by Magdalen, holding more than any other family in the town.

By the dawn of the 1600s we see a community of farmers still going about their wealth-creation. Thus John Partridge in 1599 could rank himself alongside local landed dignitaries such as Richard Bonville and Robert Merefield. It was continuing in a tradition of yeoman family estate-building begun by the likes of his kinsmen, William, and indeed the ill-fated Lacys earlier in the 1500s. By William-the-rebel's death in 1556 at the age of nearly seventy, that once-controversial local had sufficient civic pride to give a sum to the church at Wells and to donate weather vanes both to Crewkerne Church and Misterton Chapel, while still leaving a legacy to the then incumbent of Crewkerne.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, after his estate had passed to his widow, Agnes, it was William's expressed wish to lie in the parish churchyard at Crewkerne, the town which was the fountain of the family's wealth.

Many of the other kinsmen of the rioters were still to be found in Crewkerne in the 1600s. Other names, many of which exist in the area to the present day, echo from the Star Chamber writs through the Crewkerne Manor survey including Bakers, Webbes, Huchings, Frekes, Mitchells, Lawrences and Trotts. All of these in 1599 held as customary tenants in Crewkerne, the nearest settlement, a generation after the Easthams sieges.

To know what drew men and women, relations and servants into the dangerous and private conflict between a minor gentleman and a peer of the realm, we must consider the context of the Easthams cases.

We know that Cornish, the *de facto* steward, was no ordinary manager; that he held considerable influence with the baron. *Prima facie* the facts suggest a serious local discontent with the regime at Easthams—what was some of the most valuable agricultural land in the area. Certainly William Partridge was incensed when Cornish and his men tried to seize his cattle just as he was about to harness them for the plough. After ejection from the estate in 1529 and the humiliating climb-down from confrontation with Partridge, the plan to bring down Cornish looks to be a common one. Others among the locals delighted in giving





Lands formerly on the Easthams estate and still in local use: one can almost hear William Partridge reprimanding the pedantic clerk Cornish.

evidence which undermined the clerk, being unsure even if he was 'seised' of the land and in charge.

What are we to make of Crewkerne's law officers becoming embroiled? Both the upwardly-mobile William Pecher, the constable and their men poignantly refused to intervene and support the languishing Cornish and kept reappearing in Bray's subsequent indictments. The class-calibre of the Lacy supporters is notable. Unless in the wider view of Crewkerne's people this was a just and worthy cause, it is inconceivable that so many 'gentlemen' would have become implicated to such an extent.

To suggest, however, that the affray was simply the result of a dislike of Cornish or his methods would be to ignore many other factors. Indubitably, discontent was the catalyst for local prejudices against Bray, the London man who had denied the Lacy brothers their inheritance. It was yeoman against courtier, local tradesman against London money. Thus the affray was born of an historic sense of fear—old versus new.

Somerset, like much of England, was experiencing at least temporarily the strength of local opinion against the increasing power of some estate-holders, men now with valuable agricultural assets and a new place in the 1500s' growing exchange economy. Many of these disturbances took the form (if not substance) of the old enclosure riots, where locals would use force to prevent the reduction of formerly common pasture etc. At Easthams, however, the rebels did not tear down fences, hedges and cut off trees. With a strong commercial (and for the Lacys, personal) vested interest in the land which fed their supplies to Crewkerne's market, destruction was never on the agenda. Before and after the Easthams dispute there were numerous outbreaks of riot throughout Somerset, often against men of

local importance and which terminated at the Star Chamber, many of these do resemble enclosure rebellions—Easthams was far more complex.

While we have drawn inferences about the practical causes, these do not explain the risks taken by all of those involved in such a challenge to a man like Bray. The answer to this lies possibly in Crewkerne itself. Sir Edmund the Lord Bray and his immediate predecessor represented something alien to the farmers; the coming of the non-local *nouveau riches*. Bray and his uncle before him were men made by their closeness to a distant royal court, a post-civil war regime seldom embraced warmly by Somerset's folk. Lord Bray's choice of representatives did nothing to improve an already ill-feted start at Easthams after inheriting the post-Sinclair, doubted land title. Bray himself embodied the new wave of 'stranger'—often from London professional backgrounds—which was filtering into Somerset landholding and which within only a few years would buy-up swathes of dissolved monastic and chantry lands. Indeed, by 1549 a large part of Crewkerne town (and an even larger part of other counties) was in the hands of Robert Wood, a shrewd Inner Temple man with an appetite for a local bargain in cheap ecclesiastical land. Soon his contemporary, Robert Freke from that same Honourable Society, held two of the three portions of the privatised Crewkerne rectory estate. The town's economy was accelerating but not in local hands: it was a trend which the rising small landholders and tradesmen noticed with alarm years before, at the time of Easthams.

It was the spirit of the early 1500s which led from the succession dispute at Easthams to the self-interested affray it became. Following in the trail of too many other defendants at the Star Chamber adequately to cover here, the Lacy mob was another example of direct action. It was a trend which was to continue across Somerset in similar outbreaks, until the eventual fading of the riots in the second half of the sixteenth century. The ingredients were all present at the right time and at Easthams the embittered affray was inevitable; economic interest, local and family loyalty, xenophobia and personal dislike for Cornish were added to the high-summer spirits usually channelled harmlessly into traditional rites like the so-called 'lords of misrule'. At Easthams it was the astute management of men like Pecher, Daubeney and Fitzjames which fanned the flames.

The circumstances were typical of the time but the crime was unique to the town. This Crewkerne affray was an aberration in an otherwise peaceful and contented market settlement. There was no 'warlike' populace waiting to overthrow their betters; the town was certainly not viewed at large as a revolutionary place. In the fifteenth century it had, after all, continued to attract the residence of devout hermits and anchoresses as it had during previous centuries and that peaceable reputation was not lost by the Easthams shindig. County-wide, Crewkerne was considered still to be a safe place in the 1540s. Only much later did more sinister individual grudges come into the open, with the numerous petty and some fatal disputes of the last quarter of the century, perhaps when the market-led wealth began to falter. Whatever disruptive energy there was in the earlier sixteenth century had been used-up really rather gently in the fields of Easthams.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 Adapted by the author from Parker, G., *The Battle of Sedgemoor, Selected Poems in Dorset Dialect*, (London: Somerset Folk Press, 1922).
- 2 SRS Vol. 27 (1911), at p. 112. All subsequent references are to this volume give page numbers after the text. For the full extant transcripts of both cases, see pp. 112–120.
- 3 For more detailed PRO and SRO citations supporting this account of Easthams history and for a highly thorough and succinct history of the ownership of Easthams Manor covering prior and subsequent years to those discussed here, see *Somerset VCH* vol. IV, pp. 12–14, upon which I have relied greatly throughout this work.
- 4 One Henry Corysche Esq. had left extensive lands at Meere and a considerable personal armoury to his son, also Henry, in 1557, see Weaver, F. W., (ed.) *Somerset Medieval Wills*, (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1983) p. 147; one Thomas Cornish was vicar of Wedmore in 1548, see SRS VI. 2 (1888) *Somerset Chantryes*, p. 256.
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- 8 *Somerset Medieval Wills*, p. 189.

Author: [REDACTED].