

Political Elites in South-West England, 1450-1500: Politics, Governance, and the Wars of the Roses

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In terms of its published historiography, the Southwest of 15th-century England remains one of the few grey, if not blank, areas on the map. Although several doctoral theses have been written on parts of the region since the late 1970s, what has been published takes mostly article form and is consequently comparatively narrow in focus. The notable exceptions are John Hatcher's monographs on the society and economy of late medieval Cornwall and John Chynoweth's recent book on the Cornish gentry in the Tudor period ([1](#)), which supersedes A. L. Rowse's older work. It is this geographical gap that Robert Stansfield's book seeks to fill, taking as its regional limits an expanded Southwest, encompassing the four counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset. Yet, the author's stated objective is more ambitious than simply to add to the existing canon of 'county studies'. The four southwestern shires formed the core of the 'region' entrusted by King Edward IV to the rule of Humphrey, Lord Stafford of Southwick, and by examining political structures and networks in this four-county block during the period from Jack Cade's rising to the end of the 15th century Stansfield seeks to demonstrate the relative importance of a regional approach (as opposed to the county study) to the investigation of late medieval politics and administration.

The book opens with an interesting discussion of concepts of regionality, and in turn examines the credentials of the author's chosen counties to be considered as a cohesive region in terms of geography, economy and culture. Two successive chapters are devoted to a general treatment of the political structures of the south-west and of its 'political élites' (as distinct from its political society). The author's principal criterion for membership of this élite is landholding. Whereas a large group of individuals held offices under the Crown, the political élite, so he contends, attracted the most important offices by virtue of its land-based local standing (pp. 102–3). Across his southwestern region Stansfield identifies 14 peers and 21 members of the gentry who constituted a 'regional élite' by virtue of holding Crown office in each of the four counties of the study, but finds that even their regional attachment was uncertain, as most of them held lands and sought marriage alliances outside 'their' region. Nevertheless, for a deeper understanding of the place of these élites in local society, so Stansfield rightly points out, it is necessary to place them within local and regional networks of affinity and connexion. How this might be achieved is demonstrated by case studies of the Lords Hungerford and two Cornish gentry families, the Arundells of Lanherne and the Edgcombes of Cotehele.

The main body of the book is divided into five chronological chapters which in turn examine the final decade of Henry VI's reign, Edward IV's first reign and the Lancastrian Readeption, the second reign of Edward IV, the reign of Richard III, and the first 15 years of Henry VII. They take as their starting point a discussion of the leading magnates in the four southwestern counties, and seek to establish their ties among the regional gentry. The author seeks to identify Crown connexions, both in terms of membership of the royal household and office holding under the Crown, and – particularly in the further west – under the duchy of Cornwall.

In the 1450s, we are told, the dominant force in Somerset and Dorset were the Beaufort dukes of Somerset who formed an alliance among the baronage with the Lords Stourton and Hungerford, royal servants raised to the peerage during the earlier decades of Henry VI's reign. In Devon and Cornwall, by contrast, the situation was less clear: here society had been polarised since the 1430s by the rivalry of the traditional leaders of local society, the Courtenay earls of Devon, and the relative newcomer, William, Lord Bonville of Shute, who formed alliances with members of the Somerset and Dorset baronage, as well as the influential courtier, the earl of Wiltshire, James Butler. The civil war of Henry VI's later years removed the southwestern rivals Bonville and Courtenay, as well as the Lancastrian Beaufort cadets, from the political scene. By grants of lands and offices Edward IV set up his favourite Humphrey, Lord Stafford, as the leading magnate in the region, to whom the gentry clients of the dispossessed Lancastrian peers had to look for patronage. The judicial murder of Lord Stafford in 1469 necessitated a reorganisation of southwestern government after Edward IV's exile and restoration in 1470-1. If initially the king's brother, George, duke of Clarence, who had begun to exercise some influence in the region in the later 1460s seemed destined to become the new leader of southwestern society, his authority was challenged almost from the outset by the rival claims of other members of the king's inner circle: the chamberlain, William, Lord Hastings, who gained control of the heiress of the Lords Hungerford and her inheritance, Edward IV's stepson, Thomas Grey, later marquess of Dorset, who married the Bonville heiress, and the king's brother-in-law, Anthony Wydeville, Earl Rivers, who as tutor to the young prince of Wales played a dominant role in the prince's council for the duchy of Cornwall.

The interlude of Richard III's usurpation saw the removal of Edward V's kinsmen and their retainers, as well as a wider thinning of the ranks of political society, as many Edwardian loyalists from the region were forced into exile following the duke of Buckingham's uprising. Richard's introduction of trusted northern supporters, such as John, Lord Scrope of Bolton, was, however, tempered by the inclusion of local men in the office-holding élite, not least the long-standing Yorkist loyalist, John, Lord Dinham. The picture following Henry VII's victory at Bosworth was of necessity complex, as Edwardians and old Lancastrian loyalists needed to be rewarded and included in the new arrangements. Leadership of the former Stourton and Hungerford circles now fell to John, Lord Cheyne, who had married the widow of William, Lord Stourton, and Edward, Lord Hastings, who had married the Hungerford heiress. Yet, as both men's interests elsewhere precluded them from taking up leadership in the region, local authority in Somerset fell to Sir Giles, later Lord Daubeney, while the King's mother, Margaret, countess of Richmond and Derby, assumed the place of her Beaufort ancestors. Further west, the removal of Lord Dinham to Westminster as Lord Treasurer of England and the king's distrust of the marquess of Dorset paved the way for one of the Stafford heirs, Robert, Lord Willoughby de Broke, to become the dominant force in Devon and Cornwall.

This could have been an important study, but unfortunately the wheels come off at an early stage. Stansfield's regional approach is interesting and valid, but he is forced to conclude even in his opening chapter that the wider southwest including Somerset and Dorset, as well as Devon and Cornwall, did not constitute a region under any of the possible criteria that he examines. From here on in, the reader is increasingly treated to a discussion of the two bi-county blocks in this southwestern non-region, while the later chronological chapters revert to discussing each of the four counties in turn.

This might not necessary be fatal, were each county competently studied. Regrettably, however, the author displays a distinct aversion to archival research which undermines his conclusions, such as they are. The

reader is told that this book is to be considered ‘a work of synthesis’, but it is hard not to feel that this is code for the author’s reluctance to set foot in a record repository. As a result, Stansfield has barely, if at all, scratched the surface of the archival material available for each of his four counties. Just five family collections have been consulted, chosen – as is painfully obvious – not for the particular importance of the families concerned, or with a view to even geographical coverage, but for the simple rationale that a calendared form of the records could be accessed online. This point is illustrated vividly by the author’s case studies in chapter four. While the Arundell and Hungerford collections are substantial and may thus support a degree of quantitative analysis, the same is surely not true of the eight Edgcombe deeds which form the basis of his analysis of that family’s circle.

Among the important family archives that have been ignored are those of two leading noble families (the Courtenay earls of Devon and the Lords Bonville of Shute), and it is more than odd to find no reference made to the rich civic archives of e.g. Exeter, Barnstaple, Bridgwater and Wells. The records of the English Crown – unique in their scope and richness – have equally been left largely untouched: the author has surveyed the printed calendars of the principal Chancery rolls, the patent, close and fine rolls, but has made little effort to flesh out the skeletal information provided by this material through researches in other record classes in the National Archives. The principal exception here are the receivers’ and ministers’ accounts of the duchy of Cornwall which have apparently been consulted in the original both at Kew and at the Duchy’s offices at Buckingham Gate, but the information that the author has gleaned from them appears not to exceed the identity of a few senior official appointments. By contrast, there is no attempt to examine the lawlessness (or otherwise) of the region, over which scholars have disagreed [\(2\)](#), for instance through a study of some of the records of the royal law courts, which might also have provided important supplementary evidence of retaining and patron-client relationships.

While Stansfield’s bibliography is comprehensive, questions also arise over his often uncritical use of the secondary literature. While it may be true that some historians have ‘generally accepted’ Josiah Wedgwood’s guesses at the identity of many late medieval members of parliament, Wedgwood’s work was widely (and rightly) criticised from the outset. To use it, as Stansfield does, as a general dictionary of political biography to the extent of parroting the mostly speculative vital dates given (many of which can easily be corrected from standard sources like the inquisitions *post mortem*), is at best unwise, and has introduced into the text numerous irritating, if minor, factual inaccuracies. In other instances, it is the author’s failure to read and comprehend the secondary literature correctly that undermines his argument. So, for example, the *Complete Peerage* [\(3\)](#) does not state that ‘an Edgcombe was a member of every parliament from 1446–7 to 1859–61’ (*sic* – p. 141), as Stansfield claims in support of his choice of case study, but rather that ‘nearly’ every parliament during that period for which returns are extant contained a member of that family called either Richard or Piers – in itself something of an overstatement: during the period covered by this book an Edgcombe can be shown to have sat just once.

The author’s lack of industry where archival work is concerned has also determined his choice of methodology. His opening chapters set out the problems and pitfalls inherent in the study of late medieval political structures and networks in some detail, but the solution he offers is far from satisfactory. Seeking ways of addressing questions of retaining, affinity and connexion while avoiding extensive archival researches, he arrives at a quantitative method of analysis pioneered by Scottish historians. Taking as his base of evidence the property deeds and wills of his chosen case studies (the Hungerfords, Arundells and Edgcombes) the author divides their contacts and connexions into inner and outer circles, depending on the number of times their names occur in the family’s transactions. This approach may provide a viable avenue of analysis where limited material beyond a family’s property deeds is available, but its categorisations are at best rough, and it is hardly surprising that historians of medieval England have drawn upon the wealth of documentary evidence available to them for a more subtle analysis of affinities and connexions. Thus, Stansfield’s numerical analysis takes little account of qualitative differences in the relationships between his chosen examples and the men named in their transactions. Surely the relationship of the Hungerfords and Arundells with the knights and greater esquires among their connexions was different from that with, say, the clerk Robert Udy? If Sir Philip Courtenay of Powderham is to be categorised as Hungerford kin by virtue

of his marriage to the daughter of the first Lord Hungerford, is the same not also true of Courtenay's son, Sir Philip of Molland, even if the latter was only named in a single deed? The frequent occurrence of the leading lawyer Thomas Tropenell in the Hungerford deeds is surely accounted for by his profession, and the same is certainly true of the busy lawyers Thomas Limbury and William Menwyneck in the case of the Arundells.

The author himself is manifestly aware of the shakiness of his findings: the text abounds with qualifying adverbs such as 'perhaps', 'maybe' and 'possibly': their omission alone might have usefully shortened the tome. Throughout, the subjunctive is the mode of choice. Where Stansfield is more assertive, his statements are often odd. To describe Sir Hugh Courtenay of Boconnoc, a leading southwestern landowner, as 'a Hungerford dependant' (p. 219) distorts his central role in Cornwall during Henry VI's readeption. Nor does the description of John Trenowith of Fentongollan (who cannot, as Stansfield claims, be shown to have sat in the Readeption parliament) as a 'probable Arundell protégé' do justice to the man's extensive connexions among the Cornish gentry or his often complicated relationships with the various branches of the Arundell family. Humphrey, Lord Stafford's choice of John Cheyne of Pinhoe, a one-time member of the circle of William, Lord Bonville, as one of his executors surely did not reflect 'Stafford's connexions with this nexus' (p. 207), but rather Stafford's familial ties to Cheyne, his paternal aunt Alice's brother-in-law. The most significant of the marriages contracted by the sisters of John, later Lord Dinham, was at the time surely not that of Katherine Dinham to Thomas Arundell of Lanherne (even if a large share of the Dinham estates along with the family archive would eventually come to the Arundells), but that to Fulk Bourghier, heir to the barony of FitzWaryn, which indirectly connected the Dinhams to the house of York through their Bourghier kin. The author's case studies give the families he has examined undue prominence in his discussion. It is more than curious to see office holders after 1471 discussed in terms of their membership of the 'Hungerford nexus', when there is no sense of a continuation of other loyalties to, for instance, the formerly comital Courtenays. Similarly, his identification of 'Arundell affiliates' sometimes overrides potentially more significant connexions: while Sir Renfrew Arundell of Tremodret was certainly first cousin to Sir John Arundell of Lanherne, he was also the steward of the southwestern estates of Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, and Sir John Colshull of Binnamy was not only Sir Renfrew's uncle, but also brother-in-law to Warwick's longstanding servant John Nanfan of Birtsmorton.

There are some curious omissions, particularly in the middle years of Edward IV. So, for instance, there is no detailed discussion of the south-western rebellions of 1470 in the context of the duke of Clarence's role in the region. Nor is there any real engagement with the events of 1473, when John de Vere, earl of Oxford, occupied the island fortress of St. Michael's Mount and the efforts to dislodge him under the leadership of Sir Henry Bodrugan and Sir John Arundell of Lanherne were found wanting. Henry VI's Readeption itself receives curiously cursory treatment at the end of the discussion of Edward IV's first reign: the focus here is on Humphrey, Lord Stafford, and the two years after his death are mentioned only in passing.

Throughout, the book suffers from a plethora of factual errors and inaccuracies, some of them minor, others less so, and in their majority adopted directly from the secondary literature or printed sources. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the series of lists and tables which make up the final third of the volume, most notably, a 'Directory of the South-West Gentry'. This is clearly a misnomer: as a footnote indicates (p. 106), this is in fact no more than a list of office holders and above all members of Parliament. No distinction is drawn between landed gentry, merchants and lawyers, and county MPs are lumped together with the representatives of the many parliamentary boroughs of the south-west. Addresses and dates of births and deaths have mostly been copied verbatim from J. C. Wedgwood's parliamentary biographies, while lists of sheriffs, escheators and justices of the peace are more fully available elsewhere. Office holding and membership of Parliament have apparently only been taken into account if they fell within the author's chronological boundaries, even though such service was surely relevant for the assessment of an individual's standing even if it occurred earlier in his career. As a result, the information assembled here is ultimately meaningless: not only is it incomplete, it is also in many instances quite simply wrong.

Thus, to cite just a few examples, Sir Thomas Arundell of Tolverne who died in 1443 (rather than in 1445, as stated here) and who is listed here merely as a JP, held the shrievalty of both Cornwall and Devon and sat

in Parliament as a knight of the shire. John Speke of White Lackington is a conflation of two men, while the two John Radfords of Poughill and Oakford listed are one and the same person. The three Thomas Tregarthyns are just two men, the elder of whom sat in Parliament, while (contrary to what is stated here) it was the younger who served as sheriff of Cornwall in 1491–2. ‘William Dinham’ and ‘John Nimbury’ of Cornwall are phantoms conjured from the *Calendar of Patent Rolls*. In many instances (Renfrew Arundell, Roger Champernoun, Henry Champneys, Theobald Gorges etc.), membership of Parliament has simply been ignored; conversely, carpetbaggers who probably never set foot in the southwestern boroughs they represented in the Commons (Henry Chicheley, Sir William Danvers, Thomas Drifffield, Henry Fillongley, Sir John Fineux, Thomas Froxmere etc.) have been included. ‘Courtenay, Edward (fl.1478–92)’ and ‘Courtenay, Sir Thomas (fl.1455)’ are of course two later earls of Devon, and to be told that the latter was not a member of the southwestern political élite (whereas the complete outsider Drifffield apparently was) beggars belief. It would be otiose to continue this list.

This is, in summary, not only a disappointing, but in many respects a pointless book. It has nothing to offer by way of new findings, and such conclusions as it draws are undermined by the author’s lack of research and knowledge. Its price tag of £84.95 (or \$139.95 in the United States) is nothing short of ludicrous, and will surely be treated by history librarians everywhere with the contempt that it deserves. It will be left to others to enhance our knowledge of the south-west by exploring its rich (and still hardly tapped) archives: it is time for a new book on the south-west, but unfortunately this is not it.

Notes

1. John Chynoweth, *Tudor Cornwall* (Stroud, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. e.g. J. P. D. Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor State: Political Culture in the Westcountry* (Oxford, 2003); Hannes Kleineke, ‘Why the West was wild: law and disorder in fifteenth-century Cornwall and Devon’, in *The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion*, ed. Linda Clark (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 75–93; and see Peter Fleming’s [comments](#) [2] on Cooper’s book.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, ed. G. E. Cokayne *et al.* (13 vols., London, 1910–49), ix, p. 315.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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