

SIR THOMAS POPE (1507–59)



Thomas Pope was born, probably in 1507, into a yeoman farming family living at Leadenporch House in New Street. Thomas received a sound education at Banbury Grammar School and Eton College. Only 16 when his father died, he decided to pursue a career not in farming but in the law. Thomas was astute, able and diligent, and he acquired a useful reputation for loyalty to his patrons. His astuteness was evident not least in his choice of those he chose to serve.

Advancement at that time was not entirely divorced from talent, but it relied at least as much on good connections. He rose steadily in government service, not least through the patronage and friendship of the Lord Chancellor of England, Sir Thomas More. A tearful Pope was given the traumatic task of informing his friend at dawn on 6 July 1535 that he was to be executed that morning. His distress was genuine, but he recovered sufficiently to take up service with Sir Thomas Audley, the man who had sentenced More to death.

Thomas remained a Catholic throughout his life, but he remained loyal also to the government of the day. In 1535 he was knighted and in 1536 he was further rewarded with the Treasurership of the Court of Augmentations, a preposterous (to us) sounding office that transformed his fortunes. He was in effect placed in charge, on behalf of the Crown, of the administration of 800 or so religious houses dissolved on the orders of Henry VIII. Vast sums of money passed through his hands, and quite a lot seems to have stuck there.

Thomas acquired 18 manors in Oxfordshire and much land in several other counties. The Protestant regime of Edward VI can hardly have been to Thomas's taste, but he kept his head down and, consequently, on his shoulders. Queen Mary's policies were much more congenial, and Thomas became a trusted councillor of that monarch. Among his duties was, in 1556, custody of the Princess Elizabeth, a task that he carried out with such tact that she bore him no illwill when she came to power.

In 1555 Thomas bought the site of the dissolved Durham College, a Benedictine foundation in Oxford, and established there a new college. Its name, Trinity College, had been the dedication of Durham College, but its retention for the new foundation eloquently testifies to Pope's religious convictions. There is no suggestion that he saw any irony in spending part of the fortune he amassed as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries in founding a Catholic college.

Thomas died in London in 1559, possibly of malaria. His tomb, and that of his widow Elizabeth, are in Trinity College Chapel, albeit tidied away in a cupboard, the better to suit 17th-century Classical taste.

The Pope family rose inexorably into the peerage (as Earls of Downe) and out of Deddington. The family home, Leadenporch House, remains but there are no other memorials.

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