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The Troublesome bequest of Dame Joan: the establishment of the chapel of St Anne at Walsingham Priory

By Matthew Champion, Heritage Consultancy and Project Management Services

Synopsis

The establishment of medieval chantries by the wealthy has long been recognized as both a common form of devotion and a pious attempt at creating a lasting memorial to existence. The vast majority of chantry provisions were temporary affairs, designed to last a few weeks, months, or years. Yet, in the case of the truly affluent, the chantry could become a permanent creation in the form of a dedicated chapel with provision for its staff and services. In many instances the creation of purpose-built chantry chapels receives only scant attention from scholars, largely only as a tangible symbol of personal devotion to a particular cult or building, and the physical methods by which such buildings came to be constructed has been largely overlooked. However, the detailed documentation associated with the establishment of the late fourteenth century chapel of St. Anne, within the Priory church at Walsingham, gives us an intriguing insight into the financial, legal and familial complexities associated with such acts of devotion.¹

In April 1381 Sir Thomas de Felton, Knight of the most illustrious Order of the Garter, hero of the battles of Crécy and Poitiers, seneschal of Aquitaine and Gascony, veteran of numerous military campaigns and companion of kings, died peacefully at his family home. His passing marked the end of a long, distinguished, and, above all, eventful career. Born into a relatively modest Norfolk gentry family, Sir Thomas had built upon his humble beginnings to become one of the most admired, well-respected, and powerful men of his age. A seasoned military campaigner, he had become advisor and friend to the Black Prince, had undertaken daring diplomatic and military missions for his king and had been entrusted with the stewardship of vast territories and castles that made him the envy of his peers. However, despite seemingly being one of the most successful men of his age, at his death Sir Thomas undoubtedly felt the keen lack of two things. His life, adventurous and dashing though it may have been, failed him in two respects. First, and perhaps most significantly for his family's immediate prospects, Sir Thomas had failed to produce a male heir.²

Sir Thomas married when relatively young, to Joan Walkefare, the daughter of a neighbouring Norfolk family, and they appear to have had a successful and stable marriage

¹ E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: traditional religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 368-376.

² P. Morgan, "Felton, Sir Thomas (d. 1381)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edition, Jan 2008.

that showed all the outward signs of happiness. The marriage had been profitable to both families and Joan had stood beside her husband, witnessing his land transactions and managing his estates, whilst he became a leading figure in the military campaigns in France. Joan provided Sir Thomas with two daughters who survived to adulthood, Sybil and Mary, and a son, also named Thomas. Sadly, the young Thomas, like so many of his contemporaries, died whilst still an infant. At the time of his death Sir Thomas's daughters were both married but childless, and his wife was well beyond the age of childbirth so any possibility of a male heir was gone.

A second regret at the time of his death was perhaps less tangible. Although he had been a respected soldier and, at times, a brilliant commander, Sir Thomas had never been a lucky soldier. He fought alongside many of the greatest names of his age, had been a boon companion to the Black Prince and had more campaign experience than most of the other English (and French) commanders. He had been in the thick of the fighting at both Crécy and Poitiers, had undertaken sieges and skirmishes and had come through engagements that had left many of his contemporaries dead of disease, horrific wounds, or the rigors of fourteenth-century military operations. However, whilst those around him amassed honors, titles, and wealth, by the time of his death Sir Thomas had relatively little to show for a lifetime's hard-fought campaigning for his king. Sir Thomas would not have been unreasonable to blame his lack of tangible wealth upon bad luck. Upon two separate occasions Sir Thomas, largely through no fault of his own, found himself captured by his enemies and subject to ransom. On the second occasion, in 1377, Sir Thomas's honour and reputation led to his captors demanding a ransom of such magnitude that it was only matched by those demanded for captives of royal blood. In short, Sir Thomas's captivities had all but wiped out all the large financial gains that his illustrious career as a soldier, over two decades of hard campaigning, had managed to amass.³

Although nowhere near as wealthy as many of his contemporaries, at the time of his death, Sir Thomas still retained a reasonable estate which would, if well-managed and conserved, would leave his family wanting for little. In an act of both piety and remembrance, his widow, Dame Joan, ordered that his body should be buried within the great Priory church at nearby Walsingham and, above the tomb, there should be a chapel created in dedication to the mother of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Anne. In this chapel, which was to act as a chantry to Sir Thomas and his family, were to be installed four chaplains -- canons or seculars who were to celebrate divine service daily, and give prayers for the souls of the de Feltons and the king's father, Edward III. To these ends, Dame Joan created a generous endowment to finance the chapel's creation, the wages of the canons, and the daily burning of a light upon the altar at high mass. There, it was reverently hoped, Dame Joan would also eventually find herself interred, beside her husband, and with the prayers of the chaplains ensuring her soul's safe passage through purgatory. Unfortunately, Dame Joan's seemingly straightforward act of

³ Ibid. The level of the ransom is clearly a reflection of Felton's elevated status within the administration. The *Chandos Herald* refers to Felton as one of the Black Prince's companions and closest councillors. D. B. Tyson (ed), *La vie du Prince Noir by Chandos Herald*, (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1975).

remembrance and piety, designed to ensure lasting memorial and eternal salvation, was soon transformed into something that was anything but straightforward.

Despite her good intentions for the well-being of her husband's soul, Dame Joan first had to face realities that his death had thrust upon her. His recent captivity and subsequent ransom had drained the family coffers. The size of the demanded ransom was, even by the standards of the day, large. It was most certainly more than Sir Thomas or his immediate family could ever hope to raise by drawing upon their own resources. Sir Thomas's release was eventually secured after nearly three years in captivity when the king, never quick to act where money was concerned, eventually allowed the family a grant of 30,000 francs.⁴ Sir Thomas died only a year after his ensuing return to England and it is unclear whether the ransom was ever paid in full. Still, despite having spent much of the family's money on securing his release, and raising further funds upon the promise of the king's grant, it is quite clear that the king never paid the family the full amount of the grant. It appears that once Sir Thomas was in his grave, and the crown had little further use for his family, that the payment of the grant gradually slipped from the King's list of priorities. Therefore, in the months immediately following her husband's death Dame Joan would have found her own financial situation particularly difficult.

These difficulties were further compounded by the acts of the executors of Sir Thomas's Will and the Royal officials at the Exchequer. As soon as Sir Thomas was dead, the Barons of the Exchequer moved quickly. Claiming that Sir Thomas owed the crown vast sums in outstanding loans they took possession of a number of manors that he had held and seized the revenues that they generated for their own use. In particular, the wealthy manor of Kirketon (Kirton) in Lincolnshire, which Dame Joan claimed she held as a joint estate with her husband, was taken from her and became the object of a legal dispute that would continue for over two years.⁵

The truth of the matter was actually very different from that painted by the Barons of the Exchequer and their officials. The records make clear that it was actually the crown that owed Sir Thomas money; a great deal of money. As far back as 1375 Sir Thomas had petitioned the crown to settle the debts and reimburse him for costs incurred whilst acting as Seneschal of Gascony and Aquitaine. By that time the total owed him by the crown was calculated to be £7098 14s 6d and it was agreed that the exchequer would reimburse him by the amount of 2000 marks each Christmas for the next five years.⁶ Sir Thomas, however, spent much of these subsequent five years in captivity and it appears that during this time the exchequer declined, or was unable, to honor its agreement. In the months following his death Dame Joan and Sir Thomas's executors petitioned the crown to settle the debts, which by that time had escalated to nearly £15,000.⁷ Indeed, the executors of the Will were forced to

⁴ Calendar of Letters Patent, 4th Richard II, pt 1, membrane 22.

⁵ National Archives reference SC8/104/5168.

⁶ Calendar of Patent Rolls, 49th Edward III, pt 1, membrane 29.

⁷ National Archives reference SC8/104/5168.

appeal to the king and council for an immediate advance upon the sums owed as they claimed that they were actually unable to fulfil the terms of the Will itself. Unfortunately, whilst Sir Thomas had been in captivity a new king, Richard II, had come to the throne and the name of Sir Thomas de Felton meant very little to him. The crown pressed its claims to his land and largely ignored the pleas of his widow and executors. In addition, as the months dragged past, Dame Joan and the executors of Sir Thomas's Will increasingly came under pressure to settle the outstanding amounts claimed by his retinue in Gascony and Aquitaine.⁸ The sums were not insignificant and Sir Thomas's estate was in serious jeopardy.

It was not until January 1383, almost two years after the death of Sir Thomas, that any form of agreement appeared to have been reached. As was to be expected, the crown was the major beneficiary and Dame Joan was left to salvage what she could from her husband's former estate. By this time the executors had already been forced to pay £1134 12s 6d in arrears of pay to members of Sir Thomas's retinue and a further £600 to the Barons of the Exchequer.⁹ Whilst Dame Joan maintained that more had been owed by the crown for Sir Thomas's services overseas, it was agreed that the king would not seek further monies from the estate in return for certain agreements and considerations. In return for this "grant" Dame Joan was to relinquish all claims that she had in the profitable manor of Kirketon and surrender all right of action against the king concerning the monies owed to her husband. In particular, she and the executors were to write off the sum of £7098 14s 6d that dated back to the original claim made by Sir Thomas eight years earlier. In effect, Dame Joan was to surrender everything that she had fought to retain in exchange for the king's promise to refrain from pursuing her family for further money.¹⁰

It was a disappointing result for Dame Joan but, with no major nobleman to petition the king on her behalf, it was not altogether surprising. Although no one could argue that justice had been done, she had managed to retain part of her husband's estate and settle all outstanding debts against the family. Now, with her financial situation at least partially stabilized, Dame Joan could concentrate on the creation of a lasting memorial to the memory of her husband. Yet her struggle with the bureaucrats of the royal court turned out to be far from over.

The year after Dame Joan reached agreement with the king and his officials of the exchequer she began in earnest to organize the establishment of the chantry at Walsingham in her husband's memory. The three years that had passed since her husband's death had seen a number of dramatic changes in Dame Joan's life. The most significant was that she now found herself living in a nunnery. She had taken refuge from the world in the "Abbey of St. Clare without Aldgate," where her younger daughter Mary was ensconced, not entirely

⁸ National Archives reference SC8/111/5509.

⁹ Calendar of Letters Patent, 6th Richard II, pt 2, membrane 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

happily, as a Minoress.¹¹ For a relatively wealthy and well-connected widow to choose to live with the “poor Clares” at Aldgate was not unusual. The Abbey, originally established by Blanche, Queen of Navarre in 1293, from the earliest days of its existence enjoyed the patronage of many of the most powerful women in the country. In 1346 Queen Isabella herself made generous grants to the nuns, as had Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady Clare in 1355, and during Dame Joan’s residency, Margaret, Countess of Norfolk, who made similar generous gifts to the abbess and nuns. Indeed, Dame Joan’s retirement from the world to Aldgate was not one of seclusion and abstinence. A few years after she arrived at the nunnery she would be joined by the powerful Margaret Beauchamp, widow of the Earl of Warwick, who brought with her three matrons and permission from the pope to reside there as long as she pleased. Relatively close to the court, and the markets and the gossip of London, life with the Minoresses without Aldgate must have been an attractive option for many widows of rank.¹²

Along with the removal of herself to a nunnery the years since the death of Sir Thomas also saw Dame Joan taking stock of and reorganizing her remaining lands and estates. Although this had undoubtedly been undertaken to safeguard her remaining assets from the royal officials and stabilize her financial position, this reorganization added immediate complications to her plans for the establishment of the chantry at Walsingham. In the first instance, Dame Joan had a number of her lands, in particular her dower lands and manors in Great and Little Ryburgh, Norfolk, vills in the neighboring parishes of Little Snoring, Bintree, Stibbard, Gateley, Guist, Brisley, Pensthorpe, Pudding Norton, and Colkirk, in fee-farm to Sir Stephen de Hales, Sir Oliver de Calthorpe, Sir Ralph de Shelton, and other local individuals. These grants had ensured that Dame Joan and her daughters received an annual cash income of eighty marks.¹³ In addition, these very same lands had been closely associated with some violent confrontations during the uprising that took place in 1381, only a few months after Sir Thomas’s death. So, by divesting herself of these properties, Dame Joan limited her responsibility for any such future violations and distanced herself from conflict.

Dame Joan made similar grants on her holdings elsewhere in Norfolk and East Anglia and, in most cases, the individuals to whom she made these grants appear to be the same ones to whom she granted the Norfolk lands. In effect, she was compounding almost her entire estate, in exchange for annual cash payments to Sir Stephen de Hales and his associates.¹⁴ Although this may have seemed a financially prudent move at the time, the consequences of it immediately added an entirely new layer of legal complexity to Dame Joan’s wish to

¹¹ In 1385 Mary, youngest daughter of Sir Thomas de Felton, left the nunnery without permission, was posted as an apostate and a vagabond. The king’s Sergeant at Arms, John de Morewell, was charged with her arrest and return to the care of the Abbess. Calendar of Patent Rolls, 9th Richard II, pt 1, membrane 19.

¹² “Friaries: The minoresses without Aldgate,” *A History of the County of London. Volume 1, London within the Bars, Westminster and Southwark* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), pp. 516-519.

¹³ Document 12, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p.405.

¹⁴ National Archives reference C 143/410/14.

establish the chantry at Walsingham. Later events suggest that Sir Stephen de Hales undertook to act on behalf of Dame Joan with regard to her land transactions and to the Walsingham chantry and this may well have been the intention of the land deals that she struck with Hales from the outset.

The first intimation that the proposed chantry might actually eventually materialize appears in 1384/5 when Sir Stephen de Hales, Sir Oliver de Calthorpe, Sir Ralph de Shelton, and others formally grant “the manor of Great Ryburgh and the manor of Little Ryburgh called ‘Wodehalle,’ a messuage and land in Great and Little Walsingham and the reversion of the advowson¹⁵ of the church of the manor of Great Ryburgh” to the prior and convent of Walsingham. The document states that the lands are currently held for life by “Joan late the wife of Thomas Felton” and that Hales and his companions are to retain land in the parishes of Warham, Burnham, Great Snoring, West Lopham, Barningham, Walsingham, and Holkham.¹⁶ This document would appear to outline the basis of the agreement that must have been reached between Dame Joan and Stephen de Hales and his confederates. The lands being gifted to Walsingham are later judged to be worth forty marks per annum, only half the purported value of the entire parcel of lands transferred from Dame Joan to Hales. In effect, in return for acting on Dame Joan’s behalf for the establishment of the chantry, Hales and his associates retain half of the value of the original transaction. In addition, the lands that Dame Joan was to grant to Walsingham, via the services of Hales, appear to be largely composed of her dower lands; manors that she herself brought to her marriage with Sir Thomas.

¹⁵ A “messuage” is a dwelling house, its adjacent buildings and lands; “advowson” is the right to name the holder of a church benefice.

¹⁶ National Archives reference C 143/403/21.



Figure 1. The River Wensum, boundary between the manors of Great and Little Ryburgh. Woodhall is believed to have been situated to the extreme left of the image Photo: author.

This agreement was quickly followed in May of 1385 by a request, on behalf of the prior and convent at Walsingham, for a license from the king for the “alienation in mortmain” of the lands laid down in the agreement with Sir Stephen de Hales.¹⁷ Such a license was required since the implementation of the Statute of Mortmain in 1279, which decreed that no more land could be granted by individuals to the church without the assent of the king, as such grants were regarded as being detrimental to exchequer.¹⁸ The license cost the prior and convent the princely sum of £100. This document is also the first record that details the general conditions associated with the establishment of the proposed chantry at Walsingham. The money raised by the granted lands, stated as being of the value of forty marks, three shillings and four pence, was to be used to find “four chaplains, canons or seculars, to celebrate divine service daily in the chapel of St. Anne newly built by the said prior and

¹⁷ Calendar of Patent Rolls, 8th Richard II, pt 2, membrane 15.

¹⁸ The church, being an immortal institution, paid no reliefs and could not relinquish what it owned. Therefore, lands which had formally generated the Royal exchequer revenue, as they passed from hand to hand and generation to generation, would be largely removed from the royal economy. C. Coredon and A. Williams, *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004).

convent within the said priory, for the good estate of the said Joan, for her soul after death and for the souls of the king's father, the said Thomas de Felton, Thomas his son, and others... and for finding a light to burn daily therein at high mass." With the granting of the license to alienate the lands it would be reasonable to assume that the principal activities and negotiations concerning the creation of the chantry were complete. Sadly this was not the case.

The problems that now arose for Dame Joan, Sir Stephen de Hales, and the Priory of Walsingham were largely the result of the complexities of the land market and manorial system in East Anglia at the close of the fourteenth century. The overall wealth of the region, with its fertile soil, often meant that individual parishes could contain and sustain multiple manors. In some cases this would result in a parish containing a principal manor and a number of lesser ones. However, land transactions, inheritances, and bequests meant that, over time, manors could become combined, separated or change their relative status, all of which would be documented in a complex web of legal documents and court rolls. In addition, individual manors could often find themselves subject to various and multiple charges laid upon them by successive owners and generations. Indeed, by the sixteenth century it was not uncommon for long running disputes to arise between manors within the same parish as to which possessed what rights, who held the advowson of the parish church, or which manor had rights over which area of common. In parishes such as Long Stratton in Norfolk, which contained over half a dozen distinct manors, the legal complexities concerning land transactions were liable to incur costs that outstripped the value of the land in question.

In the case of Dame Joan's bequest, the legal details were actually quite straightforward, but the sheer number of institutions, individuals, and feudal rights involved meant that it would be years before it was fully resolved. Although the license to alienate the lands was granted in 1385, it was actually not until 1390 that the matter once again appears to have gained the attention of authorities. The reason for this five-year delay in moving the negotiations forward remains unexplained. Still, once the matter is highlighted, the legal complexities quickly become clear. In the first instance, Sir John Le Strange, husband of Dame Joan's sister Eleanor, generously released all the rights he held, via his wife, in the knight's fee in the manors of Little Snoring which, he stated, were held of the manor of Great Ryburgh by knight's service. Although these lands did not form part of the physical bequest to Walsingham, it would appear that they were part of the same negotiation, settling and defining rights and entitlements on the remainder of the lands that Dame Joan granted to Sir Stephen de Hales. It is also interesting to note that the document itself was dated at Little Walsingham.¹⁹

In the same year, 1390, Hales and his compatriots drew up a separate agreement that dealt specifically with the lands involved in the Walsingham bequest. Taking the form of a

¹⁹ Walsingham consists of two parishes-- Great Walsingham and Little Walsingham. The Priory and pilgrimage center was located in Little Walsingham, which soon grew to many times the size of the neighbouring hamlet of Great Walsingham. The anomaly continues to this day.

royal licence in mortmain,²⁰ the document was an agreement between Hales and Sir John de Cavendish for the alienation of the lands in Great and Little Ryburgh. Some of these lands, gifted by Dame Joan to Walsingham, had already been gifted by Dame Joan to Cavendish as part of his fee “appertaining to his manor of Fakenham Espes (Suffolk).”²¹ Cavendish relinquished his rights and granted license for the transfer to take place. Unusually, there was another agreement between Hales and Cavendish, to exactly the same effect, dated fifteen months after the first.²²

The complexities of the feudal land holding surrounding the manor of Great Ryburgh continued to engage the time and resources of Hales for some years. In 1392 a further indenture was drawn up, this time between Richard, Earl of Arundel and the prior and convent of Walsingham, that granted license for Hales to give the manor of Great Ryburgh and the advowson of the church to the Priory.²³ The indenture made plain that the manor was held by Dame Joan from the Earl of Arundel in knight service. Arundel was in agreement with the alienation of the land to the Priory, but was equally clear that Walsingham must accept the feudal obligations which were entailed with the manor. In particular, the Priory had to pay the Earl a heriot “on every voidance of the prior, as former tenants of the manor had done, and 100s. in name of relief.” In addition, the priory was also to pay for the suit “which they owe to the Earl’s court at Castleacre for the said manor 3s 4d a year, during the Earl’s life, and 6s 8d after his death.” Not content with these fairly straightforward financial arrangements, the Earl also placed a number of religious obligations upon the prior and convent. The Priory was, he stated, to “keep the anniversary of Richard, late Earl of Arundel, and lady Eleanor his wife, father and mother of the present Earl, and of Elizabeth, late wife of the present Earl... and will pray for the Earl and Lady ‘Phelipp,’ his present wife.” After the death of the Earl and his wife they too were to be included “in the said anniversary.” In effect, the Earl was demanding the establishment of a second chantry at Walsingham on the strength of his agreement to the alienation of the lands provided to establish the first chantry. The prior and convent had little choice but to agree to his request.

In the same year Walsingham’s neighboring Priory, located a few miles to the northeast at Binham, entered the proceedings with its own claims upon the land. The Priory had claims and rights over land in both the manors of Great and Little Ryburgh with a total annual value of over 32s 8d. The indenture that survives from 1392 dealt specifically with the land in the manor of Little Ryburgh, known as “Woodhall,” where Binham claimed the sum of 6s “on every vacancy of their prior’s office... by name of relief, or double the rent of the said lands.”²⁴ The claims to the land in the manor of Great Ryburgh were undoubtedly set out

²⁰ By which permission was granted by, and a fee paid to, the king for use of the properties by a religious community.

²¹ Document 50, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p. 405.

²² Document 51, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p. 405.

²³ Document 505, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p. 405.

²⁴ Document 410, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p. 405.

at this time also. However, the original document is now lost and the rights and claims are only understood from a later and more detailed general document drawn up in 1395.

Having successfully negotiated agreement for the alienation of the Ryburgh lands to the priory at Walsingham, Hales might be forgiven for thinking that most of the problems associated with the establishment of the chantry were now over. Yet, in 1395, the crown, not satisfied with the original license to alienate in mortmain granted a decade earlier, decided to once again take an interest in the proceedings taking place in Norfolk. The crown now wished to formally examine the details of the transaction to determine if the grants of land that had been agreed upon by the multiple parties were not of detriment to either the king or other individual interests. To this end, the king's Escheator for Norfolk undertook a full inquisition and enquiry into the matter. The enquiry was held at Walsingham in 1395 and appears to have taken the form of a detailed examination of all the grants, land holdings, and associated rights of all the parties involved. The resulting document is the only full record of all the rights and interests associated.²⁵

The 1395 document lays bare the intricacies of the land holdings associated with the manors of Great and Little Ryburgh. The land in Little Ryburgh, known as the manor of "Woodhall," proved to be the least complex in terms of legal intricacies. In essence, Stephen de Hales held it of Dame Joan who, in turn, held it of Andrew de Cavendish. Cavendish held the land from the king and the Priory of Binham had a grant of 6s per annum made upon the manor. All parties agreed that it could be granted to the Priory of Walsingham as long as the current feudal obligations associated with it, in particular the monies payable to Binham, were observed. The manor of Great Ryburgh was, however, less straightforward.

The manor of Great Ryburgh was essentially formed of three parcels of land. Far bigger than the manor of Little Ryburgh, and with a number of valuable resources, the manor was a wealthy one which had been divided and sub-divided over the centuries.²⁶ In effect, although the de Felton's held the manor, which was in the temporary possession of Stephen de Hales, they had held it from three individual grantees. As already seen in 1392, one parcel of the manor was held from the Earl of Arundel by knight's service, with suit due to the Earl's court at Castle Acre every three weeks. The second parcel was held of John Spoo by knight's service of the neighboring manor of Pensthorpe, whilst the third parcel was held of the Priory of Binham for a yearly rent of 26s 8d. The advowson of the parish church, it was determined, was in the gift of Dame Joan from the Earl of Arundel.

²⁵ Document 631, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p. 405.

²⁶ The manor of Great Ryburgh sat upon a strategic crossing of the river Wensum, had extensive commons, watermeadows, fisheries, and at least one mill. Even in relative East Anglian terms, the manor was a wealthy asset.



Figure 2. The Church of St Andrew, Great Ryburgh. The advowson of this church was passed to the Priory of Walsingham as part of Dame Joan's bequest. Photo: author.

Having fully investigated the matter, and having determined exactly what rights and responsibilities were entailed with the transaction, the king's Escheator finally pronounced that the grant was in no way damaging to the interests of the king. After a decade of negotiation, discussion, and legal transactions, the grant of the lands to the Priory of Walsingham, so long wished for by Dame Joan, could be undertaken. The chantry, designed to pray for the souls of her long-departed husband and family could finally go ahead. Dame Joan finally had her chantry chapel dedicated to St. Anne.

Dame Joan's Chantry

The second half of the fourteenth century and opening decades of the fifteenth saw a marked increase in the number of chantries being established. In East Anglia, where a large number of records survive, chantries took many forms. The simplest were little more than obits, often limited to a specific number of years, whilst the more elaborate, like that of Dame Joan, involved substantial building works and provision for multiple priests or canons to serve these institutions in perpetuity. In many cases, the more-simple chantry endowments were often associated with those earliest established, such as that of Henry of Longchamp in

the church of Burton Pedwardine in Lincolnshire.²⁷ Henry endowed the church with only three acres of arable land and, in return, expected a weekly mass and a half pound wax candle to be burnt before the altar upon the anniversary of his death. However, these early and simple endowments were difficult to maintain over the centuries, particularly when faced with changes in relative land values, shifting populations, and inflation, and it was not uncommon for such institutions to be either subject to a change in their provision or to cease altogether. As a result, the chantries endowed in the second half of the fourteenth century tended to be better provided for and often included detailed lists of specific items that were to be purchased for it. The chantry established by John of Harrington, in Harrington church, Lincolnshire, was required to contain “two chalices, one of the price of fifteen shillings and the other of the price of twelve shillings, two vestments, one for feasts, of the price of twenty shillings and the other for weekdays, of the price of ten shillings, one missal of the price of twenty shillings, one portas of the price of forty shillings, one good chest for the keeping of the ornaments of the price of five shillings, and two cruets.”²⁸

Dame Joan’s surviving requests concerning the establishment of the Walsingham chantry are relatively straightforward compared to many of the similar institutions established at the period. Her request for “four chaplains, canons or seculars” to celebrate divine service daily and for a light upon the altar during mass, are without ambiguity and appear relatively generous in terms of the overall bequest. Her envisaged endowment of lands worth £40 annually, above and beyond the costs of building the chapel itself, equate to a nominal stipend of £10 annually to each chantry priest. With the usual endowment for a chantry priest, even in the latter half of the fifteenth century, only providing an income of between £5 and £6, her endowment would have been regarded as more than sufficient for the creation of a sustainable chantry and bordering upon the generous.²⁹ Sadly any further detailed requests or instructions that may have been issued by Dame Joan to accompany the foundation have not survived. Such detailed instructions to the institutions were not uncommon at the period, such as those associated with the Fitzmartin chantry in Lincoln Cathedral, and it must be assumed that Dame Joan, who appears to have been meticulous in most of her business and financial dealings, left similar instructions.³⁰

As the fourteenth century drew to a close, and with the negotiations to establish the Walsingham chantry at an end, Dame Joan undertook one final act of endowment. She established a second chantry. In 1398 she endowed the Abbey of Barking, a house of Benedictine nuns, with lands in Barking, Dagenham, and London for the establishment of a

²⁷ D. M. Owen, *Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire* (History of Lincolnshire Series, Volume V) (Lincoln: Lincolnshire Local History Society, 1971), p. 92.

²⁸ Owen, p. 97.

²⁹ Owen, p. 97.

³⁰ C.W. Foster and A. Hamilton-Thompson(eds), *The Chantry Certificates for Lincoln and Lincolnshire*, AASRP, xxxiv-xxxv, (1922-5), certificate no.7.

chantry at the altar of St. Ethelburga.³¹ The establishment was to have a single priest who was to celebrate divine service and pray for the soul of Dame Joan, her long-departed husband, and the Abbess and nuns of Barking. Although the scale of the endowment and subsequent institution was far more modest than that at Walsingham, being set at forty-one marks annually, the chantry obviously had strong personal associations for her.³² The most obvious connection, and the probable reason for the chantry's existence, was that the Abbess of the powerful and influential nunnery was none other than Sybil de Felton, her own oldest daughter.³³

Despite having finally had her wishes granted, Dame Joan's chantry at Walsingham was still to be the cause of further negotiation and compromise. In 1408, almost a quarter of a century after Dame Joan had first formally expressed her wish for the chantry to be established, the relatively new Prior of Walsingham, Hugh Wells, was still not entirely satisfied with the outcome. Appealing to the original signatories of the endowment who still lived, and to the remarkably long-lived Dame Joan herself, he requested that the terms of the endowment be revised.³⁴ He requested that, considering the great charges to which the priory had been put establishing the chantry and "for the salvation of the estate of the said church," that they be discharged from the duty of finding one of the four chaplains or chantry priests. Dame Joan, who had outlived her husband, most of her children, two kings of England and at least three priors of Walsingham, acquiesced. The document that granted her approval of this request is the last extant document to refer to Dame Joan in person and it must be assumed that she died shortly afterwards. Her place of burial is unknown.

³¹ May 8th Westminster -- "Licence for the alienation in mortmain by Joan, late wife of Thomas de Felton, knight, of lands, tenements and rents whether held of the king in burgage or in chief, or of others, of the yearly value of 41 marks, to the Abbess and convent of Berkyng, founded by the kings progenitors." Calendar of Patent Rolls. 21st Richard II, Pt 3, membrane 19.

³² 1398 (June 18th, Westminster) -- "Licence for the alienation in mortmain by Joan, late the wife of Thomas de Felton, knight, of 17 messuages and a parcel of land, 6 ½ inches wide and 5 inches long, with appurtenances in the parishes of St Olave, Old Jewry, and St Mary, Stanynglane, London, held in chief in burgage, and 11 messuages, 219 acres of land and 2s 3 ½d of rent in Berkyng and Dakenham, ot held in chief and of yearly value of £20 15s 1d as found by inquisitions taken by Richard Whityngton, mayor of London, and Clement Spice, escheator in Essex, to the abbess and convent of Berkyng, in part satisfaction, viz. 35marks of lands, tenements and rents to the yearly value of 41marks, which the said Joan had licence by letters patent dated 8th May last to alienate in mortmain to the said abbess." Calendar of Patent Rolls. 21st Richard II, Pt 3, membrane 9.

³³ That the chantry priest was to direct his attentions to the altar of St Ethelburga, foundress of the Abbey, may also have been for purely personal reasons. Ethelburga, the supposed foundress of the Abbey, was recorded as being one of the saintly daughters of the Anglo-Saxon King Anna of East Anglia. Her sisters, Etheldreda and Withburga, would have been well-regarded local saints in the parishes in which Dame Joan had grown to adulthood. Etheldreda famously patronized the great monastery at Ely, whilst Withburga established the nunnery at nearby East Dereham, where her holy well was still a popular site for pilgrimage at the end of the fourteenth century.

³⁴ Document 6, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 13th report, 1892, Appendix iv, p. 405.



Figure 3. Stones discovered in a barn near Walsingham. Photo: After Rev. W. Martin, “Some Fragments of Sculpted Stone found in a Barn at East Barsham, Norfolk,” *The Proceedings of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society*_ XI (1892), pp. 257-259.

Postscript

In 1892 the Reverend W. Martin M.A. published a short article in Volume XI of the well established and highly respected *Proceedings of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society*.³⁵ The article, entitled “Some Fragments of Sculpted Stone found in a Barn at East Barsham, Norfolk,” contained a very brief account of certain pre-Reformation sculptures that had come to light during the demolition of an agricultural building a few miles

³⁵ Rev. W. Martin, “Some Fragments of Sculpted Stone found in a Barn at East Barsham, Norfolk,” *The Proceedings of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society* (1892), pp. 257-259.

to the north of the village of Little Walsingham. The report stated that, amongst a mass of worked medieval stonework that had been re-used as building material in the 16th century, had been discovered three fragments of very high class alabaster carvings which appeared to be the remnants of highly decorated and painted religious statues. At the time only two of the three fragments could be positively identified. The first was the lower section of a pietá carving which still showed strong colors upon the surface. The second, which appeared to be a section of the middle of a figure composition, was identified as quite a large statue depicting St. Anne teaching the Blessed Virgin to read. All the fragments appeared to stylistically belong to the second half of the fourteenth, or first half of the fifteenth centuries.



Figure 4. Stone from Walsingham lying in the hedgerows. Photo: author.

The alabaster fragments passed into the ownership of the local landlord and have since disappeared. The rest of the medieval stonework taken from the collapsed barn, of which there was reputedly a large quantity, was carried a mile to the east where it was used to construct a new field barn on a local farm. Today, over a century after it was first constructed, that barn now stands in a ruinous state and carved medieval stonework that once decorated one of England's most powerful and popular religious houses lies scattered in the hedgerows. ●