

Sir Ralph Egerton of Ridley

The second in this series of national heroes associated with Bunbury is Sir Ralph Egerton of Ridley who was the second son of Philip Egerton of Egerton. Though the dates of Ralph's birth and subsequent marriage to Margaret, daughter and heiress of Ralph Basset of Blore, are unrecorded his exploits as a soldier in the service of Henry VIII are well documented. In 1509, for loyal service he was appointed Ranger of Delamere Forest, a position evidently superior to the office of the Master Forester, a hereditary post held by no less than sixteen members of the Done family between 1244 and 1639.

At the Battle of Tournay in 1513 Ralph Egerton distinguished himself by taking the French Standard. His royal master was very appreciative, for Ralph Egerton was knighted and appointed Standard Bearer of England for life at a salary of £100 per annum. Sir Ralph was also granted the Manor of Ridley, together with lands therein and in other places. Ridley manor house was, in those days, a massive establishment transformed by a previous owner, Sir William Stanley, into "the finest gentleman's house of all Cheshire." In later times Ridley Manor was garrisoned by Parliamentary troops, surviving a Royalist attack on 4 June 1645, and was burnt down about 1700.

While Sir Ralph was undoubtedly a national hero he is best remembered locally for his close association with St. Boniface's Church, Bunbury. During Sir Ralph's lifetime Bunbury Parish Church also retained the college that had been founded by Sir Hugh Calveley in 1387. Possibly Sir Ralph wished to emulate Sir Hugh and attempt to ease his way to heaven by building a large chantry chapel on the south side of the chancel. This chapel is usually called the Ridley Chapel though it is sometimes more correctly referred to as the Egerton Chapel. F.H.Crossley, the renowned church historian, described the perpendicular-style Ridley Chapel, as follows:

"It is a singularly perfect piece of work, and is still beautiful in spite of neglect and restoration, the arcade to the chancel is filled in with stone screens nine feet nine inches in width and eleven feet in height, the screens are inscribed 'This chapel was made at the cost and charge of Sir Ralph Egerton Knight in the year of our Lord God 1527.' and interspersed with small shields with the arms of Egerton The doorway retains its ancient wooden doors and hinges, with delicate monograms of Sir Ralph and his Lady Margaret."

Sir Ralph died on 4 March 1528 before his chantry chapel was completed. In his detailed will, dated 26 March 1525, he left precise instructions for the completion of his chantry and also his burial arrangements:

"He thereby orders his body to be buried in the chapel of Bunbury and that 12 torches be borne by 12 men in black gowns the day of his burial and 24 tapers burning about his body the same day; and that his executors distribute £10 sterling not only to beggars but also to such poor men and women as they shall think convenient." He likewise ordered his executors "to furnish at his proper cost and charges the said chapel covered with

lead, ceiled and drawn with knots gilded and the panels painted also two images either side of the altar within the Chapel and the Chancel."

His executors were to provide

"one Chalice gilt and another double gilt, three suits of vestments, one for working days, another for Sundays and low holy-days and the other a good suit for solemn and high festival days; and that his green velvet gown lined with green sarsnet guarded with cloth of gold, as also his gown of velvet lined with black satin and perled with gold [gold buttons] as also his jacket of velvet perled with gold be taken for performance of the same; as also his jacket of cloth of silver and of blue russet velvet to make crosses and other ornaments to the said Chapel which he orders to have paved with square ashlar or tile or stone."

The executors were charged to

"erect a tomb for him with a large marble stone with his name and arms engraved thereon with this addition: 'The King's Standard Bearer and Treasurer to the Lady Princess,' as also a gilt plate fastened on the wall with his names and arms and additions aforesaid."

Sir Ralph also willed that a house was to be built in Bunbury

"for two chantry priests to pray for his soul, for his father's and mother's souls of his kind and all Christian Souls for ever."

The Chantry House was to contain

"two chambers, one parlour, a buttery and a kitchen, and the said priests to be maintained out of his mills at Nantwich."

In 1992 the Ridley Chapel in Bunbury Church is still used and Sir Ralph's memorial plate still adorns the south wall. The images and his large marble tomb have, however, disappeared but the tomb location is marked by a sandstone slab beneath the present-day blue carpet. A later Egerton tombstone, partly hidden by organ works, together with memorial tablets to John Egerton and John Egerton, jun., who ministered consecutively in Bunbury between 1805 and 1849, can also be seen. The black and white house, still known as "The Chantry House", lived in by laity since the Dissolution, has been restored in the twentieth century, and is to be found about 200m to the south of the church.

Later generations of the Egerton Family were equally distinguished. Sir Ralph's son and heir was Richard Egerton of Ridley who was also knighted, and who was buried at Bunbury on 11 June 1579. Sir Richard married Mary, daughter of Sir Richard Grosvenor of Eaton, who bore a son, Ralph, later to be buried at Bunbury on 18 November 1619. Sir Richard also had a natural son, Thomas Egerton, who represented Cheshire in Parliament and held many important legal offices. Thomas Egerton took part in the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots, and advised in his indictment that she should be styled "commonly called queen of Scots" to avoid scruples about judging a sovereign. An interesting episode in Thomas Egerton's life occurred in 1597, when he was excommunicated because

of his unlawful marriage with his second "wife" in a private house without banns, and was obliged to obtain absolution from the Bishop of London. Despite this scandalous episode, Thomas Egerton later became Lord Chancellor of England with the title Viscount Brackley. Lord Brackley died in 1617 and was the ancestor of the earls of Ellesmere and the Dukes of Bridgewater.

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