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Chapter 1

The Le Strange family and their records

Securing the status and long-term survival of the family has always been the principal concern of the English aristocracy and gentry. Central to that ambition, at least until the late nineteenth century, was the successful management of their landed estates. Failure to perform this somewhat tedious task could spell ruination for the family. Unfortunately for them, the task became much more difficult from the late sixteenth century as price inflation reduced the value of their rents and placed new demands on their management skills. By the 1600s estates in Norfolk were changing hands rapidly as the unlucky or simply incompetent failed to grapple with the issues, while the astute and enterprising capitalised on their misfortunes. When Sir Hamon Le Strange inherited the family's ancient estate at Hunstanton in 1604, after a long minority, the outlook was bleak; 'he was left neyther household stuff nor stock and his Chief House halfe built and his farme houses in such decay, so he hath built most of them out of the ground', as his wife Alice later recalled.¹ Typically, such estates were snapped up by the great lawyers, notably Sir Henry Hobart of Blickling, who amassed huge portfolios from the profits of high office and exploited their local connections.² However, Sir Hamon, a nephew of Sir Henry, resisted this fate and, with the help of his wife, restored the fortunes of the family through the careful and innovative management of their estates.³ How they achieved this outcome and secured the future of the Le Strange family, who still prosper at Hunstanton on their estates after 700 years, is the principal subject of this book.

So what was the secret of their success? A particular aspect of the strategy pursued by Sir Hamon and Alice was the way they tried, through their records, to ensure that their improvements endured and were sustained by their successors. Fathers often wrote books of general advice for their sons, but the Le Stranges' approach was specifically directed to passing on management skills and a detailed knowledge of the estate.⁴ In effect, Hamon and Alice created a prototype knowledge economy which

1 NRO, LEST/P10. See chapters 3 and 7 for further discussion of Alice's summary of their financial affairs. From this note onwards, the prefix NRO (Norfolk Record Office) to documents in the Le Strange Collection (LEST) has been dropped.

2 See chapter 4.

3 See esp. chapter 6.

4 Sir Edward Coke drew up a list of 'Precepts for the use of my children and their Posteritye'; for a selection of his wise advice, which had minimal impact on his sons, see C.W. James, *Chief Justice Coke, His Family and Descendants at Holkham* (London, 1929), pp. 78–81, Appendix VI. More generally, Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700* (London, 1994) cite many examples of this aspect of gentry culture, notably that of Sir John Oglander of Nunwell: pp. 20–3.

they successfully handed down to their children, grandchildren and most particularly to their great-grandson, Sir Nicholas Le Strange, who inherited the estate as a minor in 1669 and lived until 1724.⁵ This activity produced an estate archive of exceptional range and quality; the documents illustrate, quite clearly, through instructions to readers and cross-referencing back to earlier documents, how knowledge was created, managed and transferred from generation to generation, and how the family believed that this procedure was essential if the estate was to be preserved for posterity.⁶ Their understanding of the economic value of knowledge and the need to pass it on resonates strongly with modern management techniques, yet historians have largely ignored this aspect of estate management; this book is an attempt to correct the omission and cast light on the process of knowledge management in the early modern period.⁷

A striking feature of the documents is Sir Hamon's early awareness of what was required.⁸ Memoranda books dating from 1605 are full of information on the estate concerning the titles and rights to his property.⁹ In the same year he commissioned his first map and started on new accounts and field books.¹⁰ He also built up a library of agricultural texts and management manuals.¹¹ In his work Sir Hamon was guided by his guardians, Sir Henry Spelman, Sir Henry Hobart and his father-in-law, Richard

5 See chapter 5.

6 P. Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability: Nature and Destiny: c.1500–1870* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 90–101, includes a section on posterity in the context of woodland management with particular reference to the popularising of the concept by John Evelyn in his widely read book *Sylva, or a discourse of forest trees* (1664).

7 An exception is Ursula Schlude's work on the Electress Anna of Saxony and her creation of practical knowledge on the electoral estates in the sixteenth century, 'Diversity of media – diversity of gender and social strata. Agrarian knowledge and the written word at a sixteenth century princely court', paper for *Rural History 2013*, Bern. For a later period European historians, led by Paul Brassley, Yves Segers and Leen Van Molle, are working on 'Knowledge networks in rural Europe since 1700'; see also Eric H. Ash, *Power, Knowledge and Expertise in Elizabethan England* (Baltimore, MD, 2004); Peter M. Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology and Nature, 1750–1840* (Oxford, 2016).

8 Elizabeth Griffiths, "A Country Life".

9 Four memoranda books survive: LEST/Q34, Q36, Q37 and Q38.

10 Between 1605 and 1633 Sir Hamon commissioned maps for every part of his estate. The earliest for Holme in 1605 is missing, but they survive for Hunstanton, 1615, LEST/AO1; Ringstead, c.1625, LEST/OD; Ringstead Brecks, LEST/OB5, OB6; Heacham (in two parts) c.1623, LEST/OC2, OB2; Sedgeford (in three parts) c.1631, LEST/OC1; Gressenhall, c.1624 NRO Hayes & Storr, 72, MR 235, 242 x 1, and Brisley, 1622, repaired by Sir Nicholas (4th Bt) in 1706, NRO MR RO402/7. Sir Nicholas also made a list of 'Surveys and Plotts ... and time when taken' in one of Sir Hamon's memoranda books, LEST/Q37, which is how we know about the map for Holme. Subsequently, these maps formed the basis of his books of field maps undertaken in the 1680s and 1690s.

11 Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth Century Household: The World of Alice Le Strange* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 26–48 for a discussion on the use of these manuals, which included C. Estienne, *Maison Rustique, or the Countrey Farme*, translated by R. Surfleete in 1616.

Stubbe,¹² but his greatest asset by far was his wife, Alice, who soon showed her mettle, taking over the household accounts in 1610 from her husband and reviving the family tradition of weekly kitchen books in 1613.¹³ At the same time, she started receiving rents in place of her elderly father and, with his help, she bought sheep and kept tiny flocks for her five children.¹⁴ After he died in 1619 she managed her own estate at Sedgeford and reorganised the accounts and farming regimes. Gradually she extended her role, drawing up sheep accounts for the entire estate in 1625 and assuming responsibility for all the estate accounts in 1632; this included updating field books and rentals and keeping a record of the family finances. Alice's documents are notable for their neatness and clarity; she clearly understood the need to educate her children in farming and estate management, as she had been, and to present the information in an accessible and easily transferable way for her successors.

The success of her strategy can be seen most vividly in the farming notebooks of her eldest son, Sir Nicholas. Soon after his marriage in 1631 he embarked on a new venture draining marshes at Hunstanton, Holme and, later, Heacham.¹⁵ In these notebooks, drawing on his father's expertise in water management and building work, he provided a record of the drainage process, from the layout of drains to the cultivation of the marshes and the establishment of new farmsteads, with calculations of the costs and profits. Most significantly, he imitated the clear handwriting of his mother and designed these books as manuals for his successors. The final notebook includes a survey of what had been achieved, with fifty-five pages of notes and 'miscellaneous observations' accompanied by instructions to the reader. In 1641, when the marshes at Heacham had become productive, the income from corn rose to £864 compared with £290 in 1621; this formed a substantial portion of estate revenues, which had increased from £1700 to £2650 per annum over the same twenty years.

Continuing success was not, however, a foregone conclusion. The Le Stranges suffered severely in the Civil War when their marshes, corn and sheep flocks were plundered by the parliamentary forces; it took them several years to restock, reinstate schemes and stabilise their finances.¹⁶ However, the point is that they did recover, unlike some other families crippled by similar losses, fines, sequestration and high taxation.¹⁷ The sheep accounts show Alice rebuilding the flocks from scratch, with relatives, friends and tenants placing sheep and paying her a small fee, which she

12 Sir Henry Spelman of Congham, 1563–1641, antiquarian and jurist, <www.historyofparliamentonline.org>; Sir Henry Hobart (c.1560–1625), see Griffiths, 'Management' and 'Sir Henry Hobart: a new hero of Norfolk agriculture?', *Agricultural History Review*, 46 (1998), pp. 15–34; for Richard Stubbe see chapter 7.

13 Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender*, esp. chapter 4.

14 See chapter 7.

15 See chapter 8. Four farming notebooks survive: LEST/KA6, KA9, KA10 and KA24.

16 The Le Stranges, father and three sons, were actively engaged in the civil war, playing a leading role in the defence of King's Lynn against the parliamentary forces in 1643. R.W. Ketton-Cremer, 'Sir Hamon L'Estrange and his sons', *Norfolk Gallery* (1958), pp. 56–94.

17 R.W. Ketton-Cremer, *Norfolk in the Civil War: A Portrait of a Society in Conflict*, 2nd edn (Norwich, 1985), pp. 292–304; Heal and Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, pp. 214–26.

recorded alongside tiny sums for the tithe wool and lambs; every penny counted.¹⁸ By 1650 receipts for corn, wool and sheep had almost recovered to pre-war levels, although debts remained a stubborn problem.¹⁹ The greatest threat to their lasting recovery was not so much the war as the deaths of Sir Hamon and Alice, and Sir Nicholas and his eldest son, Hamon, between 1654 and 1656. Sir Nicholas's younger son, who inherited the estate in 1655, also died young in 1669, leaving a small child, Sir Nicholas, the fourth baronet, in the care of his aunt, Lady Astley.²⁰

Not willing personally to undertake her duties, yet desirous that the infant 'might be educated and his estate managed with the best care and advantage', Bridget Astley assigned the guardianship to Sir Christopher Calthorpe and John Le Strange, 'neere relatives and friends' of the young boy.²¹ This was a wise move. In a letter to his aunt in 1682 Sir Nicholas acknowledged his debt, 'having rec'd Sir C.C.'s accounts for the Guardianship [of my estate] wherein I find he managed all things to the best advantage & care'.²²

Over the next forty-two years, armed with this education and upbringing, Sir Nicholas engineered a further revival of the family fortunes. His strategy included searching the 'Evidence House', where he found Sir Hamon's memoranda books, as he explained in a note:

This booke I found in ye old evidence house with a decayed and worm-eaten cover thrown by and neglected. But upon perusal meeting with severall things relating to building and every material and likely to be of use, I put an index or table to that part of the booke, and such other observations as might possibly prove of service and convenience to refer to upon occasion.²³

In his estate records he referred repeatedly to Alice's field books and rentals and used them as models for his own updated versions. He also commissioned a series of new field maps with notes explaining how they should be preserved: 'These books ought not to be lodg'd in the ye Evidence Room. For by reason of some fault in the past the moysture & damp of that room contracts so great a mould that it is apt to spott and deface ye draughts as may be discern'd in most of ye tables.'²⁴ In other words, Sir Nicholas rebuilt the knowledge bank created by Sir Hamon, Alice and his grandfather; with even greater awareness, he tried to ensure it was used and preserved for future generations.

18 Chapter 7.

19 Griffiths, "A Country Life", pp. 230–55. Receipt books have not survived for the period 1641–50, so it is difficult to assess the precise impact of the war.

20 See Figure 5.1. Lady Astley was Bridget Coke, d. of John Coke of Holkham, widow of Sir Isaac Astley of Melton Constable.

21 LEST/AA18.

22 LEST/KA11, Sir Christopher Calthorpe, son of Sir James Calthorpe of East Barsham and Catherine Lewkenor, the sister of Anne who married Sir Nicholas Le Strange in 1631. The letter to Lady Astley, LEST/P20.

23 LEST/Q38.

24 LEST/EH8 field maps of Ringstead, c.1690s.