

# A Man and His House

## Sir Ralph Sadleir and Standon Lordship

*by Rob Street*

### Preface

This story has been written because we moved into Lordship Cottage next to Standon Lordship in 1980 and ever since, Sir Ralph Sadleir has been 'around'. Though most of our cottage was built in 1870 when the Duke of Wellington owned the Lordship estate, the back wall of the cottage is the original Tudor garden wall.

Over the years I have read everything I could find with the name 'Sadleir' in, from 18<sup>th</sup> century histories and 19<sup>th</sup> century biographies to documents in the Hertfordshire Records Office. I have combined this with my local knowledge and added some imaginative interpretations of times past.

Please read this story in the spirit it was written. I'm no historian, although the facts have come from reliable sources. It's an attempt to pass on Sir Ralph Sadleir to you. I'm open to queries and suggestions (you can email me at [robstreet@freeuk.com](mailto:robstreet@freeuk.com)).

You may also be interested in this website: [www.sadleir.org](http://www.sadleir.org)

Standon Lordship is now a private house and not open to visitors. Please respect the owners' privacy.

*Rob Street (with thanks to my editor, Tricia Street!)*

### Introduction

This is the story of a man and his house: the man, Sir Ralph Sadleir, 16<sup>th</sup> century Privy Councillor to Henry VIII, Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I; and the house, Standon Lordship, built by Sir Ralph in 1546. In later years the Lordship was partly knocked down, rebuilt, and nearly destroyed by fire before becoming the elegant private country house it is today; but here we shall only concern ourselves with its history up to 1660 when it passed out of the hands of the Sadleir family.

Ralph (his father Henry called him Raff, while he signed his letters Rafe, but we shall call him Ralph) was a 'doer' to three monarchs. If you wanted anything done you called Ralph. Lloyd's 'Statement and Favourites of England' called him a 'faithful subject and a honest man', and during the time of the Tudor court when the favourite sport seemed to be daggers in the back, Ralph could be trusted with all your little secrets. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were generous. Ralph was knighted, became our ambassador to Scotland and was given other lesser titles as well as lots and lots of land and buildings throughout the country. He never became a Lord - more of that later - but at his death he was the richest commoner in England.

### Chapter 1 1507 to 1535

Ralph Sadleir (again sometimes spelled Saddler or Sadler) was born in 1507 towards the end of the reign of Henry VII. Ralph's father was also a Henry, but we don't know his mother's name. As usual history tends to be written by men for men. Henry Sadleir spent his early years as steward to a wealthy Warwickshire landowner, land that was eventually acquired by Ralph. We know that in 1520 Henry Sadleir was a supplier of buckram and canvas for Henry VIII's Field of the Cloth of Gold, the

completely over the top extravaganza that was designed to put Francis I, King of France, in his place. We also know that by 1521 Henry Sadleir had moved on from Warwickshire to Tilty Abbey near Great Dunmow in Essex and had got to know that other great fixer, Thomas Cromwell. In the same year he bought a house in Hackney, London, a place described at the time as having 'green fields and clean air'. In order to secure the house Henry Sadleir needed to pay off an outstanding debt of £8 2s. Thomas Cromwell came up with the money. The house was later rebuilt by Ralph probably on the site of the present Sutton House, Hackney, now owned by the National Trust.

By this time Henry Sadleir and Thomas Cromwell (now rising fast up the political ladder as rent and debt collector to Cardinal Wolsey), were good friends. Such good friends that Ralph, who was now fourteen, was living under Cromwell's roof in Fenchurch Street. This was his big break, though at fourteen he probably didn't know it. He could soon read and write Latin, converse in French and, unusually for the time, Greek. A bright lad. Living in such an environment he must also have picked up some of the political skills needed to succeed in the Tudor court. Cromwell saw his potential and by 1527 had made Ralph his secretary. He must have been delighted with his new employee for within two years Ralph is down in his master's will for 200 marks, his library and his pictures, pictures which were still in the Sadleir family in 1623. Perhaps Ralph could supply something his master lacked; his prudence and honesty are quoted by all observers, while Cromwell is not generally known for such qualities.

By 1533 Cromwell was in the big league - Chancellor of the Exchequer of England. His influence was stamped all over the state papers of the time, he moved his own people into positions of power and of course, gathered enemies.

Ralph was 25 at this time, a bit on the short side with blue eyes and brown hair, and he fell in love. Helen or Ellen Mitchell was a domestic at Tilty Abbey and after knowing her about a year he proposed. Besides his love, he saw her as an 'honest woman'. They both came from humble stock, although he of course was educated while she was not.

Helen remains something of a mystery. We know that she had been married previously with two children and that her husband, Matthew Barre, was presumed dead in Ireland. But 12 years after her marriage to Ralph and seven children later her first husband reappeared in London ready to grab the tabloid headlines. Sir Ralph, Secretary of State to Henry VIII, had a bigamous marriage. The story broke while he was on state business in Scotland. It was a matter of catching the first horse home to sort out the mess. Though a commission of bishops under Archbishop Cranmer declared the first marriage valid, a Private Bill was rushed through Parliament declaring the second marriage a true union, and establishing the legitimacy of the three sons and four daughters. Ralph and Helen were married for over 40 years and apart from one possible indiscreet moment of a bastard son the marriage seems to have been a happy one. An interesting light is thrown on Helen's character in a 1555 document reaffirming the validity of the second marriage. Despite being abandoned without means by her good for nothing first husband she did not fall into sin but laboured "honestly and virtuously", even applying to a convent in Clerkenwell to become a nun. The prioress refused her request however, saying she was too young to retire from the world and that if she continued in her honest behaviour "she might with God's grace be matched with some honest person in matrimony". How right she was!

As Cromwell's secretary Ralph was able and hardworking; a contemporary called him a 'diligent and a trusty servant' and by his own admission he was a workaholic accustomed to rising at four in the morning, impatient to start the day. In a letter he writes, " I cannot endure the spending of that time in designing an action which might perform two, or that delay in performing two which might well perform twenty". By 1535 Henry VIII had noticed Ralph's energy and talent and he was taken into the King's service.

## Chapter 2 1535 to 1546

It was said that if Henry VIII knew nothing else he was a good judge of two things, 'a man and a dish of meat'. He judged well with Ralph Sadleir and all too well with dishes of meat by the size of him in later life. Though Cromwell had lost his Secretary to the King the two families were still in close contact and the Sadleir's first son was named Thomas in his honour. Cromwell was also invited to be godfather to the child.

This was a good time to come into the King's circle, for it was the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. The nobility must have rubbed their hands with glee when Henry decided to sell off monastic property cheaply. Some in the know were able to purchase the best land and recoup the purchase price from the income of the land within 10 years. Once they acquired the land they ruthlessly exploited the small farmers by increasing rents thus causing further deprivation of the rural working classes. You bought your land by what ever means you could; words like villainy and corruption come into mind and in a buyer's market you soon sold it on for a fat profit. Although Ralph did acquire part of the land of Selby Abbey in Yorkshire by slightly dubious means, the feeling is that in his case patronage and friendship rather than fraud were the main levers to his land purchases.

Such purchases were only possible for Ralph because he was being well rewarded by the King for his good work. And work he did. In 1537 for instance Henry instructed him to deliver a letter to Queen Margaret in Edinburgh. He left his home in Hackney on a cold late January morning for the 400 mile trip to Edinburgh. Travelling some 30 miles a day by horse on roads no better than poorly maintained cart tracks, getting lost between Doncaster and York, he finally arrived in Edinburgh on the 10<sup>th</sup> February. By the end of March he was off again from London on a 12-hour rough passage by boat to Boulogne to deliver more letters.

On the road and especially on the road to Scotland was to be Ralph's pattern of life for the next 40 years. His trips north were not without danger. Once at Darlington villagers attacked him and from then on he insisted he had protection from local dignitaries. If he was not delivering documents he was negotiating the union of England and Scotland. On one trip north in 1539 Ralph was to deliver six horses as a present from Henry VIII to James V of Scotland. By the time he had got them to Edinburgh they were on their knees. James was not impressed and called them 'a pack of donkeys'.

By 1539 Ralph had been made bailiff and steward to the Lordship Estate in Standon. We know that at this time the Sadleir family spent some time in Standon as there is a record of Lord Audley visiting them there. But their main family home was still in Hackney on the site of Henry Sadleir's original house.

1540 was a big year for Ralph Sadleir. Besides another trip north he was knighted (probably on May Day when the King celebrated the anniversary of his accession to

the throne), made Secretary of State, and saw his mentor, Thomas Cromwell, lose his head .

The paperwork of state was overwhelming so Henry created a Tudor jobshare. He gave the job of Secretary of State not just to Sir Ralph but also to his close friend Thomas Wriothesley. It was commonplace for all Secretaries of State to be well read, well travelled, and university educated. Well read our new knight was (history being one of his subjects), and also well travelled between England, Scotland and France. But passing through Oxford and Cambridge on these travels was the nearest he got to the hallowed towers of the universities.

Both Secretaries of State received a salary of £1350 per year, gratuities of approximate £600 and a payment in kind of £700 per year: an income considerably more than most of the peerage. Sir Ralph was gathering wealth around him and was still only 33 years old. His job also held considerable power. One of the most important tasks as Secretary of State was to present bills personally to Henry. If Sir Ralph favoured the petition then he would have given it the Sadleir spin. If Henry gave the OK the bill was drafted, countersigned by Sir Ralph and then became legislation. Both Sadleir and Wriothesley were also involved in the internal security of England, gathering information from the Shires in matters of heresy and treason, even having the power to commit people to prison.

The job of Secretary suited Sir Ralph down to the ground, being a born diplomat and good at organising paper and people. But some people are never satisfied; a certain Nicholas Faunt complained that both Sadleir and Wriothesley were not doing enough in checking foreign correspondence. As it was their desks were piled high with dispatches and intelligence reports from ambassadors and 'books peculiar to forraine service'.

Sir Ralph was one of the country's first civil servants. It was the start of bureaucracy and form filling. While the big names of the Tudor period have been glamorised in recent books and T.V. programmes, it was people like Sir Ralph who actually did the work of running the country. He must have enjoyed his time as Secretary of State from 1540 to 1543.

Though Sir Ralph's career took off in 1540, Cromwell's hit rock bottom. He was accused of treason, which was nothing new in Tudor times as there were more people accused of treason during this period in history than at any other time . Like most he was sent to the Tower of London. Cromwell pleaded for his life by writing a letter to Henry. Sir Ralph, still loyal to Cromwell, offered to take the letter personally to the King. The Jacobean playwright, Chapman, later captured this action of loyalty in a play called 'Cromwell':

*'Cromwell: "Sir Rafe Sadleir, pray a word with you. You were my man, and all that you possesse came by this meanes, to requite all this, will you take this letter here of me, and give it with your owne handes to the Kinge?" Sadleir: "I kiss your hand, and never will I rest ere to the Kinge this be delivered".*

This was a dangerous act as he could have found himself highly unpopular with the King. Sir Ralph did his best to persuade Henry of Cromwell's innocence and must have emphasised the last three words of the letter; 'mercy,mercy,mercy'. Henry was apparently 'much moved' by the letter and asked Sir Ralph to read it three times. As it happened it didn't move him that much; within a month Cromwell's head was cut off by an inexperienced executioner using a blunt axe. Within 7 months of his death several people close to Cromwell were rounded up, including Sir Ralph who was at Hampton Court at the time, and sent to the tower. But not for long. Henry soon realised that he had lost a faithful servant and that Sir Ralph was not a political threat

so on the ninth day the handcuffs were unlocked and his Secretary of State was back at his desk.

1540 was also the year Sir Ralph started building up his land ownership in a big way. As well as acquiring many acres of arable land and 30 acres of water meadow in Standon in that year, he also became owner of 13 parcels of land in other parts of the country as well as 13 manors; 1541 saw another 5 manors, 3 of them in Hertfordshire; and in 1544 13 more manors, 5 in Hertfordshire. But in 1546 he reached the height of his buying power with massive land holdings in Gloucestershire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire plus little bits of land in practically every other county in England.

It seems Sir Ralph was a fairly ruthless landlord. Alice Mercer and her husband were Sir Ralph's tenants and had built up a nice little farm in Standon. Her husband died leaving her with the farm and children to support. At about this time Sir Ralph demanded an increase of £2 in rent despite her lease saying any increase was not possible. She could not pay and was evicted without warning, her house destroyed and chattels taken away. She was heard saying that her children had 'noe place where to putt theyre poore heades'. She had little appeal as Sir Ralph 'was a manne of such power...'

Though Sir Ralph was at the centre of political life in Henry VIII's circle he was on the edge when it came to the social life at court. He hated the parties, masques and revelries, so he missed the court gossip - like whose turn it was to have his head removed. Perhaps his bigamous marriage still embarrassed him as we know that his wife Helen never did attend court. When Henry requested that Sir Ralph and his wife should oversee the young baby Mary, the future Mary Queen of Scots, Sir Ralph accepted but excused Helen from the task as she 'having never been brought up at court' and lacking 'convenient experience' would be unsuitable. So while Sir Ralph was in the thick of Tudor political life his loyal wife was at home with the ever increasing children. Maybe her early background always made her feel unworthy of her high status.

In 1543 Sir Ralph was still riding north continuing his love-hate relationship with the Scots, this time to meet for the first time the year-old baby who was to become Mary Queen of Scots. 40 years on, our ambassador was to take a major part in condemning her for high treason. But for now he was sent by Henry to open negotiations regarding the betrothal of the baby Mary to the Prince of Wales. After much diplomatic to-ing and fro-ing between Edinburgh and London the deal was struck. This was still a turbulent time between England and Scotland, with Scotland looking more to France as its natural ally and some people wondered if the marriage and the union of the two countries would take place.

The following year there were indeed skirmishes between England and Scotland under the command of the Earl of Hertford with Sir Ralph being given the task of handling the money to run the campaign. Later that year he accompanied King Henry to France but it was not long before he was back north again with the Earl of Hertford once more sorting out the Scots. By the end of 1545 Sir Ralph was at last on his way back to Standon to build himself a stately home suitable for his now elevated position at in the Tudor court.

### Chapter 3 The Lordship - Bring in the Builders.

It was usual for large manors to have manor houses. The manor of Standon was one of the largest in the area, but we are not sure where the manor house was. The most likely contender seems to be the largest house of the period which was known as the Brickhouse, the first reference being 1477. It had 21 rooms and a tower - most

families of the time lived in one room. In historic documents it is sometimes called 'manor of Standon' but this could really mean "manor house" because of its size and perhaps because the King's representative, e.g. Sir Ralph, lived in it or used it at certain times. Where was it? Salmon in 1728 says at 'the way west of Standon that leads by the present gravel pit to the Ware road. The name is Colney Crouch way'. The word Crouch means crossroads, so a crossroads to the west of the village on the road to Ware, could mean where Papermill Lane crosses Barwick Road and turns into Dowsetts Lane. We do know that Barwick Road was a very busy road by the amount of coins found in the area dating back to Roman times, and even a collection of market tokens (these were used as currency for the poor) which suggests there was a market sometime somewhere along Barwick Road.

It could be that Sir Ralph, while lodging at the Brickhouse, wanted to buy it and extend it but the owner wouldn't sell. There is a reference to his new house being built 'high on stony ground', so perhaps this was the intended site that never materialised. Whatever the circumstances, while Sir Ralph was away, his Steward went ahead with plans to build a new house on low ground by the river Rib. We do know that Sir Ralph was surprised when returning to Standon one day to see how large his new house was; he wasn't a man of great show and kept a tight hold on the purse strings, more than could be said for his son and grandson.

Sir Ralph's decision to build in Standon must have given the poor of the area hope of employment, not only for building work but for staff he would require to run the house. These were hard times for the poor as the population was rising fast and there was a surplus of labour. If you got work your wages were eaten away by high inflation. I think Sir Ralph would have paid the going rate for his building workers (he was hard but fair), at 8d per day for masons and carpenters and 4d per day for labourers. Six days work a week, long hours, no stopping for bad weather, Christmas day and Easter day for holidays, which were unpaid - this was the lot of the poor.

Though all of Sir Ralph's personal papers have been lost over time, what we do have is a copy of a plan of the Lordship in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Whether the whole house was built in one go or extensions were added as he got more power and money we do not know. The only other drawing we have of the house is by Johannes Drapentier dated around 1700 and shows the west and south elevation. Though you can get an idea of the appearance of the house, it is very stylised in its detail showing a coach and horses racing up to the front door.

The elevations of the Lordship were built to the fashion of the time, a central medieval style main entrance, crenellated towers either side, casement windows, and the latest luxury of the time, chimneys - 48 of them. The poor had to do with a hole in their thatch roof. Most of the west elevation as you see today is the original Tudor brick house.

If possible you dug your clay to make your bricks from the area around where you were building your house. There is no clay around the Lordship for making bricks but records show there were brickfields in operation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century at Little Hadham. Another possibility could have been Colliers End. Timber was required for floor boards, roof timbers, windows and doors. Even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century timber was nationally very scarce. Maybe the wood came locally from his own estate or from Plashes Wood. Then there was the lead for the roof and gutters. New lead was being mined in Derbyshire and the Mendip hills in Somerset but there was also a big trade in second-hand lead. Sir Ralph had access to old lead from the monasteries given to him by Henry VIII; there was even a trade in stolen lead. A story of the time found a vicar stripping lead from his own church to sell! One of the most expensive items of

building materials was glass. Undoubtedly Sir Ralph could afford glass, the best quality of which came from France, while the poor of Standon and Puckeridge had to make do with scraps of wood as shutters. Glass was so expensive at the time that the Lord of Alnwick Castle in Northumberland instructed his servants to remove the glass from the windows when he wasn't using the castle in case it got broken.

It must have been mayhem on the site when the house was being built. Deliveries by horse and cart of bricks, timber for the house and the scaffolding, and sand and lime for mortar must have turned the lanes and the site in winter into a quagmire. With all this mud the workers only wore rags around their feet.

We don't know the actual size of the original house in 1546 and it was only a lot later in 1623 on the 31<sup>st</sup> August, that an inventory of the contents and the names of the rooms was made. By this time Sir Ralph's grandson, another Ralph, owned the house. By 1623 the house had an inner courtyard and extensions from the original house stretching down to the river Rib.

According to the inventory the house had 58 rooms, the main two being the Great Chamber which was richly decorated and could have been used to present masques and plays, and the Long Gallery for exercising during bad weather and hanging your paintings. The inventory lists portraits of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, Henry V, Prince Edward, 2 pictures of Sir Ralph, Thomas Sadleir and wife, and a portrait of Thomas Cromwell by Holbein. Sir Ralph inherited most of Cromwell's library and paintings, but where is the Holbein painting today? The National Portrait Gallery in London has two copies of Cromwell 'after' Holbein but not directly attributable to him. Maybe when the house was sold in 1660 to the Aston family they also had the paintings and over time the portrait got lost. Another grand room was the Great Wardrobe with lavish furniture and Sir Ralph's armour. The Sadleir family rooms had curtains and valences made from velvet and silk, and heavy woollen damask in colour combination of blue, yellow, green, crimson and black. There are Chambers for the falkner (falconer), chaplain, and cook with private chambers for Mr Took, Mr Wilson and Mr Nowe. Mr Nowe must have been important, maybe the steward, as he had his own servant. The inventory also shows two store rooms for the sheets, a bowling alley, and a stillhouse with 'six stills and a great press'.

A lot of sleeping was done in the house as the inventory lists fifty beds! The Sadleir family had four poster beds, some decorated with plumes and feathers, while the servants slept on straw mattresses. Four poster beds were expensive to buy and become valued possessions, often left in wills.

The 1623 inventory is one of the very few personal documents of the Sadleir family that has survived, and it shows the opulence and the grandeur of life at the Lordship. All this wealth was created by Sir Ralph and it seems his son, Thomas and Thomas's son Ralph, who had a reputation for wining and dining, both had the urge to spend the inheritance. When the grandson Ralph died in 1660 most of the land bought by Sir Ralph throughout the country had been sold; the house and the land around the Lordship passed into the hands of the Aston family.

#### Chapter 4 1546 to 1558

In 1546 the building of the Lordship, Standon, was well under way. In 1547 Henry VIII died and in his will the King left Sir Ralph 200 gold marks for loyal service and gave him a position as one of the 16 executors to run the country until the young Edward VI came of age. The King had never given him a peerage, although unlike his daughter Elizabeth, he seemed to hand out honours to everybody and anybody.

Yet here was a loyal, trustworthy subject who never became a Lord: Lord Standon perhaps? We don't really know why; perhaps he refused a peerage. Perhaps, characteristically, he knew when to keep his distance from the Court. What we do know is that while others in similar positions were picking up titles, Sir Ralph was picking up land, property and lots of wealth.

On the succession of Edward VI Sir Ralph was certainly still in the thick of the political mire in his new position as executor. When 16 men gather together it's not long before one man wants to be in charge. That man was the Duke of Somerset and it was put to the vote. Sir Ralph said 'yes' while his close friend Thomas Wriothesley, now Earl of Southampton, voted 'no'. The Duke of Somerset won the day and became Lord Protector of the country until Edward reached the age of 18.

We now see the bravery of Sir Ralph in Scotland on the field of battle. The battle of Pinkie in 1547 was yet another hostile attempt by the English to compel the Scots to break their union with France and link up with England by ratifying the marriage of the child Mary to Edward VI.

Sir Ralph had been appointed High Treasurer of the army by the young Edward, but he was not content with just handling the money and was found in the thick of things rallying the English troops at a crucial time in the fighting. The 36,000 Scots fought their corner, but the English with only 18,000 men had more cannon and were better organised, eventually winning the day. It was bloody, the first six hours of fighting saw 14,000 men dead. Sir Ralph distinguished himself by capturing the Scots royal standard. A copy of the original pennant (though no longer his helmets and spurs), can be seen above Sir Ralph's tomb in Standon church. This time he was offered the title of Knight Banneret which he accepted with enthusiasm.

Despite their defeat, the Scots had the last laugh. After the battle they said they would send commissioners to Berwick to discuss terms for the King's marriage. The Earl of Warwick, Lord Grey, and Sir Ralph waited and waited for the Scots to arrive. The commissioners didn't go to Berwick but to Paris to discuss terms with the King of France for the 6-year-old Mary to marry the Dauphin instead and this was the start of Mary's life at the French court.

By October Warwick, Grey, and Sir Ralph had had enough of the waiting and set off for home totally dejected. Sir Ralph must have been very frustrated that all his efforts and diplomacy in trying to get a union with England and Scotland had failed. It was to take another 50 years before the countries were joined. At the time Sir Ralph must have thought that was the end of his connections with Scotland, but in fact he was to cross Mary's path in a far more dramatic way in the future.

Sir Ralph must have had tremendous energy. Whatever you read of the politics of the period, he always seems to be there. Not to mention the fact that by this time he had a wife, seven children, a big house and many staff to organise, though because of his constant travels the day to day running of the Lordship was left to his steward. He sold his Hackney house in 1550.

In 1550 he was on his horse yet again, this time a little closer to home. Knights and noblemen were sent to put down rebels in Norwich. Branded rebels in history books, they were in fact hard working farmers and they had a genuine grievance. The price of wool was rising fast and big profits were to be made so the nobility deprived the local farmers of their sheep-grazing on common land and enclosed it for their own use. The farmers' livelihoods suffered and so 20,000 gathered around Norwich to make their protest. It came to a bloody battle with a few of the lords being killed and Sir Ralph having to flee for his life. Eventually as with many uprisings against the establishment the establishment won.

Edward VI was always a sickly child and his health did not improve as a young man, so it was no surprise that by 1553 he was dead and that on August 3<sup>rd</sup> Mary Tudor was crowned Queen. Mary was a Catholic so her co-religionists were given most of the top jobs. Many Protestants from Edward's reign protected their positions of power by changing their views but Sir Ralph, not one to bend, resigned from the Council with dignity and quietly withdrew from court.

After many years of travelling the roads of England, mainly north to Scotland, now was the time for Sir Ralph to enjoy Standon Lordship, being with his family and indulging in his favourite sport of hawking. He must also have made many short trips to Hatfield House to keep contact with Mary's sister, the Princess Elizabeth, who regularly visited there. The two would go hawking together.

But Queen Mary wasn't going to let the retired royal servant slip away that easily. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1554 he received a letter from her stating that if there were to be any trouble in Hertfordshire she would expect him to supply the manpower, at his own expense, to sort it out. Twelve months later when many Protestants were being burnt at the stake and war with France was imminent Sir Ralph received another letter from Mary demanding him to have manpower "ready upon an hour's warning to be employed for repression of any sudden tumult within the realm, or resisting of any foreign invasion". Unrest or war didn't happen so he was let off the hook.

Withdrawal from court life was short lived however. Just before dawn on the 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1558 the 44 year old Mary died. Events moved fast. By 8 am Parliament had met and proclaimed the 'Lady Elizabeth' Queen. Straight away Sir William Cecil was on his way north out of London to break the good news to Elizabeth at Hatfield House. By Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 'Peers, Courtiers & Knights' were mingling with the regular users, coaches, people and animals on the busy Great North Road to get to Hatfield to stake their claim to any royal jobs.

Sir Ralph, though not part of the official power structure of the country, was soon on his horse for the short ride from Standon to Hatfield. By Saturday night the good and the bad of the realm had sworn allegiance to the new Queen. Lord Burleigh had been made her Secretary of State and Sir Ralph had been instructed by the Queen to round up as many of the nobility and gentry as possible, with strict instruction to wear their finest regalia, for the grand procession on Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> November when she would enter London.

25 year old Elizabeth was a popular choice for Queen with the people (and still a popular choice 500 years later, recently voted the best monarch the British ever had). The crowds gathered along her route and the celebrations started. At Highgate Hill she met the Bishops of the land and must have paused a moment to look across London and think of her new responsibilities. A major one being the diplomacy required to hold together the two main religious factions of the country. It was soon apparent at the start of her reign that she had taken Sir Ralph's advice when he used to visit her at Hatfield House regarding the religious split, 'that moderation was the interest of the public state-that the Protestant should be kept in hope, and the Papist not cast into despair'. This was good advice from a man who had seen some of his friends become over zealous with religion and be removed from power. Within a year of Elizabeth becoming Queen Sir Ralph was back in the Privy Council, serving his fourth monarch.

1573 was the start of a ten year period of political calm and prosperity for merry England: chocolate box images of dancing around the maypole; colourful clothing; ruddy cheeked people; the cult of Gloriana. Shakespeare, Drake & Raleigh were at the height of their careers, but this is history for the nostalgic. The poor of the country

were still very poor, trying to scratch a living, while the rich were getting richer. To show off their wealth they gave one another gifts. At Hampton Court in 1578 Sir Ralph gave the Queen gold to the value of £15 while she gave him 30 ¾ ounces of gilt plate. Don't know who came out best in that exchange! Maybe Elizabeth expected more, she certainly got more as this was the year she paid a three day visit to the Lordship where her host was expected to pay all the bills.

One reference at the time says that Sir Ralph "spent his great estate nobly knowing that princes honour most those that have most". He must have been delighted that the Queen of England was to stay at the Lordship, even though he knew how quickly the costs mounted. His friend Lord Burleigh once spent £3000 entertaining Elizabeth for a few days at his house, Theobalds, near Cheshunt.

This visit of the Queen's was one of her customary summer progresses, this time from Greenwich to Norwich. Besides getting out of plague-ridden London for the summer these trips were all about topping up her image with the upstart gentry and showing the yokels who was in charge. Being supreme ruler she could not buzz off for a summer jaunt around her kingdom and leave her Privy Council, courtiers and hangers-on to get up to mischief in London, so they came too. The decision-makers were impotent without their backup staff, so they came as well. The Queen also insisted on bringing her own beds, furniture, plate and kitchen-ware as well as all the documents of state and office equipment down to the royal paper clips. Then of course there were the 250 horses and 100 carts to carry all this lot. Government business had to continue and post horses were stationed 10 miles apart along the whole route so that documents from Standon could be in London within 6 hours.

Sleepy Standon must have been amazed when the great cavalcade appeared over the hill on that July day in 1578. The original Lordship, which was larger than it is today, was no way big enough for the entourage; only the Privy Councillors and the Queen's closest servants stayed in the big house. The rest had to find other accommodation locally. A Yeoman Purveyor had been in Standon and Puckeridge many days before to buy local food at prices laid down by Parliament - an opportunity for local traders to make a fast buck by giving short measure, and there are records that they did.

Before the Queen arrived, an advance team of nine men, headed by the Gentleman Usher, was giving the Lordship a royal makeover, placing the furniture and hanging the tapestries. All was hustle and bustle. Poor Sir Ralph was now 71 and having his house turned upside down by the Gentleman Usher and his gang must have made him wonder if it was worth all the upheaval. Plus the cost of feeding all this lot and making the expected gift of gold to the Queen. But this was the Queen of England, the same woman he knew when she was a teenager at Hatfield House.

Before arriving at the Lordship, Standon, the queen had stayed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July at Mark Hall, Latton (now swallowed up by Harlow). There is no exact record of her route, but it is likely that she made the 9 mile trip via Hunsdon, Widford, Much Hadham and Standon. During those three days in July, 1578 the country's affairs were run from the Lordship. Decisions were made, posthorses with letters were travelling here, there and everywhere, and the villagers of Standon and Puckeridge must have been hanging on the air for any gossip they could pick up. The Council, made up from between 17 and 20 chief officers of the state, met. One item on their agenda was a report that the Sheriff of Pembrokeshire had delayed the execution of a condemned murderer. The instructions went out from the Council to hang the murderer immediately and for the Sheriff to report in person to the Council within 14 days. Couriers arrived from Antwerp, Scotland and Ireland. It was all happening at Standon. It all came to an end on Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> July when the Queen left for Audley End,

stopping for dinner on the way at Berden Priory. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there may have been a road from the Lordship running adjacent to the river with a bridge across the Rib joining Paper Mill Lane. What a colourful sight the entourage must have been: the Queen on horseback so her subjects could see her, the bells ringing as they passed the church, and plenty of doffing of the forelock by the villagers as she passed. Houses would have had a fresh coat of lime wash for the occasion and ale must have been drunk by the gallon in celebration.

Then she was gone, though the 'sweeping up' team were still at the Lordship loading furniture etc. on to carts ready to be transported not to Audley End, but to her stop after that, at Kedington, 3 miles from Haverhill in Suffolk. For those three days in July, 1578 Standon had been in the centre of the realm.

From the time of Elizabeth's succession Sir Ralph himself was never again far from the centre of political action, particularly as far as Mary Queen of Scots was concerned. Elizabeth knew that he had been her father's ambassador to Scotland and had personal connections with the people around Mary when she was a baby. So he was appointed by her to take the position of guardian or jailer, depending on which way you look at it, when Mary was detained at Sheffield Castle in 1584.

On Tuesday, 18<sup>th</sup> August at the age of 77, Sir Ralph mounted his horse at the Lordship taking with him '50 of his trusted men armed with swords, daggers, and pistols' for the ride north. Though Elizabeth trusted her elder statesman to undertake this sensitive task she must have felt a little embarrassed to ask a very old man with his aches and pains to take on this demanding role. In her letter to him dated 12<sup>th</sup> August, 1584 her guilt showed through, she thanks him for 'his long service as of his great years' and would 'ease him of the charge as soon as conveniently maybe'.

Although 77, Sir Ralph still had the energy which had carried him through life. A later quote said that 'his nights were devoted to contemplation and his days of action; how quick and clear were his thoughts, speedy and resolute his performances'. The old man was in charge of Mary for eight cold winter months. Besides having to put up with Mary's daily demands the whole project must have been an administrative nightmare. He had to organise feeding the 50 men he brought, 40 armed soldiers already at Sheffield Castle, and the 47 servants of Mary's. Plus the many horses. Sir Ralph estimated the running costs to feed and water the lot would be £3000 per year. Elizabeth paid only £1500. So he had to do some clever house keeping while Mary continually demanded more. She insisted that the daily meal for her and her secretaries should consist of sixteen dishes of the finest French cuisine, her top servants should have eight dishes and her bottom servants the leftovers. Her whole party drank 5 gallons of wine a day. The poor soldiers were paid a measly eight pence a day and had to find their own food. And during this relative comfort Mary was scheming, scheming to overthrow Elizabeth, and in the middle of all this sat our honest broker Sir Ralph. He kept the Queen and Lord Burleigh informed as to her manipulations by writing over 100 letters during the period he was at Sheffield Castle.

He saw no end to the imprisonment of Mary and in one letter to Elizabeth laid out the two options to the impasse, a compromise by one side or 'the death of the lady'. And he also pleaded to his sovereign to be relieved of his duty, saying that he was old and infirm and that the castle was very cold. His younger son Henry heard of his father's call to be released and went to Court to plead his case. Elizabeth, who had previously promised to replace him, was renowned for breaking her promises, and still kept our ageing knight in the freezing castle to look after her troublesome cousin. To make things worse Sir Ralph was instructed to move the whole circus to Tutbury Castle in

Staffordshire. So on a bleak mid-winter's day in January 1585 the 150 odd people required to service Mary's needs were on the move.

Mary and her jailer respected each other's point of view; on one occasion he trusted her by taking her out hawking, earning a sharp rebuke from Elizabeth when she found out. But Mary didn't stop moaning about her lot. She complained about her room being too small, that it had no curtain or carpets and the beds and pillows were not fit for a queen. Sir Ralph had to dip into his meagre budget to buy Turkey rugs, tapestries, sheets, and '4 cwt of good sweet feathers'. Elizabeth thanked him by letter for his efforts but still no signs of his replacement. Thinking his job as jailer could see him out, he sent a request for his falconers, plus hawks, to come from Standon. At least he could have sport with his favourite pastime. Then on the 17<sup>th</sup> April Sir Amyas Paulet, Privy Councillor, at last relieved Sir Ralph of the keys. He was able to return home, hawks and all.

At this time the Lordship was filling up with family. Sir Ralph's eldest son Thomas, wife and two children were living there and it is possible that his four grandchildren and the wife of his second son Edward who had died a few years earlier had moved in from their house at Temple Dinsley near Hitchin.

Though Sir Ralph was enjoying his summer at the Lordship, the problem of Mary still impinged on his life. During the summer of 1587 Mary was moved yet again to Tixall Park near Stafford, the home of Sir Walter Aston. His eldest son, another Walter, later married Sir Ralph's granddaughter Gertrude, and the Astons inherited the Lordship in 1660 when the Sadleirs had run out of male heirs.

Meanwhile the net was closing around Mary. Within two weeks of moving to Tixall Park she was moved to the more secure Fotheringay Castle, and put on trial. Sir Ralph was back on the scene, pulled away yet again from his idyllic house and estate, now aged 80, to be one of the commissioners to sit in judgement on Mary. He must have sat listening to the proceedings with mixed feelings. He had known Mary from a baby and their paths had crossed many times but now she was fighting for her life. When the guilty verdict came he must have felt the same inner sickness as Queen Elizabeth who took some four months of soul searching before she signed the death warrant. But he also must have felt a certain amount of relief to see the back of Mary as most of his political life had been spent trying to secure the union of England and Scotland and now it seemed possible. On the February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1587 Mary was beheaded.

Sir Ralph was eager to return to the Lordship, but on the 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1587, seven weeks after Mary's death, he passed peacefully away.

## Chapter 6

Sir Ralph had lived through the reigns of two kings and two queens. Not just lived, but worked for and influenced in his own quiet determined way, the decisions of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I. He wasn't one of the Tudor court's big names, but one of its civil servants, intelligent, motivated, and more important in running the country than is given credit for in history books.

Quotes of the time refer to him as "a man famed for so many and great employments of the state" and as "a knight famous for his valour". Lloyd's 'Statement and Favourites of England' states "little was his body, but great his soul, his qualities were discipline and intelligence." Sir Walter Scott called him "rich, both in possessions and lineage".

At the time of his death Sir Ralph owned 23 manors, several parsonages and great chunks of land in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire

and Hertfordshire; a big inheritance for his eldest son, Thomas. He was buried in a magnificent tomb in Standon church. His stone effigy, face with a contented smile, looks towards the altar. His seven children, Thomas, Edward, Henry, Anne, Mary, Jane and Dorothy kneel below him, but Helen, his wife is not there. Thomas, who died in 1606 is shown lying with his wife, Gertrude in the tomb opposite, but Helen was a forgotten woman as far as the stonemasons were concerned, which is a shame as it was a happy and fruitful marriage. Behind every great man etc....

But there was another Sadleir son, Richard, whose simple grave lies outside the church adjacent to the family tomb. We know he was well educated in Italy, Germany and Cambridge and that as a New Year's gift in 1587 he presented Sir Ralph with a treatise on horsemanship. But we know nothing else. Was he Sir Ralph's illegitimate son? If so, he was certainly well provided for.

After Sir Ralph's death his eldest son, Thomas Sadleir, was in possession of Standon Lordship and all the inherited land. His father had been well known at the Scottish Court for his relentless efforts to bring about the union of Scotland and England. So it was natural that when James VI of Scotland travelled to London in 1603 to become James I of England that he stayed two nights at the Lordship on the way. While there he knighted Thomas. Sir Thomas Sadleir died in 1606 leaving another son, Ralph and a daughter, Gertrude. This Ralph did not seem to be as wealthy as his father, and certainly did not have the possessions of his grandfather. Ralph married Anne Coke and died in 1660 without producing any children. Ralph was not knighted and had no grand tomb in Standon church.

Ralph's sister, another Gertrude, succeeded as his heir and married Sir Walter Aston of Tixall in Staffordshire. Without any Sadleir heirs the remains of the family's wealth was now in the hands of the Astons. Though that was the end of the glory days of the Sadleir family in Standon, the rest of the family multiplied, through Sir Ralph's other children, with many living descendants in Ireland, Australia and throughout England. As you can see, it was Sir Ralph who was the driving force, his son and grandson living off his hard labour. The Aston family had gained from their decline. But it is the Sadleir name that is most remembered in Standon with a road, a Dramatic Society and last but not least, a school named after him.