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Her price is above pearls: family and farming records of Alice Le Strange, 1617–1656

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BOOK REVIEWS

Her price is above pearls: family and farming records of Alice Le Strange, 1617–1656, edited by Elizabeth Griffiths, Norwich, Norfolk Record Society, 2015, Volume LXXIX, viii + 376 pp., £18 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-9556357-8-6

The latest volume in the annual Norfolk Record Society series is an edition of transcriptions of a variety of different types of documents generated by Alice Le Strange, an early modern Norfolk gentlewoman. Alice, the wife of Sir Hamon Le Strange, effectively handled the day-to-day management of her husband's extensive and valuable North Norfolk estates while he concentrated on other things (such as building works). An interesting example of royalism in puritan East Anglia, the family was repeatedly 'plundered by the rebels' during the Civil War, as several entries in these accounts bluntly record, and victimized by the authorities afterwards. Nevertheless, they painfully built themselves back up in the post-war years, and at her death, Alice passed on to her children an estate which would continue to thrive during the rest of the seventeenth century.

The editor, Elizabeth Griffiths, is ideally suited to meeting the challenges of preparing this volume, having previously published work on the Le Stranges, and having also edited Windham of Felbrigg's estate book (dating from the later seventeenth century) for the Norfolk Record Society. Alice's accounts pose a different challenge: although in an extremely clear and legible hand, they are also extremely voluminous. A selection has therefore been chosen for this volume, with the intention of highlighting Alice's deep understanding of Norfolk's infield–outfield farming system, her practice of which at Hunstanton, Griffiths says, was already in the early seventeenth century paving the way for the Agricultural Revolution.

This volume contains transcriptions of Alice's notes on the ebb and flow of the family's finances up to 1654, an account, survey, rental, and extracts from a firmal for the Le Strange manor of Sedgford, a ship account (detailing an ill-fated maritime venture the family embarked upon around 1620), and a lengthy sheep account. Not uncommonly for Norfolk gentry, sheep were a major source of the family's economic success, and detailed accounts of their management make up a significant proportion of the transcriptions in this book. Thankfully there is a glossary for non-specialists explaining the wide range of technical terms relating to sheep. There may be a misapprehension in this section: the transcriptions contain several references to sheep being sold at 'Kippon,' and in the index Professor Griffiths identifies this as Kippen in Stirlingshire, but this seems rather a long way for sheep to be herded (raising the question of what condition they would have been in when they got there). It is true that there was a major sheep fair in Kippen, but Kipton, near Weasenham in North Norfolk, where a well-attested sheep fair took place from the middle ages onwards, seems a more likely location. Widely differing spellings of proper nouns were quite normal across England in this period, and if anything Norfolk seems to specialize in them!

One thing this volume clearly demonstrates is how much could be achieved by a visionary estate manager in the early modern period, confirming once again how far the continuing success of even the wealthiest gentry families depended upon capable and industrious sons and daughters. All early modern researchers are familiar with the profusion of different record types which estate management generated; cross-referencing them can be difficult whether held privately or deposited in an archive office. Alice understood the unwieldiness of such bureaucracy,

bringing rentals, firmals and bailiffs' accounts for her manors together into one estate book after about 1630. Her records were so useful to posterity that they continued to be actively used by her descendants long after her death, subsequent Le Stranges annotating her diagram of the field system at Sedgford with notes of which 'breck' (meaning 'outfield' in this instance) was being used for which stage of the field-rotation cycle in each year until well into the eighteenth century.

Having said that, the records are still not intuitively accessible for the modern reader, even as presented here in a transcribed form. The value of this volume would have been greater if Professor Griffiths had devoted more space in the introduction to drawing out the significance of these records, and showing what conclusions they can help scholars to draw about the economic importance of the Le Strange farming business. However, the principal value of a volume such as this was inevitably likely to be as a foundation for further studies of the Le Stranges and their milieu, and indeed Professor Griffiths is preparing a monograph on the Le Strange estates which will doubtless build upon the material collected here. Other scholars working on seventeenth-century estates history should also find this book useful by way of comparison, and anyone with a local interest will find it an indispensable addition to a collection on Norfolk history as well.

In addition to the estate records mentioned above, the volume also happily includes transcriptions of the wills of Alice and her husband. The volume's interest is really heightened by Hamon's will in particular, which contains some striking turns of phrase. There is specific mention of bequests of duplicate books to local clergy, a frustratingly rare instance of a library appearing (albeit not in any detail) in an early modern will. It is also interesting, in the Shakespeare anniversary year, to find Hamon giving Alice not one but two beds.

At only £18 for a heavyweight work of scholarship, the Norfolk Record Society volumes have long been extraordinarily good value compared to practically everything else in this field, and the production values of the series are as high as ever. This volume is beautifully presented and, as well as being amply supplied with the usual maps, tables, and illustrations, it contains a large insert, a modernized copy of a seventeenth-century map showing part of the Le Strange estates. More than 80 years after their inception, the annual Norfolk Record Society volumes remain benchmarks of quality and affordability in the world of scholarly publishing, and this volume is no exception.

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The no-nonsense guide to archives and recordkeeping, by Margaret Crockett, London, Facet Publishing, 2015, xii + 212 pp., £49.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-85604-855-2

I have been looking forward to getting to grips with this latest handbook on archives and records management. The introduction targets a broad range of audiences, from those working in the profession without a formal qualification to managers of specialist services and those working alongside us such as IT professionals, librarians and museum curators. My recent change in job role has taken me back to the cutting edge of the 'day job' so I wanted to find out if this book would also prove to be an effective reference tool for professionals changing sector or job role. I was also keen to explore its value as an advocacy tool and as a means of upskilling people with responsibility for archives and/or records management who do not have a background in the field.