



Sir Thomas Stanhope (Private collection)

***Sir Thomas Stanhope of Shelford: local life in
Elizabethan times***

by

Beryl Cobbing and Pamela Priestland



Local Heritage *initiative*



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The life of the ambitious Midlands landowner Sir Thomas Stanhope (c.1540-1596) demonstrates the **importance of patronage** in the Elizabethan period. Through distant kinship, he retained the support of chief minister Lord Burghley for much of his life, while two of his brothers at court had the ear of the queen.

Reflecting the **patriarchal nature of society**, Sir Thomas was often at odds with his wife (the heiress Margaret Port of Etwall in Derbyshire) and two of his sons (John and Edward). The feisty response of some of the women in his life may well have surprised him.

An enforcer of **anti-Catholic legislation** in his role as magistrate, he nevertheless aroused the fears of the crown when his provincial disputes appeared to undermine national stability in a sensitive period of English history.

His **public quarrels** can be largely followed through the records of Star Chamber, Chancery and other courts. The Fletchers of Stoke Bardolph, the Willoughbys of Wollaton, the Zouches of Codnor (resulting in a riot in Derby in 1577), and the Molyneux, Sacheverell, Kniveton and Markham families were amongst those involved.

His **most bitter foe** was Gilbert Talbot, 7th Earl of Shrewsbury. (The earl's wife claimed that Sir Thomas's wickedness had caused him to become 'more ugly in shape than the ugliest toad in the world'. She hoped he would 'be damned perpetually in hell fire'.) The climax of this quarrel came at Easter 1593 when the earl's tenants and servants attacked Sir Thomas's weir on the River Trent.

In 1596 Sir Thomas died in debt, partly caused by the cost of rebuilding his house at Shelford. Whether he was a **victim or a villain** is for the reader to decide. In the long run, however, his family's status rose. His grandson became the 1st Earl of Chesterfield - a title found on local public house signs to this day.

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