

XI.—THE PERCIES' ACQUISITION OF ALNWICK.¹

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The military exploits of the Percies in the fourteenth century have led to the almost instinctive association of their name with the Border warfare in which the fortress of Alnwick played a very important part. It is, however, wrong to think of the Percies as a Border family throughout their history. They acquired their first Border estates—those of the barony of Alnwick—in the beginning of the fourteenth century. The family had possessed great estates in Yorkshire since the Conquest, while Petworth in Sussex was obtained in the middle of the twelfth century. From the time of the early Normans the lords of Alnwick had been the Vescis. The last Vesci lord of Alnwick was William Vesci, who died in 1297 without lawful issue.² It was his death which eventually gave the Percy family the opportunity to acquire the castle, manor and barony of Alnwick.

Sir William Dugdale's description of Henry Percy's acquisition of Alnwick has never been challenged: Henry Percy purchased from Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham "the Honor of Alnwick, wherewith William de Vesci, Lord thereof, had intrusted that Bishop for the Behoof of John³ de Vesci, his illegitimate son; the Bishop not performing

¹ I am deeply indebted to His Grace the Duke of Northumberland for his kind permission to examine the muniments at Syon House and Alnwick Castle. These, however, contain nothing relating to the present study, beyond the original of *The Percy Chartulary* (Syon House MS., D.I., 1a) and some deeds and charters which will be mentioned below. An examination of the original of the *Chartulary* throws no light on the present study.

² He had succeeded his brother John, who died in 1289. The widows of both brothers—both named Isabel—held dower interests in the estates at the time of Henry Percy's purchase.

³ The documents cited below show that his name was William, not John.

the trust, by reason of some scandalous words exprest towards him by that John; which grant the King performed."⁴ Although this version is accepted by all the authorities,⁵ an examination of the charter evidence presents a completely different picture.

The Percy Chartulary contains a copy of the deed by which William Vesci conveyed a reversionary interest in some of the Vesci estates to Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham.⁶ The manors of Malton, Langton, Wintringham and Brampton in Yorkshire and Cathorp in Lincolnshire were entailed on William Vesci himself and the heirs of his body, with remainder in default of such heirs to William Vesci of Kildale—that is, his illegitimate son. The castle, manor and barony of Alnwick with their appurtenances were similarly entailed, but in their case, in default of legitimate heirs of the body, these estates were to remain to Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham, and his heirs.⁷ It is possible to check that the estates in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire were so settled, since the final concord concerned appears both in *The Percy Chartulary*⁸ and amongst the Feet of Fines preserved at the Public Record Office.⁹ Unfortunately, no such check can be made in the case of the Alnwick conveyance, since, while a copy of the final concord exists in *The Percy Chartulary*,¹⁰ it cannot be found amongst the Feet of Fines for Northumberland. Nevertheless, there is *a priori* no reason why the authenticity of the Alnwick portion of the deed contained in *The Percy Chartulary* should be questioned. As a result, Dugdale's version is contradicted on two vitally important points. First, on the death of William Vesci without lawful issue, the Alnwick estates were to

⁴ Sir William Dugdale: *The Baronage of England*, I (1675), p. 273.

⁵ C. H. Hartshorne: *Feudal and Military Antiquities of the Northumberland and Scottish Borders* (London, 1858), p. 150; G. Tate: *History of Alnwick*, I (1866), p. 105; E. B. de Fonblanque: *Annals of the House of Percy*, I (London, 1887), pp. 64-5; *The Percy Chartulary*, ed. M. T. Martin (Surtees Society, vol. 117), Introduction, p. x.

⁶ (*The*) *P(ercy) C(hartulary)*, No. 834, pp. 349-50.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 721, p. 266.

⁹ Feet of Fines, Series 1, 285/24/224.

¹⁰ P.C., No. 719, pp. 265-6.

revert to the bishop of Durham. Second, in this deed there is absolutely nothing to indicate that the bishop had agreed to perform any trust.

Must we, therefore, reject Dugdale's version altogether and believe that Bishop Bek of Durham acquired the Alnwick estates in fee, free of any conditions? Literary sources can help in the answer to this question. The account of *The Chronicle of Alnwick Abbey* mentions no trust and implies that the transaction was an honest one on the part of Bishop Bek.¹¹ But no great significance need be attached to this evidence. While it is true that the chronicler probably had access to original documents owing to the abbey's connection with the castle and its lords, nevertheless he was writing almost sixty years after the event and, moreover, about the abbey's patrons.¹²

The evidence of two other chroniclers is more helpful. Robert Graystanes writes of Antony Bek: "Castrum de Alnewyk, quod ei W. de Vesci contulerat, confidens in eo quod illud ad opus filii sui parvuli et illegitimi W. conservaret, et ei adulto traderet, accepta pecunia, H. de Percy vendidit."¹³ There are some good reasons why we should accept this account. Robert Graystanes was a contemporary—at the time one of the leading monks of Durham cathedral priory, soon to become sub-prior, and, therefore, near at hand when the transaction took place. He was an extremely well-informed person: not only did he become sub-prior but he was for a short time the monks' candidate for the bishopric of Durham in opposition to Richard Bury.¹⁴ One very

¹¹ *Archæologia Aeliana*, Quarto Series, III (1844), p. 38; Hartshorne: *op. cit.*, Appendix, p. v.

¹² Internal evidence suggests that the chronicle was written shortly after 1377. (a) None of the exploits of the first Earl of Northumberland or his son Hotspur are mentioned after that date. (b) Only the Earl's first marriage is described: his second—to Countess Maud, the Lucy heiress—is conspicuous by its absence. Unfortunately, we have to rely completely on internal evidence, since our only text is a late seventeenth-century copy (British Museum, MS. Harley, 692, art. 12, foll. 205-12).

¹³ *Historia Dunelmensis scriptores tres* (Surtees Soc., vol. 9), p. 91.

¹⁴ *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, XXIII, p. 30; H. Wharton: *Anglia Sacra*, I (1691), pp. xlix-1; *V.C.H., Durham*, II, pp. 97-8.

important objection must be made to Graystane's reliability: the friction between bishop and priory, always latent, had flared up into open conflict during the episcopate of Antony Bek.¹⁵ Consequently, it is possible that Graystanes may be indulging in a deliberate attempt to blacken the memory of the opponent of himself and his fellow-monks. On the other hand, it may be suggested that so well-informed an ecclesiastical dignitary whose chronicle is extremely reliable in other respects would be unlikely to make such a serious charge without at least some foundation in fact.

The *Scalacronica* is a less reliable source, since Sir Thomas Grey began writing it in 1355.¹⁶ But he, too, gives support to the charges of Graystanes: "William de Vescy dona lonour de Alnewyck a Antoyn de Bek evesque de Duresme, qui pur chawdez paroles de Johan, fitz bastard le dit William, le vendy a Henry de Percy."¹⁷ The fact that Bishop Bek held Alnwick in trust, though not explicitly stated, is clearly implied. Sir Thomas was not contemporary of the events he relates: but he came of a family which was prominent in the neighbourhood and his information may well have been derived from his father. Nevertheless, the fact that the *Scalacronica* was written over forty years after the purchase of Alnwick is a serious objection to its reliability in this respect. Despite this important weakness, it is the source of Dugdale's version.¹⁸

Clearly, in the light of this analysis, the statement of Dugdale cannot be accepted if based on the chronicle evidence alone. At the most, we can say that the accounts of Robert Graystanes and Sir Thomas Grey mirror a strong contemporary belief that Bishop Bek was breaking a trust in selling Alnwick to Henry Percy.

There is, however, some further evidence preserved in

¹⁵ *V.C.H., Durham*, II, pp. 94-6.

¹⁶ *Scalacronica*, ed. J. Stevenson (Maitland Club, 1836), Introduction, p. iv.
¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-9; translation of Sir Herbert Maxwell (Glasgow, 1907), p. 10.

¹⁸ Dugdale cites as his evidence "Lel. Col. Vol. I, p. 775", which is a reference to Leland's excerpts from the *Scalacronica*.

The Percy Chartulary which provides some confirmation of the view that Bishop Bek had not the legal right to sell Alnwick. On the death of William Vesci without lawful issue, his Yorkshire and Lincolnshire estates—in accordance with the settlement of 1295—reverted to his illegitimate son, William Vesci of Kildale: on the latter's death the estates were inherited by Gilbert Aton, the heir of the Vescis.¹⁹ It is significant that the inquisitions held to establish the Aton claim mention only the estates in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. On the other hand, in a deed dated 2 December, 1323, Gilbert Aton confirmed to Henry Percy the grant which the bishop of Durham made to Henry's father *de baronio, castro, manorio et villa d'Alnewyck* and of all the lands which Isabel who was the wife of John Vesci senior held for term of her life *que fuerunt de hereditate de Vesci de baronia predicta et que post mortem predicte Isabelle michi reverti deberent ut consanguineo et heredi predicti Willelmi.*²⁰ The grant of the latter is also confirmed in a second deed dated 3 December, 1323, where they are described as *de hereditate mea.*²¹ Moreover, Henry Percy seems to have paid for these confirmations a sum of 350 marks.²² *The Percy Chartulary* contains copies of the two fines which ensued: while one cannot be traced among the extant Feet of Fines,²³ the original of the other fine is dated 30 April, 1335.²⁴ The delay of twelve years—the licence to alienate was dated

¹⁹ P.C., No. 643, pp. 219-25; *C*(alendar of) *P*(atent) *R*(olls), 1358-61, pp. 169-71 (exemplification of inquisitions establishing Gilbert Aton's claim).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 653, p. 231; Syon House MS., D.III, 2a, No. 6, which is the original. The copy in the *Chartulary* is dated 2 September, but the original is dated 2 December.

²¹ *Ibid.*, No. 654, p. 232 (dated 3 September); Syon House MS., D.III, 2a, No. 7 (the original, which is dated 3 December).

²² According to the two fines, Henry Percy paid Gilbert Aton a total sum of £500, but this sum would appear to be a fiction, not the actual purchase price. On 2 December, 1323, Henry Percy acknowledged that he was bound to Gilbert Aton in 700 marks by recognizance: it was, however, stipulated that if he paid 350 marks by the following Christmas the recognizance would be null and void (P.C., No. 655, p. 232). Since on 22 December, 1323, Gilbert Aton acknowledged the receipt of 700 marks, we may infer that only 350 marks were actually paid (*ibid.*, No. 656, pp. 232-3).

²³ *Ibid.*, No. 715, p. 263.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 714, p. 263; Feet of Fines (1), 181/11/40.

28 June, 1324²⁵—was probably due to a desire to wait until the death of the dowager who died in 1335. The terms of these deeds imply that the Alnwick estates belonged by right to Gilbert Aton, a right which Henry Percy admitted by securing confirmation of his own possession of the estates. Indeed, in one sense he seems to have purchased the estates a second time. These details might seem to confirm the literary evidence on which Dugdale's version is based. On the other hand, the transactions with Gilbert Aton are readily explained. While Henry Percy had seisin of the estates, Gilbert Aton's claims would probably have entailed long and expensive litigation, especially if it be true that a trust was involved.²⁶ In these circumstances Henry Percy may have found it to his advantage to buy off the counter-claimant. Indeed, the lowness of the figure at which Gilbert Aton was bought off supports this suggestion: the transactions between Percy and Aton are not a recognition of the latter's claims but a settlement which avoided troublesome and expensive litigation. As a result of this discussion of the evidence, Dugdale's version of the acquisition of Alnwick is very severely shaken. It is clear that some contemporaries believed that in selling Alnwick to Henry Percy, Bishop Bek of Durham was breaking the trust reposed in him by William Vesci and was acting dishonestly: but the deeds and charters which have survived suggest that there was no foundation for this belief.

What part did money play in the transactions between Henry Percy and Bishop Bek of Durham? Both Robert Graystanes and Sir Thomas Gray stress that the estates were sold: but neither mentions the precise sum involved. Indeed, the only possible reference to the latter is to be found in an agreement dated 1 April, 1310, between Bishop Bek and Henry Percy: *si nos . . . predicto domino Hen-*

²⁵ *P.C.*, No. 717, p. 265; *C.P.R.*, 1321-4, p. 435; Syon House MS. D.III, 2a, No. 8.

²⁶ See W. S. Holdsworth: *A History of English Law*, IV, p. 416, for details concerning the uncertainty of the law regarding trusts at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

rico . . . solverimus decem milia marcas sterlingorum vel solucionem illam modo competenti et debito domino Henrico . . . plene solvendam optulerimus apud Alnewyck die sancti Michaelis archangelis proximo futuro, extunc liceat nobis . . . predicta . . . libere ingredi et imperpetuum tenere. . . .²⁷ Bishop Bek could buy back the Alnwick estates if the sum of 10,000 marks was paid to Henry Percy at Michaelmas 1310. Does this sum represent the original purchase price paid by Henry Percy? Several points make this seem unlikely. In the first place, in 1289 the total yearly value of the Alnwick estates was £475 9s. 6½d.²⁸ The available evidence suggests that no serious changes took place before Henry Percy purchased the estates in 1310.²⁹ In the second place, the revenues from the estates were saddled with two dowagers. Moreover, there was no means of knowing when the reversions would take effect: one dowager died in 1314, while the other lived until 1335. We are faced with some difficulty in calculating the actual income enjoyed from the estates by Henry Percy in the year following his purchase. It is easy to take into account that portion of the total revenues received by the dowager who died in 1335, since in 1314-15 the income from the remainder of the estates was £326 10s. 9d.³⁰ However, the evidence on the portion held by the other dowager is confusing: we have two inquisitions, separated by only a few months in 1314, one of which gives us £40 a year and the other £120 a year.³¹ The only way to express the sum of 10,000 marks in terms of annual value is to exclude both reversions from our calculations and divide £475 into 10,000 marks (£6,666 13s. 4d.). The result is fourteen years' purchase. The existence of two dower-interests would, of course, reduce the actual price below this level. In view of these calculations, we can reject the sum

²⁷ P.C., No. 673, p. 242. The original is Syon House MS., D.III, 2a, No. 4.

²⁸ Chancery, Inquisitions *post mortem* (C.133), 54/7/m.6. This is the total given in the MS.; my own calculation from the figures supplied therein is £474 16s. 8½d.

²⁹ C.134/41/1/m.5 (inquisition taken on the death of Henry Percy in 1314).

³⁰ P.R.O., Various Accounts (E.101), 14/35/m.5.

³¹ C.134/40/1/m.6 and —/2/m.4.

of 10,000 marks as the purchase price, since there is good reason to believe that at the end of Henry III's reign lands were generally sold at ten years' purchase.³² It seems unlikely that any serious rise took place between c. 1272 and 1310. Lastly, before he purchased the Alnwick estates Henry Percy's income was probably around £900 a year:³³ it was certainly not large enough to provide a purchase price of 10,000 marks.

Several pieces of evidence help to suggest a solution of this problem. Firstly, it does seem probable that Henry Percy was in prosperous circumstances at this time: on 28 July, 1309, he was able to lend the Crown the sum of 500 marks.³⁴ It thus seems quite likely that he was able to provide some part of the purchase price himself. Secondly, on 22 March, 1310, Henry Percy secured a grant of a wardship from the Crown.³⁵ And the further history of this wardship throws valuable light on a third point—Henry Percy's transactions with a company of Italian merchants. On 1 September, 1311, he sold the wardship of Vanne Bellardi and Gerard de Chiatr' and their fellows of the society of the Bellardi of Lucca.³⁶ The wardship seems to have been resumed by the Crown and then regranted to Henry Percy.³⁷ A further resumption by the Crown then occurred and on 8 May, 1314, the king promised to pay the Bellardi a sum of £340 which Henry Percy owed them as a result of the resumption of the manor and its delivery to the heir.³⁸

³² *Economic History Review*, Second Series, V, No. I (1952), pp. 44-5.

³³ This figure is based on the valuations supplied in the *inquisitions post mortem* held on Henry Percy's death (C.134/41/1). The total annual value of all the lands described therein is £770 17s. 1d. But allowance must be made for errors in calculation discovered in the MS. This total does not include rents due from "foreign" tenants. Moreover, we have no information concerning the value of the manor of Dalton in the county palatine of Durham (*V.C.H., Durham*, III, p. 255).³⁴ *C.P.R., 1307-13*, p. 177.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 408 and 410.

³⁸ *Ibid., 1313-17*, p. 113. The wardship in question was that of the manor of Kirkby Moorshead, late of John Wake. On 28 June, 1312, the escheator was ordered to restore the manor to Thomas, son and heir of John Wake (*C.C.R., 1307-13*, pp. 428-9). Consequently, the sum of £340 constitutes almost two years' income from the manor.

In the light of this evidence we may explain a document which is to be found in *The Percy Chartulary*—an acquittance to Henry Percy of 4,000 marks which he had acknowledged he owed to the Bellardi.³⁹ No date is given, but it seems obvious to assign it to the period with which we are dealing. Whether or not the sum acquitted was partly repaid by means of the wardship granted to the Bellardi, we cannot tell for certain; at least, the wardship is not mentioned.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, this evidence, though fragmentary, clearly implies that Henry Percy's purchase of the Alnwick estates was partly financed by a loan from the company of the Bellardi.

This conclusion enables us to suggest a more likely purchase price than that of 10,000 marks. It seems fair to suggest that the price lay about midway between 4,000 marks (£2,666 13s. 4d.) and 10,000 marks (£6,666 13s. 4d.). Such a figure would equate roughly with ten years' income from the estates according to the valuation of 1289. The fact that the estates were encumbered with two dower interests would obviously tend to reduce the price: but, on the other hand, the strategic potentialities of Alnwick Castle and the territorial influence its owner would carry in the Borders would outweigh these disadvantages.

The purchase of Alnwick represents a northern orientation of the Percy family's territorial interests, since hitherto the family's main estates had lain in Yorkshire and Sussex. The explanation of this switch in territorial interests is to be found in the Scottish policy of Edward I and the manner in which it was exploited by Henry Percy who played a leading part in the Scottish wars. He first appears in Scotland in Edward I's train at Berwick on 28 August, 1296.⁴¹ In the

³⁹ *P.C.*, No. 480, p. 156. Perhaps the Bellardi had interests in Northumberland: at least Colluchius Bellard was security for payment of a rent of 6 marks to a burgess of Gateshead about this time (*ibid.*, No. 699, p. 258).

⁴⁰ A wardship of the approximate value of £170 a year must have been an extremely valuable acquisition to Henry Percy in his efforts to pay off a loan of 4,000 marks.

⁴¹ *C*(alendar of) *D*(ocuments relating to) *S*(cotland), ed. J. Bain, II (1272-1307), No. 825, pp. 216-7.

following September he was appointed warden of Galloway and Ayrshire,⁴² an office which he held on several occasions during the rest of the reign. In June 1299 he was helping to suppress disorders in Scotland.⁴³ In 1298 he was one of the six English nobles who furnished 500 heavy cavalry for Scotland, his share being fifty.⁴⁴ On 5 April, 1306, Henry Percy was appointed king's lieutenant and captain of all men-at-arms, both horse and foot, in the counties of Lancaster, Westmorland, Cumberland, Ayr, Wigton, Dumfries and the whole of Galloway to repulse the rebellion of Robert Bruce.⁴⁵ Nor did these services go unrewarded. On 20 February, 1299, Henry Percy was granted all the lands in England and Scotland which had belonged to Ingelram Balliol who had forfeited them by rebellion.⁴⁶ In March 1304 he was granted the Scottish earldom of Buchan,⁴⁷ and in 1306 the earldom of Carrick.⁴⁸ Clearly, in return for his services in the Scottish wars, Henry Percy secured large gains in the form of confiscated Scottish lands. Moreover, the claim to these estates gave Henry Percy a powerful vested interest in the successful conquest of Scotland.

The possession of large estates in newly conquered Scotland undoubtedly provided the stimulus which prompted Henry Percy to acquire Alnwick. The ownership of a large estate in Northumberland would be convenient in two respects. First, merely from the stand-point of travel and administration, it would provide an intermediate stage between the estates in Yorkshire and those in Scotland. Second, from a purely military standpoint, Alnwick would provide both a comparatively near place of retirement and

⁴² *Ibid.*, No. 853, p. 225.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, No. 887, p. 233; *C.P.R.*, 1292-1301, p. 251.

⁴⁴ *C.D.S.*, II, No. 1044, p. 267.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 1754, p. 473; *C.P.R.*, 1301-7, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *C.D.S.*, II, No. 1060, p. 270; *C.P.R.*, 1292-1301, p. 396. This explains why Henry Percy received the manor of Wharrington-on-Tees from Bishop Bek of Durham (*P.C.*, No. 881, p. 376). Surtees does not mention this grant, but notes that the manor was a possession of the Balliol family (Surtees: *Durham*, I, p. 73).

⁴⁷ *C.D.S.*, II, No. 1487, p. 387; *P.C.*, No. 1875, pp. 452-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 1874, p. 452.

a vantage point for counter-attack, if ever the Scottish estates were recovered by the Scots. In the history of the Percy family the acquisition of Alnwick plays a double rôle: it marks the beginning of their power as Border landowners and it forms part of the process which, for a time, made them the owners of large estates in Scotland.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ For a detailed discussion of the Percies' activities in Scotland see J. Bain: The Percies in Scotland in *Archæological Journal*, XLI (1884), pp. 335-41.