APPENDIX 3

Bibliophiles: cousins: the Bohun family

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The close friendship between Elizabeth de Burgh and the Bohun family has been commented on by Professor Underhill, and research since the publication of the first edition, especially on William de Bohun earl of Northampton, makes it possible to examine their relationship further, especially in the context of the Hundred Years War and fourteenth-century culture. Their friendship was based on kinship, the Bohuns’ mother, Elizabeth of Rhuddlan, countess of Hereford and Essex, being the sister of Joan of Acre and daughter of Edward I. There was a considerable age difference between Elizabeth de Burgh and her Bohun cousins. Of the ten children born to Earl Humphrey (d. 1322) and Countess Elizabeth (d. 1316), John, who succeeded his father as earl, was born in 1306, followed by Humphrey, his successor as earl; the twins, Edward and William, were born in 1312, and Margaret about 1311.1 Elizabeth de Burgh was therefore about eleven years older than John and seventeen years older than William.

Both Elizabeth de Burgh and the Bohuns suffered at the hands of Edward II and Hugh le Despenser the younger in the 1320s, and this experience probably cemented their friendship. Earl Humphrey, like Roger Damory and his wife, was involved in the Marcher Rising of 1321–2; he was killed at the battle of Boroughbridge and all his estates were forfeited to the Crown. His sons, John, Humphrey and Edward were held in the king’s custody at Windsor, but the whereabouts of the other children are unknown.2 Margaret’s marriage to Hugh Courtenay, later earl of Devon, had been arranged when she was a baby by her parents and Margaret, dowager queen of Edward I, and it appears that she lived at Clare Castle for at least part of the 1320s; the receiver’s account for 1324–5 refers to the purchase of a key for Margaret de Courtenay’s chamber. Margaret married Hugh on 11 August 1325, and in the same year John married Alice, daughter of Edmund earl of
Arundel, a marriage probably designed to bind John to the king. The Clare chamber account for 1326 lists the expenses of a messenger for 39 days on the road in August, September and October, before and after Queen Isabella’s invasion, ‘on 2 journeys from Clare to Hugh Courtenay and to Lady Maria (de St Pol) and to others’. As the king fled to the west in 1326, John’s estates were restored to him. It is likely that the memory of Boroughbridge and its aftermath stayed with the Bohuns as it did with Elizabeth, and that this strengthened their friendship.

With the accession of Edward III, the fortunes of both the Bohuns and Elizabeth de Burgh improved with the restoration of estates and goods. However, in an age of war against both Scotland and France, neither John nor his brother and successor Humphrey were able to excel as warriors owing to poor health and/or disability. John served in the Scottish campaigns of 1327 and 1335, but his brother Edward took over his duties as Constable of England in 1330 because of the earl’s ‘infirmity’. John died in northern England early in 1336. Elizabeth’s visits to Walden and Pleshey in July and August 1334, and the earl’s visits to Clare in the same year, her gifts of a belt decorated with silver and a gold ring, and the presence of her counsellors at John’s funeral show that his friendship was valued by Elizabeth.

Earl John’s successor, Earl Humphrey, lived as a recluse and never married. He apparently suffered from some physical disability but he outlived all his brothers, dying in 1361. He and Elizabeth de Burgh exchanged letters and gifts, but there is no evidence in the surviving household rolls that he visited Clare or Bardfield. Elizabeth, however paid visits to Walden and Pleshey, as in July 1347 when she also visited the abbey at Tilty.

It was left to the twins to restore the Bohun family’s reputation in war and politics. Edward was well on his way to achieving this by the early 1330s; unfortunately he was drowned in the autumn of 1334. Up to that time relatively little is known of William, although he took part in Edward III’s seizure of power in 1330, and served in the Scottish wars. After 1334, he emerged as a military leader, and his marriage to Elizabeth de Badlesmere, widow of Edmund Mortimer, provided him with estates from her dower and inheritance; the marriage was also designed to heal the hostility between the Bohun and Mortimer families which had resulted from the arrest and death of Roger Mortimer in the coup of 1330. William was created earl of Northampton in 1337. He fought with distinction in Brittany and at the battle of Crécy and siege of Calais in the 1340s, and in the campaign of 1359-60. He became a knight of the Order of the Garter in 1349.
It might be assumed that there would be little common ground between Elizabeth de Burgh and Earl William. In fact they were close friends, and their friendship can be traced in the exchange of letters and gifts, and in visits. It was based on their common interests in landholding in the eastern counties, their religious and cultural patronage, and their patriotism. There is no doubt of Elizabeth's support for the French war. Her half-brother, Edward de Monthermer, had been killed in 1339 in the early stages of the war; Elizabeth took responsibility for his funeral and he was buried at Clare priory. The following year, she entertained Edward III on his way to invade Flanders and win the battle of Sluys, a battle in which William took part. In April 1360, when a French invasion was expected, she protested to the king about the activities of the commissioners of array on her lands. She pointed out that she was living in Clare Castle which was, she said, near the sea, and was ready to defend the coast with her own force of men-at-arms and archers. The commissioners of array were withdrawn. 9

Elizabeth's eagerness for news of the war probably explains why one of her officials was sent from Bardfield to Harwich to Earl William in January 1339. The visits exchanged in 1343–4 were sandwiched between the earl's relinquishment of the lieutenancy of Brittany on 2 April 1343, and his reappointment two years later. The countess visited Elizabeth in late November 1343, and both the earl and countess were at Bardfield in December. The earl visited Clare in May 1344, and Bardfield at the end of July, and the countess was at Clare in September. Elizabeth visited them at Rochford in late August. That summer also saw a visit to Elizabeth in June by William's sister Margaret Courtenay, countess of Devon, who normally lived in south-west England, too distant to make frequent visits. Frequent visits were made in 1350 with Earl William visiting Elizabeth at Clare in May and July, and Countess Elizabeth visiting Clare in May and Bardfield in late August. The friendship lasted until the end of their lives, the countess dying in 1356 and the earl four years later. Once Elizabeth de Burgh built her house in the outer court of the convent of Minories outside Aldgate in 1352, and was spending summers in London, Earl William visited her there, down to 27 June 1359. 10

Religious patronage was as important for the Bohuns as it was for Elizabeth de Burgh, although there are differences in the religious orders they favoured. All regarded the commemoration of their souls and those of their families as of great importance. Elizabeth, Earl Humphrey and Countess Elizabeth, wife of Earl William, favoured the friars rather than
the established monastic orders. The evidence of Elizabeth de Burgh’s Franciscan foundation at Walsingham, her burial in the church of the Minoresses in London, and her will exemplify her support of the Franciscan order, although she was also a generous patron of the Augustinian priory at Clare. Countess Elizabeth chose to be buried in the church of the Dominican friars in London, and left them a number of gifts in her will.  

Earl Humphrey favoured the Augustinian friars and was buried in their London church, founded by his ancestor, Humphrey earl of Hereford and Essex, in 1253; gifts to the foundation dominate his will. Earl William chose to support the Bohun family monastery at Walden, founded as a Benedictine house in the twelfth century; he was buried in the monastic church where he had previously established his chantry.

When they are compared to their contemporaries, three concerns stand out. Earl Humphrey was the only one to specify that he wanted a simple burial, with very little show; the wish for simplicity is found in several wills in the later fourteenth century, including the will of Margaret countess of Devon. Both Elizabeth de Burgh and Earl Humphrey mention the Holy Land in their wills, something that was comparatively rare at the time. In her will Elizabeth was thinking of the Holy Land in terms of a possible crusade and the maintenance of Christianity in the region; she wanted an active response to the situation in the region. Earl Humphrey wanted his executors to send a chaplain to Jerusalem to pray for the souls of his parents and himself.

Earl William’s chantry foundation was unusual in that the circle of beneficiaries was much wider than was customary at the time; whereas founders normally wanted prayers for themselves and their wives and ancestors, as was the case with Earl Humphrey, William wished to commemorate not only his family but all who had helped him in his rise to prominence. The foundation was made in 1342 at a relatively early stage of his career; some of the beneficiaries were living and were to receive prayers during their lives and commemoration of their souls after they died; others had already died and masses were offered for their souls. The list of beneficiaries was headed by Edward III who had made William’s military career possible and granted him the title of earl of Northampton. William wished to commemorate himself and his wife, his son and heir Humphrey, his and his wife’s parents, and all his siblings. He included Thomas de Brotherton earl of Norfolk, Henry Burghersh bishop of Lincoln who had facilitated his career in the 1330s, and one of his chief estate officials, Sir John de Engaine. His cousin
Elizabeth de Burgh was also named, a testimony to their long-lasting friendship.\textsuperscript{13}

The ownership of books, often illuminated and richly bound, was increasing among the nobility in the fourteenth century; the books listed in Elizabeth de Burgh’s will are listed in Appendix 4. She was already a book-owner in 1322 when her lands and goods were confiscated, although at least some of Elizabeth’s books were later returned by Edward III. The Bohuns also suffered confiscation of books, as is clear from a surviving inventory.\textsuperscript{14}

During the 1330s, Elizabeth kept an illuminator as well as goldsmiths in her household, and Robert the illuminator was included among her retainers in the livery list of 1343. The account of her personal expenditure of 1351–2 included a payment of 20s. 4d. to a Franciscan friar of Cambridge for illuminating a book.\textsuperscript{15}

The Bohun family is renowned for its illuminated manuscripts, many of which were made for Mary de Bohun, granddaughter of Earl William and wife of Henry Bolingbroke earl of Derby, later Henry IV. Lucy Sandler has done a lifetime’s research on the manuscripts, making them much better known. She is rightly considered the primary authority on the collection.\textsuperscript{16}

The family’s interest in illuminated service books and literary works can be traced back to the first half of the fourteenth century. One psalter, described in the will of his elder granddaughter Eleanor, wife of Thomas duke of Gloucester, may possibly have been made for Earl William, but is more likely to have been commissioned by his son, Earl Humphrey (d. 1373). It is described as ‘well and richly illuminated with gold enamelled clasps, with white swans and the arms of my lord and father enamelled on the clasps, and with gold mullets on the binding; this psalter was left to me with remainder to my heirs, and was to pass from heir to heir.’\textsuperscript{17} Mullets featured on the arms of William earl of Northampton but not on the shield of the Bohun earls of Hereford and Essex. William’s wife Elizabeth de Badlesmere, the Countess of Northampton, bequeathed a missal, a gradual and a breviary to the London Dominicans, and owned an illuminated Psalter and Hours. Earl Humphrey’s will of 1361 referred to a missal and a book of antiphons to be used in his chapel at Pleshey Castle for ever. His love of beautiful objects is apparent in his will; he commented on his pleasure of looking at his jewels.

He also commissioned literary works, and he is known to have employed the Augustinian friar and illuminator John de Teye who continued to work at Pleshey Castle after the earl’s death. Of the surviving manuscripts, Earl Humphrey (d. 1361) commissioned the psalter now in the National Library
of Austria, and possibly the psalter now at Exeter College, Oxford. The psalter and hours of the Virgin Mary now in the British Library may have been begun for him but more probably for his nephew and successor. The manuscripts throw light on contemporary noble culture and on social and political as well as religious ideas. Interest in book ownership and manuscript illumination constituted a bond between Elizabeth de Burgh and the Bohuns.

Medieval friendships are difficult to trace, largely because the surviving documents, even letters, were factual and formal, with few signs of emotion and feelings. Yet, putting together all the evidence on Elizabeth de Burgh and the de Bohun family, it is clear that their close ties were based on more than kinship; originating from the problems they faced in the 1320s, their friendship was based on frequent contact, and on their common interests in family, patriotism, current events, religious patronage and chivalric culture.

1 *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel, 6 vols (London, 1817–30), 6, part 1, p. 135. Three children in the family died young, and a son, Eneas, died as a teenager or a young man. Another daughter, Eleanor, grew up and married, but there is no evidence of contact with Elizabeth de Burgh.


5 TNA E101/92/2, mm. 6, 2d, 9d, 10d; E101/91/30, m. 2; E101/92/3, m. 6; *Elizabeth de Burgh, Household and Other Records*, ed. Ward, pp. 74–5, 87.

6 Ward, ‘Wheel of Fortune,’ pp. 165–6; E101/92/30, m. 7d, 8d; E101/93/12, m. 3, 1d.

7 Both William, the Earl of Northampton, and his wife Elizabeth were related to Elizabeth de Burgh; William was a first cousin, and Elizabeth de Badlesmere a first cousin once removed. The latter’s mother, Margaret de Clare, was a niece of Gilbert the Red Earl.

Elizabeth de Burgh, *Household and Other Records*, ed. Ward, pp. 43–4, 76, 87–8, 129, 139–40; *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1360–4*, pp. 19–20; TNA E101/92/11, m. 11, 12; E101/92/12, m. 9, 7d, 8d; E101/93/12, m. 3d.

E101/92/9, m. 11; E101/92/24, mm. 6, 7, 3d, 12d, 14d, 15d; E101/93/4, mm. 5d, 7d, 14d, 15d; E101/95/9, mm. 13d.


Nichols, *Collection of All the Wills*, pp. 44–56.

J. Nichols, *Collection of All the Wills*, pp. 44–56.

BL Harley MS 3697, fos. 258r–259r.

Ward, ‘Wheel of Fortune,’ p. 169; it is not clear if the Bohuns’ confiscated books were returned.


Nichols, *Collection of All the Wills*, pp. 181–2; *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry*, ed. and trans. J. Ward (Manchester, 1995), p. 51. Mullet was the heraldic term for a star, usually with five, but sometimes with six or more points.