

WILLIAM DE TRACY (C1142-C1174)

In the 1130s Henry de Tracy, recently arrived from France, was promoted at court as royal castellan and military commander to defend Stephen's interests in the West Country against the supporters of Empress Matilda such as Baldwin de Redvers. This came from pre-existing links between Stephen, Count of Mortain before 1135, and the Tracys, a large part of whose Norman estate was held from the honour of Mortain. Several charters show that Henry's family probably owed their name to the hamlet of Tracy, near Vire – a strategically important area between Normandy, Maine and Brittany that gave opportunities to a family if they backed the right side. Turgis de Tracy, probably William's grandfather, had been William the Conqueror's seneschal there in the 1070s. Henry de Tracy in turn obviously served Stephen well in England as he obtained lands in Devon at Barnstaple (a half was surrendered back in 1158) and Great Torrington following their confiscation from rebels against Stephen.¹

1] *ibid.* Gesta Stephani' p 52/3 & p95

It was probably also through Henry de Tracy that William de Tracy gained Bradninch. He was a close kinsman of Henry but Professor Vincent is not sure how close; could he be the son of Turgis, Henry's elder brother?¹ In 1172 Turgis and William de Tracy are in control of the principal family holdings in France.² William figures in a number of royal and ducal records in the years immediately before the murder, especially as a witness to settlements and charters as Henry sought to consolidate his position after the 'nineteen long winters' of Stephen's reign. The royal favour was also shown in two pardons for scutage charges for his Devon barony.³ Any acquisition of Morton has not so far been found formally documented but the circumstantial evidence for it emerges after one of the most notorious events of medieval England.

1] See also ODNB article by R M Franklin at:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27652>

2] Red Book vol II p639

3] Pipe Rolls 11 Henry II p80. Pipe Rolls 14 Henry II p128

William knew that he was lucky to keep lands secured from Stephen when Henry II became king in 1154 as they should have been restored to their former lords. His tenure remained insecure and hence perhaps his desire to do Henry's bidding as were two of the other murderers, Fitz Urse and Morville, for similar reasons when Henry seemed to finally lose patience in his power struggle for control of the church with Archbishop Thomas Becket.

Tracy was certainly at King Henry II's court at Bur-le-Roi, near Bayeux, at Christmas 1170, where Becket's conduct, and above all his excommunication of the bishops who had crowned Henry, the Young King, earlier that year, was angrily discussed. The king's

famous outburst, *‘What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and promoted in my household, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born clerk’*¹, which later oral tradition renders simply, *‘Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?’*, prompted the departure of Tracy with Reginald Fitzurse, Hugh de Morville, and Richard Brito on their ill-conceived journey to Canterbury and subsequent murder of Becket.

1/ J. C. Robertson & J. B. Sheppard, eds., *Materials for the history of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury*, 7 vols., *Rolls Series*, 67 (1875–85) Vol II p429

Tracy seems to have been the first to come to his senses: in a confession to Bartholomew, bishop of Exeter, apparently made in Devon shortly after the murder, he said that his heart sank and he feared that the earth might open up and swallow him alive.¹ His grant of land at Whipton to the nuns of Polsloe priory just outside Exeter was later confirmed by the King² but it was not enough expiation for the bishop who advised him to go to Rome where the pope ordered him to continue his journey on a penitential pilgrimage to the Holy Land that was currently in dispute between Western crusaders and the supporters of Islam.

The last certainly established action of his life took place at Cosenza in southern Italy, presumably on his way there, where he executed a charter witnessed among others by the abbot of St Euphemia³, where, according to Herbert of Bosham, Tracy lay dying. Herbert gives horrific details of Tracy's death, and although there is an alternative tradition that he did reach the Holy Land, his account of events is to be preferred.⁴

1/ *ibid.* *Materials* vol. III (Bosham) pp512-13

2/ *Queen's College, Oxford ms. 152, fo. 137v (May X November 1175)*

3/ *The abbey of St Eufemia d'Aspromonte in Regio di Calabria, Italy is about 18 miles from Cosenza.*

4/ *ibid.* *Materials* vol. III pp535-8 & vol. VII pp511-12 no. 769

Here is a translation from Latin of Tracy's charter^{1, 2}:

‘William de Tracy to all his men both French and English and Friends and Bailiffs and Ministers to whom these letters should come Greetings. I grant and make over to the Chapter of Canterbury³, for the love of God and the salvation of my own soul and the souls of my ancestors, and for the love of blessed Thomas Archbishop and Martyr, of venerable memory, by way of alms in perpetuity and free from any and all charges, one hundred shillings' worth of land in Moreton, namely Doccombe with its appurtenances and with the adjacent lands, in such manner that those hundred shillings' worth of land may be made up from Doccombe and the other adjoining lands. I grant this therefore for the clothing and provision of one monk in that monastery³ for ever, who may

celebrate masses there for the salvation of the living and the repose of the departed. And in order that this may be firm and right and granted and valid I have strengthened my charter with the confirmation of my seal.

These being witnesses the Abbot of St Eufemia, Master Ralph Hospital, Pagan of Tiru, William the Clerk, Stephen of Par{or c?}ford, Pagan of Acford, Roger the Englishman, Godfrey the Ribald and others.’⁴

1] Canterbury Cathedral Archive CCA-DCc-ChAnt/D/20

2] The grant is undated. Most probably between Archbishop Thomas Becket's canonisation on 21 February 1173 (note reference to ‘St. Thomas’) and before confirmation by Henry II between July & October 1174 (see below). The date span is also based on knowledge of appointment dates of witnesses.

3] Founded in 597, Canterbury Cathedral was home to a Benedictine monastic community known as Christ Church Priory as well as being the seat of the archbishop who was nominally their Abbot. With about 80 monks at any one time, the priory was among the largest in the country and took the income from 64 manors, 19 rectories, 6 chantry chapel estates and Canterbury (now Christ Church) College, Oxford.

4] Notes on some of the witnesses:

Pain de Acford: Presumably related to Roger de Acford who in 1166 held of William de Tracy’s barony of Bradninch by new enfeoffment – see Red Book Vol. 1 p.255 – probably within Tracy’s Devon manor of Oakford – for which see Curia Regis Rolls vol. XIII no. 612. First found in Axford in Wilts. in 1184. Acfords had family seat at Ramsbury that includes hamlet of Axford. One of largest Wilts. holdings in Domesday, then held by Bishop of Salisbury.

Roger The Englishman: The Red Book of the Exchequer p 61, 275,351. Grant of land at Stockleigh English DRO Z1/30/1-4 ? C13th

Ribaldus: ribald, minstrel, rascal, groom, bachelor

Pain de Tiru(n): presumably the same man who witnessed William de Tracy’s confirmation to St Nicholas’ Priory, Exeter & Hugh de Couterne’s charter to Alan de Tracy – see Round Calendar Documents in France no. 556

Stephen of Parford or Pacford: Pafford on west side of Moretonhampstead manor?

Others: Might include William de Thann who had accompanied William de Tracy ‘*cum iter arriperet cum Domino suo Wilemo de Traci versus terram sanctam*’ – see Stanley pp 225-6 & CCL ms Reg B fo. 400r (392r, 393r s. xiv). He also made a bequest to

Canterbury in honour of blessed martyr Thomas in the event of his death on that journey. His widow lived in Moretonhampstead.

A second Charter of Henry II confirmed Tracy's gift of Doccombe ¹: Here is a translation from Latin:

‘Henry by the Grace of God, King of the English and Duke of the Normans and Aquitanians and Count of the Angevins to Archbishops Bishops Abbots Counts and Barons Justices Sheriffs & all his ministers and faithful of England Greetings Know [that] I have granted and by this present charter have confirmed to God and the blessed Thomas and the Church of the Holy Trinity of Canterbury the gift that William de Tracy made to them of a Hundred shillings rent which the charter of the same William bears witness that they have Wherefore, I will and firmly command that the aforesaid Church of Canterbury and the monks there shall have and hold to serve God and the blessed Thomas those Hundred shillings rent that the aforesaid William gave them as perpetual alms well and peacefully and freely and wholly and honourably as the same William gave them to them and his charter confirmed. Witnesses G[albert] bishop Wagon[iniensis], R[ichard]. elected [bishop] of Winchester, R[Obert] elected [bishop] of Hereford, John Dean of Salisbury, Walter of the Island, Count William de Mand[eviller], William Fitz-Audel, Hugh of Cressy at Westminster.’

1] Canterbury Cathedral Archives CCL Register B f 392/400

2] Notes on some of the grant confirmation's witnesses:

Gilbert Foliot: Bishop of London (1163-1187) who had supported the king against Becket, who excommunicated him, and often acted as a royal judge.

Wagon: Roger of Worcester {aka of Gloucester}, Bishop of Worcester 1163-1179 and cousin of Henry II

Richard Winchester: is Richard Toc live (aka of Ilchester), elected Bishop of Winchester in May, 1173 and confirmed and consecrated in October, 1174.

Robert Hereford: Robert Foliot, elected Bishop of Hereford in 1173, and consecrated in October, 1174. Relative of Gilbert Foliot.

John of Salisbury: John de Oxenford (aka of Oxford), Dean of Salisbury from 1165 until he was raised to the See of Norwich in 1175.

Walter of the Island: Master Walter de Insula, , a Royal official viz. he carried out the Inquest of Sheriffs in 1170. His family probably originated on the Isle of Wight.

William de Mand[eviller]: is William de Mandeville, Earl of Essex, 1126-1189. A loyal member of Henry II's court. Geoffrey Fitz Peter married his granddaughter and was granted the manor of Moreton in 1199 (see below).

William Fitz-Audel: appears a witness in many of Henry II's charters and is often described as a sewer i.e. a medieval household officer often of high rank in charge of serving the dishes at table and sometimes of seating and tasting.

Hugh of Cressy: an Anglo-Norman administrator and nobleman.

By this grant Henry II acknowledged William de Tracy's lordship over Moreton manor and affirmed the grant of part of it called Doccombe to Canterbury. This can be dated to after the election in April 1173 but not before the consecration on 6 October 1174 of Richard of Ilchester and Robert Foliot as bishops of Winchester & Hereford. In that period Henry II was briefly in England in July 1173 and for longer in July and August 1174 when he made a pilgrimage to Canterbury before visiting London.

This evidence of Tracy's lordship of Moreton is complemented by a document ¹ a century later, following the death of the then lord of Moreton, in which the manor's tenantry testified:

'DEVON Morton. The manor, tenure unknown; for, William de Tracy who held the barony of Barneys & Morton of the king in chief, took part in the martyrdom of St Thomas of Canterbury..'

1] Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem vol II London 1906 no.153 p96. The inquest was for lands of John Fitz John, grandson of Geoffrey Fitz Peter and was held in November 1275. (see below).

Doccombe manor remained a property of Christ Church Priory until 1540 when the monasteries were dissolved and it passed to the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury cathedral until 1863. Its alienation meant that Moreton manor lost about 1450 acres, including two-thirds of Mardon Common and one third of its Teign Valley woodlands; that left Moreton manor with about 3000 acres or 40% of the land in Moreton parish.

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1] Tithe Apportionments from IR 29/6, 9, 10, 30 (The National Archives)