

WHITTINGHAM, Robert (d.1452), of London and Pendley, Herts.

Constituency Dates

LONDON Oct. 1416
HERTFORDSHIRE 1432

Family and Education

1st s. of Alan Whittingham of London. *m.* by 1420, Agnes (*d.*1456), da. of Richard Buckland[†] (*d.*1436), of London and Edgecote, Northants., at least 4s. Kntd. by July 1445.

Offices Held

Warden of the Drapers' Co. Aug. 1416-aft. 29 July 1417.

Alderman of Bishopsgate Ward 22 Dec. 1417-22, Walbrook Ward 1422-2 May 1438; auditor, London 21 Sept. 1418-19, 1424-5.

Sheriff, London and Mdx. Mich. 1419-20, Essex and Herts. 5 Nov. 1433-3 Nov 1434, 3 Nov 1438-5 Nov. 1439.

Commr. of oyer and terminer, Bucks., Herts. Mar., July 1430 (oppressions and extortions), Jan. 1448 (maritime case); to assess a tax, Bucks. Apr. 1431, London Jan. 1436; lease land in the duchy of Cornwall July 1434; raise a royal loan, Herts. Mar. 1442; of inquiry, Beds. May 1444 (riots at Dunstable), Herts., Mdx. Dec. 1450 (theft of deeds).

Receiver-general of the duchy of Cornwall 21 Mar. 1433-4 Nov. 1439, the English estates of John, duke of Bedford by 10 Sept. 1435, the late duke's estates and other crown property 6 Feb. 1436-5 May 1438.

J.p. Herts. 4 Aug. 1433-Nov. 1439, 4 Dec 1433-July 1445, Bucks. c.1445-Oct. 1449.

Treasurer of Calais 10 Feb. 1436-25 Dec. 1441, keeper of the mint at Calais 18 Feb. 1436-?25 Dec. 1441.

Ambassador to treat with envoys from Holland and Zeeland 23 Nov. 1438, 14 July 1441, from Flanders and Brabant 23 Nov. 1438, 23 May, 23 Dec. 1439, from France 23 May 1439, 23 Apr., 2 May, 3 Nov. 1440, 22 May 1441, from France and Burgundy 24 June 1440, from Burgundy alone 11 July 1440.

Mayor of the Staple of Calais by 14 May 1439-bef. Sept. 1442.

Capt. of Hammes castle, Picardy by 9 Apr. 1445-bef. 20 Nov. 1449.

Biography

This distinguished Londoner, who played a leading part in national affairs and was eventually knighted for his services to the Crown, began his life as a merchant and ended it as a wealthy landowner. His uncle, Robert Whittingham, from whom he inherited a tenement in the City, and his younger brother, Thomas, were both tailors. The former died a wealthy man in 1412, and the latter became warden of his guild three years later. Probably because of his comparative

youthfulness, little is known about Whittingham before his return to Parliament in October 1416. He was then in office as warden of the Drapers' Company, although there is no evidence that he had previously shown much interest in civic affairs or that he had any major commercial transactions in hand. In January 1417 he was bound over to appear before the mayor's court of London to answer unspecified charges which were evidently either dropped or found to be without substance. At this point his financial position seems to have improved considerably, and it is possible to document his activities in more detail. He had dealings with the goldsmith, Adam Francis, who mortgaged certain property in London as a guarantee that he would pay Whittingham a debt of £20, and proceeded to deliver the money in regular instalments. Having duly established himself as one of the most prosperous members of his guild, Whittingham promised in 1419 to subscribe £20 (the second largest contribution then noted by the wardens) towards the cost of building a new Drapers' Hall. Throughout this period he helped to arbitrate in a number of disputes arising between other merchants; and over the years 1417 to 1427 he attended at least six of the parliamentary elections held in London.

Meanwhile, in April 1421, Whittingham was chosen to supervise the assizes of brewers and poulterers held in the City, and three years later he agreed to audit certain accounts submitted as specialist evidence to the mayor's court. His personal affairs were, however, somewhat constrained by the perennial problem of debt collection, which grew worse as his business expanded. In 1422, for example, he sold woad and pepper worth £160 to the mercers John Butler II and John Hertwell, the second of whom later defaulted on an obligation in £175 by which he was bound to pay for the merchandise. In September of the same year the MP was involved in a dispute with another member of his guild and the prior of the Augustinian house of St. Mary Magdalene, Tortington, but he agreed, under pain of £100, to submit the matter to arbitration. The reciprocal bonds in £500 which he exchanged with another draper named Robert Tattersall in January 1424 may also have resulted from a disagreement of this kind. Whittingham was, even so, quite prepared to lend money to various people, including Sir John Knyvet and the goldsmith, Nicholas Lovet, who began suing each other over the terms of their mutual securities.

Although he retained his aldermanry until 1438, Whittingham was clearly too absorbed in other matters to play a very active role in the government of London. It was, however, at a meeting of the court of aldermen in May 1427 that he incurred the severe displeasure of Humphrey, duke of Gloucester (then Protector of England), because of certain incautious remarks which were later made public. The nature of his criticisms is not revealed, but he appears to have gone in fear of reprisals on Gloucester's part. His attack on the duke, if such it was, coincided with his appointment by Gloucester's elder brother John, duke of Bedford, as an attorney to supervise his affairs at home while he was campaigning in France. Bedford had already been obliged to restrain his more impetuous sibling, so it may be that Whittingham was simply giving voice to some of *his* opinions. At all events, his sphere of interest was already moving away from the City, and from 1421 onwards his attendance at sessions of the court of aldermen appears increasingly sporadic.

Over the year ending October 1437, for example, he was present on only one occasion, and in the following May he successfully petitioned to be excused from the office of alderman.

Most of Whittingham's London property lay in the parish of St. Stephen Walbrook, and in May 1429 he laid the third foundation stone of the new church of St. Stephen, of which he was a patron. He acquired the advowson of the church and several houses in that area from the duke of Bedford in 1432, thus adding to other premises which had been in his hands from 1418 if not before, and, incidentally, cementing an already close relationship with the most powerful nobleman in England. He also owned a tenement called 'Le Wellehous' in St. Christopher's parish, and at an unknown date he made further investments in the two parishes of St. Peter Le Poer and St. Peter Cornhill. These various holdings eventually passed to his son, and it is evident that although he gradually withdrew from civic life to become a country gentleman and servant of the Crown, Whittingham was anxious to remain a landlord of consequence in the City. The first real signs of his changing position occur in 1430, when he began to serve on royal commissions in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire. As we have seen, his association with the duke of Bedford was by now well established, and in November of that year he swore an oath in Chancery that food and wine being exported to France were intended for Bedford's household. In October 1432 the duke granted Whittingham an annuity of 40 marks, payable from the manor of Salden in Buckinghamshire, and perhaps then also made him receiver-general of his English estates—a post which he is known to have held at the time of Bedford's death.

Still retaining his interest in trade, Whittingham obtained a royal licence to export three sarplers of wool to Calais in July 1431 (having, perhaps, already been shipping wool out of the country on a regular basis for some years). He was at this time attempting to arbitrate in a dispute between John Reynwell and the merchants of the Calais Staple, which suggests that he was well known in the local community long before he actually took up office there. This important connexion clearly owed a great deal to his father-in-law, Richard Buckland, who occupied the treasurership of Calais from 1421 until his replacement by Whittingham in 1436, and who probably placed his not inconsiderable influence at the latter's disposal throughout this period. It may well have been through Buckland, one of Bedford's councillors, that our Member had first gained an entry into the duke's circle and had also become known to Cardinal Beaufort. Meanwhile, in 1434, the Drapers' Company laid on a dinner for Whittingham and other members of an inner council which had successfully dealt with a matter of evident importance to the guild.

Yet despite all these commercial advantages, Whittingham's attention was increasingly drawn to other matters; and he sat in the Parliament of 1432 as a knight of the shire for Hertfordshire, where part of his country estates lay. One year later he became receiver-general of the duchy of Cornwall; and when Bedford died in September 1435, the King's Council not only confirmed him in his annuity for life, but also left him in charge of the administration of the late duke's estates. Large quantities of Bedford's goods and muniments were already in his custody, and evidently remained at his 'place in Walbrouc' for several years. Indeed, as late as 1455, when Whittingham

himself was dead, Sir John Fastolf, the duke's sole surviving executor, was still trying to recover certain documents from his widow so as to close all the outstanding accounts.

The dates of Whittingham's various purchases of property outside London remain largely unknown, although it seems likely that he acquired the manor of Pendley in Hertfordshire before representing that county in Parliament. Some years later, in June 1440, he and his wife were granted the right of free warren there by Henry VI, who also permitted them to enclose 200 acres of the demesne. Whittingham subsequently obtained a papal licence to build a chapel at the manor-house and engage a priest to hold services when the roads became impassable in winter. He also owned the neighbouring manor of Maudeleyns; and at some point after 1443 he had to fight a lawsuit concerning his title to the manor of Dinton in Buckinghamshire, which he claimed to have purchased for 860 marks from Isabel, the widow of John Barton II. Whittingham was himself taken to law over his refusal to pay an annuity of £20 chargeable upon the revenues of his property in nearby Stone to Isabel and her new husband, Sir Robert Shotesbrooke[†], but he successfully defended himself, and eventually agreed to buy out their interest for 200 marks. His greatest acquisition was the above-mentioned manor of Salden, which Cardinal Beaufort bought from Henry VI in 1439 and sold to him 'for certeyn greate and notable sommes of money' in the following year. Whittingham, who was by then an esquire of the royal household, enjoyed quiet possession of the manor and its extensive appurtenances until the Act of Resumption of 1450 when he was briefly obliged to pay a rent of £12 3s.4d. a year at the Exchequer. But thanks to his influence at Court, the sale was duly ratified, and he received further concessions in the shape of a licence to hold fairs and a market in the village. At the time of his death he also owned the manor of Moulsoe in Buckinghamshire, but we do not know for how long it had been his.

The full extent of Whittingham's holdings in London and the country remains open to speculation, since he was involved in such a large number of enfeoffments to the use of others, most notably John, duke of Exeter (who also made him an executor of his will), Henry, count of Eu, and William, duke of Suffolk. Even after he left the City for the court of Henry VI, he was frequently chosen as a grantee of the goods and chattels of London tradesmen, and often undertook to act as their trustee. Whittingham's burgeoning attachment to Cardinal Beaufort was no doubt greatly strengthened by the work which the two men performed together as executors of the duke of Bedford's will. Certainly, Beaufort trusted him sufficiently to involve him in his highly complex financial dealings with the Crown, and, as we have seen, sold property to him, perhaps even agreeing to act as his trustee. It is worth noting that Sir Andrew Ogard, another of Bedford's executors, apparently deposited a 'store of French gold' to the value of 7,000 marks with Whittingham, whose task may well have been to invest the profits of war on his colleague's behalf. From 1433 onwards, Whittingham held a succession of royal offices and served on many diplomatic missions abroad, being thus drawn into the risky business of government borrowing. On 14 Feb. 1436, for example, four days after being made treasurer of Calais, he advanced 100 marks towards the cost of the war with France, and in the following year he made a further £100

available for the same purpose. He had, meanwhile, stood surety with the treasurer and chancellor of England for the safety of certain jewels which had been pledged in return for additional loans. Between March 1438 and June 1440 he lent Henry VI several sums ranging from £67 to £200, although there is now no means of telling exactly how much the Crown was in his debt at any given time. It was as treasurer of Calais that he joined the ambassadors who met there under Beaufort's leadership in the summer of 1439 to negotiate for peace with France. That he was a committed member of the 'peace party' which the cardinal headed, in the face of bitter opposition from his own erstwhile adversary Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, seems beyond question; and, as a courtier who owed much of his success to royal patronage, he was also attracted to the circle of William, duke of Suffolk, Henry VI's great favourite and an equally determined advocate of peace. Whittingham certainly had need of friends in high places, because it was at this time that a serious scandal concerning his misappropriation of funds at Calais came to light. Partly as a result of the demoralization following English reversals in France, the government had seriously neglected the upkeep of the fortifications there, and the defences soon began to deteriorate. But this process of collapse was accelerated during Whittingham's treasurership, not only because of his deliberate policy of economizing on repairs, but also, more seriously, because he followed his father-in-law's example of diverting cash and supplies for his own private use. Matters came to a head in 1439, when a breach of the sea wall threatened to destroy the harbour. An investigation of the state of the defences carried out on the spot by Cardinal Beaufort proved so alarming that a full-scale inquiry was held three years later, laying most of the blame on Whittingham's shoulders. Fortunately for him, he managed to avoid prosecution for embezzlement in the Exchequer court by securing successive writs of postponement, and it looks as if he was never actually brought to book for his misdeeds. On the contrary, he continued to enjoy every mark of royal patronage, with no apparent hint of displeasure on the part of the government. As early as March 1433, for example, he and Richard Alrede (with whom he was subsequently appointed to arbitrate in a dispute between Henry, earl of Northumberland, and Cardinal Kemp) had been granted the marriages of William Bykbury's two daughters for 100 marks. His accumulation of property and privileges in Buckinghamshire also owed much to the generosity of Henry VI, while the knighthood which he received in about 1444 serves as a reminder of the great favour shown to him, not least with regard to his appalling record of maladministration in Calais. His rapid exemption from the Act of Resumption of 1450 may also be attributed to his strong position at Court, then recently reinforced by the presence of his eldest son, Robert, among the ushers of the royal chamber. Not long after the murder of the duke of Suffolk, Whittingham was, moreover, given joint custody of some of the Norfolk properties which he had held as one of his feoffees.

Whittingham died at the very beginning of November 1452, having expressed a wish to be buried at Ashridge in Buckinghamshire. His extensive estate was divided between his widow, Agnes, and their four sons, the eldest of whom, an ardent Lancastrian, went into exile with Margaret of Anjou in 1463 and was killed eight years later fighting for Henry VI at the battle of Tewkesbury.