

The legacy of the ‘infamous’ Ralph Shaa

As part of The Missing Princes Project’s forensic investigations, project member **JUDITH FORD** places the will of Ralph Shaa, the churchman who announced Richard’s claim to the throne in 1483, under the spotlight in search of any evidence for ‘infamy’

On Sunday 22 June 1483 the first public statement of Richard, Duke of Gloucester’s, claim to the throne was made in London. There is disagreement among chroniclers as to whether Richard’s claim, as announced that day, was based on the illegitimacy of Edward IV, the illegitimacy of Edward’s children, or that of both Edward and his children. Chroniclers broadly agree that the statement was delivered in the form of a sermon, either at several locations in London, or at St Paul’s Cross, the public pulpit at St Paul’s cathedral. Fabyan’s chronicle (completed between 1509 and 1512), the *Great Chronicle of London* (possibly c.1512) and Polydore Vergil (c. 1513) all identify the preacher at St Paul’s as Ralph Shaa. Thomas More (writing c.1513–18) gives the name Shaa for the preacher, and provides enough information to identify him as Ralph Shaa, but calls him ‘John’. In More’s account, Shaa’s name is mentioned together with that of an Augustinian friar named ‘Penker [Penketh]’, who is said to have delivered a sermon in praise of Richard III after his coronation.¹ Shaa and Penketh had much in common. Both were well-known and respected theologians, both had a connection with Queens’ College, Cambridge, and both were natives of Cheshire.²

Thomas More asserts that the reputations of Shaa and Penketh were damaged by their respective sermons, although Penketh was damaged ‘the lesse’.³ Other chroniclers who name Ralph Shaa describe his life after 22 June 1483 in negative and moralistic terms. *The Great Chronicle*, for example, states that:

The which sermon soo dyscontentid the more party of [his] audience that, where the said doctor Shaa before dayes was accomptid moost ffamous ... he afftyr this daye was lytill Reputid or Regardyd accordyng to the honour that he In dayes passid was, and ovyr that he dayly hard the obprobrious Reportys which of hym ran thorw the land of that sermon makyng, that he took such a Remors ... he nevyr prosperid afftyr, But ffyll Into a consumpcion and lastly soo dyed.⁴



Celebrated: The theologian and philosopher, Augustinian friar Thomas Penketh (d. 1487)

Polydore Vergil asserted that

[Shaa] the publisher of thabhomynablnes of so weightie a cause (who not long after acknowledged his error, through the grievous rebukes of his fryndes that wer ashamyd of his infamy) so sore repentyd the doing therof that, dying shortly for very sorrow he suffered worthe punishment for his lewdness.⁵

Friar Penketh lived until 1487 and there is evidence to indicate that More’s assertions regarding his loss of reputation are inaccurate.⁶ Ralph Shaa died 14 months after his ‘infamous’ sermon, and there is little surviving material with which to assess the chroniclers’ claims. One extant document is Shaa’s last will and testament. What does this will reveal about the testator’s life after June 1483?

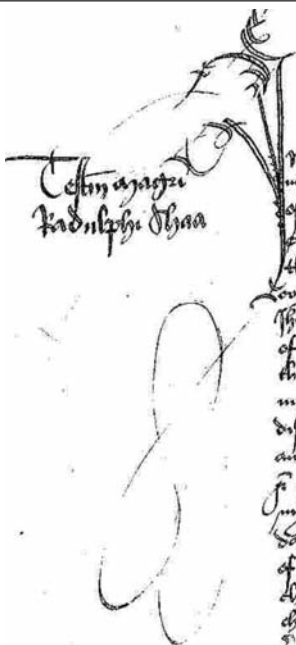
‘Vale of mysrye’

Ralph Shaa made his will on 18 August 1484 (he died before the 21st of that month).⁷ The making of his will, close to death, may indicate that the onset of Shaa’s final illness was sudden, and was not the result of a decline that might have begun with any remorse, or loss of reputation, that he experienced following his sermon on the 22 June 1483. No previous wills are revoked in this document, as would usually be the case if such existed. The implication is, therefore, that Shaa did not believe himself to be in danger of intestacy, a condition frowned upon by the Church, before the second half of August 1484. Shaa’s will opens with the formal statements of date and identity:

... the xvij day of the moneth of Auguste the yere of oure lord god millesimo CCCC lxxxiiij And the second yere of the reigne of king Richard the ijde I Rauf Shaa doctor of Divinyte and one of the residencaries of the cathedrall church of saynt paule ...⁸

Following a declaration of his mental fitness, the testator observed that ‘beyng pore in body oure lord Jhesu be thankyd in every whai withyne this Vale of mysrye [I] make and ordeyn this my present testament conteynyng my last Will in manere and forme ensuyng’. The reference to ‘this Vale of mysrye’ might be interpreted as confirmation of the allegations of Shaa’s remorse for his conduct 14 months earlier, and his loss of reputation.

Such declarations are, however, standard and formal elements of the preambles of wills, and reflect the association of will-making with achieving a ‘good end’ and preparing for the better life to come. The will of Ralph’s sister-in-law Julyan Shaa, for example, references this association in its statement that the testator did not want to ‘departe intestate out of this miserable lyfe’.⁹ Instances of the phrase ‘this vale of misery’ are to be found in the preambles of wills throughout the fifteenth



In the name of almyghty god father and son and holy goste Amen the day day of the
 month of Auguste the yere of our lord god and kyngs Henry the second yere of the reigne
 of kyng Richard the first I Rafulph Shaa docto of Divinity and on of the rectoriaid of the
 cathedraill church of saint pauls hole of mynde neddes, lasse being por in body and laud I be
 thankyd in evy wyche I wote this orde of my tye make and ordeyn this my ffent testamēt
 conteynyng my last will in maner and forme chynnyng ffurst I bequeth my simple soule to almyghty
 god my feid maker and fader to the blessed virgyn and lady saint mary and to all the holy company
 of heven And my simple body to be buryed wth the cathedraill church of saint pauls of london after
 the blessed figure of our lord Ihu called the roze of North door in such place as yett shall be thought
 most best and necessary for me after the distracion of myn executours conditioyn I w^{ill} and
 dispose after all othir thinge and bequeths principally ffurst after my buryng and the exequies of dunge
 and masse don and endyd of at my monethly mynde all my dette the whiche I owe of right to content
 a pay by my feid executours conditioyn be ffairly and truly content a payd in discharge of
 my soule I w^{ill} bequeth to the chaunc of the feid cathedraill church being ffent a shill at the
 day of my decease or at my monethly mynde for evy of the feid tymes xx dy and in like wyse to evy
 of my brethren rectoriaids at evy of the feid tymes ther also being xx dy and to evy foreign
 chanon of the same church ther also being for evy of the feid tymes xx dy and to evy pety
 chanon of the same church ther also being for evy of the feid tymes v dy and to evy charyte
 ffes of the same church ther also being for evy of the feid tymes v dy and to evy vicar of
 the feid church being no ffre ther also being for evy of the feid tymes my dy and to evy quest
 of the same church ther also being for evy tyme xx dy I w^{ill} that myn executours conditioyn
 in all the goodly hast that they can or may after my decease be occupyed and given to the feid
 cathedraill church to pay for my soule a pnce of the pte of x mark I w^{ill} bequeth to my ffyter
 maunde dwelling at manchestre x mark of lawfull money after the distracion of myn executours

and overseer I w^{ill} bequeth to Edmond latymy my ffyter son to ward his exchibicion to stode x mark
 after the distracion of the feid executours Also I bequeth to the pety church of Drotton in Wiltshire whiche
 was the ffist benefice that I had x s in money or a rescontent to the same value Also I bequeth
 dyffe pnce wth in my pety of saint Giles wth oute beparishe of london be to me endowd
 for ther offour and thirtie yearly and ffairly done them of all the feid offour and thirtie
 by them to me due ffrome the begynnyng of the world vnto the day of my decease and that
 none of my feid executours at no tyme hereafter trouble ne venge them for the same I w^{ill} bequeth
 to John basynp my soun to pray for my soule x mark I w^{ill} that my feid executours under
 wth xx dy and Edward Rafulph latymy x mark and to Robt latymy x mark and to Edmond
 basynp x mark Also I w^{ill} that all the doughts of Henry basynp whiche be yett vntoward be
 redwardy toward the said marriage after the distracion of my feid executours or overseer or the
 next pte of them I w^{ill} bequeth to ward the marriage of Edmond latymy to pray for my soule
 after the distracion of my feid executours or overseer or the next pte of them xx mark I w^{ill} bequeth
 to Thomas coke my ffuant for his good ffance to me done in my lyff by p^{ro} his wyffe xx dy I w^{ill} bequeth
 to thurston shred p^{ro} his good ffance to me done in like wyse xx dy I w^{ill} bequeth to
 my ffuant in like wyse xx dy I w^{ill} bequeth to my brother Edmond Shaa and to John Shaa my lobe
 callid barne the residue of all and singuler my goodes and chattel moneable and vntowable not
 bequethid after my dette payd and bequethis in all thinge fulfilled I w^{ill} the same residue be
 disposed by my feid executours after the distracion And by the offour of my wellbelovyd brother
 Edmond Shaa wth dymyter and late anawd of the cite of london and of my soun John Shaa
 quaterm and goldsmith of the same cite and of thre my ffent testamēt and last will I w^{ill} bequeth
 and ordeyn executours of this my ffent testamēt Thomas latymy and the feid Edmond and
 John Shaa overseers of the same I w^{ill} witnesse p^{ro}

Robatym fuit scriptum testm cora dno ad knoll xij die mens Octobris Anno dm
 sup^{er} no appo^{ro}bat p^{ro} infirmat p^{ro} Et comissa fuit d^{omi}nistrata omⁿⁱ p^{ro} sing^ulis bonoz p^{ro}
 thome latymy executore emb^o definit de bene p^{ro} fidelit^{er} admistrand^o ead^{em} ac de
 plano p^{ro} fidel^{it}er^{er} confiteand^o p^{ro} et f^uit Marat dm p^{ro} ac de plano p^{ro} o^{mn}ino
 campo p^{ro} in d^{omi}n^o m^o forma mar^o p^{ro}

Test of will: The last will and testament of Ralph Shaa included bequests for cathedral masses, his family, the poor and parishioners

Source: The National Archives

Ricardian advocate: Doctor Ralph Shaa preaching from the public pulpit at St Paul's Cross, shown in an eighteenth-century print



Image: Look and Learn/Elgar Collection

dignity, in life.¹¹ But neither was Shaa trying to hide himself away. There were 'a cluster of popular chapels near the Rood over the door of the north transept leading to the Pardon Churchyard, which was a highly favoured gravesite'.¹²

The testator did not apparently fear that his burial near to the crucifix of the north door would cause any problems for the cathedral. Many offerings were made at this crucifix, which 'greatly increased the revenue of the dean and canons'.¹³ As the central task of residentiaries was to transact the business of the cathedral and chapter, and take daily care of the concerns of the church,¹⁴ it is unlikely that Shaa would have done anything he thought might prejudice the popularity of this crucifix through association with his mortal remains and his alleged 'infamy'.

Cathedral masses

Shaa appears to have expected his obsequies to be fully supported by the cathedral community, resident and non-resident. His will includes a lengthy and meticulous list of small monetary bequests to each of the personnel of St Paul's who attended his funeral mass and his 'monethes mynd' (the memorial mass to be celebrated a month after the testator's death). These payments are graduated according to hierarchy, headed by the 'Dean of the seid cathedral church' who was to receive 20d for each occasion, and concludes with a bequest of 2d to every 'prest' under the same terms. The list includes a payment of 12d to the 'foreyn' (non-resident) canons of St Pauls. This detailed list may have been

century, including those of clerics of unquestioned reputation.¹⁰

Ralph Shaa next made provision for his mortal remains. He directed that his

simple body[was] to be [sic] buried withyne the cathedral churche of saint paule of London afor the blissid figure of oure lord Jhesu called the rode of North doore in such place as ytt shall betought most best and necessary for me after the discrecion of myn executors underwretyn.

The discretion allowed to those charged with fulfilling Shaa's will, regarding his exact place of burial, and the lack of instructions concerning monuments or other physical memorials, do not suggest a testator who was anxious to create a visual 'post-mortem identity' to mitigate any loss of regard, or

inserted by a testamentary scribe, with minimum instruction from the testator, as it was usual for those participating in funeral services at St Paul's to receive 'monetary compensation based on ... rank'.¹⁵ If there is a pro forma aspect to this section of the will, it indicates that Shaa expected to be treated in the same way and with the same respect as any other member of his community. The testator also gave to the cathedral, to pray for him, 'a cupe of the price of x marks' but he did not make any stipulation regarding the frequency or duration of those prayers. Ralph Shaa's bequests and intentions clearly indicate an attachment to the St. Paul's community.¹⁶

The focus of Shaa's pious and charitable bequests was not entirely upon the cathedral. He remembered the parish of Stockton, Wiltshire, which had been his first benefice, and

bequeathed to the church there the sum of 100 shillings, or a vestment of the same value, but he made no specific request for prayers to be said for his soul in return. Overall, for someone who had allegedly been brought low by the burden of his 'lewd' conduct on the 22 June 1483, and who might well have feared the consequences of that conduct for his soul, Shaa's bequests and directions for masses and prayers appear modest. If this was a result of Shaa's weakness or infirmity at the time his will was made, that indicates that he had not felt it necessary to prepare a draft of instructions, regarding his pious wishes, in preceding months. The testator's local community was not forgotten. To 'dyverse pore persons' in his parish of St Giles without Cripplegate, Shaa gave his pardon for all tithes and offerings owed to him 'frome the begynnyng of the world unto the day of my decease'. This charitable bequest to his parishioners had pious as well as mundane implications for those pardoned, since debts to the Church were believed to lengthen the time spent in purgatory.

Family bequests

The contents of his will suggest that Shaa's alleged loss of reputation had not alienated him from his family or his household. He made bequests of money to various relatives, including 10 marks to his sister Maude 'dwelling at Manchester', and the same sum to his nephew Edmund Lathum, 'towards his exhibicion of scole'. In only two instances did Shaa ask that prayers be said by family beneficiaries. He bequeathed 10 marks to his cousin Henry Harsnap 'to pray for my soul', and 20 marks 'toward the mariage of Emma Lathum [probably his niece] to pray for my soul'. The testator appointed as his executor Thomas Lathum (possibly his brother-in-law), and his overseers were named as his 'welbelovid brother Edmond Shaa Goldsmyth and late mair of the cite of London and ... [his] cosyn John Shaa citezin and Goldsmith of the same cite'. Shaa's servants at his residence at St Paul's¹⁷ were clearly loyal. He made generous provision for each of them and acknowledged their 'good service done to me in my lyff'.

The formal and personal elements of wills and testaments can be difficult to disentangle. The only statement in Ralph Shaa's will that might be interpreted as supporting the allegations of chroniclers about his loss of reputation is likely to be a formalised acknowledgement of the contrast between the earthly life and the Heavenly life to come. In other respects, Shaa's testamentary wishes and instructions do not support the allegations. Shaa was not, apparently, in particular fear for his soul after his sermon on 22 June 1483, and he does not appear to have prepared or completed a will, or instructions regarding his pious wishes, prior to his last illness. Nor does he appear to have been alienated from his family (near or far), or from the communities he served.

Judith Ford has researched wills and testaments for more than 30 years. In 1992 she was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Open University for her study of nearly 800 wills, dating from 1500 to 1533, which are recorded in the first three surviving registers of the court of the Archdeacon of Bedford

Notes

1. J. Rawson Lumby (ed.), *More's History of King Richard III*, 1883, p. 57.
2. For a detailed discussion of Ralph Shaa's family background, see

R. Cunliffe Shaw, 'Two Fifteenth-Century Kinsmen, John Shaw of Dukinfield, Mercer and William Shaw of Heath Charnock, Surgeon', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire for the Year 1958*, vol. 10, pp. 15–30; for Thomas Penketh's distinguished career see J. Catto, entry for Penketh, Thomas, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21844>. For a reference to both Shaa and Penketh in the context of Richard III's connections with Cambridge University, see L. Visser-Fuchs (ed.) and W. Moorhen (tech. ed), *Richard III and East Anglia: magnates, guilds and learned men*, Richard III Society, 2010, p. 125 and fn. 106.

3. Rawson Lumby, p. 57.
4. A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley (eds), *The Great Chronicle of London*, 1938, repr. 1983, p. 231; I am grateful to Marie Barnfield for her thoughts on the dating of this and other London chronicles; M-R. McLaren, *The London Chronicles of the Fifteenth Century: a revolution in English writing*, 2002, pp. 7, 27, 28.
5. H. Ellis, *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History*, 1844, p. 185. The accusation of 'lewdness' was a serious one. Contemporary meanings of the word included ignorant, lay (not clerical), useless, vile, base and wicked. *Early Translation, Old Royal Library, British Museum*, Camden Society.
6. See, for example, F. Roth, 'Sources for the History of the English Austin Friars: III The Fifteenth Century, IV the Sixteenth Century', *Augustiniana*, vol. 10, no. 3 (August 1960), p. 371.
7. The National Archives, PCC prob 11/7/70v-71. Shaa's successor in the prebendary of Caddington Minor was presented on 21 August 1484. R. Newcourt, *Repertorium Ecclesiasticum Parochiale*, vol. 1, 1708, p. 31.
8. The statement of the regnal year of the monarch is a standard, formal, detail of a medieval last will and testament.
9. TNA PCC prob 11/10/170-171. Julyan Shaa was the widow of Ralph's brother Sir Edmund Shaa.
10. See, for example, the will of priest and canon lawyer John Lydford of Devon, proved 1407. Lydford uses the phrase 'vale of misery' in his preamble, but later in the will he indicates his enjoyment of a successful life by bequeathing a maple cup in which he had enjoyed 'much good wine'. F. C. Hingston-Randolph (ed.) *The Register of Edmund Stafford, 1395–1419*, 1886, pp. 389–90; ODNB, D. M. Owen, entry for Lydford, John. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/49665>.
11. For a discussion of *post-mortem* identity see, for example, M. Wilson, 'Peacock Feathers and Pater Nosters: the post-mortem identity of Sir Thomas Burgh', *The Ricardian*, vol. 30, 2020, pp. 151–67.
12. C. Steer, 'The Canons of St Paul's and their Brasses', *Transactions of the Monumental Brass Society*, vol. 19, part 3, p. 220.
13. Revd J. Entick, *A New and Accurate History and Survey of London, Westminster, Southwark, and Places Adjacent*, vol. 4, 1766, p. 198.
14. Entick, p. 218.
15. M-H. Rousseau, 'Chantry Chaplains at St Paul's Cathedral, London Ca. 1200–1548', *Medieval Prosopography*, vol. 26 (2005), p. 205. The amounts left by Shaa to the St Paul's community were not, apparently, either token or excessive. In 1540, for example, Thomas Woode, a chantry priest at St Paul's, left £4 to be distributed among the clergy attending his funeral services. Rousseau, pp. 215–16.
16. Rousseau, pp. 215–16.
17. Residentiaries, as the name suggests, lived close to the cathedral in houses situated near the Bishop of London's palace (where 'Edward V took up his lodging when he was brought to London to take possession of the crown'). Entick, p. 39.
18. This is specified in the case of the servant listed first (Thomas Coke) and implied for each of the remaining three listed men.

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