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The Making of a Tudor Courtier: The Military, Court and Diplomatic Career of Sir Philip Sidney's Grandfather, Sir William Sidney (c.1482-1554)

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Abstract. The importance of Sir William Sidney's career to establishing the Sidneys as a major Tudor and Stuart family has been rarely researched. This essay examines his early rise to court prominence via his personal connections with the Brandon and Howard families and his exceptional skill on the tiltyard. It traces for the first time his distinguished naval career as commander of the *Dragon* and *Great Bark* and corrects longstanding errors over his central naval role and combat in the English vanguard formation at the Battle of Flodden (1513). His influential but hitherto unacknowledged role in Anglo-French diplomacy from 1513 until the mid-1520s is also traced. These distinctions, coupled with his longstanding intimacy with Henry VIII, led in 1538 to his appointment as Lord Chamberlain of the household of the infant Prince Edward and in 1552 the grant of the manor and estate of Penshurst in Kent which remains today the Sidneys' family residence.

Introduction

The reputation of Sir William Sidney has long been overshadowed by the personal distinction, court prominence, and state responsibilities of his descendants. His son Sir Henry Sidney (1529-86) served Elizabeth I as Lord Deputy of Ireland and President of the Council in the Marches of Wales. His grandson, Robert (1563-1626) was appointed Lord Chamberlain to Queen Anne soon after James I's accession and his services to the Crown were recognised by his creation in 1618 as 1st Earl of Leicester. Most famously, Robert's elder brother Sir Philip (1554-86) was venerated after his death in October 1586 in the Low Countries as a legendary icon of Protestant militarism and is still admired for the imaginative creativity of his prose romance *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, and his versifications of the Psalms of David, completed after his death by another of Sir William's talented grandchildren, Philip's sister Mary Sidney Herbert (1561-1621), Countess of Pembroke. Sir William's great-grandson, Robert (1595-1677), 2nd Earl of Leicester, served King Charles I in diplomatic missions to Denmark and France and as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Leicester's second son, the republican theorist Algernon (1623-83), was executed on a charge of treason; and his fourth son, Henry (1641-1704), 1st Earl of Romney, played a leading role in the accession in 1689 of King William III.¹

¹ For the public careers and literary works of the Sidneys, see my *The Sidneys of Penshurst and the Monarchy, 1500-1700* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

In contrast, Sir William Sidney remains a shadowy figure in accounts both of the reign of Henry VIII and of the history of the Sidney family. Few of his personal papers have survived, in contrast to many of his descendants whose extensive archives, preserved at the Kent History and Library Centre (formerly Centre for Kentish Studies), comprise one of the largest collections of private family papers during the Tudor and Stuart periods.² Biographical accounts of Sir William are scanty and he is only briefly included in the introduction of the entry for his son, Sir Henry Sidney in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.³ No authenticated portrait of him is known to have survived.⁴ Yet given the importance of family lineage and contacts during the early modern period, without Sir William's military, courtly and diplomatic skills during the reigns of King Henry VIII and Edward VI, it is unlikely that the later Sidneys would have been able to achieve such notable court prominence during the Tudor and Stuart regimes. Furthermore, this article proposes that the courtly, military and tiltyard achievements of Sir William Sidney—now largely forgotten—must have remained long in the minds of subsequent generations of his family, especially of Sir Philip Sidney and his father Sir Henry Sidney who also excelled on the tiltyard and on the battlefield.

Little specific attention has been paid to how the distinguished naval, military and diplomatic experiences of Philip's grandfather, Sir William Sidney, during the early years of King Henry VIII's reign may have inspired both Philip and his father Sir Henry. For example, it has been rarely mentioned (or noted outside archival naval records) that between 1511 and 1513 Sir William commanded two ships of the Tudor navy, the *Dragon* and the *Great Bark*, even though these involvements played a crucial role in bringing him to prominence at the Henrician court. Sir William has at least been celebrated for his distinguished participation in the bloody clash of English and Scottish forces in 1513 at Branxton Hill, Northumberland, the site of the Battle of Flodden. Surprisingly, however, his role and strategic positioning in this

² Many other Sidney family papers are preserved in the British Library, London; The National Archives, London; Yale University Library, and other national and international institutions. See, for example, the survey of Sir Philip Sidney's surviving correspondence, in libraries and archives in Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands in *The Correspondence of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Roger Kuin, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxii-xxxii.

³ Wallace T. MacCaffrey, "Sir Henry Sidney," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online edition].

⁴ Mona Wilson, *Sir Philip Sidney* (London: Duckworth, 1931), reproduces a portrait at Penshurst Place, Kent, which she describes as of Sir William Sidney. However, this painting, now in the Long Gallery at Penshurst, has been reattributed to Hans Eworth (1520-74) and is thought to be of Sir Henry Sidney. I am very grateful to Viscount De L'Isle, CVO, MBE, for his advice on this portrait. See also, the on-line catalogue raisonné of Hans Eworth's portraits

<http://www.hanseworth.com/HEworthCatalogue2013.pdf>.

conflict has been inaccurately reported since the mid-eighteenth century. As will be explained below, this persistent error has served to obscure Sidney's true significance, both during key preparations for the conflict and his presence on the battlefield at the centre of the hand-to-hand fighting. Nor has even the date of his knighthood ever been definitively resolved.

Sir William Sidney's Family and Early Career

Sir William Sidney's contribution to the English military forces at Flodden played a key role in facilitating his rise from Kentish gentleman and naval commander to a trusted associate both of Henry VIII and his son Edward VI. Few prominent courtiers managed to remain close to Henry VIII throughout his often unpredictable and dangerous reign. Two such individuals were Sidney and his relative and jousting partner Charles Brandon (1484-1545), Duke of Suffolk, whose aunt, Anne Brandon, had married Sir William Sidney's father, Nicholas (c.1447-51-c.1512).⁵ Due in no small measure to his personal intimacy with Brandon and the king, Sir William's centrality to the royal circle was publicly confirmed during the 1530s. The birth of Henry's only legitimate son Prince Edward on 12 October 1537 was greeted with national rejoicing, although his mother, Jane Seymour, died only twelve days later. Consequently, the infant prince's newly widowed father was concerned to provide his male heir with the best of care and education. In a striking confirmation of the personal warmth and high regard in which Sir William Sidney was held by Henry VIII, the welfare of the future king of England was entrusted to his immediate family.

Soon after Prince Edward's first birthday the king established a separate household at Hampton Court for his son, with a detailed description of its constitution drawn up and addressed to Sir William who was to serve as the prince's Chamberlain with his wife, Anne Sidney, as Edward's governess. The Prince's "Lady Mistress" was Lady Bryan, who had served both Princess Mary and Princess Elizabeth in the same capacity. His dry nurse, Edward's most intimate carer who "lay in bed with him so long as he remained in woman's government," was Sybil Penne, the sister of Sidney's wife Anne. These arrangements were maintained until summer 1544 when the king laid plans for his son's more formal and academic education. Sir William, who was now in his early sixties, was transferred to the post of Steward.⁶ His son Henry was educated with Prince Edward, as was Charles Brandon's son and heir, Henry (1535-51). As a culminating reward for his long and loyal royal service Edward VI granted in 1552 to

⁵ For Sidney's relationship with Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, see Brennan, *Sidneys of Penshurst*, 12-16.

⁶ Brennan, *Sidneys of Penshurst*, 20. British Library MS Cotton Vitellius C.I, f.65v. Malcolm William Wallace, *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915).

Sir William the estate and house of Penshurst Place, Kent, which still remains in the possession of the Sidney family today.

Little is known about William Sidney's childhood and early education. His great-grandparents were William (d.1449) and Agnes Sidney of Cranleigh. His grandfather, William Sidney (c.1417-c.1453/65 or 1477) of Kingsham owned estates in Surrey and Suffolk.⁷ He was the first member of the family known to have used the renowned Sidney pheon, a variant of the broad arrow heraldic symbol, on his armorial seal. He married as his third wife Thomasine Barrington (c.1414/22-c.1498) and they were the grandparents of our William Sidney. His father was Nicholas Sidney (c.1447-51-c.1512) who had at least two brothers, Edward and Lewis, although they probably died young. Nicholas Sidney married Anne Brandon (c.1454-c.1497/1508), daughter of Sir William Brandon and aunt of William Sidney's close associate at the Tudor court, Charles Brandon.⁸

As a youth William Sidney joined the household of his mother's brother, Sir Thomas Brandon (d.1510) of Southwark. His uncle's career offered an outstanding example of military, royal, and diplomatic service and would have also provided him with a keen sense of the vicissitudes of court life. Sir Thomas' brother William had died at the Battle of Bosworth, fighting on the side of the future Henry VII and was honoured as a military hero during Henry VIII's reign. In contrast, William Sidney's commander at Flodden, Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, had fought in the same conflict alongside his father, John Howard (c.1425-85), 1st Duke of Norfolk, in support of Richard III. Norfolk, in command of the vanguard at Bosworth, was killed and his son Thomas was wounded, taken prisoner, stripped of his lands and imprisoned in the Tower of London for three years. His earldom of Surrey was only restored in 1489 after proving his loyalty to Henry VII.⁹

⁷ I have been unable to establish a definite date of death for this William Sidney. Various genealogical and historical sources suggest (without evidence) that he died either between 1453-65 or in c.1477. It is claimed in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord De L'Isle and Dudley Preserved at Penshurst Place*, 6 vols. (London: HMSO, 1925-66), I.ix, that he served as MP for Sussex in 1429 and 1433. However, if he was born in c.1417, this seems unlikely since he would have been only about 12 years old in 1429. The authoritative source for parliamentary information is *The History of Parliament. British Political, Social and Local History* but its records for Members of Parliament for Sussex between 1422 and 1504 are not yet accessible to researchers.

<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/research/members/members-1422-1504>

⁸ HMC, *De L'Isle and Dudley*, I.ix, 5-6.

⁹ Gervase Phillips, *The Anglo-Scots Wars 1513-1550* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 111-33. Thomas Howard was the grandfather of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard and the great-grandfather of Elizabeth I.

Sir Thomas Brandon was prominent in international diplomacy. He had served in 1492 on an English embassy to conclude peace with France. In 1500 he accompanied Henry VII to Calais to meet with the Archduke Philip of Austria and then travelled to Antwerp for private discussions with the Emperor Maximilian. This latter mission was aimed at persuading Maximilian to withdraw his support from the Yorkist claimant to the English throne, Edmund de la Pole (c.1471-1513), third Duke of Suffolk, whom Henry later had executed on 30 April 1513. Pointedly, when Sir Thomas's nephew, Charles Brandon was raised by Henry VIII to an earldom on 1 February 1514, he was created Duke of Suffolk in a final confirmation of the king's political eradication of the Yorkist Suffolks. In October 1507 Sir Thomas met Baldassare Castiglione, the author of *The Book of the Courtier*, who had come to England to receive the Order of the Garter for the Duke of Urbino.¹⁰

Sir Thomas Brandon, who also served Henry VII as an Esquire of the Body (1489) and Master of the King's Horse (1501-10), was a distinguished performer in tournaments and court entertainments, as were his nephews Charles and William Sidney during the reign of Henry VIII. When Sir Thomas died in 1510, his banner was borne at his funeral by William Sidney who was still a member of his household and, according to a contemporary source, "contynually waytid upon hym in the court."¹¹ The trajectory of Sir Thomas Brandon's career, combining military and diplomatic affairs, offers an interesting model for the development of William Sidney's own rise to prominence at the court of Henry VIII. The Brandons also provided Sidney with important personal contacts with other influential families, most notably the Guildfords and Dudleys, who would prove of especial significance to Sidney's family circle in later years.

The association of Charles Brandon with the Guildfords was of considerable importance to William Sidney. Sir Thomas Brandon had willed his Southwark house to Lady Joan (Vaux) Guildford, the widow of the Comptroller of the royal household, Sir Richard Guildford (c.1450-1506). Sir Richard had also served at Bosworth Field (1485), fighting on the side of Henry VII with Sir Thomas Brandon's brother William. Guildford, who had considerable knowledge of artillery, military fortifications and shipbuilding, was appointed as Master of the Ordnance and Armoury in the Tower of London in September 1485. One of his own ships was called the *Mary Gylford* and from 12 July 1490 he undertook to serve Henry VII at sea in three ships with 550

¹⁰ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (Venice, 1528), trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London, 1561).

¹¹ The National Archives (henceforth TNA) C24/29, Haworth and Powis, Suffolk, deposition of Sir William Sidney, quoted in S.J. Gunn, *Charles Brandon. Henry VIII's Closest Friend* (Stroud: Amberley, 2015, rpt. 2016), 17. See also S.J. Gunn, *Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, c.1484-1545* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 3; and his "Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (on-line edition); and Brennan, *Sidneys of Penshurst*, 12-13.

marines and soldiers for two months.¹² Given his close associations with the Brandons during his youth, it seems likely that William Sidney would have been familiar with the public and naval career of Sir Richard Guildford and this connection may have first introduced him to naval affairs. In 1506 Sir Richard undertook his most arduous sea voyage, setting out in April 1506 from Rye on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. His party first crossed by land through France, Savoy and northern Italy before reaching Venice. From there he took passage on one of the Venetian pilgrimage galleys, sailing via Crete, Cyprus and Jaffa before arriving at Jerusalem where he died on 6 September.¹³

After Sir Thomas Brandon's death in 1510, Charles Brandon rented Southwark house from Sir Richard Guildford's widow, Lady Joan. She was, respectively, the mother and stepmother of two of Brandon's closest friends, Edward Guildford (c.1479-1534) and his half-brother Henry Guildford (1489-1532).¹⁴ Edward served from 1493 until 1506 with his father as joint master of Henry VIII's armoury and was sole master from 1506-1514. This position meant that Edward was responsible in 1513 for the supply of armaments used for both the king's French campaign in 1513 and Thomas Howard's (and Sidney's) involvements at Flodden.¹⁵ It seems, therefore, that through his personal intimacy with the Brandons and Guildfords, the young William Sidney would have been able to gain valuable expertise in military armaments and naval affairs during the first decade of the sixteenth century.

¹² Sean Cunningham, "Sir Richard Guildford," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (on-line edition).

¹³ Sir Richard's experiences on pilgrimage were recorded by his anonymous chaplain, see *This is the begynnyng, and contynuaunce of the pylgrymage of sir R. Guylforde knight. And howe he went towards Jherusalem* (London: T. Pynson, 1511); rpt. *The Pylgrymage of Sir Richard Guylforde to the Holy Land*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London: Camden Society, 1851). Sir Richard's experiences at Venice are edited in my *English Travellers to Venice: 1450-1600* (London: The Hakluyt Society, forthcoming).

¹⁴ The links between the Brandons, Guildfords and Sidneys were sustained when Henry VIII's sister Princess Mary was married to Louis XII of France on 9 October 1514 at Abbeville, Lady Joan Guildford was a member of her entourage. Following the king's death on 1 January 1515, Charles Brandon, by then Duke of Suffolk, married Princess Mary in a secret ceremony on 3 March 1515. Sidney was in France during spring 1515 and his central role in the aftermath of Brandon's marriage is discussed later in this article.

¹⁵ Edward Guildford was the father of Jane Guildford who married John Dudley, later Earl of Warwick and Duke of Northumberland. Their daughter, Mary Dudley, was to marry in March 1551 Sir William Sidney's son, Henry, thereby cementing the fortunes of the Sidney-Dudley alliance for the next four decades.

Early Naval Career and Command of the *Dragon*¹⁶

Following the death and breakup of Sir Thomas Brandon's household in 1510, William Sidney commenced his naval and military career. In May 1511 he joined the English expedition to Cadiz under the command of Lord Darcy, sent to aid Ferdinand, King of Aragon and Castile (Henry VIII's father-in-law), against the Moors. Although this expedition began as a grandiose crusade-like venture, it soon degenerated into an abortive disaster with the ramshackle and often drunken English forces of about 1,000 men never even reaching North Africa. Nevertheless, along with other members of the English contingent, William Sidney was lavishly entertained at the royal palace in Burgos.¹⁷ Arthur Collins states that he was accompanied there by "*Henry Guilford*" and "*Weston [Wiston] Brown*" who were both knighted by King Ferdinand on 15 September 1511 but "*William Sidneie* begged to excuse himself, as *Hollinshed* writes, that he was not knighted."¹⁸

Henry VIII joined the Holy League in November 1511 with Venice and Ferdinand of Aragon to defend the Papacy of Pope Julius II from France. By spring 1512 William Sidney had been appointed as an Esquire of the King's Household and was involved in overseas trade. On 24 April a license was granted from Greenwich to him and his comrade from Lord Darcy's expedition, Sir Wistan Brown (d. by 1535),¹⁹ to export 2,000 sacks of wool from London, Southampton or Sandwich "through and beyond the Straits of Marroke."²⁰ At about this period William Sidney took command of the *Dragon*, a ship of 100 tonnes which had been purchased for the Tudor navy in 1512.²¹ Following the outbreak of war with France in April 1512, Sir

¹⁶ I am very grateful to Professor Claire Jowitt and Dr Gary Baker for their advice on early Tudor naval history and sources.

¹⁷ Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, ed. H. Ellis, *et al.*, 6 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1807-8), III.503. Brennan, *Sidneys of Penshurst*, 9-10.

¹⁸ Arthur Collins, *Letters and Memorials of State*, 2 vols. (London: T. Osborne, 1746), I.76.

¹⁹ Sir Wistan Browne (d.c.1535) served as Sheriff of Essex and Hertfordshire in 1514. "Essex and Hertfordshire: Inquisition on possessions of Wistan Broun collector of customs in port of London," TNA PRO E 199/12/11.

²⁰ The Straits of Gibraltar, formerly known as the Straits of Morocco. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 1, 1509-1514* (London: HMSO, 1920) (henceforth *LP*), I.i, 1172 (2). <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp538-552>. See also *LP*, II.ii, 1623, for a renewal of this license on 5 March 1516.

²¹ This vessel was so named after the figure of the red dragon, first displayed as a Tudor emblem by Henry VII when he adopted the red dragon of Cadwallader. Henry VIII also utilized it as a support of his royal coat of arms. David Childs, *Tudor Sea Power. The Foundation of Greatness* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2009), 286.

Edward Howard was appointed (7 April) as Admiral of a fleet of about eighteen ships, including the *Dragon*, to patrol and control the sea between Brest, Calais and the Thames estuary. His ships set sail in April 1512 for a three-month cruise, not only harassing French boats but also plundering Spanish and Flemish trading vessels whenever the opportunity arose.²²

Between 3 and 6 June 1512 Howard, with fleet of twenty ships, escorted Henry VIII's army of about 10,000 to 12,000 men from Dorset down the coast of Brittany to Fuenterrabia (Hondarribia) in Basque territory on the north coast of Spain, close to the French border. The army was under the command of Thomas Grey (1477-1530), second Marquess of Dorset, with the aim of recovering Guyenne and the conquest of Aquitaine.²³ Howard and his fleet, including William Sidney in the *Dragon*, landed soldiers in Brittany, gained firm control over the English Channel, and captured various Breton and French ships. During a period of four days these English forces burned local towns and villages, including Le Conquet.²⁴ Lorenzo Pasqualigo, the Venetian consul in London, noted in letters (27-29 May 1512) to his brothers Alvise and Francesco (some of which were read aloud in the Senate):

In the Channel there were 30 [sic] large ships armed by Englishmen, which do not allow so much as a French fishing boat to put to sea without taking it. Report that some French vessels were fitted out, but did not dare show themselves.²⁵

In a later letter (14 July, recorded *CSP Venice*, 17 August) to his brothers, Pasqualigo provided more details of Sir Edward Howard's fleet:

The English fleet on its homeward voyage landed troops at two places in Brittany [sic], burned many castles and villages thereabouts, captured many ships and vessels fallen in with, and carried them away, after sacking everything.

²² *Letters and Papers Relating to The War with France 1512-1513*, ed. Alfred Spont, Publications of the Navy Records Society, vol. X, 1897, x-xvi (henceforth NRS, X, 1897).

²³ Dorset's forces relocated to Bayonne until October 1512, offering support to Ferdinand II of Aragon's conflict in the Kingdom of Navarre. Dorset later accompanied Brandon and Sidney to France in October 1514 when they escorted Henry VIII's sister, Princess Mary, for her wedding to Louis XII.

²⁴ NRS, X, 1897, xvi-xx. Douglas McElvogue, *Tudor Warship Mary Rose* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 48.

²⁵ *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume II* (London: HMSO, 1867), 64-70, 17 June (henceforth *CSP Venice*). <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol2/pp64-70>

Then, on entering the Channel, they met 26 hoys,²⁶ carrying much cannon, and bound for the bay (*alla baia*) in Brittany to load salt; these they took, and went all together to the Downs, where on board this fleet the King of England embarked very many troops, and armed the hoys and ships captured in Brittany; and one night they departed with 60 ships, besides the 40 hoys and ships captured in the ports of Brittany. Their destination was unknown, but they were supposed to be bound for some place in France, with which they have an understanding, and the result is awaited.

In the same letter Pasqualigo noted rumours that the French were outfitting a large fleet but they were unlikely to put to sea due to the growing size and threat of the English fleet. Pasqualigo's sources at the English court and London are not identifiable but he was clearly well informed. He continued:

The wish of England is that the French should come out, though this they will assuredly not do, as they have neither the means nor places for fitting out half as large a fleet as that of England, without counting that of Spain, which is very considerable. ... The other 20,000 men now mustering for embarkation on board vessels in the Thames are to be ready for their passage to Calais in the course of August, under command of "the Talbot,"²⁷ of a family always accustomed to beat the French ("*El Thalabot di caxa uso a bater sempre Francesi*") and he will go to Paris, four or five days march from his landing place.²⁸

Howard returned to Southampton in June for provisions and refitting. According to Holinshed, Henry briefly met him there on 1 July and five ships were added to his fleet (now totalling twenty-five vessels), including the newly refurbished 1,000 tonnes carrack *Regent* (225 guns), the building of which had been supervised in 1487 by Sir Richard Guildford (c.1450-1506).²⁹ In another report (3 August, recorded *CSP Venice*, 20 August) Pasqualigo noted that more ships were being armed, including the 800 tonnes carrack *Sovereign* (141

²⁶ *hoys*: small, single-mast, sloop-rigged coastal vessels, also used on short sea routes for transporting cargo, armaments and passengers.

²⁷ George Talbot (c.1468-1538), 4th Earl of Shrewsbury, was Lieutenant-General of the English army invading France. He fought at the Battle of the Spurs and the capture of Thérouanne in August 1513.

²⁸ *CSP Venice*, 72-78. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol2/pp72-78>

²⁹ NRS, X, 1897, xxii.

guns).³⁰ He thought that the fleet would ultimately total about sixty vessels, in addition to the first fleet but not including thirty ships then in Biscay but “expected hourly.” Once these arrangements were completed, Pasqualigo believed that another 20,000 English soldiers would be landed somewhere in Normandy or Brittany.³¹

The Lord Admiral’s accounts detailing “Charges of the English navy for the first three months” (17 April – 8 July 1512) provide more information about the crew and troops of William Sidney’s *Dragon*:

The Dragon of Grenewiche [beginning 22 January 1512]
Also to syr William Sydney, capteyn, spere: nichil.³²
Also for vitaylyng of 103 [men], souldiours 63, maryners 30,
gonners 5 and servitours 5: 77^l. 5^s.
Also for wages of the said 103 persons: 77^l. 5^s.
Also for 22 deddeshares ½: 16^l. 17^s. 6^d.
Also for toundage of 100 tons: nichil, quia navis regis.
Somme: 171^l. 7^s. 6^d.³³

On 10 August 1512 Sir Edward Howard’s fleet was off Brest where a combined French and Breton fleet was assembling. They had not expected the English to return for several days and Howard was able to launch an immediate attack. The ensuing conflict, known as the Battle of Saint-Mathieu, took place on 10 August 1512. The English fleet included the *Dragon*, commanded by William Sidney, and the *Sovereign*, jointly commanded by Sir Charles Brandon and Sir Henry Guildford (1489-1532).³⁴ The French cut their anchors and spread sails but remained trapped. The huge Breton flagship, the *Marie la Cordelière*, sailed towards the largest vessel in the English fleet, the 1,000 tonnes carrack *Regent* (225 guns).³⁵ Grappling hooks drew the two ships together, resulting in a bloody conflict between the two crews with sword, bill,

³⁰ The carrack *Sovereign* (800 tonnes and 141 guns) was built in 1488 and served in the Brest conflicts of 1512/13. It was condemned in 1521. Childs, *Tudor Sea Power*, 286. Brennan, *Sidneys of Penshurst*, 10-11, 13.

³¹ *CSP Venice*, 72-8. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol2/pp72-78> >

³² *nichil*: medieval spelling of *nihil* (Lat.), nil or nothing. Royal Spears retained their daily wage from court service and, therefore, were not paid extra for naval duties.

³³ NRS, X, 1897, 9-10. An account for April – October 1512 also detailed the replacement of the “Great and small hawser and new cabull” for the *Dragon*, NRS, X, 65, note 4.

³⁴ NRS, X, 1897, xxi-xxii.

³⁵ The *Regent* was built in 1488 at Rother and had previously fought during the Scottish war of 1497. Childs, *Tudor Sea Power*, 286.

and pike as the *Regent* was boarded. Suddenly, the *Marie la Cordelière* exploded and both ships sank in flames with huge losses on both sides. Sir Edward Howard's brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Knyvet (c.1485-1512), the captain of the *Regent* was also lost.³⁶

After the return of the English fleet, variously, to Southampton and Dartmouth by late-August 1512, the *Dragon* was included in a list made in September of those vessels to be "discharged and delivered to their owners at Hampton." This list was followed by another noting the Winter Guard ships for that year, including the *Great Bark*, then captained by Sir Wiston Browne—

a ship which Sidney would later command in spring 1513 off the French coast and several months later when transporting north armaments and troops to Flodden.³⁷ On 28 October 1512 additional accounts were compiled of the fleet with Sir Edward Howard listed as captain of the flagship *Mary Rose*.³⁸ This list included "The *Dragon of Grenewich*: Sir Wm. Syddeney, captain," and also noted that Sidney's kinsmen, Sir Charles Brandon and Anthony Wingfield (c.1488-1552) and Sir John Seymour (1473/4-1536) were aboard the vessel.³⁹ Between November 1512 and January 1513 the *Dragon* underwent extensive refitting and essential repairs as detailed in navy accounts:

Account for repairs, gunstocking, &c., in the *Dragon*, 24 Nov. 4 Hen. VIII., 28 Nov. at Dover, 8 Jan. in Solent and finally (no date given) at Armew [?], where a new foremast was fitted and a compass and "viewing glasse" bought. Wages to ship's carpenters, 8*d.* a day; meat and drink, 2½*d.* a day.

"Sir, as to these costs done by Walter Loveday upon the King's ship the *Dragon*, as cawking, as stocking of certain guns and lead that he hath paid for, with other costs writ

³⁶ Knyvet's co-commander of the *Regent*, Sir John Carew, and Hervé de Portzmoquer, the commander of the *Marie la Cordelière*, were killed in the conflagration.

³⁷ Childs, *Tudor Sea Power*, 286. *LP*, I.ii, 1413. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp633-648>

³⁸ The *Mary Rose*, a 500 tonne carrack with 60 guns, had been built at Portsmouth in 1509. It capsized in the Battle of Solent (1545) and was raised in 1982.

³⁹ *LP*, I.ii, 1453. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp657-669> "Wingfield, Sir Anthony (by 1488-1552) of Letheringham, Suff." *The History of Parliament. British Political, Local & Social History* (on-line edition) <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/wingfield-sir-anthony-1488-1552> Anne (Brandon) Sidney, William Sidney's mother, was the daughter of Sir William Brandon and Mary (Wingfield) Brandon.

within the same, he ought to be allowed of all as to that is contained herein bought. My fellow William Gonson saw what he (?) bought. *Per me* John Hopton.”⁴⁰

By February 1513 William Sidney was receiving an annual stipend of £60 as a Spear of Honour.⁴¹ This payment meant that he now belonged to an elite company of military men at court formed by Henry VIII in October 1509. Sir Charles Brandon and Sir Henry Guildford were also members.⁴² On 10 March 1513, Sir Edward Howard was formally appointed as Lord Admiral of England, succeeding the seventy-year-old John de Vere, 13th Earl of Oxford (1442-1513). Oxford had commanded the vanguard of the future Henry VII’s forces at the Battle of Bosworth and had also served as Lord Admiral since 1485. Later that year Sir William Sidney would presumably have been aware that the Earl of Oxford had replaced Lord Admiral John Howard, 1st Duke of Norfolk—the father of Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, his commander at Flodden—who had died at Bosworth fighting in support of Richard III.

Command of the *Great Bark*

On 10 April 1513 an advance naval expedition set out from Plymouth for France. The new Lord Admiral Sir Edward Howard commanded the fleet from the *Mary Rose* which was captained by Thomas Sperte. Plans were still being made for the king to follow in June with the main body of the English forces. Promoted from his captaincy of the *Dragon* to a much larger vessel, William Sidney now commanded in this fleet the second-rate galleon *Great Bark*, a 250 tonnes

⁴⁰ *LP*, I.ii, 1600 [5790]. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp713-732>. Walter Loveday captained both the *Anne Gallant* and the *Barbara of Greenwich*. John Hopton was appointed in 1512 Clerk Controller of the Tudor Navy and rapidly became as Comptroller of the Ships the “most prominent figure in naval administration.” N.A.M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea. A Naval History of Britain 660-1649* (London: Penguin Books and the National Maritime Museum, 2004), 222.

⁴¹ The King’s Book of Payments, February 1513, “Sir Wm. Sidney, spear of honor, year’s wages, 60l. 16s. 8d.” <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp1458-1463>. Sidney had served as one of the King’s Spears since at least April 1511. His name is included, along with Sir Edward Howard, Sir Wiston Brown and Edmund Howard, in a royal warrant for their payment at the rate of 3s 4d per day from 1 April 1511 for “their hole yere’s wages,” issued in April 1511, before Admiral Edward Howard’s fleet, including Sidney captaining the *Dragon*, set sail to protect the waters between Brest, Calais and the Thames estuary. NRS, X, 1897, xv.

⁴² Neil Samman, “The Henrician Court During Cardinal Wolsey’s Ascendancy c.1514-29,” unpublished University of Wales PhD, 1988, Appendix IV, 444-61. Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 19-20.

(63 guns) ship which had been built only the year previously.⁴³ A “*List of ships appointed to the sea*” compiled in February or March 1513 includes the *Great Bark*, captained by “Sydney, Shurborne” with “Browne” as its master. An annotation is added, apparently in Henry VIII’s own hand, after the captains’ names to include that of “Th. Lucy” (one of the captains knighted by Lord Admiral Edward Howard on 7 June 1512), presumably as either an additional or alternative captain. However, there is no evidence that Lucy ever captained the *Great Bark*. Similarly, the same list includes the “Mare Georg” [*Mary George*], naming “Barclay” as its captain and “Spodell” as its master. Added to this captaincy, again apparently in the king’s hand, is “Sidney, Shurborne,” even though Sidney never captained the 250 tonnes ship *Mary George* which had been purchased in 1512 for the Brest expedition.⁴⁴

Another “List of ships appointed to the sea” (compiled in February or March 1513 and annotated by Wolsey) provides details of the gentlemen and their retinues and the number of mariners sailing with Sidney on the *Dragon*:

The Grete Bark, Portage 400	
Shurborne and Sidney, capitayns of their owne retynew	50)
Sir John Cutte	25)
Sir Robert Southwell	25)
Sir Ric. Lewis	25)
Sum 251 ⁴⁵	
Sir William Walgrove	25)
Browne, maister	
Maryners Wherof 12 gunners	100)

⁴³ Childs, *Tudor Sea Power*, 287. The *Great Bark* served in the Tudor navy until 1531 when it was sold. Childs, 286-7, lists twenty-one other vessels which saw service at Brest. This ship should be distinguished from the *Great Bark* included in the three vellum rolls, known as the *Anthony Roll* (1546), Pepys Library MS 2991, Magdalene College, Cambridge. This later vessel, originally named the *Great Galley* (built 1515), was rebuilt as a ship in 1542 and renamed the *Great Bark*. C.S. Knighton and D.M. Loades, *The Anthony Roll of Henry VIII’s Navy: Pepys Library 2991 and British Library Add MS 22047 with Related Material*, Navy Records Society (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴⁴ NRS, X, 1897, 77-8. This list also includes the *Dragon* among the victuallers of the fleet; and another list details that it was the victualler to the “Petur,” i.e., the 450 tonnes carrack *Peter Pomegranate* (NRS, 86).

⁴⁵ Another list of Admiral Edward Howard’s ships (February or March 1513) confirms “Sherburne and Sydney” as the captains of the *Great Bark* but gives the total number of men aboard as “253.” NRS, X, 1897, 87.

Fitting out and repairs to the *Dragon* were also detailed in this account, including: “109*l.* 6*s.* 2*d.* spent by John Hopton, in the Thames, 2 Nov. 1512 – 11 Feb. 1513: ‘For the payntyng of 100 pavassys,’ 16*s.* ‘For lyterage of certain gons, which war had and conveyd from the Henry Cateryn.’”⁴⁶

On 25 April French galleys were spotted off the Brittany coast, laid up in shallow waters and strongly protected by bulwarks on both sides.⁴⁷ The Lord Admiral drew up a reckless plan to get close to them, using two of his shallow draft row-barges (with eighty men in each) and two crayers.⁴⁸ He was accompanied in this risky venture by some of his leading officers, including Sir Henry Sherborne and William Sidney in one of the crayers who, as David Childs notes, would have wished “to seize this opportunity for achieving a glory that would be reported favourably to their king.”⁴⁹ According to an account compiled on 5 May 1513 by one of his fleet’s victuallers, Edward Echyngham, their vessels came under heavy fire from the French but they still managed to throw a grappling-iron onto the French flagship of Admiral Gaston Prégent de Bidoux (referred to by the English as “Prester John”).⁵⁰ This allowed Admiral Sir Edward Howard and seventeen men to jump aboard.

Probably recalling the *Regent* conflagration, the grappling-iron was then reattached to the galley’s capstan from where it could be veered in case of fire, allowing Howard’s galley to draw back from potential danger. However, the line was lost (either cut by the French or let slip by the English sailors) and Sir Edward Howard was left stranded on the French galley. According to one of the assault party who managed to swim back to the English vessels, Howard defiantly tore from around his neck the gold boatswain’s whistle denoting his badge of office and flung it into the sea so that it could not be captured as a trophy by the French. He was then pressed against the rails and stabbed with “morrice” (i.e., Moorish) pikes before being flung overboard to drown. In the *mêlée* other English borders had lost sight of Edward Howard, as Echyngham recounts:

⁴⁶ NRS, X, 1897, 82.

⁴⁷ Each of the French galleys carried a single heavy gun, known as a basilisk, in its prow which was reputed to be able to sink any man of war. It is likely that this would have been the first time that Sidney and his colleagues would have seen these powerful and terrifying weapons. David Loades, *The Tudor Navy. An Administrative, Political and Military History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 62.

⁴⁸ *crayers*: small, single-masted merchant vessels, built for ferrying cargo and supplies.

⁴⁹ Sir Henry (Harry) Sherborne (d.1523) of Sherborne, Norfolk was a Spear of Honour and captain of the *Mary Rose* by 1514. He took part in royal jousts on 19-20 May 1516 (*LP*, II.ii, Revel Accounts, no. 9) and was killed in a sea fight with a French vessel in 1523 (*LP*, III, 3281).

⁵⁰ NRS, X, 1897, 145-54.

And then came sir Henry Sherborne and sir William Sidnaye, and they russhid aborde of Pryer Johns galye and brake parte of his oris on the one side. And so when they saw euey gone of from theym, and they last alone wenyng to theym that mylord Admyrall hade be still in the english galye, they came of foloyng our galye, and so they retorned all into the Treade, whereas the greate ships laye without any more doyng, for they knew not perfitey where mylord Admirall was.⁵¹

Etchyngham's account makes clear that not only did Sherborne and Sidney bravely board the French galley but that they were also two of the last Englishmen to escape from it alive. Questions were later raised as to whether Sherborne and Sidney could have done anything more to assist Howard. Fortunately, Sir Edward Howard's younger brother, Sir Thomas, affirmed that neither Sherborne nor Sidney could have saved the Lord Admiral and the fleet returned to Plymouth in late-April with Sidney still as captain of the *Great Bark*.⁵² Sir Thomas was appointed as Lord Admiral in succession to his brother and in September of that year fought alongside Sir William Sidney and Edward Etchingham at Flodden. However, Henry VIII was angered by the loss of his Lord Admiral and the otherwise inconclusive outcome of this naval encounter. In his formal report to the king, written from Plymouth on 7 May 1513 aboard the *Mary Rose*, Thomas Howard resolutely defended the actions and bravery of his commanders and their sailors:

And as [accordyng] to the actuell ffeityts of all such noblemen and gentylnen as were pr[esent], my broder, the Admyrall, was drowned (whom Jesu perdon!) I assure your [Grace] herforth as I can be anywise understande, they handelid them self as [well as ever] men did to opteyne their Masters pleasure and favor.

Syr, ther w[er with my brother] 175 men, of whom wer left on life but 56, and of those [beyng wyth] my lord Ferrers, men 25 slayne and 20 hurte, and may galye had not fallen on grounde beyng nere the shoore, then the od[er in like]wise borded as the oder dyd and of lyklyhode ferre had escaped. ... Sherborne and sir William Sydney

⁵¹ NRS, X, 1897, xxxix, 149-50. British Library Cotton MSS, Caligula D VI, f. 107. David Childs, *The Warship Mary Rose: The Life and Times of King Henry VIII's Flagship* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2007), 116-18. George Goodwin, *Fatal Rivalry. Henry VIII, James IV and the Battle for Renaissance Britain. Flodden 1513* (London: Phoenix, 2014), 139-41

⁵² NRS, X, 1897, xl. Earnest Law, *England's First Great War Minister. How Wolsey Made a New Army and Navy and Organized the English Expedition to Artois and Flanders in 1513* (London: George Bell, 1916), 123-4, 130-1.

borded a galie, they beying in a small [crayer], and yet by fortune had but 3 men slayne and 7 hurte ...⁵³

William Sidney's esteem at court does not seem to have suffered from the loss of Sir Edward Howard. During July 1513 he was still listed as joint captain with Sherborne of the *Great Bark* with 147 soldiers, 100 mariners, 20½ dead shares and 12 gunners, totalling 279½.⁵⁴ On 20 July 1513 he was also granted an annuity of 50 marks per annum, authorised by Henry VIII at Calais on 13 July.⁵⁵

The Date of William Sidney's Knighthood

Before examining Sidney's involvements at Flodden, a final question remains over the exact date of his knighthood. The new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Sir Henry Sidney records that Henry's father William Sidney "fought in battle against the French off Brest, where he was knighted, on 18 April 1513."⁵⁶ The information about Sidney's knighthood was more ambiguously dated in the old *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900) article by Robert Dunlop: "[H]e took part in the naval operations before Brest in April 1513, and later in the year commanded the right wing of the English army at the battle of Flodden. He was knighted for his services ..."⁵⁷ Over 150 years earlier, Arthur Collins had stated that Sidney had "the Honour of Knighthood conferred on him, for his valiant Deportment, being in the Attempt made on Prior *John* and the *French Fleet* in the Haven of *Brest*" (i.e. April 1513, although Collins dates this action as in March).⁵⁸ In contrast, Malcolm W. Wallace in his landmark 1915 biography of Sir Philip Sidney states:

In 1510, being then an Esquire of the King's House, he [William Sidney] saw service against the Moors in Spain; two years later he held command in the French war under Lord Edward Howard, High Admiral of England, and was knighted for his bravery at

⁵³ NRS, X, 1897, 155-6.

⁵⁴ NRS, X, 1897, 171. According to these figures, the number of men aboard the *Great Bark* was 279½ not the 263 given as the total in this document.

⁵⁵ *LP*, I.ii, 2137 (21), [4356]. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp952-967>.

⁵⁶ Wallace MacCaffrey, "Sir Henry Sidney," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [on-line edition]. This date of "18" is clearly inaccurate since this conflict did not take place until 25 April 1513.

⁵⁷ [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sidney,_Henry_\(1529-1586\)__\(DNB00\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sidney,_Henry_(1529-1586)__(DNB00)). Following this source, the HMC, *De L'Isle and Dudley*, I.x, states that Sidney "was knighted for his services at Flodden in 1513."

⁵⁸ Collins, *Letters and Memorials of State*, I.77.

the burning of Conquet. In the battle of Flodden he commanded the right wing of the English army, and was then for his valour made a Knight Banneret.⁵⁹

Wallace is referring to the Anglo-French conflicts at Le Conquet, northern Brittany. The first took place in June 1512 when English forces burned the town. This was followed on 10 August 1512 by a naval conflict off St Matthew's Point (Battle of Saint-Mathieu) and another on 25 April 1513 (Battle of Les Blancs-Sablons) at which Sir Edward Howard lost his life. However, the previously quoted naval accounts compiled on 28 October 1512 clearly list "The *Dragon of Grenewich*: Sir Wm. Syddeney, captain." Similarly, the narrative already cited by Edward Etchingham (compiled 5 May 1513) of the loss of Sir Edward Howard off Brest also refers to "Sir William Sidnaye." This information is supported by two contemporary manuscripts. The first, British Library Harleian MS 5177, f.102, provides a list of knights made from the reign of Henry VI to the year 1582. It includes the following entries:

1511 (15 Sept.) Sir Henry Guldeford and Sir Wistan Browne dubbed by the King of Aragon at Bourges in Castile 15 Sept. 1511.

1512 (30 March). Sir Henry Guldeford (*sic*) and Sir Charles Brandon dubbed at Westminster, 30 March 3 Hen. VIII.

[...]

1512 [no date] Sir Wm. Sidney "dubbed knight at Bretaine by the Duke of Norfolk lord Admiral" (then Lord Howard).⁶⁰

The second manuscript, British Library Cotton MSS, Claudius C.III. ff. 68-144, lists knights bachelor and banneret created from the reign of Henry VI until that of Charles II. It also states that William Sidney was knighted in 1512, "made in Bretaine by the Duke of Norff., Lorde Admiral."⁶¹ However, if William Sidney was knighted in 1512, then this identification of the

⁵⁹ Malcolm Wallace, *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 4-5. A Knight Banneret was one who had led a company of troops during battle under his own banner and was eligible to bear supporters in English heraldry. This military honour was rated higher than a knight bachelor.

⁶⁰ *LP*, II.i, "Appendix: Commissions of the Peace and Miscellaneous," item 26. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1533-1557>.

⁶¹ British Library Cotton MSS, Claudius C.III printed as *A Book of Knights Banneret, Knights of the Bath, and Knights Bachelor Made Between the Fourth Year of King Henry VI and the Restoration of King Charles II* (London: Mitchell and Hughes, 1885), 45. It confirms that Sir Henry Guildford and Sir Charles Brandon were created knights banneret at Westminster on 20 March 1511; and that Sir Henry

Lord Admiral as Sir Thomas Howard (who succeeded his father—the English commander at Flodden—to the Dukedom of Norfolk in 1524) must be incorrect in the Harley and Cotton manuscripts because Sir Thomas did not succeed his brother Sir Edward as Lord Admiral until after the latter's death on 25 April 1513.

It may be cautiously proposed, therefore, that William Sidney is most likely to have been knighted by Sir Edward Howard, probably either after the burning of Le Conquet (June 1512—if Wallace's reference to "burning" is correct)⁶²—or after the Battle of Saint-Mathieu (10 August 1512) when William Sidney was still commander of the *Dragon*.⁶³ It seems certain, contrary to the statement in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, that Sidney was knighted in 1512 and not 1513 and well over a year before the Battle of Flodden.

The Battle of Flodden (1513)

After Maximilian I joined the Holy League in November 1512, Louis XII of France sought to persuade the Scottish king James IV, whose queen was Henry's sister Margaret, to invade the north of England as a distraction.⁶⁴ Louis had agreed to a treaty of mutual aid with James as early as 22 May 1511 at Blois, confirmed at Edinburgh on 10 July.⁶⁵ In late-October 1512 Queen Catherine of Aragon wrote to Cardinal Bainbridge, the English Ambassador at Rome:

[King James IV] invaded Berwick, and proclaimed war against England; for which reason three earls and two barons are already on their march towards Scotland, namely

Guildford and Sir Wistan Browne were created knights at "Bruges in Castille" on 20 September 1511 by Ferdinand, King of Aragon (44).

⁶² NRS, X, 1897, xviii, records that the Lord Admiral knighted on 7 June 1512, "to encourage divers gentlemen the more earnestly to show their valiancy," Edward Brook, Griffith Don, Thomas Windham, Thomas Lucy, John Burdet, William Pirton, Henry Sherborne and Stephen Bull. William Sidney is not included in this list which may not be comprehensive.

⁶³ *A Book of Knights Banneret*, 56 also lists 28 knights who "are each stated to be a "Banneret," including Sir Henry Guildford's name but not Sidney's. Nor is his name included among those knighted or raised to knight banneret after the "battail of Branston Moor otherwise called Flodden field." However, a more authoritative source, Sidney's tomb in St John the Baptist Church, Penshurst denotes him as "Knyght and Bannorett." Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, I.82.

⁶⁴ Princess Margaret's marriage to James IV had been held on 25 January 1503 with the Earl of Bothwell standing proxy for the Scottish king. On 27 June she began her progress northwards, accompanied by the Earl of Surrey. This marriage had been intended to strengthen good relations between England and Scotland.

⁶⁵ NRS, X, 1897, xvi.

the Earl of Surrey, commander-in-chief, the Earl of Northumberland, the Earl of Derby, the Lord Darcy, the Lord Dacres, and many other captains, with 30,000 men; not only for the defence of Berwick, but also to conquer and annihilate the kingdom of Scotland, according to the fashion in which the Catholic King treated the King of Navarre.⁶⁶

On 23 January 1513 Nicolo Di Favri, a citizen of Treviso attached to the Venetian embassy in London, wrote to Francesco Gradenigo, the son-in-law of the Venetian ambassador, Andrea Badoer:

The King of England has an army of picked men in Scotland, under a valiant commander, called my Lord Treasurer, one of the King's chief ministers, a man 70 years old and upwards, to whom on the Scottish border the King of Scotland sent "*carta bianca*" and they made terms together. It is said in England that the perfidious King of France caused the King of Scots to attack King Henry, but that the English had made provision betimes.⁶⁷

Queen Catherine was regarded by Badoer as a guiding influence over Henry VIII's aggression towards France and on 9 November 1512 he reported to the Senate:

The King was preparing a fleet with the intention of attacking the French in the spring in several quarters, and of sending an army across the Channel. Queen Katharine of Arragon, very warm in favour of this expedition, would fain have four large galleasses and two "bastard galleys" from the Signory, and enquired of him the monthly cost of a galley afloat completely found. Answered her that it would amount to 10,000 ducats a month. She would wish the Signory to send them some bastard galleys, because she understood France was building two vessels of that description.⁶⁸

By May 1513 large numbers of English troops were stationed at Calais under the command of George Talbot (c.1468-1538), Earl of Shrewsbury, with John Hopton in charge of troop ships. On 17 May King Henry advised the Cinque Ports and Edward Poynings, Constable of Dover Castle, that he would be joining the invasion in person and commissioners were appointed to requisition all available shipping. In late May 1513 Louis's queen, Anne of Brittany, made a celebrated chivalric appeal to James IV to assist France, accompanied by a

⁶⁶ *CSP Venice*, 83-6. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol2/pp83-86>

⁶⁷ *CSP Venice*, 88-94. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol2/pp88-94>.

⁶⁸ *CSP Venice*, 86-8. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol2/pp86-88>.

gift of a turquoise ring which he later wore at the Battle of Flodden. Louis also offered to pay for a Scottish fleet and to provide arms and munitions. On 24 May James IV wrote to Henry VIII, seeking his cessation of hostilities towards the French.⁶⁹ This letter had no effect and Henry arrived in person at Calais on 30 June. Sir William Sidney's close friend, Charles Brandon, by now Viscount Lisle, was also prominent in this campaign.

In view of Sir William Sidney's extensive naval experience in 1512 and 1513, it should be asked why he was not with Henry VIII and Charles Brandon in France. The reason lies in his close association, first with Sir Edward Howard and, after his drowning at Brest, with his brother Sir Thomas who succeeded him as Lord Admiral. Their father Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey had expected to lead the English forces to France. However, during the period of his absence in France Henry VIII appointed Queen Catherine of Aragon as Rector and Governor (*Rectrix et Gubernatrix*) of England and Wales.⁷⁰ The Earl of Surrey, as one of Henry's most experienced and trusted military commanders, was instructed to support her and to deal with any domestic problems or uprisings which might occur during his absence.⁷¹

On 12 July Newcastle was chosen as the muster point for the English army and its supplies in the north and by 21 July the Earl of Surrey was organizing his personal staff at Lambeth before heading north on the following day, bringing with him his own retinue of 500 soldiers. In response, James IV ordered a general muster on the Burghmuir of Edinburgh which was ready by mid-August. By 1 August Surrey had established his temporary headquarters at Pontefract, West Yorkshire, one of the chief fortresses in the north, while still mustering troops on the way, primarily from shire levies in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Northumberland.⁷² The Scottish army marched south and on 22 August crossed the Tweed at Coldstream with about 42,000 soldiers and artillery.⁷³ On 26 August Surrey advanced to York and on 29 August arrived

⁶⁹ John Sadler, *Flodden 1513. Scotland's Greatest Defeat* (Botley: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 12-13.

⁷⁰ Goodwin, *Fatal Rivalry*, 146-7.

⁷¹ It is possible that the Earl of Surrey's enmity with Thomas (later Cardinal) Wolsey (1473-1530), then a Canon of Windsor and King's Almoner, was influential in denying him the leadership of the English forces for France. Goodwin, *Fatal Rivalry*, 148-9.

⁷² Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*, 116, noting that the chronicler Edward Hall claimed that many, or even most, of the shire levy militia were horsed infantrymen. See also James Raymond, *Henry VIII's Military Revolution. The Arms of Sixteenth-Century Britain and Europe* (London and New York: Tauris, 2007), 122-5.

⁷³ Meanwhile, over in France the Battle of the Spurs (or Guinegate) took place on 16 August 1513 when a combination of English and imperial troops under Henry VIII and Maximilian I were besieging the town of Thèrouanne in Artois (Pas-de-Calais). Henry then besieged and took Tournai on 24 September 1513. Sir Anthony Wingfield, who had served with Sir William Sidney on the *Dragon*, was knighted

at Durham where he collected the banner of St Cuthbert which was traditionally carried by English forces in battle against the Scots. On 30 August Surrey arrived at Newcastle where the mustering of the English forces was completed. On 1 September the English army left Newcastle and marched north to Bolton in Glendale, near Alnwick, where on 4 September Surrey marshalled the English army in dismal weather conditions. At Bolton he was joined by his son Lord Admiral Thomas Howard with some 1,200 marines and other soldiers. In total, the English forces probably numbered somewhere between 26,000 and 30,000 persons.⁷⁴

The Lord Admiral, Sir Thomas Howard, had brought additional marines and armaments north by sea. Edward Hall records his arrival “with a compaignye of valyaunt Captaines and able souldiers and maryners” from his fleet.⁷⁵ Among their number was Sir William Sidney, captain of the *Great Bark*. It was accompanied north by the *Spaniard* (captain, Edward Echyngham, who had compiled in the previous May the account of the death of Sir Edward Howard at Brest) and thirteen other ships.⁷⁶ Naval accounts drawn up later in September 1513 include reference to “the King’s great bark called *The Herry [Henry] of Grenewyche*,” captained by Sir William Sidney, as having carried 263 soldiers, marines, dead shares and gunners.⁷⁷ The Lord Admiral’s small fleet of ships had stopped for four days at Hull, either for provisioning or to ride out the atrocious weather conditions, before landing at Newcastle. In February 1514 Exchequer accounts recorded a request from the Lord Admiral for payments towards the costs of the various ships used in the Flodden campaign: “Money that I, Thomas earl of Surrey, Admiral of England, doth ask allowance of for such charges as I and my company were at from the time we landed at New Castell into the time we took the sea again, by the space of 16 days.” These included charges for the “*Grete Barke*, Sir Wm. Sydney and Sir Henry

after this siege. <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1509-1558/member/wingfield-sir-anthony-1488-1552>.

⁷⁴ Sadler, *Flodden*, 13-14, 25-28, supplies a detailed assessment of the size and diversity of the English forces. See also Raymond, *Henry VIII’s Military Revolution*, 18-19, 123-4, estimating the English army at a lower figure of c.20,000 or c.22,500 men.

⁷⁵ Edward Hall, *The Triumphant Reigne of Kyng Henry the VIII*, 2 vols. (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1904), I.100.

⁷⁶ See the “Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum & the Flodden 500 Project.”

<https://www.flodden1513ecomuseum.org/project/the-campaign/30-a-problematic-e-number-the-role-of-henry-viii-s-navy-at-flodden>.

⁷⁷ *LP*, I.ii, 2304 (3) [5761]. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1023-1042>. “Dead shares” or “dead pay,” means by which the remuneration of officers was supplemented to pay for food and other necessities for non-crew members such as the captain’s and senior officers’ personal servants.

Sherborne.”⁷⁸ This reference confirms that Sidney and Sherborne were still co-commanders of the *Great Bark*, as they had been in April 1513 when Sir Edward Howard had been killed boarding the galley of the French admiral off Brittany.

On 5 September Surrey formally unfurled his banners, including that of the Tudor Dragon, at Bolton in preparation for the imminent conflict; and Thomas Hawley, Rouge Croix Pursuivant, was sent to deliver a formal challenge to James IV. On the next day the English forces advanced from Bolton to Wooler and on 8 September the Rouge Dragon was sent back to Surrey with a second message. On the same day the English flank march began while the Scots remained at Flodden. On the next morning the English crossed the river Till and advanced towards Branxton. An exceptionally bloody conflict ensued during that afternoon and evening, resulting in a victory for the English forces and the death of James IV as he led the final Scottish charge, along with numerous Scottish noblemen and bishops (some eighty-nine members and retainers of the Hay family alone were reputed to have died). Surrey formally disbanded his army on 14 September. On 16 September Queen Catherine of Aragon sent John Glyn to Henry VIII in France with the blood-stained coat and gauntlets of James IV, suggesting that the coat should be adopted as his battle-banner.⁷⁹ News of the English victory at Flodden finally reached Henry on 25 September and he ordered a celebratory cannonade and a *Te Deum* to be sung in the cathedral of Tournai which had recently surrendered.⁸⁰

For over two hundred and fifty years there has been considerable confusion over the specific role of Sir William Sidney in the battle once the marines and armaments had been disembarked from the *Great Bark*. The first serious attempt to publish a large selection of the Sidney family papers was made in 1746 by the antiquarian Arthur Collins in his *Letters and Memorials of State*. He stated, without citing any specific source, that Sidney “commanded in the Right Wing of the Army under the Earl of Surry.”⁸¹ This statement is entirely incorrect but has been consistently repeated by later historians and writers about the Sidneys. These include Malcolm William Wallace’s *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (1915), which reiterated Collins’ error: “In the battle of Flodden he commanded the right wing of the English army.”⁸² More recently, Alan Stewart stated in his otherwise authoritative biography, *Philip Sidney A Double Life* (2000) that Sidney “led the right wing of the Earl of Surrey’s army” at Flodden; and even

⁷⁸ *LP*, I.ii, 2652. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1153-1163>.

⁷⁹ *LP*, I.ii, 2268 [4451]. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1012-1023>.

⁸⁰ Sadler, *Flodden*, 86-7.

⁸¹ Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, I.77.

⁸² Wallace, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 5.

the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* reaffirmed without question: “In 1513 he commanded the right wing at Flodden.”⁸³

This long-lived inaccuracy requires conclusive correction. No contemporary source confirms the claim that Sir William Sidney, formerly an Esquire of the King’s house who had been knighted only in the previous year, was endowed with the remarkable honour of leading the right wing of the English forces at Flodden. Significantly, the chronicles of Edward Hall, completed and published by Richard Grafton (1548), are unequivocal on this matter and confirmed by later accounts offered by John Stow and Raphael Holinshed. Sir William’s son Henry owned a copy of Hall’s *Chronicles* and knew several of the contributors to Holinshed, suggesting that their information about the battle would have been well known to the Sidneys. Hall clearly states that Sir William served with other marines in the central vanguard formation of the English attack under the command of the Lord Admiral Sir Thomas Howard. This would have been his natural place, given his professional and personal bonds with the two Howard brothers, Sir Edward and Sir Thomas, during his service in the Tudor navy as commander of the *Dragon* and *Great Bark*. As noted, Sir Thomas joined up with his father’s northern army on 4 September, bringing with him a force of 1,200 highly trained marines originally intended for service with Henry VIII’s army in France. This was undoubtedly the élite military unit to which Sir William Sidney belonged.⁸⁴ John Sadler details the forces in the centre vanguard of the English formation:

1,000 of the total complement of 1,200 marines drawn from the fleet, each under their normal captains
2,000 men under the bishop of Durham’s banners, drawn from the Palatinate and led by Lord Lumley and Sir William Bulmer

⁸³ Alan Stewart, *Philip Sidney A Double Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 15. Wallace T. MacCaffrey, [included in the entry for “Sir Henry Sidney”], *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [on-line edition].

⁸⁴ I first corrected this error over Sir William Sidney’s exact role and military position at Flodden in 2006 in my *Sidneys of Penshurst*, 9-11. However, even this correction has been misreported as, for example, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern English Literature and Religion*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 325: “William Sidney was also a soldier: he led the vanguard at the battle of Flodden Field (1513).” Although Sidney was a member of Sir Thomas Howard’s militia in the central vanguard formation, he was not then of a rank personally to lead the vanguard.

Most of the rest drawn from the Ridings, including dalesmen under Lord Clifford and the North Riding men under Lord Conyers.⁸⁵

Edward Hall clarifies that another Howard brother, Edmund, was the individual who led the right wing at Flodden. Other contemporary and modern accounts of the battle confirm Hall's designation of the leadership of the centre and right wing of the English militia.⁸⁶ Modern historians agree that almost as soon as the Scottish guns fired their first volleys, the foot soldiers of the English right wing broke ranks and began to flee, although Edmund Howard fought on with conspicuous bravery, receiving multiple wounds but preserving his standard. He survived only after the heroic intervention of a border reiver, John "the Bastard" Heron, who came to his rescue and fought ferociously alongside him in the midst of the battle.⁸⁷ Fortunately, the left wing under Sir Edward Stanley held firm and, exploiting the mobility of Lord Dacre's 1,500 horsemen, enabled the centre to play a major role in securing ultimate English victory at Flodden.⁸⁸

Sir William Sidney, probably fighting under the banner of Sidney family pheon and serving with the Lord Admiral in the centre vanguard formation, would have experienced some of the most brutal fighting at Flodden.⁸⁹ As the Scottish forces headed towards them from higher

⁸⁵ Sadler, *Flodden*, 28. He also notes that the other 200 marines served on the right wing, led by Thomas Howard's younger brother Edmund, under the command of their captain Maurice Berkeley, master of the 250 tonnes *Mary George* which had been purchased in 1512 for the Tudor navy. Childs, *Tudor Sea Power*, 286.

⁸⁶ The central English formation behind Sir Thomas Howard's soldiers was led by the Earl of Surrey, with the left wing commanded by Sir Marmaduke Constable (forward) and Sir Edward Stanley (rearward). Reserves under Thomas Lord Dacre were deployed on the right wing behind Edmund Howard's units. F. Elliott, *The Battle of Flodden and the Raids of 1513* (Edinburgh: A. Elliot, 191), 62. N. Barr, *Flodden 1513. The Scottish Invasion of Henry VIII's England* (Stroud and Charleston, SC: Tempus, 2001), 144–5.

⁸⁷ Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*, 125–6. Sadler, *Flodden*, 65–8. Border reivers were English and Scottish raiders in the Anglo-Scottish borders who paid little regard to their victims' nationality. John Heron was the natural brother of Sir William Heron whose Ford Castle on the east bank of the River Till had been captured earlier by James IV. The king held Sir William hostage, demanding in return the surrender of John who was accused of murdering one of James's officers, Sir Robert Ker of Ferniehurst, Warden of the Middle March.

⁸⁸ Wallace, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 1–6. The battle became the subject of sixteen contemporary English poems, see Nancy Gutierrez and Mary Erler, "Print into Manuscript: A Flodden Field News Pamphlet (B.L. Additional MS 29506)," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, n.s. 8 (1986): 187–230.

⁸⁹ For a report on the battle written in French and signed by the Lord Admiral (TNA SP 49/1/18), see Fitzwilliam Elliott, *The Battle of Flodden and the Raids of 1513* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1911), 28,

ground, they were harried first by English archers and then, in close proximity, hand-to-hand conflict began with the Scottish pikes facing the English bill men. The bill (or brown bill or halberd), with its 8ft staff was some 10ft shorter than the Scottish pike (c.18-22ft) and a far more versatile weapon, having both a point and blade. While the spike could be used for parrying and stabbing, the blade could easily slice through the tops of the Scottish pikes as well as cleaving heavy armour and causing grievous physical injuries.⁹⁰ The 1,000 marines brought to Flodden by Sir William Sidney and his naval colleagues were experienced in bill fighting since it was a weapon suited to grappling and boarding enemy ships at sea. As their pikes were destroyed or rendered ineffective, the Scots drew their swords but such weapons were inferior to the bill at close quarters.

It has been estimated that the carnage began at about 4:30PM in the afternoon of 9 September and lasted for about two hours. When the battle was clearly lost, King James IV rejected personal flight and made a last-ditch attempt to capture Surrey's standard and to kill him.⁹¹ His mangled body was later found close to Surrey's position and identified by Lord Dacre, with James' left hand virtually severed, his lower jaw shot through with an arrow and his throat slashed, probably by the stroke of an English soldier's bill. Close to the king's body lay those of the Earls of Bothwell, Cassillis and Morton and the king's eldest natural son, Alexander Stewart (c.1493-1513), Archbishop of St Andrews.⁹²

Anglo-French Diplomacy

The Earl of Surrey paid off the bulk of his northern army on 14 September and Sir William Sidney returned south after the Battle of Flodden, probably sailing the *Great Bark* back to London with Sir Henry Sherborne. The defeated Scots feared an English invasion and an improvising rampart was hastily constructed around Edinburgh. However, the Scots' responses were not entirely defensive and, despite the magnitude of the disaster at Flodden, David Sadler notes that they "were thirsting for revenge and had every intention of renewing the conflict."⁹³

Appendix I. This account formed the basis of an anonymous contemporary Italian poem, "*La Rotta di Scocesi*": see W. MacKay Mackenzie, *The Secret of Flodden with "The Rout of the Scots": A Translation of the Contemporary Poem La Rotta de Scocesi* (Edinburgh: Grant & Murray, 1931).

⁹⁰ Raymond, *Henry VIII's Military Revolution*, 85-8.

⁹¹ Edward Hall, *The Lives of the Kings ... Henry VIII*, ed. C. Whibley, 2 vols. (London and Edinburgh: Jack, 1904), I.100. Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, I.77-82. Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*, 107-8.

⁹² Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*, 130. Sadler, *Flodden*, 73-77, 81-2, 86. Alexander Stewart, a promising scholar, had studied in 1507 at Padua under Erasmus who wrote a moving elegy on his death. Goodwin, *Fatal Rivalry*, 110-11, 178.

⁹³ Sadler, *Flodden*, 87. Phillips, *Anglo-Scots Wars*, 132-4.

Scottish garrisons were re-provisioned and regular military musters held. The *Great Bark* probably sailed in late-September back up north with artillery, probably to support further English raids on the Scots led by Lord Dacre, but this time with Sherborne as its sole commander, as detailed in navy accounts compiled November 1513:

“Payments as well of wages for divers ships of war of the King’s army royal, and other charges and prests of money to passengers of the King’s belonging to the same, as for carriage of artillery northwards, and expenses there and other places, by commandment of the King’s Council, as hereafter particularly doth appear,” viz.:—To Sir Henry Shirbourne, captain of the King’s *Great Bark*, for a month’s wages for the said ship, beginning 26 Sept. 5 Hen. VIII, reckoning 28 days to the month, as follows: To the said Henry, wages at 18*d.* a day; wages of 140 soldiers and 101 mariners for a month, at 5*s.* each; of a pilot to convey the said ship northward, 20*s.*; 21½ deadshares allowed to the master and other mariners, at 5*s.* a deadshare; 1 master gunner, at 10*s.* a month, 4 quarter-masters at 7*s.* 6*d.* each, and 7 gunners at 6*s.* 8*d.* a month; total expenses of the ship 70*l.* 19*s.* 2*d.*⁹⁴

There is no evidence that Sir William Sidney ever went to sea again as a naval captain but, as detailed below, he made several crossings of the North Sea and the English Channel between autumn 1513 and summer 1515 on diplomatic duties. His military prowess, especially as a horseman and tournament jousting, also enabled him to consolidate his personal intimacy with the king. During autumn 1513 an ambitious but ultimately abortive scheme was hatched for his kinsman and friend Sir Charles Brandon to marry the regent of the Low Countries, Margaret of Austria (1480-1530), Duchess of Savoy. These plans directly involved Sidney who was then based in the Low Countries, supposedly learning the language for diplomatic and military purposes. On 3 December 1513 Henry VIII wrote from Windsor to Margaret in French recommending Sidney to her (“*Il recommande à Marguerite Messire Guillaume Sydney, qui se rend au Pays Bas pour passer son temps et apprendre la langue*”).⁹⁵ Sir Richard Wingfield (1456-1625), an experienced diplomat and Lord Deputy of Calais since 1511, was leading the

⁹⁴ *LP*, I.ii, 2478. Although this account probably refers to the mission of the *Great Bark* in late September, it may possibly refer to delayed payments for the transportation north of armaments and troops prior to the Battle of Flodden in early September. But if this was the case, Sir William Sidney should also have been named as co-commander. The same account records that Sir Henry Sherborne took over the command of the *Mary George* from 25 October: “A month’s wages to *The Mary George*, Sir Henry Shirborne, capt., from 25 Oct. 5 Hen. VIII.” <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1084-1102>.

⁹⁵ *LP*, I.ii, 2488. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1102-1121>.

negotiations, and was also seeking to arrange a dynastic marriage alliance between the Habsburg Archduke Charles of Austria (1500-58)—from 1519 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V—and Henry VIII’s sister, Princess Mary Tudor (1496-1533). Sir William Sidney was assisting Wingfield, although he reported on 20 May 1514 to Charles Brandon, who had been created Duke of Suffolk on 1 February, that his “cousin Sidney is a little crazed with the ague.”⁹⁶

On 23 May Wingfield wrote again to Suffolk from Mechelen (Malines) and although the letter is mutilated and in parts difficult to decipher, it makes clear Sidney’s key role in these negotiations as a trusted intermediary. Wingfield noted that the Duchess of Savoy was delaying in revealing her views on a possible match with Suffolk and he had urged her to “satisfy him as she had now received letters from the Emperor.” She advised Wingfield that she would “dispatch his cousin Sydnaye” who was “now a[gain] being at Lovayne” [Louvain] and “write by him to the King” and Suffolk. Wingfield, however, was concerned that her “credence by Sydnaye would not satisfy the King” and, instead, pleaded with her to send a more formal communication. However, she refused since she believed that her “former letters to the King” and Suffolk had not been “kept secret.” Wingfield concluded his letter to Suffolk by promising that he would “send further news by his cousin Sydnaye.”⁹⁷

It is uncertain as to how long Sidney spent in the Low Countries and it is likely that he made at least two or more trips there since he was acting as a messenger and intermediary between Margaret of Savoy, Wingfield and Henry VIII. In March 1514 when he may still have been abroad, he was granted the lordship of the manor of Kingston-upon-Hull and that of “Myton” (Milton) in Yorkshire, forfeited by the Yorkist heir Edmund de la Pole who had been executed on 30 April 1513.⁹⁸ He also remained as a Feed Esquire of the Body from 1514 until after 1520.⁹⁹ After the plans for Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, to marry Margaret of Savoy came to nothing in autumn 1514, an even more promising opportunity arose for Sidney to confirm his personal links with the English royal family. In October he was dispatched to France with Suffolk, followed by Sir Henry Guildford and a detachment of Yeomen of the Guard, as jousting ambassadors to celebrate the marriage of Henry’s sister Princess Mary to Louis XII.

⁹⁶ *LP*, I ii, 2924. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1256-1266>. Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 44.

⁹⁷ *LP*, I.ii, 2940. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1266-1285>. See also *LP*, I.ii, 2941, in which the references to Margaret of Savoy’s dealings with “this gentleman” almost certainly ‘refer to Sidney.

⁹⁸ *LP*, I.ii, 2772 (56). *HMC De L’Isle and Dudley*, I.x. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol1/pp1194-1212>.

⁹⁹ *LP*, I.ii, 3324 (34); III.i., 246, 704, 999. Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 83.

Arthur Collins recounts how Sir William and his companions landed at Calais heavily disguised “all in green Coats and Hoods, with Intent not to discover themselves till their Arrival at *Paris*”:

And, being at that grand Solemnity at the Coronation, the 5th of *November*, in the Monastery of *St Dennis* in *France*, he was also at the Justs [jousts] began on the 7th of *November*, which continued for 3 days, wherein 300 and 5 men of *Armes* ran five Courses with sharp Spears, and the *English* (as *Stow* and *Hollingshed* write) performed as well as the best, not only in the Justs, but also in the Tourney and Barriers.¹⁰⁰

While in France Suffolk had been instructed to explore tentative plans for establishing an offensive alliance with France against Ferdinand of Aragon, whom Henry VIII had not forgiven for his duplicity during the recent French wars. But on 1 January 1515 the French king unexpectedly died and Suffolk, who had been close to Princess Mary before her union with Louis XII, entered into a secret marriage with the widowed French queen on 3 March 1515 at the Hôtel de Cluny, Paris.¹⁰¹ Sir William Sidney may have been with Suffolk at this time and he was certainly in Paris in April, carrying out the demanding role of a confidential messenger between Suffolk, Thomas Wolsey (then Archbishop of York), Henry VIII, and Francis I of France.¹⁰² Henry VIII was at first enraged by Suffolk’s illicit relationship and marriage with his sister which he had expressly forbidden. On 3 April Sir Richard Wingfield wrote to Wolsey about some problems over his patents and annuities but added an intriguing postscript in his own hand: “I cannot wryt your lordschype the grett [ease] and confort that my Lord of Suffolk [hath] taken as well opone the syett of your [gracious] and frendlye lettre, as also of the cred[ence gran]ted fro yow by Sir Wyllame Sydnye.”¹⁰³ This comment suggests that Sidney had been sent back to England by Suffolk (or Wingfield) to meet personally with Wolsey in the aftermath of this secret marriage. By 17 April Suffolk was growing increasingly anxious over his situation and wrote directly to Wolsey, expressing his concern that he had not heard personally from him “since the coming of Sir ‘Wyelleam Sedynay.’”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, I.77. *LP*, I.ii.3426, 3578. Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 46, citing *The Chronicles of Calais*, ed. J.G. Nicholas (London: Camden Society 35, 1846), 16. See also TNA SP 1/10/174, Wolsey’s instructions to Sidney for negotiations with King Francis I of France.

¹⁰¹ The widowed Princess Mary Tudor had been confined to the Hôtel de Cluny for forty days in January 1515 to ensure that she did not carry an unborn heir to Louis XII which would have prevented the crown passing to Francis I. The date 3 March (New Style, France) corresponds to 21 February 1515 (Old Style, England).

¹⁰² Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 57. Wolsey became cardinal in September 1515.

¹⁰³ *LP*, II.i.297. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp89-104>.

¹⁰⁴ *LP*, II.i.331. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp104-118>.

Sidney seems to have travelled back to France to be with Suffolk after meeting with Wolsey in late March or early April but he was soon sent back to England with a personal letter to Henry VIII from Suffolk who was then at Montreuil. Suffolk claimed in this letter, dated 22 April 1515, that he felt that all of the Council's members except for Wolsey seemed determined to have him either put to death or imprisoned. He was deeply hurt by this ingratitude since he had previously helped many of them whenever they had requested his assistance. But now that he was in "this little trouble," they seemed ready to destroy him. He continued:

But God forgive them, whatsoever comes of me, for I am determined; for your grace is he that is my sovereign lord and master and he that has brought me up of nought, and I am your subject and servant and he that has offended your grace in breaking my promise that I made your grace touching the Queen your sister.

Throwing himself on the king's mercy, he promised to undergo "what punishment Henry pleases" and hopefully claimed to know that his monarch would not be swayed by the malice of others. Suffolk's letter concludes with begging "credence for his cousin Seddnay (Sidney), the bearer."¹⁰⁵ Charles Brandon's self-abasing pleas, coupled with his cousin Sidney's diplomatic skills, soon elicited forgiveness from Henry VIII even though the king chose to levy severe financial penalties on the couple. His affection for both his sister and his long-term friend ("the man in all the world he loved and trusted best") led him to sanction a formal celebration of their union at Greenwich on Sunday 13 May 1515, with Sidney very probably in attendance.¹⁰⁶ Suffolk's potency at the royal court was now confirmed in his various roles as a royal adviser, brother-in-law, courtier, and boon companion to the king. His marriage to Princess Mary even raised the possibility of their children's claim to the English throne.

Sir William Sidney also benefitted personally from this challenging situation since his reliability and diplomatic skills during the previous months had impressed both Henry VIII and Suffolk. Detailed diplomatic instructions drawn up in May 1515 are regrettably damaged and incomplete, but they still provide a clear sense of his growing importance to the king. He was sent back to France to meet personally with King Francis I and to report to him on the marriage of Brandon and Princess Mary at Greenwich in the presence of King Henry VIII, Queen Catherine of Aragon, and a small number of "other nobles and estates of this realm as then were attending the court." The primary purpose of his mission was for Sidney to request Francis I to keep news of this marriage confidential:

¹⁰⁵ *LP*, II.i.367. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp104-118>.

¹⁰⁶ Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 50-2.

And considering that there be no mo[re] privy of the said secret marriage made between them in France but only the said French King, and none privy here thereunto but the King, to whom the said French King and Duke disclosed the same, the said Sir Wm. Sidney shall say that the King's grace desireth and perfectly trusteth, that for the honor of the said French Queen, and for avoiding of all evil bruits which may ensue thereof, he will reserve and keep the same at all times hereafter secret to himself without making any creature privy thereunto, like as the King shall do for his part.

These instructions provide a fascinating insight into the workings of Tudor diplomacy because they also detail the specific tactics which Sidney was advised to adopt and how he was expected to liaise back with Wolsey and Suffolk. They continue:

And at this point the said Sir Wm. Sidney shall pause, noting and marking substantially what answer the said French King shall make hereunto, to the intent he may certify the said Archbishop of York and Duke of Suffolk thereof accordingly.

A financial settlement had been agreed on 11 May for Suffolk and Princess Mary to make to Henry in recompense for their unauthorized behaviour. Mary was to pay £2,000 a year until £24,000 had been paid, of which some £5,000 included debts already incurred by Suffolk to the king. He was also obliged to return to the king a lucrative wardship worth £4,000, and Mary was to surrender the plate, jewels and half her dowry for her marriage to Louis XII.¹⁰⁷ In his embassy to Francis I, Sidney was instructed to ensure that Francis I handed over valuable gifts of jewels and plate presented to Mary by Louis XII in the previous October to mark their marriage:

He [Sidney] shall then say that the King is marvellously well minded to the French King, and desires often to common [commune] with him;— that if he do the King a pleasure he may be sure of twain;—and that as the jewels and plate which he promised to deliver to the French Queen were given her by her husband, the Archbishop and Suffolk think he cannot object to do so. The King would think it strange if he esteemed so small a thing more than his friendship.

The concluding section of the surviving part of these diplomatic instructions focuses on a proposed meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I and various other political matters,

¹⁰⁷ Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 52.

including French dealings with Spain and Wolsey's ongoing problems with Louis Guillard, Bishop Elect of Tournai:¹⁰⁸

With regard to the meeting which Francis proposed should be arranged by Suffolk, the King desires that he will himself devise the time and place and the manner in which it had best take place. On his intimating this to Wolsey and Suffolk they will consult with the King for a final arrangement. In the affairs of Spain Henry will steadily support the French King's interests. Lastly, is to state that, in spite of the French King's promise to make the elect of Tournay resign, he is now in the Prince's countries using every effort to prevent Wolsey levying the dues of the bishopric; that he has obtained inhibitions against Wolsey's officers from the Bp. of Rayns, "and that all folks think that the French King hath little estimation of the honor of the said Archbishop thus to suffer any of his subjects to disturb him in the said administration; which is a thing that he regardeth and esteemeth much, not for the profit thereof, but inasmuch as it pleased the King's grace to name him thereunto, and the Pope's holiness by his brief hath confirmed to him the same." If any think that by creating disturbances the King will be induced to give up the city they are greatly deceived.¹⁰⁹

After this mission, Sidney returned to England to report on his meeting with Francis I. However, he was back in France again in early July with a personal letter for the French king from Henry VIII. On 6 July 1515 Sir Richard Wingfield wrote from Calais to Wolsey about the activities of an unnamed "King's spy in France" and also noted that his "cousin, Sir William Sidney, departed from hence towards the French King's court, on Monday last was seven days; where I trust by this time he is very nigh and that shortly your grace shall have some good answer from him."¹¹⁰ Sidney was able to meet with Francis I, and on 23 July the French king wrote from Lyons to Henry VIII, saying that he had received the letter delivered by "Cidenay (Sidney)" and that he was returning to England with his reply to Henry and that Sidney would also report verbally on their conversation.¹¹¹ On the same day Francis I wrote to Wolsey, noting

¹⁰⁸ Louis Guillard (1491-1565) was Bishop Elect from June 1513 but after the English took the town on 23 September, Pope Leo X appointed Wolsey as its administrator and acting bishop. Guillard had appealed to Francis I and the matter was only resolved by the Treaty of London (4 October 1518) which returned Tournai to France. Guillard finally took possession of his see in February 1519. Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher, *Contemporaries of Erasmus. A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, Vols. 1-3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985; rpt, 1995), 151-2.

¹⁰⁹ *LP*, II.i.468. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp118-133>.

¹¹⁰ *LP*, II.i.665. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp174-190>.

¹¹¹ *LP*, II.i.740. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp190-205>.

that he was “gratified at the news received through the Sieur de Sidenay, the bearer” of his reply.¹¹² Presumably, Sidney left the French royal entourage at Lyons soon after 23 July to cross the Channel yet again back to England.

Later Career

The centrality to the Henrician court of Sir William Sidney’s now closest personal allies, the Howards and Brandons, is illustrated by the baptism of Princess (later Queen) Mary on 20 February 1516. The infant was carried to the font by the Countess of Surrey (the wife of Sir William’s vanguard commander at Flodden, Lord Admiral Thomas Howard, who succeeded in 1514 to the earldom of Surrey), assisted by his father (Thomas Howard, the overall commander at Flodden, who had been restored in 1514 to the dukedom of Norfolk) and the Duke of Suffolk (Charles Brandon), with Agnes (Tilney) Howard (c.1477-1545), Duchess of Norfolk, as godmother. In 1517 Sir William Sidney married Anne Pakenham/Pagenham (d.1543/4), widow of Thomas Fitzwilliam, a Flodden veteran and the elder brother of William Fitzwilliam (c.1490-1542), Earl of Southampton.¹¹³ Sidney was also listed in 1516 for the first time among those privileged courtiers who gave New Year gifts to the king.¹¹⁴ He was involved in a tiltyard entertainment, “running at the ring,” in early February 1516 and accounts of 5 February record: “Received of Ric. Smyth, yeoman of the ‘rooms’ (robes), 31 yds. tinsel satin, 22 yds. black and blue velvet, 21 yds. blue and black satin for coats for Sir J. Peeche and Sir W. Sidney.”¹¹⁵

Sir William Sidney is listed among the numerous knights and gentlemen who were present at the Field of the Cloth of Gold for Henry VIII’s meeting with Francis I in June 1520. His name appears twice in a list compiled in the preceding March, as a member of the planned retinue of his cousin, Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, and as an Esquire for the Body.¹¹⁶ Arthur Collins records from Stow’s *Annals* that “Justs [jousts] being thereupon held for 14 Days, he was one in the 2d Band of the *English*, at those martial Exercises.”¹¹⁷ In September 1523 Sir William Sidney and his younger brother, Sir Francis, took part in a major but

¹¹² *LP*, iii.741. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp190-205>.

¹¹³ Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, I.78.

¹¹⁴ Samman, “The Henrician Court During Cardinal Wolsey’s Ascendancy,” 190, 459.

¹¹⁵ *LP*, II.ii, Revel Accounts, no. 9, 1516, 5 February (ii). <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp1490-1518>.

¹¹⁶ *LP*, III.i, 703. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol3/pp231-249>.

¹¹⁷ Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, I.77. For these jousts, see *LP*, III.i, 869 (11 June); and *CSP Venice*, 37-79.

unsuccessful military expedition to France led by Suffolk.¹¹⁸ Arthur Collins records both brothers in 1525 as challengers in “Feats of Arms, which was proclaimed by *Windsor Herald*, and performed before the King in the *Tilt-yard at Greenwich*, who kept his *Christmas* there with great Mirth and princely Pastime.”¹¹⁹

After 1525 Sidney, then in his early forties, seems to have retired from both active military service and courtyard tilts. He continued to be involved in coastal defences and also sat on investigating committees and juries during the aftermath of the northern Catholic uprising known as the Pilgrimage of Grace (October 1536–February 1537).¹²⁰ The suppression of this rebellion was put in the hands of George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (the commander of the English forces in France in 1512 when Sidney as captain of the *Dragon* was landing troops in Brittany) and Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk (Sidney’s overall commander at Flodden in 1513). It was, however, Sidney’s role from 1538 as Lord Chamberlain of the household of the infant Prince Edward, and the grant in 1552 of the manor and estate of Penshurst in Kent, that provided the most public and lasting confirmation of his personal importance to both Henry VIII and Edward VI.

In conclusion, although little attention has been previously paid to the significance of Sir William Sidney’s early naval and military career, it is clear that his martial, courtly, and diplomatic skills, coupled with his personal intimacy with King Henry VIII as well as with the Howards, Brandons and Guildfords, enabled him to become one of the most successful and respected courtiers of the early Tudor period. He should be regarded as the founder of a Sidney family line which thrived throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods and still today owns his estate and residence at Penshurst. Specifically, both Sir Henry and Sir Philip Sidney sought in their own public careers to fulfil the key roles of the high-ranking English courtier through their bravado performances in the tiltyard, their military valour on the battlefield, and their negotiating skills in international diplomacy. While Sir Philip was undoubtedly inspired by the public service of his father Sir Henry, both men would have constantly borne in mind the outstanding courtly, military, and diplomatic achievements of Sir William Sidney, whose personality and skills laid the foundations for the prominence of the Sidneys of Penshurst for the next four centuries.

¹¹⁸ *LP*, III.ii, 3288. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol3/pp1353-1372>. Gunn, *Charles Brandon*, 2016, 89-91; and his “The Duke of Suffolk’s March on Paris in 1523,” *English Historical Review*, 101 (1986): 596-634.

¹¹⁹ Collins, *Letters and Memorials of State*, I.77. Collins was unaware of Sir William Sidney’s younger brother Francis, who is named in Holinshed’s account of these tilts, and assumed that “Francis” must have been a misprint for “William.”

¹²⁰ MacCaffrey, in the entry on “Sir Henry Sidney,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online-edition).

