

Sir William Dugdale, Antiquary to the Stars

At the beginning of Jane Austen's final novel, *Persuasion*, the inflated Sir Walter Elliot is sat in the library of Kellynch Hall, thumbing through his favourite tome. The volume concerned is *The Baronetage of England*, and it conveniently falls open at the usual page, a history of the Elliots of Kellynch Hall. Sir Walter reads – as if he had not read it a thousand times already – how his ancestors had once been settled in Cheshire, had stood in Parliament, risen to the baronetcy, and how they were mentioned in Dugdale.

Mentioned in Dugdale ! For Sir Walter this was the equivalent of appearing on Graham Norton. Dugdale bestowed far more antiquity and standing upon a family that any baronetcy could. We could call him "antiquary to the stars".

Alongside this, we might also call Dugdale the godfather of English historical research, the man who recognized that the key to the past was delving in its documents and visiting its ruins. Our knowledge of English history would be immeasurably the poorer, had not this meticulous antiquarian put in all that effort more than three centuries ago.

William Dugdale was born in the rectory at Shustoke, Warwickshire, in 1605, lived through all the turbulence of the Civil Wars, and ended his days in the same village church 81 years later.

But this is no humble tale of rags to rags. For this was William Dugdale, knight of the realm, for one thing, proud owner of Blyth Hall, and the man's expertise in matters genealogical, scholastic and heraldic brought him a marvellous array of exotic titles: Pursuivant extraordinary, Blanch Lyon, Rouge Croix, Norroy, and Garter Principal King of Arms. Sir Christopher Hatton was his friend and patron, and Elias Ashmole his son-in-law.

Dugdale's published output in the twenty years or so from the mid-1650s is extraordinary, even in those days that offered less distractions to scholarly endeavour. It included a history of every monastery in England in three folio volumes; an account of every village and significant family in Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Cheshire and a host of other counties; a history of St Paul's Cathedral; studies of the draining of fenlands, the English legal system, and a detailed history of every landed family in the country since the Conquest.

And long before the publications, there was the research. In 1641, recognising that the wind was blowing from a Puritan direction, and England's ecclesiastical heritage was under threat, Dugdale spent the summer visiting every important church in the country, in the company of an artist, sketching the tombs, copying the memorials and recording all the heraldic glass. In many instances he got in just before the whirlwind of war blew them away.

Rescue missions were something of a Dugdale speciality, even if he did not always know it at the time. He scoured the riches of Sir Robert Cotton's library, one of the country's richest private collections and one which was to be largely destroyed by fire a few years later.

All this haste should not imply slipshod research. *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* took a quarter of a century, and is one of the most detailed local studies ever attempted, a model of its kind. Dugdale paid for whole thing all himself, and enrolled

the Bohemian artist, Wenceslaus Hollar, to provide engravings, considerably raising the quality (and the cost) of the final work.

But this studious and energetic scholar was not without a hard nose. Given the expense of supplying illustrations, chiefly heraldic, for his books, William Dugdale invited the descendants of the noble families he featured to contribute to the cost. If they wished to be "mentioned in Dugdale", they could, at least, stump up something towards the accolade. And if they refused, then the engravings failed to appear. Nor was Sir William above pointing a finger at noble parsimony along the way. He singled out the Ferrers family of Baddesley Clinton for particular censure. I had drawn the family monuments in the church, ready for the engraver, writes Dugdale in his preface, to bring their beauty and importance to the world, "which is so subject to perish by time and unhappy accidents". But no cash came his way. "So frugal a person is the present heir of the family, refusing to contribute anything towards the charge thereof, and it not being proper for me to undergo it totally, they are omitted." Good for Dugdale, I say.

Happily, for the quality of the finished work, most felt duty-bound to contribute. And since we began with Warwickshire, we might conclude with it too, and with what still seems an extraordinary lapse of concentration in such a painstaking scholar.

When Sir William visited the parish church in Stratford he was inevitably drawn to the memorial to William Shakespeare on the south wall of the chancel. Will had, after all, made the self-same journeys between Warwickshire and London, just a generation before his namesake.

Dugdale sketched the monument, and it was then worked up as an engraving by Hollar for the Warwickshire volume.

The monument, as we see it today, shows Shakespeare, pen in hand, writing on a piece of paper, supported by a tasselled cushion. Dugdale's surviving drawing – minus pen – looks more as if the poet is clutching the cushion to his stomach, and in Hollar's engraving the object is more akin to a lumpy sack of wool. Perhaps the Shakespeares failed to put in money too.

Yet so great was William Dugdale's reputation for accuracy that for a century this was the picture of the Bard's memorial which was copied and reproduced, and not the real thing.