

A Recently Discovered Boyle Letter of 1646

By Maria Boxall and Michael Hunter

The 1640s are a frustrating period in the history of Boyle's correspondence. Thomas Birch published a number of key letters from these years in his 1744 edition of *The Works of Robert Boyle*, particularly in the 'Life of Boyle' that was prefixed to it, while two letters from Boyle to his father were published shortly afterwards in the account of Boyle in *Biographia Britannica*.¹ In the second series of *The Lismore Papers* (1887-8), A.B. Grosart published various letters from Boyle to his father during his continental travels in the early part of the decade, derived from the family archive then at Lismore but now at Chatsworth, and further items from the same source were first published in *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle* in 2001, along with a few letters that survive elsewhere.² However, most of the letters that Birch published, especially those in his 'Life of Boyle', are now known only from his published version since the manuscript originals have since been lost. To make things worse, a whole series of letters that were listed by Birch's collaborator, Henry Miles, at the time when Birch's edition was in preparation are now known only from the brief details of date and place that he recorded, since they have otherwise completely disappeared.³

It is therefore exciting to be able to report the discovery of a substantial, hitherto unknown letter dating from this period of Boyle's life. This differs from those already known in that it relates to Boyle's role as Lord of the Manor of Stalbridge, the Dorset estate which his father, the Great Earl of Cork, had purchased in 1636 and which Boyle inherited on his death in 1643; Boyle lived there for nearly a decade after his return from his continental travels in 1644. The letter, dated 14 April 1646, is in Boyle's own hand and it carries the remains of his seal; it is addressed to a neighbouring landowner, Thomas Weston, of Calew Weston. It now survives among the papers of the Helyar family of Coker Court, Somerset, since the papers of the Weston family descended to the Helyars following the marriage of William Helyar to Betty Weston in 1743; her brother Thomas, the last male heir, died unmarried and intestate in 1767. The papers are now on deposit at the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton, where the item in question is DD\WHh/498. It is here reproduced by permission of the South West Heritage Trust.

Thomas Weston, the recipient of the letter, was the son of another Thomas Weston whose father, Sir William Weston, had been appointed Lord Chief Justice of Ireland in 1593 but who died the following year, at which point Thomas senior inherited his estates, including the manor of Calew Weston. Both Sir William and Thomas Weston senior attended the Middle Temple, though Thomas junior did not.⁴ Thomas Weston senior died in 1668 at the age of eighty-nine, and to commemorate him and his wife, Anne (née

¹ For details, see Michael Hunter, Antonio Clericuzio and Lawrence M. Principe (eds), *The Correspondence of Robert Boyle* (6 vols., London, 2001), vol. 1, pp. xxvi and 25ff. For the *Biographia Britannica* items see *ibid.*, pp. 6, 17-18.

² *Ibid.*, pp. xx, 3ff.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. xxviii-xxx.

⁴ Their admissions were registered respectively on 31 July 1564 and 8 May 1593: see H.F. MacGeagh and H.A.C. Sturgess, *Middle Temple Admissions Register* (3 vols., London, 1949), vol. 1, pp. 28, 65.

Willoughby), an elaborate memorial was erected in the parish church at Stalbridge, which still survives and is illustrated here.⁵ Thomas Weston junior was born sometime around 1600 and his marriage settlement to Anne Lutterell is dated 2 November 1625.⁶ They had more than one child and it makes sense that by 1646 he, rather than his father, was managing the family lands and that it was therefore to him that Boyle's letter was addressed. It may also have been he who was responsible for erecting the tomb to his parents, though he himself died in 1669.



Plate 1: The memorial to Thomas Weston sen. (d. 1668) in Stalbridge parish church.

The letter concerns grazing rights on the common lands at Stalbridge. Due to the medieval settlement pattern of the Forest of Blackmore, where Stalbridge is located, an abnormal amount of the parish comprised common lands, and the grazing rights on these

⁵ For details of the coats of arms and inscription see John Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (3rd edn., 3 vols, Westminster, 1868), vol. 3, p. 678; the latter part of the inscription is now barely legible.

⁶ See G.D. Squibb (ed.), *The Visitation of Dorset 1677 made by Sir Edward Bysse* (Harleian Society, 1977), p. 74, and Dorset Record Office D1-LT/48.

were the subject of agreements reached at the Manorial Court.⁷ It appears that Weston had breached agreements reached both at a court meeting at Michaelmas 1618 (in other words, before the Earl of Cork arrived at Stalbridge) and at a further court held on 28 March 1639, over which Cork would presumably have presided, and which Boyle could conceivably have attended as a boy, since he was living at Stalbridge at that point prior to his continental travels.⁸ Unfortunately, no manorial or other records relating to Boyle's Stalbridge estate appear to survive, so it is not possible to substantiate these meetings from other sources.

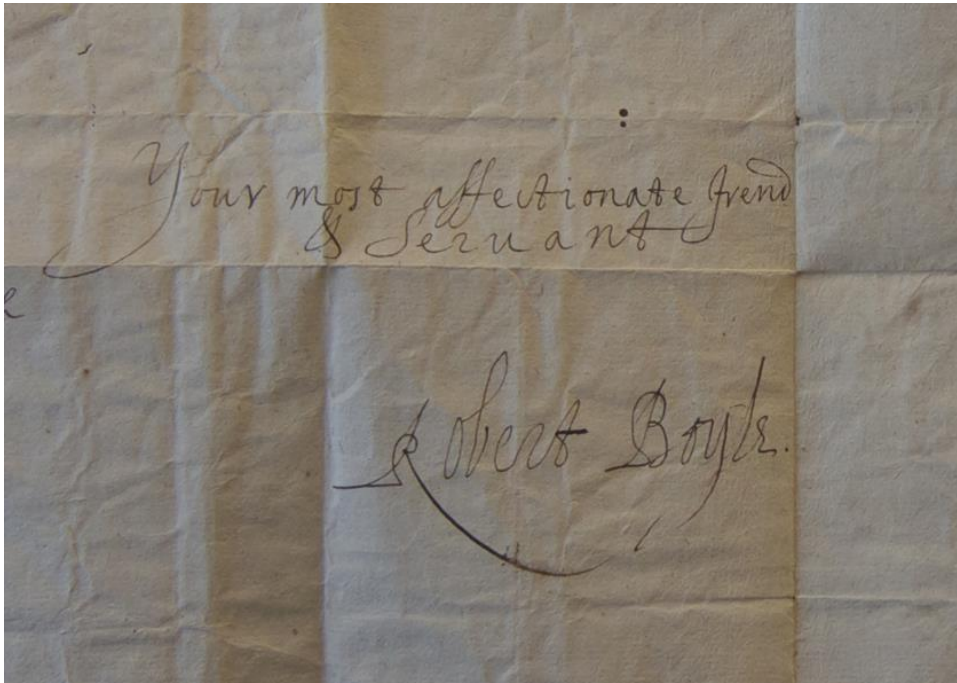


Plate 2: Boyle's signature to the letter

Though the thrust of the letter is to deal with the matter in hand, ending by threatening to have Weston's sheep impounded if he continued to graze them in defiance of what had been agreed by the Manorial Court, the text has a slightly literary tone which echoes Boyle's writings from this period of his life.⁹ There is a rhetorical streak in his description of tenants' entitlement to graze their sheep as existing 'by Vertue of this, that they enjoy it', or his statement: 'I have neither the Power to give away their Riht if I had the Will, nor the Will to do it, tho I had the Power' (the rather arch reference to 'What our Great-grandfathers did concerning this Bisnesse' is perhaps to be seen similarly, though it could allude to something that Weston had said in the letter to which Boyle is responding). Also interesting is Boyle's reference to the current political state of the country in his observation that Weston had failed to take the opportunity to assert his rights at Westminster at a time when he might have done, presumably before the Civil War, while

⁷ For the background, see C.C. Taylor, 'The Pattern of Medieval Settlement in the Forest of Blackmore', *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History & Archaeological Society*, 87 (1966), 251-4.

⁸ See Michael Hunter, *Boyle: Between God and Science* (New Haven and London, 2009), pp. 35-7, 40-2.

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 59-63, and John T. Harwood (ed.), *The Early Essays and Ethics of Robert Boyle* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1991).

more telling is his view that ‘the Ruines of those Customes’ might give ‘an arbitrary Power’ to the Lord of the Manor, leaving such cases to ‘the Indiscreet Discretion of a Domineering Landlord’. All this might have been slightly disconcerting to the letter’s recipient, who seems to have been a fairly ordinary figure: in an inventory of his goods and chattels made at his death in 1669 the ‘Bibles and other Bookes’ that he owned were valued at only ten shillings.¹⁰

Yet the letter attempts to be reasonable and conciliatory, and in a postscript Boyle pays his compliments to Weston’s wife and children. Since the document is a piecemeal survival, it is unclear what its outcome was, yet from it we gain some insight into the day to day administration of Boyle’s Stalbridge estate, a topic about which little is otherwise known. It is also gratifying that it is possible to link the letter with one of the many dating from 1645-7 that were listed by Henry Miles but are now lost: one of these is described as having been written by Boyle at Stalbridge on 14 April 1646, and there can be no doubt that this is the item in question.¹¹ It is to be hoped that more may surface in due course.

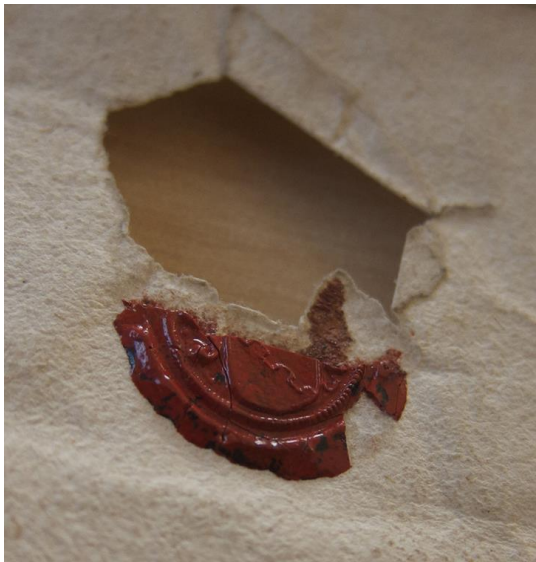


Plate 3: the fragment of Boyle’s seal¹²

¹⁰ Somerset Heritage Centre, DD\WHh/3. For an inventory of Thomas Weston senior’s goods in 1668 see DD\WHh/16; for the probate copy of his will, proved 7 December 1668, see The National Archives Prob/11/328.

¹¹ See *Correspondence*, vol. 1, pp. xxviii, 34.

¹² This is in fact the earliest known example of the heraldic seal that Boyle used later in his life, for instance in his letter to John Malet of 23 March 1652 (British Library Add MS 32093, fols. 293-4; *Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. 135; see also *ibid.*, p. xlvi): *per bend embattled sable and argent, a martlet for difference; crest: a bear’s head coupé* (the martlet denoted that Boyle was the 4th surviving son of the Earl of Cork, though in this case the section of the seal that would have shown that is missing, as is most of the crest). Insofar as other early Boyle letters have seals, these are borrowed from others (see *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 4, 8-10, 12, 14, 16-17, 20, 22, 24).

BOYLE to THOMAS WESTON¹³, 14 April 1646

From the holograph original among the Weston family papers which form part of the Helyar Muniments from Coker Court on deposit at Somerset Heritage Centre, DD\WHh/498. Fol/2.

Not hitherto printed. This is presumably the letter given as 'Stalbridge Apr. 14 1646' in Henry Miles' list of letters of 1645-7 that was previously thought to be lost: see *Correspondence*, vol. 1, pp. xxviii, 34.

Sir

I received on Sunday morning your Letter concerning the unusuall Continuance of your Sheepe in the Common. To which (after many thanks for your Civility in writing it,) I shall return this Answer. What our Great-grandfathers did concerning this Bisnesse, is unnecessary for me to enquire, & I am too young to remember. Only this much appears evidently unto me, That at a Court held for the Mannor of Stalbridge, at Michelmas 1618, the Tenants of this Mannor with the consent of the Free-holders, made a presentment upon their Oathes, what every Free-holder & their Tennants, that have riht of Common in the greate Wast or Common of Stalbridge, & what every Copsyholder that claim'd common there, was to be allowed for his riht therein: (the Particulars whereof you may see more at large whensoever you please:) which Presentment has been since consented to by my Father & the Freeholders & Copsyholders of this Mannor at another Court heere held the 28 of March 1639.¹⁴ (Wherein your Allottment by the Tenants was 12 beasts Leaze;) And whatsoever Beast's Leaze the Tenants for the Present enjoy upon the Common, 'tis by Vertu of this, that they enjoy it. Neither has any (so far forth as I kno) ever gon about to question it's Validity but Your Selfe, nor your Self, til now. If you have yet any unproduced Deed or Evidence in reserve that can give you a lawfull Title to what you now begin to pretend to; you shal find me very ready, rather to promote then any way to hinder the prosecution of your just advantages. But if, (as I beleeve) your only plea be what your Forefathers have enjoyed; I shal desire you to Consider; That' not only the never putting in for your riht, in a Time when the Gates of Westminster were so open to all kind of Commers, will in the Judgment of impartiall men, breed a Strong suspition of it's Unsoundness; but also, that admit that were not, yet any old Claime or Pretence of yours upon the score of Prescription, is utterly frustrate & made void by your «owne» Consent to these renewed «Presentments».ⁱⁱ Wherefore Sir, I cannot possibly condescend to a compliance with your Desires, in a Matter so Prejudiciall not only to my self in particular, but to all my Tenants in Generall, whose Interest herein being wrapped up in mine, I have neither the Power to give away Their Riht if I had the Will, nor the Will to do it, tho I had the Power. I shal on Thursday next, God willing, keep a Court at this House, where if I may be favored with your Presence, you may perhaps receive a great deal of Satisfaction from them concerning the Matter in question.

¹³ Thomas Weston was the son and heir of Thomas Weston (b. 1579), whose father, Sir William Weston, was Lord Chief Justice of Ireland in 1593-4 and who might have known Boyle's father, the Earl of Cork, either in Ireland or in the 1580s through the Middle Temple.

¹⁴ Boyle refers to his father and to a court held at Stabridge House, alluded to as 'heere'; later in the letter, it is referred to as 'this House'. In the next line 'leaze' means 'pasturage'.

After that Warning, if your Sheep shal continue upon the Common contrary to the Custom, I shall be necessitated to make the Hayward take the usuall Course of impounding them; with which if you shal chance to be /fol. 1v/ yet unsatisfy'd; 'tis but speedily comming to a faire Tryall betwixt us; wherein I am confident that the Tenants will further me with their Assistance as far as Justice will permit; (& farther then that I neither need it nor desire it) because they all holding their Estates, (as you kno) By the Will of the Lord, according to the Custom of the Mannor; the Ruines of those Customes must needs build up such an arbitrary Power for him, as may in many Cases leave them to the Indiscreet Discretion of a Domineering LandLord. However, Sir, I shall desire the Continuance of that Friendliness that has ever been betwixt us; which Ile assure you on my side shall never suffer a Breach, unless your owne Provocations dispence me from the obligation of persevering to remaine as I am

Sir

Your most affectionate Frend
& Servant

Robert Boyle

Stalbridge the 14th
of April 1646

ⁱⁱⁱPray Sir, present my Service to Mrs Weston & your Children.

Second leaf blank except for address on verso:

To his much respected
Frend Thomas Weston
Esquire at his
House at
Weston/
/these

Seal partially removed, leaving a hole in the paper. The extant portion of the seal shows the bottom portion of an elaborate crest flanking on both sides the lower part of a shield *per bend embattled* (see above, n. 12).

Adjacent to this is an endorsement in a later hand that is heavily crossed through and is now barely legible; it evidently relates to a financial transaction.

ⁱ Followed by 'put' [?] deleted.

ⁱⁱ Replacing a heavily deleted word: 'Acquittances' [?].

ⁱⁱⁱ Written in margin at right angles to text on fol. 1v.