

It's a real Norfolk saga – the four-decade long investigation into the Bacon Papers represents a family history writ large. **Steve Snelling** explores a truly epic historical odyssey.

It smacks of a scandal that makes the salacious affair of the hapless rector of Stiffkey seem tame by comparison. Stern, self-righteous Sir Nathaniel Bacon, justice of the peace and member of parliament, was appalled. And he made no secret of the fact.

Writing to John Jegon, bishop of Norwich, on May 1, 1605, he called for the dismissal of James Pointer, the well-connected vicar of Blakeney and Glandford, rector of Wiveton, and a man whose alleged sexual proclivity were an affront to every last one of his puritanical sensibilities.

Cataloguing the wayward cleric's 'crimes' in fathering a host of illegitimate children and being "openly arraigned for a rape", Bacon insisted that Pointer "hath dwelt longe in this kinde of sinne" and urged Jegon to take decisive action.

"Your Lordshipe shall doe both God and the country good service if he might be removed," he wrote, "that some better man might be placed in his charges..."

The letter marked the beginning of an ire-filled correspondence designed to cleanse the coastal parishes of an unholy scandal and ranks among the more colourful episodes to appear in the latest instalment of one of Norfolk's greatest family sagas – the fifth volume of *The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey*.

Described by one distinguished historian as a "monumental undertaking", the 35-year ongoing project represents an epic of scholarly time-travel and investigative research with few parallels in modern times.

Launched in the mid-1970s by a team of historians at the University of East Anglia led by emeritus professor Hassell Smith, who remains one of the general editors, the mammoth venture which has involved reconstituting an archive dispersed to dozens of repositories on three continents already runs to around 2,200 published pages of text and introduction.

It has been a challenging odyssey on the trail of a Norfolk notable whose life of duty and strict piety seem so at odds with the modern world as to render him a difficult historical companion. But then, as Dr Victor Morgan observes in his illuminating introduction to the latest volume: "Editors may be grateful for the archives bequeathed them, but they are not obliged to like the individuals whom they document."

In saying that he is speaking from years of experience. Indeed, beyond Hassell Smith, who in Dr Morgan's words has "lived with Bacon for 50 years or more", no one else has spent more time in his ghostly company.

Joint editor of volume five with Elizabeth Rutledge and Barry Taylor, Dr Morgan can look back on an enduring association with this rather forbidding public figure that stretches back to the late 1960s and a summer's road trip across America "chasing after all the known Bacon manuscripts".

It proved a sometimes daunting quest. He recalls visiting a library in Los Angeles where the key document had been framed and wall-mounted behind glass.

"It wouldn't photocopy, so I had to transcribe the damn thing," he says. "Nowadays, of course, a lot of the papers are catalogued and even online, which is Nirvana compared with how it used to be.

"When we started on this project a lot of the papers weren't even catalogued. But it has certain pleasures, a bit like stamp-collecting, as you track down the various papers and fit them together. I think both Hassell and myself can get a bit obsessive about that."

The result of that grand obsession has been to reconstruct the family archive, piecing together a documentary mosaic that had been scattered across Australia, Britain and America, to shed fascinating light on a long-vanished Tudor and Jacobean era when Norwich was England's second city and Norfolk boasted some of the wealthiest families in the country.

Widely regarded as among the most important and instructive paperstosurvive from a period of great uncertainty marked by dynastic change in the monarchy, the editing of the reconstituted Bacon papers has been hailed as a modern-day triumph of historical investigation.

"In terms of local archives," says Dr Morgan, "it is probably the finest collection relating to the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, and that's quite possibly because it's now so much more accessible."

But what is it about the papers which makes them so significant?

"What we have here is an enormous body of material that relates to estate management and what might be described as public business at a local level.

"As a justice of the peace and a deputy lieutenant, he is involved with dispensing the king's justice, but around this core activity more things were added around this time entailing an enormous amount of administrative activity, such as the control of grain exports, making sure the markets are well supplied..."

"And what also becomes plain from these papers is the amount of legislation – far more than is the case today – that was being initiated locally with MPs being sent to parliament with a whole series of draft bills to pass through."

As well as the focus on local initiatives, the documents also point to some striking links with the modern world. Most notable among them is the petitioning process with the Bacon papers providing ample evidence of its long pedigree. And no less fascinating are some of the issues which provide a common thread between Jacobean times and our lives today.

One such example is the threat of coastal erosion and anxiety over the condition of Cromer's pier, then little more than a jetty designed to allow merchantmen to load and offload cargoes.

By 1607, the "utterly decayed" pier was in such a shocking state of disrepair that Sir Nathaniel Bacon and a trio of co-petitioners, who included Sir Edward Coke, felt a new "great peere" or "several smalle peeres" were desperately needed not merely to allow seagoing trade to continue but in order to preserve the town "from the force of the sea".

Already, "manie howses" had been "brought to ruine" and the loss of some six acres to the sea over the past 12 years had left the town's "faire" parish church with its "high steeple" within "twelve score" (perhaps some 240 paces) of the shoreline and, therefore, vulnerable to erosion.

The petition noted: "The towne hath much buildinge in it, and is a market towne, and maie justly move compassion."

If such appeals on behalf of the "pore" townsmen of Cromer brought out the



Epic quest into a

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public-spirited best in Nathaniel, there is little question that the debauched dalliances of the vicar of Blakeney and Glandford brought out the worst in this most God-fearing of men.

There was certainly little by way of compassion or tolerance in his attempts to have James Pointer removed. But then, given his own joyless existence and

faith in what Dr Morgan refers to as "the harsh guiding oversight of an omniscient magisterial god", that is hardly a surprise.

More concerned with business than pleasure, he was, as Dr Morgan notes, "above all assiduous in establishing the puritan ethic in north Norfolk" as was reflected in his persistent efforts to "secure



History man: Above, Dr Victor Morgan continuing a 35-year historical journey in St John the Baptist Church with a backdrop of the Bacon memorial. **Heraldic feature:** Left, the Bacon family crest.



Family odyssey: Professor Hassell Smith launching the latest volume of the Nathaniel Bacon papers in Stiffkey Church.

marshes and Nathaniel made the most of them."

His impact on the community from the 1570s on when he had his house built there was immense. Not only was he a "major source of employment" – 18 people lived and worked in his house – he also provided sources of income for people in the neighbourhood as is reflected in the estate account books which the research team have made available in computerised form.

"You can see how local wives would turn up at the kitchen door with half a dozen eggs to sell and things like that. And then, there's a woman who doesn't live in the house, but goes down to the beach where she gathers up fine sand which she uses to scrub and scour the dishes."

More than most studies of this period, the book also explores the relationship between rich and poor, and in particular what Dr Morgan refers to as people's dependence "on their social standing for the leverage they can get in society".

"People enter into obligations in which someone does something for them," he explains, "but they, in turn, will then be obliged to do something for that person in the future."

This was a form of credit, part of a broad-based "culture of honour" that is revealed in the Bacon papers as being far more significant than some have previously imagined.

"There is an assumption among some historians that the culture of honour was the province of the ruling elite," says Dr Morgan, "but that was not the case. Honour was extremely important to the humblest in society. To women, for example, it was very important because, in a sense, they had little else."

By the same token, the research has found far closer bonds between rich and poor during Nathaniel's day, a result in part of their living together in closer proximity and closer harmony with far greater inter-dependence. Theirs was, as Dr Morgan points out, "a natural form of relationship which is difficult for us to understand in our egalitarian and meritocratic society".

Such issues will no doubt be further explored in future volumes as this historical odyssey draws to an end. Two more volumes and a possible cumulative 'catch-up' book over the next seven or eight years should complete a remarkable journey into one of the richest and most compelling periods of Norfolk history.

For now, though, the epic quest goes on...

The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey: Volume V 1603-1607, edited by Victor Morgan, Elizabeth Rutledge and Barry Taylor, is published by the Norfolk Record Society, priced £18. For more details visit the website at www.norfolkrecordsociety.org.uk

Norfolk man of letters



was so keen to select the best ministers he would get everyone out on Tuesdays and march them all off to Wiveton for prospective clergymen to practise their sermons on them.

"This was a man who believed he was going to make the world anew. He was a radical protestant whose idea of a good time was to ride into Norwich to hear people like John More, the so-called 'Apostle of Norwich', preach in front of St Andrew's Hall."

Little wonder then that he should have little time for the antics of James Pointer, a cleric who cared so little about his 'flock' that he allowed his three parishes to be served, in Nathaniel's words, "by 2 curates, who preache not" one of whom was "scarse able to read".

His most dastardly crime in Nathaniel's eyes, however, was not neglect but over indulgence. A paternity examination carried out in April 1605 opened a can of worms. Not only was Pointer accused of having "defiled" one of his parishioners "sondry tymes" in his Blakeney and Wiveton parsonages but, in a letter to the bishop, Nathaniel effectively accused him of being a serial adulterer.

"There was one Alice Whitbie a younge woman of Blakeney, for whome he was sondry tymes in question," he wrote, "and she had severall children, whereof she was delivered of some in one place and some in another, and he suspected to be the father of them..."

By September, when Nathaniel was taking his case to the Commissioners for causes Ecclesiastical, the list of children

Bacon heritage: Above left, Dr Victor Morgan in Stiffkey churchyard.

Seat of power: Far left, an 18th century print of Stiffkey Hall.

Portrait: Left, an image purporting to be of Sir Nathaniel Bacon.

Pointer was suspected of fathering had grown and he beseeched God "to direct you to do that which shall be most to his glory".

But it was all to no avail. As chaplain to Henry Percy, the 9th Earl of Northumberland, Pointer was not without influence in high places and, with the help of his powerful friends, he was able to thwart Nathaniel's attempts to have him banished from his post.

When it came to matters of business, particularly those affecting his substantial Norfolk estate and interests at home and abroad, Nathaniel was altogether more successful. From his own riverside wharf and warehouse, he traded as readily with the Low Countries as he did with the merchants of London.

"There is," as Dr Morgan points out, "a North Sea orientation about him and, on occasion, he even despatches his ship off to Amsterdam to do the Christmas shopping!"

But it was closer to home that his entrepreneurial spirit truly shone. Dr Morgan cites one example.

"During this period saffron was a valuable commodity. In fact, at some points, saffron was worth more than gold. To get the saffron, you have to grow a certain bulb and you don't want great clumping husbandmen or farm workers working on this stuff. So, he uses women and one of our research students, Linda Campbell, has written of the women labourers in the saffron fields of Stiffkey.

"Up on that coast there were enormous natural resources to be found on the

the appointment of Godly preachers".
"He was a very driven man," says Dr Morgan. "There's certainly something of the Ayatollah about him. He was determined to create a Godly community in North Norfolk. He was a man who didn't feel the Reformation had gone far enough. He saw a religious structure that didn't include bishops at all... and he