

Henry Sully's Life Story - Chapter 1 Origins

By Robert St-Louis, Ottawa, Canada, August 2022 – All rights reserved

ORIGINS AND BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

In “Charles Gretton: Clock and Watchmaking: Through the Golden Age” (published in 2016 by Dennis Radage, Warner Meinen, and Laila Radage), there is some discussion of Henry Sully, due to his apprenticeship under Gretton in London. The date and registration of Henry’s birth is given in this book (quoted in Betts 2017¹) as: 12 February 1679, in Stogumber, Somerset, England. Most previous references to Sully (in Loomes, Baillie, Tardy, etc., listed his birth year as 1680).

An online search carried out by the author into online genealogical records in Stogumber, confirms a baptism date for Henry Sully of 12 February 1679, and lists his parents as being Richard and Deinah of Bicknoller.²

- The first image below shows a “Richard Sully” identified as having been baptized in the area on May 11, 1634, the son of Henry and Elizabeth. This may be Henry’s father. In an online record Elizabeth, wife of Henry Sully, is said to have died on 26 December 1644.
- The second image shows Richard Sully marrying Dinah Gunning on 14 March 1659 (another record indicates 1660). These are clearly Henry’s parents, and this indicates that Henry was born quite late in that marriage, so he most likely had several siblings preceding him (including his brother Richard, who will appear later in the story).
- The third shows Henry Sully’s baptism record from 12 February 1679.

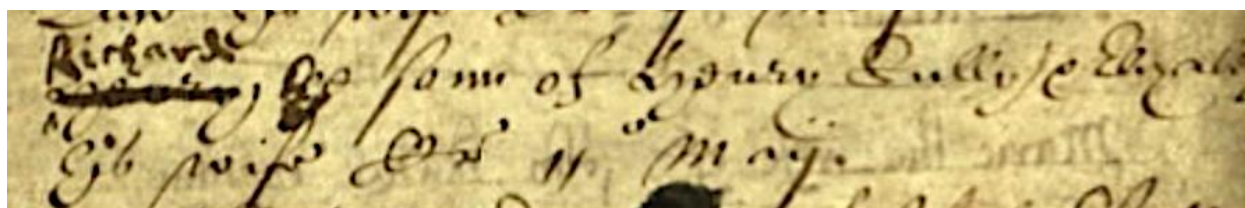


Figure 2: Richard Sully baptism record 11 May 1634, (son of Henry Sully and Elizabeth his wife)

¹ Betts, Jonathan, *Marine Chronometers at Greenwich*, 2018, Oxford University Press

² The images were obtained from online Somerset Parish Records 1538-1914 (Source: Somerset Heritage Service; Taunton, Somerset, England; Somerset Parish Records, 1538-1914; Reference Number: D\P\stogm/2/1/2). Other information was obtained from West Somerset Parish Transcriptions <http://www.wsom.org.uk/Parreg.html>.

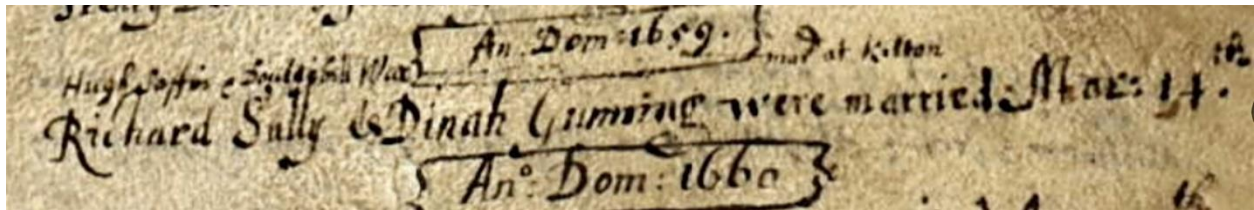


Figure 3: Richard Sully marriage 14 March 1659 (to Dinah Gunning)

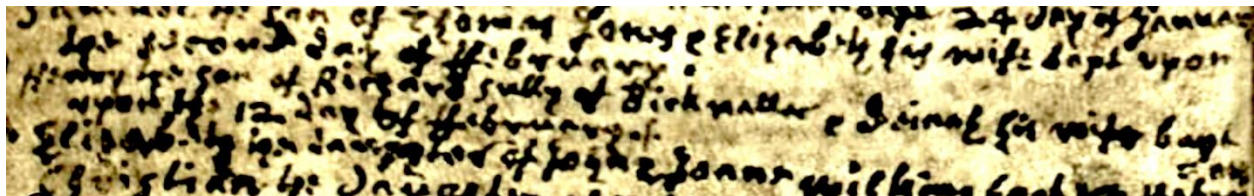


Figure 4: Henry Sully baptism record 12 Feb 1679, middle entry (son of Richard Sully of Bicknoller, and Dinah his wife)

Bicknoller is a small village on the western slopes of the Quantock Hills, and 5 kms south of the edge of Bridgwater Bay. In its center stands the medieval church of St. George, which originally dates from the 12th century, while the current building originates from the 14th and 15th centuries. In the churchyard stands a large yew tree estimated to be older than 1000 years, and a medieval cross. Today, it is a quaint little village with numerous thatched cottages, and a population of less than 400. The name Bicknoller (where Henry’s parents lived according to his baptism record), is derived from the Old English word for alder tree (noller) and Bick is derived from *bica*, which means “little treasure”.

Stogumber, where Henry’s baptism was recorded, is located on the eastern flank of the Brendon Hills, and about 3 kms west of Bicknoller. Stogumber has a current population of around 700, and its name derives from the old English “stoke” which means “place” or “dairy farm”.

“Gunner” is personal name that was added around 1225. Stogumber was an important center of woolen cloth making from the 12th to the 18th centuries. The church in Stogumber was wealthy and had ecclesiastical links with its chapel in Bicknoller. This explains why the Sully birth and marriage records listed above were preserved in Stogumber.³

Below is a portion of a map of Somerset County showing parish names, and the dates when their records are first registered. Following that is a portion of a 1648 map of Somerset County.

³ British History Online – A History of the County of Somerset Vol. 5

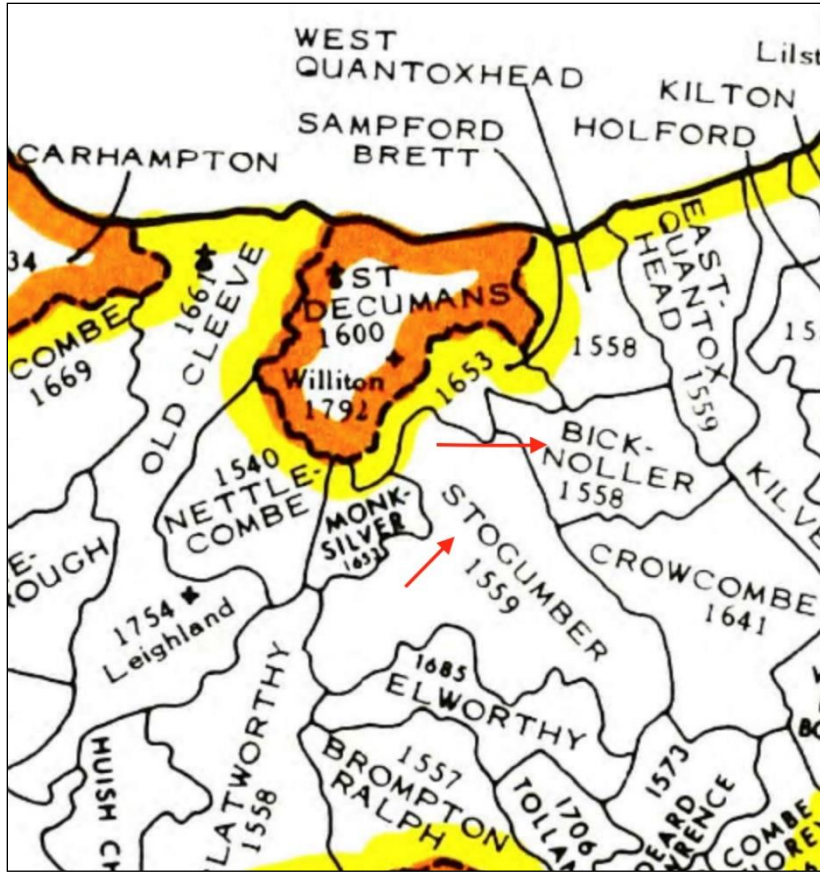


Figure 1 Parishes of Somerset (partial)

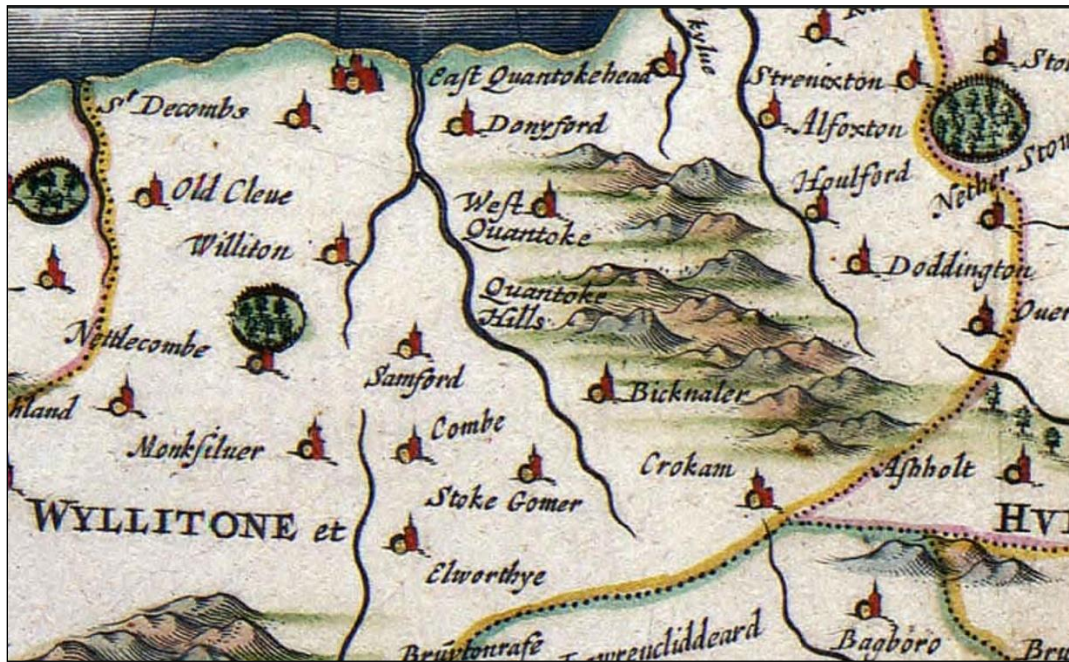


Figure 2 Partial map of Somerset ca. 1648



Figure 3 St George church in Bicknoller

The church records unfortunately do not reveal the livelihood of Henry's father, Richard. However, the indenture document that was used to document Henry Sully's apprenticeship to London clockmaker Charles Gretton, in 1694, identifies Henry's father Richard as deceased, and having been a "taylor" in Somerset⁴. Given the prominence of the wool and cloth trade in nearby Stogumber, it is not surprising that he would have worked in an area related to this trade, as many of the other residents certainly did. It is not known why or how young Henry was sent to London to apprentice to become a clockmaker, especially in the shop of one of the capital's most prestigious makers, Charles Gretton. Possibly there could have been a family relative living in London who could have helped secure a place for Henry in Gretton's desirable shop, but that kind of information is currently unavailable to the author.⁵

One thing is clear: young Henry Sully's schooling in Somerset, before he reached the age to embark upon an apprenticeship in London, must have been reasonably good.⁶ All his life, he had

⁴ See Chapter 2 of Henry Sully's life story for further details on his London apprenticeship.

⁵ Could his older brother Richard, who played a role with Henry and John Law in France many years later, have been living in London, and encouraged his younger brother to join him there, made arrangements with Gretton?

⁶ Having said this, there exist no historical records of what schools may in fact have existed in either Bicknoller or Stogumber, Somerset, during the formative years of young Henry.

a very keen mind for mathematics and scientific concepts, and was a voracious reader and amasser of knowledge. Moreover, he proved himself an excellent writer, in a foreign language (French) no less, so his grounding in writing skills, obtained in the school system, must have been very solid.

As can be seen from the partial map of Somerset County below, Bicknoller is quite close to Stogumber (where Sully's baptism was recorded). As early as 1720, it is known that a yeoman farmer and clockmaker named John Millard, from a family of blacksmiths going back 200 years, was making and repairing clocks in Stogursey (about 10 kms from Bicknoller). And as early as 1740, a clock dial maker named Thomas Pyke was working out of the larger center of Bridgwater (20 kms from Bicknoller). There must have been several clockmakers nearby to which Pyke would have provided dials.⁷

This suggests that there were likely numerous clockmakers spread about in the various villages and towns of Somerset (numbering over 400), possibly as early as the late 17th century, when Henry Sully was coming of age. Thus, there may have been some clockmakers nearby under whom Henry could have been apprenticed to learn the trade. And yet, he ended up travelling all the way to London, 260 kms away. Bath is located only 190 kms from London and in 1700, it took over 50 hours to reach London by coach.

Glennie and Thrift (2009)⁸ have studied clockmakers and clockmaking in Bristol, where a majority of clocks in Somerset were produced for many years, especially after 1750. From 1750 to 1800, the annual number of clockmaking apprenticeships begun in Bristol ranged from 7 to 18 annually. From 1690 to 1720, the number is only 1 to 4. This suggests that for a young man like Henry Sully, desiring to become a clockmaker, there were possibly few opportunities in Bristol and even less in the rest of Somerset, where a town could likely not have more than one or two clockmakers. More clockmakers around London would have been looking for apprentices, and they often would bring in boys from the countryside to fill their workshop needs.

The reasons why or how Henry went to London may always remain one of the mysteries about his life.⁹ However, he wasn't the first nor the last young man from provincial towns who had gone to London to become a clock/watchmaker and many of the finest horologists in England had started that way. Two famous ones that come to mind are Edward East (1602-1697) who had come to London from Southill Bedfordshire, and Thomas Tompion (1639-1713) from nearby Northill Bedfordshire (both about 80 kms from London). Charles Gretton himself had come from Claypole Lincolnshire (about 200 kms from London). Sully came from a place further away, about 265 kms from the metropolis.

⁷ In his book "The Clockmakers of Somerset" A.J. Moore indicates that the craft of clockmaking was already present in 1650.

⁸ *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales 1300-1800*, Oxford University Press

⁹ In a presentation on Somerset clockmakers given on 13 November 1993, A.J.(Jim) Moore suggested that in the early days of clockmaking in Somerset, there was low literacy and people came into the trade through blacksmithing, and learning was done through repairing existing clocks. Jim also suggested that an untaught "village genius" would have been attracted to this trade, and it's at least possible that Sully would have been such an intelligent young man, drawn to London to pursue his interest in this trade. The fact that he later authored several treatises on horology suggests that he would have been literate before he left his home town, and started his apprenticeship in London.

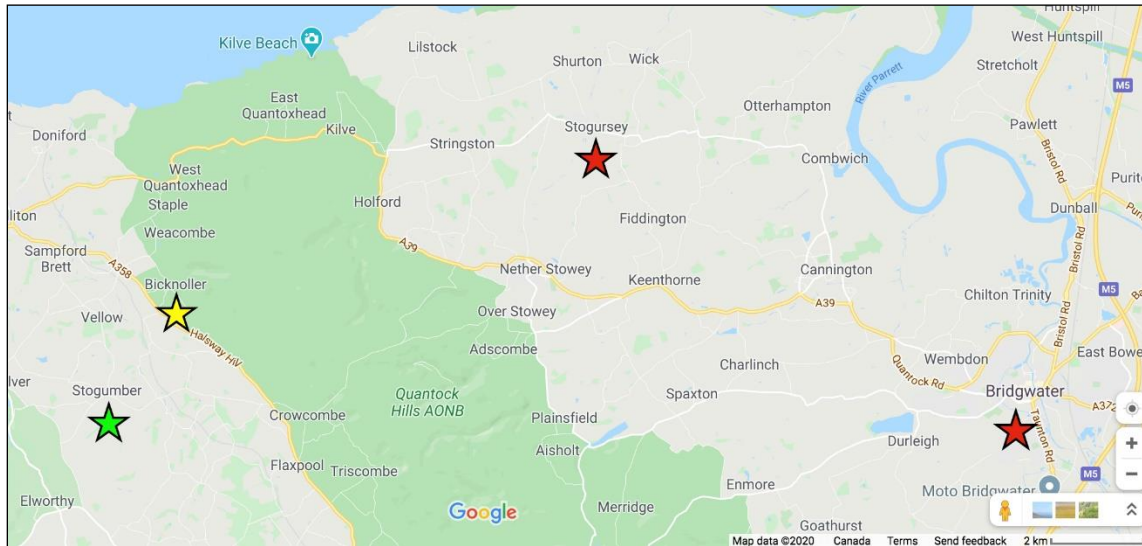


Figure 4 Somerset villages and towns (partial)

J.R. Harris¹⁰ confirmed that Henry had a brother named Richard who worked with him in Paris around 1718-20 under the arrangements with John Law (to be discussed later)¹¹, so his brother may have been older and named after their father, while Henry may have been named after his grandfather. A parish record has been found in Bicknoller for a “Rich Sully”, baptised on 30 June 1677, whose father is identified as “Richard Sully”. This is likely Henry’s older brother Richard.

It has been written in several places about Henry Sully over the years that he came from French Huguenot ancestors, but it’s not clear that the genealogical evidence quite bears this out, unless those Sully’s had come from France much before¹². Mary Tudor ruled England from 1553-1558, during which time being a Protestant was not necessarily a good thing, so perhaps Phillip Sully (if he is an actual ancestor of Henry’s) came to England after Mary’s death, and during the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, who was obviously much more favourable to followers of the Protestant religion.

In an article entitled “England’s First Refugees”¹³, Richard Gwynn writes that “*forty or fifty thousand [Huguenots] crossed the Channel while Louis XIV sat on the French throne (1660-1714). Others had come in the time of the Tudors, especially during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth.*”¹⁴ Although the largest influx of Huguenots came after the revocation of the Edict of

¹⁰ Harris, J.R., *Industrial Espionage and Technology Transfer*, 1998, Routledge Publishing, New York.

¹¹ There may also have been a John Sully involved with Henry at the time.

¹² French genealogical records have entries for “Henri de Sully” in 1188, and “Henri de Sully III” in 1285. On the other hand, England seems to have had Sully’s in its past as well. For example, Sir John Sully (born c.1283 – died c.1388), of Devonshire, who was an English knight.

¹³ Gwynn, Richard, *England’s First Refugees*, *History Today*, Vol.35 Issue 5, May 1985

¹⁴ In a FamilySearch Wiki article entitled “Huguenots in Great Britain” it is stated that between 1547-1553, surveys revealed about 40,000 French Protestants in London. These were called “Walloons” as the term “Huguenot” came later.

Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, some had come over in the decades preceding this event. Gwynn goes on to say that although the vast majority of men and women in England and France at the time, lived and worked on farms, “*few among the Huguenots were workers of the land. The great majority lived in towns; they were artisans, especially weavers. Those who came to Britain included many skilled craftsmen, silversmiths, watchmakers.*”

Records in the region of Somerset where Henry was born indicate the presence of several Sully’s, going back as far as 1624 (two girls, named Elizabeth and Anne, both from a father named William Sully). Also, there is a listing for a marriage in Stogumber between a certain John Bacon, and the daughter of a certain Phillip Sully, on November 24, 1559. Obviously, this predates by over a century the exodus of many Huguenots from France (following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV).

Whether Philip or William Sully were in fact Huguenot refugees from France, and ancestors of Henry Sully, is unknown. Consequently, it is not possible to corroborate the oft-repeated statement that Henry Sully descended from Huguenots, something which, it should be pointed out, was never mentioned by Sully himself, Julien Le Roy, nor other contemporary accounts.

Annex. Origins of the family name Sully.

The origins and meaning of the name Sully are described as follows in the Dictionary of American Family Names ©2013, Oxford University Press:

1. *French: habitational name from any of various places, for example in Calvados, Loiret, and Oise. The first of these is recorded in 1180 as Silleium, from the Gallo-Roman personal name Silius or Cilius + the Latin locative suffix -acum. The others are from a personal name Sol(l)ius + -acum.*
2. *Southern English: of uncertain origin; possibly a habitational name imported from France and so identical with 1, or alternatively a variant of Sulley. It may also be from the parish of Sully in Glamorgan, Wales, so called either from Old Norse sul ‘cleft’ + ey ‘island’ or from the Norman family name de Sulley (as in 1), which is recorded in Glamorgan in the 12th century.*

More insights on the name Sully from: <https://forebears.io/surnames/sully#meaning>

- This surname is derived from a geographical locality. 'of Sudeley,' now Sudeley Manor, a parish in Gloucestershire, often written Sully in old records. A family of Sudeleys resided here for centuries.
 - Bartholomew de Sulley, or Sudeley, Gloucestershire 1273. Hundred Rolls.
 - Henry de Sully, Devon, *ibid*.
 - Walter de Sully, Devon, *ibid*.
 - Reymond de Suleye, Devon, Henry III-Edward I: Testa de Nevill, sive Liber Feodorum, temp. Henry III-Edward I.
 - Mabillia de Suly, Gloucestershire, 20 Edward I: Placita de Quo Warranto, temp. Edward I-III.

- Ralph de Sudlegh, or Sule, or Suley, Gloucestershire, Henry III-Edward I: Testa de Nevill, sive Liber Feodorum, temp. Henry III-Edward I.
- Adam Sulleygh, Somerset, 1 Edward III: Kirby's Quest.
- 1702. Married — Thomas Leigh and Joan Sully: St. George, Hanover Square.
 - A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames (1896) by Charles Wareing Endell Bardsley
- (French-Latin + Celtic) belonging to Sully (Normandy), a.d. 1119 Sul[l]iacum = the Estate of Sulla [i-ac-um, the Latin-Gaul. poss. suff.]
 - Surnames of the United Kingdom (1912) by Henry Harrison
- (French.) Local. From the town of Sully, in the province of Orleans, France.
 - An Etymological Dictionary of Family and Christian Names (1857) by William Arthur
 - From Sully (Solliaco), name of two towns of France, one dep. Loiret, the other dep. Nievre. 2. From Sully, a parish of South Wales, co. Glamorgan.
 - Ludus Patronymicus (1868) by Richard Stephen Charnock
- Walter de Sully, Suilli, or Suilleio, Normandy 1180-95 (Magni Rotuli Scaccarii Normanniae). Robert de S. Ibid. and 1198; Walter de Sully, Engl. c. 1198 (Rotuli Curiae Regis).
 - The Norman People (1874)
- A location name in South Wales. Or from the French, Soulé; a personal name.
 - British Family Names: Their Origin and Meaning (1903) by Henry Barber
- Sully is an ancient west of England name. In the 13th century it occurred as De Sully in Devonshire and as De Sulleye in Wilts, Gloucestershire, and Worcestershire (H. R.). Sir Raymond de Sully had lands in Huntspill, Somerset, in the 14th century (C.). William Sully, one of the martyrs of the Monmouth rebellion of 1685, met his death on the scaffold at Dunster (W.).
 - Homes of Family Names in Great Britain (1890) by Henry Brougham Guppy

(More information on Sully family in Somerset could be obtained in person at the SOUTH WEST HERITAGE TRUST: Somerset Archive Catalogue, namely: *Notes on the history and pedigrees of the Sully family of Somerset, Devon and Wales, and miscellaneous deeds, etc.. mid-17th century-20th century.*)