

## Chapter Fourteen : Dodgy Dossiers 1594

### Plots and Plotters

In the middle of August, harvest-time, 1594 Ralph was ordered by the privy council to report to the London house of Sir William Waad, secretary of the privy council. The councillors could hardly do otherwise in the light of what they had been told over the past three weeks. But, one of the most important episodes in Sheldon's life, the accounts of his questioning, have been ignored.<sup>1</sup> Instead of illuminating Sheldon's life, the events have given rise to incorrect conclusions.

The privy council, always on the alert for threats and already alarmed because this was the fourth plot of the year to come to their attention, had been following the questioning of three young men.<sup>2</sup> All had links to the English troops stationed in the Low Countries, part of the forces first sent there ten years previously against the armies of the king of Spain. Commanded by the unreliable and impulsive Sir William Stanley, he and his co-commander, Sir Rowland Yorke, were notorious for their surrender to the Spaniards of the English-held port of Deventer in 1587. Yorke's nephew, Edmund, was one of the plotters.<sup>3</sup> He and his companions, Henry Young son of a Kentish gentleman with a moderate income of £60 a year and Richard Williams whose father, former sheriff of Anglesey, was known to the authorities,<sup>4</sup> had all left England for various reasons and without formal permission. Drifting into military service for the sake of pay and honourable employment they abandoned the ranks when their wages were not forthcoming, becoming easy targets for more seasoned schemers to recruit. All had returned to England, separately, over June and July with the permission of the young earl of Essex, the Queen's current favourite.<sup>5</sup> Watched from the moment of their arrival, they were arrested one by one and questioned, separately, by a team recently appointed to act on behalf of the council.<sup>6</sup>

What the interrogators heard was chilling, though neither coherent nor consistent. The young men claimed to be planning an uprising, even an invasion, of England; their aim was to put the earl of Derby on the throne in place of Queen Elizabeth. Their plans were bold but inchoate: the rising would start in north Wales where Williams' father had his estates on the

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<sup>1</sup> The episode was played down by his biographer Barnard, *The Sheldons*, p. 35, and ignored by Minney, 'The Sheldons of Beoley', pp. 1-17. Pollen ed, *Unpublished Documents*, I, p. 345 noted the plot was fictitious.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, *Plots and Plotters* outlines the story; Devlin, 'The Earl and the Alchemist' pp. 74-114; Green, *The Double Life of Dr Lopez*.

<sup>3</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 485, no.69; Edwards, *Plots and Plotters*, p. 236, following Hume, *Treason and Plot*, p.153.

<sup>4</sup> Young, *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 485, no.69; Emyr Gwynne Jones, 'Robert Pugh of Penrhyn Creuddyn', pp. 10-19.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, *Plots and Plotters*, p. 236, *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 550, no. 114 makes it clear that Yorke sought the earl's help; *CSPD 1591-1594*, p.522, no. 19, 23 June, is Yorke's apology for departing without licence.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Bacon, Attorney General Sir Edward Coke, the Catholic leaning Lord Cobham, Drury and Waad himself.

Anglesey coast.<sup>7</sup> He owned a pinnace,<sup>8</sup> which would make it possible to receive supplies, messages and reinforcements from Ireland in the event of a siege. Alternatively, action might start in Yorkshire where they knew Catholics to be strong, numerous and doughty; or possibly forces could be landed in Portsmouth, assisted by another troop at Winchelsea where supposedly a tunnel led from the shore to the centre of town.<sup>9</sup> They later made an unlikely claim – that they had the support of certain Jesuits resident chiefly in Brussels, their activities in seeking foreign support to overthrow Elizabeth familiar enough for the privy council to realize that cooperation between the two parties was at least plausible.<sup>10</sup>

Their figurehead, the plotters maintained, was the earl of Derby, significant because his family, the Stanleys, had a claim to the English throne by descent from Mary Tudor, youngest sister of Henry VIII. On paper and from a distance the proposition might appear logical enough; in practice it disregarded realities since none of the three men to hold the title of earl as the plot evolved were likely rebels. The family, however, had a bad record. In 1570-71 the sons of the third earl had contemplated a plan to abduct the imprisoned Mary Queen of Scots as she walked on the moors.<sup>11</sup> Their father, earl Henry, died in September 1593, leaving his eldest son and heir, Ferdinando, to receive the leader of a band of plotters based in Prague. His reaction to his request for support had at first been all politeness; within a month he turned their representative, Richard Hesketh, over to the authorities in London who saw to his speedy execution. Six months later Ferdinando died very suddenly, whether from natural causes or from poison remains unclear. His successor, his younger brother William, was about to marry Lord Burghley's niece. The three conspirators had yet to approach the earl, but that did not stop them from asserting his willingness to participate – insisting even at the last moment that they would carry on with their plan in his name 'even if he were not willing'.<sup>12</sup>

Their financier was to be Ralph Sheldon, or so they claimed. But his consent had not been obtained, or even sought. It was said that the suggestion had come from Sir William Stanley himself, but it was also admitted that Stanley had thought it necessary to make certain Sheldon would consent.<sup>13</sup> He considered the most persuasive man to send was the seminary priest Dr Gifford, another name familiar to the Council, though he was not free to travel until sometime towards the end of 1594, a remarkably leisurely way to plan an assassination attempt.

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<sup>7</sup> Mentioned in a document calendared as the confession of Henry Young, *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 531-32, no. 41 and *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 545, no. 92, SP 12/249 f.152-154v, 16 Aug. All SP 12 originals are in TNA.

<sup>8</sup> A small sail boat, a tender, *OED*.

<sup>9</sup> Mentioned by Yorke, examined by the Earl of Essex and Lord Cobham on 15 August, *CSPD, 1591-1594*, p. 543, no. 79, 80, SP 12/249 f.134.

<sup>10</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p.546, no. 98, copy 99, SP 12/249 f. 164-6, Yorke and Henry Young *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 550, no. 114; Ric Williams *CSPD, 1591-1594*, p.546, no.97, SP 12/249 f.159-159v, Aug. 20 1594.

<sup>11</sup> Bagley, *The Earls of Derby*, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, pp. 546-7, no. 98.

<sup>13</sup> *CSPD, 1591-1594*, p.531, no. 41, SP 12/249/, f.70.I should like to correct the error in my article, 'Cloaked in Conformity', p. 577, that Gifford was a Jesuit.

## The charges against Sheldon

Charges against Sheldon rested largely on information given by Henry Young, much itself third-hand, derived from a chance conversation reported to him by his fellow conspirator Yorke.<sup>14</sup> In the course of their travels Yorke and Williams had met a former Sheldon servant, Edward Williams, in Louvain. He proved to be remarkably talkative, divulging that his former master, whom he referred to by the courtesy title of ‘uncle’, had contrived



A seventeenth century drawing of different species of hawks and the equipment needed for their care. © Wikimedia Commons

to send him to Ireland ‘under colour of buying hawks’.<sup>15</sup> The real purpose of his travels, he said, had been to take letters to Cardinal Allen, then living in Rome. The servant claimed that he had been instructed by Allen not to return to England in case he should be intercepted and Sheldon betrayed; he was to go instead to the Cardinal’s sister at Louvain where he claimed he had handled Allen’s correspondence. Meanwhile, Sheldon supported Williams’ wife and children in England.<sup>16</sup>

The plotters stated that the servant Williams had heard his master say he hoped England would become Catholic again. His confidence that Sheldon would finance the plot was unbounded. After all, Williams was reported as boasting, he himself had been sent to Sir Christopher Hatton, the Lord Chancellor, ‘at the camp at Tilbury’, presumably a reference to the gathering there of troops against the Armada, with £500 and 20 horses, the aim being, said Williams, to help the Spaniards rather than the queen.<sup>17</sup>

To make certain they embroiled Sheldon as thoroughly as they could Young went on to offer details of Sheldon’s way of living, a picture splashed with local colour to add verisimilitude which grew in the telling. It was certainly not knowledge that Young would have known at firsthand. Claiming that Sheldon heard mass, as did his son, the celebrant was named as the previously imprisoned William Bishop of Brailes ‘who often comes over’, meaning that he moved freely between England and the continent, his father was reported to be ‘worth £400 a year’. A member of the Thimelby family, possibly a prospective

<sup>14</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.531, no.41, SP 12/249 f.70, titled Pretence of Yorke.

<sup>15</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 540, no. 64, SP 12/249, f.108-108v, copy at no. 65, SP 12/249, f.110, Aug. 12 1594. Not a kinship relationship but a courtesy title, see below, note 53.

<sup>16</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.544, no. 87, SP 12/249, f. 145-145v.

<sup>17</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 545, no. 92, SP 12/249 f.152-154v, esp. f. 152v.

bridegroom for a Sheldon daughter, was also said to have been present.<sup>18</sup> Sheldon had therefore been very successfully both entangled in a plot and exposed as a practising Catholic.

Edward Williams' reported words, however, represent a mixture of wishful thinking, hearsay and garbled reporting on the part of the plotters; the council had no way of knowing how out of date the information was. The inquisitors paused and took stock of the situation. The findings were summarized in a memo entitled 'names of sundry persons that are diversely charged', dated 16 August, quoted here in full.<sup>19</sup>

Mr Ralfe Sheldon is charged both by Yorke and Yonge upon report of Williams and partly by Williams to be a Catholique, to have masse in his house and resort of priests; a priest kept always in his house; the hope Williams had to have aid of him. To have sent one Williams his servant under colour of going into Ireland for hawks to Cardinal Allen; he maintaineth the wife and children of Williams in his absence. That Dr Gifford should be sent into England to resolve him; that [ the] Cardinal keepeth that Williams with his sister at Louvain lest they should be taken coming into England and so Mr Sheldon revealed and his eldest *son*<sup>20</sup> going to mass.

The Council considered that proceedings could move on. Sheldon was ordered to come to London; the Warwickshire JPs were instructed to search his house, presumably Weston rather than Beoley or Skilts. William Bishop's house at Wolford was to be searched and he, with Thimelby, were also to be sent up to London for questioning.<sup>21</sup> Neither man was found.

Questioning of Yorke, Williams and Young continued. On August 20 Yorke reiterated that the conspirators planned to offer the crown to the earl of Derby, putting a fresh spin on it by adding that they had the King of Spain's assistance.<sup>22</sup> Four days later, required to declare the truth of a previous statement that Father Holt had shown him a letter received from Mr Ralph Sheldon, Yorke said 'it was upon occasion to show he had good friends in England.'<sup>23</sup> The council, however, was getting wise to their tales. By the end of the month the Attorney-General Edward Coke had drawn up a three page memorandum for the indictment of Yorke and Richard Williams; both were executed in February 1595 as would-be assassins.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p.541-2, no. 72, SP 12/249 f.122, no. 72, copy no. 73, *ibid.*, f.124.

<sup>19</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.544, no 87; once again the calendar is abbreviated.

<sup>20</sup> The calendared version reads Sheldon's *daughter*.

<sup>21</sup> *ODNB*; *CSPD 1591-94*, p.544, no. 87, SP 12/249, f. 145-145v; for Bishop see *ODNB*.

<sup>22</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 546-7, no. 98 and copy no. 99.

<sup>23</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 549-50, nos 112, 113 Aug. 24, SP 12/249 ff. 194-5.

<sup>24</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, nos 134, 135, p. 553, SP 12/249, f.219., in August but nd, circa 20<sup>th</sup>. Petti, *Letters and Despatches of Richard Verstegan*, pp. 238-39, 240, n.8; *CSPD 1591-94*, p.548, no 111, Aug 21 Yorke deposed that Williams 'wished his sword in the Queen's belly'.

### Three Interrogations

While waiting for Sheldon to arrive in London a start was made on drawing up the first of the three surviving sets of interrogatories his examination would demand, material not previously been examined in detail. What looks like a list of questions tabled for the interrogator/s in the first session, neatly written, was simply a check on the plotters' information.<sup>25</sup> The page was set out in two columns; one contained the questions to be asked, the other the expected answer or information the council already had which would help the interrogator formulate another question or warn him when Sheldon's answer could not possibly be true. The questions were designed to check what Sheldon might admit against the story told by the plotters. He was reported to have said that he hoped the Catholic religion would be restored in England, but it was also noted that Sheldon 'cometh to church'.

<https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/1594-Interrogatories-One.pdf>

For us, as for the privy council, the interest of the three known sessions revealed by internal evidence – there may have been more – lies in the questions. Even though none of Sheldon's answers survives, independent evidence allows us to understand why some of the questions were posed and suggests some of the reasons why, beyond the accusations levied, it was necessary to question the Catholic who came to church.

A second set of interrogatories, not previously transcribed, is less tidily penned and shows a number of deletions in the course of composition; it is endorsed 'the articles set down by Mr Bacon touching Sheldon' and, lower down 'This one particular to be kept by itself'.<sup>26</sup> Calendared as copies of the first set and so briefly summarized in the printed version as to be misleading, the questions cover wide ground and were more detailed, more specific and more pointed than before. They probably formed the basis for an otherwise unrecorded second interview, but might also have served for inquiries made in Warwickshire.<sup>27</sup> Sheldon was asked very particularly about three men named Williams the Council thought he might know. Further inquiries were intended to eliminate the possibility that Sheldon had had contact with the exile Thomas Throckmorton, brother of the plotter Francis executed in 1584 because of his participation in a plot against the queen.<sup>28</sup> Thomas was part of an exile group, well known to the council for the past ten years, associated also with Charles Paget, brother of Thomas Lord Paget, Sheldon's erstwhile friend, and with a man called Clitherow. Clearly the council wished to rule out any confusion with the other Thomas Throckmorton, Sheldon's brother in law, who the council had first ordered to be held in detention and later freed upon bond; there was the possibility there had been contact

<sup>25</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 554, no 1, SP 12/250 f.1. The printed version abbreviates and omits material.

<sup>26</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.554, no.2, SP 12/250, f.2-2v. The document cannot date before 21 Aug because some of its information was not known until Yorke's confession on that day, *CSPD 1591-94*, p.548, no. 103; *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 548, no 107, copy 108, f. 186. *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 552, no. 132, SP 12/249 f.217.

<sup>27</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.554, no.3, SP 12/250 f.2-2v.

<sup>28</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.548, no. 103, Yorke's confession, 21 Aug 1594, before the Earl of Essex and Lord Cobham.

between them.<sup>29</sup> Sheldon was asked if he had any acquaintance with Dr Gifford or with four other named priests, not all of whom had been mentioned by the plotters, at least as their interviews have come down to us. Finally, questions returned to what Ralph had or had not said about his alleged desire to see the Catholic church restored in England.

<https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/1594-Interrogatories-Two.pdf>

Again, Sheldon's answers do not survive, but independent sources supply some background to the people in whom the council was most interested. They were not necessarily connected to the supposed plot, but reveal the suspected Catholic contacts of a man supposedly conforming. Sheldon was directly asked about four priests. Two he certainly knew. The first, Thomas Whitnell, his background untraceable, seems to have been proposed as rector at Barcheston, an advowson in the gift of the Throckmorton family and, during the 1580s, in dispute and possibly vacant for several years.<sup>30</sup> At the resolution of a law suit in 1588 the Crown appointed an Oxford graduate Robert Hyll and cancelled the presentation of Thomas Whitnell, clerk' who must have been the Sheldon/Throckmorton nominee.<sup>31</sup> Sheldon must also have known the priest 'Bushop', said to have been seen at Sheldon's house, identifiable as the seminary priest (one trained abroad) William Bishop of Brailes.<sup>32</sup> His family lived only a half hour's ride from Weston. He would later become the first Catholic bishop since the Reformation, with the title bishop of Chalcedon. Captured returning to England in February 1581 he had been sent to the Marshalsea prison; thereafter he again went overseas, returning by 1592 and listed in that year's survey of Warwickshire recusants.<sup>33</sup> Sheldon's demonstrable dealings with other members of the same family and their proximity to Weston makes it all too likely that he had indeed been in Sheldon's house at some point.<sup>34</sup> Identification of the Jesuit Hall is more problematic; it may refer to the alias used by Father Oldcorne;<sup>35</sup> otherwise, the man is unknown as is the fourth name, White alias Hugnell.

Meanwhile questioning of Richard Williams continued until, on 12 September, he cracked and denied his previous story saying 'he never heard Edw. Williams (the servant) speak unkindly of Ralph Sheldon; he always used to keep a hawk.'<sup>36</sup> The prosecutors knew then that the case against Sheldon had collapsed, but they had not yet finished with him.

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<sup>29</sup> He had permission to remain a further three months at Bath only on August 4, Lambeth Palace Ms 3470, f.138.

<sup>30</sup> A Mr Whytemayld, parson of Barcheston, was paid £6 in May 1587, CR 2632, f.79. See Chapter Ten.

<sup>31</sup> TNA REQ 1/15, f. 24.

<sup>32</sup> CSPD 1591-1594, p.541-2, no. 72, SP 12/249 f.122, 13 Aug. and copy, no.73, f. 124; *Vis'n Worcestershire 1634*, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> TNA SP 12/243, no.76, ff.235-248, transcribed Hodgetts in *Worcestershire Recusant*, vol 5, May 1965, pp.18-30, continued in vol.6, December 1968, pp.7-20.

<sup>34</sup> Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests*, pp. 36-8; BAH MS 3061/1/18, (former 167418), MS 3061/1/384, (former 167784); WaCRO CR 2632, ff. 61, 90.

<sup>35</sup> HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 19, (1965), p. 34-35, 27 January 1605/06. He is not the Hugh Hall priest of the 1583 inquiries who died c. 1597. Foley, (ed), *Records of the English province of the Society of Jesus*, vol 4, p. 219

<sup>36</sup> CSPD 1591-94, p.552, no.132, Aug 31; CSPD 1591-94, p. 555, no. 8; TNA SP12/250, f.7. Sheldon's love of hawks is amply verified in the account book, CR 2632.

### Inquiries in Warwickshire

Sheldon's initial interviews were probably completed by early September.<sup>37</sup> Further action had to wait for the return of the answers of those questioned in Warwickshire, presumably Sheldon's family and household staff, perhaps also his neighbours. Once again neither interrogatories nor responses are now extant, but, when someone read through the responses it was realized that the questioning was not complete. On 23 September it was remarked that:<sup>38</sup>

The examiners in the country have omitted one principal interrogatory, which was to know of the woman what servants of Mr. Sheldon were most familiar with her husband, that light may be taken by them.

Also it must be known what that Ed. Sheldon was which lay in Ed. Williams' house the very night before his departure, and this Ed. Sheldon may be examined of Ralph Sheldon's knowledge of his servant's journey.

Together, the Warwickshire evidence, the results from continuing questioning of the plotters and possibly also papers brought to light from the search of Sheldon's and Bishop's houses sent the council's inquiries off in very different directions. A further set questions was penned the same day, headed 'interrogatories of further examinations to be ministered to Ralph Sheldon, Esq'.<sup>39</sup> <https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/1594-Interrogatories-Three.pdf> One part dwelt again on relations with the servant Williams. It was hinted that there had been a quarrel – possibly implying a hasty departure and a grudge on the servant's part. But it was also reported that Sheldon had a rent from a property belonging to Williams, which would suggest that there had not been a definitive breach. That part of the information was true; a law suit of 1605 reveals that Williams owned a house in Oxford inherited from his father, an Oxford Alderman.<sup>40</sup> The money was used to support Williams' family in England, as the servant himself had stated.

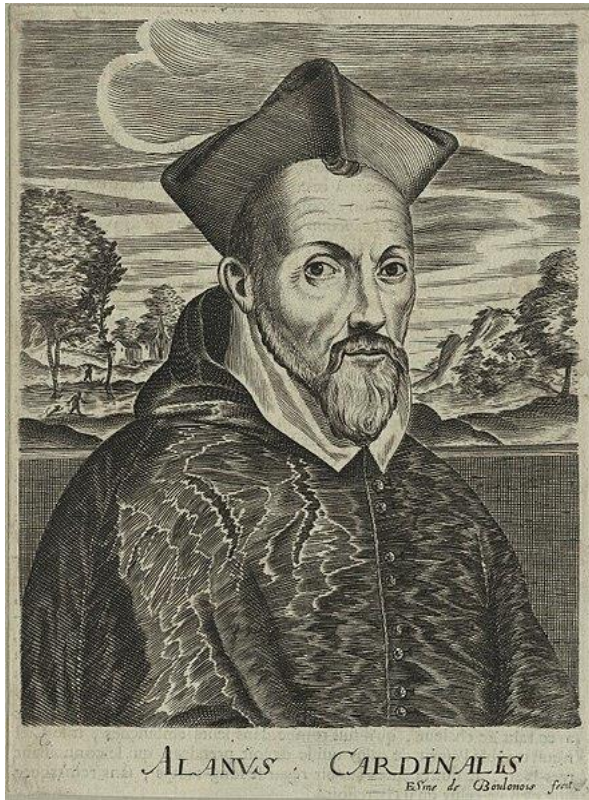
A second theme was concerned with a letter from Cardinal Allen sent, in 1592, 'to his afflicted children in England'. Sheldon was asked whether he had heard of it and 'in whose hands he hath seen or by whose report he hath understood of, the same letter, and what were the contents thereof'. The question was posed a second time, in different words; 'what he hath heard of any dispensation or indulgence from Rome for Catholics to come to church, or any counsel or direction given to priests from thence to absolve such as shall come to church with gentleness, and without having regard of how oft they relapse, but *toties quoties*, or of any opinion from the learned of the lawfulness or unlawfulness thereof'.

<sup>37</sup> Both sets filed on 6 September...

<sup>38</sup> HMssC, *Salisbury*, vol. 4, pp.618-19 for the afterthought.

<sup>39</sup> HMssC, *Salisbury*, vol. 4, pp. 618-19.

<sup>40</sup> TNA C 2/JasI/S22/55 Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxford wills 186.113. On-line at FindmyPast.



Cardinal Allen from the engraving by Edme de Boulonois, 1682, © National Portrait Gallery, London, Wikimedia Commons

Written as a response to Burghley's harsh petition of 1591, the Cardinal's letter was almost as well known to the Council as it was to Catholics in England.<sup>41</sup> In it, the Cardinal had instructed Catholic priests working in England to 'use great compassion and mercifulness towards such of the laity especially as for mere fear or saving their family, wife and children from ruin are so far only fallen as to come sometimes to their churches or be present at the time of their service.' Necessity, he went on, made the offence less and more easily absolved; absence should always be forgiven. The opposite of Jesuit hard-line policy as presented by Persons and Campion in 1580 which had insisted on loyalty to the Pope, not to Queen Elizabeth, Allen's words offered quiet encouragement to the faithful.

However, they made the task of suppressing Catholicism very much harder for the English government to execute. As the law required, a Catholic might now attend services in his parish church, knowing that his conscience need not be troubled because he had obeyed English law; he would be forgiven. Although possession of a copy could have been used as the basis of a charge of infringement of the law of 1571, knowledge of its content proved nothing.

It is much harder to interpret the council's insinuations. The underlying implication might be that Sheldon had been trying to influence Allen to compose it – hence the despatch of letters to Rome with his servant. The council might have known from their search of his house that he had received a copy or have found evidence that he had been amongst its disseminators. Was it the simple question it appears to be or were the councillors hoping Sheldon would reveal closer contact with, and knowledge of, Cardinal Allen's activities, particularly his dealings with Spain. These were already well known at least to Burghley from the report of Allen's curious conversation in Rome with a Cecil spy, John Arden. Allen had proposed a way to achieve peace; advocating the alliance of any member of the royal family with either the future king Philip (IV) of Spain or with the Infanta.<sup>42</sup> Fearing their interception, the negotiator sometimes sent his reports to William Walter of Putney, son of Sheldon's step-mother's steward, rather than directly to Lord Burghley. It is perfectly possible that Sheldon did know something, directly, as rumour or through his friendship with the Walter family.

<sup>41</sup> Knox, (ed), *Letters and Memorials of Cardinal Allen*, pp.343-45; other copies, all in different hands, in SP 12/243, nos 80, 81, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Wernham, *Calendar of Foreign Papers Elizabeth*, vol iv, nos.625, 626, pp. 459-61.



The council then cast the net more widely, fishing for Sheldon's possible links abroad and requiring assurance of Sheldon's ignorance and innocence of such ties – or of his implication in them. It is uncertain whether information giving rise to such concerns had been supplied by the conspirators, by those questioned including Sheldon himself or possibly even by Council members. Yorke had mentioned a letter supposedly written by Sheldon to William Holt based in Brussels.<sup>43</sup> Letters had supposedly been entrusted to the servant Williams for delivery to Cardinal Allen. Staying close to the plotters' allegations, Sheldon was then directly asked to reveal 'What motion or question he hath made by letter or message to any beyond the seas, or to any that is since gone beyond the seas, touching the treaty of peace between Spain and England'. Whatever answer had been hoped for, none was a matter which William Cecil Lord Burghley in particular would want bruited abroad. Finally, Sheldon was asked 'What conference he hath had to the same effect with any on this side besides those he named to William Lord Cobham.'<sup>44</sup> Clearly Sheldon had talked; what and who he revealed, and its significance, is unknown.

Changing tack completely, the council's inquiries then became rather more direct. 'In what message or employment of trust did he use Clethro [Clitherow] at his first going over; and what letter, and of what contents, was brought unto him from Clethro by the messenger that came with the token of the King of Armies. A second question asked 'What moved him to nominate Clethro as an instrument to deal in a peace, considering he had discontinued, by his own saying, his acquaintance for six or seven years and knew him also at the time to be "priested".'

More familiar now as Clitherow, the name was only been mentioned at a very late stage in the council's inquiries. Possibly prompted by his interrogators, the conspirator Williams had been persuaded to admit, guardedly, that 'Clitherow lives chiefly in Antwerp', information which the Council could substantiate for itself. It is not clear from the context which of the several possible men was meant. One, possibly a Cambridge graduate, had been known to the government in 1580, eminent enough then to have had his letters intercepted; after his ordination as priest in 1582 the trail goes cold.<sup>45</sup> He could be the same man reported in 1585 to have been in Rouen in the company of the exile Charles Paget, brother of Sheldon's friend Thomas.<sup>46</sup> But he could also be the man who in 1580 was said to have penned the document known as Sheldon's persuasion.<sup>47</sup> In turn, this was possibly the same Clitherow mentioned in 1577, a student at Oxford known to Alderman Williams, father of Sheldon's servant;<sup>48</sup> this Clitherow was old enough to be the step-son of the Blessed

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<sup>43</sup> CSPD 1591-94, p. 549-50, no. 113 Aug. 24, SP 12/249,f. 194-5. There was, however, an unrelated William Sheldon, son of Henry and Anne of Wolverhampton, at loose in the Low Countries – Anstruther, *Seminary Priests*, I, p. 308. Was the Council cautiously checking there could be no confusion?

<sup>44</sup> Cobham was known to run a team of informers in the Low Countries, Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage*, p. 181.

<sup>45</sup> Letters intercepted, CRS 53, *Miscellanea*, pp. 239-40, pp.200, 245; ordination, Knox, *Douai Diaries*.

<sup>46</sup> CSPD 1580-1625, *Addenda*, p. 148, no. 39; TNA SP 15/29 f.52.

<sup>47</sup> *Miscellanea II*, CRS 2, 'Domesticall Difficulties', 179-80, 'Autobiography', *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Ryan, *Diocesan Returns*, pp. 98 –9. No Clitherow is recorded as matriculating at the University.

Margaret Clitherow, pressed to death in 1586.<sup>49</sup> One of the two was later involved with Jesuit-backed efforts, reported in 1591, to gain the support of king James of Scotland.<sup>50</sup> A William ‘Cletherow’ had been conveyed from Antwerp to London by a Thames boatman as recently as January 1594 and was clearly familiar with the means to arrange passage between England and continental ports.<sup>51</sup>

### The role of Edward Williams of Oxford

If there were a link between the family of the servant Edward Williams, Clitherow and Sheldon the circle could easily be closed and it does indeed seem possible that these were Sheldon’s connections. They would also shows us Sheldon in midst of a Catholic ring just at the time of his second conforming. Sheldon had certainly employed Williams in household duties throughout 1586-87 and possibly before.<sup>52</sup> Williams was sufficiently familiar with Sheldon to refer to him by the honorific term ‘uncle’; it is not the genetic kinship as so often assumed.<sup>53</sup> Edward was the son of Thomas Williams, JP and Recorder of Oxford. Despite his position Thomas was well known as a receiver of Catholics though he himself went to church; his wife, however, living at the sign of the Star, the old Clarendon Hotel on Cornmarket, was reputed to be a practising Catholic, coming secretly to church only once a year to receive communion.<sup>54</sup> Their eldest son entered the Jesuit order, their daughter, Anne, married Roger Marbeck, the Catholic fellow and briefly President (1565-66) of Oriel College, Oxford, during whose presidency Cardinal Allen was finally expelled from the college. By the time of these examinations he was amongst the Queen’s doctors.<sup>55</sup>

The plotters’ report that Edward Williams had been sent via Ireland to deliver letters to Cardinal Allen sounds far-fetched, but it is perfectly plausible. Entries in the State Papers show that hawks from Ireland were highly valued.<sup>56</sup> His cover would have allowed him to move freely; he would not have been questioned at the ports. It might not have been too difficult to obtain a pass, for at this time the post of Queen’s Master of Hawks was held by a

<sup>49</sup> Lake and Questier, *The Trials of Margaret Clitherow*.

<sup>50</sup> CSPD 1591-94, p. 34, no. 136, ?April 1591.

<sup>51</sup> CSPD 1591-1594, p. 409, no. 8; SP 12/247, f. 13, (reference to Poley is omitted from the calendar).

<sup>52</sup> WaCRO, CR 2632, ff. 7, 8, 16, 22, 26, 50-1, 56, 68, 70, 78, 81, Sheldon’s account book.

<sup>53</sup> Muddled pronouns make unclear the text from which the oft quoted link to Sheldon as uncle derives; it must be Edward Williams who claims Sheldon as uncle, not Richard whose identity the plotters themselves revealed. Edward was correctly identified by Davidson, ‘Edward Williams of Oxford: a Sheldon servant’, pp. 2-4. However, he did not explain that this was a courtesy title, not a kinship relationship; no male Williams married a Sheldon daughter. The confusion was first printed by Hume, *Treason and Plot*, p. 154, but it originates with the plotter Young who said first that the man was nephew of Anglesey Williams in CSPD 1591-1594, p.531, no. 41, SP 12/249 f.70 ; July 30 1594, CSPD 1591-1594, p. 540, no. 64, SP 12/249 f.108-108v, Aug. 12 1594 but correcting himself in CSPD 1591-94, p.540, no.65, SP 12/249, f. 110r-111r; later he again confused them within two paragraphs of the same document, CSPD 1591-1594, p. 545, no. 92, SP 12/249 f.152-154v, Aug. 16 1594. Neither Williams was a priest, as Donno, *Harington’s Metamorphosis*, p. 239, n.193, followed by Kilroy, *Memory and Transcription*, p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> Ryan, ‘Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577’, pp.98-9; Davidson, ‘Edward Williams’, pp. 2-4. Much of Davidson’s information can now be amplified and some assumptions corrected.

<sup>55</sup> Furdell, *Royal Doctors*, pp.79-80.

<sup>56</sup> *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland*, vol. 2, 1589-1603, p. 773.

member of the Throckmorton family, George,<sup>57</sup> a kinship contact which could have been exploited. However, there was also a much simpler way for Williams to leave the country; in mid-March 1590 a levy of 200 men from Warwickshire to serve in Ireland was ordered.<sup>58</sup> It could have been the opportunity for Sheldon to send Williams abroad, under orders to desert.

The privy council had quickly dismissed the possibility that Sheldon had connections to the family of the plotter Williams family in North Wales. It came closer to the mark when its members asked whether Mistress Sheldon's family, the Throckmortons, had neighbours called Williams, the third potential Sheldon contact in which the council was interested. They had. Their bailiff, Reignold Williams, had been noted as absent from church in the 1577 survey, owning lands valued at £10 per year and worth about £100 in goods.<sup>59</sup> His name had also been included in Whitgift's second examinations of October 1580, but by June 1586 the Worcestershire JPs reported that he had conformed.<sup>60</sup> Apparently close to the family, he had been associated in transactions with William Sheldon of Abberton.<sup>61</sup> More recently he had been summoned before the Consistory Court in Worcester in a matter of a contested will.<sup>62</sup> In 1595 he and his wife sold land to Ralph;<sup>63</sup> a year later his widow Mary engaged in a further transaction with Sheldon.<sup>64</sup> Reignold's will, written at Beoley, instructed Sheldon to act as executor for the benefit of his two daughters, neither yet married; later documents suggest that he did.<sup>65</sup> Reignold also left his three nephews, Hugh, Richard and Lewys, small cash bequests, as well as the profit of debts if they could be recovered from members of the Sheldon family. Hugh remains unknown, but Richard was employed occasionally in the Sheldon household in 1587-88;<sup>66</sup> in 1593 a Louis Williams was paid a Spanish pension of 20 escudos.<sup>67</sup>

The council was pursuing two very different lines of questioning from the previous sessions, and very much broader than anything the conspirators had said. Ralph was no longer being asked about any plot but about matters raised by, and perhaps peripheral to, the plotters' confessions. The interrogatories indicate that the privy council's fears about Sheldon ran much deeper than any potential involvement in invasion plans as far-fetched as those the plotters had outlined. Far more serious was the implied connection to international affairs and correspondence with Cardinal Allen, whose enormous influence in Catholic circles at home and abroad was wielded by the pen rather than the sword. Oxford contacts running from Sheldon to Edward Williams and so to the Cardinal were only small jumps. The three might

<sup>57</sup> *CSPD 1595-1597*, p.397, April 26 1597 reciting an earlier grant.

<sup>58</sup> *APC 18, 1589-90*, p.414, 13 March 1590.

<sup>59</sup> Ryan, '*Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577*', p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> *CSPD 1581-90*, p.332, no.11.

<sup>61</sup> *CPR 1575-78*, no. 2765, 1 March 1578, alienation of lands to William Savage, William Sheldon of Abberton and Reginald Williams.

<sup>62</sup> WAAS, Consistory Court Deposition Book, vol. iii [794.052 BA 2102] ff. 360-362v; the contested will survives, Fry, *Worcester Wills*, 1588/38, William Evance.

<sup>63</sup> *CPR 1594-95*, L&I, vol. 310, no. 308, lands in Pershore and Aylesborough.

<sup>64</sup> *CPR 1595-96*, L&I, vol. 317, no. 176, the same land sold on, for 53s 4d.

<sup>65</sup> WAAS, wills, as Reynold Williams, 1597/168.

<sup>66</sup> CR 2632, ff. 49, 63, 70, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Loomie, *The Spanish Elizabethans*, p. 263, no. 151.

well even been acquainted, whether through the Williams' family connections to the Cardinal's Oxford college, Oriel, or through Edward Williams' Jesuit brother. It is perfectly plausible, though perhaps not very likely, that Allen might have agreed to shelter Williams and equally possible that he did not wish to endanger Sheldon, of whom he had probably heard, whether or not the two had ever met. If Sheldon, viewed as a figurehead, really had direct contact with Allen, known for efforts to fan discontent, then Sheldon was rightly regarded as a potential danger to the state. It might only have been the Cardinal's death on 16 October 1594 which laid council fears to rest and saved Sheldon from further problems.

### **Ralph Sheldon exonerated**

It is impossible now to penetrate Sheldon's actions, still less his motives. The episode gives us a picture if not of what he was really doing at least of what he was suspected of being capable. The local details, confirmed by documents, are true; so too it seems is Edward Williams' information that Sheldon had succeeded in getting his conviction as a Catholic quashed.<sup>68</sup> But, when Richard Williams retracted his accusations against Sheldon on September 12, the other parts of what the servant Edward Williams was reported to have said instantly became less credible. That leaves important questions unanswered. Had Edward Williams really heard Sheldon say he wished the old religion restored? Did Sheldon keep open house for any who sought shelter, thus putting him in breach of the law? Would Edward Williams have known? It was a curious statement for a former servant, supposedly living abroad, presumably conscious of the dangers to all Catholics, to have made. Even though it was phrased so that Sheldon could have denied all knowledge of who had been in his house or houses, Edward Williams cannot possibly have been unaware that his words could, and would, have been interpreted as meaning that Sheldon was prepared to help Catholic dissidents.

None of the three separate sets of questions makes reference to Sheldon's involvement in any invasion plans. Clearly the council had dismissed any idea of his participation in any plot, but they availed themselves of the opportunity to cross-examine the Catholic who came to church. In so doing they illuminate a corner of his life. Whatever Sheldon said or professed, his religious inclinations seem to have been clear enough. Nevertheless the case was dropped and no charges were brought. Sheldon could easily have been shown to have been in breach of the law at several points. Harboring, even helping, priests alone was a criminal offence; even if he had not aided and abetted his servant he had at least turned a blind eye to his departure from the kingdom – which would have taken place clandestinely and without licence – illegal since 1571. Even to be in correspondence, let alone contact, with enemies was treasonous while communication with the influential exile Cardinal Allen would have put Sheldon firmly into the Catholic rebel camp and subject to penalties. The commonly met assertion that he began to pay recusancy fines after these

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<sup>68</sup> However, his claim that Ralph had been with Hatton at the time of his conviction is not, see Chapter Thirteen.

interviews could scarcely be more incorrect.<sup>69</sup> None of these matters would have led the council to impose recusancy fines; the charges against Sheldon were of potential treason not infringement of the laws concerning church attendance.

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<sup>69</sup> The statement, unsubstantiated, originated in Ralph's biography in Hasler, *House of Commons* published long after the Recusant Rolls for 1592-1596 were in print, eds Calthorp, Bowler, CRS vols 18, 57, 61, and 71.