

## Chapter Sixteen : Uneasy Times 1603-1606

### Uncertain Directions

In both public and private spheres 1603 was an uncomfortable year for Sheldon.

Queen Elizabeth's death on 25 March was scarcely unexpected and the immediate proclamation of King James VI of Scotland as her successor little more of a surprise. But if his accession had been neatly managed, its consequences could not be so easily controlled. Contradictory attitudes towards Catholics and conflicting views about their treatment emerged almost immediately. In some counties leading Catholics were placed under restraint; Catholics too were divided, some sending protestations of loyalty to Elizabeth's ministers.<sup>1</sup> Ralph Sheldon should probably be counted amongst them.

A month into the new reign on the very day of the old queen's funeral, a date perhaps not chosen at random, Ralph chose to write to Robert Cecil thanking him and, belatedly, his father for past kindnesses.

Right honourable: not having to offer unto you any thing worthy of you nor answerable to the many favours I received in times past from your honourable father and you I humbly beseech you, accept of this tryfell and pardon my remissness heretofore in not doing that which became me and my boldness now in this unruly manner to offer myself to you. And so in all duty I humbly take my leave. From Beoley the xxviii of April 1603.  
Yours ever to be commanded  
Ralph Sheldon<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Cecil.pdf>

Although the words acknowledge a debt of gratitude they scarcely represent an unmistakable pledge of loyalty; rather Sheldon let it be understood that he would not dive into open revolt. It is, however, just as important for what it tells us of past connections, now concealed, to the Cecils. It appears to hint at previous occasions where help had been extended and favour shown. Though, annoyingly, Sheldon this time did not identify the 'small trifle' he begged Cecil to accept, it was not the first gift he had offered. The previous year the 'architect'- designer of large scale waterworks at Theobalds, his father's large house near Cheshunt, some fifteen miles north of London, mentioned Sheldon's promise of a gift of 100 flying fowl so that Cecil 'shall have his pleasure this winter'.<sup>3</sup> It was to Sheldon's advantage that their acquaintance should continue.

<sup>1</sup> Questier, *Catholicism and Community*, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> Calendared in HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 15, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 12 (1910), p. 221, 11 July 1602, letter from Adrian Gylbarte.

Catholic hopes for greater toleration ran high. In the many meetings James had had with his future subjects indications had been that Elizabeth's stern measures might be relaxed; there had not, however, been any definite promises. Catholics in particular expected change, anticipating an amnesty and even the cessation of recusancy fines. They hoped that the new king might respect the beliefs of his Catholic mother, Mary queen of Scots, and of his wife, Anne of Denmark, a recent convert, honouring them by extending greater toleration. Although privately James had assured Robert Cecil, who for years had worked to achieve his accession, that the existing order would in essence be maintained, he had also hinted, often publicly but always vaguely, to the many who had importuned him that change was possible. Emollient words came easily, but no definite promises were made

English Catholic hopes for more moderate treatment were not entirely unjustified, particularly given the religious leanings of several of the new ministers and officials, Scots and English. Their expectations were soon shattered; in May the recusancy fines were collected as usual. Reaction came quickly. Even as James made his way southwards, two plots were being formulated, the Main and the Bye Plots. Both came into the open in the two months between James' arrival at Theobalds on 3 May and his coronation at Winchester on 25 July. The earlier, somewhat obscure Main Plot was hatched by English-born Catholics, largely men who had chosen to spend long periods abroad and in a position to invoke foreign help.<sup>4</sup>

The Bye Plot was organized largely by the secular priest William Watson, vehemently opposed to the Jesuits, supported by Catholic priests and laymen. The latter included Sir Griffin Markham, his sister married to Sheldon's heir and one of those who had importuned the king. Their objectives were bold, to kidnap James on Midsummer night and hold him prisoner in the Tower, their demands simple: guarantees for religious toleration and the removal and prosecution of certain ministers of state, in particular Sir Robert Cecil.<sup>5</sup> In their premature re-assignment of the newly freed posts to staunch Catholics, Sheldon's name was mentioned, rather vaguely; he was, said Watson, to become 'Lord of I know not where'.<sup>6</sup> The plot failed for lack of support and, although, prudently, the plotters had included a clause begging pardon for their own offences, Markham, with other leaders, had been committed to the Tower by 23 July, two days before the Coronation.

Just before it took place Sir Thomas Tresham, tireless advocate of the Catholic cause despite paying heavy fines, and others had met with the king and council to learn that the king had suspended payment of recusancy fines, a response to Tresham's earlier petition for greater toleration.<sup>7</sup> It turned out to be a very brief respite.

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<sup>4</sup> Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica, 1598-1621*; help from a Hapsburg ambassador, Charles, Princely Count of Arenberg, then sent to congratulate King James upon his accession; the following year he headed the archducal delegation that negotiated the Treaty of London, Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage*, pp. 224-25, 231-33.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholls, 'Treason's reward: the punishment of conspirators in the Bye Plot of 1603', pp. 828-830.

<sup>6</sup> Tierney-Dodd, vol. iv, xlvi-vii, SP 14/3/f.29r, his statement is not substantiated; Edwards, *The succession, bye and main plots of 1601-1603*; Sir Thomas Tresham was to become Constable of the Tower.

<sup>7</sup> Tierney-Dodd, vol. iv, p. 37, n.

For Sheldon and for his nephew Francis Plowden the manoeuvres of their co-religionists meant a brush with the law. Early in August Plowden travelled northwards from his Oxfordshire property at Shiplake to his house at Bishop's Castle, some twenty miles beyond Ludlow. He was trailed by an informer who alerted the bailiff of Ludlow to the possible nature of a stranger's arrival in the town; arrested, he was found to be carrying a letter from Ralph to his nephew.<sup>8</sup> Its contents sent the bailiff into a tail-spin.

#### Jhesu

Mr Antonie Skinner has upon determination to stay iij or iiij dayes hear about his business was yesterday about ij of the clocke drawne away by letters commended unto hym from Shiplake soe as he presently departed and went directly to Weston meaning to hasten to the Court with all the speed he may / his desire is yow shold be advertysed and make speed [ xxx] that you will follow with all <the> convenient speede you may that first busyness being best knowen to you in which also he sayeth you have some interest // this must suffice to hasten yow away / between this and Thursday yow shall god wylling ffinde me here/ and I hope yow wyll not passe by without vysytyng us.

Tassis for certen is either at Gravelines or arrived in England// do make stay to follow your dyrectyon until I may speake with yow only I may fortune to see my good neyghbor<sup>9</sup> and to intreat hym as with conveniency I maye; yow knowe my credit is not great/. Remember me to your self and to Mistress Marye / from Skiltes this ffirst of August 1603

Yor loving uncle  
Raff Sheldon

<https://www.ralphsheldon1537-1613.info/pdf-pages/Plowden.pdf>

Reacting quickly, the bailiff wrote immediately to Sir Richard Lewkenor, Chief Justice of Chester.<sup>10</sup> Lewkenor, kin to Sheldon's Broadway cousins,<sup>11</sup> ordered the Ludlow bailiff to keep the messenger in isolation and under lock and key. Having sent the letter on to the privy council in London,<sup>12</sup> he questioned Plowden. Only recently closely examined, the record reveals far more about Ralph's position in the early months of James' reign and suggests that Ralph's support for greater toleration might have been stronger than previously demonstrated.<sup>13</sup> Of a part with the hints of his association with the Bye Plot, whether real or

<sup>8</sup> HMssC, *Salisbury*, vol.20 1968, p. 303; *CSPD 1603-1610*, p. 26, no. 2 and 2.i, summary; SP 14/3, f.4 1 August 1603.

<sup>9</sup> 'My good neighbour' may refer to Henry, 5th Lord Windsor (1562-1605); resident at Hewell Grange in Tardebig close to Beoley, there had been contact, if not close links, with the family since the 1540s.

<sup>10</sup> *CSPD 1603-1610*, p. 26-7, no. 2.ii, Aug. 1 1603; SP 14/3 f.3.

<sup>11</sup> Lewkenor was related to the Broadway Sheldons, Alan Davidson, 'A further note on Judges', *Worcester Recusant*, vol. 20 Dec 1972, pp. 87-97.

<sup>12</sup> *CSPD 1603-1610*, p. 26, no 2, Aug. 2 1603; SP 14/3 f.2.

<sup>13</sup> *CSPD 1603-1610*, p. 28, no 13, Aug. 6 1603; SP 14/3 f.22-22v, recte Aug 3 in the document. still only part published, Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage*, pp. 230-32.

only in the mind of its instigator, Sheldon had clearly been watching events, one of the few occasions when he can be seen to collaborate to even a limited extent with his co-religionists though without any special energy.

### Family Matters

Ralph was now the head of a family which reflected differing views of religious practice. Few of his sons in law or his male grandchildren were openly of the Faith. Only three men in the wider Sheldon family considered it prudent to purchase the knighthoods the king made so liberally available at the time of his coronation; his apparently conforming grandson Thomas Russell and, counter-intuitively, the unwaveringly Catholic Edward Sulyard, in and out of detention for the past thirty years, and his son John, husband of Sheldon's youngest daughter.<sup>14</sup>

Ralph may have been only passively involved in measures for toleration, but despite his own financial difficulties he was very actively helping family members in financial distress. In December 1602 he and his son entered into a recognizance to the clothier Roland Berkeley of Worcester for £2000, an action intended to head off disaster for their cousin Philip Sheldon, who, unable to repay an earlier debt, had defaulted by May 1603. Berkeley foreclosed in November 1608.<sup>15</sup> More particularly, Ralph went to the aid of the Markham family where the marriage alliance, once advantageous for the protection it could offer, was turning into a liability. Early in 1603 Sheldon entered into a bond with the powerful moneylender Thomas Sutton on behalf of his brother in law, Thomas Markham. In debt to Sutton and unable to repay, Markham's lands, part of which were his daughter's dowry, were in danger of being taken temporarily into Sutton's hands until the debt was repaid.<sup>16</sup> Ralph's action staved off disaster by offering to stand surety for eventual payment, thus giving Markham more time to raise the money.<sup>17</sup> He also helped Markham's son, Griffin, a man with a checkered career long before becoming one of the seven conspirators in the Bye Plot. Brought to trial in mid-November 1603 and condemned to death, Griffin was unexpectedly reprieved on the scaffold in December and subsequently sent into exile, a punishment which entailed the forfeiture of lands.<sup>18</sup> Robert Cecil, interested in the financial arrangements for Griffin's estates during his exile, was informed that one of his guarantors was Ralph Sheldon.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, *The Knights of England*, vol. 2, p. 121. Francis Clare's eldest son, Ralph, was knighted only later on entering the service of the king's eldest son, Prince Henry, appointed soon afterwards as ranger of the royal forest of Bewdley, Worcestershire.

<sup>15</sup> C 231/21, last m.; C 43/15; Berkeley foreclosed on Philip in November 1608, LC 4/196 f.96; (LC 4/195 f.161).

<sup>16</sup> Dowry land lay in Kirby Bellars, transferred to Edward in 1603, *VCH Leicestershire*, Texts-in-progress Kirby Bellars, TNA, CP25/2/313/1JASIMICH: feet of fines.

<sup>17</sup> BAH MS 3061/1/454 (former 167854); N.R. Shipley, 'Thomas Sutton: Tudor Moneylender', pp. 456-476.

<sup>18</sup> W.J.Tighe, 'A Nottinghamshire gentleman', pp. 39-40; Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, p. 291 from *CSPD 1591-94*, no. 64, p. 540, no.87, p.544, no.103, p. 548, SP 12/249.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Cecil, HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 15, p. 344 and simultaneously he seems to have been extending a helping hand to Sir Thomas Brudenell, HMSSC, *Salisbury*, vol. 17 (1938), p.462. Others later acquired by Sir John Harington (of Exton and Combe) *CSPD 1603-1610*, p.125, Docquet Book.

At much the same time Ralph's private life was collapsing. For him, the year 1603 ended on a note of personal sorrow. Anne Throckmorton, his wife of nearly forty-five years, died in December 1603.<sup>20</sup> She was buried at Beoley and a start was made on the elaborate tomb which Ralph would later share and which still remains, its position in the extended church probably already planned.

### Electioneering

Anne's funeral and the Christmas revelries were scarcely concluded when James announced the first parliament of his reign; it would meet almost a year after his accession. Elections were proclaimed on 11 January.<sup>21</sup> The event, delayed by the previous year's plague in London, had long been expected, if for no other reason than that the king needed money. The king expressed his hope for a balanced parliament, 'without partial respects'. Feeling in Worcestershire however ran high. The search across the county for two Catholic candidates 'most fit for their purpose', the advancement of their religion amidst continuing hope of greater toleration and concessions from the new king, had begun even before the official declaration.<sup>22</sup> The quest moved slowly; difficulties finding candidates afflicted both sides. In the end the Catholics came to the poll with only one candidate. Widow Lyttleton, member of the formerly



Anne Throckmorton in death; detail from the tomb in Beoley church.  
© Hilary L. Turner

<sup>20</sup> WAAS, Beoley parish registers, burial 15 December.

<sup>21</sup> Larkin and Hughes, *Stuart Royal Proclamations*, vol 1, no. 33, pp. 66-70.

<sup>22</sup> The older account by Grosvenor, 'Catholics and the Politics: the Worcestershire election of 1604', has been largely superseded in Thrush, *House of Commons, 1604-1629*, vol.2, pp. 455-58. .

supportive family, ranged her influence on the opposing side. Although it had quickly become clear that the contest would be turbulent, this time there was no attempt at interference by the Crown.

Some five days before the vote Ralph made an open bid to influence the outcome, sending a messenger to taunt one of the opposition candidates, ‘assuring him ... that he was like to receive a disgrace (if he stood out to the election) for want of voices’.<sup>23</sup>

This time the sheriff, on whom all the organization of an election devolved, was Sir Thomas Russell, Ralph’s grandson and candidate in the previous election. He was now in a position to control and more importantly, to influence, the outcome. In the face of strong factional feeling, he shut the castle gates; he could control entry to the courtyard where voters would shout out their choice. Despite considerable uncertainty, Russell declared the Protestant candidates elected.

A lingering suspicion of corrupt practice led after some months to an inquiry of sorts. The investigation, covering twenty long sheets, reveals just how partisan the sheriff could be and to what extent he could manipulate results. The depositions, albeit surviving from only one side, make lively reading.<sup>24</sup>

A week before the Worcestershire polling day King James had announced the re-imposition of recusancy fines. Almost worse than the fact that the promised relaxation had lasted a bare six months, arrears were charged on the fines unpaid, entirely negating any good intentions the king might once have had.<sup>25</sup>

The assembled parliament passed several Acts re-enforced all the laws of the previous reign and added to their severity.<sup>26</sup> Almost immediately, like many others, Plowden and Sheldon’s grandson, William, now aged 16, sought and were granted permission in May to travel abroad for three years.<sup>27</sup>

The speedy reversal of the relaxation of fines, imposition of punitive legislation and absence of any hint of wider, more permanent concessions combined to push the more extreme members of the Catholic gentry community in England into renewed plotting. Summer 1604 was marked by unrest in the Marches, sufficient to demand troops to restore order, the first of many small-scale outbreaks of violence.<sup>28</sup> The Gunpowder Plot, carried out late in 1605, was already in embryonic planning. Death removed two men who might have been able to dissuade the plotters. The first, the redoubtable Sir Thomas Cornwallis, died in February 1605; Sheldon was amongst the seven men

<sup>23</sup> STAC 8/201/17, sheet 15v, 16; it was Francis More, Ligon’s brother-in-law, *Vis’n Worcestershire 1569*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>24</sup> TNA STAC 8/201/17.

<sup>25</sup> Questier, *Dynastic Politics* ... p. 287.

<sup>26</sup> *Statutes*, vol IV (ii), I Jac c.4, pp. 1020-22.

<sup>27</sup> *CSPD 1603-1610*, p.110, May 16 1604, Docquet Book.

<sup>28</sup> Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage*, pp. 271-74.

entrusted to act for and advise his daughter Mary, then at the start of the process of separating from her troublesome husband, William Bouchier earl of Bath.<sup>29</sup> In September 1605 the death of Ralph's brother in law, Sir Thomas Tresham, one of the wealthiest landowners in Northamptonshire, brought vigorous leadership of Catholics in England to an end, though his efforts on their behalf had fallen far short of their hopes. He had paid £7720 in recusancy fines while his obligations in dowries for six daughters 'married ambitiously' amounted to £12,200.<sup>30</sup> The expression of his views in a propagandist building programme remains in the Triangular Tower at Rushton, Northamptonshire, and at nearby Lyveden.<sup>31</sup>



The Triangular Tower erected by Sheldon's brother in law Sir Thomas Tresham at Rushton, Northamptonshire carried an overtly religious message. Photograph © Christopher Hilton, image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

### Re-marriage

Just as Sheldon's friends were being freed from 'divers sums, part of the fines due to the Crown on their conviction', Ralph was facing a situation which would only grow steadily more acute.<sup>32</sup> He had more personal matters on his mind.

In April 1604, he had decided to remarry; he formed an alliance with Jane, Lady Tasburgh with whom he may previously have been acquainted since her father, William de la Warr, had once been resident in the Whitefriars. Three times a widow, she came burdened with debts of her previous husband, Thomas Tasburgh, a former minor Exchequer official, and also with the children of her earlier marriages.<sup>33</sup> The wedding took place around April-May 1604.<sup>34</sup> Recognizances for the performance of the marriage settlement were entered into on both sides. A year later the couple were in dispute and in the courts.<sup>35</sup>

The marriage settlement survives. Recited in court in May 1605, it is not too difficult to see how conflict might arise. Sheldon believed himself secured against the debts owing by

<sup>29</sup> TNA PROB 11/105/106, proved 6 Feb 1604/05

<sup>30</sup> *ODNB*.

<sup>31</sup> Each three storied side measured 33 feet with three rows of windows, one on each floor; each wall terminated in a triangular gable topped by a 3-sided chimney. Emblems signified the Trinity, inscriptions made reference to the Mass; Kilroy, *Memory and Transcription*, pp. 136,142; Fairey, 'Tres testimonivm ...', pp. 55-82; Kilroy, 'Sir Thomas Tresham: His Emblem', pp. 149-179.

<sup>32</sup> Docquet Book. 27 Nov 1604, discharge of Thomas Throckmorton, Edward Sulyard, Sir Thomas Tresham, *CSPD 1603-10*, p.171.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Davidson, 'The Second Mrs Sheldon', 15-21; the document quoted here was not catalogued when Davidson wrote.

<sup>34</sup> Tasburgh marriage articles recited TNA C 3/291/89; in effect Jane had a pre-nuptial agreement.

<sup>35</sup> TNA C 3/291/89; TNA C 54/1797, 19 May 1604; C 231, m.5, m.8.

the said Dame Jane by being, during coverture,<sup>36</sup> owner of the possessions of the said Dame Jane to the yearly value of one thousand pounds per annum above all charges and also owner of all her goods and chattels. There were ‘divers other article and promises on her part to be performed’ as there were also on Ralph’s side.

Jane’s understanding, however, was rather different. Her trustee, Sir William Roper, only recently freed from payment of recusancy fines,<sup>37</sup> claimed that Sheldon had promised to provide a house with a jointure of one thousand pounds per annum; to leave all her leases at her own disposition; to allow her to sell her ‘little odd lands’ so that she could discharge her private debts; to have all income above one thousand pounds the year to discharge debts to the king, (probably those of her former husband), and for the maintenance for her children. The jointure house was to be left furnished to her if she survived with ownership of its contents and the right to dispose of them as she wished at her death; her own jewels, plate and goods ‘if God call her before Ralph’ she would leave to Ralph’s son to set down what you think fit to give me to make my will of one thousand marks. She was to be allowed to ratify the agreements already made either by herself or her husband with her tenants, to reduce all her own debt and had promised to come to the marriage free from liabilities. Details of the jointure were to be finalized within six months of the ceremony.

For a man who was already cash-strapped, it was almost impossible Sheldon could meet those demands. Heavily in debt, his own resources already fully stretched, Ralph needed the ready cash the settlement had provided for. Jane’s refusal, or inability, to fulfil her promises, while also failing to honour the arrangements made to keep Sheldon free from the debts of her previous husband and from any obligation to provide for her children, was the last straw. As the Catholic trustee of the marriage settlements, holder of a recognizance for £6000 intended to guarantee their fulfilment, Roper decided to put that recognizance ‘in suit’ – ie he sought to enforce payment.<sup>38</sup> By June 1605 Sheldon was at law with him, claiming that Jane had reneged on her side of the agreement and that therefore Roper had no grounds for foreclosure.

It was bad timing. Behind the scenes the matter of Sheldon’s debt to his long term creditor Thomas Horde looked as though it might be resolved. In March and again in May there had seemed to be a chance that an agreement might be reached; Roper was amongst those named in the proposed settlements with Horde. As a result, Sheldon and Roper deferred the question of repaying the recognizance; Sheldon was given another opportunity to put matters right.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The period of time Jane was under her husband’s protection.

<sup>37</sup> Docquet Book. 27 Nov 1604, discharge of Sir Wm Roper, *CSPD 1603-10*, p. 171.

<sup>38</sup> At the time of the agreement he had still been liable for fines; he was discharged only in November, Docquet Book. 27 Nov 1604, *CSPD 1603-10*, p.171.

<sup>39</sup> TNA C 54/1797 19 May 1604 for the bond; case at TNA C 231, m.5, m.8.