

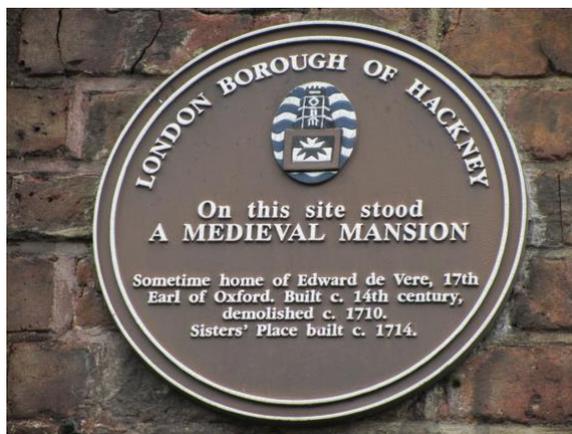
In the January 2016 DVS newsletter, Kevin Gilvary explored the possible literary links between Oxford as Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. In this article, Jan Cole considers historical records which suggest an acquaintance.

Oxford and Jonson in Stoke Newington

Oxford's possible connection with Ben Jonson through mutual acquaintance with the Townshends

by Jan Cole

When Edward de Vere married his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham, in December 1591, the happy couple moved to Stoke Newington, Middlesex, now part of Greater London. Hackney Council believes their 'mansion house' was on the site of the present 172-173 Church Street, London N16, and a brown plaque commemorating Oxford's residence there has been fixed to the wall of the early eighteenth century house that still occupies the site.



The house was on the south side of the street to the southwest of the parish church of St Mary's, roughly opposite today's council offices and public library. John Norden mentioned the house in his *Speculum Britanniae* (1593) in the section covering towns and villages in Middlesex:

Newington... There the Earle of Oxford is sometime resident in a very proper house.¹

Oxford's son, Henry, was baptised at St Mary's and entered in the parish register:

Henry, Viscount Bulbeck, sonne to the Right Honourable Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, was born 24th Feb., 1592 [1593] and christened the 31st day of March.²

In the 1590s, Stoke Newington was a small country village of perhaps about 100 persons. Through the parish ran the Hackney brook, today culverted underground. The fields would have been cropped for cereals, oats and hay, and used for sheep and cattle pasture. Cheese and other produce was taken to London for sale in the markets, and gardens planted with the market-garden crops (salads, herbs, vegetables), for which this area became famous in the following decades.

The manor was a prebendary of St Paul's, London (see below), and was leased to tenants, who functioned as local lords of the manor. The lord of the manor was William Patten (c.1510-1580), a teller of the Exchequer, who improved the manor-house with brick and rebuilt the south aisle, porch and vestry of St Mary's church in 1563, installing his carved arms on the church, which can still be seen. In 1571 he assigned the lease of the manor to John Dudley, a cousin of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. John and his wife, Elizabeth, took care of the illegitimate son of Leicester and Douglas Sheffield there after his birth in 1574.³ The tomb of John Dudley (d.1581) survives in the church. His widow, Elizabeth, then married the wealthy Thomas Sutton (1531-1611), a civil servant, owner of Durham coal-mines, businessman and moneylender who, at his death, was regarded as the richest commoner in England with personal wealth of over £60,000. In 1607 Sutton had purchased the manor of Castle Campes in Cambridgeshire (previously sold by Oxford to Thomas Skinner in 1584) for £10,800, and in May 1611 had purchased Charterhouse from Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk, at a price of £13,000. His spectacular wealth later led Thomas Sutton to become the personage on whom Ben Jonson's 'Volpone' character was based, according to John Aubrey and others.⁴ Later, Sutton became a neighbour of Oxford's in Hackney, where by 1602 or earlier Sutton lived at Tan House, adjacent to the present-day Sutton House, a finely restored property in Homerton, now owned by The National Trust and open to the public.

Sutton's lease of the manor house comprised twenty chambers, two parlours, a gallery, a kitchen, and outhouses. In the 1649 survey (see below) the manor house was listed as being of brick, containing a large hall, fair staircase, wainscotting, courtyards, gatehouse, and numerous farm and other outbuildings.

What was Oxford's house like?

It seems that the house Oxford occupied was part of the manor. William Patten acquired the manor in 1549. It was a 'prebend' or member of a chapter of a church or college, which held its revenues. In this case the church was St Paul's in London and the leaseholder of the manor was required to pay tithes and dues to St Paul's. The

demesnes of the manor occupied the lands north of Church Street, with the manor house itself on its southern extent. The site regarded by Hackney Council as the site of Oxford's house is on the south side of Church Street and was opposite the manor house and its lands.

In 1649 a detailed survey of the manor was made for St Paul's. After describing the main manor house (see above), there follows a description of a 'messuage or tenement' whose details suggest it was the largest dwelling other than the manor house; the only other two dwellings are described as 'cottages'. This large 'messuage or tenement' is described as having a hall, a great parlour, seven chambers, three closets, a kitchen, a buttery, a cellar, a wash-house, and a 'necessary house' (i.e. a privy) with an apple-loft above it. It had two yards (courtyards?), a garden and an orchard in 1.5 acres of land.⁵

All this is described as the 'copyhold of John Dudley and not part of the demesne land belonging to the church'.⁶ This indicates that it did not belong to the prebendary manor, did not require tithes to be paid on it, and could therefore be sub-leased to others. The survey's authors note that it was not known how John Dudley came into ownership of the copyhold, which passed with the manor to Thomas Sutton. It is further described as 'abutting on a parcel of land on the south'. This is ambiguous, but implies that it was south of the main manor house and on the south side of Church Street. The description of this seven-chambered dwelling with its generous domestic buildings, garden and orchard adequately fits Norden's description of Oxford's 'very proper house' - and there is no other dwelling in the survey that could be a candidate for his place of residence.

The Townshends of Raynham Hall and Stoke Newington

In the late 1580s Thomas Sutton leased the manor house and demesnes of Stoke Newington to Sir Roger Townshend (1544-1590).⁷ The Townshends' country seat was Raynham Hall, Norfolk, and from the late 1580s their London base was Stoke Newington manor house. They were a large family with aristocratic connections and Catholic leanings. They were retainers with the Howard dukes of Norfolk. In 1569 when Thomas, 4th Duke of Norfolk was involved in marriage negotiations with Mary Stuart, he was attended at Kenninghall by Roger Townshend and, after Norfolk's execution in 1572, Townshend looked after the heir, Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, who was a minor at that time. In 1582 it was Townshend whom Philip Howard hurried into a boat bound for Arundel House on the Strand in order to avoid becoming involved in an affray between the servants of Thomas Knyvett and the Earl of Oxford.

In 1578 Oxford sold his Cambridgeshire manors of Castle Rising and Brakeye to Roger Townshend. In 1579 Townshend purchased Oxford's Norfolk manor of East Rudham, and in 1585 the Essex manors of Wivenhoe and Battleswick.⁸

During the Armada of 1588 Townshend was a naval commander and was knighted at sea on board the 'Ark Royal' by Lord Howard of Effingham. A year or so before Oxford took up residence in Stoke Newington, Townshend died in the manor house, and was buried in St Giles Cripplegate.

After Roger's death in 1590, his son, Sir John Townshend (c.1568-1603), inherited and took over the manor house of Stoke Newington as his London home. Then in his early twenties, John joined up as a soldier in the Netherlands with the forces commanded by Oxford's cousins, Francis Vere and Horatio Vere. Two of his fellow soldiers during the 1591-92 campaign were the 18-year-old Ben Jonson⁹ and possibly the 30-year-old George Chapman,¹⁰ both destined to become poets and dramatists by the end of the decade and successful playwrights in the Jacobean era and beyond. On their return from the Netherlands sometime in late 1592 or 1593, it seems likely that all three sought recreation at the theatres in Shoreditch, a few miles distant from Townshend's manor house and Oxford's house at Stoke Newington.

The young John Townshend and Ben Jonson appear to have shared an aggressive disposition. In July 1597 Jonson was arrested in the aftermath of the *Isle of Dogs* play, together with Robert Shaa and Gabriel Spencer, two fellow-players with Pembroke's Men, and committed to the Marshalsea prison. After his release from the Marshalsea, Spencer left Pembroke's Men to become a member of the Admiral's Men. On 22 September 1598 Jonson and Spencer quarrelled, leading to a fight in Hoxton fields, an area just north of Shoreditch, known as a location for the exercising and training of soldiers and for duels. The outcome was that Jonson killed Spencer with his sword, and Gabriel Spencer was buried on 23 September 1598 at St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch.¹¹

As regards John Townshend, though he made a reasonable career as an MP, he too had a quarrelsome nature and several times inflamed local quarrels and disagreements to the point of breaches of the peace. He accompanied Essex on the expedition to Cadiz in 1596 and was knighted there by Lord Howard, and as a man 'of good experience in martial affairs' he was appointed to the commission of musters two years later. However, in 1600 he quarrelled with Theophilus Finch and even more violently with Sir Christopher Heydon, with whom he was prevented from fighting a duel only by the action of the Privy Council, when the Attorney General, Edward Coke (Townshend's cousin) offered to bind himself for Townshend's good behaviour.

Heydon later took part in the Essex rising. However, Townshend died on 2 August 1603 from wounds received in a duel with Sir Matthew Browne, who also died, on Hounslow Heath, west of London.¹² In 1603 Matthew Browne had been involved in legal and financial affairs concerning the Globe playhouse. John Townshend's son, another Roger (d.1637), would eventually marry Mary, a daughter and co-heir of Horatio Vere, and build a fine Jacobean house at Raynham Hall, which survives today and where descendants of the family still live.

About this time (1603), Ben Jonson is noted to be living in the house of Robert Townshend (d.1614), son of Sir Roger and brother of John.¹³ Jonson seems to have suffered an illness in late 1602 and to have recuperated in Townshend's house. Though Jonson's latest biographer doesn't say where this was, I think this would have been the manor house at Stoke Newington (rather than in Norfolk), where Robert would take over the household from his brother, John, after his death, and where Jonson would have remained reasonably close to the theatres and actors while he was writing. It is known that an episode of plague occurred in late summer 1603, and so this would also have provided a safer location in country air, although 65 people in Stoke Newington succumbed fatally to the infection. In Townshend's house Jonson completed his tragedy *Sejanus*. Later he presented a copy of the 1605 quarto to his patron inscribed, 'The testimony of my affection and observance to my noble friend, Sir Robert Townshend, which I desire may remain with him, and last beyond marble.'¹⁴

Jonson's next play was *Volpone* (performed 1605-06), whose main protagonist is reputed to have been based upon Thomas Sutton, who by then had moved from Stoke Newington and was living at Tan House, Homerton, not far from Oxford at King's Place, Hackney. It seems more than probable that while Jonson was living at Stoke Newington with Robert Townshend, he had a good opportunity to hear about and perhaps observe the extravagant wealth of Thomas Sutton.¹⁵

Was Jonson introduced to Oxford in Stoke Newington?

This is, of course, the million-dollar question arising from the above intriguing, but historically documented, links. So far there have been no suggested 'place-and-time' links between Jonson and Oxford to suggest that they met. However, Jonson's knowledge of Oxford's authorship of 'Shakespeare' is crucial to the Oxfordian thesis, especially as regards his supposed writing of the epistle in the quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* (1609) and his later involvement in the First Folio (1623).

There is a possibility, between 1592 and 1603/4, of a relationship between Oxford and Jonson, but we can only speculate as to how it may have come about.

Oxford had known Roger Townshend and his sons from the late 1570s. If the demobbed Jonson (and Chapman, too) were invited to visit the house of their fellow ex-soldier, John Townshend, in late 1592 or 1593 - perhaps after a pleasant afternoon watching a play at the Curtain - they would have been in the manor house opposite Oxford's house on the other side of Church Street, Stoke Newington. Could John have suggested introducing Jonson to his neighbour, Oxford - the friend of his father, a man with his own acting troupe and knowledgeable about the theatre? Returning from the wars, Jonson had now to think of a career. That career would not be his former occupation of bricklaying - although he was made a freeman of the bricklayer's guild, suggesting that he must have served a full apprenticeship. It would be the theatre, which initially would not have provided much more of an income. At some point he began as an actor and progressed to writing for the stage by 1597-98. Who encouraged him to use his good Westminster School education, further his studies, and write? Who helped him to purchase the books he required for what would become an excellent knowledge of the classics? Almost the same can be said for George Chapman. In 1593 in his early 30s he suddenly started writing poetry (publishing his first poem in 1594) and then plays, although his classical education and extensive knowledge of Homer and Hesiod may have been secured earlier. Who encouraged Jonson and Chapman to write? Could it have been Oxford?¹⁶

With this possible scenario an opening could be provided for Oxford's direct connection to Jonson and his eventual revelation to him of the 'Shakespeare' authorship - the name already in print on *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 - and the pseudonymous role played by William Shakspere of Stratford, who would also become known to Jonson. This would have required considerable trust on Oxford's part and a developing relationship involving a triangular 'contract of silence' over the ensuing years until Oxford's death in 1604. Six months after the death of her father, Susan de Vere married Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery. Initial favourites of James I, both were prominent at court and both became well known to Jonson as they danced in the masques he wrote.

We know that Jonson - by then a 31-year-old established dramatist who had written for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with whom Shakspere was a shareholder - was resident at Robert Townshend's house in Stoke Newington for several months in 1603. Did he pay a visit to Hackney to visit Oxford and Elizabeth in the last year of Oxford's life? Compare the scene in the film *Anonymous* in which 'Jonson' visits 'Edward de Vere' towards the end of his life. Although the film is fictional, it might contain some hidden historical truth in this scene

Notes

1. Norden, J. *Speculum Britanniae* (1593), p.37, online edition (1723) at Google Books
2. Robinson, W. *The History and Antiquities of the parish of Stoke Newington in the County of Middlesex*, (1842) p.190, online edition (1842) at Google Books
3. Skidmore, C. *Death and the Virgin: Elizabeth, Dudley and the mysterious fate of Amy Robsart* (2010), pp.309-310; for William Patten see 'History of Parliament' online
4. Donaldson, I. *Ben Jonson: a Life* (2011), pp.339-340; Wikipedia - entry on 'Thomas Sutton, 1521-1611'
5. Robinson, *op.cit.*, Appendix III
6. Robinson, *op.cit.*, p.294
7. *A History of the County of Middlesex*, vol.8. *Islington and Stoke Newington parishes* (1985), pp.177-78 – British History online. For the Townshend family's links with Oxford (and later with Horatio Vere's family through marriage), see Nina Greene's 'oxford-shakespeare-authorship' website. An inventory made of the manor house at the time that Roger Townshend made his will can be seen online at the 'Tudor Hackney' website.
8. Pearson, D. *Edward de Vere (1550-1604): the Crisis and Consequences of Wardship* (2005), pp.229-232
9. Donaldson, *op.cit.* pp.94-98; Wikipedia - entry for 'Ben Jonson, 1572-1637'. See also Appendix 1 Below
10. Wikipedia - entry for 'George Chapman, c.1559-1634'. Chapman alluded to Sir Francis Vere and the ambush at Nijmegen in his first poem *The Shadow of Night* (1594). In 1610 he alluded directly to 'the Earl of Oxford' in *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*. In 1614 a sonnet was addressed to Susan Vere, Countess of Montgomery and included in an edition of his *Homer*. In 1622 he wrote *Pro Vere, Autumni Lachrymae* in support of Horatio de Vere, then besieged at Mannheim.
11. Donaldson, *op.cit.*, pp.113-115, 132-134
12. History of Parliament Online - entry for 'John Townshend, 1568-1593' and entry for 'Matthew Browne'. Wikipedia - entry for 'Matthew Browne d.1603'
13. The Townshend genealogies are complex, but I follow Donaldson in identifying this relationship.
14. Donaldson, *op.cit.*, pp.181-182
15. Donaldson, *op.cit.*, pp.339-340; Shipley, N.R., 'A Possible Source for *Volpone*', *Notes & Queries*, vol.39, no.3 (1992), p.363
16. Cole, J. 'Was Oxford Chapman's Patron?', *DVS Newsletter*, vol. 18, no.2 (July 2011), pp.30-34

Appendix 1

Ian Donaldson's 'Life of BJ' at The Cambridge Works of BJ online:

At some time in the early 1590s... Jonson abandoned his work as a bricklayer and joined the English expeditionary forces to the Low Countries. The dates of this period of service...have been disputed, but it is likely that he was recruited during the early months of 1591, when special efforts were made to reinforce the English presence in the Netherlands. In the spring of that year Maurice of Nassau, commander of the army of the States General, began his first campaign to drive the Spanish out of the inland provinces of the north.

The English general **Sir Francis Vere**, accompanied by his younger brother, **Sir Horace**, whom Jonson was later to celebrate in *Epigr.* 91, gave brilliant support and tactical advice. Zutphen fell in May [1591], Deventer in June, and Nijmegen in October. English troops were also involved the following year [1592] in the successful siege of Steenwijk in June and the capture of Coevorden in September. Jonson may have seen service at all or several of these sites. One notable feat he described to William Drummond with evident pride almost thirty years later: 'In his service in the Low Countries he had, in the face of both the camps, killed an enemy and taken *opima spolia* from him' (*Informations*, 184–6). *Opima spolia* are the arms traditionally taken by victors from the vanquished on the field of battle: the Latin phrase hints at the antiquity of the custom.

Later in the decade Jonson was certainly to be associated with the Curtain Theatre, Shoreditch, where *Every Man In His Humour* was performed in 1598, but there is no other evidence of an earlier connection.

Appendix 2: message house for Oxford

Since Thomas Sutton and Roger Townshend were both living at Stoke Newington manor concurrently, it's rather difficult to be sure who was living where. The probability seems to be as follows:

Manor House - Thomas Sutton lived there with his wife Elizabeth (widow of John Dudley) from 1581. Later in that decade he moved to Hackney (Tan House), sub-leasing the manor of Stoke Newington to Roger Townshend and his wife and sons.

'Message' House - Sutton leased this to Roger Townshend at some time in the 1580s. On Sutton's move to Hackney, Townshend must have moved into the manor house, leaving the 'message' house for Oxford and his wife in 1591.