

Based on a talk given at a meeting of the De Vere Society, London, 2015

Location, Location, Location! Oxford's 1580 purchase of land and property 'east of Aldgate'

By Jan Cole



Figure 1: Map of London by Braun and Hogenburg, c.1572

With each house-move he made, Oxford gradually moved eastwards and northwards in a sequence of steps that have all the appearance of being deliberate. Over a period of ten years, he moved from Cecil House to London Stone and then to Fisher's Folly, gradually distancing himself from life at Court and placing himself closer to the world of the **public** theatre and the common people.

With the purchase of Fisher's Folly outside Bishopsgate in 1580, together with substantial tenements and land that eventually came with it in 1582, and the purchase of another property and land outside Aldgate in 1580, Oxford established himself outside the City in the north and eastern suburbs, at the centre of most of the public playing venues that then existed. These were the purpose-built Theatre and Curtain to the north in Shoreditch; the three theatre inns of the Bull, the Bell and the Crosskeys inside the city walls to the south; and The George and The Boar's Head inns outside Aldgate in the Whitechapel road. With the possibility of seven playing venues in the immediate area, this looks like a purposeful move in order to concentrate on theatrical interests. This is apparent not only from the location, but from the rapid succession of events in the first few months of 1580.

27 January 1580

Arthur Throckmorton (c.1557-1626) wrote in his diary that Oxford had written a challenge to Sidney, and that on the 29th Oxford had been commanded to keep to his chamber at court.

11 February 1580

Oxford was released from confinement to his chambers at Court following the challenge to Sidney and criticism of the Earl of Leicester, as noted in the diary of Arthur Throckmorton.¹

March 1580

Shortly afterwards Oxford leased the mansion of Fisher's Folly from the trustees of the late Jasper Fisher, subsequently purchasing the reversion in 1582² and began preparing it for residence, as noted by Henry Howard's comment on its 'trimming up'.³ This purchase included a substantial amount of property and land related to the mansion, comprising '30 messuages, 20 cottages, 20 tofts, 30 gardens, 10 orchards and the moiety of a reservoir and its lead water-pipes... in the parish of St Botolph's without Bishopsgate'.⁴

April 1580

Oxford took over some of the Earl of Warwick's players, notably John and Lawrence Dutton and Jerome Savage, and put them into his own troupe called Oxford's Men. It is thought that they performed at the Theatre in Shoreditch.⁵ After 1581, Anthony Munday also joined Oxford's Men as an actor or actor-manager.⁶

9 June 1580

Cecil wrote to John Hatcher, Vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, requesting that Oxford's Men be allowed to 'repair to that university and there to make show of such plays and interludes as have been heretofore played by them publicly, as well before the Queen's Majesty as in the city of London'.⁷ This request was not granted, but the same year payments were recorded for Oxford's Men and Oxford's Boys performances in Coventry, Norwich, Bristol and Dover.⁸ The letter shows that the troupe used the city inns as a venue.

15 June 1580

Oxford purchased a tenement and seven acres of land east of Aldgate from the Italian merchant Benedict Spinola for £2500.⁹ This property was known as the 'Great Garden of Christchurch', formerly the gardens east of the church of St Botolph's-without-Aldgate, anciently associated with Holy Trinity Priory and with Magdalen College, Cambridge. The Priory was the first religious house to be established inside the walls after the Norman Conquest and the first to be dissolved in February 1532, when it passed to Henry VIII. In the mid-16th century it was owned by Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, and so came into crown ownership again after his execution in 1572. Queen Elizabeth had granted it to Spinola on 29 January 1575, at a time when he was administering finances with regard to Oxford's continental tour.

Thus, in less than six months, Oxford had established himself at Fisher's Folly and, by purchasing other pieces of land around it and a property very close to the theatre inns outside Aldgate, he seems to have had the intention of pursuing a life at the centre of the theatrical and literary community. Here he could pursue his duties as patron of his own acting troupe, Oxford's Men, developing them into a stronger unit and perhaps using the Boar's Head and the George inns for their playing venues, both outside the restrictions on playing that pertained within the city walls. Oxford remained in the area for the best part of the decade of the 1580s, a period (it is now realised) which was crucial for the development of drama leading to the 'Shakespeare' plays.¹⁰

John Lyly, Anthony Munday and Thomas Churchyard were all in service to Oxford at this time. Within the next few years Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, John Southern, and Angel Day were within his milieu. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Fisher's Folly may have been the centre of a literary circle with Oxford as its patron.

Oxford's 'great garden and tenement'

Oxford's recorded interest in the 'great garden' property goes back to August 1579, and he was clearly very keen to purchase it.¹¹ This was just a month after John Lyly's *Euphues His England*, dedicated to Oxford, had been placed on the Stationer's Register, and which gave rise to a new literary style that significantly influenced prose and drama. It took almost a year before the indenture was drawn up on 15 June 1580, assigning the 'east of Aldgate' property to Oxford, which comprised:

all that Great Garden situate, lying and being in the parish of Saint Botolph without Aldgate, London, commonly called or known by the name of the Great Garden or Covent Garden of Christ Church with th' appurtenances, and also all that message or tenement called the Gatehouse with a backside thereunto belonging and a pathway leading to the said Great Garden, and all houses and buildings of, in or upon them or any of them now being.¹²

The 'tenement called the Gatehouse' suggests that the building was on the perimeter of the plot, probably on the eastern side. The expensive purchase of this large plot is significant because its location was immediately west of the Boar's Head Inn. It was situated on the other side of Hog Lane, which led into Whitechapel Street from the north, with the Boar's Head on the opposite corner of the T-junction. The point where Hog Lane joined Whitechapel Street was the location of 'the barres', the formal city limits. On the Agas Map of c.1570 the property is shown with two buildings on the east (Hog Lane) side, an outhouse or barn to the west of the plot, and the remainder uncultivated, in contrast with the gardens of the several plots to the west.

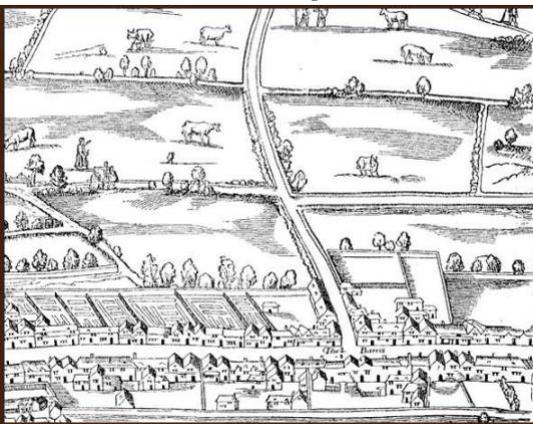


Figure 2: Boar's Head theatre at the corner of Whitechapel. Agas map.

Hog Lane ran northwest from Whitechapel Street, skirting the rear garden wall of Fisher's Folly on the way to its northern junction with upper Bishopsgate Street. On the Agas map no houses are shown on the lane, but Ryther's map of 1604 shows that houses had been built all the way up both sides of Hog Lane, now marked as 'Petticoat Lane'. The shortest route between Oxford's two properties would have been through the fields via Hog Lane, a ten-minute walk, rather than along Houndsditch, which was lined with poor dwellings and lower status artisan's houses. The parish records show there were many French and Dutch immigrants in the area, and also a Jewish community. A rare full set of records for St Botolph's-without-Aldgate, written by the parish curate, Robert Heaz, himself a French immigrant, survives in the library of the Guildhall.¹³ During the 1580s and 1590s this area increased rapidly in buildings and population.

What's in a name?

Was the Boar's Head already associated with the de Vere family? There was a Boar's Head near Oxford House at London Stone that was associated with the de Veres.¹⁴ The Blue Boar inns at Earl's Colne and Colchester in Essex were also named for the de Veres. Was the Boar's Head at Whitechapel, which stood on the main road out of London to Essex and Colchester, similarly associated? The first recorded play performed at the Boar's Head dates from 1557. The inn may have been associated with Oxford's father and his dramatic patronage via his heraldic crest of a blue boar and the story of his courageous hand-to-hand killing of a boar in France in 1544 which became legendary, as told by Gervase Markham in *Honour in His Perfection* as late as 1624. His players certainly performed in London, notably in Southwark in 1547 during the mourning period for the death of Henry VIII.¹⁵

So, could the sign of the Boar's Head have been a *blue* boar's head, like the Boar's Head in Eastcheap, whose painted stone sign of 1668 has survived in the Guildhall? On Ogilby's 1677 map of London there is a named 'Blue Boar' further west in Whitechapel Street. This is the 'Blue Bore' mentioned in a 1594 parish meeting, apparently part of a larger property known as 'The Woolsack', but clearly on a different site.¹⁶ This is the same date (1594) that the Boar's Head Inn was leased by Oliver Woodliffe for 21 years from Jane Poley. He began improving the inn with various structures including 'the Tiring House and Stage'.¹⁷ Documentation in the manorial records suggest that the Boar's Head was in use for plays during the 1570's through to the 1590s, so a removable platform stage is likely to have been already in place. By 1599, more galleries were built, significantly increasing the seating capacity. This fact alone suggests a

successful theatre enterprise, although details prior to 1594 are lacking. If the 'Blue Bore' mentioned in 1594 was a new tavern, it may have been named for Oxford's presence in the area.

The 'great garden' property

The 'tenement called the Gatehouse' on the Great Garden site was evidently already there in 1580 and later documents suggest that the site was extensively developed by 1608. Two buildings are shown on the site on Norden's 1593 map of London on the other side of Hog Lane opposite the Boar's Head Inn (not named as such). This property, though leased to his brother-in-law Francis Trentham in 1591, was the *only* London property (apart from King's Place Hackney) that remained connected with him at his death in 1604, referred to as the 'Great Garden, London, a messuage called Le Gatehouse'.¹⁸ This property has received little attention in Oxfordian biography, perhaps because the importance of its location, being adjacent to the Boar's Head Inn, has not been recognized. Clearly it was let out to tenants and later developed quite substantially, but in July 1580 Queen Elizabeth issued a proclamation restricting any new building in the city and within three miles of the gates on pain of imprisonment, so Oxford could not have erected any new buildings whilst this proclamation was in force, which seems to have been until the end of the reign.

In August 1608, four years after Oxford's death, there was a further inquisition about this property, at which the jurors expressed doubt as to who had been taking its profits, which should have gone to Oxford's widow, Elizabeth in trust for Oxford's son, Henry. The commissioners also noted that 'the houses, messuages, tenements and buildings' there were 'newly constructed and built' and 'lately in the tenure of a certain Thomas Casey'.¹⁹ In November 1609 the masters of Magdalen College tried to regain the property.²⁰ In 1610 a bill was drafted in Parliament on behalf of Oxford's son, Henry, concerning the property, in which it is noted that Oxford and his tenants had 'quietly enjoyed' it for '30 years or more'. This document also notes that Oxford and his tenants had expended £10,000 on the property (this figure may be an exaggeration). As Nina Green suggests, 'this statement...provides an important indication of where at least some of the money Oxford realized from the sales of his inherited lands went, that is, into purchasing and improving this London property and then leasing it out'.²¹

A recent excavation report on the site of the Boar's Head and environs, describes the present day location of the 'great garden' site as Beaufort House, 29-55 Middlesex Street, Whitechapel, London E1 and noted:

Widespread and thick deposits resembling garden soil probably represented the Great Garden of Holy Trinity Priory which was located here from the 13th century. Above this lay soil and building debris of post-medieval date, probably indicating a change of land use after the Dissolution. This property passed into the possession of the De Vere family, earls of Oxford, and two substantial buildings are documented from the early 17th century onwards. The remains of a brick-lined well and cellars or wall foundations of brick and chalk were all that was observed for this period, succeeded by the foundations of the modern building.²²

Unfortunately, this report does not give a source for the early 17th century documentation of the ‘two substantial buildings’.

Family associations in Aldgate and Shoreditch

There were strong family associations in the area. A friend of Oxford’s father owned the land on which the Boar’s Head stood and, like Oxford’s father, this man had also been a patron of the radical dramatist, John Bale (see below).

The area immediately outside the city walls at Aldgate had historic associations with the county of Essex and the de Vere family. The church of St Botolph, named after an East Anglian saint, was anciently connected with St Botolph’s Priory in Colchester, Essex, in the heart of de Vere territory. Oxford’s grandfather had been Sheriff of Essex and Keeper of Colchester Castle in 1515-16, 1519-20 and 1524-25, before he acceded to the earldom in 1526, and his father had acted in a similar capacity.²³ Founded between 1093 and 1100 as the priory of St Julian and St Botolph, this was the first religious house in England to adopt the rule of St Augustinian. In 1108, its abbot, Norman, left Colchester to become the first prior of Holy Trinity Priory, Aldgate, and in 1115 St Botolph’s church was incorporated into Holy Trinity Priory on the north side of the street just outside Aldgate. Matilda (1102-1167), daughter of Henri I, was the probable founder of the Priory; and when she battled with Stephen of Blois for the English throne, it was Stephen’s wife, Maud of Boulogne, who bestowed the title ‘Earls of Oxford’ on the de Vere line in c.1142. Maud died at Hedingham Castle in 1152, while staying there with Aubrey de Vere, the first Earl of Oxford.

With regard to the area north of Fisher’s Folly, it is also of interest that in 1536 Oxford’s father had married his first wife, Dorothy Neville, at Holywell Place, part of the old priory of St John’s in the parish of Shoreditch, located between Shoreditch High Street and Holywell Street. This was a triple wedding and on the same occasion,

Dorothy's sister, Margaret, married Henry Manners, 2nd Earl of Rutland, whose family had property in the area, and her brother Henry Neville, son of the Earl of Westmoreland, married Anne Manners, the sister of Henry.²⁴ On this grand occasion, the Earls of Derby and Surrey (Edward Stanley and Henry Howard) were also present, and at the reception Henry VIII and his courtiers presented 'a mask in the Turkish fashion'.²⁵

By 1580, as at the Aldgate site, only the gardens and fields of the old priory remained in Shoreditch, plus, of course, the recently built three-year-old Curtain playhouse, a little way south of the four-year-old Theatre playhouse.

The Wentworths: theatre-supporting friends of de Vere and owners of the Boar's Head

The lords of the manor of the huge area northeast of the city, from Spitalfields in the north to Whitechapel in the east, were the Wentworth family, who as landowners in Suffolk and Essex had long been friends of the de Veres. The two families were in fact related through marriages in the 15th century.

Oxford's grandfather, John 15th Earl of Oxford (d.1540), the first Protestant earl in the family, kept a company of players for which he commissioned the radical John Bale (1495-1563) to write plays from 1534-1536. Bale is regarded as the originator of the English history play with his *King Johan*, which marks the transition between the old morality plays and English historical drama. It may have directly influenced the later chronicle history plays, particularly *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and subsequently Shakespeare's *King John*. Bale's play was a Protestant polemic, and in it King John is represented as the champion of English church rites against the Roman Catholic rites.

In 1536 Bale listed in his *Anglorum Heliades* (a history of the Carmelite order) fourteen plays and stated that he had written them especially for 'Master John Vere', though it is not entirely clear whether he meant the 15th Earl or John the 16th Earl, or both. In any event they both knew Bale and his plays, and a manuscript copy of *King Johan* may have existed at Hedingham Castle in Oxford's youth. In 1536 *King Johan* was performed (presumably by his own players) for Oxford's father. In the last year of Bale's life, 1561, the play was performed again at Ipswich by Oxford's Men to entertain Queen Elizabeth on her summer progress. As part of the itinerary, she stayed, with William Cecil and Thomas Smith, at Hedingham Castle from 14-19 August. Bale's *King Johan* therefore has a specific resonance, being a play written for Oxford's father and played by his father's players.²⁶

Bale, born in Suffolk, had been a Catholic Carmelite monk and claimed that his conversion had been influenced by another East Anglian patron, Thomas, 1st Baron Wentworth (1501-1551) of Nettlestead, Suffolk. As stated, he and his son were well known to Oxford's father. When the 16th Earl turned suddenly to supporting Mary Tudor in 1553, the son, Thomas, 2nd Baron Wentworth (1525-1582) became a commander in her army. In claiming loyalty to Mary, they were acting from expediency to protect their lands, but both were actually Protestant sympathisers.²⁷ In September 1560, Oxford's father and Wentworth were commissioned to escort Prince Eric of Sweden from Harwich to Hedingham Castle and thence to Colchester, on his journey to London for marriage negotiations with the Queen.²⁸

In 1550 the manor of Stepney (to which Whitechapel belonged) and the manor of Hackney were granted to the Wentworth family and remained theirs until the 1630s. It is interesting to note that King's Hold (later Brooke House) in Hackney, where Oxford lived for the last years of his life, was at this point owned by this family²⁹. The Wentworths had eighteen acres of land in Spitalfields (then also under Stepney manor) and a house at Mile End (a mile east of Aldgate). Therefore, in 1580, Oxford's father's friend, Thomas Wentworth - who, like Oxford, had been educated at St John's College, Cambridge - was a near neighbour and landowner in Aldgate.



Figure 3 Thomas, second baron Wentworth (1525-1584) in 1569

Wentworth is commemorated in present-day Wentworth Street to the west of Middlesex Street.

Aged about 55 in 1580, Thomas had been MP for Suffolk from 1547 to 1551, when he succeeded his father. He was made Lord Deputy of Calais in 1553, surrendering the city to France in 1558, for which he spent time in the Tower.

He was Lord Chamberlain to Edward VI in 1550, and Lord Lieutenant of Suffolk from 1570. His first wife was his cousin, Mary, daughter of the 16th Earl's close friend, John Wentworth of Gosfield (some four miles from Castle Hedingham), and his second wife also a cousin, Anne, daughter of Henry Wentworth of Mountnessing, Essex. As a

landowner and a Middlesex Justice, Wentworth supported the theatre in the 1570s and 1580s. In 1577 the City and Privy Council tried to place an embargo on playing outside the liberties of the city, but of course they had no jurisdiction over Middlesex and Wentworth evaded the order. In 1578 he attended a meeting with the Lord Mayor about theatre playing, and in 1580 he was again charged to restrain playing in Middlesex. From this it seems clear that the George and the Boar's Head were both in use as theatre inns through the 1570's and 1580's.^{29a}

On 20 June 1581 he wrote to William Cecil 'from my house at Mile End' about the proposed marriage of his son, William (aged 27) to Cecil's daughter, Elizabeth (aged 19), which took place on 26 February 1582.³⁰ However, William died shortly afterwards, Elizabeth a few months later, and her father-in-law Wentworth in the same year. So, for a very short time, Wentworth became a kinsman of Oxford's.

One of Thomas's older sisters, Anne Wentworth, had married c.1541 a John Poley of Badley, Suffolk. The Poley family were administrators and stewards for the Wentworth estates. In about 1561, Jane Transfield, the widow of the man who leased the Boar's Head Inn, married Edmund Poley and she and her sons became leaseholders of the inn from 1561 until 1594 when the lease was transferred to Oliver Woodliffe.

Oxford was in good relationship with both the landowners and the leaseholder-innkeepers of the Boar's Head playhouse. Because of this, he was in a position to get plays put on there at his request and with the players he requested. Whether he did so or not, is not on record.

Theatres in the Elizabethan East End

Elizabethan theatre history has largely concentrated on the new purpose-built suburban theatres, though recent studies of individual companies are beginning to fill out the complicated picture³¹. Whitechapel Street was a distinct theatre district with inn-yard theatres that had permanent stage-structures, galleries and facilities. These represented the professional theatre as it stood before, and as it overlapped with, the age of the purpose-built theatres. The three inn theatres outside Aldgate were all held in fee from the Wentworths as lord of the manor of Stepney, and were all developed (with various success) by John Brayne, better known for his association with his brother-in-law, James Burbage, in the building of The Theatre in Shoreditch. The theatre entrepreneur John Brayne lived in Whitechapel from 1580 to his death in 1586, and was probably known to Oxford.

There were three theatres in Whitechapel Street. The Boar's Head was on the north side on the eastern corner of Hog Lane and the high street. The George was also on the north side, three hundred yards to the east of the Boar's Head. The Red Lion was a mile or so further east from the Boar's Head, on the south side of Whitechapel. This had been the first of Brayne's theatre enterprises, but was active as a theatre inn only from 1567 to 1568. The George was active from 1580 to 1586, and the Boar's Head, by far the most successful, and active from 1594 (and indeed 40 years earlier) to 1616.³²

A few surviving documents associate the Boar's Head with three main acting troupes: Worcester's, Derby's and Oxford's (and the later joint Oxford's and Worcester's, known simply as Worcester's from 1602 or earlier). Worcester's Men played there from 1599 or earlier under the management of Robert Browne, leaseholder of the inn, who extended its stage and galleries, and who was a 'stage player' either with Worcester's³³ or with Derby's.³⁴ An undated letter to her uncle, Robert Cecil (leader of the Privy Council) from Oxford's daughter Elizabeth, Countess of Derby, probably written late 1599 or early 1600, requested that Derby's Men be allowed to continue playing.³⁵ They may have been using the Boar's Head. Then, in 1602 the Privy Council acknowledged receipt of a letter from the Lord Mayor of London, concerning the abuses caused by theatrical activity in the city. Until this date the use of venues was flexible and all the companies used whatever venue 'at their own disposition'. The company recently formed by the merging of Oxford's and Worcester's Men represented a particular problem, as it moved from playhouse to playhouse, rather than remaining at a single venue. Oxford petitioned the Queen and the Privy Council reported that:

beinge joyned by agreement together in on[e] Companie (to whom, **upon notice of her Maiesties pleasure at the suit of the Earl of Oxford,** tolleracion hath ben thought meete to be graunted, notwithstandinge the restraint of our said former Orders), doe no tye them selfs to one certaine place and howse, but do change their place at there owne disposition, which is as disorderly and offensive as the former offence of many howses, and as the other Companies that are allowed . . . be appointed there certine howses and one and no more to each Company. Soe we do straightly require that this third Companie be likewise to one place and because we are informed **the house called the Bores head is the place they have especially used and doe best like of, we doe pray and require yow that the said howse . . . may be assigned to them,** and that they be very straightlie charged to use and exercise there plays in no other but that howse, as they looke to have that tolleracion continued and avoid farther displeasure.³⁶

It is clear from the above letter that they played at different locations, possibly at the George Inn between 1580 and 1586, and (as the letter implies) at the Boar's Head, **'the place they have especially used and doe best like of'**. One obvious reason for Oxford's Men to prefer the Boar's Head was because of its titular association with their patron. They wore Oxford's livery as his servants and this would have included a badge in the shape of a blue boar. Another reason is that it was right next door to Oxford's 'Great Garden' property, where one of the buildings may have been used for their storage of costumes and properties.

In the summer months from May to September they toured the country, but they needed a place to play in London during the winter season, which ran from Michaelmas to Shrovetide, or 29 September through to the day before Ash Wednesday in February or March (i.e. for most of a six-month period). It is usually forgotten that the theatre inns, even those within the city limits, continued to be used long after the purpose-built suburban playhouses were established. For example, the Queen's Men played at the Bull Inn in Bishopsgate Street and at the Bell Inn in Gracechurch Street in the 1580s and 1590s, and Strange's Men played at the Cross-Keys in Gracechurch Street in 1594.³⁷ The probability is (as the Privy Council was told in 1602) that Oxford's Men usually played at the Boar's Head Inn.

Status of Oxford's Men

Oxford began to form his own playing company after 1572, following the official 'Act for the punishment of vagabonds', which required all players to be in a permanent company under the patronage of 'a great lord'. He re-formed his players in April 1580 by taking in members of the Earl of Warwick's Men. These included the actor brothers John and Laurence Dutton, Jerome Savage, Robert Leveson, Thomas Chesson, John Symons and perhaps Richard Tarlton, who would soon feature as 'Dericke' in *The Famous Victories* (notice 'Dericke' is close to 'Dick', suggesting perhaps that the role was written especially for him). Jerome Savage had been connected with the playhouse at Newington Butts south of the river between 1576 and 1578, and had taken a sub-lease on it even earlier, and it's possible that Oxford's Men played there in the early 1580s and later. Newington Butts remained active as a playhouse until c.1594.³⁸ John Symons is recorded as playing at Court in 1584 in the capacity of a 'tumbler' or acrobat. Oxford's company of boy-players acted at Court at Greenwich Palace on the night of 17 December 1584, presenting *The History of Agamemnon and Ulysses*, their payment given to Henry Evans the following April.³⁹

The touring record for Oxford's Men runs from 1580 to 1597 at forty-six locations.⁴⁰ They toured the provinces during the summer months in what appears to be a regular circuit from East Anglia, Gloucestershire and the Midlands, and down to Kent and Dorset on the south coast. The furthest points north that they played were York and Liverpool, with several visits to Norwich, Cambridge, Coventry, Boothall, Oxford, Bristol, Bath, Bridgwater, Barnstaple, Totnes, Exeter, Faversham, Fordwich, Maidstone, Hythe, Dover and Lyme Regis. It has been noted that some of these counties had genealogical connections with Oxford's family,⁴¹ which may have been a 'draw' factor for audiences.

Alan Nelson generously called Oxford's Men 'one of the four principal companies of London', based on their mention in a 1587 letter complaining about stage plays⁴² and also suggested a long list of actors who cannot be traced to any company before 1601 and 'may have belonged to Oxford's Men': Thomas Greene, James Holt, John Lowin, Robert Pallant, Richard Perkins, Thomas Swinnerton.⁴³ Perkins was with the amalgamated Oxford's-Worcester's Men from 1602, and Lowin is named as a principal actor in the First Folio.

The popular comedian Thomas Greene gave his name to the title of a play, *Greene's Tu Quoque*. He was an actor with the amalgamated Oxford's-Worcester's Men from 1602 and was leaseholder of the Boar's Head from April 1604 until his death in 1612. He had married Susan Browne, the widow of the previous leaseholder, Robert Browne, an actor with Worcester's Men.^{43a} Greene was associated with Stratford-upon-Avon and William Shaksper by Nathan Drake (following Malone's research) in his *Shakespeare and his Times* (1838). Recent scholarship has also raised the profile of Oxford's Men and Boys in the early 1580s:

The most likely company to have been occupying the vacant Curtain [theatre] at this time was that of the Earl of Oxford... [who] may have carried on at Newington Butts.⁴⁴

In the main, Leicester's Men, Derby's Men and the company newly organised as Oxford's Men in 1580 were very active touring companies in the years shortly before the formation of the Queen's Men.⁴⁵

It is right to argue that the combined children's company was known sometimes as Oxford's Boys and sometimes as the Chapel Children; the next two seasons of court performances, totalling thirteen performances in all, were put on by only this company and by the new Queen's Men. All other companies were denied court performances for two years.⁴⁶

In the same book, it is noted that between 1574 and 1578

the most favoured company [at court] was the one headed by Jerome Savage and the Dutton brothers, thought to have passed from Lincoln's to Warwick's in 1575 under the patronage of Ambrose Dudley, Leicester's brother.⁴⁷

In 1580 Jerome Savage and the Duttons transferred from Warwick's Men into Oxford's Men, and in March 1583 the Duttons and Tarlton were picked out for the Queen's Men. Shortly afterwards the first plays for the Queen's Men plays were being written, plays which were prototypes of the 'Shakespeare' history plays, i.e. *The Famous Victories of Henry V*; *The Troublesome Reign of King John*; *The True Tragedy of Richard III*; *King Leir* - and plays also written for them by Robert Greene, e.g. *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and *James IV*, and by George Peele, e.g. *The Old Wive's Tale*. It has been noted that, despite the printed dates, any play with 'Queen's Men' on the title page suggests a 1583 to 1589 date, even if it was published in the 1590s.

Plays performed by Oxford's Men

Two plays performed by Oxford's Men both reached publication status. The first was *The Weakest Goeth to the Wall*, a romance set in France with a comic sub-plot. This was registered on 23 October 1600 and printed by Thomas Creede with 'as it hath been sundry times played by the Right Honorable, the Earl of Oxenford his servants' on the title-page. Copies of the text survive and the play was published in 1911 for Tudor Facsimile Texts (reprinted 1913 and 1970). A critical edition by J. L. Levenson was published in 1980. The text is readable online. Its anonymous authorship has been attributed variously to Anthony Munday, Thomas Dekker or John Webster. A modern spelling edition can be found at the Dekker website: bradfilipone.wordpress.com.

The second play was the anonymous *True Historie of George Scanderbeg*, a history play about George Castriot, Prince of Albania, and his heroic battles against the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century. This was registered on 3 July 1601 and printed by Edward Alde. The S.R. record states 'as it was lately played by the Earl of Oxford his servants'. No copies of this play have survived (see Lost Plays Database online, where the play is dated to 1587 and thought to have been played at the Boar's Head Inn). The source was likely to have been the English translation (via a French translation from the original Latin) by Zachary Jones and published as *The Historie of George Castriot, surnamed Scanderbeg, King of Albanie*, printed by William Ponsonby in 1596.

As we have seen, Oxford's Men regarded the Boar's Head as **'the place they have especially used and doe best like of'**. It seems probable, therefore, that both these

plays were performed there in the 1590's. The assumption that they ceased to be active after 1588 or 1590 (as stated on their Wikipedia entry, citing no less an authority than Andrew Gurr) is evidently untrue, as the title-pages of *The Weakest Goeth to the Wall* and *George Scanderbeg* show. Records show that they were active from at least 1580 to 1597 as a touring company, and remained active in London until 1604 (amalgamating with Worcester's Men in the last few years) - some 24 years in all.

Surrounded by local talent

The move to Fisher's Folly placed Oxford in the best position he could be in to develop his theatrical interests. Many actors lived in the area⁴⁸. John Dutton, Oxford's principal actor, lived locally. He is almost certainly the John Dutton in the parish registers of St Botolph's, Bishopsgate, who married Agnes Duke there (probably a relative of the actor John Duke of Worcester's Men) when he was 22 in 1570, and christened two daughters there in 1586 and 1587 and a son in 1589. He is recorded as proprietor of the Dolphin Inn, next door to Fisher's Folly on the corner of Houndsditch, from c.1593, after he had retired from acting, and he was buried in St Botolph's in 1614.⁴⁹ A John Symons also appears in the same registers, marrying Anne Browne in 1586 (possibly a relative of Robert Browne of Worcester's Men, who became leaseholder of the Boar's Head) and christening a son in 1589.⁵⁰ This would seem to be the same 'John Symons, and other his fellows, servants of the Earl of Oxford' who performed 'feats of activity and vaulting' at court on 1 January 1585.⁵¹

The great actor, Edward Alleyn, had also been born in the parish in 1566, in his parent's house, the Pye Inn, which was next door to Fisher's Folly on the north side. He was aged 16 when Oxford moved there. In October 1585, at the age of nineteen, he and his brother John bought his mother and stepfather's properties in Bishopsgate Street, consisting of 'four messuages in Busshopsgate Streete without Busshopsgate in the suburb of London, lying next the house of the Earl of Oxford' and in a later document 'messuages... lying next the mansion-house of Fisher's Folly, in Bishopsgate Street, with an alley and garden and eight small tenements adjoining... [endorsed] Pye Alley in Bishopsgate Street'.⁵² In 1585 Alleyn was already acting with Worcester's Men, and would certainly have known Oxford and his players. By 1587 the 21-year-old 'star' had joined the Admiral's Men to play in Marlowe's *Tamberlaine*.

Further to the north in Shoreditch by the early 1590's, possibly from the late 1580s, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe shared lodgings. Other residents there were Robert Greene, James Burbage and his sons Richard and Cuthbert, and the actors Richard Tarlton (d.1588), William Sly, Richard Cowley and Nicholas Tooley. Thomas

Watson may also have lived in Shoreditch, but is later recorded living in Bishopsgate ward. By 1595, a certain William Shaksper is first recorded as living in the parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, within the city and defaulting on his rent.

Members of the Bassano family of court musicians also lived in the area. Emilia Bassano (sometime candidate for 'the dark lady' of the sonnets) was christened at St Botolph's, Bishopsgate, in January 1569, and in 1592 she married Alphonso Lanier at St Botolph's-without-Aldgate.⁵³ The great comedian, Robert Armin, was also born in the parish of St Botolph's-without-Aldgate c.1570 and was buried there on 30 November in 1615. Armin appears to have lived in that parish all his life. Alice, the 'sometime wife' of Augustine Phillips, 'a player with the King's Men' was buried there in 1617. John Brayne, brother-in-law to Richard Burbage and co-developer of the theatres, also lived in Whitechapel.

Oxford almost certainly knew most, and perhaps all, of these people.

A London base for Oxford's Men?

With all of the above connections in mind, we might well ask what Oxford's purpose was in buying the seven acres of land with buildings at the 'Great Garden', so close to the Boar's Head Inn, and which remained active in his ownership from June 1580 to at least July 1591, when it was entrusted to his brother-in-law. Apart from its obvious use as a property portfolio, an additional possibility is that it was put to use, at least in the early years, as a home base for Oxford's Men. In part of the seven-acre plot they could have stored their touring wagons and stabled and pastured their horses. In one of the buildings they could have stored properties and costumes, and even used the space for rehearsals, perhaps under Oxford's direction. Some actors may have had lodgings there.

To support this theory, it is significant that one of the three men named in the indenture of June 1580 was George Kirkham, a cousin of Edward Kirkham (1550-1617) a Revels officer from 1581 and Yeoman of the Revels from 1586, responsible for court theatre costumes. He worked with Henry Evans for the Blackfriars, and is later documented as receiving licenses for training boy players for the Children of the Revels under Queen Anne⁵⁴. Edward Kirkham was authorised to sell or hire out costumes to different companies, so the relationship between George and Edward Kirkham again suggests that theatre business was, indeed, part of Oxford's reason for the purchase of this property.

Afterword

On 4 July 1591 Oxford sold the ‘Great Garden’ property to Francis Trentham and John Woolley ‘for life... or to receive the rents thereof for life, the reversion and the remainder and the entire fee simple, to be disposed of for the advantage of Elizabeth, sister of the said Francis Trentham.’⁵⁵ Oxford married Elizabeth four months later in late December 1591, and presumably moved to Stoke Newington immediately afterwards.

The registers of St Botolph’s Bishopsgate contain the following interesting entry in the ‘Burials’ lists, not previously noticed by Oxford’s biographers: ‘27 August 1591, Mr Thomas Bracey, servant to the Lord Oxenford, slain in the Spittle’, i.e. in St Mary’s Hospital in Spitalfields.⁵⁶ Since Bracey was buried in Oxford’s parish church of St Botolph’s, Bishopsgate, he was presumably part of his household at this time. However, Oxford had sold Fisher’s Folly to William Cornwallis and his wife before December 1588. As Cornwallis’s name does not appear in St Botolph’s churchwarden’s accounts until late 1589 or early 1590,⁵⁷ there is a gap of a year or so in Oxford’s residential record. And since the St Botolph’s record of August 1591 for Bracey’s burial suggests he was living in the household, where was Oxford living at that time? He may have retained chambers in Fisher’s Folly after Cornwallis had moved in, or lived at the Great Garden property until his marriage to Elizabeth Trentham. The couple moved to Stoke Newington and then in c.1597 to Hackney.

At all events, Fisher’s Folly and ‘the great garden’ property at Aldgate together represent the longest residence/ownership Oxford ever had, living in the same area during the most important period for his relationship to the public theatre and his patronage of authors such as John Lyly, Thomas Watson, Robert Greene and many others.

Oxford intended the ‘Great Garden’ property to remain in his family, but when he died in 1604, his heir, Henry, was only 11 years old and, just as Oxford had been in 1562, was unable to continue patronage of Oxford’s Men until his majority. By that time (1614), Henry had set out on foreign travel and ultimately pursued a military career, showing no apparent interest in the theatre.

Conclusions

Oxford’s purchases of Fisher’s Folly and the ‘Great Garden’ properties in 1580 were purposefully related to his theatrical interests. It is possible that the latter property was used as a London base for his own acting troupe, whose usual and preferred

playing venue is known to have been the immediately adjacent Boar's Head. The long family friendship with the landowner, Thomas Wentworth, placed Oxford in a position of having a say as to which plays and which players might be allowed to perform at the Boar's Head.

In this decade Oxford's Men were developed and strengthened, Oxford gave the lease of the Blackfriars to John Lyly, saw the establishment of the Queen's Men in 1583 with several of his actors included, received an annual pension of £1000 from Queen Elizabeth in 1586, and the prototype 'Shakespeare' history plays were being written and performed. Oxfordians will recognise this decade as the 'seed bed' of the 'Shakespeare' canon of plays, not the mid-1590's and later as is usually claimed.

There are many missing links in the history of the theatre in the 1580s and its relationship to what happened in the next decade. The Boar's Head was a successful playhouse, especially from 1594 onwards. Robert Browne had built more galleries at the Boar's Head by 1599. He obviously needed more audience capacity, and this suggests that some *very* successful plays were being performed there in the years prior to this. We don't know what they were, but perhaps some of them were by the dramatist known as 'Shakespeare'.

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