

Fisher's Folly



Fisher's Folly, Bishopsgate, London, and its connection with Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, and Anne Cornwallis' commonplace-book of poems.

Author: Peter Dawkins

www.fbrt.org.uk/pages/peter_dawkins

In 1580 Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, then thirty years old, bought the mansion in Bishopsgate known as Fisher's Folly, the original builder and first owner, Jasper Fisher having died on 28 February 1579. Until then Oxford's only London home had been Oxford Place by London Stone, which he inherited, it having been the London residence of the 15th and 16th earls of Oxford since 1539.¹

Fisher's Folly occupied the present site of Devonshire Square, just east of Bishopsgate Street and within the boundary of Bishopsgate Ward. It was a palatial dwelling, described by Stowe as a "large and beautifull house with Gardens of pleasure, bowling Alleys and sumptuously builded".² Built by Jasper Fisher, a member of the Goldsmiths' Company who was one of the six clerks in Chancery and a Justice of the Peace, the construction and maintenance of this princely establishment proved such a strain on his resources that the place was called Fisher's Folly. According to Henry Howard, De Vere paid not only a large sum for the property but also for renovations to it.

During the early 1580s it appears that Oxford lived mainly at Wivenhoe, one of his Essex country houses, but this was sold in 1584. He continued to maintain both his London houses until 1588 when, after the death of his first wife, he sold both properties; Fisher's Folly being sold in December 1588 to William (later Sir William) Cornwallis of Brome, a descendant of the 11th Earl of Oxford as well as a relative of the Cecils.

Why Oxford should want two palatial London houses is a moot point, especially as his main London residence as a family home was still Oxford Place.

One possibility is that Oxford needed a separate townhouse to that of his family. During 1580-81 the earl was still estranged from his wife, Anne Cecil,³ and had an active on-going relationship with his mistress, Anne Vavasor, resulting in the birth of a son⁴ in March 1581. He plus his mistress and new-born child were imprisoned in the Tower of London for a few months. On the 8 June he was released, thanks to Burghley, but he remained under house arrest until sometime in July 1581 when he was freed but banished from court until June 1583. He was reconciled to his wife at Christmas 1581, but his affair with Anne Vavasor continued to have repercussions, including violent street brawls between the retainers of Oxford and Sir Thomas Knyvett, uncle of Anne Vavasor, which resulted in the deaths of three followers of De Vere and Knyvett as well as injury to both men.

Fisher's Folly was located near to the theatre district, close to the newly established Fortune and Curtain Theatres, and not far from the Boars Head Inn at Eastcheap and the Bull Inn on Bishopsgate Street where plays were regularly performed. Oxford was intensely interested in the theatre, having revived in April 1580 his father's acting company, the Lord Oxford Players, and being an acknowledged patron of many poets and playwrights as well as being a poet and playwright himself. So this might be another or additional reason for his

purchase of Fisher's Folly. His patronage was acknowledged by such poets as John Lyly, Thomas Watson, Robert Greene, Anthony Munday, Thomas Churchyard and Thomas Nashe, who comprised some of the so-called "University wits" of the 1580s. Oxford, in his occupation of Fisher's Folly, was said to have surrounded himself with "lewd friends", which could be taken (or not) as a reference to his poet friends.

Oxfordians often use as support for this suggestion⁵ the fact that Nashe, in his *Strange News*, responds to Gabriel Harvey's criticism by explaining that his discourse takes place within a well-governed nobleman's house and in the company of "rare qualified men and selected good scholars":-

"For the order of my life, it is as civil as a civil orange.⁶ I lurk in no corners but converse in a house of credit, as well governed as any college, where there be more rare qualified men and selected good Scholars than in any Nobleman's house that I know in England.

"If I had committed such abominable villanies, or were a base shifting companion, it stood not with my Lord's honour to keep me. . . ."

However, *Strange News*, which was entered in the Stationers' Register to John Danter on 12 January 1593 under the title *The Apology of Pierce Penilesse, or Strange News of the intercepting certain letters and a convoy of verses as they were going to victual the Low Counties*, was Thomas Nashe's response to Gabriel Harvey's *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets*, which had been entered in the Stationers' Register on 4 December 1592, and printed by John Wolfe, in whose house Harvey was residing at the time. It is quite clear from this that Nash was referring to some other nobleman's house, as Oxford had sold both his London houses in 1588.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that Oxford did not entertain poets and playwrights amongst his "lewd friends" at Fisher's Folly during the 1580s.

William Cornwallis, to whom Oxford sold Fisher's Folly in 1588, provided a position in his household as "reader" for the poet Thomas Watson, one of Oxford's literary protégés, whom Cornwallis describes as a prolific and popular playwright in letters to Sir Thomas Heneage. Cornwallis also employed or patronised other literary and musical men, and became a friend of Ben Jonson. He was married to Lucy Neville, and they and their family lived at Brome Hall near Diss in Norfolk, but had a house in Highgate as well as Fisher's Folly in Bishopsgate, London. Their daughter Anne was a poet in her own right and is the subject of an interesting discovery.

In 1852 the scholar and Shakespeare biographer J. O. Halliwell-Phillips announced his discovery of a small commonplace-book of some thirty pages bearing the signature of "Anne Cornwaleys", who was probably the daughter of William Cornwallis.⁷ The commonplace-book contains 33 poems written in two different hands, being transcriptions of the work of various Elizabethan poets. The collection includes:-

- an anonymous poem that appeared in 1599 as Poem XVIII in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (an anthology of 20 poems printed by William Jaggard and attributed to "W. Shakespeare");

- some verses composed by or attributed to Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford;
- some verses by “J. Bentley” (i.e. John Bentley, the noted Elizabethan actor and poet, who was a leading man with the Queen’s Players from 1583 until his death in August 1585);⁸
- some poems that were printed in *The Paradise of Daintie Devices*;⁹
- a poem by “G.M.” (supposedly Gervase Markham);
- a poem attributed to “Sir P. Sidney”, which was printed as the “Montanus Sonnet” in *England’s Helicon*, published 1600, with “S.E.D.” (the initials of Edward Dyer) subscribed to it;¹⁰
- a poem by “Ann Vavaser” (i.e. Ann Vavasor, Oxford’s mistress and one of Queen Elizabeth’s Ladies of the Bedchamber, 1580-81), which is printed on the page opposite the so-called Echo poem attributed to Oxford.

Halliwell-Phillips estimated that Anne Cornwallis¹¹ had the transcriptions made of these then-unpublished verses some time during the years 1590-5, when she was living (from time to time) at Fisher’s Folly with her parents, William Cornwallis and Lucy Neville. The house was eventually sold to the Fifth Earl of Rutland sometime before 1603.

Of particular note, in terms of Shakespeare, is that F. E. Halliday and others have found a resemblance between Poem XVIII in *The Passionate Pilgrim* and Canto XLVII of *Willobie His Avis* (1594) by Henry Willobie, a poem in which Willobie listens to advice from his friend “W.S.”. These initials are often conjectured to be those of William Shakespeare. The conjecture is highly questionable but, if true, it is possible that the anonymous poem in Anne Cornwallis’s commonplace-book—the poem that that appeared as Poem XVIII in *The Passionate Pilgrim*—is or might be an early example of Shakespeare’s poetry.

None of this proves much, except that Anne Cornwallis, or her amanuenses, had access to unpublished poems by poets whom she might have known. In terms of Oxford being Shakespeare, which Oxfordians propose, it proves nothing.

A far more important collection of manuscripts is the one referred to as “The Northumberland Manuscript”—a collection seemingly compiled and written for Henry Neville by Francis Bacon’s scrivenry no later than 1597, and which once contained two then unpublished Shakespeare plays (*Richard II* and *Richard III*) as well as a play by Nashe (*The Isle of Dogs*) and an unknown play, *Asmund and Cornelia*, all bound with philosophical and poetical writings by Francis Bacon, and a contents page that links Francis Bacon with Shakespeare’s name. It should also be noted that William Cornwallis was a friend of Ben Jonson, and the latter was one of Francis Bacon’s “good pens”.

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Endnotes

¹ Oxford House or Oxford Place by London Stone (sometimes erroneously referred to as Vere House), the London home of the earls of Oxford, was located in Walbrook Ward, on the north side of

St. Swithin's Church and Churchyard. Originally it was the dwelling house of Henry Fitz-Alwin, the first mayor of London, (1189?-1211). When Henry's granddaughter Joan married William Aguylun, the house passed into the hands of that family. In 1285-6 Sir Robert Aguylun gave the house with its courtyard and gardens to the Priory of Tortinton, together with the patronage of St. Swithin's Church. After the dissolution of the monasteries, in 1539 Henry VIII granted the house to John de Vere, 15th Earl of Oxford. The 15th and 16th Earls of Oxford (both named John de Vere) made their London home here. The mansion was eventually inherited by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, who sold it in 1588 after the death of his first wife.

² Stow, John. *A Survey of London* (1603).

³ Anne Cecil was the daughter of Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and his second wife, Mildred Cooke, sister of Anne Cooke, wife of Sir Nicholas Bacon. Robert Cecil was her brother, Thomas Cecil her half-brother, and Anthony and Francis Bacon were her cousins.

⁴ Later to be known as Sir Edward Vere.

⁵ The idea has been taken up and developed by Oxfordians from a suggestion first put forward by Charles Wisner Barrell in 1945 that Oxford acquired Fisher's Folly "as headquarters for the school of poets and dramatists who openly acknowledged his patronage and leadership."

⁶ A pun on Seville, from which London's oranges were imported. Shakespeare uses the same pun in *Much Ado*. II.1.263: "The count is neither sad nor sick ... but civil ... civil as an orange."

⁷ Halliwell-Phillips published the first account of his acquisition of the russia leather-bound quarto bearing the large feminine signature, "Anne Cornwaleys her booke," in a volume entitled, *Catalogue of Shakespeare Reliques In the Possession of James Orchard Halliwell, Esq., F.R.S. in the year 1852*. Only seventy copies of the *Catalogue* were printed. A copy can be found in the Folger Library (Folger MS V.a.89).

"Anne Cornwaleys" is generally assumed to be Anne Cornwallis, the daughter of Sir William Cornwallis, but the latter had an aunt called Anne who died unmarried (and therefore kept her family name of Cornwallis). Sir William's mother, wife of his father, Sir Thomas Cornwallis, was also named Anne, as were both wives of his younger brother, Charles Cornwallis. It is possible therefore that the commonplace-book of poetry belonged to one of these four women rather than to Sir William's daughter Anne; but the latter is the most likely.

⁸ Thomas Dekker in *A Knight's Conjuring* (1607) describes "inimitable Bentley" as a poet among Poets; "though he had been a player, yet because he had been their lover, and a register to the Muses."

⁹ *The Paradise of Dainty Devices*, the most popular miscellany printed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, first appeared in 1576, and by 1606 had reached at least a tenth edition. Copies of nine of these editions are extant; all copies of the 1577 edition seem to have been lost. Compiled by Richard Edwards, a distinguished lyricist and playwright, sometime before his death on October 31, 1566, the *Paradise* was perhaps inspired by the collections of "songs and sonnets" now known as *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) and *A Handful of Pleasant Delights* (1566, 1584).

¹⁰ The "Montanus Sonnet", which has the signature of "S.E.D." (Edward Dyer), is also inserted in Lodge's *Rosalinde, or Euphues' Golden Legacy* (1590) as "Montanus' Second Sonnet".

¹¹ Anne Cornwallis, daughter of Sir William Cornwallis and Lucy Neville, became Countess of Argyll when, on 30 November 1610, she married Archibald Campbell, 7th Earl of Argyll, son of Colin Campbell, 6th Earl of Argyll and Lady Anne Keith. The marriage took place at St. Botolph's Church, Bishopsgate, London, England. Anne died on 12 January 1634/35.