

# Ralph Sheldon (1537–1613) of Beoley and Weston: cloaked in conformity?

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On two occasions, in 1580–1 and 1587, the Worcestershire gentleman Ralph Sheldon of Beoley and Weston (1537–1613) undertook to attend services in his parish church. This article seeks to make sense of these occasions of ‘conformity’, in the context of the situation and choices facing Catholics in Protestant England. It argues that Ralph consciously rejected the Jesuit message about non-attendance at the state church, a view he never abandoned. Never described by his contemporaries as ‘papistically affected’, let alone as an ‘obstinate recusant’, his later reputation as such is mistaken. By exploring the evidence relating to these occasions of official conformity, it is possible to see how he managed the challenge of being a Catholic living within the law. He could be regarded, and treated, as an obedient subject. He might thus be viewed as a church papist. However, since occasional conformity must itself also suggest recusancy, a more nuanced understanding of his position requires a reconsideration of some of the evidence.

Keywords: Sheldon, conformity, Jesuits, loyalty, church papist

**R**alph Sheldon of Beoley and Weston (1537–1613) opened his will with a strongly Catholic preamble, followed by a declaration of his wish to die as he had lived, in the verities of the Catholic church.<sup>1</sup> This statement appears to contradict his undertaking in 1581 to remain loyal to the queen and to attend church, in other words to conform to the law demanding attendance. Dividing opinion now much as he did in his lifetime, his amorphous figure flits through sixteenth-century English Catholic history. Previous studies have presented Sheldon in a number of different ways. Sheldon’s only biographer, writing in 1936, noted strong Protestant influences in his childhood.<sup>2</sup> W. R. Trimble asserted, without substantiation, that he was ‘regarded as one of their staunchest coreligionists by Catholics’, setting the framework which has since guided perception of

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<sup>1</sup> London, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), PROB 11/121/345.

<sup>2</sup> E. A. B. Barnard, *The Sheldons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

Sheldon's conduct.<sup>3</sup> T. B. Minney claimed he had conformed 'because of sickness', whilst A. Morey endowed him with a long, unsubstantiated, history of recusancy.<sup>4</sup> A throw away remark claimed his association with every plot.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the editors of a key source collection on recusancy and conformity note that 'we know little about this layman'.<sup>6</sup>

Ralph's activities attracted government attention on four occasions: brief detention in 1580, his conviction as a recusant in 1587, allegations of plotting in 1594 and as bystander in moves towards greater toleration in 1603. His two earliest biographers, chroniclers of the Sheldon family, portrayed Ralph as a Catholic victim. Using official sources in print leavened by local knowledge, E. A. B. Barnard, a High Anglican, depicted him dispassionately as head of a landed family he revered, silently regretting their religion as a handicap to social position.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the Benedictine Father, Brendan Minney, who was priest at Redditch 1961–1967, was reliable about later generations from Catholic sources. However, Minney set Ralph against an inaccurate Catholic background.<sup>8</sup> A determined, but ill-founded, effort to claim Ralph for recusancy – refusal of church attendance — was made by the most recent biographers.<sup>9</sup>

Ralph was a convicted, fine-paying recusant for only three years. Whatever suspicions his contemporaries harboured, he was not officially known as 'papistically affected'. On two occasions he undertook to attend church services, hardly making him the most obstinate of recusants. The paradox between his behaviour and his later presentation has never been examined. Reconsideration of familiar material, alongside unknown or unread sources suggests that Sheldon illustrates both Christopher Haigh's argument that the process of reform was not complete or fully accepted even by the end of the sixteenth century,

<sup>3</sup> W. R. Trimble, *The Catholic laity in Elizabethan England, 1558–1603* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 105–06. Sheldon was passed over by John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975) and by Arnold Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalty in Elizabethan England* (London: Scolar Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> T. B. Minney, 'The Sheldons of Beoley', *Worcestershire Recusant* 5 (May 1965): 1–17; A. Morey, *Catholic Subjects of Queen Elizabeth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Alan Davidson, 'Catholics and Bodley', *Bodleian Library Record* 7 (1972), 252–257.

<sup>6</sup> Ginevra Crosignani, Thomas M. McCoog, Michael Questier eds. *Recusancy and conformity in early modern England: manuscript and printed sources in translation* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 2010), 116n.

<sup>7</sup> K. Gill-Smith, 'E. A. B. Barnard MA FSA FRHist, A Freeman of Evesham', *Vale of Evesham Historical Society, Research Papers I* (1967): 47–53.

<sup>8</sup> <http://minney.org.uk/webpages/brendan.htm>. Accessed 20 June 2019. See also the brief biographical note in 'Two Lists of supposed adherents of Mary Queen of Scots, 1574 and 1582', ed. John Bannerman Wainwright, *Miscellany viii*, Catholic Record Society, 13 (1913) (hereafter 'Two Lists'): 86–142 at 98–99.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Davidson, 'The Recusancy of Ralph Sheldon', *Worcester Recusant* 12 (December 1968): 1–7, more strongly with S. M. Thorpe in 'Ralph Sheldon', in P. W. Hasler ed., *House of Commons 1558-1603* 3 vols. (London, H.M.S.O., 1981): 3.

and fits Alexandra Walsham's portrayal of the church papist.<sup>10</sup> Defined by the Benedictine Augustine Baker (1575–1641), as those '... who did believe Catholicke religion in their hearts, but did outwardly practise the Protestant for fear or interest', this study looks at how one such man lived.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, it bears in mind Michael Questier's argument that the same individual could be 'recusant' or 'church-papist' at different points in their life.<sup>12</sup>

Ralph was born in 1537 into an upwardly mobile family. His father held a number of county posts, as well as local offices which helped execute the Henrician Reformation. He was also briefly solicitor to queen Katherine Parr.<sup>13</sup> By 1560 his contacts, official and familial, amongst members of the Elizabethan government included Sir Ambrose Cave, William Cecil and the Dudley brothers, Ambrose and Robert. Ralph attended the Middle Temple from 1556–58; he married into the well-connected Throckmorton family, and, in 1563, became MP for Worcestershire. He inherited around 14,000 acres in 1571, was a JP in Worcestershire at least from 1572 and sheriff in 1576–77.<sup>14</sup>

Ralph had not grown up in devout Catholicism. His grandfather had expressed himself happy with Henry VIII's early moves against Rome; in 1564 his father was described as 'indifferent' in religion.<sup>15</sup> Minney's picture of mass being celebrated in chapel and chancel at Beoley church through the century does not match the evidence.<sup>16</sup> In 1569 Ralph's place was on the commission of musters for Worcestershire raising forces to march against the northern earls; the army was commanded by Ambrose earl of Warwick, briefly

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Haigh, *English reformations: religion, politics, and society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1993); Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1993), 2, which misidentifies Ralph Sheldon with the Norfolk-London merchant family of Shelton.

<sup>11</sup> *Memorials of Fr Augustine Baker OSB*, eds. Dom Justin McCann and Dom Hugh Connolly, Catholic Record Society 33 (London: 1933): 74.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Questier, 'What Happened to English Catholicism after the English Reformation?', *History*, 85 (2000), 28–47 at p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> S.T. Bindoff, *House of Commons 1509-1558* (London, 1982), 306-08.

<sup>14</sup> *Register of Admissions to the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple*, ed. H.A.C. Sturgess, 3 vols. (London:1949) (1): 22, 1556; Thorpe and Davidson, 'Ralph Sheldon'.

<sup>15</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII*, 21 vols, ed. J.S. Brewer, J Gardiner and R. H. Brodie (London 1862-1910), 13(1) no. 822; M. Bateson, ed. 'A Collection of Original Letters from the Bishops to the Privy Council, 1564', *Camden Miscellany IX*, Camden Society NS liii (1895): 6.

<sup>16</sup> Minney claims that Mass was celebrated there by Mr Brock: Minney, *Sheldons*, 4. Brock was buried there in 1570 but was not the parish priest. Beoley Parish Registers. Church of England Clergy Database [<http://theclergydatabase.org.uk/>]. Accessed 3 July 2019] gives Richard Whittington or Weston (CCed Person ID: 83169); Richard Malbon (d.1561) (CCed Person ID: 66546); Humphrey More (d.1576) (CCed Person ID: 28271) and William Aldwell (CCed Record ID: 247550). The chapel was constructed and furnished with four impressive tombs around 1600. Treadway Nash, *Collections for a History of Worcestershire*, 2 vols (London: 1781): 1, 66.

son-in-law of Sheldon's step-mother.<sup>17</sup> Later, Ralph was appointed twice by the privy council to mediate in local disputes. The first, in 1572, concerned a land deal involving Francis Alford, brother of Cecil's advisor, Roger and Sheldon's neighbour in his London Whitefriars' apartments.<sup>18</sup> The second occasion, in 1573–74, concerned charges of wrongful enclosure and of wrongful eviction against Sir John Conwey of Arrow, Warwickshire.<sup>19</sup> Given this apparent approval, it is striking, therefore, that Ralph's name is found in a list of Mary Queen of Scots' potential supporters in 1574, and that in the summer of 1575 his older, Protestant, sister hosted queen Elizabeth.<sup>20</sup>

In 1580, Ralph's apparently exemplary existence as a member of the gentry ended. Two accounts survive. One is a government source, the other written by one of the two Jesuit missionaries, Robert Persons and Edmund Campion, whose arrival in London prompted Ralph's summons before the privy council in mid-August.<sup>21</sup> Amongst the fifty or so 'dyvers principal persons, recusants' the council was 'minded to reform', Ralph's first examination, by Bishop Aylmer, resulted in committal to the Marshalsea prison.<sup>22</sup> Questioned six weeks later by Bishop Whitgift, in whose diocese he lived and on whose information he had probably been summoned, Sheldon admitted that he had not attended church for the past ten years.<sup>23</sup> His wife was permitted, or persuaded, to make a plea for his release on the grounds of ill-health endangering his life. By 1 November Ralph was transferred into the custody of the Dean of Westminster, Gabriel Goodman, former chaplain to William Cecil, Lord Burghley.<sup>24</sup> Sheldon was allowed medical care, visitors and use of the Dean's gardens; if the Dean found him able, there was to be 'conference for the reforming of his error in religion'. On 8 January Sheldon stood before the privy council and undertook to 'yielde himselfe dutifull and obedient unto her Majestie and in token thereof to be contented to repair unto the church and in all

<sup>17</sup> TNA, SP 12/63, f.1; Dudley marriage, Bindoff, *House of Commons*, 608–11.

<sup>18</sup> G. R. Elton, *The Parliament of England, 1559–1581* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 129, 296.

<sup>19</sup> Briefly mentioned in Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: social protest and popular disturbances in England, 1509–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 67.

<sup>20</sup> 'Two Lists', 98–9; Sheldon is not named in the second. That he acted as Mary's courier in February 1570 is a modern misreading of *CSPD Addenda 1566–1579*, no. 95, 236, TNA SP 15/17 f.223r–v. The document reads 'Skeldoun', Mary's servitor. *John Nichol's The Progresses of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Elizabeth Goldring et al, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 2: 349 n.629, 358.

<sup>21</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council* (hereafter *APC*), 45 vols, ed. J.R. Dasent (London: HMSO, 1890–1964) 12: 166.

<sup>22</sup> *APC* 12: 156.

<sup>23</sup> Lambeth Palace, Carte Antique A IV no. 183, printed in C.D. Gilbert, 'Catholics in the diocese of Worcester 1580–81,' *Midland Catholic History* 1 (1991): 19–27.

<sup>24</sup> *APC* 12: 254–55.

other things to serve and obey her Highness as becomethe a dutifull subjecte'.<sup>25</sup>

In October 1577 lists of recusants were requested from every diocese, to be supplied within a week.<sup>26</sup> Sheldon's name is missing from the Worcester count, explained by an administrative blunder for which Whitgift later apologized.<sup>27</sup> But perhaps it should not have been overlooked. Ralph's self-confessed decade of non-attendance suggests his absence began around 1570, the year of the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* which declared Elizabeth a bastard, heretic and excommunicate, and freed her Catholic subjects from their allegiance to her. Anyone loyal to the pope would automatically become disloyal to his own sovereign and country. The government response was a series of prohibitions designed to prevent the perpetuation of Catholic culture, most especially the entry of devotional aids or pamphlets into England, and support for priests.<sup>28</sup> Enforcement of the laws and imposition of the fines for non-attendance was patchy during the 1570s. Ralph escaped notice. Only later evidence reveals that, for an undefined period in 1578, the Sheldon household amongst others sheltered Hugh Hall, a Warwickshire-born Marian priest, a connection resumed in 1582 after Hall's sojourn overseas.<sup>29</sup>

Two letters suggest that Sheldon had contacts with at least two Oxford University exiles. Gregory Martin, writing to Edmund Campion in 1575, referred to Sheldon as 'nobilissimo viro'. Three years later Martin wrote of money which Sheldon had tried to send, this time using the phrase 'clarissimo Sheldon'.<sup>30</sup> One might wonder how he reacted to Martin's pamphlet, *A Treatise of Schisme*, published in 1578, which argued that Catholic attendance at parish services was sinful.<sup>31</sup> The following year Sheldon avoided taking the oath as JP: as others did, he claimed to have been out of the county.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps he had been influenced by the decision to refuse the oath made ten years previously by his brother in law, Edmund Plowden. Explaining his

<sup>25</sup> APC 12: 301-02.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Lake, 'A tale of two Episcopal surveys: the strange fate of Edmund Grindal and Cuthbert Mayne revisited', *TRHS*, 6<sup>th</sup> series 18 (2008): 129-162.

<sup>27</sup> TNA, SP 12/118/11; printed as 'Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales 1577', ed. Rev Patrick Ryan SJ, *Miscellanea xii*, Catholic Record Society 22 (London: 1921): 1-108, at 63-66 (hereafter Ryan ed., 'Diocesan Returns'); Whitgift's apology, TNA, SP 12/118 f.21-21v

<sup>28</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, 13 Eliz, caps 1, 2, 3, 5, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Hall's confession, TNA, SP 12/164, f.141-141v, named his hosts: John Talbot of Grafton, Sir John Throckmorton, the Windsors, the Ardens. British Library, London (hereafter BL) MS Cotton Caligula C VIII f. 204r - 206v. Hall was not a former Bordesley monk, as Minney claims. Minney, *Sheldons*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Francis Knox, ed. *The First and Second Diaries of the English Colledge, Douay* (London: 1878), 308, 317.

<sup>31</sup> Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 168-202.

<sup>32</sup> TNA, SP 12/133, f.24v.

reasons, Plowden acknowledged that he owed the queen his love and duty, but could not accept her as the arbiter of his conscience.<sup>33</sup> Clearly the limits to royal authority were discussed in the Sheldon family.

This plays a key role in the second version of Sheldon's decision to conform, written by Robert Persons. Only one of his four eye-witness accounts of his stay in England is contemporary with events; the story grew in the telling. In his letter to Alfonso Agazzari, rector of English College in Rome, on 17 November 1580 Persons named some of those detained; he did not name Sheldon.<sup>34</sup> Yet by 6 November Persons already knew that Thomas, fourth Lord Paget, and Sheldon were less than his heartfelt supporters. They were, said his informant, under the influence of a 'peevisish book'.<sup>35</sup> In 1594 Persons wrote that 'two principall men' had 'yielded' to go to church, because of that book; in 1598 Sheldon alone was named. By 1608 Sheldon was described as a rich and powerful man whose capitulation generated a pasquinade, first alluded to in 1596.<sup>36</sup>

The 'book', about which the privy council records remained discreetly silent, was almost certainly the manuscript now preserved in only one copy filed amongst the State Papers.<sup>37</sup> Labelled in Cecil's spidery hand as 'Sheldon's perswasion', its authorship is uncertain. Persons ascribed its copying to a William Clitherow, characterized as 'little studied though afterward made priest in Flaunders' and as 'a lawyer's clerk', noting in 1608 that he died in France.<sup>38</sup>

Whether an answer to, or the spur for, further tracts, the pamphlet argued that attendance at church to avoid persecution was permissible, the exact opposite of the Jesuit, and Martin's, standpoint.<sup>39</sup> Since the

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey de C. Parmiter, *Elizabethan Popish Recusancy*, Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research Special Supplement 11 (1976), 105-8.

<sup>34</sup> *Letters and Memorials of Father Robert Persons*, ed. L. Hicks, Catholic Record Society 39 (London: 1942): 49-50, 58.

<sup>35</sup> 'Domesticall Difficulties', ed. J. H. Pollen, *Miscellanea II*, Catholic Record Society 2 (London: 1906) (hereafter 'Domesticall Difficulties') 179-80, 'Autobiography', *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> 'Notes on Mission', ed. J. H. Pollen, Catholic Record Society 4 (London: 1906), 3-5, 'Sheldon is fallen and do ye ken why/oves et boves et pecora campi'; E. S. Donno, *Harington's Metamorphosis of Ajax* (London: RKP, 1962), 239.

<sup>37</sup> TNA, SP 12/144, ff. 137-142. Partly printed by Robert Miola ed. *Early Modern Catholicism: an anthology of primary sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71-75; and printed in full in Crosignani, McCoog and Questier eds., *Recusancy and conformity*, see note 1, 116-129. Another copy was found by the torturer Topcliffe: M. C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and religion in England, 1580-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 50.

<sup>38</sup> 'Domesticall Difficulties', 179-180; 'Notes', Catholic Record Society, 4 (London: 1906), 3-5.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Lake and Michael Questier 'Puritans, Papists and the "Public Sphere" in Early Modern England: the Edmund Campion Affair', *Journal of Modern History* 72 (September 2000): 587-627 esp. 603-08; Crosignani, McCoog and Questier eds., *Recusancy and conformity*, xxiii, 143; Elliott Rose, *Cases of Conscience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 74; Peter Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 90-4; Walsham, *Church Papists*, 51.

new factor in the situation was Jesuit insistence on non-attendance, Sheldon's response could be interpreted as rejection of that position, a decision that Persons could not accept.<sup>40</sup>

Three considerations challenge Persons' explanation. Firstly, by 1580 Sheldon was acquainted with Thomas Paget, useful to the privy council as Sheldon had been himself. The tone of Sheldon's letter to him dated March 1581 indicates that they shared memories of social occasions well in the past.<sup>41</sup> According to one source, Paget had arranged the venue in Smithfield outside London's walls for the mass celebrated, and sermon delivered, by the newly arrived Campion on 29 June 1580.<sup>42</sup> Paget's summons on 7 August, the first of the fifty or so despatched, probably confirms its truth.<sup>43</sup> It is perfectly possible, though speculative, that Sheldon had assisted him so that both men had 'had the doings with the Jesuits'. The Jesuits' arrival after all was no surprise to the government or to a well-organized welcome group of London Catholics. Given later events, it is reasonable to suggest that Paget and Sheldon had been amongst them.

Secondly, Sheldon's confinement in the Marshalsea overlapped with that of Thomas Pounce, former courtier and recent convert. Pounce met the Jesuits just as they were leaving London, and they gifted him with their mission statements in case, as seemed probable, they were captured. Pounce had been enjoined to silence, but he shared the content with his fellow prisoners, developing and expanding the plans and ideas set out.<sup>44</sup> Given the slack conditions inside the Marshalsea, Sheldon must almost unavoidably have been amongst his hearers.

Thirdly, in the light of new material, Mrs Sheldon's plea for Ralph's release because of ill-health looks rather too convenient, even contrived. Later evidence suggests that Ralph enjoyed a hardy constitution; even in his sixtieth year, 1597, he made a round trip of some 300 miles on horseback from the Midlands to Sir Thomas Cornwallis in Suffolk.<sup>45</sup> Any indisposition suffered in the Marshalsea seems likely to be transient rather than life-threatening as she claimed; though possibly serious, requiring immediate relief through the services of a surgeon, it may also have been fictitious.<sup>46</sup> Née Throckmorton, her own

<sup>40</sup> It is unclear why the editor of *Two Lists* concluded that Sheldon was 'an intimate friend of Fr Persons.'

<sup>41</sup> Stafford Record Office, D603-K-1-6-34.

<sup>42</sup> Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 67-8; Richard Simpson, *Edmund Campion, A Biography* (Leominster: Gracewing Reprint, 2010), 178.

<sup>43</sup> *APC* 12: 134.

<sup>44</sup> A. C. Southern, *Elizabethan Recusant Prose* (London, 1950), 149-150, 480-81.

<sup>45</sup> Warwickshire County Record Office (hereafter WaCRO), CR 2632, *passim*; Bodl Ms Tanner 115, f. 58; Ms Tanner 283, f. 6.

<sup>46</sup> She made no similar request for her imprisoned brother, Thomas.

family was divided.<sup>47</sup> She herself was a staunch Catholic, unafraid to summon a priest to her daughter's house.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless she perhaps agreed with Ralph's dislike of the stern Jesuit objectives and performed her part in a face-saving manoeuvre to cover his only alternative, the decision to conform, already made. His comfortable, relaxed detention with Dean Goodman lasted only until the council had formulated the defensive measures thought necessary, announced in January.

It is also worth recalling that not all Catholics accorded the Jesuits an unqualified welcome. When a small group of Catholics met the missionaries almost immediately after their arrival in Southwark some even urged them to leave England.<sup>49</sup> Sheldon and Paget, whether at the meeting or not, perhaps shared that opinion. This could explain their early decision to conform, Paget at a sermon in St Paul's a week after Sheldon's undertaking before the privy council.<sup>50</sup> Other detainees were released only in May, on conditions.<sup>51</sup>

In the light of his subsequent behaviour, it is difficult to see Sheldon's conformity either as Trimble's Protestant victory, or as Minney's or Morey's weakness.<sup>52</sup> Pounce's enthusiastic exposition perhaps gave Ralph an insight into Jesuit aims. With the time to weigh up the probable consequences, he reached a deliberate decision to conform, considering that loyalty to the queen was preferable to the potentially divisive demands for loyalty to the Papacy. If the price of conforming was an undertaking – not on oath, not by bond – to give his allegiance to the queen expressed by, and recognized in, church attendance, agreement might not prove too difficult. The mechanism to report absentees was scarcely robust.

If Ralph had any regrets about his promise of allegiance, opportunity to change his mind soon came. In 1583 serious threat of trouble came from men to whom he was related: John Somerville's desire to assassinate the queen,<sup>53</sup> the Throckmorton

<sup>47</sup> Her uncle was Clement Throckmorton and his son Job, Warwickshire JPs. For relationships, Peter Marshall and Geoffrey Scott, eds. *Catholic Gentry in English Society: the Throckmortons of Coughton from Reformation to Emancipation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 270.

<sup>48</sup> The Marian priest John Felton, not to be confused with the Felton who nailed the bull *Regnans* to the door of St Paul's: his confession in 1582 is at TNA, SP 12/156/29. Nevertheless, a visit from Campion to Beoley, Kilroy, *Scholarly Life*, 192, unsubstantiated, seems unlikely.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas McCoog, *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland and England 'Our way of proceeding'* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 143–45; Kilroy, *Scholarly Life*, 170; 'Domesticall Difficulties', 177–8.

<sup>50</sup> *CSPD 1581-90*, p. 1, no.5; TNA SP 12/147, ff.7-7v.

<sup>51</sup> *APC* 13: 42.

<sup>52</sup> Trimble, *Catholic Laity*, 105–06; Minney, *Sheldons*, 4–5; Morey, *Catholic Subjects*, 140, 142–3.

<sup>53</sup> Glynn Parry, 'Catholicism and Tyranny in Shakespeare's Warwickshire' in R Malcolm Smuts ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 121–138.

Plot,<sup>54</sup> and Edward Arden's supposed treachery, target of the earl of Leicester's accusations.<sup>55</sup> Nothing linked Sheldon to treasonous activity. The authorities accepted his loyalty and did not question him, although there were rumours in Warwickshire that he 'was fled abroad'.<sup>56</sup> But, unlike Thomas Paget, who left England in December, Sheldon saw no reason to choose exile.<sup>57</sup>

Eighteen months later Ralph was targeted by his erstwhile son-in-law, Sir John Russell of Strensham. Given leave of absence from the House of Commons to pursue 'his great business', Russell mounted a case in Star Chamber, either from personal malice or as mouthpiece of earl of Leicester in a replay of his recent attack on the Arden family.<sup>58</sup> Sheldon faced a lengthy inquisition on his personal religious behaviour and his conduct in office as sheriff and JP. He responded with a protestation of his loyalty; claiming his religion was no business of the court, he evaded any answer.<sup>59</sup> No obvious penal outcome followed, although the quarrelsome Russell was almost immediately sent abroad in the earl of Leicester's household. The incident seems to mark the end of a connection long since weakened. Sheldon drew closer to Sir Christopher Hatton, Leicester's opponent in the privy council and rival in the queen's affections. Hatton was more sympathetic to Catholics, and increasingly influential in Warwickshire politics.<sup>60</sup>

Local suspicions of the Sheldon family's unreliability in the matter of religion persisted. Late in 1586 a Worcestershire clothier, Thomas Morley, probably a member of a local family living some five miles north of Worcester, voiced his fears of Sheldon's undue influence in the county to the queen's spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham.<sup>61</sup> The complaint may have prompted Sheldon's presentation for recusancy at the Worcester spring Assizes in 1587. In June he received a letter from Walsingham, followed by a summons before the council.<sup>62</sup> Though Ralph presented himself to the council's clerks and was told to hold himself in readiness, the Council's deliberations went unrecorded.

<sup>54</sup> John Bossy, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), 28–33.

<sup>55</sup> Cathryn C. Enis, 'Edward Arden and the Dudley earls of Warwick and Leicester, c. 1572–1583', *British Catholic History* 33(2) (2016): 170–210.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, SP 12/164 f.78.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, SP 12/167, f. 93–4.

<sup>58</sup> The British Library, Lansdowne Ms, 43, f. 171.

<sup>59</sup> Russell's interrogatories, TNA, STAC 5/R12/34; Sheldon's answers, TNA STAC 5/R41/32.

<sup>60</sup> C.C. Enis, 'The Dudleys, Sir Christopher Hatton and the Justices of Elizabethan Warwickshire', *Midland History* 39 (1): 1–35.

<sup>61</sup> *CSPD 1581–1590*, p. 369, no. 35; TNA SP 12/195 f.58. John O. Morley, 'The Origins of the Morleys in England and their Early Appearance in Wales,' in *Annals of Genealogical Research* 9 (1) (2013): 1–61.

<sup>62</sup> WaCRO, CR 2632, f.74; *APC 15*: 137, 23 June 1587.

Still a JP, Ralph's case was heard in September.<sup>63</sup> It was Worcester's first experience of recent legislation which transferred control of recusancy prosecutions from local to central justices. Cases were to be tried only at the Assizes or at Queen's Bench rather than the quarter sessions.<sup>64</sup> Identifiable from Sheldon's account book, the justices were Sir Roger Manwood, chief baron of the Exchequer since November 1578, and Francis Wyndham, former Steward and Recorder of Norwich, who appears to have remained in the background.<sup>65</sup> The Grand Jury condemned all those brought before them, hesitating only when they reached Ralph's name. Four members of his household asked permission to speak, offering examples of his presence at church. Their statements were deemed inadequate. Manwood's appeal for support from the sheriff, a known Sheldon friend, also failed to bring a positive response. Exasperated, Manwood threatened the jurors with investigation of the way in which they had been appointed, hinting at the possibility of a rigged jury. At that point their resistance collapsed. Ralph was convicted.

It seems as though Manwood had been instructed to ensure Sheldon's conviction, even though, ironically, both justices had sympathies with religious non-conformity. In Hampshire in 1578, Manwood had appointed one of his hosts, a Catholic sympathiser, as a JP; Wyndham had been reprimanded in 1581 over slack enforcement of the law at the Hereford assizes when he had released the recusants sent for trial.<sup>66</sup> Another complaint had been threatened by Bishop Freke at Norwich (and now at Worcester) when the townsmen, Wyndham's clients, proved disinclined to obey the bishop's orders to punish religious offenders.<sup>67</sup> Ralph became part of the drive to increase the low conviction rate for recusancy, a victim of divided opinion over the treatment of Catholics at conciliar level.<sup>68</sup>

A month later Sheldon was removed from the bench, not for specific misdeeds but in accordance with the decision that a man with a recusant wife could not hold office.<sup>69</sup> Records of his fines begin a month after that.<sup>70</sup> Although now technically a recusant, he nevertheless remained noticeably free of the controls placed on many of his more

<sup>63</sup> Alan Davidson, 'The Recusancy of Ralph Sheldon', *Worcestershire Recusant* 12 (December 1968): 1-7. His otherwise full and accurate transcription omitted this paragraph. He could not date the episode exactly.

<sup>64</sup> Statutes, 29 Eliz I c.6; J. S. Cockburn, *A History of English Assizes from 1558-1714* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 204.

<sup>65</sup> Payment of 2s 6d to their 'cryers' CR 2632, ff. 96, 97; Cockburn, *Assizes*, 265-66.

<sup>66</sup> Cockburn, *Assizes*, 208-09, 211.

<sup>67</sup> M. McClendon, *The Quiet Reformation: Magistrates and the emergence of Protestantism in Tudor Norwich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 238-9.

<sup>68</sup> Cockburn, *Assizes*, 204-08.

<sup>69</sup> J. Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, 3 vols. (London: 1725-28 edition), 3(ii), 455, item no 24.

<sup>70</sup> TNA, E 401/1842-48; E 372/432-35, summarized in *Recusants in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls 1581-1592*, eds. H. Bowler and Timothy J. McCann, Catholic Record Society 71 (London: 1986), 152.

openly Catholic friends. He was never required to surrender his arms nor impeded from making new purchases. Neither did he experience detention, as many of his friends and wider family did: Sir Thomas Cornwallis, Sir Thomas Tresham, John Talbot of Grafton, his brother in law Thomas Throckmorton of Coughton, Sir William Catesby and a future brother-in-law, Edward Sulyard.<sup>71</sup> Next year Ralph was careful to contribute £50 to a ‘most needful service to Her Majesty’, a ‘loan’ requested by the queen to defray the expense of the Armada.<sup>72</sup> His willingness to contribute aligns him with many other Catholics who also hoped for the chance to demonstrate their loyalty.

Ralph paid fines for only three years, and by 1589–90 these were entered as a debt rather than having been paid.<sup>73</sup> Sheldon’s name was not noted in the *Abbreviatio* in or after 1590,<sup>74</sup> and it was not transferred to the recusant rolls instituted at Michaelmas 1592.<sup>75</sup> In 1594 it was noted that ‘he cometh to church’.<sup>76</sup> According to a garrulous former servant the Lord Chancellor [Hatton] had written to the Lord Chief Baron [Manwood] that he should not proceed against him [Sheldon], writing that he was at church at his chapel in London.<sup>77</sup> Though no trace of a formal ceremony survives,<sup>78</sup> the statute of 1587 was clear: when a recusant conformed his fines ceased.<sup>79</sup>

Sheldon proceeded to show himself useful. Ownership of salt bullaries at Droitwich gave him electoral influence to assist the selection there of Thomas Combes in 1589, the Whitgift-Hatton candidate, and in 1593 of Robert Walter, well known to Burghley.<sup>80</sup> Service on

<sup>71</sup> James McDermott, *England and the Spanish Armada: the necessary quarrel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 244–47; Francis Young, ‘The Bishop’s Prison at Ely as a Prison for Recusants 1577–1597’, *British Catholic History* 32(2) October 2014: 195–216.

<sup>72</sup> *The Names of those Persons who subscribed towards the defence of this county at the time of the Spanish Armada 1588 and the amounts each contributed*, ed. T. C. Noble (London, 1886), 66–7.

<sup>73</sup> Entered on the pell rolls, TNA, E 401/1842–48 and on the Pipe Rolls. These were levied retrospectively for the year September 1586–October 1587, in full for 1587–88 and 1588–89 but recorded as a debt in 1589–90. TNA, E 372/ 432–35; printed in *Recusants in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls*, Bowler and Mc Cann eds. Catholic Record Society 71 (London: 1986).

<sup>74</sup> TNA, E 401/1847.

<sup>75</sup> Name absent from both originals and edited volumes, *Recusant Roll no. 1 1592–1593*, ed. M.M.C. Calthrop, Catholic Record Society 18 (London:1916); *Recusant Roll 2, 1593–94*, ed. Hugh Bowler, Catholic Record Society 57 (London:1965); *Recusant Roll No. 3 (1594–1595), and No. 4 (1595–1596)*, ed. Hugh Bowler, Catholic Record Society 61 (London:1970).

<sup>76</sup> TNA, SP 12/250, f.1v.

<sup>77</sup> *CSPD 1591–1594*, p. 545, no. 92; TNA SP 12/249 ff.152–154v, 16 August 1594. Where calendaring of repetitive confessions has significantly diminished and even omitted important content both printed and original reference are given.

<sup>78</sup> Dorothy M. Clarke, ‘Conformity Certificates among the King’s Bench Records’, *Recusant History* 14 (1977/78): 53–63; no relevant item is filed in TNA, KB 145/13/32. Vincent Burke, ‘Submissions of Conformity by Elizabethan Recusants in Worcestershire’, *Worcestershire Recusant* 21 (1973): 1–7, found no surviving Worcester diocesan records for this period. Questier, *Conversion*, suggests a degree of flexibility in procedural acknowledgement of conformity, 102–05, 108–110.

<sup>79</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, 29 Eliz cap 6, clause 6.

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Hyde and Alan Davidson, ‘Thomas Combes’, in Hasler ed. *Commons*, 1: 634–5; S.M. Thorpe, ‘Robert Walter’, in Hasler ed. *Commons*, 3: 576.

two commissions in 1591, one in Leicestershire alongside his brother-in-law Thomas Markham, the other in Warwickshire alongside a cousin, Fulke Greville the elder, demonstrates a collaboration which raises questions about the circumstances in which doctrinal differences might be overlooked.<sup>81</sup> Whether or not anyone believed Ralph had experienced a sincere change of heart, his knowledge of local circumstances was useful. It is a striking example of how some in government were ready to accept outward conformity if it allowed the administration to function.

Up to this point one might consider Sheldon as a faithful subject at least. He appeared less so when, in 1594, he again came to the notice of the privy council. The year saw power struggles within the council between the older, experienced Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and the younger earl of Essex.<sup>82</sup> It also saw four plots against the queen.<sup>83</sup> Three had been solo attempts, but in August three young men were questioned about their plans to foster an uprising, kill the queen and put the earl of Derby on the throne in her place. The earl's family had a claim by descent from the youngest sister of Henry VIII; it was not the first occasion on which their support had been hoped for by those with subversive intentions. However, the earl had not been consulted and was in any case about to marry the granddaughter of Lord Burghley. The plotters hoped that Sheldon would be their financier. His consent had not been sought.<sup>84</sup>

The details of the plot have been investigated by Francis Edwards and by Stephen Alford, each reaching different conclusions.<sup>85</sup> However, neither they, nor others, have looked, as the privy council did, at Sheldon's alleged role. He was associated with an inchoate conspiracy by the incautious, and possibly exaggerated, words of a servant, which were opportunistically exploited by the plotters.<sup>86</sup> Ralph's questioning stretched over six weeks at least, but he was not charged with collaboration. Two of the three interrogatories have been misleadingly calendared as 'his contacts with priests'; the content of all has been ignored.<sup>87</sup> Questions started with Sheldon's alleged actions

<sup>81</sup> *APC* 20: 242-3, January; *APC* 21: 187; *APC* 22: 56, 63, 263; Stratford-Upon-Avon, Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive, ER 2/22, 5 October 1591. Friendship with both men was ongoing till their death; the latter made Sheldon his executor.

<sup>82</sup> P. Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: the Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>83</sup> F. Edwards, *Plots and Plotters* (Dublin: 2002); C. Devlin, *Hamlet's Divinity and other essays* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), 'The Earl and the Alchemist', 74-114; Dominic Green, *The Double Life of Dr Lopez* (London: Century, 2003).

<sup>84</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 531, no. 41; TNA SP 12/249 f.70.

<sup>85</sup> Edwards, *Plotters*, 236-252; S. Alford, *The Watchers* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 303-09.

<sup>86</sup> The episode was played down by Barnard, *The Sheldons*, 35, ignored by Minney, *Sheldons*, and misrepresented in Thorpe and Davidson, 'Ralph Sheldon'.

<sup>87</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 554, nos. 1, 2, TNA SP 12/250 f.1r-1v, 3r-3v; *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House* (hereafter *Cecil Papers*), 13 vols (HMSO: London, 1883-1976), 4: 618-19.

but then ranged over ground not mentioned in the plotters' confessions as they are now known. Though none of Sheldon's answers survives, other sources sometimes corroborate, sometimes contradict, the plotters' information, and suggest the reasons behind the questions and the ways in which they were framed. Some of the remarks which follow must remain speculative, but an exploration of the circumstances of the plot expands and alters understanding of Sheldon's life.

The three plotters had all left England without permission. They drifted into service with Sir William Stanley's English regiment in the Low Countries, notorious as a breeding ground for sedition. Edmund Yorke was the nephew of Stanley's co-commander jointly responsible for handing over the English garrison town of Deventer to Spanish forces in 1587. Henry Young was the son of a Kentish gentleman; earlier in the year Yorke had tried to recruit him for service with the emperor Rudolph II.<sup>88</sup> Richard Williams was the son of a known recusant living on Anglesey; he was not related to Sheldon as is often assumed.<sup>89</sup> Late in July 1594 all returned to England on passports supplied by the earl of Essex, only to be arrested. Their expectations of Sheldon originated in an encounter in Louvain with his former servant, Edward Williams, the son of an Oxford Alderman.<sup>90</sup> He acted as Sheldon's factotum in Oxford, and referred to Sheldon as 'uncle' as a courtesy, rather than to acknowledge a kinship tie. Sheldon was closely examined about Williams' reported remarks. The plotters' statements about Sheldon are therefore second-hand. However, because Williams was an eyewitness to most of the information he let slip, because much of that can be substantiated from other sources, and because his identity is beyond doubt, it becomes possible to look closely at a short period in Sheldon's life.

All the plotters had been examined by 16 August when their answers were summarized as follows:

Mr Ralfe Sheldon is charged both by Yorke and Yonge upon report of Williams and partly by Williams *to be a Catholique*, to have masse in his house and resort of priests; a priest kept always in his house; the hope Williams had to have aid of him. *To have sent one Williams his servant under colour of going into Ireland for hawkes [with letters] to Cardinal Allen*; he maintaineth the wife and children of

<sup>88</sup> Edwards, *Plotters*, 240.

<sup>89</sup> The misinformation emanated from the plotter Young. In the same document he described Richard first as the nephew of Anglesey Williams and then as Richard's uncle, *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 531, no. 41, TNA SP 12/249 f.70, 30 July 1594. The link to Sheldon was cited by M. A. S. Hume, *Treason and Plot: struggles for Catholic supremacy in the last years of Elizabeth* (London 1901), 153-161, at 154; it was repeated in 'Two Lists' 98-9. He was not a priest, as Donno, *Harington*, 239, n.193, quoted by G. Kilroy, *Edmund Campion Memory and Transcription* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), 92.

<sup>90</sup> Williams was correctly identified by A. Davidson, 'Edward Williams of Oxford: a Sheldon servant', *Worcestershire Recusant*, 25 (June 1975): 2-4. Edward Williams, though never described as Sheldon's nephew, himself said he was servant to his uncle Sheldon, reported by Young in *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 545, no. 92, TNA SP 12/249 f.152-154v, Aug. 16, 1594 and *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 540, no. 64, TNA SP 12/249 f.108-108v, 12 Aug. 1594 and *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 540, no. 65, TNA SP 12/249, f. 110r-111r, 12 August 1594.

Williams in his absence. That Dr Gifford should be sent into England to resolve him; the Cardinal *keepeth that Williams with his sister at Louvain* lest they should be taken coming into England and so Mr Sheldon revealed and his eldest son going to mass.<sup>91</sup>

The Warwickshire JPs were ordered to command Ralph to report to Sir William Waad, a skilled interrogator, at his house in Wood Street, London. The sheriff of Warwickshire was instructed to arrest William Bishop of Brailes and young Mr Thimelby, described as a possible husband for one of Sheldon's nine daughters. Both were to be sent to London, but neither was found. Bishop's house, like Sheldon's, was to be searched. The council had not yet understood that some of the plotters' information was out of date.<sup>92</sup>

The first of three sets of interrogatories to Sheldon was set out in double column, neatly written: the left hand column noted the answer the privy council expected or what they already knew from their own resources, the right hand column the question to be asked.<sup>93</sup> This set focused on checking out the conspirators' statements, in particular relating to men called Williams. Two further questions, not dependent on the plotters' information, concerned books or papers against the state in Sheldon's possession; the privy council might have been waiting to hear what Sheldon might admit, given he knew that his properties were being searched. Another question concerned Sheldon's brother in law, Thomas Throckmorton of Coughton, Warwickshire. The council had confined him in Broughton castle, Oxfordshire, almost continuously since 1590. However, he had been released in May 1593 to attend to 'waitie causes' and remained at liberty for a further eighteen months, supposedly for his health.<sup>94</sup> Presumably the council feared his contacts with Sheldon. To be certain they had not confused him with a man of the same name, despite their familiarity with the latter's activities, inquiry was also made about 'Thomas Throckmorton beyond the seas', the brother of Francis executed in 1584. Both were distant kin to Sheldon.

The second set of interrogatories, less tidily penned, is marred by several deletions and corrections: a priest's name mentioned in the first

<sup>91</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p.544, no. 87; TNA, SP 12/249, f. 145r-146r. Phrases omitted in the calendar are in italic type. The calendared version incorrectly reads 'Sheldon's daughter going to mass'. Interrogators included the earl of Essex, Lord Cobham, William Waad, Francis Bacon and Sir Michael Blount, lieutenant of the Tower acting on behalf of the privy council; Edward Coke annotated some of the interviews.

<sup>92</sup> Williams had described the circumstances between 1588 and 1591 when four daughters remained unmarried. The proposed alliance with the Thimelbys, unknown from other sources, is not an impossibility. It was perhaps abandoned when the bridegroom's father found himself interned, sometime in 1589. Briefly released, he was quickly returned to custody: *APC* 20: 6-7.

<sup>93</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 554, no. 1, TNA SP 12/250, f.1.

<sup>94</sup> *APC* 18: 415; *APC* 24: 221, 224, 399; Lambeth Palace, London, MS 2008, f.49, MS 3470, ff. 135, 137, 138. He was never a knight.

set is this time so heavily scored through that it is virtually impossible to read.<sup>95</sup> Sheldon was first to be asked if he had received any token, letter or message from that priest. Next he was required to clarify his acquaintance with men called Williams. This time specific individuals were named. Sheldon must already have admitted at least to the master-servant relationship; the additional names of men called Williams were probably a cross-check on information already known from official records. Interest focused on Lewis and Richard Williams, nephews of the Throckmorton's bailiff.<sup>96</sup> The bailiff himself, Reignold Williams, was known to Archbishop Whitgift, previously bishop of Worcester, as a former recusant.<sup>97</sup> Payments in Sheldon's account book reveal that Richard had served briefly in Sheldon's household in 1587–88, possibly because of acquaintance with Mrs Sheldon; his brother Lewis had a Spanish pension.<sup>98</sup> The aim was, presumably, to uncover links Sheldon had abroad but also to be sure that he had not known the plotter Richard Williams of Anglesey.<sup>99</sup> It was a point the council laboured.

Questioning then turned to the identity and activities of Sheldon's servant, Edward Williams. Regular payments through 1586–87 reveal Williams performing steward-like duties in Oxford.<sup>100</sup> His mother, despite being wife of an alderman, was known to attend church only at Easter; one of his brothers became a Jesuit. His sister married Roger Marbeck, briefly provost of Oriel College (1565–66) who, on technicalities, had deprived Cardinal William Allen of his fellowship there in 1565, but was now a member of the College of Physicians.

Inquiries then focused on names which, with one exception, do not appear in the surviving statements of the plotters. Sheldon was asked about his contacts with priests in this country. One, White alias Huggins, remains unidentified. Whitnell, his background unknown, was the priest Sheldon had nominated in the late 1580s to the church at Barcheston, an advowson in the gift of his Throckmorton brother in law and, during the 1580s, in dispute.<sup>101</sup> William Bishop, the future

<sup>95</sup> *CSPD 1591–94*, p.554, no.2, TNA SP 12/250, f.2-2v. The name could be Ogleshorpe, as before.

<sup>96</sup> They can be identified from their uncle's will, Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service, The Hive, Worcester, as Reynold Williams, 1597/168.

<sup>97</sup> Reignold Williams listed in 1577, Ryan, *Diocesan Returns*, 66; as conforming by 1586, *CSPD 1581–90*, p. 332, no.11, TNA SP 12/190, f. 28; in Sheldon accounts, WaCRO, CR 2632, ff. 120,184.

<sup>98</sup> WaCRO, CR 2632, ff. 45, 120. He was possibly also in receipt of a Spanish pension, A. J. Loomie, *The Spanish Elizabethans, English exiles at the court of Philip II* (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 263, no. 151.

<sup>99</sup> *CSPD 1591–1594*, p.531, no. 41, TNA SP 12/249 f. 70.

<sup>100</sup> WaCRO, CR 2632, ff. 7, 8, 16, 22, 26, 50-1, 56, 68, 70, 78, 81.

<sup>101</sup> *Lists and Indexes*, 295, no. 473, 26 June 1587; 'the presentation of Thomas Whitnell to the benefice is cancelled.'

appellant priest and later Bishop of Chalcedon, was mentioned first by Henry Young and then by plotter Richard Williams, both presumably repeating what they had learnt from the servant Williams. Bishop was both Sheldon's relative and his neighbour at Brailes. Transactions with other members of the family in the district make acquaintance, if not direct contact, almost certain.<sup>102</sup> Bishop had been imprisoned attempting to return to England in 1581; though banned, he had returned and was noted in the inquiry into Warwickshire recusants of 1592.<sup>103</sup> The fourth, Hall the Jesuit, might possibly be identified as Edward Oldcorne, later reported as living with Thomas Habington at Hindlip but not obviously linked to Sheldon.<sup>104</sup>

The council also required clarification of potential links with leading Jesuits. Had Sheldon ever known Dr William Gifford, the Jesuit instructed to ensure that Sheldon would finance the intended uprising?<sup>105</sup> The answer is lost. Sheldon was next asked whether he had ever sent letters abroad to any special person? Though his questioners perhaps hoped he would confirm Young's claim to have seen Sheldon's letter to the Jesuit William Holt, the question was broadly phrased.<sup>106</sup> Sheldon could have responded in more than one way. His answers are unknown; later questioning suggests the Jesuit connection was denied.

Proceedings with Sheldon paused until inquiries of his Warwickshire household were complete, but questioning of the plotters continued. On 12 September plotter Williams admitted that he had never heard the servant Williams speak any harsh words against his master, Sheldon; rather the servant had claimed to be much beholden to Sheldon.<sup>107</sup> Yet it was plotter Williams who had reported the servant's remark that 'his master had sent £500 and twenty horse' to Sir Christopher Hatton, 'at the camp, more to help the Spaniards than the queen.'<sup>108</sup>

By 23 September answers had come back from the Warwickshire hearings, and some gave rise to further questioning of Sheldon.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Geoffrey Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests 1558-1800*, 4 vols (Bognor Regis: [Arundel Press], 1967; and Great Waking: Mayhew-McCrimmon 1975-77), 1: 36-8; Birmingham Archives and Heritage MS 3061/Acc 1901-003/167418, 167784; WaCRO CR 2632, ff. 61, 90. Ralph's cousin Jane of the Broadway Sheldons married Barnabas Bishop of Brailes, William's brother.

<sup>103</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 290, no. 76, TNA SP 12/243, no.76, ff.211-216r, transcribed Michael Hodgetts in *Worcestershire Recusant* 5 (May 1965):18-30, continued in *Ibid*, 6 (December 1968), 7-20. The section where Sheldon might have been listed is now missing.

<sup>104</sup> ODNB; *Cecil Papers*, 18: 34-35, 111, not Hugh Hall priest of the 1583 inquiries who died c.1597.

<sup>105</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p.531, no. 41, TNA SP 12/249 f. 70. The council knew it was not convenient for him to come to England until early in October.

<sup>106</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 550, no.113, not calendared, see TNA SP 12/249, f.194-195r at f.194v.

<sup>107</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 555, no 7; TNA, SP 12/250 f.8.

<sup>108</sup> *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 545, no. 92; TNA SP 12/249 f.152-154v.

<sup>109</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 4:618-19, Hatfield House CP 28/45. Edward was Ralph's heir, aged 24 or so.

The third set of interrogatories, neatly penned, was composed the same day.<sup>110</sup> The first two questions were deceptively innocuous; had Sheldon heard of, or been shown, a copy of Cardinal Allen's letter of December 1592? Was he familiar with its contents?<sup>111</sup> If Sheldon were truly conforming he might have known nothing of the matter except in general terms. Allen's letter must have been widely known; it was a response to the proclamation of October 1591 against Catholics in general and priests in particular.<sup>112</sup> The cardinal, tacitly acknowledged as head of English Catholics, relaxed the prohibition on church attendance. He instructed priests working in England not to judge too harshly those who attended Anglican services to avoid the penalties of the law. Their confessions were to be heard and absolution given. This effectively rendered Burghley's policy harder to implement in that Catholics could now meet the essential criterion of secular loyalty, attendance at church, without incurring priestly censure for disloyalty to the pope. Sheldon might tell an unconvincing lie, or might admit to having seen it. If he did the latter his admission became a weapon against him, as the possession of seditious literature had been outlawed since 1571.

More questions were posed about Edward Williams' activities and relations with his former master, checking perhaps on what had been learned from the Warwickshire witnesses, some of whom would have known Williams. It was hinted that Williams might have been dismissed; that at least would explain why he had given away so much that damaged Sheldon, boasting of his master's wealth and virtually promising his financial support. Conversely, that information would also afford Ralph the chance to deny employing him to take letters to Cardinal Allen. It was probably Warwickshire sources that said that Williams had entrusted his Oxford property, bequeathed to him by his father, to Sheldon around 1590.<sup>113</sup> If indeed Sheldon had sent Williams abroad, this evidence revealed his action had been premeditated. On the other hand, however, the transaction potentially weakened the suggestion that Sheldon was supporting the family of a possible traitor: he

<sup>110</sup> The phrases 'by his own admission' and 'those he named to Lord Cobham' make clear that there had already been at least one, and possibly two, other interviews, no longer extant, on matters other than those in the previous inquiries. Hatfield House CP 28/45. Cobham was known to maintain an intelligence network through Catholic refugees in the Low Countries, Patrick H. Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage: plotters and spies in the struggle between Catholicism and the Crown* (McFarland and Company: Jefferson, North Carolina, 2016), 181.

<sup>111</sup> T. F. Knox, ed. *Letters and Memorials of Cardinal Allen* (London: 1882), 343–45. At least three copies were known to the council, all in different hands, *CSPD 1591–1594*, p. 291, nos. 80, 81, 82, TNA, SP 12/243, f. 221–226v.

<sup>112</sup> P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin, eds., *Tudor Proclamations* 3 vols (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1969), 4: 86–93, discussed in Walsham, *Church Papists*, 68–70.

<sup>113</sup> Oxfordshire Wills 118.113 [<https://www.findmypast.com>. Accessed 23 June 2019]; C 2/JasI/S22/55.

might be considered to be merely the administrator of rents from Williams' own property.

It was almost certainly discoveries amongst Sheldon's papers which provoked questions on two subjects of serious concern. The priest whose name had previously been crossed out turned out to be Clethro or as we would spell it, Clitherow. Sheldon was to be asked:

In what message or employment of trust he did use Clethro at his first going over; and what letter, and of what content, was brought unto him from Clethro by the messenger that came with the token of the King of Armies.<sup>114</sup>

What moved him to nominate Clethro as an instrument to deal in a peace, considering he had discontinued by his own saying his acquaintance for six or seven years and knew him also at the time to be "preisted".<sup>115</sup>

For whatever reasons the interrogators already had their suspicions and something, or someone, had prompted them to wring information about Clitherow from plotter Williams. On the afternoon of 12 September Richard Williams stated that 'Clethro lives mainly in Antwerp'.<sup>116</sup> In itself that was not news. More than one man called Clitherow was already known to the council, although the identity of each man is difficult to disentangle and the two are often conflated by contemporaries.<sup>117</sup> Association with either Clitherow would probably incur suspicion, however. In November 1590, Robert Allat described a man at Antwerp to Lord Burghley as 'sometime of Lincoln's Inn, now a priest'.<sup>118</sup> This is the same information Persons gave, slightly later, about the lawyer's clerk, the copyist of 1580, on whom Persons blamed Sheldon's capitulation. He may be one and the same as the Clitherow noted in the 1577 Oxford census, acquainted with the family of the servant Williams in Oxford.<sup>119</sup> This man may also be the Blessed Margaret's step-son: the imprisoned shipmaster Thomas Blake described a passenger he had brought from Antwerp to London at Michaelmas 1592 as having been a student at Oxford, his father a butcher in York.<sup>120</sup>

The link to the Williams family gives this latter Clitherow the strongest claim to be Sheldon's 'instrument to deal in a peace'. The interrogatories indicate that, despite the hint of a quarrel between Sheldon and Clitherow

<sup>114</sup> Quite how the phrase 'the token of the King of Armies' should be interpreted is debatable; it might not refer to a person but be taken, literally, to mean an image, a sign by which a person might be recognized, a suggestion for which I thank Professor Michael Questier.

<sup>115</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 4:618–19

<sup>116</sup> *CSPD 1591–1594*, p. 555, no 7, TNA, SP 12/250 f.8.

<sup>117</sup> Two are traditionally identified as the brother-in-law and the stepson (b.1563) of the Blessed Margaret Clitherow. Anstruther, *Priests*, 1:81, II, 64, tends to overlook some of the relevant material presented here.

<sup>118</sup> BL, Lansdowne MS, 68, no. 69, f. 157r.

<sup>119</sup> The recording clerk, thoroughly confused, also mentioned a second man of this name as a lawyer, but not, he thought, a resident Oxford citizen: Ryan, *Diocesan Returns*, 98–9. Lincoln's Inn registers record a student of this name in 1556, *Records of the honourable society of Lincoln's Inn, Admissions, 1420-1893*, 2 vols (London: 1896) 1: 62.

<sup>120</sup> *CSPD 1591–1594*, p. 409, no. 8; TNA SP 12/247, f. 13. No William Clitherow matriculated at Oxford.

around 1587, whether in person or by letter, Sheldon sought to use him as an agent. In February 1591, Allat reported that Clitherow was involved in the correction of pamphlets which were aligned with those exiles making tentative approaches to James VI of Scotland, queen Elizabeth's most likely but still unacknowledged heir.<sup>121</sup> Their activity was reported to Burghley; he later received intelligence from the English Ambassador in Edinburgh that Clitherow and others were shortly expected in Scotland, although he was back in Brussels soon afterwards.<sup>122</sup>

Beyond his personal outlook, why Sheldon would pursue involvement in negotiating with Scotland is unclear.<sup>123</sup> Also unclear are the reasons the interrogators even formulated the question. Either it was based on material from a source now unknown or it was designed to lure Sheldon into betraying information. It appears to bear out the suggestion of Paul Hammer that the Yorke-Williams inquiries were concerned chiefly with plumbing infiltration of spy networks.<sup>124</sup>

If Sheldon had really been in contact with the Clitherow described to Burghley, it must be concluded that he was in touch with the faction opposed to the Jesuits.<sup>125</sup> It would be consistent with his decision to conform in 1581. But, in that case, the plotters' claims that they had Jesuit support and that Sheldon could be persuaded by a Jesuit priest to assist their enterprise does not add up, something of which the council was probably aware.

Two further questions represent an alternative, diametrically opposed, line of questioning. Clearly the council knew Sheldon had been discussing with people in England the possibility of a peace with Spain; he had admitted as much. They remained worried by contacts he might have had abroad. Sheldon was asked:

<sup>121</sup> T. M. McCoog, 'Harmony Disrupted: Robert Parson SJ, William Crichton SJ and the Question of Queen Elizabeth's Successor, 1581-1603', *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 145 (January-June 2004), 149-220; BL, Ms Lansdowne 68, no. 70, f. 161r.

<sup>122</sup> *CSPD 1591-94*, p. 33-34, no. 136, TNA SP 12/238, f. 203v; *Calendar of State Papers Scotland 1589-93* (hereafter *CSP Scotland*) no. 578, p. 531-33; *CSP Scotland 1589-93*, no. 586, p. 539-40. Shipmaster Blake thought Mr Poley had taken him back to Antwerp, *CSPD 1591-1594*, p. 409, no. 8; TNA SP 12/247, f. 13 (reference to Poley is omitted from the calendar). It is unclear whether he is also the Clitherow who engaged in long-term covert correspondence with London merchants, reporting on military and Jesuit affairs from 1586 until at least 1591, *CSP Scotland 1585-86*, p. 643-45, no. 734; *CSP Scotland 1586-88*, p. 30; *CSP Foreign Jan-July 1589, 224-5*, TNA SP 77/5/ 19A, 67B, f. 72r, 73; SP 84/41, f. 359v.

<sup>123</sup> Such an alliance would be in line with Sheldon's support in 1603 for his nephew Francis Plowden, whose father Edmund had argued in support of Mary Queen of Scots' claim to the English throne: Geoffrey de C. Parmiter, *Edmund Plowden, An Elizabethan Lawyer*, Catholic Record Society Monograph Series (London: 1987), 4. Which Clitherow composed a treatise in support of the Queen of Scots is unclear, *CSPD 1598-1601*, pp. 456, 460, but cf. BL, Lansdowne 68, f.160v.

<sup>124</sup> Hammer, *Polarisation*, 158-59.

<sup>125</sup> He should be distinguished from another Clitherow, Steward of the College of Reims, sufficiently important for the spy Charles Sledd to filch his letters in 1580, *Miscellanea*, ed. Clare Talbot, Catholic Record Society 53 (London: 1961): 204, 239-40, 245, who was priested in 1582, Knox ed. *Diaries*, 188.

What motion or question he hath made by letter or message to any beyond the seas, or to any that is since gone beyond the seas, touching the treaty of a peace between Spain and England.

What conference he hath had to the same effect with any on this side besides these he named to the Lord Cobham.<sup>126</sup>

Peace between Spain and England was the pursuit of Lord Burghley, even if he did not want this widely known. Proposals from Cardinal Allen were reported to Burghley by another informant, John Arden: Arden and his brother held extensive talks with Allen before a meeting with Pope Clement VIII in April 1593.<sup>127</sup> The proposition was that queen Elizabeth should choose someone related to her by blood to marry either the young prince Philip of Spain or the Infanta, 'so that all might be restored again to the ancient amity, the queen to go on reigning for her life, with liberty of conscience for all.'<sup>128</sup> Allen believed this was the only way 'for the Treasurer [Burghley] to be assured that his generation should live in peace for this would drown all injuries he had done to the church'. The spy expressed his own opinion to Burghley - that 'the matter may be by marriage better done than by any other way'.<sup>129</sup>

It is not entirely impossible that Sheldon knew something of this, whether, as the supposed correspondence suggests, directly from Cardinal Allen, or through his own exile contacts. Moreover, one of the Cecils might have been aware of this. Sheldon enjoyed a long-standing friendship with the Walter family of Wimbledon; the father had served Ralph's step-mother while Robert, the older son, was almost an unofficial secretary to Lord Burghley; the younger son was a successful lawyer, and, on occasion, himself the recipient of letters from Italy from the spy Robert Allat.<sup>130</sup> Burghley might have considered the possibility of leaked information or, worse, that a secret channel of communication was available to Sheldon. There was certainly a link between Sheldon and Robert Walter. Ralph would later commemorate him with an elaborate tomb and fulsome epitaph in an Oxfordshire church.<sup>131</sup> Ralph and his son Edward were made overseers of Walter's will, proved in October 1595. The chief beneficiaries and executors were members of the privy council, with whom Ralph would inevitably come into contact.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>126</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 4:618–19.

<sup>127</sup> Devlin, *Hamlet's Divinity*, 97; R. B. Wernham ed, *List and analysis of state papers: foreign series: Elizabeth I; preserved in the Public Record Office*, 7 vols (London: HMSO, 1964–2000), 4: nos.638–39.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>130</sup> Wernham, *Lists*, 1, nos. 638, 681–2, nos. 638, 641.

<sup>131</sup> Thorpe, 'Robert Walter'; epitaph in Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms Wood E.1, f. 108v-109.

<sup>132</sup> TNA, PROB 11/86/266.

Admittedly, in the absence of any of Sheldon's answers, this interpretation must be hypothetical. However, the evidence suggests that the 'conforming' Ralph was supporting priests in his own houses, and was possibly in touch with both exile factions, one relying on the pope and Spain, the other steadily coming round to support James VI. Sheldon does not, superficially, appear to have been an active protagonist of his faith, but neither was he a man to be ignored. Ownership of around 14,000 acres might reasonably inspire the expectation of his having a reasonable income. Ralph did nothing to dissipate this impression, building an extravagantly decorated new house. The second largest in Warwickshire, its hall was decorated with unusual map tapestries. These were a declaration of loyalty, delineating the houses of his family and his Catholic friends.<sup>133</sup> The servant Williams would have seen both house and tapestries progress before his departure and was unlikely to know that Sheldon was heavily in debt. He would also have known when Sheldon ceased to pay fines.

The 1594 investigation into Sheldon petered out; indications that he had infringed the provisions of several statutes were overlooked. He almost certainly had contacts abroad; if he had not sent his servant overseas he had at least facilitated his illegal departure and turned a blind eye to his disappearance; he might have sent money to exiles, as he had in 1575, and he probably had received a copy of Cardinal Allen's letter of 1592. Nevertheless, no charges were levied and no penalties imposed. The recent assumption that from 1594 Sheldon began to pay recusancy fines is incorrect.<sup>134</sup> The allegations against him implied suspicion of treason, not recusancy. Yet, his activities raise questions about his practice of conformity, and suggest that, although prepared to respect the State, even to cooperate with it, he continued to hope for a Catholic England.

Within six months of James I's accession in March 1603, Sheldon is glimpsed twice. He was named in one of the confessions of William Watson, the vehemently anti-Jesuit secular priest who organized the Bye Plot, an attempt to hold James VI hostage and appoint Catholic councillors. Watson's statement, that Sheldon was 'to become 'Lord of I know not where' is not corroborated and may be no more than wishful thinking.<sup>135</sup> However, when Ralph's relative, Sir Griffin Markham, was pardoned, but exiled, in December, his lands were given into Sheldon's keeping with Sir Robert Cecil's approval, a

<sup>133</sup> H. L. Turner, *No Mean Prospect: Ralph Sheldon's Tapestry Maps* (Oxford: Plotwood, 2010); *Idem*, 'Glimpses of a Gallery: the maps and 'paynted pictures' of Robert Hare', *Bodleian Library Record* 26 (1) (April 2013), 102–112.

<sup>134</sup> Davidson and Thorpe, 'Ralph Sheldon.'

<sup>135</sup> M. A. Tierney, *Dodd's Church History of England* (Westmead: Gregg International Publishers, 1971), iv, xlvi–vii, TNA, SP 14/3/f. 29r; Francis Edwards, *The Succession, Bye and Main Plots of 1601–1603* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).

notable mark of trust.<sup>136</sup> That decision suggests that relations with the Cecil family may have been closer for longer than the brief hint revealed in Sheldon's letter to Cecil in April 1603. Here he acknowledged a debt of friendship to both father and son and begged Robert to accept a 'trifle'. It was not his first gift.<sup>137</sup>

Given Sheldon's apparent connection to the Bye Plot, his letter of 1 August 1603 to his nephew Francis Plowden, a convicted recusant and son of the jurist Edmund, acquires greater significance. Sheldon agreed to try to enlist the support of his neighbour, presumably the Windsor family at Tardebig; he then reported the progress of the Spanish Ambassador, Juan de Tassis, across Europe. Sheldon's news was inaccurate but clearly he was watching the situation.<sup>138</sup> Trailed by a spy, Plowden was subsequently questioned by Sir Richard Lewkenor, Chief Justice of Chester.<sup>139</sup> Plowden's answers, still only part published, reveal close involvement, surely not unknown to Sheldon, with Anthony Skinner.<sup>140</sup> Skinner had a long history of plotting, and was leader of one of several groups aiming to request toleration from James.<sup>141</sup>

In the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot in January 1606, a condemned man wrote to Lewkenor, providing the names of others to save his own life. He claimed Sheldon harboured 'one Butler alias Lyster the Jesuit'.<sup>142</sup> The report, of dubious merit, was not immediately followed up as it directly concerned Sheldon, but the accusation may have soon played into an entirely different situation. In May Sir Edward Coke, Attorney-General, pursued Sheldon's creditor, convicted Catholic recusant Thomas Horde, his accomplices and Sheldon himself.<sup>143</sup> Recognizances totalling £24,000 from Sheldon were forfeit for non-payment to Horde. Coke argued that part of that money was due to the Crown for Horde's unpaid fines. Coke won and Sheldon was ordered to pay money owed to Horde to the Crown. As security, Sheldon's lands were taken into the Crown's hands, and were only returned to him a few months before his death.<sup>144</sup> Coke's action is a reminder of differing attitudes to Catholics developing amongst men in power.

<sup>136</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 15: 344. Markham's sister was married to Sheldon's heir.

<sup>137</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 15: 60, Cecil Mss CP 99/13; *Cecil Papers*, 12: 221, 11 July 1602.

<sup>138</sup> *CSPD 1603-1610*, 26, summary; TNA, SP 14/3, f.4 1 August 1603, from Skilts.

<sup>139</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 20: 303.

<sup>140</sup> *CSPD 1603-1610*, p. 28, 6 August 1603; TNA, SP 14/3 f.22-22v. Dated 3 August in document. Patrick H. Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage: plotters and spies in the struggle between Catholicism and the Crown* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Co., 2016), 230-32.

<sup>141</sup> Martin, *Espionage*, 230-32.

<sup>142</sup> *Cecil Papers*, 18:34-36. His reference is not easy to interpret. Contemporary sources describe a Jesuit Lyster using the alias Butler, and a seminary priest Butler using the alias Lyster, Anstruther, *Priests*, 1: 59-60, *Catholic Encyclopaedia*. Minney took this as evidence that Sheldon had re-joined the Church, *Sheldons*, 5.

<sup>143</sup> TNA, E 126/1 Easter 4 Jas, 15 May [1606] f. 41.

<sup>144</sup> TNA, WARD 7/51/91 and CP 25/2/386/10JasIMic Double Counties show the lands were not sold as Thorpe and Davidson, 'Ralph Sheldon'.

Sheldon's position, ambivalent in regard to both Catholic church and English state, had by now been tacitly acknowledged by both sides. Cardinal Allen's letter to the English people in 1592 had admitted the need for what was essentially church papistry, though he stopped short of condoning the practice.<sup>145</sup> The insecure acceptance of the official church afforded Ralph his opportunities. Within a show of attendance, however occasional, Ralph's freedom within a divided society was clear.<sup>146</sup> Firmly meshed into local Worcestershire and Warwickshire society, he was able to command witnesses and local knowledge to conduct, without impediment, at least twenty-five law suits. Until 1606 he controlled nine advowsons without too many objections to appointments from parishioners or diocesan authorities.<sup>147</sup> His choices did not thwart the established church but were scarcely an ornament to it. Like his conforming neighbours he used tithes from a different five parishes as a source of income or as a bargained commodity.<sup>148</sup> Associations at grass roots stretched across at least eight counties through the marriage alliances he made for his nine daughters, from Worcestershire into Staffordshire and through Rutland to Suffolk, Berkshire and Kent. One daughter married a Hatton relative around 1585,<sup>149</sup> another married William Standen, son of Edmund, clerk of the Petty Bag, possibly bringing contact with Anthony, the spy so recently come in from the cold.<sup>150</sup> Elizabeth Trentham, Maid of Honour to the Queen, married Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford, only a short time before her brother married Katherine Sheldon.<sup>151</sup> Ralph's second, and his youngest, daughters married into recusant families, the Fowlers of Stafford and the Sulyards of Haughley, Suffolk.<sup>152</sup> The loyalties of Sheldon's own

<sup>145</sup> Walsham, *Church Papists*, 68–70.

<sup>146</sup> His name was omitted from a socially conscious report on recusancy in Worcester diocese in 1596, *Cecil Papers*, 6: 255–272, 17 July; abbreviated as printed in Talbot ed. 'Miscellanea', 127–28.

<sup>147</sup> For Abberton, Beoley, Broadway and Shrawley, *A History of the County of Worcester: Volume 4*, ed. William Page and J. W. Willis-Bund (London: St Catherine's Press, 1924), 7, 19, 43, 341; For Barcheston, *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 5, Kington Hundred*, ed. L F Salzman (London: University of London, 1949), 10; for Ditchford Frary, now in the parish of Stretton on Fosse, Birmingham Archives and Heritage, Ms 3061/Acc1901-003/167885; For Stretton on Fosse, *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 5, Kington Hundred*, ed. L. F. Salzman (London: University of London, 1949), 157; for Tredington, *A History of the County of Worcester: Volume 3*, ed. William Page and J. W. Willis-Bund (London: St Catherine's Press, 1913), 550; For Whichford: TNA, C 78/110/11.

<sup>148</sup> At Beoley TNA, WARD 7/51/91; Deddington: TNA C 2/Eliz/A8/55; Flyford Flavell: TNA, C 66.1516, mm 32-42 at 41-42; Steeple Barton, TNA STAC 8/162/6, sheet 31, 23 Nov 2 Jas.; TNA C 2/Jas1/S12/32 1604; Whichford: TNA, C 78/110/11.

<sup>149</sup> Jane, baptized in November 1567, Beoley Parish Registers; her marriage had been concluded before 1587, WaCRO CR 2632, f.202.

<sup>150</sup> P. Hammer, 'An Elizabethan spy who came in from the cold: the return of Anthony Standen to England in 1593' *Historical Research* 65 (1992): 276–295, at 290–91.

<sup>151</sup> Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 337.

<sup>152</sup> Staffordshire Record Office, D641/4/J/4/1/3(b).

friends, and theirs, crossed the county and the doctrinal divide, as did those of his own wider family; his brother William and sister Anne (Daston) were Protestant, his sisters Katherine (Plowden) and Philippa (Pollard) Catholic. Sheldon's quiet ignoring of the law would have been, equally quietly, ignored by that extensive circle, all with their own contacts both wide and high. In the last decade of his life Sheldon could count as friends men in government,<sup>153</sup> in the English church,<sup>154</sup> at Oxford university,<sup>155</sup> and, amongst Catholics, the staunch Sir Thomas Cornwallis (d.1605), and the Dormer brothers John and Thomas, future baronet.<sup>156</sup> He was even in a position to enlist the help of the earl of Worcester, first to achieve a composition of his debt to the Crown and then arrange a marriage between the earl's grand-daughter and his own grandson.<sup>157</sup>

Around 1596 Sir John Harington, the queen's godson, recorded the back-handed comment that 'he heard one that was a great courtier say that he thought Sheldon one of the sufficientest wise men of England and fittest to have been made one of the Council, but for one matter'.<sup>158</sup> Others spoke angrily of his being 'well friended' in the county.<sup>159</sup> On one occasion even the privy council was wary of his potential local influence when they warned him against interfering to upset the election of government candidates in the 1601 parliamentary elections.<sup>160</sup> Sheldon's 'Catholic' behaviour, however, was never that of an activist, neither intellectually, like his brothers in law Edmund Plowden and Sir Thomas Tresham, nor impetuously, like his cousins Francis Throckmorton and Robert Catesby. Living his life on the principle that loyalty to the queen was not in conflict with adherence to the Catholic church, where consistent rejection of support for the Jesuits avoided conflict with the Crown, Sheldon appropriated perfectly legal means, tacitly acknowledged and widely tolerated, using them against the state for his own ends; he avoided penalties while adopting a defensive stance against measures he did not much like. Outward conformity - the position of a church papist - allowed him the freedom to practise his faith and gave him the means to preserve it, for himself

<sup>153</sup> The Catholic sympathizer Sir Thomas Lake, clerk of the Signet and close to king James, TNA, SP 14/70, f.151; Henry Maynard, former Burghley secretary (d.1610), with whom he was sufficiently familiar to borrow money, WaCRO CR 2632, f.127.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Eades, Dean of Worcester (d.1604), author of an epitaph on Ralph's father's tomb at Beoley.

<sup>155</sup> Anthony Blencowe, Dean of Chichester and Provost of Oriel College; the Catholic Thomas Allen, Principal of Gloucester Hall, Oxford. Both received bequests in Sheldon's will.

<sup>156</sup> To whom Ralph had acknowledged recognizances: TNA, E 126/1 Easter 4 Jas, 31 May 1606 f. 49.

<sup>157</sup> Nancy Briggs, 'William Lord Petre 1575-1637', *Essex Recusant* 10 (2 August 1968): 51-64.

<sup>158</sup> Donno, *Harington*, 239-40.

<sup>159</sup> TNA, C 2/Eliz/T10/3.

<sup>160</sup> *APC* 32: 251.

and for six generations of descendants.<sup>161</sup> Incidentally, conformity both protected of itself in law and eased the path of any who might wish to offer the assistance and support to achieve the security Ralph appears to have enjoyed. And it reconciles his actions with his protestation of having lived as a Catholic.

<sup>161</sup> Barnard, *Sheldons*.