

Thomas Atkyns' Letter, 1589

On the 28th August 1589, Thomas Atkyns wrote a long and informative letter to George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, the Earl Marshall of England [1]. Atkyns was an official of the Council of the March in Wales and he wrote from their office in Ludlow Castle. Three pages long, it is signed and endorsed. The letter described the civil disturbances at the Earl of Shrewsbury's weir and iron forge on the River Wye at Whitchurch in Herefordshire and provided an account of Atkyns' attempts to prevent them. The importance here is how this letter illuminates Blanche's position at the Royal Court [2]. The letter concluded:

*... And to the end [that] your Lordship must be assured of the minds of other men in this behalf, I have written and sent to my Lords the Earls of Worcester and Pembroke, to Sir Charles Herbert and some others, owners of weirs on that river, to understand their dispositions. From my Lord of Worcester and some of the rest I learn, and so hath his Lordship written to the Commissioners, that if they [the Commissioners] attempt any thing against his weirs in such course as they have begun, he will seek his redress by law, and therefore hath wished them to be well advised. This now I find the Commissioners to be thoroughly perplexed [about]; if they do cease [their actions], then stand they more fearful of your Lordships [law]suit. If they do go forwards then have they such and so great persons to answer as their whole habilities [resources] cannot defend. This sole hope they have, and this they do give out, that Mrs Blanche ap Parry will obtain her Majesty's pardon and discharge for them. Pardon my good Lord the length of these my letters wherein I could not omit to signify the whole of that which hath been done, that thereby such course may be taken by your Lordship for reformation and redress as to your Honour shall be thought most fit. If [a lawsuit were held] here before this Council then is there no doubt of Sir Richard Shuttleworth (who is now Chief Justice with us) his just and due consideration of the greatness of the cause, and that with good speed. If [a lawsuit were held] in the Star Chamber, than will it be most heavy for the offenders. And thus with my prayers for your Lordship's long happy health I most humbly take my leave
From Ludlow this 28th of August 1589*

*Your good Lordship's in all service
To be commanded*

Briefly, weirs were a long-standing cause of friction on the River Wye as they could impede the passage of fish and, of course, boats. They are forcibly described as a source of contention by Rowland Vaughan, Blanche's great-nephew, in 'His Booke...' published 1610, see page 57. Atkyns [2] actually said that the number of salmon in the river was declining presumably because they could not readily swim upriver to spawn. The Commissioners of Sewers assembled in Hereford had responsibility for ensuring navigation and fisheries on all rivers but this often led to conflict with powerful weir owners. In this case there were opposing influential factions, including some with motives unconnected with either fish or river transport. Here the weir had been broken down by iron-workers from the

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Forest of Dean, men who were being put out of business by the fine wrought-iron produced in the Earl of Shrewsbury's iron forge adjacent to this weir. It seems that the Commissioners had not actively discouraged this destruction. According to Atkyns he had attempted to persuade the Commissioners to act, describing the breaking of the weir as illegal, but matters escalated out of their control.

Atkyns then wrote to the owners of the other weirs, who included the Earl of Worcester, the Earl of Pembroke and Sir Charles Herbert, to warn them that their weirs were also at risk. As a result the Earl of Worcester wrote to the Commissioners that he would seek redress at law if his weirs were tampered with. The Commissioners, in Atkyns' words, were now *thoroughly perplexed* as whatever they did would seem to displease some *great persons*. This was an extremely worrying position for them as they were now confronted with the real possibility of lawsuits against them. As seen in the above extract, he continued:

***... This sole hope they have, and this they do give out,
that Mrs [Mistress] Blanche ap Parry will obtain her
Majesty's pardon and discharge for them...***

A pardon would obviate any lawsuits and a discharge would ensure they were not held financially responsible, see page 73. So their only hope was to approach Mistress Blanche to intercede with the Queen on their behalf to protect them against whoever they offended. It is also evident that Blanche had a reputation for the impartial assessment of any issue brought to her. The Commissioners had total confidence in her, clearly considering that she would present their case fairly to the Queen despite her relationships with the nobility involved. Her influence must have been greatly missed when she died. Blanche herself was proud of her reputation for she recorded it in her Bacton Epitaph:

For too rewarde decerts by course of ryghte – To give each man's deserts their fair reward

Blanche was in the last year of her life when this letter was written, the same year as she dictated a letter on behalf of James Parry. Her much deteriorated signature, due to blindness not mental loss, is shown on page 108. As her signature, see page 99, on the undated letter to the Mayor of Hereford is far more legible it is not likely that this letter was written as a result of an approach by the Commissioners in 1589. However, the Mayor's letter dating from the late 1560s or 1570s was still on file in Hereford where it had been carefully preserved to cover any future difficulty. It seems reasonable to suggest that the Commissioners would have mentioned it in approaching Blanche for help.

It is evident that it was an understood procedure to approach Queen Elizabeth through Blanche Parry. It is also clear from the James Parry letter that despite Blanche's age she was fully competent in all matters within months of her death. It is probable that she well understood the issues involved as her lands in Fawley, Herefordshire, bordered the River Wye and a fishery on the river was one of her holdings. The eminence of the earls involved only made it more needful to approach Blanche and no-one else. This is important new confirmation of the recognition of Blanche's rôle as an intermediary with the Queen – see chapter 5 in her biography.

Blanche's own eminence at Court can also be gauged from her connections with those mentioned in Thomas Atkyns' letter. All were also related to each other.

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The Earl of Worcester, the Earl of Pembroke and Charles Herbert were all descended from:
William Herbert 1st Earl of Pembroke (1st creation), see pages 14-15, 18, 21:

The Earl of Worcester in the Atkyns' letter:

- the son of William Herbert 1st Earl of Pembroke (1st creation) was created

1st Earl of Huntington (he married Anne Devereux).

- their daughter and direct heir was Elizabeth Herbert who married
Charles Somerset the 1st Earl of Worcester.
- their son, Henry (2nd Earl of Worcester) is mentioned in Sir William Herbert of Troy's Will, see page 27. Henry's second wife is the Countess Elizabeth on page 35.
- their grandson was **Edward Somerset, 4th Earl of Worcester K.G. (c.1550-1627/28)** who was the Earl of Worcester in the Atkyns' letter.
- one of the 4th Earl's daughters was Blanche Somerset, Blanche Parry's god-daughter, see pages 129-130. This Blanche Somerset would marry Thomas Arundell Howard 2nd Baron Arundell of Wardour in 1607 [4].

The Earl of Pembroke in the Atkyns' letter:

- William Herbert 1st Earl of Pembroke (1st creation) had two known mistresses.
- the son of one of these ladies was Sir Richard Herbert of Ewyas.
- his son was William Herbert 1st Earl of Pembroke (2nd creation).
- his son was **Henry Herbert 2nd Earl of Pembroke (2nd creation) K.G. (c.1538-1601)** who was the Earl of Pembroke in the Atkyns' letter.
 - Henry Herbert's second wife was Catherine Talbot daughter of **George Talbot 6th Earl of Shrewsbury (c.1522-1590)**, Earl Marshall, to whom Atkyns wrote his letter. (George Talbot's second wife, not Catherine's mother, was Bess of Hardwick)
 - Henry Herbert was President of the Council of the March in Wales 1586-1602.
- note the present Earls of Pembroke are descended in this line.

The Sir Charles Herbert in the Atkyns' letter:

- William Herbert 1st Earl of Pembroke (1st creation) had two known mistresses.
- one of the sons of his other mistress was Sir William Herbert of Troy see pages 26-27, 40.
 - his wife was Blanche, Lady Troy, Lady Mistress to Henry VIII's children
see chapters in the biography.
- one of Sir William and Lady Troy's two sons was Thomas Herbert (who married Anne Lucy daughter of the Thomas Lucy of Charlecote who was possibly connected with William Shakespeare). Their other son was Sir Charles Herbert, pages 41, 45, but he died in 1557.

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- Thomas and Anne had two sons:
 - Henry Herbert appointed Sheriff, who married Lucy Somerset the sister of 4th Earl of Worcester, and
 - **Charles Herbert (born c.1532- died after c.1595)**
It is probable that he is the Sir Charles Herbert in the Atkyns' letter.

Notes and References

1. Lambeth Palace Library: Shrewsbury MS 3198 f493. This was discovered by Rosalind Lowe in researching weirs on the River Wye (forthcoming paper in the Transactions of The Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club). I am most grateful to her.
2. I am very grateful to Sue Hubbard for this transcription.
3. As was common at the time Thomas Atkyns accrued extra money from the functions of his appointment which served as supplementary pay to augment his paltry salary. This suggests to us that he was corrupt but in fact this was a recognised procedure then and was similar to farming (see page 18). His patron appears to have been George Talbot the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury.
4. See Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for details concerning the Civil War.

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