The Bull Theatre, Bishopsgate Street and John Welles: a Creative Nexus for Marlowe, Shakespeare and the Inspiration for *The Massacre at Paris?*

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Introduction

The Massacre at Paris is often considered Marlowe's last surviving play before his death in 1593. It was probably completed in 1592, since Lord Strange's Men performed the "*tragedy of the gvyes*," thought to be the same play, on 26 January 1593 at the Rose playhouse on Bankside.[1] It is a frustrating work due to its partial, mutilated survival as an undated octavo edition of 1238 lines, perhaps half the original text.[2] In recent decades, critical commentary of *The Massacre of Paris*, have shifted from seeing it as crude Protestant propaganda to viewing it as a more ambiguous and complex work.[3]

This paper examines the "topographical backdrop" to the creation of the play and potential intersections between Marlowe and Shakespeare c.1589/93. The overall purpose is to question how Marlowe and Shakespeare might have been influenced by conversations with neighbours, acquaintances and fellow writers. This study is, therefore, also partly about John Welles, one of the many, mostly long forgotten, government officials who kept the wheels of the Elizabethan state turning about whom it is usually impossible to discover much of significance.[4] However, it is possible to rescue this intriguing character from obscurity to reveal a Londoner, who for a time lived a few hundred yards from Marlowe and, literally, across the road from Shakespeare. That is, when he was not riding the roads of France as a government courier. Furthermore, while resident in Bishopsgate Street waiting for his next assignment to the continent, he lived next door to the entrance to the Bull Theatre, which was owned by George M(a)ese, his brother-in-law.

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[1] Listed as "30" [January] in Henslowe's diary but the dates, immediately prior to the closure of the Rose playhouse, seem confused and most scholars consider 26 January the likely date. For details and the subsequent ten performances by the reconstituted Lord Admiral's Men in 1594, see Lawrence Manley and Sally Beth Maclean, *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays* (Yale University Press, 2014), 88–90.
[2] 11,000 words against 18,000–20,000 in other Marlowe plays.
[3] Julia Briggs, "Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*: A Reconsideration," *The Review of English Studies* 34, no. 135 (1983): 257–78.
[4] His name is spelt various ways. Welles is used here, regardless of the original spelling, as this is how he signed letters. He was also referred to as John (the) Furrier (see footnotes 62, 65 and 66).

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Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing interest in exploring informal forms of Elizabethan communication, including oral processes, which often lie in the shadow of traditional literary analysis. This frequently requires combining historical, topographical, genealogical and literary research. Evidence for the existence and impact of informal verbal communication is usually fragmentary and inconclusive. This essay is a contribution to this evolving research and illustrates some of the possibilities and problems.

Moreover, it is important to consider these potential influences, even if currently unproven, to gain a more complete and nuanced understanding of the richness of Elizabethan drama. A recent study by the author of Shakespeare's residency in the parish of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, in the mid-late 1590s has identified the wide range of his immediate neighbours, including an Alderman, three "paracelsian" doctors, musicians, international merchants, servants, immigrants from France/Low Countries and not least Sir John Spencer, the Lord Mayor in 1594/5.[5] However, whether he spoke to any of them and, if so, what was discussed must remain speculation.

Particularly intriguing is that Marlowe and Shakespeare both lived, eight hundred yards apart, on Bishopsgate Street. However, current documentary evidence only proves they were there at different times; Marlowe at the northern end in Norton Folgate up to his death in 1593 and Shakespeare at the southern end in 1597/98. However, it his highly probable that Shakespeare was living there from c.1592/93 or even earlier and that their periods of residency overlapped.[6]

Mathew Martin's recent edition of *The Massacre at Paris* summarises current thinking about Marlowe's sources.[7] There is general agreement about the books and plays, covering the events of 1572 and the years immediately after, which were available in London.[8] Martin also agrees with the established view that, for the latter half of the play,

[5] Geoffrey Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare: Saint Helen's Parish, London 1593–1598* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).
[6] See Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 194–96.
[7] Christopher Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris*, ed. Mathew R. Martin (Manchester University Press, 2021). Quotations from the play refer to this edition.
[8] The extensive literature on this issue is covered in David Potter, "Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris* and the Reputation of Henri III of France," in *Christopher Marlowe and English Renaissance Culture*, ed. Darryl Grantley and Peter Roberts (Scholar Press, 1996). Key texts were Jean de Serres, *The Three Partes of the Commentaries … of the Ciuil warres of Fraunce*, trans. Thomas Timme (London, 1574) and François Hotman, *De Furoribus Gallicis* (Edinburgh, 1573). See also Joseph Khoury's contribution to this issue for a discussion of Anne Dowriche's *French History* as a source for the play.

Marlowe probably drew on contemporary pamphlets and broadsheets.[9] However, no one has explained how, in practice, Marlowe would have accessed such material. It seems unlikely that he would have collected such ephemera himself, so perhaps he borrowed it from others with a longer-term interest in French affairs. The Bishopsgate area had many French immigrant refugees. However, David Potter has noted:

> Nor should it be assumed that all Marlowe's sources of information were printed. It must be reasonable to assume that his personal contacts were wide enough for him to have absorbed information and ideas from diplomats like Walsingham, Stafford and Cobham, soldiers and courtiers like Raleigh as well as merchants who knew France.[10]

So perhaps Marlowe worked from information passed onto him by others around a dinner table or at an inn. However, if so, who were his expert informants? Probably his most important connection, Sir Francis Walsingham had died in April 1590. This paper examines the potential role of John Welles as such a "personal informant" for Marlowe and the possibility of connections to Shakespeare, a close neighbour. There are also other significant local connections. Henry Maunder, another royal messenger, was also living very close to Shakespeare in the same tiny parish in 1598 and conceivably five years earlier when, on 18 May 1593, he was ordered by the Privy Council to arrest Marlowe.[11]

This study has drawn on a wide variety of records to explore these potential connections. However, it is only the survival of a unique set of parish accounts for payments for the wages of the parish clerk (from St Ethelburga) and a short addendum to a burial register entry referencing the Bull Inn (from St Peter, Cornhill) that allow the documentary dots to be connected together, albeit still tentatively. Combined with other material, they record in some detail Welles's life when he was living next to the entrance to the Bull

[9] Paul H. Kocher, "Contemporary Pamphlet Backgrounds for Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 8 (1947): 151–73, 309–18. See also contemporary French commentators such as Jean Boucher, *Histoire tragique et mémorable de Gaveston* (Paris, 1588).

[10] Potter, "Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*," 9.

[11] John Welles lived in St Ethelburga parish for over twenty years and Benedict Barwick, probably another messenger, for at least thirteen years. The area with its cluster of carrier inns would have been convenient for couriers, who would have to hire their horses. David Mateer highlights the role of Bishopsgate as the entry point from Cambridge and a 1587 court case relating to the adjoining parish of All Hallows, London Wall involving Marlowe hiring a horse. See his "New Sightings of Christopher Marlowe in London," *Early Theatre* 11, no. 2 (2008): 13–38, especially 19–28. Owning a horse in London was prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthy. A 1562 estimate put the cost of fodder alone at five shillings a week (see Mateer, 26 and footnote 56). Given these long residences and local facilities, it is entirely possible that Maunder was living in St Helen's in 1593. He is not recorded in the 1589 St Helen's tithe, so presumably he arrived after that date. The first record of him as a courier is from 1591 and he died sometime 1603–1608. See Mateer, footnote 156, which notes another courier, William Seger living in St Ethelburga for at least eleven years.

Inn/theatre. These potential intersections hint at a "cultural nexus" in this area and shed some light on the fascinating but thorny question of the relationship between Marlowe and Shakespeare c.1589/93. These survivals demonstrate the potential of combining different documentary sources, much of which remain unpublished.

The essay is in two parts: Part 1 is a reconstruction of the micro-topography of the area where Marlowe and Shakespeare lived in the late 1580s/1590s, eight hundred yards apart on Bishopsgate Street (see Fig. 1). Their choices of where to lodge show interesting similarities but also significant differences, which throw light on their lives at this time. This streetscape means that their physical movements around this area can be identified with some certainty. In summary, London's city wall and eight gates were still fully operational. Bishopsgate itself, a towering symbol of civic authority, controlled their north-south movements in and out of the city. As a result, they could only use one access route: Bishopsgate Street.[12]

Furthermore, the listings of payments by each householder for the cost of the parish clerk for St Ethelburga parish means the social structure of one section of Bishopsgate Street, between their respective lodgings, can be reconstructed in great detail, house by house. This parish contained, at least up to 1594, the Bull Theatre, situated within the extensive premises of the Bull, one of the four inns inside London's city wall used for performing.[13]

Part 2 drills down into the career of John Welles, one of the residents of the St Ethelburga section of Bishopsgate Street from 1579–c.1602, who lived next to the entrance to the Bull Inn/Theatre. Other records allow Welles's role as Queen Elizabeth's royal messenger to be reconstructed in some detail. Welles had extensive knowledge of French politics and it is suggested that he may have been a key source for *The Massacre at Paris.* While not capable of conclusive proof, this local expertise demonstrates how Marlowe and Shakespeare could have drawn on the knowledge of their neighbours, alongside the well-documented use of written sources. Shakespeare and Welles were certainly living within a few yards of each other in 1598 and arguably from 1593, or even earlier.

[12] Using the next gates along the city wall at Moorgate and Aldgate would have meant detours of 15–20 minutes with no obvious benefits.

[13] This large inn was a valuable property with three or four inner yards. These gave through access for wagons to Broad Street but one was a dead end, considered the most likely place for the theatre. See Julian Bowsher, *Shakespeare's London Theatreland* (MOLA, 2012), 45–46.

PART I

Topographical Context: Marlowe and Shakespeare on Bishopsgate Street

This study begins by examining Marlowe's relationship to a small area of London from 1587–93.[14] This neighbourhood consisted of an eight-hundred-yard stretch of Bishopsgate Street which then, and still today, runs north from the parishes of St Helen and St Ethelburga, with the Bull theatre, inside the city wall, via Bishopsgate itself and then on through the extramural suburb of St Botolph, Bishopsgate. It continued past the Liberty of Norton Folgate to reach the village of Shoreditch, across the City boundary in the county of Middlesex.[15] This busy highway linked two distinct "Londonscapes." In 1589, and potentially up to the time of his death in 1593, Marlowe was recorded as living at the northern end,[16] while from 1597, and possibly from 1593 or even earlier, Shakespeare was lodging at the southern end.[17] Shakespeare would have walked past within a few yards of Marlowe's lodgings when he was working at The Theatre in Shoreditch. That these two great playwrights probably lived less than ten minutes' walk apart on the same street is intriguing, particularly with modern research suggesting Marlowe may have been involved in writing parts of the *Henry VI* trilogy.[18]

[14] For Marlowe in this area 1587–89, see Mateer, "New Sightings," 13–38.
[15] Confusingly, the name Norton Folgate has been used to mean different areas. The origins are discussed in "The Manor and Liberty of Norton Folgate," in *Survey of London: Vol. 27, Spitalfields and Mile End New Town*, ed. F. H. W Sheppard (1957), 15–20, *British History Online* [accessed 2023], hereafter *BHO*. Originally, the title Liberty of Norton Folgate was the northern part of the former precinct of St Mary Spital on the east side of Bishopsgate Street. In later centuries, the liberty expanded onto the west side of the street.
[16] As recorded following Marlowe and Watson's arrest for the murder of William Bradley in nearby Hog Lane on 18 September 1589. See David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, (Faber, 2004), 249–51.
[17] See Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare,* 394–443 for a detailed discussion of where and when Shakespeare lived in St Helen's. There is documentary proof from 1597 but it is argued that an earlier arrival, before the anti-theatre Lord Mayor Sir John Spencer moved in 1593/94, is likely.
[18] See Rory Loughnane and Andrew J. Power, "Introduction: Beginning with Shakespeare," in *Early Shakespeare, 1588–1594*, ed. Loughnane and Power (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 7. This provides an exhaustive review of the numerous recent studies on Shakespeare's early work and potential collaborations with Marlowe, Watson, Nashe and others. See also Will Sharpe, *Shakespeare & Collaborative Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2023). However, views on playwrights, exact dates and co-authorship remain in flux.

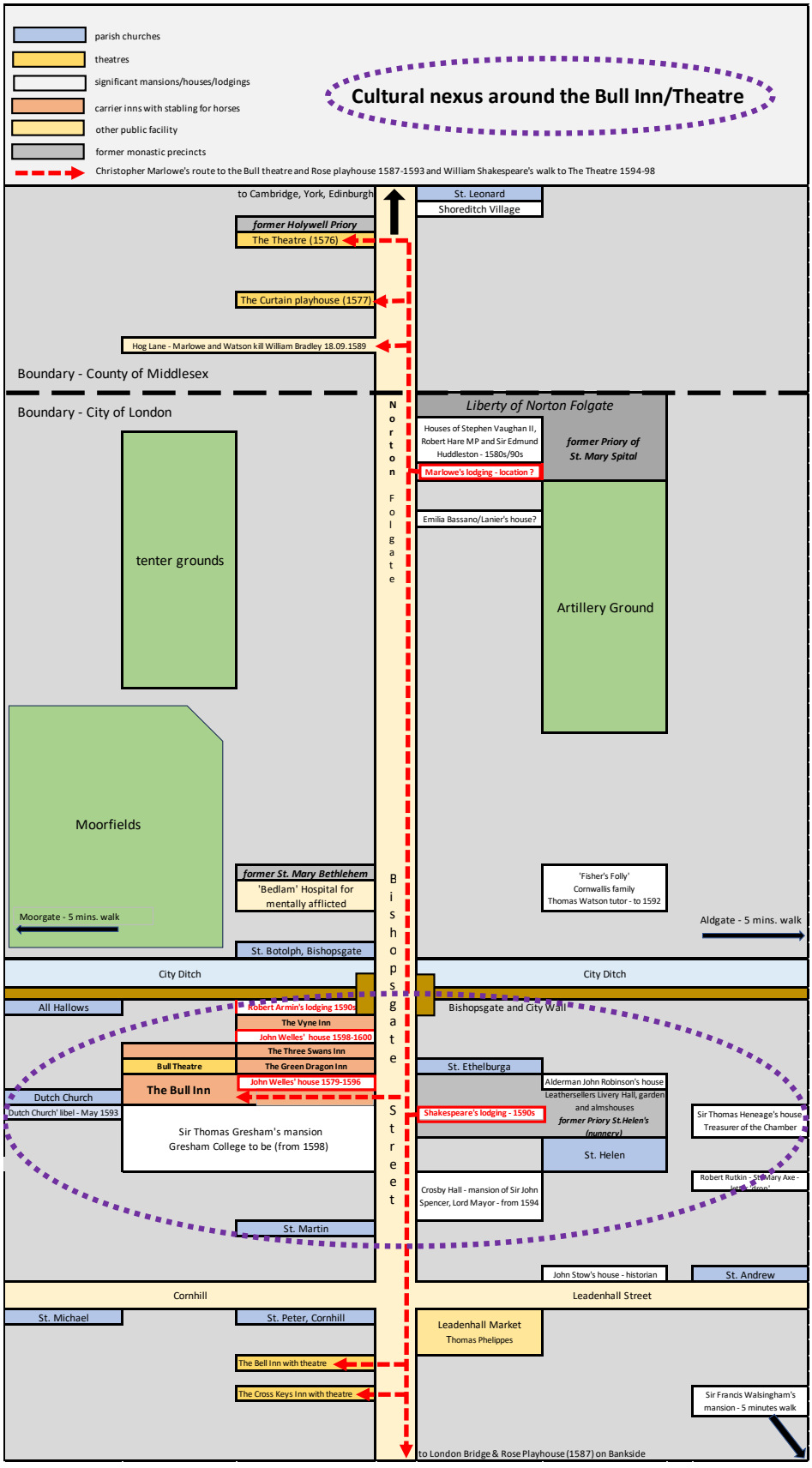

Figure 1: Diagrammatic plan (not to scale): relationship of Marlowe, Shakespeare, John Welles and the Bull Inn/Theatre, 1592–98

Moreover, both lived in distinctive locales, created from two former Catholic monastic precincts. Although by the 1580s these had been developed for secular residential use, they retained their earlier boundaries and, in modern parlance, might be considered "semi-gated" communities. Entry would have been through the former monastic gatehouse, maybe with a watchman, with no through vehicular traffic, ensuring a degree of calm in a hectic city.

Furthermore, a unique run of churchwardens' accounts (see Appendix 2) lists every householder in the parish of St Ethelburga, in their house order along Bishopsgate Street (Fig. 2). Taking 1592/93 as a benchmark, one can map all the residents that Marlowe would have walked past on his way to catch a play at the Bull or the Cross Keys and the Bell, further south on Gracechurch Street, or from 1587 at the newly built Rose in Southwark. Since the parishioners moved infrequently, it would have been much the same community that Shakespeare passed through on his daily walk to The Theatre in Shoreditch, home of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, before their relocation to the new Globe in 1599.

While this information provides a rare microcosm of Elizabethan London life, its specific relevance to Marlowe and *The Massacre at Paris* lies in one longstanding resident, John Welles (see Fig. 2 - underlined), who had a detailed knowledge of the French political landscape from the 1570s through to 1593 and beyond.

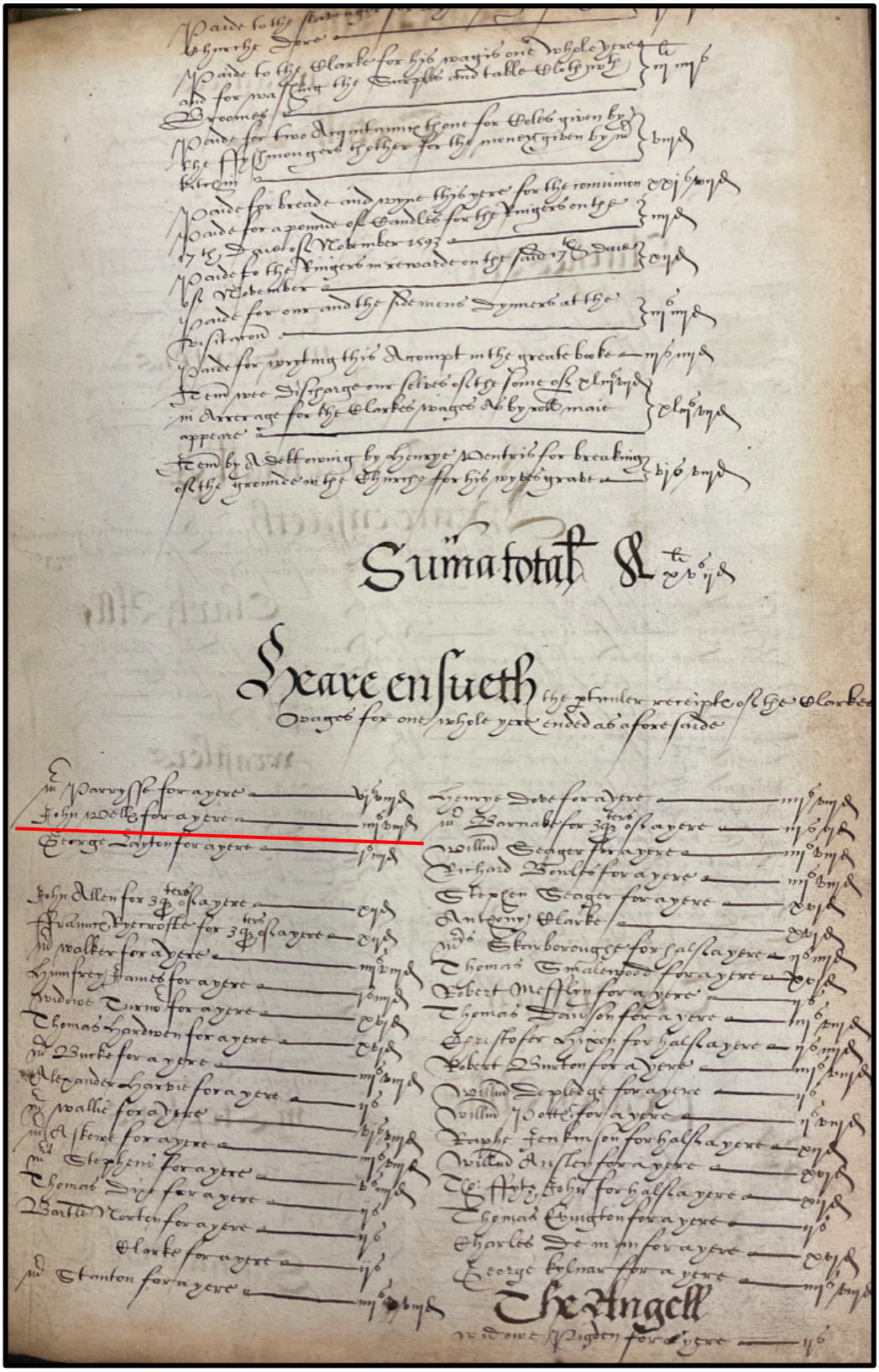

Figure 2: First part of listing of householders paying the clerk's fee in the Parish of St Ethelburga 1592/93. John Welles underlined, with William Parris, leasee of the Bull Inn above. London Metropolitan Archive P69/ETH/006/MS04241/001

The evolution of the two former precincts

While Marlowe and Shakespeare both lived in former monastic precincts, the sixty years 1534–94 had seen their transformation, reflecting the religious and social upheavals of the Tudor period.

1534. The Catholic high altars of St Mary Spittle priory and Saint Helen's nunnery stood seven hundred yards apart.[19] They were the spiritual hearts of significant monastic establishments both facing onto Bishopsgate Street, the road from London to York and independent Scotland. The former was an Augustinian priory which had developed into a major hospital and lay outside the city wall on the boundary with the county of Middlesex. The latter was a Benedictine nunnery, located just inside Bishopsgate. Both were enclosed by precinct walls, with imposing entrance gateways which provided security and status, whilst defining the limits of their ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Both were abolished during the suppression of the major monasteries in 1538.

1564. The last thirty years had seen political and religious upheaval on a huge scale. Elizabeth I had been on the throne for five years and England was firmly Protestant, although with a substantial Catholic minority. English monasticism had been swept away and the former sites sold off by the crown for secular uses, such as schools and upmarket mansions. At St Helen's, the Worshipful Company of Leatherworkers had bought the three-acre site and converted the nuns' dormitory into their livery hall. There was a large private garden alongside, partly occupied by new alms-houses.[20] The nuns' church was amalgamated with the parish church and the rest of the former precinct converted for residential use to generate a significant rental income. The main claustral ranges on the north and west side of the former nuns' cloister were turned into two particularly impressive residences. The social standing of early occupants, the newly married, thirty-two-year-old Francis Walsingham, MP, and the financier Richard Clough, factor/partner of Sir Thomas Gresham, speaks volumes about the status of this new residential enclave.

[19] For readers who cannot visit the area, it is difficult to find a map which highlights the relationship between and the comparative sizes of these two precincts. Perhaps the clearest, although covering the late thirteenth century, is *A Map of Medieval London* (Historic Towns Trust, 2019). This also shows the Priory & Hospital of St Mary Bethlehem ("Bedlam"), St Botolph Bishopsgate, St Ethelburga, and the sites of the future Dutch (St Olave) and French (St Anthony's Hospital) churches.

[20] Shown in detailed plans in Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 16–20. The Leathersellers still own this property in 2025.

At St Mary Spital, the former precinct had largely ended up in the possession of Stephen Vaughan I, MP (died 1549), a merchant, diplomat and under-treasurer of the Tower mint. Vaughan was described as "a man of great Substaunce possessions and Estimacion and greatly frynded alyed and supported"; he built himself a mansion from the former east wing of the priory cloister, which included the canons' dormitory and the chapter house.[21] The west wing and parts of the former church were converted into a larger house, the "principal tenement." Its status is demonstrated by Paul de Foix, the scholarly French ambassador (1561–65) living there in 1563. These two houses would have been of a similar standing to the two major residencies at St Helen's.[22] Other parts of the site were converted into a range of smaller houses, including twelve facing onto Bishopsgate Street.[23] Most importantly, this area, now termed Norton Folgate, like the former Blackfriars precinct inside the city wall, remained a self-administering "liberty," free of direct interference by either the authorities in the City or the county of Middlesex.[24]

In Canterbury on 26 February 1564, Christopher Marlowe was born, the eldest son of a shoemaker. Eight weeks later, on 23rd April in Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare was born the eldest son of a glovemaker.

Twenty-six years later and Christopher Marlowe, MA was now an established playwright with *Tamburlaine I* and *II* along with *The Jew of Malta* and possibly *Doctor Faustus* to his name. Shakespeare's status is unclear. The eight-hundred-yard street frontage, which separated the two former religious precincts, was densely built up although there were still gardens and open fields, Moorfields and Spitalfields, beyond. Leaving the parish of St Helen, one passed into the small parish of St Ethelburga, which extended up to the city wall and Bishopsgate. The small parish church stood on the east side of Bishopsgate Street, while four

[21] See "The precinct of St Mary Spital: The priory site," in *Survey of London: Vol. 27*, 39–51 and the report of recent archaeological excavations in Chiz Harward, Nick Holder and Nigel Jeffries, *The Spitalfields Suburb 1539–c.1880: Excavations at Spitalfields Market, 1991–2007* (MOLA, 2015), 32–45.

[22] See Harward et al, 122–25.

[23] See Harward et al, Fig. 102. The 1598 Lay Subsidy roll lists thirty-two English individuals, almost all at the lowest levels of £3 or £4, who probably mostly lived in these houses and suggesting some were split into two or more lodgings. Norton Folgate was recorded in Middlesex, The National Archives (hereafter "TNA"), E179/142/239.

[24] There were over two dozen monastic precincts in the City of London and some, like the Blackfriars, became upmarket residential areas and anti-theatre because of the associated crowds. For the reasons why a few remained liberties and others not, see Anthony House, *The City of London and the Problem of the Liberties, c1540–c1640* (Ph.D. University of Oxford, 2006).

large courtyard inns took up much of the west side. The Bull Inn, the southernmost and largest, with three interconnected inn yards, was the home of the Bull theatre.[25]

North of the city wall, Bishopsgate Street ran through the large sprawling extra-mural parish of St Botolph, Bishopsgate, which housed a significant population of French Huguenot protestant refugees. The Liberty of Norton Folgate did not have a church, so the residents used St Botolph. Beyond, the village of Shoreditch, still surrounded by open fields, was immediately to the north over the county boundary in Middlesex. There, in 1576, James Burbage had built The Theatre within another former monastic precinct, Hollywell Priory. Shortly after, The Curtain opened a little to the south creating London's first theatre district. With the Bull, there were now three theatres within a few minutes' walk of Norton Folgate. In 1587, Henslowe built the Rose playhouse, the first theatre on Bankside, south of the Thames.

After Stephen Vaughan I's death in 1549,[26] his son Stephen Vaughan II eventually inherited the Norton Folgate mansion and lived there until his death in 1605. The family's religious affiliations were complicated. One sister was the highly educated Anne Vaughan Locke, the poet who wrote *A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner* (1560), the first sonnet sequence in English.[27] She was also a significant Calvinist figure, a Marian exile who corresponded with John Knox. However, Jane, the second sister,[28] was a Catholic recusant, whose four daughters all migrated to the Continent to become nuns, two going to Louvain, where one was a prioress and two, via Rouen, eventually to Lisbon, where one was an abbess.[29] Two of her four sons went to Rome to become novices with the Jesuits. Jane was indicted in January 1593, nearly became a martyr and was imprisoned for her Catholic faith.

Thomas Wiseman (d.1585), Jane's husband,[30] was Catholic and his country estate Broadoaks Manor at Wimbish, eighteen miles south of Cambridge is famous for its surviving priest holes. The mansion saw major pursuivant searches in autumn 1592 and particularly in

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[25] David Kathman, "Hobson the Carrier and Playing at the Bull Inn," unpublished paper presented at the Shakespeare Association of America Annual Conference, 2009.
[26] Vaughan's brother-in-law and executor was the remarkable Catholic composer Father John Gwynneth.
[27] Appended to John Calvin, *Sermons of Iohn Caluin, vpon the songe that Ezechias made after he had bene sicke and afflicted by the hand of God* (London: 1560).
[28] Her entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* suggests her father was the soldier Cuthbert Vaughan but this seems unlikely.
[29] Details of the four nuns are listed in *Who were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile 1600-1800*, research project at Queen Mary, University of London, https://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/analysis.
[30] Their marriage may have been arranged by Father Gwynneth. See William Wizeman, *The Theology and Spirituality of Mary Tudor's Church* (Ashgate, 2006), 39.

Easter 1594 when Father Gerrard, the Wiseman family chaplain from c.1591, narrowly escaped capture. Furthermore, their eldest son and heir, Sir Thomas Wiseman, married Jane Huddlestone, daughter of Sir Edmund Huddlestone of Sawston Hall, thirteen miles north of Broadoaks and just south of Cambridge. The Huddlestones were another leading recusant family, and the house contains three priest holes, the finest the work of the carpenter martyr Saint Nicholas Owen.

Stephen Vaughan II's will, witnessed 15 February 1589, left his "mancion house wherein I now dwell" in Norton Folgate to his third son, Rowland as the eldest, Stephen Vaughan III, was mentally unstable having been "corrupted by religion" and "being fallen into a kinde of phransie or lunacye" and the second had disappeared overseas, "gone I know nott whither," with the implication that he might have been a Catholic exile, particularly since six of his cousins were members of religious orders on the Continent.[31]

Therefore, by September 1589, when Marlowe was recorded as living in Norton Folgate, the main landlord's family had strong Protestant and Catholic connections. Historians have associated Marlowe's residency there with a disreputable lifestyle in a downmarket neighbourhood, part of the ongoing projection of him as a louche character. However, while Norton Folgate's legal status as a liberty may have appealed to Marlowe, the area was anything but run down at the time. This identity developed in the nineteenth century when Norton Folgate degenerated into a squalid inner-city slum. However, in 1589, it was a highly desirable residential enclave with gardens and an orchard.[32]

A more powerful motivation for Marlowe's residency may have been the concentration of upmarket residents with Catholic connections. Stephen Vaughan II's religious sympathies are uncertain. However, in 1580, he leased the "principal tenement" adjoining his mansion, to Robert Hare, MP (c.1531–1611) a prominent Catholic.[33] Furthermore, on the south side of Vaughan's property was the house of the Catholic Sir Edmund Huddleston, whose daughter Jane was married to Thomas Wiseman junior, Vaughan's nephew. The Cambridge carrier route, which passed Norton Folgate, went within a couple of miles of the Wiseman and Huddleston country estates at Wimbish and Sawston

[31] Fairhurst Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3470, fol. 113 (Discovery Catalogue).
[32] Also, Sir Paul Pindar, the future English ambassador to Constantinople, built his luxurious mansion just to the south in 1599. The decorated wooden frame of the front is displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum..
[33] For the lease detail, see "The precinct of St Mary Spital: The priory site," in *Survey of London: Vol. 27*, 39–51, referring to Bodleian MS. Charters, Middlesex 59. A survey of Catholics dated possibly to October 1578, records Hare going to mass at the house of Lord Chidiock Paulet in "the Spittle." See *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Elizabeth, Addenda, 1566–79*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (London, 1871), 550–51, *BHO* [accessed 2023]; hereafter *CSPD*.

respectively. In 1599, the Jesuit Father Garnet was recorded as having a house "in a place called Spital" and it has been suggested that the Jesuit Father Gerrard may have hidden there in 1597, after his dramatic escape from the Tower of London.[34]

Unfortunately, without parish clerk accounts for St Botolph, Bishopsgate, matching those from St Ethelburga, it is impossible to map Marlowe's immediate neighbours in detail.[35] Apart from the parish church and a few inns, there were only two anchor points in the parish, both close to Bishopsgate. These were the Bedlam Hospital for the mentally afflicted and across Bishopsgate Street a mansion, "Fisher's Folly," recently purchased in 1589 by Sir William Cornwallis from Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. The Cornwallis family were also well-known Catholics. Cornwallis employed the poet Thomas Watson (d. 1592), Marlowe's compatriot at his murder trial in 1589, as a tutor. Gary Taylor has suggested that Watson may have worked with Shakespeare on *Arden of Faversham* around this time.[36] Marlowe also had one particularly interesting neighbour, the poet Emilia Bassano Lanier (1569–1645).[37] Her father Baptiste Bassano, a Venetian musician, left her and her sister Angela three houses in the parish of St Botolph, described as "near unto the Spital,"[38] presumably at the north end of the parish abutting the Liberty of Norton Folgate.

In conclusion, quite why Christopher Marlowe chose to live in Norton Folgate c.1589 is open to debate. A simple explanation would be that it was a liberty close to the main cluster of theatres – both those in city inn yards and purpose built. However, the presence of leading recusant families in Norton Folgate provides an interesting backdrop to Marlowe's life at this time.

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[34] John Gerard, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan,* trans. Philip Caraman (Longman, 1951), 137–56.
[35] It seems likely that the names in the 1598 Lay Subsidy roll are in house order. See PRO E179/142/239, perhaps running north to south along Norton Folgate.
[36] Gary Taylor, "Finding 'Anonymous' in the Digital Archives," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 34, no. 4 (2019): 855–73 and "Shakespeare, *Arden of Faversham*, and Four Forgotten Playwrights," *The Review of English Studies* 71, no. 302 (2020): 867–95.
[37] From 1587–1592, she was the mistress of Lord Hunsdon, patron of the Lord Chamberlain's Men from 1594.
[38] "Will of Baptista Bassanye or Bassany, Musician of Her Majesty, TNA PROB 11/58/261. "Baptista Bassanye, native of Venice and one of the Musicians of our Sovereign Lady the Queen's majesty," was probated 6 July 1576. He made bequests to "Emelia Bassany," who was to receive £100 when she reached the age of 21. Bassano knew Stephen Vaughan II, since an inquisition of 1590 records that in 1575 he appointed him and John Austen, gent. to take responsibility for a property on behalf of Emilia and her sister. See "Inquisitions: 1590," in *Abstracts of Inquisitiones Post Mortem For the City of London: Part 3*, ed. E. A. Fry (British Records Society, 1908), 143–51, *BHO* [accessed 2023]. Two of Emilia's royal musician uncles, Mark Anthony and Jeronimo Bassano, were living nearby as they were listed in the 1589 St Helen's parish tithe survey. See Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 250–51, 414–15. By 1598, the latter was living in Shoreditch, next to his brother Edward, another royal musician.

Shakespeare's choice of St Helen's for his lodgings, certainly from c.1597 and possibly from c.1592/1593, was very different to Marlowe's.[39] Inside the city wall, surrounded by dense housing, St Helen's was not a liberty but had become part of a normal city parish. Also, it was a bastion of the Protestant mercantile city establishment. Shakespeare's immediate neighbours included Sir John "Rich" Spencer, Lord Mayor in 1594/95, Alderman John Robinson, a leading Merchant of the Staple and Doctor Peter Turner, MP, a violently anti-Catholic former Marian exile.[40] If the proposal that Shakespeare was lodging in rooms sub-let in a property leased from the Company of Leathersellers is correct, it would be hard to imagine a much more "establishment" location. He was living in a semi-gated or gated community, owned and managed by a major city livery company.[41] Since Shakespeare could have lived anywhere with reasonable access to his workplaces, his choice of St Helen's is significant. For him, the pull of privacy, the Leathersellers' community, the Bull Theatre and the other city theatres clearly outweighed a daily fifteen-minute walk to The Theatre.

In summary, constrained by London's defensive wall and Bishopsgate, Marlowe must have entered the city along Bishopsgate Street when living in Norton Folgate. If heading to a performance at the Bull theatre, he would have walked past a street frontage of about a hundred houses, passed through the massive wooden city gates and picked his way along the street inside, crowded with carts and horses, finally passing John Welles's house before turning right into the hectic Bull Inn yard. By 1592/93, Shakespeare may also have been living across the street from Welles's house. The proposition that Marlowe and Shakespeare collaborated on *Henry VI* can, therefore, be placed into a broader context of potential physical proximity.[42]

The residents of St Ethelburga

The small parish of St Ethelburga consisted of a hundred-yard section of Bishopsgate Street, located between the lodgings of Marlowe and Shakespeare. The west side gave access to four multi-storeyed inn yards: The Bull, The Green Dragon, The Three Swans and The Vyne,

[39] The arguments for an earlier date are set out in Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare,* 194–96. Shakespeare is not listed in the 1589 St Helen's tithe survey, so he most likely arrived in the parish after this date. A prompt for his move to St Helen's might have been his shift to writing narrative poetry in late 1592, following the near complete closure of the theatres until January 1594.

[40] Son of William Turner, churchman, pioneering naturalist and Marian exile.

[41] The Leathersellers were fifteenth in order of livery company precedence.

[42] Loughnane and Power, "Beginning with Shakespeare," and G. Taylor, "Who Read What When?" in Loughnane and Power, eds., *Early Shakespeare, 1588–1594*, 7 and 284–301.

along with five or six narrow side alleys. The parish escaped the 1666 Great Fire, so Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677 shows the building plots much as they existed in the 1590s. As St Helen's had no inns, this cluster of hostelries offered a choice of inviting taprooms for enjoying a drink leavened with travellers' news or local gossip – all grist for hard up writers scrabbling to create content for the nearby theatres.

The annual listings of the levy to pay for the parish clerk's wages indicate around thirty properties on the west side of Bishopsgate Street and perhaps fifteen on the shorter eastern side.[43] Most were individual dwellings with a shop on the ground floor and two and three or even four floors of residential accommodation above. There were also around fifty-five individuals listed in the narrow side alleys, which snaked back between the inn yards. Here, many lived in one room hovels.

Out of the hundred or so households, nineteen were listed in the 1598 Lay Subsidy roll as being wealthy enough to pay this tax. This compares to forty-nine in neighbouring St Helen's, where William Shakespeare was rated at £5. The St Ethelburga listing is headed by Edward Walker (£25) and Thomas Parris (£20), innholders of the Green Dragon and the Bull with its theatre, followed by two gentlemen, Robert Groome (£15) and Henry Dove (£10), Robert Wincott (£12, status unknown) along with Edward Bamford and John Stanton (both £10), innholders of the Three Swans and The Vyne respectively. If Shakespeare had lived in the parish, he would have been ranked tenth wealthiest.

Of the forty-five properties on Bishopsgate Street, it is possible to identify the trades of about a dozen or so residents in 1592–93. It was a mixed bag; the four inn holders (Thomas Parris presumably also a theatre promoter of sorts) dominated, along with one gentleman, a wealthy widow landlord, an ironmonger/scrivener (possibly an overseas courier in the 1580s), a possible courier, a draper/brown baker, two joiners, a clothworker, a plasterer, possibly a former mayor/alderman of Bath and the Queen's Principal Overseas messenger. Robert Armin the actor/comedian and successor to Will Kempe in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was living in "Mrs Stevens' Rents, by London Wall." Furthermore, Thomas Smythe, the parish schoolmaster, taught in the church and Samuel Aylwarde, a glover, rented a shop wedged in front.[44]

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[43] London Metropolitan Archive P69/ETH/006/MS04241/001. The surviving listings begin in 1569 and run to 1615. It appears this is the only parish for which such listings survive from this period. David Kathman first noted their significance in "Hobson the Carrier."

[44] Both lived in adjacent parishes. Smythe is listed in the 1589 St Helen's tithe survey. In 1597, a Thomas Smythe, gent. (£30) is recorded in the St Helen's Lay Subsidy default roll, immediately under Shakespeare's entry (TNA E 179/146/354). Two tiny shops were constructed in front of the west end of the church. Aylward

The house of Mr Walley(ie), possibly a Bath alderman, had the highest fee at 6s 8d and a succession of upmarket residents, including Dr Thomas Skeffington, a Doctor of Civil Law in 1591/92[45] and, in 1595/96, probably Dr Giles Fletcher MP, uncle and future adopter of John Fletcher, the Jacobean playwright. Skeffington's will, dating to his occupancy, suggests a house of considerable luxury with paintings, silver tableware and musical instruments.

In summary, St Ethelburga was a middling, socially mixed parish, nestling next to the wealthier St Helen's and richer parishes to the south. On the parish boundary was the Bull Inn and its theatre.[46] When Anthony Bacon moved in nearby in spring 1594, his mother wrote disapprovingly:

> The Bull Inne there with continuall enterlude had even infected the inhabitants there with corrupt and lewde dispotions; ……. so neere a place haunted with such pernicious and obscean playes and theaters able to poyson the very godly and, do what you can, your servants shalbe entyced and spoyled.[47]

It seems likely that Marlowe would have been a regular attendee in the late 1580s.[48] If so, every time he entered the Bull Inn's main gateway from Bishopsgate Street, he would have passed the front door of John Welles's house.

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rented them from 1592, so every day, as Shakespeare walked north to the Theatre, he would have passed a reminder of his earlier life in Stratford.

[45] Skeffington went up to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1565, where he became a fellow. He owned a decent sized library and, his will, TNA PRO 11/ 80/309, proved 25 October 1592, stated his executors could choose the books they liked but the rest should go to Trinity. For the Skeffington gift of fifty-nine books, mostly law related, see Philip Gaskell, *Trinity College Library: The First 150 Years* (Cambridge University Press, 1980). A fellow from Trinity was sent to London to examine the books with a 24s. 9d. bill for carrying them back to Cambridge. It seems likely but unproveable, that Skeffington's books were kept in his Bishopsgate house. They included (Trinity Library TS 46) Jean Bodin's *The Six Books of the Republic* in French (2nd edition, 1577), which was popular in England and hints at an interest in French affairs. There was also a copy (TS 51) of Petrus Ramus' *Tabulae* (2nd edition, 1576). Ramus was a famous victim of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre and features in *The Massacre at Paris*, with his murder in scene 9. For his central significance, see Efterpi Mitsi, "Killing the Humanist in Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*," in *War on the Human: New Responses to an Ever-Present Debate*, ed. Theodora Tsimpouki and Konstantinos Blatanis (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 174–190. It is an intriguing thought that Marlowe may have walked past these publications on his way to the Bull or Rose theatres—a possible rare example of being able to geo-locate specific books into the evolving theatre ecology of late Elizabethan London. Welles may have met Bodin in 1581/2 when he accompanied the Duke of Alençon on his trip to England to woo Elizabeth I, see pp. 20, 25 in this essay. Unusually, Skeffington left £6, £4 and £2 to the poor of the French, Dutch and Italian churches in London.

[46] The boundary was defined by the north wall of Sir Thomas Gresham's huge mansion which became Gresham College, London's first higher education establishment, in 1598/99.

[47] See Letter 101, April 1594 in Gemma Allen, ed., "The Letters of Lady Anne Bacon," *Camden Fifth Series* 44 (2013): 180.

[48] Caution is needed in making such assumptions. See particularly J. A. Downie, "Marlowe, May 1593, and the 'Must-Have' Theory of Biography," *Review of English Studies* 58, no. 235 (2007): 245–67. However, there is a

PART II

John Welles: A potential source on French civil war politics[49]

Historians have questioned whether Marlowe worked for the English government in France. David Riggs notes:

> Even in its truncated form, *The Massacre* reveals that Marlowe had an intricate, first-hand knowledge of the French civil wars. It includes details that were not available from printed sources, and thus bears out the hypothesis that he had performed diplomatic or secret-service work in France.[50]

However, an alternative possibility is that, rather than undertaking such service himself, Marlowe was closely acquainted with someone who had carried out government work in France. If so, John Welles would have been an excellent informant, since he was Queen Elizabeth's "principal" overseas courier, the most senior of her four messengers that carried royal correspondence to foreign courts across mainland Europe. These couriers played a crucial role in maintaining diplomatic channels. For example, on 16 October 1584 Edward Stafford, English ambassador in Paris from 1583–90, wrote to Walsingham about the arrival of Welles, and highlighted the practical problems of diplomatic service:

> By them [new letters] I find that her Majesty wishes me to deliver the despatch sent by John Welles, with "mitigation" of some things, which I will perform as soon as I can get audience. The King [Henry III] was to arrive to-night at "Dolingville" but I fear I shall be put off to the 10th of next month like the rest, and especially the Venice ambassador, who wishes to present his successor and take his leave and has already posted to Orleans and Blois and hither again, but can by no means get it sooner.[51]

A few weeks later, Stafford wrote more prosaically about Welles's equine expertise:

> First, for horses: John Welles has not better skill to choose any than I, nor so good credit or friends to get such as will serve your turn; therefore send me word what country horses you like best, and I will find means to fit you; and for wines likewise of the best to be had.[52]

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significant difference between suggesting that a leading playwright was likely to visit the theatre and stating that Marlowe was certainly an established government spy.

[49] Information on Welles comes largely from five types of records, i. official (Privy Council, lay subsidy rolls, parish), ii. about thirty surviving letters written by Welles, mostly to Lord Burghley, Sir Francis Walsingham and Robert Cecil, iii. mentions in letters by others, iv. letters recorded as delivered by Welles and v. payments made to Welles for the costs of carrying letters recorded in the pipe rolls. Often, the same journeys are recorded in iv. and v. but some only appear in one or the other. Welles could be paid from other sources, for example directly by Walsingham.

[50] Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, 37.

[51] TNA SP 78/12/90, fol. 106.

[52] 3 November 1584, TNA SP 78/12/110, fol. 139.

So, who was this John Welles, who lived within earshot of one of London's four inn theatres at the time when English drama was evolving rapidly?[53] One thing is certain: Welles was one of the most travelled inhabitants in the parish. His employment as one of the crown's four overseas messengers meant that, over the years, he had criss-crossed western Europe carrying letters from Elizabeth I and the Privy Council to the French and German princes' courts, as well as Spain and the Low Countries. It is necessary to explore Welles's career in some detail to demonstrate the extent to which he gained direct experience of French politics and conflict.

Fifty years ago, E. John B. Allen sketched a pioneering, but somewhat inaccurate, summary of Welles's career to which much more information and clarity can now be added.[54] In brief, Welles is first recorded in Cambridge in January 1566 writing to William Cecil, Lord Burghley.[55] His familiar tone and comments on college affairs suggest he was acting as some form of personal representative for Burghley, who was Chancellor of the university.[56] For example, he passed on a question about ecclesiastical vestments from Richard Beaumont, the Vice-Chancellor and Master of Trinity College. In another letter, dated 25 January 1567 and written in Latin, Welles writes sycophantically to Burghley about the latter's sickness, generally bemoaning the fragility of life and suggesting that he (Welles) would willingly have suffered the illness on his Lordship's behalf: "*ego pro te libenter sufferrem*.".[57] These letters suggest that Welles was born in the later 1540s, but his place of birth and family have not yet been identified.[58] Burghley seems to have identified him as a talented youngster worth developing.

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[53] There has been confusion with another John Welles, a scrivener, living in St Dunstan in the West, see "John Welles, Scrivener of Fleet street," 6 February 1581 entry, *J. House of Commons: Vol. 1, 1547–1629* (London, 1802), 122–23, *BHO* [accessed 2023]. Usually with a partner, often Henry Best, he was involved in numerous land transactions in the 1580s/90s. It is this John Welles who sometimes appears in Shakespeare studies as, with Best, he acquired the manor of Stratford-upon-Avon on behalf of Sir Edward Greville, MP in 1591.

[54] See E. J. B. Allen, "English Diplomatic Couriers in Post and Courier Service in the Diplomacy of Early Modern Europe," in *International Archives of the History of Ideas*, Minor Series 3 (Nijhoff, 1972), 107–135. Unfortunately, Allen does not reference some of his sources in detail and there are significant errors.

[55] *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth, 1547–80*, ed. R. Lemon (London, 1856), 267–74. These 19th century transcripts often tidy up Welles's original English.

[56] Welles wrote that the Bishop of Ely's ranger thought he was Burghley's chaplain. In 1597, Welles returned to working for the Cecil family, when he became "harbinger" for Robert Cecil. This is discussed later in the essay.

[57] TNA SP12/42, fol. 24 recto (see *CSPD 1547–80*, ed. Lemon, 287). Welles refers to fountains (of Buxton spa?), Jerusalem, Athens, Corinth, Alexander the Great, Croesus of Lydia and Cyrus of Persia, along with John 14:6, clearly trying to demonstrate his erudition with three contrasting triplets, which perhaps suggest he was an educated younger son from an affluent family.

[58] A William Welles is recorded in the 1541 Lay Subsidy roll for St Ethelburga rated at £20. This might be John Welles's father, but it has not been possible to make a firm connection as the parish registers do not survive before 1671. See "1541 London Subsidy roll: Bishopsgate Ward," in *Two Tudor Subsidy Rolls for the City of London, 1541 and 1582*, ed. R. G. Lang (London Record Society, 1993), 21–25, *BHO* [accessed 2023].

Five years later, in January 1573, Welles is first recorded as an overseas courier carrying letters from the court at Somerset House to Francis Walsingham, the English ambassador in Paris and back to London.[59] Walsingham is referred to as "his M[aste]r," suggesting Welles may, at this point, have been part of Walsingham's retinue in France, in some form of "servant-courier" role.[60] Even if this was just Welles's first visit, it was only five months after the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, when Walsingham had been an eyewitness to the horrors in Paris. It is quite possible that he was in Paris with Walsingham earlier. Whatever the truth, Welles had a close connection with the key English witness. During 1573 and 1574, Welles made several journeys from Paris to London and back.[61] Then, in late October 1575, he was given the responsibility of taking letters written by the Queen and Burghley from Paris to the Spanish court at Madrid, covering the eight hundred miles in fourteen days, averaging sixty miles a day, truly *post-haste*.[62]

Thereafter, a considerable number of documents highlight subsequent developments in Welles's career, particularly his:

- **overall role:** from 1575, his letters to Walsingham contain detailed political and military intelligence on French affairs, focussing on strategic information rather than gossip. Possibly formally appointed as an overseas courier in 1575, when he carried letters to Madrid, or on his return to England in 1576;

[59] Pipe Rolls TNA E351/541, fol. 150 recto, warrant dated 29 January 1572/73. Walsingham's wife, who had fled to England after the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, had given birth a few weeks earlier and presumably Walsingham was anxious for news of mother and baby. Later in 1573, Welles is described as the servant of Dr. Valentine Dale, the ambassador who replaced Walsingham, suggesting he was attached to his household in Paris.

[60] Nothing is currently known of Welles from 1568–73. However, since Burghley was instrumental in getting Walsingham appointed as ambassador to France, it is possible that he passed on his efficient servant to assist when his protege moved to Paris in late 1570.

[61] TNA E351/541 fol. 150 verso, fol. 151 recto and verso, fol. 165 recto – warrants dated 6 April, 22 May, c. 28 July, 15 September, 26 October.

[62] Dr. Dale, writing from Paris to Burghley on 2 November 1575, notes that "John Furrier went away the 30th October early in the morning towards Spain with a large passport" and Henry Cobham, writing to Burghley on 14 November 1575, relates that "As he was ending this, John Wells came with the Queen's and his Lordship's letters, and has accordingly sent to desire audience of the King," demonstrating that Welles and Furrier were the same person. See *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 11, 1575–1577*, ed. A. J. Crosby (London, 1880), 172, *BHO* [accessed 2023], 172–73, 180–81. Dr. Dale wrote again on 26 November, stating that he had news that "John Furrier is passed Bordeaux" (189) and on 8 December reports "John Furrier's arrival in Spain," twenty five days after his arrival, giving an indication of the time and difficulty of keeping track of the delivery of vital government documents (197).

- **geographical experience:** from 1576–84, he travelled mainly to and from France, but also to Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges and Frankfurt;[63]
- **status and responsibility:** by early 1580, he was "Principal" overseas courier, responsible for the most important diplomatic communications. For example, in 1580–81, he was involved in the visit of the Duke of Alençon for marriage negotiations with Queen Elizabeth including, in early February 1582, having to find 100 horses and 17 carts for his departure;
- **insights into key personalities**: increasingly involved in meeting key English and French personalities. On 27 November 1579, ten days after he had arrived as ambassador in Paris, Sir Henry Cobham wrote to Walsingham, "I have sent John Furrier to see the interview between mother [Catherine de Medici] and son [Henry III]."[64]

Welles's work gave him a grandstand view of the complex factional and religious politics in France and the resulting power struggles between Henry III, the rest of the royal family, the Guise faction and the Catholic League. By 1590, only Elizabeth I, the Privy Council, and a small number of officials, diplomats, soldiers, merchants, exiles and churchmen in England would have as good a knowledge of French affairs as Welles.

One unusual feature of Welles was that he was also known as John (the) Furrier/Furriar, particularly c.1573–81.[65] Walsingham or his clerk added this moniker on the outside of several letters from Welles. No other messenger was given an additional name in this way. Francis Walsingham often used alias for his spies, but Welles's tone of familiarity with Walsingham suggests it was a descriptive nickname of some sort.[66]

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[63] See, for example, Daniel Rogers at Frankfort to Walsingham, 13 October 1577, William Davison at Antwerp to the Earl of Leicester, 12 December 1577, *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 12, 1577–78*, ed. Arthur John Butler (London, 1901), *BHO* [accessed 2023].

[64] Letter 25 November 1579, *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 14, 1579–1580*, ed. Arthur John Butler (London, 1904), 98, *BHO* [accessed 2025].

[65] The first reference to Furrier/Welles is a warrant for a payment to John Furrier dated 18 January 1573, recorded in the pipe rolls TNA E351/541 fol. 150 recto, charge of 10s for carrying a letter from Hampton Court Palace to London. This is listed four entries before John Welles's first appearance, a charge of £12 for carrying letters from Somerset House to Paris and back, dated 29(?) January. The last mention is a note by Lord Burghley in July 1590 that "John Farriar" had been exchanged for a prisoner in Paris. This was a misunderstanding as Welles was still in prison in Rouen.

[66] OED defines furrier as "One who went in advance of an army, etc. to secure and arrange accommodation, etc.; a purveyor, quarter-master; hence also a courier, harbinger" (n.1). The entry gives the first recorded use as 1575 by the poet and translator George Turberville, but this term is used of Wells two years earlier. It is possible that there was more than one "John the Furrier" but the destinations and dating of the warrants suggests they all refer to one person. For example, on 31 December 1579, Sir Henry Cobham writes to Walsingham that "John Furrier had received and brought his dispatches," but in the pipe rolls the warrant of £25 for this journey is listed

From 1580–84, Thomas Walsingham, first cousin once removed to Sir Francis Walsingham, had a junior courier position carrying messages to Paris and back. Starting aged seventeen, he was around fifteen years younger than Welles. Given their similar roles in the small pool of five to ten regular messengers to Paris, they were probably colleagues or at least were aware of each other's journeys.[67] In August 1581, three letters from Francis Walsingham were brought separately from Paris for Burghley. The messengers were Walsingham, Watson and "John Furriar." The first was almost certainly Thomas Walsingham and "John Furriar" was John Welles.[68]

With two important exceptions, there is a blank in Welles's recorded activities in 1585 and 1586. This period overlaps with the years when Thomas Walsingham, subsequently joined by Robert Poley, went to work closely with Francis Walsingham on the espionage activities which led to the 1586 Babington plot, in turn resulting in the arrest, trial and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. There is no direct evidence that Welles was involved intimately in these machinations, but this gap in his messenger journeys is intriguing. It is reasonable to suggest he may have become close to the inner core of Francis Walsingham's operation. It is these years when many Marlowe scholars have suggested the MA student was drawn into spying, "wherebie he had done her Majestie good service."[69]

Welles's involvement, in some way, is suggested by his two recorded activities. On 5 October 1586, Welles left London for Paris with letters for Sir Edward Stafford, the English ambassador, which presumably briefed him that Mary was to be tried for treason.[70] Three weeks later, on 29 October 1586, Parliament assembled to formally condemn her.[71] The same day, Welles left London again for Paris to forewarn Stafford of the approaching diplomatic

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as John Welles. See *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 14*, ed. Butler, 16–31 and for pipe rolls TNA E351/542 fol. 8 recto. The use of the term furrier may suggest that Welles was always seen as having a higher status than an ordinary courier. A letter dated 25/27 April 1576 from Sir Thomas Randolph in Paris to Walsingham, refers to "their last letters by John the Furrier." Since Randolph had been appointed "Master of the King's Post" (later Postmaster General) in 1566, he presumably knew the precise meaning of the term.

[67] Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*, rev. ed. (Vintage, 2002), 216.

[68] Nicholl suggests the Watson was Thomas Watson (see *The Reckoning*, 216) but the pipe rolls show it was a John Watson, most likely the John Watson recorded as the Bailiff of St Katherine [presumably by the Tower], responsible in early 1591 for the prisoner John Arden "brought from Calais." Six years later, when Father Gerard escaped from the Tower of London in 1597, Arden was his fellow escapee. However, Watson and Thomas Walsingham were in Paris together c.1581/82 (see Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 217).

[69] Recorded in the minutes of the Privy Council, see TNA Privy Council Register, Elizabeth I, PC 2/14, Vol. 6, 29 June 1587.

[70] Warrants in Pipe Rolls TNA E 351/542 fol. 91 verso.

[71] A guilty verdict had been passed by the Star Chamber on 25 October 1586.

storm. William Davison, the Queen's Principal Secretary and Privy Councillor, wrote a note to Lord Burghley, specifically recording Welles's departure.

The role of an overseas messenger

The four overseas messengers were distinct from the domestic messengers, who travelled in England, Wales and Ireland.[72] As an "overseas" messenger, Welles had higher status and regular pay. They would specialise in one destination such as Paris, the Hague, or Edinburgh. However, when there were many letters, the service would be augmented by other trustworthy travellers.

Sending letters was expensive. A one-way trip from London to Paris would typically incur costs of £10–15, for horses, stabling, accommodation *en route* and crossing the Channel. It is the official warrants for these costs which provide much information about the service.[73] In 1584, Francis Walsingham wrote to Sir Edward Stafford, the English ambassador to France, instructing: "Do not take it in ill part that I write no oftener; for the charges of posting are so straitly looked into that I must not send unless upon some matter of importance."[74] With the upheavals of the religious wars, the French court was frequently on the move, usually to the Loire Valley, and the foreign ambassadors would often follow. Messengers might arrive in Paris, only to find they had to continue to Blois, Angers or Tours.

Riding with confidential diplomatic documents of the highest importance, it is reasonable to assume Welles was an excellent horseman, physically strong, extremely fit and self-reliant, with a working knowledge of French. Travelling alone through foreign countryside, with all the attendant possible difficulties,[75] he would have been accustomed to spending long periods by himself and away from his family. A return trip to Paris might be

[72] See Mark Brayshay, "Messengers, Pursuivants and Courier Agents of the English State, c.1512–c.1640," in *Postal History: Multidisciplinary and Diachronic Perspectives*, ed. Bruno Crevato-Selvaggi and Raffaella Gerola, (Istituto di Studi Storici Postali, 2020), 279–318.

[73] From 1587–96, Sir Thomas Heneage, as Vice-Chamberlain of the Royal Household, was responsible for these payments, listed in the records of Pipe Office, Declared Accounts, Treasurers of the Chamber (TNA E 351/542). Welles lived close to Heneage, who lived in the neighbouring parish of St Andrew Undershaft, immediately to the east of St Helen and St Ethelburga. In 1594–95, he was married to Mary Wriothesley, Countess of Southampton, the mother of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton.

[74] Letter from Walsingham to Stafford, 3 December 1584, *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 19, August 1584–August 1585*, ed. Sophie Crawford Lomas (London, 1916), *BHO* [accessed 2023].

[75] In 1581, Thomas Walsingham was held up by French soldiers in Picardy, the area north of Paris, presumably on his way back to England; see Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 139. In April 1580, Welles was attacked at sea by pirates and received £20 compensation; see TNA E351/542/9 recto. In August 1582, Lord Cobham's "servant" Benedict Barwick, carrying letters to Walsingham, was attacked *en route* south of Boulogne and at "7 o'clock at night in the wood robbed of his packets and money," *CSPF*: *Elizabeth: Vol. 16, May–December 1582*, ed. Arthur John Butler (London, 1909), *BHO* [accessed 2025].

accomplished in fifteen to twenty days but was dependent on the time taken for writing replies and to secure favourable winds to cross the Channel.

Overseas messengers were not spies; their diplomatic role meant they were viewed as official representatives. However, their activities meant they were automatically a major source of general intelligence in a world without journalists. Furthermore, some, most clearly Robert Poley, shifted from one role to the other. There is no evidence that Welles was a spy and his career after 1592, outlined below, demonstrates him veering more towards administrative and attaché/diplomatic roles.[76]

However, there is some evidence that Welles was close to the Cecil spy networks around the time of Marlowe's death. On 22 February 1593, a letter signed "John Welles" was sent from Antwerp to "William White," Burghley's codename, seeking to recover his favour.[77] The writer had lost an important letter from Burghley, which was subsequently printed in Richard Verstegan's Catholic polemic, *An Advertisement Written to a Secretarie of My L. Treasurers of Ingland, by an Inglishe Intelligencer ... Also ... a Letter Written by the L. Treasurer in Defence of His Gentrie, and Nobility, Intercepted, Published, and Answered by the Papistes* (Antwerp, 1592).[78] However, the letter is not in Welles's handwriting, and the signature is a misspelt forgery: John instead of his usual "Jhon." A note on the outside, added by Burghley's clerk, records it was from Michael Moody, a duplicitous agent who was involved in the 1587 Stafford plot and worked for the English government until at least 1596. The house of Robert Rutkin, a London merchant in St Mary Axe, a couple of minutes' walk from the Bull Inn, was used as a drop box "front."[79] Moody would send letters to Rutkin, who passed them to Robert Poley, then living close to Marlowe in Shoreditch, who in turn would send them to Thomas Heneage, whose house was close to St Mary Axe, or the

[76] Welles's journeys to Paris, via Dieppe, would have taken him through Rouen, a significant centre for exiled English Catholics and anti-Protestant printing. Father Robert Persons had established his own press there in the early 1580s.

[77] TNA SP 12/244/ fol. 99 recto.

[78] See for details Gary Schneider, "Propaganda, Patriotism, and News: Printing Discovered and Intercepted Letters in England, 1571–1600," *The Journal of Epistolary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 48–66.

[79] See letter of 20 February 1592, "Cecil Papers: February 1592," in *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Vol. 4, 1590–1594*, ed. R. A. Roberts (London, 1892), 178–83, *BHO* [accessed 2023]. The [One] Swan Inn, also a couple of minutes away, but outside Bishopsgate just north of Bedlam, was being used as a drop for letters from spies in the Low Countries in 1591/92; see TNA SP 12/242 folio 74, summarised in Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (Penguin, 2012), 286. Reinold Bisley, a double agent, lodged close by near Bedlam; see TNA SP 12/242/234 and TNA SP 12/241 fol. 182.

Cecils.[80] Presumably, Moody forged Welles's name, when the latter was either in France or London, to ensure that if the letter was intercepted it could not be linked to himself. Seventeen months earlier, Moody had travelled from Antwerp to Flushing with the aim of persuading the English governor Sir Robert Sidney to try and "turn" the leading Catholic spy Hugh Owen. Although their discussions ended in late November 1591, Moody was again in Flushing in February 1592, shortly after Sidney had arrested Marlowe for coining in the town.[81]

It is difficult to assess Welles's personal views from his letters beyond him being an efficient and trustworthy royal official. He seems to have been a committed Protestant, hardly surprising as he worked for Walsingham. His enthusiastic reporting of "400 priests, friars, monks and [church] doctors slain" at the siege of Paris in November 1589 does not suggest any Catholic sympathies.[82] More revealing of Welles's own character is an account in 1580 by Lord Cobham, the English ambassador in Paris, "[Best] has told me how first the speech of this slander commenced by words spoken by John Furryer, which were … with deep oaths answered" stirring up a fight [with weapons] between two of his servants, resulting in one being killed.[83] The survivor, Best, was shot dead five weeks later in a mysterious street brawl at the embassy gate.[84] Best is thought to have been a Walsingham spy and Cobham, though he might "lament John Furryer, for his evil tongue towards me and mine and other his demeanors," wanted to forget the matter and be "no further 'travailed' with his dealings."[85] Welles's job and personality took him into volatile territory.

Overall, Welles appears to have been independent, ambitious and self-confident; a man of the world. However, in April 1589, when Welles was close to forty, his career took a disastrous turn, a crisis which may connect to *The Massacre at Paris*. Before examining this event, one needs to return briefly to St Ethelburga and Welles's domestic situation.

[80] Detailed in Christopher Mains, *Sir Robert Cecil and Elizabethan Intelligencing, 1590–1603* (PhD thesis, The Open University, 2021), 55–58. See also the deposition of Robert Rutkin, broker, April 1591, TNA SP 12/238, fol. 208 recto, discussed in Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 299–300.
[81] See Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 300–307 for details.
[82] Welles to Walsingham, 17 November 1589, TNA SP 78/20/84 fol. 168.
[83] Cobham to Walsingham, 23 May 1580, "Elizabeth: May 1580, 16–31," in *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 14*, ed. Butler.
[84] Cobham to Walsingham, 2 July 1580, "Elizabeth: July 1580, 1–5," in *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 14*, ed. Butler.
[85] Cobham to Walsingham, 23 May 1580, "Elizabeth: May 1580, 16–31," *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 14*, ed. Butler.

John Welles's move to the parish of St Ethelburga

On Wednesday 8 July 1579, Welles married Isabel M(a)ese in St Botolph, Bishopsgate, a union which took him to St Ethelburga parish.[86] Welles was in his early thirties and his young bride nearly eighteen. Marriage was in the air as the Duke of Alençon made his first visit to England in August to woo Queen Elizabeth. Welles may also have been prompted by his appointment to "principal" royal messenger around this time. Isabel was something of a catch. Christened in the nearby St Peter, Cornhill on 24 August 1561, she was the daughter of a successful grocer, William M(a)ese/Mease. Her father owned various properties and when he died in 1573, her older brother George (b. 1555) inherited the Bull Inn. The extensive premises enclosed three to four internal yards (Fig. 3) and stretched from Bishopsgate Street through to Broad Street, close to the Dutch church.[87] The Bull Inn was the London terminus of several carrier routes, notably from Cambridge.[88] The first record of a theatre at the Bull date from 1578, but performances could have started earlier. Isabel inherited the house on Bishopsgate Street next to the entrance to the Bull Inn.[89] The couple may have had a brief period setting up home together but by October, at the latest, Welles was off to Paris again. Isabel may have already been pregnant as they soon had a daughter.

[86] If his family were not there already, see footnote 63 above. Welles was not listed in the 1576 Lay Subsidy roll for St Ethelburga but was there in 1582, rated at £15 'x Q 44s', indicating he was a royal official. Shakespeare was rated at £5 in 1598 for comparison. However, Welles signed off the 1578/79 parish accounts, which suggests he moved in shortly after the wedding. By 1582, Isabel's mother Julian, who had remarried, was living in the adjacent parish of St Botolph, Bishopsgate, hence they married in that church. It is recorded as "John Well and Elizabeth [error for Isabel] Mace." See *The Registers of St Botolph, Bishopsgate,* Vol. 1, transcr. A. W. Cornelius Hallen (London, 1889), 14.

[87] See TNA PROB 11/55/373. There are two wills of the same date but only the second was probated. William M(a)ese and subsequently George always sub-leased the Bull Inn. From at least 1569/70–1589, it was leased by William and Joan Harrison, a cordwainer and then by Thomas Parris. Details of the wills and the subsequent remarriage of his wife are outlined in Kathman, "Hobson the Carrier." William M(a)ese appointed William Harrison one of his "faithful and trustie friends" as overseer of his will. Isabel had two older sisters Elizabeth and Susan, who must have been born in the early 1550s as they were both married by 1573 and hence only received small bequests. The latter married Richard Billingsley, connecting Isabel to one of the wealthiest and most powerful City merchant families based in the nearby parish of St Katherine Coleman. Richard's father William had married the widows of two former Lord Mayors. Richard's younger brother Henry (1538–1606) was Lord Mayor in 1596(delayed)/1597, but is probably best known today for his 1570 translation into English of Euclid's *Elements,* with a preface by John Dee. The brother of Welles's brother-in-law was therefore a future Lord Mayor. Elizabeth married John Quarles, member of another large family of merchants, based in the nearby parish of St Peter le Poore.

[88] Including Thomas Hobson (c.1544–1631), immortalised by John Milton's "On the University Carrier."

[89] The clerk's fee records show it was leased to Hugh Wheeler a shoemaker from at least 1569–1579, when the newly married Isabel moved in with John Welles.

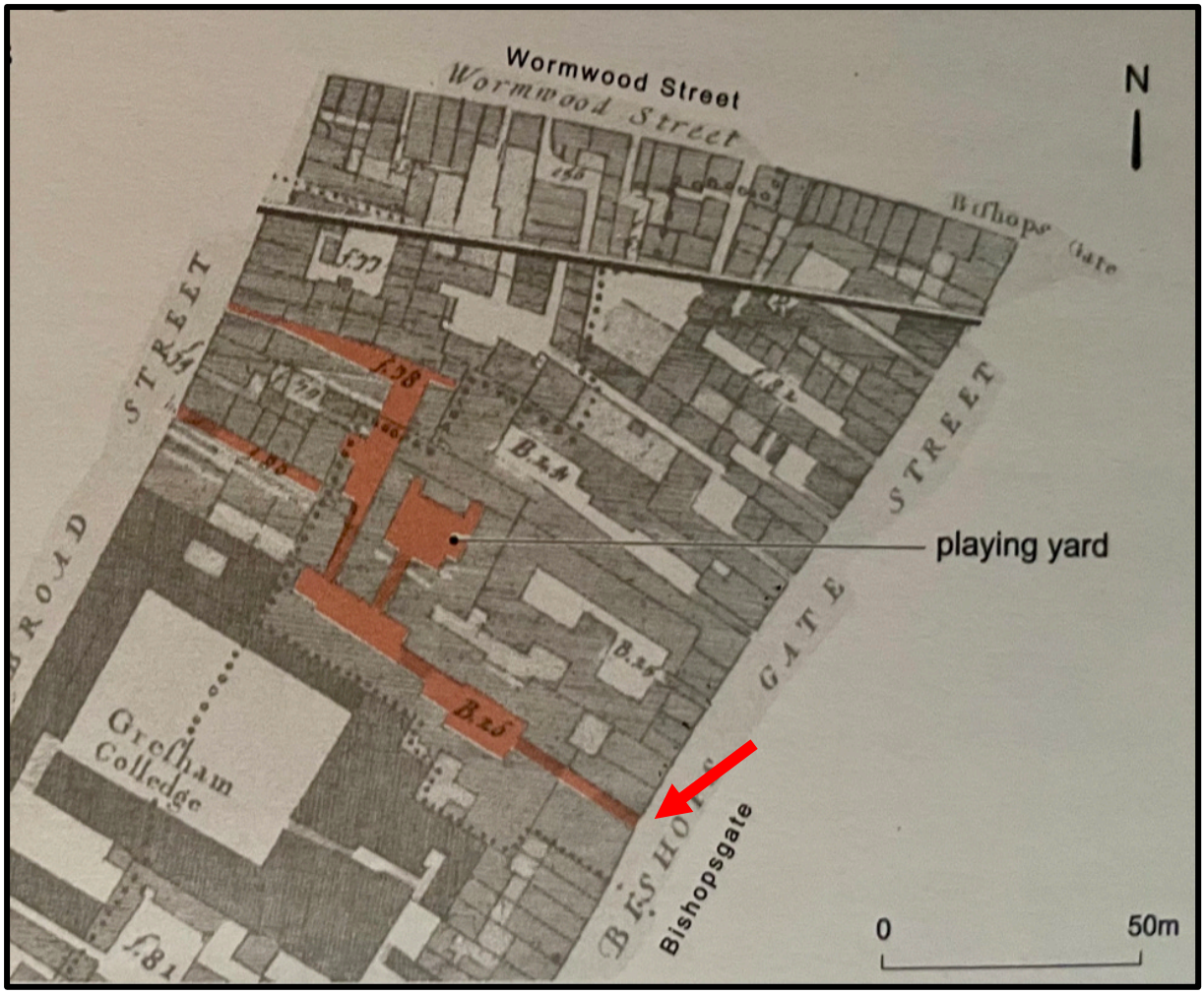

Figure 3: Location of Bull Theatre within premises of Bull Inn. Detail from Ogilby and Morgan's 1677 map of London, reproduced in Bowsher, Shakespeare's London Theatreland*. The red arrow marks the location of the house of John and Isabel Welles.*

When in England, Welles lived in this Bishopsgate house from 1580–1596, as demonstrated by his annual payment of 4s. 8d towards the parish clerk's wages. These years bracket the period when Marlowe, Shakespeare and Robert Armin were living and working nearby.[90] It was a convenient location for a royal messenger, since there was stabling for horses at the nearby carrier inns. It was also only eight-minutes' walk from Sir Francis Walsingham's house in Seething Lane. There is no evidence of whether Welles enjoyed plays, but living within earshot of the Bull Theatre, with time on his hands waiting for his next posting, it would be surprising if he did not attend performances.

[90] As the records of the parish clerk's payments survive back to 1569, it is possible to look at Welles's neighbours in the early 1580s. The employment mix is similar to 1592.

Also living in the vicinity was Thomas Watson, recorded in June 1581 as being a yeoman of St Helen's and not attending church. This was most likely the poet Thomas Watson and friend of Marlowe.[91] A John Watson, possibly his father, is recorded in the 1576 and 1582 Lay Subsidy rolls for St Helen's rated in the "rich" list at £50. Charles Nicholl has highlighted that Watson's sister probably married the spy operative and future overseas messenger Robert Poley in a Catholic wedding in 1582, although he seems to have soon abandoned her.[92]

The events of 1588–91

In late 1588, Welles was around forty and life probably seemed good.[93] England had seen off the Spanish Armada in July and he had a secure job with royal status. His abilities had led to his appointment as "principal courier." He only had one child, but she was now seven or eight, so past the major risk period for infant mortality. After fifteen years of extensive foreign journeys, he was highly experienced and respected by the most powerful people in England. In his letters, he mirrored the English government's position on the complicated politics and ongoing religious conflicts in France, but he would have picked up much detailed knowledge through his travels.

However, as 1588 turned to 1589, Welles was to be dragged directly into the French succession crisis and the ninth war of religion (1589–98). In January 1589, all France was in uproar following the murder of Henry, Duke of Guise, leader of the Catholic League, on 23 December 1588 at Blois on the orders of Henry III. This was followed by the murder of his brother, Cardinal Louis of Guise, the following day and the death by natural causes of Catherine de Medici, the queen mother, two weeks later on 5 January. On 27/28 January 1589, Welles collected a letter from Sir Francis Walsingham, written at Richmond Palace and destined for Sir Edward Stafford, the maverick English ambassador in France.[94] Walsingham wrote to confirm that news of the Guises' murders—"that billet"—had reached England.

Welles's two-hundred-and-fifty-mile ride took two weeks and he arrived on 11 February at Henry III's court, by then at Vendôme. His route would have taken him from the

[91] See generally for Watson, Michael J. Hirrell, "Thomas Watson, Playwright: Origins of Modern English Drama," in *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England*, ed. David McInnis and Matthew Steggle (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 187–207.
[92] Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 215. A Mrs Poole, possibly Poley's wife, is recorded in the 1598 Lay Subsidy Roll for St Helen's at £10; see Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 144, 166–68.
[93] There is no evidence for Welles's activities in the five months after his trip to Flushing in August 1588.
[94] This journey is not recorded in the pipe rolls.

English controlled port of Dieppe through Rouen and Chartres. Welles would presumably have received a detailed account of the murder of Guise brothers, given his arrival only seven weeks after the events. It is possible that Welles had a much more direct knowledge and had carried the first news of the murders from France as, later in the year on 5 September, Welles wrote to Walsingham in London stating, unfortunately ambiguously, that:

> [the Duke of] Aumale[95] [cousin of the Duke of Guise] doth say that it was I that carried the death of Guise and his hid [meaning?] into England and therefore I shall smart [suffer] for it with my life.[96]

There were also unsubstantiated rumours that Elizabeth I had secretly sent intercepted letters to Henry III, proving that the Guises were in an alliance with Philip II of Spain against him.

In late February, Welles, returning to England probably with Stafford's account of the Estates General assembly at Blois and its outcomes, collected a letter from Thomas Moffat in Dieppe for Walsingham.[97] However, in early April, while back in France, Welles was seized by Catholic League forces in Normandy.[98] Ottywell Smythe, in Dieppe, wrote to Walsingham: "John Welles was brought prisoner to Roanne [Rouen] last Thursday [10 April], and all his letters taken. He is likely to be very ill handled. Heard this from an Englishman at Roanne."[99] On 26 April, Smythe reported "John Welles still a prisoner at Roanne."[100] By 1 May, Welles was able to write directly to Walsingham (quoted here in the third-person paraphrase of the State Papers transcription):

> Has himself been a close prisoner for 14 days, thrice examined by the council and threatened with the rack. They say that they have not all his letters……. They demand 500 crowns [ransom] and now the captain asks for 200. All say that John le

[95] Commander of the League forces at Rouen. This title was used by both the English and French. Hence, Dukes of Aumale/Aumerle (Albermarle) are characters in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry V*.

[96] John Welles to Walsingham, 26 August/5 September. A few days later, Ottywell Smythe, an English merchant in Dieppe, who acted as the *de facto* English agent there, repeated this claim in a letter to Walsingham, 31 August/10 September 1589. See *List and Analysis of State Papers, Foreign Series: Elizabeth I, Vol.1,* ed. Richard Bruce Wernham (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1964). Welles was at Richmond Palace on 28 January (O.S.) and could have made the journey from Blois in two weeks or so.

[97] Thomas Moffat to Walsingham, 26 February 1589, "February 1589, 26–28," *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 23, January–July 1589*, ed. Richard Bruce Wernham (London, 1950), *BHO* [accessed March 2025]. The date suggests this was on Welles's return trip from meeting Stafford in Vendôme. Moffat [or Moffett] lived in Rouen but, as the letter explains, had fled to Dieppe because of the Catholic League's coup on 5 February. Moffat was probably an English spy; see Robert Hutchinson, *Elizabeth's Spy Master* (Phoenix, 2006), 285.

[98] Welles was wary of travelling after the coup. In a letter dated 5 November 1589 to Courdaillot, secretary to Castleneuve the French ambassador in London, Welles claimed the latter had offered him 100 crowns (c. £30) to make the journey. See TNA SP 78/20, fol. 143.

[99] Ottywell Smythe to Walsingham, 7/17 April 1589, *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 23, January-July 1589*, p. 203. *BHO* [accessed 2025].

[100] Letter Ottywell Smythe to Walsingham, 16/26 April 1589, *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 23, January-July 1589*, p. 220.

> Roye [another royal messenger] betrayed Welles. His [le Roye's] brother goes into England: they say that he is the greatest villain against the King that there is in Ron [Rouen] (in addendum – "your honour may have him for me") …. they have taken everything, to his shirt. Bycnor [Becknor] dare not speak for him, so he depends entirely upon his honour.[101]

On 7 May, Welles wrote again describing his interrogation:

> Was to-day before the council, who said his letters of credit were at the court, threatened him with torture, and accused him of being a spy and … the death of many Papists, which his honour knows is untrue. Will not be released till they have another prisoner for him.[102]

However, Welles was to remain a prisoner for twenty-two months until early in 1591. Further letters to Walsingham survive from 6, 10, 28 July and 8 August, the latter recording the celebrations in Rouen at the news of the assassination of Henry III on 1 August 1589 (O.S.).[103] Conditions were harsh; Welles was kept in a cell with no daylight. There were various proposals for his release, a ransom of 800 crowns, a prisoner swap for twelve papists in England, but nothing happened. In early September, even Henry IV, then camped outside Rouen, sent a mediator in an abortive attempt to free Welles.[104] Soon, he was begging Walsingham to look after his wife and child.

There is insufficient space to explore Welles's imprisonment in detail. Events pick up in August 1590, when the English government seized a Scot, John Leslie junior, at the port of Hythe in Kent, as a potential prisoner for exchange. Lord Burghley, with Walsingham recently dead, seems to have decided to help free his former servant. Leslie was the nephew of John Lesley senior, Bishop of Ross, a major supporter of Mary, Queen of Scots, but who was now based in Rouen. After eighteen months in prison, Welles was desperate and, with a second winter approaching, wrote to Burghley, the most powerful man in England:

> beseeching your honour to have pity on me living here in most miserable estate having not a rag to put on me nor meat & drink but that which good people doth give me … I am like to end my days here in prison most miserably … my good Lord there shall nothing be more welcome to me in this world than death.[105]

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[101] Welles to Walsingham, 24 April /4 May 1590, TNA SP 78/19, fol. 109. It was probably Thomas Becknor, an English cloth merchant in Rouen, who supplied information on English Catholics there to Walsingham; see Hutchinson, *Elizabeth's Spy Master*, 86, 279. John Le Roye was regularly used as a messenger, including after Welles's arrest. He became a merchant in London and died in 1615; see TNA PROB 11/126/291.
[102] Welles to Walsingham, 27 April /7 May 1589, TNA SP 78/19 fol. 129.
[103] Welles to Walsingham, 29 July/8 August 1589, TNA SP 78/19 fol. 255.
[104] Welles to Walsingham, 26 August/5 September 1589, TNA SP 78/19 fol. 277. This was two weeks before Marlowe was arrested over the death of Bradley. For twelve days, both men were in prison at the same time.
[105] Welles to Burghley, 8/18 September 1590, TNA SP 78/22/5 fol. 8.

Lesley junior subsequently petitioned Burghley to expedite the exchange but the authorities in Rouen declined.[106] Discussions of a swap continued at the highest levels and, in October, Humphrey Basse, a London merchant, whose parents and wife came from Rouen, was sent officially with money to pay off Welles's debts for his bed and board in prison.[107] Eventually, Welles was swapped for a grey friar held prisoner by the English, Ross writing in December 1590: "I will not desist to travail at my power for the liberty of John Welles who will be delivered for Galloways, a grey friar cordelier, born in this town [Rouen] and now a prisoner in Dieppe."[108]

Welles's career after his release from Rouen

Welles was released in early March 1591 and returned to England via Dieppe, where he collected a letter on 19 March for Burghley, arriving by early April.[109] Back with his family in Bishopsgate Street, he sought government compensation for his imprisonment. His petition does not survive but on 20 June 1591, the Privy Council decided:

> upon a petition of John Welles, Her Majesty's principal courier, since his long imprisonment and barbarous usage by Leaguers at Rouen … do grant him their licence and commission to seize upon some of their bodies and goods of the said [Catholic] Leaguers for his relief and recompense until Her Majesty might be moved to have further consideration of his service.[110]

[106] Although the Bishop of Ross was Scottish, he was made suffragan and vicar general of the Archbishopric of Rouen in 1579. Leslie junior, imprisoned in the Gatehouse in London for more than six months, petitioned Lord Burghley at least twice, including a letter from James VI, for an exchange with Welles, see "Queen Elizabeth—Volume 261: Undated 1596," in *CSPD: Elizabeth, 1595–97*, ed. Mary Ann Everett Green (London, 1869), 328, *BHO* [accessed 2025]. Although listed as "1596(?)," these letters must date to 1590. Ironically, Ross himself had suffered being imprisoned at Honfleur and ransomed in June 1590; see several letters in "Cecil Papers: June 1590," in *Calendar of the Cecil Papers Vol. 4*, ed. Roberts, 36–49.

[107] Basse (b. 1560s) was a founder member of the East India Company and by 1604 had moved to St Helen's, where he was buried in 1616. His son, Nathaniel (b.1589), was a leading colonist in Virginia. His journey is recorded in the pipe rolls and he was paid £16 for taking "money disbursed and conveyed to John Wells now prisoner in Roane [Rouen]."

[108] Ross to Archibald Douglas, 22 November/2 December 1590 in *Calendar of the Cecil Papers Vol. 4*, ed. Roberts, 70–76. On 22 March 1591, Ross sent letters to Elizabeth I and Burghley stating that he had helped free Welles and appealing for the release of his nephew in return; see BL Lansdowne Papers Vol. 66, fols. 70 and 72.

[109] Ottywell Smythe to Burghley, 19 March 1591. The pipe rolls record payment of £20 to Welles, "her majesty's chief courier," by a warrant of Burghley dated 6 April 1591.

[110] *Acts of the Privy Council of England Vol. 21, 1591*, 219, ed. J. R. Dasent (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1900), *BHO* [accessed 2023].

Welles also brought a French hostage back to London, presumably of some status. Two years later, he complained to Burghley about the cost of keeping him and that the French ambassador in London considered his captive "no good prize."[111]

Welles's licence to secure financial redress against his former persecutors was part of a much wider sweep of events as the limited English military involvement in northern France evolved into a major expeditionary force. In June 1591, Elizabeth I finally agreed to send four thousand troops to Normandy to help the French King Henry IV against the Catholic League supported by Spain. Her favourite, the Earl of Essex, was appointed as commander and the focus of the campaign was to link up with the King's forces and capture Rouen, which controlled the road to Paris. After mustering the troops in July and shipping them across to Dieppe, the third biggest problem was feeding the soldiers and horses.[112] At some point, Essex appointed John Welles as his army's "provant-master," the official in charge of securing food, drink and hay in an area ravaged by conflict. Welles, with his first-hand knowledge of Rouen and its region, combined with his likely language skills, would have been judged a competent official for this arduous role.

For Welles, this was a major step up in status and responsibility. There were immense logistical problems and numerous letters from autumn 1591 show the problems of controlling, paying and feeding the English troops with large numbers falling sick or deserting, while the campaign failed in its objectives.[113] Welles's work was, however, appreciated; a letter of Henry Killigrew, in time the deputy commander, records "our discipline is decayed" and noted that if all had behaved as well as Welles "we should have missed many disorders."[114] In January 1592, Essex returned to England and Sir Roger Williams succeeded him as commander in Normandy.

On 8 March 1592, Welles was definitely at the siege of Rouen (November 1591–April 1592) since he sent a letter to Burghley written at Darnétal, one of the camps of the besieging forces where the Earl of Essex had been based.[115] However, with the abandonment of the siege and an increased English focus on operations in Brittany, Welles's duties appear to

[111] Letter Welles to Burghley, 13 April 1593, TNA SP 78/30/114, fol. 251.
[112] On 21 July, Queen Elizabeth issued a general order for the shipping of supplies to France.
[113] See letter of Sir Roger Williams to Sir Thomas Leighton, advisor to the Earl of Essex, 15 October 1591, TNA SP 78/26 fol. 29. He notes Welles reporting that the provision of daily supplies had been reduced to "2,000 loaves, 16 barrels of brew and 300 fishes," half of what was needed. The result would be the pillaging of the surrounding countryside; TNA SP 78/26, fol. 29.
[114] Killigrew to Burghley, 15 September 1591, TNA SP 78/25, fols. 316-317. Killigrew noted Welles asking to be remembered to Burghley for "his duty of service unpaid."
[115] TNA SP 78/27/79 fol. 164. He enclosed a letter from Henry IV to Thomas Grove.

have shifted to work more closely with Sir Roger Williams, in a quasi-attaché role.[116] In early July 1592 Williams, then at Dover, sent Welles back to London to seek instructions from Burghley about how to proceed in France.[117] Another journey back to London included delivering a letter, dated 19 December 1592, from Williams, leaving Welles to explain the details of the situation to the Privy Council.[118]

This return brought Welles another personal tragedy as, a few days later, his wife Isabel died aged just thirty-one, maybe an early victim of the 1592/93 plague.[119] She had seen her husband for less than six months in the last four years and left him a twelve-year-old daughter. She was given a prestigious burial, next to her father, in the quire of St Peter, Cornhill: "Decem 28 Thursday—Mrs Isabell Welles wif of Mr John Welles a messenger, shee came from Bishopes gate street next the bull, her pit [grave] by her father Mr Mase in ye quire."[120] This additional detail, added by the parish clerk, provides the direct connection between Welles, the "principal" royal courier, and the house next to the entrance to the Bull Inn with its theatre.

Despite this tragedy, around 16 January 1593 Welles left from Hampton Court Palace "into France,"[121] so it is just possible he could have returned and attended the première of *The Massacre at Paris* on 26 January, a few days before the London theatres were closed due to the plague. He is likely to have been back in London around this time since he was complaining about the terms of his employment in Normandy. Clearly, Welles's personal connection to his patron Burghley overrode any concerns about slighting his commander behind his back. The Privy Council wrote on 22 February to Sir Roger Williams upbraiding him about his treatment of Welles. Williams responded testily from France:

> Whear your L[ordshi]ps finds fault w[i]th me, about Johne Welles those that imfirme [inform] your L[ordshi]ps of that, wold not strike to doe more, y[e]t they know what to speake against me, true it is, John Welles is an honest man and an olde poor servant

[116] Letter of 10 May 1592, from Sir Roger Williams, carried by Welles with instructions to report to Sir Henry Unton, the English ambassador with Henry IV, asking for 1,000 crowns, TNA SP 78/28 fol.31.
[117] 25 July 1592, TNA SP 78/28/134 fol. 296. There is no record in Burghley's 1592 diary about this. Williams also sent Welles to Henry IV with Nicolas de Harlay, Seigneur de Sancy, one-time French ambassador to Constantinople and owner of the fabulous Sancy diamonds, later sold to James I.
[118] The pipe roll warrants record Welles was back at Hampton Court Palace by 23 December, with the Normandy situation perhaps discussed by the Privy Council two days later.
[119] There are no surviving burial records for St Ethelburga but, directly across Bishopsgate in St Helen's, four people died in George Tedder's house in three weeks in late September, possibly an early plague outbreak, see Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 131.
[120] *A Register of the Christenings, Burialles and Weddinges within the Parish of Saint Peters on Cornhill* (London: Publications of the Harleian Society, 1877), 140, available at Internet Archive. St Peter, Cornhill was a much more prestigious church than St Ethelburga.
[121] Pipe rolls TNA E 351/542 fol. 180 verso.

> of hir ma[jes]tie, whoe did hir poor subiectes great pleasure in theis partes, appointed provant m[aste]r for the whole by the Earle of Essix w[i]ch place he has still having noe allowance for the saide place[122]

Williams continued that, since he had no sergeant-major, Welles was allowed some of the empty post's pay but he never meant Welles to receive all the pay, "much less to execute or carry the name of sergeant-major."[123]

The Privy Council also took direct action, since on 19 March 1593, they ordered Welles, now certainly back in London, to round up army deserters:

> A placarde to John Welles, one of her Majesty's postes, to take up all soche lewde souldiours as have latelie ronn [run] from the captens out of Normandy and Brytanie [Brittany] wanderinge about the citty of London or suburbs, the counties of Middlesex or Surrey and to bringe them before the Lord Maiour or Justices, who are to commit them to priyon, wherein all publique officers are required to be aiding unto him.[124]

However, by 13 April, Welles was back in Dieppe writing to Burghley about a possible visit to England by King Henry IV's sister.[125] This is the last known reference to Welles in Normandy. It is therefore possible but uncertain that he was back in Bishopsgate Street on Friday 18 May 1593 when Henry Maunder, his fellow royal messenger, likely neighbour and almost certainly acquaintance, was ordered by the Privy Council to arrest Marlowe.[126] Details of Welles's life after this point are discussed in Appendix 2.

Marlowe, Welles and *The Massacre at Paris*

During 1587–1590, following his MA, Marlowe had established himself as a leading playwright and writer In London, despite a short spell in Newgate Prison. After his initial success, how could he sustain his career? His three later plays, c. 1589–92, *Doctor Faustus, Edward II and The Massacre of Paris* are very different in subject. Faust was an obvious choice as his story published in German in 1587 and translated into English in 1592 was already a popular hit. The logic for *Edward II* is more complex given its themes of regicide and homoeroticism, subjects which appealed to Marlowe but were unlikely to be popular with

[122] Sir Roger Williams to the Privy Council, 8 March 1593, SP 78/30/74 fol. 165. "Poor" is used here in the sense of lowly, rather than financial, status.
[123] A 1592 imprest, SP 78/28 fol. 41, records the provant-master, presumably Welles, receiving "63s. 4d weekly in dead pays."
[124] *Acts of the Privy Council of England, Vol. 24, 1592*, ed. J. R. Dasent (London,1900), 129, *BHO* [accessed 2023].
[125] TNA SP 78/30/114.
[126] Maunder was an ordinary messenger working in England, although he travelled to Dublin. Pipe roll warrants record him escorting other prisoners in 1594 and 1602.

the authorities. However, there was a significant advantage in that *Holinshed's Chronicles* provided a main source. Its performance in 1592 suggests it was written in 1591.

The Massacre at Paris, however, is an interesting choice for a London audience. True, the massacres of Protestants and the murders of the Guise brothers and then Henry III provided points of high drama and there were parallels between Henry III and his favourites and Edward II/Gaveston. However, the complexity of events in France did not make for a simple storyline. By mid 1592, the English expeditionary force in Normandy had failed in its primary purpose of capturing Rouen and was an unpopular drain on recruits and money. Moreover, there were already rumours from late 1591 that Henry IV was going to convert to Catholicism. There were plenty of other stories, whether from classical or more recent times, which would have provided more malleable subjects. By 1590, Marlowe and others were exploring dramatising the Wars of the Roses in *Henry VI*, so historic English civil conflict appeared to be acceptable on the London stage.[127]

Something or somebody convinced Marlowe that the fluctuating, factional struggles in France could be distilled into a coherent plot which would be popular with a London audience. However, his basic concept for the plot of balancing the massacre of 1572 with the bloody murders of 1588/89 required a clear understanding of recent events. Marlowe might have talked to French refugees or pored over French political pamphlets. However, perhaps it was talking with Welles, who could provide a coherent overview of events in France stretching back over two decades, which persuaded Marlowe that he could shape them into a popular play. Marlowe could also have spoken to other locals who had been to France like Benedict Barwick. However, it is the extent of John Welles's experience which stands out. Barwick had been in France over a maximum of four years with ambassador Sir Henry Cobham. Welles had been imprisoned for nearly two years in Rouen, recently campaigned there and worked with six ambassadors to France.

When could Marlowe and Welles have met?

Potentially, Marlowe and Welles could have met at many points between 1581–1593, beginning when the seventeen-year-old Marlowe may have waited at the Bull Inn for a carrier's cart to take him for his first term at Cambridge University. However, from April 1589–March 1591, Welles was imprisoned in Rouen. Furthermore, for at least nine months

[127] See Loughnane and Power, "Beginning with Shakespeare," 1–20.

July 1591–May 1592, Welles was serving full-time in Normandy. This leaves three periods for a potential meeting(s):

- Spring 1581–March 1589: for the first six of these eight years, Marlowe was at Cambridge University, although possibly travelling via the Bull Inn. From 1587–89, Marlowe is recorded as living in the Norton Folgate/Bishopsgate area;
- early April 1591–July 1591: while Welles was in London petitioning the Privy Council and receiving his appointment to Essex's army; and
- late July 1592–December 1592: when Welles was still serving in Normandy but making official journeys, at least two, to London.

April–July 1591 seems the most likely time for conversations, which could have led to the inception of *The Tragedy of the Guise.* Welles would have been kicking his heels in London waiting for a response from the Privy Council to his compensation request. Presumably, in the Bishopsgate area at least, the liberated Welles would have been something of a local celebrity, the Queen's principal courier seized by the treacherous French Catholic Leaguers, who had returned home with a French hostage. The Government's sudden volte face in June/July 1591 of sending an army to Normandy, led by the charismatic Earl of Essex, would have provided a surge of public interest in French affairs.[128] A topical play could turn the bloody but complicated Valois/Guise struggles into a popular success. The murder of the Guises and Henry III's subsequent assassination were only a couple of years past, almost current news. Essex's planned expedition provided the perfect patriotic excuse for tackling the tricky issues of regicide and childless succession on the London stage by exploring them through a French lens. Now events had provided Marlowe with an experienced, intelligent and well-informed source, who could literally provide "chapter and verse" of the complex narrative in France.

Alternatively, Marlowe and Welles could have (re)connected in the five months July–December 1592. However, it is uncertain how much of this period Welles was in London rather than Normandy. The theatres were also closed from 23 June to 29 December, generating a high level of uncertainty across the London theatre community.

Whatever prompted *The Massacre at Paris,* Marlowe would have found in Welles someone with exceptional knowledge of the events around the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's

[128] Manley and Maclean suggest the Earl of Essex's 1591 campaign "may account for the prominence of the earlier siege of Rouen in Act 3 of *1 Henry VI.*" See *Lord Strange's Men,* 98.

Day Massacre. Welles may have possibly been in Paris at the time and if not, was there shortly afterwards. Welles also had direct knowledge of the murder of the Duke of Guise in 1588 and the subsequent political fallout. His surviving letters clearly show an experienced and accurate recorder of events and he could have offered first-hand knowledge of the French court at Paris, Blois and elsewhere. Welles was also a rare and accessible source of information. With the death of Walsingham in 1590, few people in London could have offered Marlowe, or Shakespeare, his range of experience, both the general overview and specific details. Indeed, few people in England could have matched his knowledge. There were Elizabeth I, Burghley, Cecil and Essex but three of the six English ambassadors from the period were already dead. Others, like Sir Roger Williams, had been involved in parts but the not the whole run of events.

Moreover, discussions with Welles would have offered Marlowe something else. The Queen's principal courier to France was part of the story himself, a "character" who could have intrigued Marlowe. Prior to 1589, Welles was a respected and "good" individual, dutifully delivering the heavy responsibility of keeping the wheels of diplomacy moving to maintain peace and avoid war. But then the chaos of the French civil war, stoked by bitter religious conflict, engulfs him. In a matter of hours, Welles crashes to earth and becomes a pawn in the vast conflict, simply worth his ransom value. But then again, the wheel of fortune turns, Welles is freed in a prisoner exchange, brokered by the Bishop of Ross, and returns to England intent on revenge and bringing back his own ransom victim. While the power brokers in *The Massacre at Paris* plan murder or die themselves, Welles represented how the resulting violence cascaded down through society.

By January 1592, Marlowe was in Flushing but Sir Robert Sidney's letter to Burghley of 26 January suggests Marlowe would have been returned to London by February/March.[129] Meanwhile, Welles was fully engaged in the Normandy campaign. However, with the lifting of the siege of Rouen in May, Welles's responsibilities appear to have shifted to a more political role. Certainly, in May, Sir Roger Williams sent Welles to Henry Unton, the English Ambassador in Paris, to update him and in July, to Burghley in London to explain the current

[129] Marlowe's run in with the constables in Holywell Lane, resulting in a court appearance on 9 May 1592, provides a *terminus ante quem* for his return and suggests he was still living in the Norton Folgate area. Welles had also visited Flushing, just after the Spanish Armada; see the letter from Sir William Russell, the English governor, to Walsingham 22 August 1588, *CSPF: Elizabeth, Vol. 22, July–December 1588*, ed. Richard Bruce Wernham (His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1936), 21–25, *BHO* [accessed 2023].

military situation.[130] A review of English strategy would lead to a new focus on Brittany to head off the Spanish attempt to establish a naval base there.[131]

In summary, if *The Tragedy of the Guise*, performed on 26 January 1593, is *The Massacre at Paris*, then Marlowe was most likely inspired to write it in mid 1591, as Essex's expeditionary force got underway. The failure to capture Rouen would have been a significant dampener and Henslowe might have held it back from production hoping for an English success. From June 1592 the theatres were closed, so it was not until January 1593 that there was the opportunity to perform the premiere. By late 1592, possibly with rumours of Henry IV converting to Catholicism growing, Henslowe may have decided to stage the play to avoid having an outdated script on his hands.

Welles's possible input to Marlowe's work

When Marlowe sketched his outline of *The Massacre at Paris*:

- the events of the St Bartholomew Day Massacre in 1572, the first half of the play (scenes 1–12), were well covered in books but, as noted above, Welles might have had (in)direct memories from his time working with Sir Francis Walsingham;
- the murders of the Guises and Henry III, forming the second half (scenes 13–24) were recent events. While news would have circulated in London, detailed coverage had only just started to be published. Critics have proposed that Marlowe gathered his information from the more ephemeral pamphlets and broadsheets being circulated.[132]

However, the possibility of direct suggestions by Welles, or others, should be considered. One apparently insignificant potential connection is considered here. It occurs in the final scene of the play:

> *Enter a* MESSENGER
>
> MESSENGER An it please your majesty, here is a friar of the order of the Jacobins sent from the President of Paris, that craves upon Your Grace.
>
> HENRY [III] Let him come in

[130] TNA SP 78/28 fol. 31 and fol. 270.
[131] This threat continued until November 1594 and the defeat of the Spanish at Crozon.
[132] See, for example, the collection of over 2,000 pamphlets at Brigham Young University, online at https://lib.byu.edu/collections/french-political-pamphlets/. For an example of criticism discussing Marlowe's debt to such pamphlets in the writing of *Massacre at Paris*, see Kocher, "Contemporary Pamphlet Backgrounds," and Briggs, "Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*: A Reconsideration."

Enter FRIAR *with a letter*

ÉPERNON I like not this friar's look.

'Twere not amiss, my lord, if he were searched. (24.17–22)

Why does Marlowe introduce a messenger into the play? Jacques Clément, the Dominican friar assassin, had travelled the nine miles from central Paris to St Cloud on 31 July and had been granted an official audience for the following day. Even if, in reality, a messenger had been sent with him, why include this character when any of Henry III's courtiers could have explained Clément's role? Anybody coming from the enemy would have been closely watched and brought to the king by one of his private guardsmen or a close courtier. William the Silent had been assassinated six years earlier by a Catholic who had been able to get close to him.[133] Although Welles was a prisoner in Rouen at the time of Henry III's murder, one wonders if this was a nod by Marlowe to the profession which had provided his sources.

John Welles and Marlowe's death

It is impossible to ascertain whether Welles was in London or Normandy in May 1593 and nothing suggests he was directly involved in the events leading to Marlowe's death.[134] However, he almost certainly knew two of the three men who took part, in particular Nicholas Skeres, who by his own admittance served with his "master" the Earl of Essex in Normandy in late 1591 and returned to England in February 1592.[135] The two men would have likely met at Essex's military HQ, even possibly worked together on logistics.

In addition, Robert Poley was one of the small group of overseas messengers. Indeed, he was returning from The Hague to Nonesuch Palace, when he appeared at Deptford. Poley was intimately involved in Walsingham's spy networks, notably contributing to the unravelling of the Babington Plot in 1586. There is no evidence that Welles had met Ingram Frizer. However, Frizer's master was Thomas Walsingham, who Welles almost certainly did know from their time working as overseas messengers to Paris in the early 1580s.

[133] Sir Roger Williams was present and helped capture the assassin.

[134] His last recorded letter to Burghley on 13 April 1593 reported that the king's sister might be coming to Dieppe, SP 78/30/114. The English troops returned to England in August 1593, although some stayed on in France to fight as mercenaries. Others went to join the English expeditionary force in Brittany, where Welles may have continued serving in 1593/4.

[135] See Skeres's own statements, noted in Nicholl, *The Reckoning*, 34. Welles was a friend of Edward Walker and witnessed his will in 1602, see footnote 162. Walker left a property near the Curtain Theatre to his "brother" (possibly brother-in-law) John "Skerr(i)e," potentially a relative of Nicholas.

John Welles and William Shakespeare

If Welles knew Marlowe and was a potential source of information for *The Massacre at Paris*, it is reasonable to ask if this courier turned army provant-marshal turned diplomatic attaché had any connections with Shakespeare. If Marlowe and Shakespeare were working together on 2 and 3 *Henry VI* in 1590,[136] then they were connected around the time of Welles's ill-fated trip to France. In 1597/98, Welles and Shakespeare were certainly living within a hundred yards of each other on opposite sides of Bishopsgate Street. However, if Shakespeare moved into St Helen's c.1593 or earlier, as seems probable,[137] when Welles was still living next to the entrance to the Bull, then they were even closer neighbours for several years, living only a couple of minutes apart.

Given this likely proximity, it is important to consider *Love Labour's Lost*, thought to have been written 1594–97[138] and with no obvious written source. The four lead male characters are loosely based on contemporary French royalty and nobles: Navarre on Henry IV of France (King of Navarre until 1589), "Berowne" on Charles de Gontaut, Duc de Biron, "Longaville" on Henry I d'Orléans, Duc de Longueville and "Dumain" on Charles, Duc de Mayenne. Welles knew the first three and would have met them all, through his important military role in the Anglo-French campaign against the Catholic League in Normandy 1591–93.[139] In contrast, the Duc de Mayenne, brother of the Guise brothers murdered at Blois and central to *The Massacre at Paris*, was commander of the Catholic League until 1595, when he made peace with Henry IV.

What prompted Shakespeare to choose this group, including in the form of Navarre (Henry IV) one of his few lead characters to also appear in a play by Marlowe? Following the major success of *The Massacre at Paris* at the Rose playhouse in 1594, when there were nine performances in fifteen weeks,[140] it is conceivable that Welles, following his return to London, discussed recent events in France with Shakespeare. Welles's clerk's fee payments ran up to Michaelmas 1594. However, it would be curious for Shakespeare to portray

[136] As argued by Loughnane and Power in "Beginning with Shakespeare."
[137] For the detailed arguments, see Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 194–96.
[138] Loughnane and Power suggest 1594. See "Beginning with Shakespeare," 10.
[139] Welles might have first met Henry IV, Biron and Longueville together at Compiègne/Noyon on 19/20 August 1591, if he was part of Essex's delegation to the king. See Sir Thomas Coningsby, *Journal of the Siege of Rouen, 1591*, ed. John Gough Nicholls (London: Camden Society, 1847; repr., Alpha Editions, 2019), 17.
[140] From 19 June to 25 September.

Mayenne/"Dumain" as a friend of Navarre, when he was actually commanding the enemy forces, so a later date seems more likely, after Welles returned to Bishopsgate in 1595.[141]

Also relevant is the well-aired argument of whether the character of Fluellen, the Welsh captain in *Henry V*, was based on Sir Roger Williams (d.1595). When Shakespeare was writing the play in 1598/99, Welles, who had campaigned alongside Williams in Normandy 1591–93, was living less than a hundred yards away. Although hanging looters, such as Bardolph, was part of normal military discipline,[142] Welles would have had many trenchant stories to tell given his experiences in France. In addition, Agincourt is only forty miles north of Amiens where Welles was fighting in 1597 and he would have had an intimate knowledge of the Picardy countryside where Henry V had campaigned.

Conclusions

It has been proposed that Marlowe, in John Welles, potentially had direct access to one of the best-informed men in England about the political, military and religious struggles in France from 1572–93. Welles could have provided Marlowe with an unparalleled range of detailed information touching on specific individuals, places and events. Moreover, Welles's royal "principal" courier status formed a rare social "bridge" between the bustling yards, stables and low life of London's inns and the highest political powers in England: privy councillors, ambassadors, the Earl of Essex, Sir Francis Walsingham and Lord Burghley.

The four months following Welles's release from imprisonment in March 1591 and before his return to France organising supplies for Essex's expeditionary force seems the most likely time for Marlowe and Welles to have discussed the events which became *The Tragedy of the Guise*. The delay in the play's premiere to January 1593 may be partly accounted for by Marlowe's trip to Flushing in late 1591/January 1592 and the six-month closure of the theatres from June 1592.

This potential access to a highly knowledgeable source suggests Marlowe's original play could have been a much richer, more complex and nuanced story than the one that survives today. Marlowe also clearly felt confident enough in his understanding of events in France to make significant changes in the interest of creating a simpler and more dynamic plot. A good example is the cuckolding of the Duke of Guise. The amour of Guise's wife is

[141] Longueville died in April 1595. Mayenne fought for Henry IV at the Siege of Amiens in 1597, where Welles might have met him. Intriguingly, there was a real French Charles de Man/Demayne living a few doors along Bishopsgate Street in 1590–94, see Appendix 2, No. 43.

[142] Williams had hung the leader of a group of English deserters in 1592.

shifted from her real lover, the young nobleman Saint-Mégrin killed by Guise in 1578. Instead, in the play, it is the king's mignon/minion Mugeroun who is shot by a soldier in 1588, providing the killing which in turn results in the revenge assassination of Guise by Henry III.

Marlowe was also experienced enough to avoid reaching back another decade to the assassination of Guise's father in 1563 at the siege of Orleans following the massacre of Protestants at Wassy the previous year (and the death of Navarre's father at the siege of Rouen in 1562). These were the events that triggered the French Wars of Religion and started the bitter blood feuds that led to the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. However, two generations of violent deaths would have overcomplicated the play. The extra drama might have appealed to Marlowe, but he kept the plot to a shorter time frame to create a clear balance between the first half (historic) and second half (near contemporary). This still provided enough deaths, twenty in the surviving text, to underpin the ongoing cycle of revenge. In 1591, Welles himself was a participant, seeking to get his own revenge on the citizens of Rouen who had persecuted him.

Marlowe's possible connection with Welles does not directly throw any further light on his suggested spying activities or his murder at Deptford. However, Welles was well acquainted with all the key players – Lord Burghley, Sir Francis Walsingham, Thomas Walsingham, Robert Poley and Nicholas Skeres.

It will always be difficult, given the limitations of sixteenth century records, to prove examples of play storylines shaped by oral sources rather than published works. However, the growing digitisation of surviving records increases the chances of identifying potential intersections and as a result gaining a deeper understanding of Elizabethan writing. The example of John Welles highlights the particular opportunities of exploring the physical environments, such as Bishopsgate Street, in which playwrights and actors lived and where Marlowe and Shakespeare read, researched, wrote—and probably met.

APPENDIX 1: WELLES'S CAREER AFTER THE DEATH OF MARLOWE, 1593–1603

Several events in Welles's career in the years after Marlowe's death in 1593 provide more information on his character, experience and ambitions. The three years from August 1594 to May 1597 are mostly a blank in Welles's activities. However, in 1594/95, Welles did not pay his parish clerk's fee and this coincided with his only surviving messenger bill, a payment request dated December 1594, recording a 550-mile journey from London through the west country to Tavistock, returning via Cambridge and Reading.[143] His task was delivering eight letters to aristocrats, "touching the payment of the second subsidy." Sub-leasing his house for a year suggests Welles was taking part in a larger operation by the Government to communicate with key figures in raising the subsidy.

The voting through of the 1593 Subsidy Act had been controversial due to its size and three payments over four years 1593–96.[144] It seems Welles's administrative abilities and honesty had again been recognised by the Government. On the journey, Welles went to the mansions of some of the most important men and women in England: Lord Stourton, Lady Dakers [Dacre], Earl of Hertford, Viscount Howard of Bindon (who managed the March 1594 Cerne Abbas special ecclesiastical commission), Earl of Bath, Lady Stourton, Earl of Bedford and Lady Chandos. There is a grisly connection to the visit to the recusant Lady Stourton at Chideok Castle, Dorset. Only five months earlier, the messenger Henry Maunder, the pursuer of Marlowe in May 1593, had been escorting John Cornelius, her protégé and family priest, from interrogation in London to his trial at Chideock and subsequent execution.[145]

Welles returned to his Bishopsgate home by the Bull in 1595/96, when he paid the clerk's fee, but then disappeared from the listing for two years, only to reappear in 1598/99 living eleven doors along Bishopsgate Street between the Three Swans and the Vyne inns.[146] He was assessed at £5 in the 1 October 1598 Lay Subsidy assessment, the same rate as Shakespeare across the road in the parish of St Helen's. Welles paid for the parish clerk's fee for the first six months in 1599/1600 and was assessed at £5 in the October 1600 Lay Subsidy

[143] TNA E 407/38 fol. 76 dated December Elizabeth 37th year, which was 1594 as her regnal year ran from 17 November.
[144] The first payment was divided into two annual charges.
[145] Pipe roll warrant TNA E 361/542 fol. 196 recto. Lady Anne Stanley's nephew was Ferdinando Stanley, fifth Earl of Derby and possible patron of Marlowe who had died in mysterious circumstances in April 1594.
[146] His house next to the Bull Inn was taken over by Gabriel Vandeviver, a Dutch immigrant tallow chandler, who was still there in 1602. The gap in payments does not prove Welles left the parish. He could have sub-let rooms while he was involved in military duties in France.

roll.[147] The last record of Welles in the area is in April 1602 when he and a group of neighbours witnessed the will of Edward Walker, inn holder of the Green Dragon.[148] Walker's will recorded that he had recently bought the Bull Inn from George Me(a)se along with Welles's former house.

The gap in 1596/98 is explained by two letters dated June 1597 from Welles to Robert Cecil, Secretary of State, which indicate he had returned to military duties, as they were sent from "Abbeville" and "before Amiens."[149] The Franco-English siege of Amiens from May-September 1597 resulted in the capture of the city from the Spanish occupiers and brought an end to the French Wars of Religion. Welles may have been continuing in some logistics role, the work he had proved so capable of in Normandy.[150]

Welles's rising status, apparent at least to himself, prompted an attempted dynastic move. By 1597, now aged close to fifty and apparently well off, Welles felt it was the right time to find a husband for his only child, now aged sixteen or seventeen.[151] Given his self-identified social standing, Welles decided to approach Captain John Brooke, then a twenty-one-year-old soldier who would also fight at Amiens, the nephew of William Brooke, 10th Baron Cobham. The young soldier was to become a future MP and 1st Baron Cobham.[152] Welles had angered Brooke's father Sir Henry Brooke in 1580 when the latter was English ambassador in Paris.[153]

Sometime in spring 1597, Welles made a marriage offer, including a dowry "package" worth in total £9,000: £4,000 on marriage and £5,000 on his death.[154] Quite how Welles amassed such a huge sum is a mystery, even if he had sold his Bishopsgate house.[155] However, the aristocratic Cobham family clearly considered Welles far beneath them

[147] The 1599 Lay Subsidy roll for St Ethelburga is missing. A John Clarke, otherwise untraced, paid the remaining six months clerk's fee for 1599–1600.
[148] TNA PROB 11/99/336. One of the seven witnesses was John Saracwolde, recorded as an innholder near the Guildhall.
[149] TNA SP 78/39/117 fol. 276 and SP 78/39/144 fol. 325.
[150] However, the outside of the letter references Cecil as "Master," which might indicate Welles was working directly for Cecil, as he was a few months later.
[151] 1597 was the year that Henry Billingsley, the brother of Welles's brother-in-law, was Lord Mayor, see footnote 87.
[152] His cousin Elizabeth was married to Robert Cecil.
[153] See footnote 85.
[154] By comparison, Shakespeare's 1604 landlord, a successful Huguenot craftsman, offered a dowry of £60 and £200.
[155] Welles might have made a second marriage to a rich widow or, alternatively, inherited from his own family or the M(a)ese side but there is no evidence of either. It has not been possible to locate a will for George, his brother-in-law, who owned the Bull Inn.

socially. Captain John Brooke wrote to his cousin-in-law Robert Cecil from Amiens on 26 June, stating his disinterest recorded in a fascinating vignette of Elizabethan social mores:

> Concerning John Wells his offer of his daughter unto me, which was merly of himself and not of my asken I protest unto your honor He offered presently with 5000 pound and after his death 4000 pound more. At Sir Arthur Savages [then deputy commander at siege of Amiens] his going into England [Spring 1597], I desired him to enquier of ytt, and if he found that yt might be A mach fit for me. Then to aquaint your honor with itt. But he not finding itt a matter to do me good, writ me that as I had not done any things in itt so I should not, his advice I willingly followed. For I protest with your Honor I am not desirus of marriage nor espesiall to mach myself basly for that has been my [?] fering that this imployment I am now in should fayle me, And that my poverty shall constrain me to do Contrary to my own disposition[156]

It is intriguing that at this time Shakespeare, certainly by 1597 living a stone's throw from Welles's former house across Bishopsgate Street, was writing *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* and creating the character of Sir John Oldcastle, an ancestor of William Brooke, 10th Baron Cobham (Lord Chamberlain August 1596–March 1597) and Captain John Brooke. The former objected to the unflattering description and the character was transformed into Falstaff.

The eventual fate of Welles's daughter is currently unknown but, with the fall of Amiens, Welles moved on in early 1598 to organise Robert Cecil's embassy trip to Henry IV in France.[157] On 29 January, Sir Thomas Fane, Lieutenant of Dover Castle, wrote to Cecil: "Mr. Welles, your harbinger, took shipping yesternight, and is, in the opinion of all the mariners, at Dieppe before this time. Your horses, with your provision, were embarked on Friday last.'[158] The account of the embassy's journey, which went via Paris, Orleans and Blois to Angers, highlights Welles's onerous responsibilities in organising forty gentlemen with their servants and baggage by ship, horse and river transportation along with securing suitable accommodation.[159] Amongst the aristocrats accompanying Cecil through the dreary February weather was Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. One wonders if, during the long ride south, Southampton had the inclination to discuss theatre in London with Welles

[156] "Queen Elizabeth, Vol. 263: June 1597," in *CSPD: Elizabeth, 1595–97*, ed. Green, 445. This transcription is from the original letter and a comparison demonstrates how the nineteenth century editors tidied up the English of many documents.
[157] In mid-January Welles was sent from the Court in London to Rouen "with letters for Her Majesty's special service." See pipe rolls TNA E 351/543, fol. 26 recto.
[158] *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Vol. 8, 1598*, ed. R A Roberts (London, 1899), 17–35, *BHO* [accessed 2023].
[159] "Cecil Papers: January 1598," in *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Vol. 23, Addenda, 1562–1605*, ed. G. Dyfnallt Owen (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1973), 10–74, *BHO* [accessed 2023].

and the merits of his near neighbour Mr. Shakespeare, who had dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* to him just a few years earlier.[160]

Three years later, and back in England, Welles took up his sword again as part of the loyalist resistance in London which crushed the Earl of Essex's attempted coup on 8 February 1601. Captain Christopher Levens wrote to Robert Cecil on 9 March seeking "rewards for services done on the occasion of the late rebellion" with a list of eleven men including John Welles.[161] Thereafter, Welles is only recorded doing diplomatic related work in England. In September 1601, the Duc de Biron, Marshall of France, came to England in great style to announce the marriage of Henry IV to Marie de Medici. His arrival at Dover was chaotic as an insufficient number of horses was ready. In London, Welles was ordered to gather eighty-two horses to take Biron to meet Queen Elizabeth at Basing House. While the embassy waited, Biron was put up in Crosby Hall in St. Helen's, just across Bishopsgate Street from the Bull Inn.[162]

Sometime in 1603, Welles gave up his principal courier post.[163] On 6 August, Welles's position was given to his successor, although it is not certain when William Trumbull took over: "Grant to William Trombull, in reversion after John Welles, of the office of one of the King's Couriers or Posts."[164] This was the young William Trumbull the elder (d.1635), a future MP, whose voluminous correspondence in the British Library provides one of the most important records of Jacobean diplomatic life.[165] In 1609, he was appointed English ambassador at the court of Archduke Albert in Brussels. While it is not suggested that Welles, who had started work a generation before, was the intellectual equal of

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[160] In the following year, on 11 October 1599, Roland Whyte, postmaster of the court, wrote to Robert Cecil, noting: "My Lord Southampton and Lord Rutland come not to the court: the one doth but very seldom. They pass away the time in London merely in going to plays every day." *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord De L'Isle & Dudley preserved at Penshurst Palace, Volume II: 1557–1602*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1934), 400–401.

[161] *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House: Vol. 11, 1601*, ed. R. A. Roberts (London, 1906), 100–119, *BHO* [accessed 2023]. Skirmishes reached as far as Gracechurch Street.

[162] Home of the former Lord Mayor Sir John Spencer (and the Duke of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *Richard III*). Shakespeare's lodgings in St Helen's were next door but by 1601 he may have moved elsewhere. Sir Walter Raleigh complained about the poor welcome: "I am glad I came hither, for I never saw so great a person so neglected." See *Calendar of the Cecil Papers Vol. 11*, ed. Roberts, 374–401. For the possibility that Shakespeare remained in St Helen's until 1602/04, see Marsh, *Living with Shakespeare*, 432–42. The relevant records are frustratingly opaque. Biron was executed in 1602 on his return to France.

[163] Another long-time royal messenger unsuccessfully sought the revision: "John Symons. For the reversion of the place of John Welles, the Queen's post for France." *CSPD: James I, 1603–1610*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (London, 1857), 28, *BHO* [accessed 2023].

[164] *CSPD: James I, 1603–1610*, ed. Green.

[165] Sonia P. Anderson, "The Elder William Trumbull: A Biographical Sketch," *The British Library Journal* 19, no. 2 (1993): 115–32.

Trumbull, this passing on of his position to such a talented young man illustrates the political strata that Welles had reached.

In June/July 1603, John Welles, now an "ordinary" post, was looking after the Marquis de Rosny, the French Ambassador Extraordinary and the Duke of Lorraine on their visit to England to acknowledge the new king James I. Welles was paid £100 each for looking after them for thirty days. This is the last record of John Welles found to date. So, as the Jacobean era began, Elizabeth I's faithful servant disappeared. It has not been possible to track down his place and date of death or a will. 1603/04 saw a major plague epidemic in London and it is conceivable that Welles, then aged in his mid-fifties, was a victim and died intestate.[166]

[166] Unfortunately, the parish records of St Ethelburga do not survive before 1671. In the parish of St Botolph, immediately to the north, over 1,200 people died in 1603 during the outbreak.

APPENDIX 2: ST ETHELBURGA DURING MARLOWE'S LAST YEAR 1592/93

This appendix locates the parishioners of St Ethelburga along Bishopsgate Street in 1592/93. Marlowe would have passed by these Londoners every time he walked down from Norton Folgate to the inn theatres in the City. The listing follows the order of contributions in the churchwardens' accounts to meet the wages of the parish clerk. The amounts refer to the payment per property. The most common fees are 1s. 4d, 2s. 0d and 4s. 8d with 4d or 8d in the side alleys. There are minor changes in the spelling of names and order from year to year. Around a third of the names listed, typically the wealthier, served as churchwardens (marked *). Residents from the side alleys have been excluded for clarity and since there is only significant information on one, the actor Robert Armin. The fees in the alleys were typically very low: a twentieth or tenth of the highest payment of 6s 8d in Bishopsgate Street. This analysis can continue, on a more tentative basis, south into the parish of St Helen's, but the parish of St Botolph is not susceptible to such a reconstruction at present[167].

Bishopsgate Street: West side – walking south to north

St Ethelburga/St Helen's parish boundary

1. Thomas Parris: 4s. 8d—inn holder of the Bull Inn with its theatre, the latter operating until c. 1594. Parris leased the inn from George M(a)ese, John Welles's brother-in-law.
2. John Welles: 4s. 8d—Elizabeth I's principal overseas courier. In autumn 1592, probably still employed as provant-master to the English army in Normandy. His wife Isabel buried 28 December 1592.
3. George Layton: 1s. 4d—no further information (hereafter "nfi").
4. John Allen: 1s. 4d—nfi. Property owned by Edward Walker.
5.Francis Pyecroft (?): 1s. 4d—nfi. Property owned by Edward Walker.
6. Edward Walker*: 4s. 8d—innholder of the Green Dragon Inn, landlord and sadler.
7. Humphrey James: 1s. 4d—nfi. Property owned by Edward Walker.
8. Widow Turner: 1s. 4d—nfi.
9. Thomas Hardwin: 1s. 4d—nfi.

[167] The names in the Lay Subsidy roll for the parish may be listed in a similar manner to St Ethelburga and St Helen's, but it has not been possible to identify enough anchor residents/premises to test this.

10. Matthew Buck*: 4s. 8d—innholder of the Three Swans Inn. Died 1593/94.
11. Alexander Harvie*: 2s. 0d—nfi.
12. Mr. Wallie: 6s. 8d–most expensive fee rating. ?John Walley, alderman and former mayor of Bath 1585/86. In 1595/96, house occupied by Dr Fletcher, ?uncle of John Fletcher playwright b. 1579.
13. Mr. Askew: 4s. 8d—nfi. House later occupied by John Welles from autumn 1598 to spring 1600.
14. Edward Johnson*: 2s. 0d—joiner.
15. Mrs Elizabeth Stephens: 5s. 4d—landlord and widow. Second most expensive rating.
16. Thomas Dixie: 2s. 0d—nfi.

? entrance to Peahen Alley: c. eighteen properties all rated at 4d apart from the end house. Presumably single rooms, at least four occupied by widows.

17. Bartholomew Norton*: 2s. 0d—joiner. In the 1590s, William Norton, virginal maker, and John Norton, butcher, lived nearby in properties owned by Peter Baker.[168]
18. Benedict Barwick: 4s. 8d—ironmonger, scrivener. Property owned by Peter Baker. Almost certainly the same person as the Benedict Barwick who was a servant of Sir Henry Cobham, English ambassador to France 1579–83.[169] Barwick first appears in the clerk's fee listings in 1584, in a house on the east side of Bishopsgate Street. He lived in this property from c.1590–94 but did not pay in 1592–93.
19. Henry Ventris: 2s. 0d—clothworker.
20. Mr. Clarke: 2s. 0d—nfi.
21. John Stanton*: 4s. 8d—innholder of the Vyne Inn and girdler.
22. Henry Dove*: 4s. 8d—Gentleman. ?mayor of Salisbury 1615.
23. William Barnaby: 4s. 8d—nfi.
24. William Seager: 2s. 0d—surname suggests French immigrant; see No. 26, probably a relative. A William Seger is recorded as a domestic courier carrying letters to the Justices of the Peace in Somerset and back in January 1598.[170]
25. Richard Bowles*: 4s. 8d—nfi.

[168] Peter Baker was a court letter writer; see his will TNA PROB 11/80/8 (1 June 1592) and subsequent inquisition, "Inquisitions: 1593–4," in *Abstracts of Inquisitiones Post Mortem Part 3*, ed. Fry, 171–219.
[169] See "Elizabeth: June 1582, 21–25," in *CSPF*: *Elizabeth: Vol. 16*, ed. Butler.
[170] See pipe rolls TNA E 351/543 fol. 26 recto.

26. Stephen Seager: 1s. 4d—French immigrant.
27. Arthur Godfrey: 8d—nfi.

Following properties possibly in Wormwood Street facing the inside of city wall.
28: Richard Dixon: 2s. 0d—nfi.
29. Anthony Clarke: 1s. 4d—nfi.
30. Mrs Scarborough: 1s. 2d—widow.

Possible location of "Mrs Stevens Rents by London Wall." Seven properties, five rated at 4d. The fifth was occupied for eight years c.1590–99 by Robert Armin, the future comic actor of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He only appears to have paid in 1593–94.

Bishopsgate and the city wall
31. former Wrestlers' Inn, now divided into over twenty tenements, presumably most single rooms as the majority only rated at 4d or 8d.

Camomile Street
Possible location of "Mr Piggott's Rents." He had previously owned the Wrestlers' Inn. Five or six small properties.

Bishopsgate Street: east side—north to south
32. Thomas Smallwood*: 1s. 4d—ironmonger.
33. Robert Mefflyn*: 2s. 0d—connection to coach trade? as a Robert Mefflyn is recorded in the pipe rolls hiring coaches for the Danish ambassador.
34. Thomas Dawson*: 4s. 8d—Draper and brown baker.
35. Christopher Hixon*: 2s. 0d—died during year and widow continued living there.
36. Robert Burton*: 4s. 8d—plasterer mentioned several times in guild records and eventually master. Could not sign his name.

? entrance to Clark Alley, former location of Clerks' Hall—demolished. Seven or eight tenements.

37. William Depledge: 2s. 0d—nfi.
38. William Pottes: 2s. 0d—nfi.

39. Ralfe Jenkinson: 2s. 0d—nfi.
40. William Ansley: 1s. 4d—nfi.
41. Thomas Fitzjohn: 2s. 0d—nfi.
42. Thomas Evington*: 2s. 0d—nfi.

? entrance to Angel Court, the former Angel Inn.

43. Charles de Man/Demayne: 1s. 4d—recorded in 1598 as a stranger.
44. George Kylner*: 4s. 8d—nfi.

St Ethelburga church and graveyard

Inside the church, Thomas Smythe ran a school. Samuel Aylwarde, glover, operated "the little shop by the church door" selling gloves and accessories.

St Ethelburga/St Helen's parish boundary.

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